Gifted Education Strategies - What Works?
Separate studies conducted during the last few decades have demonstrated both the need for and the benefits of gifted education programs (Hutchinson, 2010). But for many of the websites and journals on gifted education one hot topic seems to be prevalent: gifted education strategies – what works?

Differentiated Instruction
There has been great debate over the last few years about the best strategies for gifted students. The answer? “It all depends on how each child learns best,” says Julian Kitchen, an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Brock University (OCT, 2013). This comment makes me immediately think of “differentiated instruction.” In fact, The National Association of Gifted Children listed “differentiation” as a hot topic for gifted education:

“Just like snowflakes, no two students are alike. Therefore, differentiation of curriculum and instruction is one strategy that educators can use to respect and celebrate the variation found in their students. Essentially, differentiation involves the modification of content, process, product, and/or learning environment to tailor curriculum and instruction to the individual needs of all learners - including gifted learners (National Association of Gifted Children Website).”

According to Susan Winebrenner (1997) one key element of differentiated instruction for gifted students is pre-assessment. “All learning activities, including thematic, interdisciplinary units, should have pre-assessment opportunities available for students who volunteer to demonstrate prior knowledge and mastery of concepts, ideas and skills. Whatever method you have planned for assessing student progress during or at the end of a particular unit of study is the same method you can use for pre-assessment.” The pre-assessment is one step in what is called “compacting,” which means finding ways for gifted students to spend less time with the curriculum designed for age peers.

One way to differentiate instruction for gifted students is through differentiating products. Winebrenner recommends providing opportunities for choice to gifted students. “Always offer a menu of ways in which information may be shared, like those found in the Tic Tac Toe Menu “ (1997, p.2).

Differentiation is not the only answer to providing the best services and programming for gifted students in the classroom, but it is an essential part of ensuring that high-ability learners are adequately challenged and make continuous progress.

Tic Tac Toe Menu
Provides different opportunities for a student to share information on a topic.

To the right is an example of a menu related to cell biology but it could be adapted for any topic.
According to Carol Ann Tomlinson (1997) in her article “What it Means to Teach Gifted Learners Well”

"What it takes to teach gifted learners well is actually a little common sense. It begins with the premise that each child should come to school to stretch and grow daily. It includes the expectation that the measure of progress and growth is competition with oneself rather than competition against others. And it envisions schooling as an escalator on which students continually progress, rather than a series of stairs, with landings on which advanced learners consistently wait."

**Good Curriculum and Instruction**  
Good curriculum and instruction for gifted learners begins with good curriculum and instruction. Like all students, gifted learners need learning experiences that are rich. That is, they need learning experiences that are organized by key concepts and principles of a discipline rather than by facts. They need content that is relevant to their lives, activities that cause them to process important ideas at a high level, and products that cause them to grapple with meaningful problems and pose defensible solutions (Tomlinson, 1997).

**Compacting**  
When you compact, you also plan differentiated activities for gifted students to work on instead of that part of the curriculum they have already mastered. When compacting and differentiation opportunities are regularly present, your most capable learners can enjoy the wonderful experience of learning new content as well as learning how to learn (Winebrenner, 1997).

Researchers have found that elementary teachers can eliminate from 24 to 70% of high-ability students' curriculum by compacting without any negative affect on test scores or performance (National Association for Gifted Children website).

When classroom teachers eliminated between 40-50% of the previously mastered regular curriculum for high-ability students, no differences were found between students whose work was compacted and students who did all the work in reading, math computation, social studies, and spelling. Almost all classroom teachers learned to use compacting, but needed coaching and help to substitute appropriately challenging options (National Association for Gifted Children website).

In Tools for Schools, the U.S. Department of Education reported that - "the compacting process can be implemented in a wide variety of settings, with positive effects for both students and teachers (National Association for Gifted Children website).

**Acceleration**  
Educational acceleration is one of the cornerstones of exemplary gifted education practices, with more research supporting this intervention than any other in the literature on gifted individuals. The practice of educational acceleration has long been used to match high level student general ability and specific talent with optimal learning opportunities. The purposes of acceleration as a practice with the gifted are:

1) to adjust the pace of instruction to the students’ capability in order to develop a sound work ethic  
2) to provide an appropriate level of challenge in order to avoid the boredom from repetitious learning  
3) to reduce the time period necessary for students to complete traditional schooling.
Acceleration benefits many highly capable individuals by better motivating them toward schooling, enhancing their involvement with extracurricular activities, promoting more challenging options in the middle school and high school years, and preparing them to begin contributing to society at an earlier age. While not as widely used as a practice with diverse gifted learners, evidence suggests that it can be a successful strategy with low income, minority, and students with learning problems as well (National Association for Gifted Children website).

**Grouping**

Students at all achievement levels (high, medium and low) benefited from cluster grouping and other forms of instructional grouping accompanied by differentiated instruction and content. Students who were in cluster groups scored significantly higher than students who did More students were identified as high achieving during the three years that cluster grouping was used in the school (National Association for Gifted Children website).

Achievement is increased when gifted and talented students are grouped together for enriched or accelerated learning. Ability grouping without curricular acceleration or enrichment produces little or no differences in student achievement. Bright, average, and struggling students all benefit from being grouped with others in their ability/instructional groups when the curriculum is adjusted to the aptitude levels of the group. When gifted students are grouped together and receive advanced enrichment or acceleration, they benefit the most because they outperform control group students who are not grouped and do not receive enrichment or acceleration by five months to a full year on achievement tests (National Association for Gifted Children website).

**Resources**

Council for Exceptional Children [https://www.cec.sped.org/](https://www.cec.sped.org/)

Gate Parent Association (Gifted and Talented Parent Association) [http://www.gatecalgary.ca/](http://www.gatecalgary.ca/)


