

## **GIFTED EDUCATION STRATEGIES**

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### **Abstract-**

This article contains information on gifted education strategies, the goals and objectives of gifted education, the special needs of gifted children, and how to educate gifted children. Keywords - talent, education, gifted student, program, identification, skills development.

### **Introduction**

Separate studies conducted during the last few decades have demonstrated both the need for and the benefits of gifted education programs. Of special interest are the documented benefits that occur for all children when gifted education strategies and programs are extended to other students, as well. Simply stated . . . Gifted education works!

- **Why gifted programs are needed**

Gifted and talented students and those with high abilities need gifted education programs that will challenge them in regular classroom settings and enrichment and accelerated programs to enable them to make continuous progress in school.

- **Acceleration**

Educational acceleration is one of the cornerstones of exemplary gifted education practices, with more research supporting this intervention than any other in the literature on gifted individuals. The practice of educational acceleration has long been used to match high-level students' general abilities and specific talents with optimal learning opportunities.

- **Curriculum compacting**

This important instructional strategy condenses, modifies, or streamlines the regular curriculum to reduce repetition of previously mastered material. "Compacting" what students already know allows time for acceleration or enrichment beyond the basic curriculum for students who would otherwise be simply practicing what they already know.

- **Grouping**

The practice of grouping, or placing students with similar abilities and/or performance together for instruction, has been shown to positively impact student learning

gains. Grouping gifted children together allows for more appropriate, rapid, and advanced instruction, which matches the rapidly developing skills and capabilities of gifted students.

- **Identification**

Identification is a critical component of effective gifted education programming. One size does not fit all. In addition to using assessments appropriate to the services provided, different strategies may be needed to ensure students with high potential are identified.

- **Pull-out and other specialized programs**

Programming options for gifted and talented students occur in a variety of ways, and research demonstrates the effectiveness of pull-out programs, specialized classes, and other special programs and schools and the curriculum these services use in raising student achievement.

- **Teacher training**

Teachers who know how gifted students learn and are well trained in gifted education strategies are critical to high-level gifted programs; however, most gifted students spend their school days in the regular classroom. Providing basic training for all teachers on recognizing and serving advanced students helps identify and more appropriately educate those students in the regular classroom.

## **Goals and principles of gifted education**

### **The need for gifted education**

All teachers want to give their students the best, most appropriate education. Your gifted learners have varied and unique needs that require multi-faceted gifted education to help them reach their full potential. To provide gifted learners with effective instruction, you must understand the rationale, principles and goals behind gifted education.

### **Rationale for gifted education**

Your gifted students have characteristics that set them apart from average learners. Gifted students learn at a rapid pace, are often highly creative, and think in ways that are logical, abstract and complex. The typical classroom frustrates these learners as they wait for peers to catch up to them in learning content. These students require an educational program to suit their individual needs.

The benefits of gifted education go beyond your classroom. Gifted students often have lofty career goals and the ability to reach them. Our gifted learners become doctors, scientists, artists, researchers, musicians and more. As they pursue their careers, gifted students

become adults who can make important contributions to society as a whole. Perhaps the strongest argument for gifted education is that meeting the needs of our most capable students has long-term positive effects on our society.

### **Principles of gifted education**

You understand that your gifted learners are distinct from their peers. Unfortunately, if you're like many busy teachers, you may find yourself overlooking these children while you focus on aiding students in need of remediation. You and your administration need to keep in mind two key principles:

- Gifted children deserve the opportunity to fulfill their learning potential.
- Teachers need adequate training to provide an education that delivers this crucial opportunity.

A controversial approach to gifted education is homogeneous ability grouping, which places gifted children with peers of similar ability. Many educators argue that non-gifted students gain from having gifted students in their classes; however, the reality is that many gifted children do not reach their full potential when placed in a heterogeneous, or diverse, group. If your school does not utilize ability grouping for gifted students, you may find yourself with a mixed-ability classroom that includes a gifted cluster, or small group of gifted students in a non-gifted class. This grouping enables you to serve your gifted learners through small group instruction that challenges them and moves at their pace.

Teachers of gifted students need adequate preparation and training. Because of the unique characteristics of gifted children, you should be trained to understand these characteristics, identify gifted learners, and develop and differentiate a gifted curriculum. This involves crafting tasks and questions to challenge learners and foster critical thinking skills.

### **Special needs of gifted children**

If you're the parent of a gifted child, then you probably feel very proud of your child and his academic accomplishments -- and rightfully so! Gifted children have so much to offer, and a great deal of potential. Teachers often regard them favorably, and parents beam with pride as they watch their child excel in many different academic subjects.

To an outsider, it would seem that nothing is difficult for gifted children. After all, these overachievers breeze through assignments and easily grasp concepts that confound their classmates. What could be hard for the gifted? The truth is, though, gifted children have their own unique set of needs, and since most people don't fully realize or acknowledge these needs, gifted children can often struggle in nonacademic areas. Ironically, since so many people view these children as natural achievers, it can be even more difficult for them to receive the special assistance they need in areas not directly related to academic

performance. There are five specific special needs common to children who are identified as gifted:

### **1. Interpersonal Relationships with Peers**

It is not uncommon for gifted children to find it difficult to relate to others. They are intelligent enough to recognize that they are different than most children, and therefore, they often view themselves as separate somehow. This can make interpersonal relationships challenging. As a parent, it's important to realize the truth in your child's observation and relate to it. Denying that he is different from his classmates will only confuse your child, thus making the situation worse. Instead, talk to your child about the differences amongst all people. Teach your child to celebrate these differences and to be proud of his individuality. It is often easier for these children to relate to adults than their peers. Teach your gifted child that he can learn from his peers. He can teach them his academic interests and learn about sports or art from them.

### **2. Attention**

Gifted children often have trouble paying attention in class and are sometimes misdiagnosed with ADD or ADHD. Although it's possible for a gifted child to have these disorders, careful diagnostic measures must be taken since gifted children who are under-challenged in school often mimic the same symptoms as a child with an attention-deficit problem. When gifted children aren't provided with engaging, challenging material, they naturally become bored and look for other things to occupy their minds or simply daydream to pass the time. These are not behaviors that should be punished, but rather a sign that your gifted child requires advanced learning opportunities to stimulate her cognitive abilities. If your child is exhibiting signs of ADD or ADHD but is consistently scoring high on classroom assessments or standardized tests, then she may just be in need of an enrichment program or advanced placement. Talk to your child as well as her teacher to gain a better understanding of the situation. If you suspect that your child is bored with the existing curriculum, then advocate on her behalf for a more challenging academic experience to meet her special needs.

### **3. Motivation**

Gifted children can also display a lack of motivation for some of the same reasons that they exhibit attention problems. When children aren't challenged, then they can't grow. As a result, they become bored and fidgety. If this boredom becomes part of their daily routine, then children will simply give up hope that school will ever provide them with an avenue for exploring curiosities or trying new things. When this hope no longer exists, children lose the motivation to participate in classroom activities and may lose the desire to attend school at all. If your gifted child begins to show signs of disinterest when it comes to school,

then you need to take action to ensure he is provided with a more engaging, challenging curriculum. Talk to the special needs director at your child's school to find out what programs and options are available to you.

#### **4. Performance anxiety**

Gifted children quickly become used to excelling in school. They respond to the praise of their parents and teachers, and sometimes begin over-identifying with their performance. Combine this with an emotional intelligence deficit, and you have a recipe for performance anxiety. Children who strongly identify with their performance will inevitably fear failure and as a result, avoid taking risks and shy away from any activity they perceive as too challenging. They may avoid difficult assignments or tasks for fear of disappointing their teachers or parents. Of course, such avoidance behaviors will eventually inhibit your gifted child's growth and deprive her of necessary learning experiences and life skills such as persistence and resilience. In addition, children who equate their performance with their self-worth often become perfectionists and struggle to perform to their own ideal standard, often setting bars for themselves that are too high and becoming angry, upset, or even depressed when they fail to meet their own expectations. Instead of seeing mistakes as learning experiences, these children view academic failures as very personal. Any perceived sense of failure has the potential to damage these children's self-esteem. Thus, it's important that parents talk to their gifted children about the important difference between a person's performance and their value as a human being. Avoid being overly critical of your child's scores on assignments and tests, and help children realize that everyone makes mistakes, even gifted individuals. When your gifted child does make a mistake -- as she inevitably will -- be sure to help her embrace the learning experience that the mistake offers.

#### **5. Verbal communication**

Verbal communication can also be a special needs area for many gifted students. Specialists theorize that the spoken word can be difficult for these children because they have the added task of translating the complex ideas in their heads into language that others can understand. This process can lead to abnormal hesitation when speaking, stuttering, and frustration on the part of the child and sometimes those around him as well. To help your gifted child develop good verbal communication skills, encourage him to think through what he's going to say before he says it. Demonstrate the process for him, and let him know that it's perfectly normal to pause before answering a question. Realize that despite your efforts, verbal communication may not ever be one of your child's strengths. Instead of focusing on this weak area, celebrate all of your child's natural talents, and provide him with plenty of ways to express himself nonverbally. Gifted children commonly love to

write, for instance, and many of them are artistically talented as well. Be sure to provide necessary materials such as journals, paper, and art supplies, so that your child has every opportunity to explore other avenues of communication.

As you strive to help meet the special needs of your gifted child, realize that you're not alone. There are people who can help you provide the resources and support your child needs. Start with your child's school. Talk to his teacher, the special needs coordinator, and the administrator to discover special programs that may be available for your gifted child. You may also find a support group for gifted children and their parents in your community.

### **What it means to teach gifted learners well**

Some people suggest that gifted education is just sort of "fluffy" or enriching-gravy on the potatoes, perhaps, but not anything especially substantial or critical in the way of mental fare. Others propose that all gifted education is what's good for all students. Unfortunately, those two criticisms sometimes stem from observing classrooms where gifted learners are taught inappropriately.

So what does it mean to teach a highly able student well? Of course it will vary some with the age of the child, the subject, the learning style of the student-and possibly even the child's gender or culture. Certainly appropriate instruction for such learners varies for a child who comes to school rich with experiences vs. a child who is equally able but lacks richness of experience. And it will vary with a child who has immense potential vs. a peer with somewhat less capacity. Nonetheless, there are general indicators of appropriate curriculum and instruction for highly able students (in their areas of strength)-and general indicators of inappropriate curriculum and instruction for such learners.

### **Good instruction for gifted learners**

1. Good curriculum and instruction for gifted learners begins with good curriculum and instruction. It's difficult, if not impossible, to develop the talent of a highly able student with insipid curriculum and instruction. Like all students, gifted learners need learning experiences that are rich. That is, they need learning experiences that are organized by key concepts and principles of a discipline rather than by facts. They need content that is relevant to their lives, activities that cause them to process important ideas at a high level, and products that cause them to grapple with meaningful problems and pose defensible solutions. They need classrooms that are respectful to them, provide both structure and choice, and help them achieve more than they thought they could. These are needs shared by all learners, not just those who are gifted. But good instruction for gifted learners must begin there

2. Good teaching for gifted learners is paced in response to the student's individual needs. Often, highly able students learn more quickly than others their age. As a result, they typically need a more rapid instructional pace than do many of their peers. Educators sometimes call that "acceleration," which makes the pace sound risky. For many gifted learners, however, it's the comfortable pace-like walking "quickly" suits someone with very long legs. It's only "fast" for someone with shorter legs. On the other hand, it's often the case that advanced learners need a slower pace of instruction than many other students their age, so they can achieve a depth or breadth of understanding needed to satisfy a big appetite for knowing.
3. Good teaching for gifted learners happens at a higher "degree of difficulty" than for many students their age. In the Olympics, the most accomplished divers perform dives that have a higher "degree of difficulty" than those performed by divers whose talents are not as advanced. A greater degree of difficulty calls on more skills-more refined skills-applied at a higher plane of sophistication. A high "degree of difficulty" for gifted learners in their talent areas implies that their content, processes and products should be more complex, more abstract, more open-ended, more multifaceted than would be appropriate for many peers. They should work with fuzzier problems, will often need less teacher-imposed structure, and (in comparison to the norm) should have to make greater leaps of insight and transfer than would be appropriate for many their age. Gifted learners may also (but not always) be able to function with a greater degree of independence than their peers.
4. Good teaching for gifted learners requires an understanding of "supported risk." Highly able learners often make very good grades with relative ease for a long time in school. They see themselves (and often rightly so) as expected to make "As," get right answers, and lead the way. In other words, they succeed without "normal" encounters with failure. Then, when a teacher presents a high-challenge task, the student feels threatened. Not only has he or she likely not learned to study hard, take risks and strive, but the student's image is threatened as well. A good teacher of gifted students understands that dynamic, and thus invites, cajoles and insists on risk-but in a way that supports success. When a good gymnastics coach asks a talented young gymnast to learn a risky new move, the coach ensures that the young person has the requisite skills, then practices the move in harness for a time. Then the coach "spots" for the young athlete. Effective teachers of gifted learners do likewise.

### **Inappropriate instruction for gifted learners**

1. Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it asks them to do things they already know how to do, and then to wait for others to learn how. Many advanced learners regularly complete assignments calling on materials, ideas and skills they have already

mastered. Then they wait for peers to catch up, rather than being pre-assessed and assigned more advanced materials, ideas and skills when they demonstrate competency.

2. Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it asks them to do "more of the same stuff faster." Reading more books that are too easy and doing more math problems that have ceased being a challenge are killers of motivation and interest.
3. Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it cuts them loose from peers and the teacher for long periods of time. Asking a highly able student to sit at a desk in the back of the room and move through the math book alone ignores a child's need for affiliation, and overlooks the fact that a teacher should be a crucial factor in all children's learning. It also violates the importance of meaningful peer interaction in the learning process, as well as in the process of social and emotional development.
4. Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it is structured around "filling time." Highly able students are often asked to go write a play, complete a puzzle, or do classroom chores because they have completed required tasks that take others longer. It would be difficult to defend such practices as a high-quality use of educational time.
5. Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when they spend substantial time in the role of tutor or "junior teacher." All students need to be colleagues for one another, giving a hand or clarifying procedures when needed. That's quite different from when advanced learners spend chunks of time on a regular basis teaching what they already know to students who are having difficulty. Some educators suggest that doesn't harm highly able learners because their test scores remain high. That begs the question of the extended learning these students might have garnered had the same amount of time been spent in pursuit of well-planned new ideas and skills.
6. Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it is rooted in novel, "enriching" or piecemeal learning experiences. If a child were a very talented pianist, we would question the quality of her music teacher if the child regularly made toy pianos, read stories about peculiar happenings in the music world, and did word-search puzzles on the names of musicians. Rather, we would expect the student to work directly with the theory and performance of music in a variety of forms and at consistently escalating levels of complexity. We would expect the young pianist to be learning how a musician thinks and works, and to be developing a clear sense of her own movement toward expert-level performance in piano. Completing word-search puzzles, building musical instruments and reading about oddities in the lives of composers may be novel, may be "enriching," (and certainly seems lacking in coherent scope and sequence, and therefore sounds piecemeal). But those things will not foster high-level talent development in music. The same hold true for math, history, science, and so on.



### **It's actually simple—in theory**

What it takes to teach gifted learners well is actually a little common sense. It begins with the premise that each child should come to school to stretch and grow daily. It includes the expectation that the measure of progress and growth is competition with oneself rather than competition against others. It resides in the notion that educators understand key concepts, principles and skills of subject domains, and present those in ways that cause highly able students to wonder and grasp, and extend their reach. And it envisions schooling as an escalator on which students continually progress, rather than a series of stairs, with landings on which advanced learners consistently wait.

It's not so hard to articulate. It's fiendishly difficult to achieve in schools where standardization is the norm, and where teachers are supported in being recipe followers, rather than flexible and reflective artisans. In schools where responsive instruction is a carefully supported indicator of professional growth, the capacity to extend even the most capable mind is a benchmark of success.

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