

Differentiated Curriculum: A Successful Experience

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What is differentiated curriculum?

Differentiated curriculum is one that is individualized to meet the diverse needs of all of the students in one class. As gifted children expert Susan Weinbrenner says, "Equality means giving everyone equal opportunities to learn, not teaching everyone in exactly the same way." If implemented appropriately, differentiation does not have to mean more work for the teacher. In fact, it will allow a teacher to spend his or her time more efficiently with a greater number of students.

Compacting the curriculum

Compacting the curriculum occurs when students are allowed to "buy back" time for what they already know so they can "spend" time another way (Renzulli & Reis, 1991). It is a way that allows students to earn self-directed time to work independently on special interest projects. First, look at your curriculum in a particular content area. Determine what criteria students need to meet in order to convince you they know the material. Then compact the curriculum:

Give the unit test at the beginning of the unit. Students who achieve 85% or better agree to follow a learning contract outlining an independent study during the time the rest of the class is working toward mastery in a certain area. It is understood that the independent contract students will need to do a lot of problem solving without the one-on-one help of the teacher during this particular time. This is not to say that the teacher ignores those students. They need to be checked on from time to time, just like the rest of the students in the class.

For instance, if you usually give **spelling** tests on Friday, give a practice test on the prior Monday. Students who score 85% or higher can work on projects of their choice or on alternate word-building activities such as creating a spelling game, playing Scrabble, or making a crossword puzzle.

If your goal is for students to **write** a coherent paragraph, tell them and show them specifically what you are looking for. Give a quick assessment that will allow students to prove they can write a coherent paragraph with at least 85% mastery. Those who can write at this level should be encouraged to pursue individual projects such as creative writing or journaling, or the activities may not have anything to do with writing, depending on students' needs and teacher's comfort zone.

In **math**, grade level standards may require students to add and subtract fractions. After an introduction to basic concepts and some practice, a quick, informal assessment should show who has internalized the mechanics as well as developed an understanding of fractions. Those scoring 85% or better can pursue projects, problems, or games involving fractions or some other area of interest while the rest of the students continue to familiarize themselves with the beginning components of numbers less than one. The same compacting applies to reading, social studies, and science.

Fairness issues

Some students may not score 85% or higher in any subject area. All students, however, benefit from pursuing their interests by utilizing their strengths. If everyone gets an opportunity at least once a week to focus on something that is special to them, then no one should complain about not getting a chance to work on projects. Project time may last anywhere from one hour to all day.

Housekeeping hints

Keep a **Work in Progress** folder for each student to store his or her projects while not in use. Do not use a student's earned time in one area to remediate skills in another area. Allow students to pursue their passions with the time they have earned. You might be surprised by how much transfer of skills there is from an area of interest to a less favorite subject when people are allowed to learn more about something in which they already excel.

Behavior problems are a consequence of two sources: Either the curriculum is inappropriate or the structure of the environment is inappropriate. Students pursuing their passionate interests in an environment conducive to learning will not become behavioral problems. They will become educated.

Good luck and have fun!

References

Renzulli, J.S. and Reis, S.M. (1991) "The schoolwide enrichment model: A comprehensive plan for the development of creative productivity." In N. Colangelo & G. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook for Gifted Education* (pp. 111-141). Allyn & Bacon: Boston, MA.

Weinbrenner, S. (1992). *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom*. Free Spirit Publishing: Minneapolis, MN.