Selecting differentiation appropriate for diverse learners

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Within any group of gifted students, there are diverse needs. It is important to identify what forms of adjustment will be made according to the students' levels of ability and their needs. Our society is very deficit-oriented; however, if a sensitive, gifted student is to grow up with a positive sense of capability and feel fulfilled, it is important that they develop requisite skills while focusing on their strengths and passions.

This requires a paradigm shift with emphasis and focus placed on the individual gifted student's areas of strength and interest. By understanding the individual student's needs, it is possible to address their needs by differentiating according to the gifted student's requirements. This means a strength-based orientation is needed to determine the most appropriate form of differentiation for an individual gifted student.

It is important to consider the contrast between equality and equity. Equality means everyone receives the same – irrespective of individual need. This may initially be perceived as fair but individuals have specific needs that must be addressed if they are to achieve at the optimum level.

Two bi-partisan, Federal Senate Select Committees identified gifted students as the most educationally disadvantaged students in this country. Recommendations that all universities that provide Education courses for pre-service teachers require that they undertake a course in Gifted Education "to dispel misconceptions about gifted children, misconceptions which are held because contrary research findings are not widely known".

ACARA made the statement: "Gifted and talented students are entitled to rigorous, relevant and engaging learning opportunities drawn from the Australian Curriculum and aligned with their individual learning needs, strengths, interests and goals." There is an emphasis upon personalising each student's learning needs by aligning these to a student's current level of learning, interests, strengths, goals, and interests; by drawing on appropriate content; by adjusting learning focus with general capabilities and aligning individual learning goals.

Geoff Masters' research, identified that there is a 5 – 6 year spread within each Australian year level, resulting in curricular gaps when teaching is focussed on the middle of the class, thus ignoring the needs of the most and least advanced students. Pete Goss and Jordana Hunter maintain that despite efforts by many teachers, the most advanced students are not adequately stretched while the least advanced are not properly supported."

Pete Goss and Julie Sonnemann responded: "Without targeted teaching, the top students will be bored, and the bottom students will be confused." Geoff Masters said: "…when teachers praise students for success on easy tasks, they risk sending the message that success at school can be achieved with minimal effort. Rewarding success on unchallenging tasks does little to develop students' understandings of the relationship between effort and success."

Writing about Csikszentmihalyi's 'Flow' concept in his book, *The Optimistic Child*, Martin Seligman wrote "Flow cannot be achieved without frustration. Success after success, unbroken by failure, regrouping, and trying again will not produce flow. The cushioning of frustration, the premature alleviation of anxiety and learning to avoid the highest challenges all impede flow. A life without anxiety, frustration, competition, and challenge is not the good life; it is devoid of flow." Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is aligned with Miraca Gross' "Stretching on tiptoes" and Steve Garvey's aim is to set goals that are almost out of reach.

John Feldhusen promoted that schools should establish a 'smorgasbord of options' to provide for gifted students who vary in their strengths, interests and needs. This means that not *all* the modifications suggested will be necessary for *all* gifted students *all* the time. It is important that a balanced, well-articulated program should include a variety of these modifications to provide opportunities for challenge for each individual gifted student. A pyramid of options has been adapted from the pyramid in Nicholas Colangelo and Gary Davis' *Handbook of Gifted Education*.

There are various ways we can extend talented learners. Academic provision for the gifted involve enrichment, compacting, ability grouping, curriculum differentiation and acceleration. Enrichment provides additional activities, projects or materials outside of the regular curriculum. Bloom's Taxonomy can be inverted to extend the gifted learner by seamlessly providing more challenging questions or to increase the challenge within a classroom activity or task.

An Individualised Education/Learning Plan (IE/LP) is frequently developed (especially because of parental pressure) in response to identification of a gifted learner. Wilma Vialle and Karen B. Rogers, in their book, *Educating the Gifted Learner*, make the point that no research has compared gifted learners' achievement with or without an IEP/ILP but they make the point that common sense suggests that the student with aplan will thrive and learn more appropriately. Unfortunately, experience has shown that although an IE/LP may be developed, it is not always implemented.

Ability grouping is placing students of high intellectual potential together with benefits related to their self-concept, attitude toward subject matter and school and academic achievement. Teachers can group students daily for intellectual stimulation, academic learning and socialization; compress and accelerate the curriculum and learning; individualise for the talented learner to develop his/her unique talents and differentiate the curriculum to address the specific needs of gifted students. There are various ability grouping options for gifted learners, designed to provide instruction to groups of students with similar abilities, thus creating a less restrictive environment for high achievers through within-class grouping (clustering) for lessons, projects and tasks as well as between-class grouping.

Subject area grouping might include full-time ability grouping; establishing a multi-age classroom; regrouping by achievement for subject instruction and providing a cluster–grouped class. Year level grouping includes: within-class performance grouping, co-operative grouping with like-ability learners and a pull-out program.

There are many forms of differentiation but the curriculum can become cognitively challenging for the gifted when the focus is on differentiating the content, process, product or learning environment to suit the interests, strengths, abilities and needs of the gifted.