Can a Standard Classroom Meet the Needs of the Gifted?



http://www.specialneeds.com/children-and-parents/general-special-needs/can-standard-classroom-meet-needs-gifted

It is widely known that gifted students have special needs, yet few schools provide daily programs designed to meet these needs. While many schools have what they refer to as a “gifted program,” this program usually only consists of a weekly, pull-out class. Thus, the vast majority of a gifted child’s school experience occurs within the walls of a “normal” classroom. This begs the question -- can a standard classroom meet the needs of gifted children?

**The Gifted Dilemma**

While many advocates of gifted students believe that the ideal solution is to provide a comprehensive gifted curriculum with special teachers and a variety of enrichment activities, school budgets often come up short of providing for such a luxury. Therefore, regular education teachers are left with the task of challenging their gifted students within the regular classroom environment. Can it be done? Yes, but not without a substantial amount of effort and a repertoire of research-backed strategies.

**The Need for Engagement**

One of the primary obstacles to learning that gifted children often face in a regular classroom is boredom. Whether they already know the material presented, catch on much faster than the other students in the class, or simply crave something more stimulating, these students often have difficulty paying attention and are known for daydreaming and fidgeting. Thus, in order for teachers to help their brightest students reach their full potential, they must provide a curriculum that is both challenging and engaging. Of course, increasing the engagement of classroom instruction will benefit all students, not just the gifted ones.

Engagement begins with making the content relevant and meaningful for the students. Teachers need to get creative and find ways to make even the most abstract concepts applicable to their students’ daily lives. For example, when learning Shakespeare’s play, *Julius Caesar*, the teacher can invite students to ponder how one of the key themes, ambition, has played a role in their own lives. Students can write a true-to-life essay or act out an autobiographical skit in which ambition becomes one of the main characters. By creating a way for students to apply the subject matter to their current life situations, teachers can transform a seemingly ancient text into something that is alive and relevant.

**Differentiated Instruction is Key**

In order for gifted children to thrive in a standard academic setting, teachers must differentiate their instruction to accommodate the diverse needs of their above-average learners. Differentiated instruction is a teaching strategy that many of the finest teachers in our nation have already adopted as a mainstay for all of their students, not only those who are designated as gifted students.

With differentiated instruction, all students are introduced to the same concept, but each may approach the learning from different angles and by participating in different activities. While the teacher may have a minimum standard in mind that all students should achieve, there is no cap to the learning that can take place. That is, the teacher will provide the necessary resources and support for students to extend their learning beyond the minimum standard. This provides the opportunity for each student -- gifted students included -- to get the most out of every learning opportunity. Differentiated instruction is particularly important for gifted children who often become disinterested in tasks that aren’t sufficiently challenging.

**Goal-Setting for Gifted Children**

Since many gifted children quickly become disenchanted with traditional school curricula, it’s important for teachers to help them find sources of motivation. Of course, there’s no better motivation than the kind that comes from within. While it’s true that students will respond to temporary incentives such as extra recess, certificates of recognition, and tangible awards, these trivial enticements simply can’t compare to a deep-seated personal dream or goal.

Teachers can help gifted students focus on the daily tasks that need to be accomplished by aligning these tasks with the students’ aspirations -- whatever they may be. Once students realize that all school tasks, however simple or mundane, will help them achieve their career or personal goals, then these tasks suddenly become more interesting. The key is to keep the light shining within these bright children, so that they can go on to achieve their hearts’ desires long after their academic careers have come to a close.

**Specific Special Needs Areas**

While many people -- even some parents and educators -- assume that everything comes easily to gifted children, this is simply not true. Although mastering academic subjects like math, science, social studies, and the like may seem almost effortless for the gifted child, [life skills](http://www.specialneeds.com/children-and-parents/general-special-needs/special-needs-gifted-children) such as effectively using verbal communication and maintaining interpersonal relationships can prove to be quite difficult in many cases.

Teachers of gifted students have the unique opportunity to help these students develop skills in these areas, empowering them to express their ideas eloquently and form lasting relationships. There’s no doubt that skills such as these are equally important as general academics, yet they are often overlooked, even in specialized gifted curricula.

Introducing gifted students to effective group work techniques and presentation skills is a good first step. Although these students may be hesitant to participate at first for fear of failing or being ridiculed, a little support from their teachers, parents, and classmates can go a long way toward helping them feel more comfortable in these settings.

While it may be true that gifted children would be better served in exclusive settings under the care of a teacher who is specifically certified in gifted education, such an ideal circumstance is not always within the reach of school budgets and resources. Thus, all teachers must take on the responsibility of ensuring that each of their gifted students receives an education that is both engaging and challenging, one that pushes them to realize their full potential. By implementing proven strategies intended to accommodate gifted children, teachers will be simultaneously enriching the learning experiences of each and every student in her care, despite their diverse ability levels. To put it quite simply, sound gifted education is just good teaching.

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Written by: Rick and Teena Kamal [See other articles by Rick and Teena Kamal](http://www.specialneeds.com/search/node/type%3Aarticle%20%22Rick%20and%20Teena%20Kamal%22)
About the Author:

Award-winning study and life skills experts Rick and Teena Kamal founded EduNova to prepare students to lead and thrive in the global economy. They worked with 33 top university education experts and many successful senior executives to produce resources that empower middle school, high school and college students to succeed. Learn more at [www.HowToStudyBest.com](http://www.howtostudybest.com/).