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Strategies and Instructional Models

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Writing Assignment #2

Jeff Danielian, editor of Teaching for High Potential (THP), writes that “High-potential students are in classrooms across our country, but their ability will not be fully realized without teachers who are trained and who have the resources to find and cultivate that hidden talent” (2013). Classrooms all across the country have gifted students sitting in them who are bored and disinterested in school because they aren’t being challenged. Some of these students might just be going through the motions because they think that is what’s expected of them, and they are trying to please their teacher and parents. Other students might be acting out behaviorally because they are tired of sitting through lessons on material they mastered months or years ago. Although it’s vital to differentiate instruction and compact the curriculum through extension activities and independent study, it’s more important to provide pretest opportunities to students so that they can be identified as having already achieved mastery in particular subjects or with certain skills.

Whether students are being presented with new content (as in classes like science or social studies) or participating in skill work (i.e. spelling or grammar), they should be offered a pretest so it can be determined if they have already mastered the skill or know enough content that re-learning it would serve as a waste of time. It’s impossible to provide appropriate extension activities if a formative assessment isn’t given to provide teachers with an idea of what students are already able to do or what they already know. In my advanced humanities classes, students are already learning more advanced vocabulary words; but a pretest of the unit’s vocabulary words allow me to identify which students already know 80% of the words that the class will be learning. Making these students work with SAT vocabulary words they already know would be a waste of time for them. After the pretest, students who scored high might decide not to use compacting; but students should be given the option after the pretest indicates what they know. Additionally, teachers must be willing to do something with the pretest information. In an article regarding talent search development, Assouline et al (2013) writes that, “Fewer than 10% of the educators in Olszewski-Kubilius’ and Lee’s study used talent search scores to program for their students…The disconnect between the information revealed by students’ above-level test scores and actual school-based programming is an unfortunate waste of valuable information that could provide important data for more differentiated programming that aligns the learner’s needs with the academic program” (136). Admittedly, I’ve been guilty of giving a pretest and then not providing extension activities after the pretest for gifted students. In the past, I’ve used the pretest to identify struggling students; but it’s just as important to identify gifted students whose curriculum could be compacted to be more challenging. Winebrenner (2012) writes, “Equality in education has never meant that all students should be treated the same. Rather, it means that all students should enjoy equal opportunities to actualize their learning potential” (69). The pretest is the key to unlocking the information about which kids need support and which kids need more independent study.

In my advanced humanities classes, students are learning skill work (vocabulary, spelling, grammar, reading comprehension) and new content (social studies content, novel studies). Prior to reading the chapters on compacting in Teaching Gifted Kids in Today’s Classroom, I thought that I could pretest each type of learning in the same ways. I also was overwhelmed with the amount of pretests that would need to be completed and how to differentiate for so many different skill levels. The Most Difficult First strategy would be a practical way to start using compacting in my classroom for grammar instruction. As I begin to utilize compacting, this strategy will allow me to “teach one lesson to all students in a particular subject area” while still allowing opportunities for advanced students to work on extension activities of their own choosing (Winebrenner, 45). The Learning Contract would be a useful strategy for my unit on geography and map skills. This is our first required unit in social studies each year, and often I have students who this is review for. After a pretest, I would know which students needed instruction on which map skills and geography related content. The Learning Contract strategy allows students to “complete extension activities [but] still receive direct instruction in areas in the unit they have not yet mastered” (Winebrenner, 51).

For most social studies units, however, the Study Guide (with or without the extension menu) method will be the most helpful compacting strategy. Most of the content in our ancient civilizations units is new for students. “The Study Guide method…enables you to compact new content in any subject area by reducing the amount of time gifted students must spend learning grade level standards” (Winebrenner, 73). I plan to try this out soon for our ancient Rome unit, since I know I have at least one student who will need differentiation for this unit. I can’t wait to use his exceptional knowledge in this subject area to practice compacting the curriculum and allowing him to become a resident expert.

References

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Winebrenner, S. (2012). *Teaching gifted kids in today’s classroom*. (3rd ed.). Minneapolis, Minnesota: Free Spirit Publishing.