

Why it is important to  
differentiate the  
curriculum for gifted  
learners in school...



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Importance of Differentiated Curriculum for Gifted Learners The Maker Model of Differentiated Curriculum addresses the need to adjust teaching environments and practices to create different learning experiences for different students. Maker suggests that curriculum needs to be differentiated in terms of Learning environment, content modification, process modification, and product modification (Maker, 1982, Maker and Nielsen, 1995). This is particularly important in the case of gifted students with higher levels of thinking and abstraction, in order to help these students reach their full potential.

Brown & Wragg (1993) identify the ten roles of the teacher as being, “director, facilitator, adviser, teacher, guide, critic, freedom giver, supporter, manager and examiner” (p. 31-32). There are many other educational writers who suggest various other dimensions of teaching and the essential teaching skills within these dimensions. Kyriacou (1998) lists the essential teaching skills as “ethos, direct instruction, management of materials, guided practice, structured conversation, monitoring, management of order, planning and preparation and written evaluation” (p. 6). These skills are imperative in the direction of gifted students in order to tailor the curriculum to their accelerated learning needs.

This is why educators of the gifted value the benefits of ability grouping for advanced learners. The availability of some forms of homogeneous grouping for these learners has been strongly advocated by proponents of gifted education (Allan, 1991). Educators of the gifted are also concerned about a lack of emphasis on differentiated instruction for academic diversity in heterogeneous classrooms and reject a one-size-fits-all approach to educating students as varied as those who inhabit the average classroom.

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Thus, it is necessary to abandon these practices that homogenize instruction by permitting and in some cases, even encouraging a “one-size-fits-all” approach to instruction (Kaplan, 1979). Instead, it is necessary to emphasize appropriately differentiated instruction in heterogeneous classrooms. In order to cater for giftedness, a curriculum must be developed which creates opportunities to optimize students’ potential (VanTassel-Baska, 1993). A goal in gifted education is to reach the ‘optimal match’ of curriculum with the needs of gifted students. (Hoekman, McCormick and Gross, 1999). Curriculum should be complex, fast-paced, rigorous and match the abilities and interests of gifted students (Gross, 1994, 1997, 2001, Sawyer, 1988, VanTassel-Baska, 88, 91, 92, 93, 98). Matching curriculum to the needs of gifted students can be achieved through a range of curricular practices, such as above level testing, curriculum compaction, and curriculum differentiation. (Gross, Sleaf, and Pretorious, 2001). Kierouz suggests that this can be achieved by deleting already mastered material from the curriculum, adding new content, process, or product expectations to existing curriculum, extending existing curriculum to provide enrichment activities, providing coursework for able students at an earlier age than usual, and writing new units or courses that meet the needs of gifted students.

The accelerated pace at which gifted and talented students learn information requires that flexible pacing strategies such as skill grouping, curricular compacting, contracting, and credit by examination be integrated into classroom management formats. It is important that educators recognize the abilities of gifted students to learn complex information more quickly in order to adapt their approaches in the classroom likewise.

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