

Serving Gifted Students in General Ed Classrooms

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Gifted students who are served in general education classrooms frequently finish their work sooner than other students. This can happen in one subject area, such as mathematics, or in all subject areas. Due to their rapidity of thought (VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007), they typically finish assignments before other children. Then they may act out because they are bored. What is really going on is a mismatch between the academic needs of the student and the pace and depth of the curricula and instructional program.

Following are suggestions for how to best serve these students -- and what not to do.

Don't . . .

1. Use these students, whether formally identified as gifted or not, as teacher assistants.

Using gifted students as tutors or teacher assistants for other students in the classroom is inappropriate and unethical, and it does not provide for their social-emotional or academic needs. When an appropriately differentiated education is not provided, gifted learners do not thrive in school, their potential is diminished, and they may even suffer from cognitive and affective harm.

2. Expect the gifted student to be well behaved.

Just because a student is smart does not mean that he or she is well behaved. Frequently, if there is a mismatch between classroom instruction and a gifted student's intellectual needs, that child may "act out" or misbehave. It's not because he or she is looking for attention, but because this student may be bored. Gifted students are developmentally asynchronous, meaning that their cognitive and emotional development are out of sync.

3. Give them more work because they finish early.

You are sending the implicit message, "Hey, you're smart, here are another 20 math problems," while everyone else is still working on the original set of 10. By giving gifted students more of the same type of work, you are penalizing them for being bright. If the child is intuitive, he or she will actually slow down and never finish early any more because that means getting more work. You want them to produce quality, not quantity.

4. Isolate them to work independently without oversight.

While independent research projects based on student interest may provide depth in an area, teachers assume that a gifted student is self-regulated and can work independently on a project without any guidance, oversight, or accountability. Sending them unsupervised to the computer lab, library, or back of the room to work independently may not produce the desired result.

5. Expect a gifted child to be gifted in every subject area.

Emerging research and new definitions of gifted speak to gifted students having an area or domain of high ability that generally is not across all areas. For example, even though a student is a gifted reader (able to read adult novels), he might not be a good writer -- reading and writing are different skills sets. Just because a student is highly precocious in math does not mean that she will be just as high in science.

Do...

1. Figure out in what area(s) students are gifted.

You can acquire this information through formal and informal assessments that will help you provide extension, enrichment, acceleration, and complexity in that student's specific area of strength. This may mean a different lesson plan or finding additional resources related to an area of study. You could collaborate with the technology specialist, explore related arts, or work with other teachers to find appropriate extensions. Often this can mean linking the assignment to the student's area of interest or giving him authentic problems.

2. Ensure that task demands and assessments are content rich.

Many teachers think that serving the gifted means providing them with thinking skills or creative activities in isolation. These are fine as long as they are linked to high-level content. Everyone thinks critically about something, and he or she can be creative as long as the work is built upon a solid content foundation.

3. Find other gifted students and create opportunities for them to work together.

Gifted students need intellectual peers to develop optimally. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, through ability grouping during school or supplemental programs, such as talent search programs like Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth, or Saturday or summer enrichment programs. These supplemental programs are imperative to the health and well-being each learner. Gifted students need to spend time with other gifted students.

4. Learn about this special diverse population of learners.

Take classes, get certified or licensed in gifted education, attend conferences, and become a life-long learner seeking out others who have a vested interest in gifted learners. You need to network with other people, who can converse with and support you so that you won't feel isolated in your attempts at meeting gifted students' needs in the classroom or at the school level. There are national and state gifted advocacy associations as well as partners available through university networks.

5. Implement research-based curriculum units.

These units, which have been found to be effective with gifted students while complementing state standards, can augment your curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and typically have efficacious results with different populations of gifted students. Seek out curriculum units that have been funded through the Javits program, the National Science Foundation, and other sources, because student learning results have to be documented. Moreover, there are additional methods and models that have been effective for use with gifted learners. Using these units of study will save you time that you might otherwise spend seeking resources, while ensuring that what you are using in the classroom is supported by research.

Gifted students need teacher advocates that care about them, understand them, and can provide differentiation in the classroom, as well as options and opportunities outside of the classroom that will help them achieve at levels commensurate with their abilities. By implementing these suggestions, you'll do more than meet their needs. You'll be setting them on a trajectory toward developing their talents.

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