Valuing the Advanced Learner: Differentiating Up

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Abstract: In today’s educational climate, differentiated instruction is a common practice for students who need remediation; what is less common is to Differentiate Instruction for the advanced learner. Contrary to popular perceptions, advanced learners do not automatically differentiate instruction on their own. Students who have the potential to excel within the curriculum are sometimes ignored due to a variety of classroom challenges. Asking students about their interests and questioning their perceptions are places to begin differentiating for advanced learners. All children, including advanced learners, should have the opportunity to be challenged and to excel in their classroom curriculum.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, advanced learners, curriculum

Teachers in the regular classroom are in a constant state of review, remediating for students that are weak. Higher-achieving students are lost in the shuffle and bored out of their minds. Most teachers need help in providing enrichment for those that don’t need extra help. They do need challenging, but I don’t feel I have the energy or the time, or the training!

—General education teacher discussing her frustrations in trying to teach the gifted learner

This comment by a general classroom teacher taken from a recent study on general education teacher practices with gifted students (Manning 2005) typifies the feelings of many educators in today’s accountability-driven educational climate (Gallagher and Harradine 1997). With the advent of No Child Left Behind (2001), increased pressure has been placed on educators to identify and remediate students who do not demonstrate mastery of curriculum standards; however, little attention has been given to advanced learners (Moon, Brighton, and Callahan 2002; Tomlinson 2002). Recognizing and serving advanced learners in the general education classroom is a task made more difficult by the proliferation of myths and misunderstandings about this student population. Contrary to popular belief, these students will not differentiate instruction on their own and must be guided by the professional expertise of highly trained teachers to reach their highest capabilities. Although advanced learners are curious and eager to learn, just like all students, they need guidance by educators who value their potential and are willing and able to differentiate instruction to meet their needs (Davis and Rimm 2004).

Valuing the Advanced Learner

Differentiation is doing “whatever it takes to ensure that struggling and advanced learners, students with varied cultural heritages, and children with different background experiences all grow as much as they possibly can each day, each week, and throughout the year” (Tomlinson 1999, 2). This statement establishes no hierarchy among student groups, but rather reflects the equality of students’ needs across the spectrum in the typical public school setting. The unique characteristics of advanced learners, however, often necessitate a type of differentiation that general classroom teachers may not have been trained to provide. Typically, advanced learners demonstrate a strong, interest-based intrinsic motivation; a capacity for understanding abstract concepts; and an ability to transfer knowledge from one learning situation to another (Chaffee 2002; Clark 2002). To make the most of these characteristics, it is necessary to provide differentiated instructional
methods that integrate substantive information across the curriculum in advanced content, process, and product, as well as a democratic learning environment. Reflect on the following quote from a seventh-grade general education classroom teacher on her differentiation techniques for the advanced learners in her classroom while considering the instructional needs of her students:

I try to let the higher ability students help those that have problems in different areas.

It is little wonder that general education teachers stymied by state testing pressures typically fail to offer the type of differentiated instruction needed to meet gifted student needs (Archambault et al. 1993; Moon et al. 2002). Further, this statement promotes timely educational questions: Are teachers meeting advanced learners’ needs by using them as peer tutors? Conversely, are gifted learners deprived of advanced content by the exploitation of their broad knowledge base to serve general classroom purposes? Research suggests the latter. In environments that fail to differentiate for their learning needs, many intellectually gifted students have mastered the majority of grade-level content prior to the beginning of a given school year (Reis et al. 1993). Therefore, it is essential that advanced content be offered along with instruction in information-processing skills to enable these students to develop products that match their intellectual abilities (Maker and Nielson 1995; VanTassel-Baska 1994; Tomlinson 2002). Additionally, underachievement among intellectually gifted students is a growing problem and may result not only in academic mediocrity, but also in a failure to reach potential beyond their school careers (Winebrenner and Espeland 2001). A pattern of underachievement sometimes develops that pervades all areas of the student’s life. Intellectually gifted learners, who are able, by virtue of above-average intelligence, to retain vast amounts of knowledge, inherently want to satisfy those needs. Factors beyond their control, such as the requirement to sit in classrooms day after day without exposure to new ideas or a requirement to do work they feel is unimportant or unchallenging, often results in a lack of internal motivation and the beginnings of school failure (Moon, Brighton, and Callahan 2002).

Many unchallenged advanced learners develop the misconception that all academic work is or should be easy. As they progress through the elementary grades to middle and high school, this mistaken notion is translated into the belief that if a task requires more than a minimum amount of effort, the task is too difficult (Berger 2005). The result of this belief may be a failure to develop risk-taking and problem-solving skills to the degree that, during middle and high school, these same students—who have the intellectual capacity to excel—are not willing or to put forth the effort to achieve these skills (Archambault et al. 1993). According to McIntyre (1992), an imposter syndrome may cloud intellectually gifted students’ thinking to such a degree that they come to doubt their intellectual abilities. For unchallenged, but academically able students, the imposter syndrome occurs when the curriculum requires effort and study to successfully complete it. In other words, what used to be “simple” is now “difficult” to complete and the thought occurs to the student: “Maybe I am not as smart as I thought I was! Am I just a regular student who thought of myself as gifted?” The inevitable conclusion for these students is a loss of potential not only for themselves but for society.

**Valuing the Advanced Learner through Differentiated Instruction**

These issues beg the question of where does the classroom teacher begin to differentiate for the advanced learner? Differentiation requires a considerable degree of self direction from both teachers and students (Heacox 2002). The teacher must focus on developing intrinsic motivation because the idea and concept of fairness is very important. In education, the guiding concept of fairness means that everyone receives what is needed, and not necessarily that everyone receives the same instruction (Welch 2000). A generalized example of fairness is the use of glasses. A student needs glasses to see effectively, but asking all children to put on glasses because one student needs them is foolish and a waste of time for all of the parties involved. Yet it seems that sometimes teachers and other stakeholders in education want everyone to wear glasses: those who need them and those who do not.

When teachers consider the needs of individual children, then the process of teaching all students becomes quite clear. The idea that students in the bottom 25% of the class in academic abilities have needs that vary from those students in the top 25% of the class academically is obvious, yet many classrooms are still structured for one-size-fits-all instruction (Murray, Shea, and Shea 2004). For students who need more depth of instruction, covering information or concepts that they already know is indeed not fair.

As a group, gifted learners tend to comprehend complex ideas quickly, learn more rapidly and go into greater depth than their peers, and exhibit interests that differ from those of their peers (Clark 2002). They also need time for in-depth exploration, in which they manipulate ideas and draw conclusions about seemingly unconnected concepts. Gifted students ask provocative questions and need teachers who value these questions and are able to guide them to find the answers. The development of a differentiated curriculum around these questions can show the students they are valued and that they have a voice and a choice in the pursuit of knowledge and learning.
Differentiating the Curriculum

I made a lot of mistakes at first, and it was a challenge, but it was worth it.

—seventh-grade science teacher discussing her move to a differentiated curriculum format based on gifted students’ interests in science

A variety of methods can be used to differentiate the curriculum for advanced learners. According to Berger (2005), strategies include content acceleration, curriculum compacting, variety, reorganization, flexible pacing, and more advanced or complex abstractions and materials. The content of curricula for gifted learners should focus on and be organized to include more elaborate, complex, and in-depth study of major ideas, problems, and themes that integrate knowledge within and across thought (Maker and Nielson 1995; VanTassel-Baska 1994; Tomlinson 2002).

Attention to teacher-student relationships also contributes to student energy for learning (Tomlinson, Brimijoin, and Narvaez 2008). A well-developed learning environment builds a strong context for learning. Teachers focus on student readiness allows for academic growth, because students’ backgrounds and needs build bridges that connect learners and important content. The teacher must be aware and cognizant of these student conditions if he or she expects great growth. Students’ motivation increases as a greater emphasis is placed on their interests (Reeve, Deci, and Ryan 2004). Focusing on student learning profiles enables efficient learning for all students.

To define and use differentiated instruction correctly, one must know his or her learners. Teachers should find ways to get to know students more intentionally and in greater depth beyond initial identifications of “this child is gifted” or “she will need me to lead and to guide her beyond the basics of the curriculum.” Ways that teachers get to know students purposefully for curriculum-differentiated development include interest inventories and learning styles inventories (Wormeli 2006). Further, a variety of checklists and assessments can be used to identify advanced learners’ weaknesses and strengths (Eby 1989; Gardner 1983; Renzulli et al. 2002). Questionnaires based on instructional topics and questions are further ways to measure students’ strengths and weaknesses. Student strengths should be the foundation for advanced learner curricula. By initially accessing areas of strength and weakness, assessments can become beneficial. Metacognitive reflections, adjustable assignments, curriculum compacting, and project- and problem-based learning are a few examples of how to differentiate in the classroom (Tomlinson 1999). Gifted students also need an equal amount of cooperative and independent learning time. Projects and assignments can be altered to provide for different learning styles (Cooper and Tomlinson 2006).

Teachers may group students by interest, but also have set activities at different levels of complexity (e.g., questioning levels, abstract thinking processes), resulting in varying products from different learning modalities. Thus, content is differentiated by interest, the process is differentiated by readiness—either to complete the assigned task or move on to a more challenging task—and the product is differentiated by student learning-modality preference (Ellis et al. 2008).

Valuing the Gifted Learner through Application of Differentiated Instruction

Teachers worry that by differentiating, they will make more work for themselves. Initially, this belief is probably true. Learning to differentiate is like learning to ride a bicycle or use a laptop. Extra time needs to be invested in the beginning, and frustrations as one learns are inevitable. However, once that initial period is over, one’s life is much easier and more interesting. Differentiating will become comfortable, teaching will be more productive and efficient, students will be more engaged and responsible, and behavioral problems will be eased (Levy 2008).

Using the interests and topics generated by students, teachers can begin to incorporate small-group teaching into daily or weekly teaching routines. Teachers will learn to integrate the differentiated curriculum when teaching to the high-end ability students. Teachers must walk a fine line, because they cannot forget that regular instructional requirements, which are often seen as “teaching to the middle” (Nunley 2004; Willoughby 2005, para. 5), are still an important part of their job.

Resources

I found that when I was patient with myself and my students, things [higher-level, differentiated activities] went much better.

—seventh-grade science teacher

There are multiple activities readily available online to help teachers become more involved with Internet-based learning; various topics offer students opportunities for exploration, which helps both the teacher and the student become more actively involved in the learning experience (Levin and Arafeh 2002). Many projects and independent studies are available in every area of interest. These high-quality enrichment projects can encourage teachers to pursue areas of their interests and bring enjoyment to their learning in such varied instructional areas as building bridges, writing short stories, studying castles, and creating numerous authentic products.

The regular use of informal assessments to monitor student understanding is both desirable and necessary.
Informal assessments lead to frequent updates on how students are progressing toward their goals and help the teacher make curriculum-based decisions on lesson modification, reteaching concepts, and topic restructuring (Reeves and Stanford 2009).

In the area of assessments, contests and competitions can provide opportunities to learn important skills and life lessons. Contests are available in hundreds of areas, from building bridges to writing poetry (Renzulli Learning 2009). Contests and competitions provide an outstanding way to match teacher and student talents with exciting outlets. Contests can teach important life lessons such as cooperation within competition and encouragement for others’ success. Contests and competitions inspire students to achieve higher levels of excellence while having fun.

By compacting the curriculum for the advanced learner, teachers move students beyond the minimal requirements of the content (McGral 2005). The compacting procedure is straightforward: teachers must determine what the students already know through pretesting and what they still need to learn, and replace this content with more challenging material that they would like to learn. Students should be encouraged to work with peers to complete the tasks, but working alone should also be a possibility. Providing a variety of experiences is important in a gifted student’s education (Hertzog 2003).

Teachers often wonder how parents will react to students being given different assignments. Questions from home at the beginning of a differentiated program are common and should be expected (Heacox 2002). The teacher might hold discussion times with parents to help them understand the value a differentiated program. When parents understand the underlying principles that every child is being appropriately challenged every day and every child is getting help with concepts that are personally difficult, most parents become shared stakeholders in the process, instead of adversarial to the design. Teachers should ask parents, “Do you feel that your child is being appropriately challenged?” This is a crucial question for parents. Teachers should emphasize the point that it is not important that all the students are doing the same thing at the same time, but that each child receives the instruction he or she needs.

Conclusion

All children should have the opportunity to encounter a differentiated curriculum marked by challenging and enriching activities based on their individual needs. Regrettably, the current climate of accountability resulting from high-stakes testing has pressured teachers to deliver identical instructional activities to all students. This reality degrades the phrase “equity in education” to a euphemism for teacher-centered instruction that is obliged to cover as much information as possible with minimal variation. Further, this system mocks real learning and is injudicious for students at every level of cognitive development. The possibilities for student advancement, however, can be vast when educators recognize and are afforded the opportunity to modify instruction to meet all learners’ needs including gifted learners.

REFERENCES


