

Tips for Teachers: Successful strategies for teaching gifted learners

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This article by the Davidson Institute for Talent Development offers a list of tips for teachers. It focuses on suggestions any teacher can use in the classroom to aid their gifted students and promote their achievement in positive ways. Common blunders are also discussed as well as why they can be detrimental to the gifted student.

Being a regular classroom teacher can be both an exciting and overwhelming experience. There are so many curriculums to cover, so many standards to meet, and so many things to learn. It can seem as though you're being stretched in an infinite number of directions. And, the most challenging part generally isn't the teaching; it is managing student behavior. Without a doubt the most difficult student in your classroom is generally the one who finishes every assignment in less than five minutes and requires constant redirection. When I first started teaching, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what to do with these students and what I discovered was that very often, if I just adjusted my perspective and offered them more challenging experiences, the problems disappeared -- like magic! This is how I became passionate about meeting the needs of gifted students. I came to see how making a few simple adjustments could change the entire culture of my classroom. With that in mind, here is a list of tried and true tips I recommend.

Tip #1: Familiarize Yourself with the Characteristics of Intellectually Gifted Students

Not all gifted students in your classroom will be identified and even those who are may not always appear to be gifted. As such, it is important that you don't allow yourself to be distracted by false stereotypes. Gifted students come from all ethnic groups, they are both boys and girls, they live in both rural and urban areas and they aren't always straight A students. Students who are intellectually gifted demonstrate many characteristics, including: a precocious ability to think abstractly, an extreme need for constant mental stimulation; an ability to learn and process complex information very rapidly; and a need to explore subjects in depth. Students who demonstrate these characteristics learn differently. Thus, they have unique academic needs. Imagine what your behavior and presentation would be like if, as a high school junior, you were told by the school district that you had to go back to third grade. Or, from a more historical perspective, what if you were Mozart and you were told you had to take beginning music classes because of your age. This is often the experience of the gifted child. Some choose to be successful given the constructs of public school and others choose to rebel. Either way, a few simple changes to their academic experience can dramatically improve the quality of their lives -- and, mostly likely, yours!

Tip #2: Let Go of "Normal"

In order to be an effective teacher, whether it's your first year or your 30th, the best thing you can do for yourself is to let go of the idea of "normal." I can't encourage you enough to offer all students the opportunity to grow from where they are, not from where your teacher training courses say they should be. You will not harm a student by offering him/her opportunities to complete work that is more advanced. Research consistently shows that curriculum based on development and ability is far more effective than curriculum based on age. And, research indicates that giftedness occurs along a continuum. As a teacher, you will likely encounter students who are moderately gifted, highly gifted

and, perhaps if you're lucky, even a few who are profoundly gifted. Strategies that work for one group of gifted students won't necessarily work for all gifted students. Don't be afraid to think outside the box. You're in the business of helping students to develop their abilities. Just as athletes are good at athletics, gifted students are good at thinking. We would never dream of holding back a promising athlete, so don't be afraid to encourage your "thinketes" by providing them with opportunities to soar.

Tip #3: Conduct Informal Assessments

Meeting the needs of gifted students does not need to be an all consuming task. One of the easiest ways to better understand how to provide challenging material is to conduct informal whole class assessments on a regular basis. For example, before beginning any unit, administer the end of the unit test. Students who score above 80% should not be forced to "relearn" information they already know. Rather, these students should be given parallel opportunities that are challenging. I generally offered these students the option to complete an independent project on the topic or to substitute another experience that would meet the objectives of the assignment, i.e. taking a college/distance course.

With areas of the curriculum that are sequential, such as mathematics and spelling, I recommend giving the end of the year test during the first week of school. If you have students who can demonstrate competency at 80% or higher, you will save them an entire year of frustration and boredom if you can determine exactly what their ability level is and then offer them curriculum that allows them to move forward. Formal assessments can be extremely helpful, however, they are expensive and there is generally a back log of students waiting to be tested. Conducting informal assessments is a useful and inexpensive tool that will offer you a lot of information.

Tip #4: Re-Familiarize Yourself with Piaget & Bloom

There are many developmental theorists and it is likely that you encountered many of them during your teacher preparation course work. When it comes to teaching gifted children, I recommend taking a few moments to review the work of Jean Piaget and Benjamin Bloom. Jean Piaget offers a helpful description of developmental stages as they relate to learning. Gifted students are often in his "formal operations" stage when their peers are still in his "pre-operational" or "concrete operations" stages. When a child is developmentally advanced he/she has different learning abilities and needs. This is where Bloom's Taxonomy can be a particularly useful. Students in the "formal operations" developmental stage need learning experiences at the upper end of Bloom's Taxonomy. Essentially all assignments should offer the student the opportunity to utilize higher level thinking skills like analysis, synthesis and evaluation, as defined by Bloom. I recommend using the Internet to learn more about these two important theorists. A couple of websites that may be of interest include:

[Piaget's Stage Theory of Development](#)

[Bloom's Taxonomy](#)

Tip #5: Involve Parents as Resource Locators

Parents of gifted children are often active advocates for their children. If you are not prepared for this, it can be a bit unnerving. The good news is that, at least in my experience, what they want most is to be heard and to encounter someone who is willing to think differently. Generally, I found that if I offered to collaborate with them, rather than resist them, we were able to work together to see that their child's needs were met. For example, if they wanted their child to have more challenging experiences in math, I would then enlist their help in finding better curriculum options. I generally conducted an informal assessment to help them determine the best place to start and then

encouraged them to explore other options that could be adapted to the classroom. Most parents understood when I explained that I didn't have the luxury of creating a customized curriculum for every student, but that I would be willing to make accommodations if they would do the research. Flexibility and a willingness to think differently helped me create many win-win situations.

Tip #6: Learn About Distance Learning Opportunities

The choices available to teachers and parents in this area have exploded in the past several years. Distance learning opportunities have dramatically increased options for meeting the needs of gifted students. Programs such as EPGY math and the Johns Hopkins Writing Tutorials as well as online high school and college courses, including online AP classes, are a great way to substitute more challenging curriculum for students who demonstrate proficiency with grade level material. Of course, these classes generally aren't free, but they are an option. And, in my experience, they are an option that many parents are willing to fund. Search the free online [Davidson Gifted Database](#) to find resources recommended by students, parents and teachers.

Tip #7: Explore Acceleration ~ It's Free and It Works!

Another option is to allow students to attend classes with other students who are at the same developmental level, rather than with their age peers. If a 9 year old can demonstrate that he is ready to learn algebra, why should he be forced to take fourth-grade math just because he is 9 years old? Same goes for language arts, or science, or social studies or any other area of the curriculum. Many well-meaning teachers worry that a student will run out of things to learn if they are given access to curriculum designated for older students. Whenever I hear this question I can't help but ask -- can a person ever truly run out of things to learn? Indeed, if we let Susie, a third grader, learn fifth grade math this year, then fifth grade math isn't going to be appropriate for Susie when she gets to fifth grade. So, during fifth grade, Susie should have access to seventh grade (or higher!) math -- depending upon her needs. What's wrong with that? Susie is learning at a rate appropriate to her abilities and will continue to do so whether or not we "make" her do third grade worksheets. Why not accommodate her unique learning needs with a bit of flexibility. Susie may just be the one who discovers the cure for cancer or comes up with an alternative fuel source that is more planet-friendly. Besides, and I can only speak for myself, I don't believe ANY student should have their opportunities limited because of their age, their race or any other factor that is beyond their control. I believe education should be about creating true learning opportunities for ALL students -- including gifted students. If you have a student who is ready for fifth grade work, collaborate with the fifth grade teachers. There are great tools, such as the Iowa Acceleration Scale, that can help you to determine whether the student should be moved ahead for just a subject or two or should be grade accelerated.

Another reason that many teachers are afraid to try acceleration is that they are concerned about the student's level of social maturity. Research has demonstrated time and time again that acceleration is effective for many reasons and that social maturity is rarely an issue. Several studies have shown that social age is correlated with mental age -- not chronological age. So, not only is it generally in the student's best interest academically to accelerate, it is in his/her best social interest as well! The same goes for students in high school. If a student is ready for college work, encourage them to take college courses or to consider an early college entrance program. Indeed the student might need a bit of tutoring to get up to speed and/or may need some extra support initially, particularly with writing and/or organization, however, gifted students learn very quickly and my experience has been that

these supports can generally be removed after a reasonable adjustment period.

Tip #8: Learning from the Experiences of Others

Many well-meaning teachers innocently commit the following blunders when they encounter gifted students. Don't feel bad if you have committed them. I know I have and I wish someone would have pointed them out to me before I had to learn about them the hard way.

Blunder Number One: Asking Your Gifted Students To Serve As Tutors For Students Who Are Struggling. Gifted children think and learn differently than other students. Asking them to serve as tutors can be a frustrating experience for all parties involved. This should also be remembered when putting together learning teams or group projects. Putting your strongest student with your students who are struggling is likely to be a painful experience for everyone. Imagine developing a cycling team with someone like Lance Armstrong as one member and then selecting other members who have either just learned to ride their bikes or are still relying on training wheels to help them gain their balance. It is unlikely that anyone in this group is going to have a positive experience.

Blunder Number Two: Giving Your Gifted Students More Work When They Finish Early. It is common practice to give students more work if they complete their assignments early. This is counterintuitive if you consider that if the student is completing his/her work in an efficient manner, it is likely that the work is too easy. Let's once again consider our cyclist. Would you have the cyclist who finished the race first continue to ride, on a stationary bike no less, until all of the other cyclists finished the race? I hope not! What if that cyclist was given an opportunity to participate in more challenging races or had the opportunity to develop his/her talents in related areas -- wouldn't that be a better use of his/her time?

Blunder Number Three: Only Allowing Gifted Students To Move Ahead When They Complete The Grade/Age Designed Work Assignments With 100% Accuracy. It is important to remember that gifted students think and learn differently and can be extremely rebellious. No one -- not adults, not children and especially not gifted children -- likes to be bored! Gifted students, thanks to their ability to reason, will purposely choose not to do something merely because they "must" do it, particularly if it seems pointless to them. They would rather spend their time thinking or reading than completing worksheets that are too easy. If you are truly interested in doing what's best for your students, it is imperative that you focus on their strengths, not their shortcomings. Offer them opportunities that are consistent with their abilities -- lead them from where they are. Depending how long they have been in the system, it may take them a while to trust you. So, don't be surprised if there isn't a miraculous overnight change. Be consistent and positive and remember, you may be the first teacher who has offered them an opportunity to actually learn, rather than regurgitate and they may not know how to handle your responsiveness. Don't fall in to the trap of saying, "See, I told you he wasn't gifted, I gave him one tough assignment and he failed." Gifted students generally haven't had to work to succeed. Give them time to build their, often atrophied, wings in a safe environment.

Tip #9: Utilize Outside Resources

There is a lot of information in this article, and it is likely you're feeling a bit overwhelmed! Here is the best news so far...you are not alone and you don't have to come up with all of the answers by yourself. There are several national organizations devoted entirely to assisting gifted young people and the professionals who serve them. The three most notable organizations are the [National Association for Gifted Children](#), [Belin - Blank Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development](#) and the [Davidson Institute for Talent Development](#). As a first step, I recommend joining the Davidson Institute's free

Educator's Guild. Members have access to private electronic mailing lists and bulletin boards to exchange ideas, locate resources and discuss issues with educators all over the country. Members also have access to the Davidson Institute's in-house team of professionals for personalized assistance with identification, assessment, exploration of educational options, creation of Individual Educational Plans, and location and development of curriculum for highly gifted learners. All you have to do is call to receive answers to your questions -- completely free of charge. And, the Davidson Institute also provides participants of the Davidson Young Scholars program and their parents, free services as well. In addition to investigating these national organizations, you may also wish to investigate organizations at the state and local level that focus on meeting the needs of gifted students. It isn't necessary to turn your world upside down to be an effective teacher of gifted students, you just have to be flexible, knowledgeable, and be willing to try new things. Gifted students cannot fend for themselves and I wish you the best of luck as you begin the exciting adventure of making a difference to the gifted students in your classroom! After all, one person can and does make a difference.

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