

Differentiation

In differentiated classrooms, teachers begin where students are, not the front of a curriculum guide. They accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways. Thus, they also accept and act on the premise that teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction through different learning modalities by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity.

In differentiated classrooms, teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's. These teachers believe that students should be held to high standards. They work to ensure that struggling, advanced, and in-between students think and work harder than they meant to; achieve more than they thought they could; and come to believe that learning involves effort, risk, and personal triumph.

(Carol Ann Tomlinson)

How can a teacher differentiate instruction for gifted learners?

There are many ways teachers can modify instruction to be appropriately challenging and interesting for gifted learners. Among them are:

- using advanced text materials
- providing advanced novels on a class theme
- having advanced tasks at learning centers
- using advanced computer programs providing varied journal prompts
- assigning activities at different levels of complexity
- encouraging students to help set criteria for quality
- providing expert-level goals for student products
- encouraging and supporting independent study
- pre-testing students and exempting them from practicing skills they already have mastered
- varying homework by student need
- encouraging student choice of topics for investigation
- varying working groups, including opportunities for work with other advanced students and opportunities to work alone
- coaching for a student's personal best in thought, activities, and products.

What is the role of parents in supporting differentiated classrooms?

Parents can play essential roles in encouraging appropriate differentiation by:

- asking teachers to specify ways in which differentiated instruction will be provided
- understanding that teachers can not (and should not) differentiate all assignments and materials every day
- encouraging students to let teachers know when assignments are a good fit - and when they are not
- encouraging students to compete against themselves rather than comparing themselves to peers
- volunteering in the classroom helping secure a range of classroom materials.