

What Parents Need To Know About Curriculum Differentiation

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As the Capitol Region Parent Representative, parents often say to me, "My child has been identified as gifted. Now what?" The answer is a complex one that I will try to simplify and summarize.

Gifted and talented students are those whose learning characteristics and thinking abilities differ significantly from those of their chronological (same age) peers. They tend to learn basic information quickly and easily. They are often resistant to "relearning" what they already know and may develop behavioral problems or become underachievers if not appropriately challenged. In order to meet their potential they may need modification of the core curriculum (that basic information that students are responsible for knowing). That modification is called "differentiation".

Although some differentiation occurs naturally with good teaching, the majority of teachers need specific training in recognizing the characteristics of gifted students, understanding what differentiation is and how to make it happen in the classroom in a consistent and purposeful manner. When differentiation is used consistently and frequently over time, it raises achievement levels for all students in the class. There are several pieces to the differentiation puzzle; they include:

- * Complexity
- * Acceleration
- * Novelty
- * Depth

Complexity can be seen as making connections or seeing relationships. One way to do this is to look at a subject or type of event over time. During a unit on the civil war in America, a teacher may introduce the fact that there have been many civil wars in many countries, and some are still occurring in the world today. How are the causes of these events similar? How are they different? Complexity can also be done by looking at an issue from different perspectives. How would your view of offshore drilling differ if you were the owner of the oil well, an oceanographer or a marine biologist?

Acceleration is the easiest form of differentiation to use. It is useful in the area of math but is also used in other subject areas. Ideally students should be pretested before a unit is taught. If students demonstrate mastery of content in that area they are not required to sit through instruction about material they already know but are given more advanced content. This is called curriculum compacting. If the pretest shows areas of weakness, those areas could be addressed before students move on.

Novelty is introducing an area of study that is new to the student. It is most effective if the student chooses or has input into the subject based on his or her own interests. This might take the form of a contract with the teacher for an independent study project and could be what the student works on when he has compacted out of some content area.

Depth involves digging deeper into a subject. Too often the curriculum in California deals with many issues, but in a superficial manner. Gifted students sometimes have intense interest in a subject and wish to know more. Depth can involve looking at patterns

(there are patterns in math, in literature, in a civil war), looking at rules (again there are mathematical rules, rules governing the English language, rules in government), or looking at the ethics of an issue.

Differentiation can provide a richer, more meaningful learning experience, not just for gifted children but for all children. These lessons, discussions, approaches may be done with a whole class, with flexible groups within a class (children may change groups periodically in order to be taught at the appropriate level) or in the form of tiered lessons which have specific learning objectives for individual students according to their needs. While differentiation is good teaching for all students, it is critical for gifted students if we are to keep them engaged in the educational system and enable them to reach their full potential.

It is also critical that parents of gifted children learn how to recognize differentiation in the classroom and encourage and support teachers in its use. Parents can do this by attending classes or conferences, reading books, or joining a GATE advocacy group. Start by talking to the program coordinator in your district. Find out what type of program your district offers and what learning opportunities may be available for parents. Get involved. Parent involvement can be one of the most important factors in insuring a successful learning experience for children.