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Chapters

The Learning Environment

Gifted girls assume all sorts of extra burdens that educators need to understand. Few gifted girls know they are talented. They know only that they are different and that this difference is somehow wrong or weird.

Gifted Girls (Smutny, 1998)

THE PROCESS OF DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION IS MOST effective in a flexible and supportive learning environment, which encompasses both the physical setting of the classroom and its climate. The teacher sustains a relaxed yet challenging environment by encouraging responsibility and autonomy, supporting students' different needs, and emphasizing students' strengths. In addition, sharing responsibility for the classroom climate with students helps to ensure that it is productive and comfortable for everyone.

What is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated instruction is an approach to teaching that is comprehensive and guides teachers in all aspects of their practice. It does not mean grading gifted students harder than other students or assigning extra work to keep students busy (Tomlinson, 1995). It is a continuous process of learning about students' needs and interests and using that knowledge to guide instruction. Teachers use their knowledge of students to determine how content is presented, what activities are appropriate, and how to guide students in demonstrating what they have learned (Tomlinson, 1999). All of the strategies in the following sections are a part of providing differentiated instruction.

Classroom Organization and Management

The classroom itself must be organized for flexibility and openness. There will be space for students to engage in a variety of activities, both independently and in small groups. Students are free to move as they need to, as long as they remain on task. They are able to leave the classroom in order to go to the library, for example, or to a resource room or computer lab (Feldhusen, 1993).

When students work on different content, use different learning strategies, and create different products, the teacher takes on an altered role in the classroom. Presenting the curriculum to students is no longer the teacher's primary focus. Instead, she concentrates on creating and selecting learning opportunities for students, guiding them, and working with them to assess their progress.

Giving students choices and allowing them to schedule their activities encourages independence and keeps students engaged (Feldhusen, 1993). It is recommended that students be allowed to choose what they want to work on at least part of the time. Students are still accountable for completing specific activities or demonstrating what they have learned within a certain period of time, but they choose when or how they will work.

The following strategies are helpful in organizing and managing the classroom for differentiated instruction:

- Using "anchor activities" that students can complete with little supervision-tasks such as writing journal entries or working on a portfolio-provides time for the teacher to work directly with other students (Feldhusen, 1993; Tomlinson, 1999).
- When students are working on different activities, it will be helpful to have instructions available for easy access. The teacher may want to create assignment cards rather than giving directions orally or writing multiple sets of directions on an overhead (Tomlinson, 1999).
- Teachers will also need to be sure that all students know how to get help when they need it, either by asking another student, going back to the directions, or working on another task until an appropriate moment for asking the teacher (Tomlinson, 1999). A student might serve as "Expert of the Day" when she has shown a deep understanding of the concept or task.
- Involving the students in creating classroom procedures and rules

and in organizing their time helps them to build important skills in decisionmaking, negotiating, and planning. It also ensures that students feel at home and involved in the classroom (Feldhusen, 1993).

Social and Emotional Climate

A nonthreatening atmosphere is important for all students, including high ability learners. Gifted students are often perfectionists, and they may place great significance on getting the right answers or completing tasks quickly. They are sometimes outsiders among their classmates because of their unusual abilities, or they may be accustomed to having a higher status than other students in the classroom.

The foundation of a good learning environment is a feeling of safety and acceptance. Teachers help to create this atmosphere by modeling respect and care for all members of the classroom. Emphasizing every student's strengths is another important element of an effective atmosphere for learning. All students need to feel and recognize the value of the abilities and experiences of themselves and others.

Sometimes gifted students feel insecure when they are presented with open-ended inquiry or problem-solving activities. Students may insist that they need procedures spelled out for them so that they can follow directions and "do it the right way." The teacher might remind students that mistakes are an important part of learning. It is possible to communicate understanding for students' feelings while also being firm about the requirements of the task.

Gifted students may also resist when they are asked to show their work or explain their thinking processes. If they are accustomed to finishing tasks quickly, some students resist what they see as unnecessary work that slows them down. Explain to the students that it is just as important to show how they got an answer as it is to be correct. Using a scoring guide with descriptive criteria helps students understand how their work will be evaluated and articulates high standards.

Support for Gifted Minority Students

Although there has recently been a significant increase in research about identifying gifted students from cultural minority groups, there is not yet comparable attention to the challenge of providing support for

gifted minority students. All gifted students may experience isolation and pressure to hide their abilities, but minority students tend to feel the weight of these forces to an even greater degree. Gifted minority students report feelings of inferiority, as well as the need to constantly choose between using their talents and fitting in with their peers (Cropper, 1998).

Providing students with extra support is especially important in mathematics and science. In these fields, cultural stereotypes have contributed to the underrepresentation of minorities. Although there is not yet a substantial body of published research, there are many suggestions and strategies developed by educators for meeting the needs of gifted minority students:

- Communicate high expectations.
- Be sensitive to the experiences and beliefs of people from different cultural groups. Get to know all students and their cultures. Consider the challenges that students may face in school.
- Continuously and firmly encourage students to go to college. Discuss the necessary coursework, tests, and other preparations with students and parents.
- Create a multicultural learning environment and make sure the curriculum reflects a variety of cultures.
- Help students connect with role models and mentors. Organize peer support groups for students with similar interests and abilities.
- Reach out to parents and family members. Enlist their support in providing encouragement and high expectations.
- Provide students with a variety of learning options. Create or select activities that are engaging, active, and grounded in reality.
- Listen to students' concerns, fears, and beliefs about their experiences and their education.

(Cropper, 1998; Ford, 1996)

Support for Gifted Girls

Gifted female students face many unique challenges and problems that tend to undermine their abilities and potential. Gifted girls do not achieve at expected levels, especially in middle school and high school, and they often do not pursue careers appropriate to their abilities (Badolato, 1998). Researchers have identified a number of reasons for female students' underachievement: gender stereotypes pervasive in

society, lack of role models, declining confidence in their abilities, mixed messages and conflicting expectations from teachers and parents, and peer pressure to hide their abilities and intelligence (Smutny & Blocksom, 1990).

More specifically, teachers often have less tolerance for girls who call out answers in class, ask numerous questions, and are confident in their opinions and willing to argue-behaviors that are likely to be accepted as evidence of giftedness in boys (Kerr, 1994). Often girls are socialized in school and at home to be attractive, obedient, caring, agreeable, and submissive. As a result, girls have a tendency to hide their intelligence and downplay their abilities in order to conform to the socially accepted stereotypes of femininity (Ryan, 1999).



To counteract the forces that work against gifted girls' achievement, teachers and parents must become aware of their biases about gender and appropriate behavior for females. It is also important to strike a balance between encouraging girls to pursue nontraditional fields while not devaluing traditional female strengths and interests. Some recommended practices in meeting the needs of gifted girls include:

- Communicate with parents about their daughter's abilities and the importance of mathematics and science for higher education and careers. Encourage them to identify and address sources of gender bias.
- Organize peer support groups for girls. Mathematics and science clubs encourage girls to develop their skills and abilities and help connect them to other girls who share their interests.
- Avoid praising girls for their neatness or behavior. Point out specific

examples of their excellent work and achievements. Actively correct them if they attribute their accomplishments exclusively to luck or hard work.

- Provide opportunities for girls to use their leadership abilities.
- Expose students to women in nontraditional careers. Help them to identify and connect with role models and mentors.
- Openly discuss gender stereotypes and the mixed messages that society broadcasts about femininity, intelligence, and achievement.
- Provide a safe environment for girls to share their confusion and fears.
- Actively recruit girls to participate in advanced courses and extracurricular activities related to mathematics, science, and technology.
- Encourage students to research and report on female contributions to mathematics and science.

(Davis & Rimm, 1994; Smutny, 1998)

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