Practical Strategies for Gifted Classroom Differentiation

Author

Imfadi R. Abuhola, PhD

Consultant, King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity, Riyadh, KSA

Published by:

King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity (Mawhiba)

April 2025

To cite this article, you may copy the following:
Abuhola, I. (2025, April*) Practical Strategies for Gifted Classroom Differentiation*. King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity. https://www.mawhiba.org/en/qualitative-knowledge/digital-library/articles/

Practical Strategies for Gifted Classroom Differentiation

Imfadi R. Abuhola, PhD

Consultant, King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity, Riyadh, KSA

Introduction

Differentiation in teaching gifted learners involves tailoring instructional strategies and practices used to meet their advanced learning needs, interests, and pace. This approach emphasizes that gifted learners often have advanced cognitive abilities, heightened curiosity, and unique social - emotional needs. Differentiation involves modifying content, processes, products, and the learning environment based on the learner readiness, interest, and learning profile (Hockett, 2018; Schools Vic.,2023). Differentiation also provides gifted learners with reward, motivation, and challenge at the same time.

Characteristics of Gifted Learners

Before implementing differentiation strategies in gifted classrooms, it is crucial to discover, understand, and distinguish gifted learners. One of the organizations that has been interested in this aspect is the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), which emphasized that gifted learners have advanced cognitive abilities, creativity, leadership skills, or specific academic talents (National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), 2018). Gifted learners are also characterized by several cognitive, social, and emotional characteristics and traits, including:

- The ability to ask diverse questions about a single phenomenon.
- Have a strong curiosity for more knowledge.
- Can learn new information quickly.
- Use higher-order thinking skills and apply them practically.
- Have outstanding problem-solving ability.
- Show superior reasoning abilities.
- Show exceptional interest in humanity, the universe, and societal issues in general.

Recognizing these traits enables teachers to design curricula that efficiently nurture the gifted.

Identifying and discovering gifted

There are quantitative and qualitative strategies and methods for identifying and discovering gifted, including:

- Intelligence quotient tests that measure interpretation, reasoning, and problem solving.
- Standardized achievement tests in mathematics, science, or reading and other subjects.
- Performance-based assessments within a realistic context, portfolios that assess growth over time and show distinct strengths, teacher and peer ratings, and others.

Theoretical framework for differentiation

There are basic pillars of differentiation that must be considered before implementing any differentiation activity, through which teachers can support all learners in reaching their full potential, while maintaining high standards and expectations for all (Reis and Renzulli, 2018). These pillars are :

- Content, which addresses the diversification of materials or information that learners interact with based on their readiness or interests, such as providing a variety of advanced and in-depth texts for gifted learners, and the use of graphic organizers such as concept maps and Venn diagrams for learners who need help organizing their learning.
- Processes, such as modifying the ways in which learners interact with and understand content, such as offering different types of activities, varying the pace of instruction, or using group work and independent self-study to meet different learning styles and preferences.
- Product, which represents the diversification of the ways in which learners demonstrate what they have learned in line with their strengths, preferences, and interests, such as allowing learners to choose between writing a paper, creating a video, or designing a project as a final product.
- Learning environment, which includes addressing the needs of individual learners, such as creating flexible seating arrangements, adjusting lighting, or providing a variety of spaces for collaboration or independent work.

Practical strategies for differentiation

There are several practical strategies for differentiation, including (Weber, Behrens, and Boswell, 2021; Abebe, 2024):

- **Tiered Assignments**, which reflect the creation of assignments with different levels of complexity, depth, and abstraction on the same topic and adjusting the criteria based on learners' readiness. As an example, all learners may study ecosystems, while gifted learners may design an experiment to investigate ecological interactions or conduct research on endangered species.
- Compact Curriculum, in which curriculum content is simplified and exploited in the greatest possible depth for learners who have already mastered the material and for deeper exploration. Learners' knowledge level must be assessed in advance to determine their understanding and allow them to skip certain units or lessons and instead engage in enrichment activities that deepen their knowledge, such as research projects or problem-based learning tasks. Compact curriculum is implemented through the following steps:
    - Pre-assessment through various objective and written tests or informal assessments such as discussions or projects.
    - Identifying mastery levels based on the results of the pre-assessment.
    - Develop plan for compacting the curriculum after identifying the mastery levels. This plan should include:
        1. Specific topics or units that can be skipped.
        2. Enrichment activities or advanced projects that will replace the omitted content.
        3. A timeline for when these activities will be addressed and implemented.
    - Provide enrichment opportunities such as research projects, participation in competitions and scientific exhibitions in mathematics, science, or other subjects.
    - Monitoring progress and adjusting it as needed.
    - Compact curriculum provides increased engagement, developing critical thinking skills, and investing learning time efficiently, putting in consideration that challenges such as the difficulty of providing diverse, deep, and sufficient

resources, the need for teacher training, and the difficulty of integrating and adapting all learners while providing advanced differentiated instruction.

- **Interest-based projects** that allow gifted students to explore topics of personal interest and that they are passionate about. These projects can be implemented by providing a list of project options related to the curriculum and let learners choose based on their interests. For example, learners can choose to study renewable energy sources, endangered species, flight physics, technology and programming, environmental awareness campaigns, or implement some entrepreneurship projects.
- **Flexible grouping** which involves regularly re-arranging and distributing groups based on readiness, activities, ability, tasks, and interests. This strategy promotes collaboration and exposes learners to diverse perspectives. Teachers may use a variety of grouping strategies as the whole class, small groups, pairs, or individual work to facilitate peer collaboration. Teachers may also use other grouping strategies, such as homogeneous groups for advanced discussion or heterogeneous groups for collaborative learning.
- **Open-ended questions** which encourage higher-order thinking and multiple responses. They are therefore an effective and powerful teaching strategy because they promote critical thinking and deeper engagement and allow for a variety of responses. This strategy enables learners to think of multiple correct answers, and encourages them to explain their thinking, consider multiple perspectives, and explore concepts in greater depth.

- **Learning contracts** which outline expectations while allowing learners to make choices and are a tool that helps learners take ownership of their own learning. They frame specific learning objectives, tasks, timelines, and assessment methods. This strategy is particularly effective in differentiated instruction and learner-centered learning, allowing learners to work at their own pace and according to their interests and abilities. Also, this strategy reflects agreements between the teacher and the learner that define specific learning goals and methods, and are implemented through collaboration with the learners, identifying the resources and activities they will use, which enhances their learning status.

- **Independent study projects** which are centered around guiding gifted, encouraging self-directed learning, and addressing topics of personal interest. This strategy promotes

independence and allows learners to delve deeper into topics they are passionate about. It is also an excellent strategy to promote exploration and deepening in a variety of topics while developing essential skills such as time management, research, and problem solving.

For teachers to be able to plan and implement these strategies effectively, they must be applied in a variety of sustainable situations and encourage students to engage in relevant activities with follow-up, motivation, reinforcement, and continuous assessment to track the progress of students' learning because of investing in practical strategies for differentiation in gifted classrooms.

References

Abebe, D.(2024, 29 March) .*Implementing Differentiation Strategy in Teaching: Enhancing Learning Outcomes.* file:///C:/Users/Mawhiba/Downloads/ImplementingDifferentiationStrategyinTeaching.pdf

Hockett, J. A.(2018). *Differentiation Strategies and examples: Grades 6-12.* https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/training/access_differentiation_handbook_6-12.pdf

National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC). (2018, 12 November 2024). *What is Giftedness?* https://nagc.org/page/what-is-giftedness#:~:text=No%2C%20Keep%20Private-,What%20is%20Giftedness%3F,learn%20and%20realize%20their%20potential.

Reis, S. M. and Renzulli, J. S. (2018*). The Five Dimensions of Differentiation*. International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity, 6(1and 2), 87-94.

Schools Vic. (2023, 27 March). *High impact teaching strategies in action: Differentiated teaching.* https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/high-impact-teaching-strategies-action-differentiated-teaching

Weber, C. L., Behrens, W. A., and Boswell, C. (2021*). Differentiating Instruction for Gifted Learners. Routledge-Taylor and Francis Group: New York and London*