

P

DIFFERENTIATION

GIFTED AND TALENTED EDUCATION

Differentiation is adjustment to curriculum in content, process, product and/or learning environment to meet the needs of a student, or students.

The most important and essential factor in designing programs for gifted students is differentiation of the curriculum. Regardless of the structure or grouping made by the school, gifted students require a curriculum that is tailored to their specific (intellectual, social and emotional) learning needs, just as we recognise the need to differentiate the curriculum for students with learning difficulties.

Differentiation involves making modifications to the curriculum through adjustments to content, processes and skills. It provides a planned, documented and challenging curriculum that matches the ability of gifted students to learn at a faster rate, they are able to find, solve and act on problems more readily and they are able to manipulate abstract ideas and make connections. As a result, curriculum modifications could be provided in different ways including but not limited to: how widely and in-depth a topic is studied, how quickly the topic is covered and what sorts of subjects and topics are explored.

Curriculum for gifted students needs to be appropriately paced and allow the opportunity for in-depth exploration, manipulation of ideas and questions that require higher order thinking (thinking that is more complex than simple repetition of facts and knowledge). Subject or whole-grade acceleration should also be considered, in conjunction with curriculum differentiation, when appropriate.

When considering differentiation and the point at which to start teaching a topic to gifted students one of the first steps should be to pre-test the students in order to discover what they already know. Another tool that is often used when differentiating is to assess gifted students using off-level testing. This means assessing the student at a higher level than the year they are currently in.

It is also important that these modifications provide a curriculum that is uniquely appropriate for gifted students rather than being appropriate for all learners (Passow, 1988).

Tomlinson (2001) identifies three ways in which the curriculum for gifted students can be modified to be effectively different from the regular curriculum:

- Content – the ideas, concepts and information presented to students. To make it more appropriate for gifted students, content needs to be adjusted to accommodate the ability of gifted students to manipulate abstract ideas and deal with complexity and in terms of variety and organisation.
- Process – the way content is presented including the types of questions asked of gifted students and the activities expected of them. For the process to be more appropriate for gifted students, it should be modified to incorporate higher-level thinking, creative problem solving, decision making, planning and forecasting and the pace and type of teaching.
- Product – the outcomes of the learning experience. Ideally, for gifted students, learning tasks should be designed to address a real problem or concern rather than simply summarising what they learn. As with content and process, the importance of demonstrating higher-order thinking skills is very important in the product.