

Au Contraire

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Differentiation Requires HOPE

Everybody's doing it: differentiating curriculum to make it deeper, broader, parallel (to what?) and more complex. No longer the private property of gifted specialists, differentiation is now a democratic pursuit of classroom teachers, curriculum specialists, and anyone else who subscribes to *Educational Leadership*. In an era of competency-based tests that seek to measure schools and students on the lowest common denominator—"Who knows their basic skills?"—differentiation has become a beacon of hope for learners who require more than just the same old stuff. At least that's the theory.

Like any bandwagon, though—and make no mistake about it, differentiation is as much a bandwagon as were outcome based education and whole language in previous years—differentiation needs to be noted as one piece in the very big puzzle of educational improvement. But without shifts in some related and relevant areas, differentiation is just another panacea that is no more likely to improve the school experience for gifted children than is changing one spark plug on an eight-cylinder car in hopes that the car's overall performance will improve.

Yet, I believe there is hope when it comes to "doing" differentiation appropriately—rather, there is HOPE. For proper differentiation of curriculum demands more than "doing"; it also requires

Heart

Outlook

Procedures

Expectations

that differ substantially from what we may now accept as adequate. Let's examine each.

Heart: Who can argue that putting your heart into something is *not* the most important ingredient

to ultimate success? If people change instructional practices because it is somebody else's idea to do so, the change will be as long lived as a snowball in Sarasota. I saw this first-hand in a school district where I worked some years ago. The newly-minted curriculum director attended a workshop or two on authentic assessment and decided our teaching crew should buy into it. Giving us reams of paperwork and the promise of a release day to learn it from the experts, the curriculum director rallied for authentic assessment with everything save a bonfire and a pep rally. Two years later, that idea exited as the Ohio Proficiency Tests were adopted. Forward thrust was halted, engines reversed. Only the school's veterans took it in stride, as they had ridden on other abandoned bandwagons, and so, never really changed their assessment practices, authentic or otherwise.

I'm afraid that differentiation is headed down this same route unless both administrators *and* teachers commit to the long term, with gusto and heart. This is the only way that sustained change ever occurs. This systemic shift is achingly slow, slower than many administrators and legislators have the patience to

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endure. So if (when?) differentiation as a positive movement ebbs, I can already hear the chorus of our school’s most experienced teachers: “Another big idea bites the dust.”

Without heart, even good ideas die.

Outlook: There are lots of glitzy posters published by *SUCCESSORIES* that leave readers with the transparent message that “attitude is everything.” This ought to be obvious, but common sense isn’t always in abundance, especially in educational arenas.

Still, sometimes glitz can work, and that is the case with differentiation. Without the proper outlook on the part of individual teachers, differentiation will exist only in theory. What does outlook entail?

- a belief that gifted children are capable of more than a general curriculum allows or encourages;
- an attitude that any teacher of gifted students is competent only to the extent that he or she is willing to admit to *not* being the font of all knowledge; and
- a strength to admit that repetitive practices, given as classwork or homework, is nothing but a waste of time for students who soak up their lessons as efficiently as a dry sponge absorbs a puddle.

The above attributes can never be measured by a test and are seldom available to view on a job resume. Instead, they either exist inside the person or they don’t; and if they don’t, pity the gifted child whose needs and desires remain unaddressed.

Procedures: Think back to the best teachers you ever had. One of mine was Mrs. Voyer, my teacher in a fourth/fifth grade of 48 students in a Catholic school, where class size was not an

issue—they were *all* big! As a 4th grader, I was told a month after school began to sit in the middle row of the room, right next to the fifth graders.

“ . . . And listen to the lessons I teach them, James, because you are capable of understanding them.”

Such a simple procedure, and such a respectful and efficient one.

True differentiation will occur only if it is seen as extending beyond curriculum and into the realm of the human spirit. Mrs. Voyer did this naturally, and millions of teachers do so today. They don’t need the cumbersome forms that are part and parcel to curriculum compacting. Instead, they need acknowledgment that their gut instincts have value:

- like allowing Sara to skip 8th grade English class twice a week so she can go to the school library to work on completing the novel she is writing.
- like allowing Rachel, who is raising funds to build a local animal shelter, to use this work for credit in math, social studies, and community service.
- like challenging Phil to write a book report on *Fahrenheit 451* without once using the letter “E” in his 500-word assignment—and giving him extra time, if needed, and extra credit, if desired.

The best way for these procedures to become a part of one’s teaching repertoire is to pair a teacher who does this naturally with one who does it grudgingly, woefully, sporadically, or without confidence. Then, sit back and watch the sparks fly!

Expectations: People do not feel disrespected by having someone think more of them than they think of themselves. Gifted kids, so prone to self-criticism and perfectionism, are especially vulnerable to setting the bar not only too high, but

in the wrong place. They strive for goals that are not only out of reach, they are also out of balance. The sensitive teacher, the effective teacher, emits casual and formal messages that new insights, ideas, and perceptions are more vital to a well-lived life than are straight-As and flawless projects, those idolized facades others use to measure success.

My son, always a writer but seldom a speller, was lucky enough to have had three teachers—in grades four, eight, and twelve—who acknowledged to him that his energies needed to be directed toward the creative, rather than the mechanical, aspects of his mind. They focused on Matt’s ideas, his vocabulary, his imagery, for they knew that it was there that his strengths lie. In so doing, they validated Matt, not just his work. And he remembers them still, and fondly. In essence, Matt’s best writing teachers acknowledged the strength of his thoughts, not the limits of his grammar.

Expectations for gifted children are generally seen in relation to GPA, class rank, honor roll, and such. But, these are artificial barometers of success, something that is known to any teacher who views differentiation as a ticket to educational nirvana.

Without the sustained acknowledgment that even gifted children have different and varied learning and emotional needs, differentiation will come and go as quickly as a roll of quarters in Las Vegas. And without putting into practice the strategies we know are best for gifted children, all the best of intentions will be for naught. Let us recognize that the singular contribution to be made through curriculum differentiation is not half as strong as the contribution made if we see differentiation within a wider context: the context of HOPE. **GCT**