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Differentiating Instruction

Serving Gifted Students in the Regular Classroom

Kathy Checkley

Most educators agree that, when done right, differentiated instruction can help teachers better meet the learning needs of more of their students. What's unclear, however, is whether gifted children with exceptional needs can truly thrive in the mixed-ability classroom. Too often, experts say, teachers fail to help these students grow intellectually and emotionally—even when differentiated instruction is "done right."

"Full inclusion classes have done a disservice to the gifted," states James Delisle, professor of education at Kent State University. Few teachers can deliver the level of instruction gifted students require while also adapting their lessons to meet other students' needs, he contends. It's not that teachers don't want to provide for gifted students, Delisle is quick to clarify; it's just that they often lack the knowledge, necessary resources, and support to do so.

Understanding the Gifted

Teachers have "very little understanding about highly gifted children," says Lesley Ansell-Shepherd, president of the Gifted Children's Association of British Columbia, Canada. And although it seems unlikely, these children "often have a harder time learning in the classroom," she states.

When teachers don't—or won't—recognize students' advanced intellectual capacity, the learning environment can become uncomfortable and even hostile for these children, experts in gifted education agree.

The mother of two highly gifted boys, Ansell-Shepherd uses her sons' experiences to illustrate that reality. One primary teacher told her that her older son didn't concentrate when he read. "In fact, he was reading so quickly that he turned the pages more often than the other students," Ansell-Shepherd says. The teacher, however, thought the boy was skimming rather than reading—an accusation her son found insulting.

Her other son would often solve simple arithmetic problems in his head. "The teacher told him he wasn't paying attention and that he should count on his fingers. He still counts on his fingers today," Ansell-Shepherd notes. "My son no longer trusts his ability to do math in his



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head." Unfortunately, she adds, "these are pretty typical stories."

What's also typical is that extremely gifted children "become underachieving and depressed" if they aren't challenged or allowed to progress, says Kathi Kearney, a consultant in gifted education. And if these children sense that their giftedness isn't appreciated—by their teachers or their peers—they try to hide their advanced intellectual capacity, she observes. When they start school, many gifted children begin to "deny who they are."

What Gifted Students Need

It simply doesn't need to be that way, Kearney asserts, adding that it's possible to provide for the gifted in differentiated classrooms if the teachers are open to the approach and if they have been fully trained.

Delisle agrees. He believes that "every student could benefit" from the instructional approaches associated with differentiation, such as taking field trips and conducting independent research projects. What too often happens, however, is that "teachers don't know the specifics for differentiation and end up giving gifted students more work rather than different work."

Giving students more work typically happens because teachers are reluctant to let students "test out" of grade-level content, say experts. Extension activities for the gifted, therefore, are added to the regular workload—a discouraging burden on gifted children, notes Ansell-Shepherd. "Many teachers believe that if children are gifted, they will want to do more." That's not necessarily true, she observes dryly.

"Differentiation is complex," and universities are at fault for not helping preservice teachers better understand this instructional approach, concedes E. Jean Gubbins, associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut. "We have masters students who haven't heard of differentiated instruction at all."

Still, even with better trained teachers, it takes effort to construct a differentiated activity, Gubbins cautions. With all that's going on in the classroom, she notes, teachers won't attempt to differentiate instruction "unless they have support," especially from the principal.

The support of school leaders is key in meeting the needs of gifted students, agrees Kearney. School policies must not only support differentiated instruction but also be flexible enough to provide an even wider array of options for gifted students—from clustering gifted students within the classroom, to allowing gifted students to participate in pull-out programs, to accommodating parents who want to homeschool their gifted children for a portion of the school day.

Moreover, altering the curriculum often isn't enough, asserts Delisle, who worries about the emotional development of gifted students. "Children benefit by being in a class or group with other 'like' kids. Students can then use language their gifted peers understand," he explains.

"I do believe there are times when kids have to be with others who are similar in interests and abilities," agrees Gubbins. Once a teacher for gifted elementary school students, Gubbins recalls one little girl who wrote fabulous poetry—at home. The reason? The child had read one

of her poems in class, and all the kids laughed, says Gubbins. That little girl never shared that form of poetry in school again. What this taught Gubbins is that teachers must ensure that "gifted kids have an audience." Gifted children, she affirms, must be "appreciated for their gifts."

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