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Exceptionally able students will always do well whatever the circumstances!

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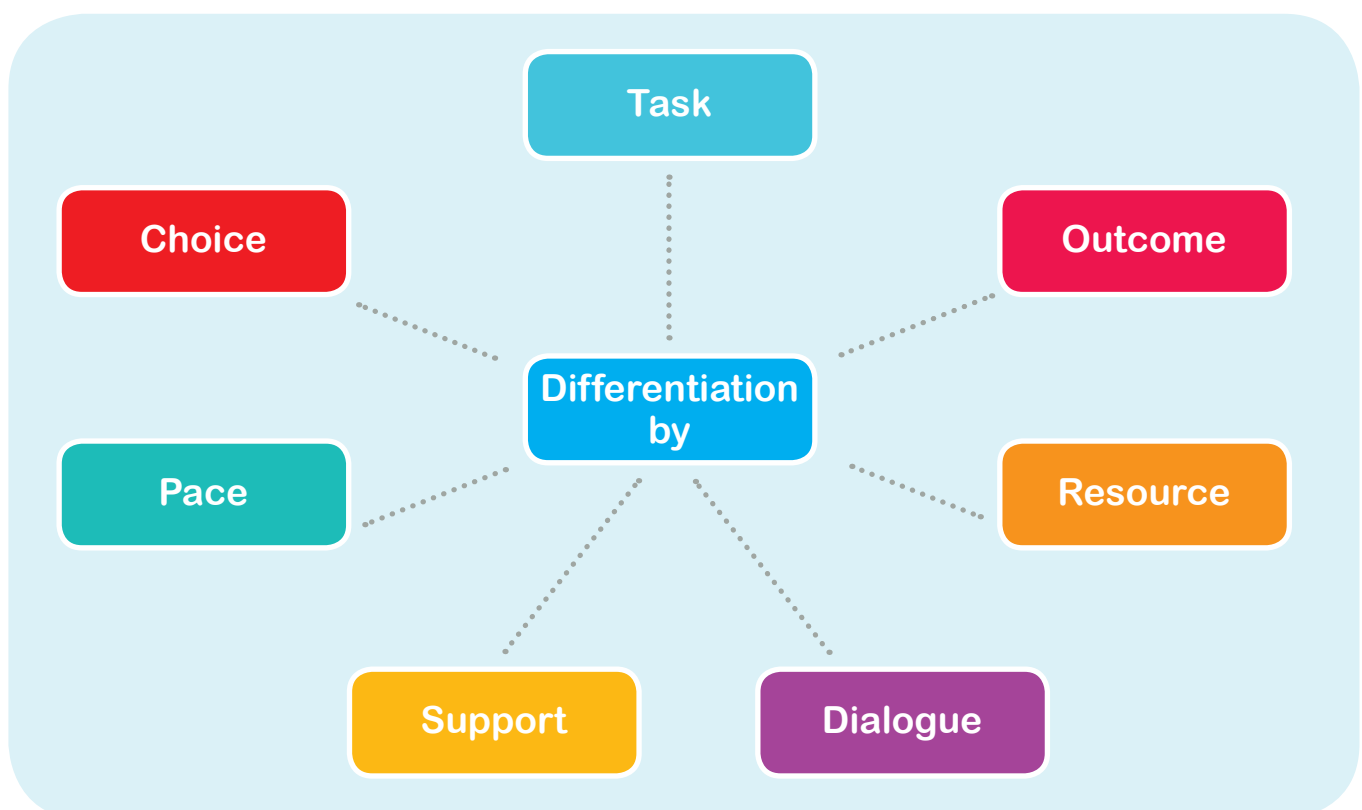
Exceptionally able students are so clever they do well with or without special education provision!

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The typical picture of the exceptionally able student, as evidenced above, is often one of a hard-worker who diligently completes work and is perhaps known as the class 'brain box'. This model defines the student as self-reliant and not in need of any special attention. However, in reality the picture is much more complex than that.

Exceptionally able students are not a homogeneous group and even identifying them can be a problem. Once a teacher has recognised that she has an exceptionally able student in her class, the response is often to presume that he/she will always excel, without any special provision. But, far from leaving them to get on with their own work, students who are classified in this way belong on a continuum of students with special educational needs. However, in most cases their needs are best met as part of the normal differentiated classroom provision.

If 'differentiation' is to teach to the differing needs of individual students, in the case of exceptionally able students it should allow for advanced learning opportunities both within and beyond the curriculum. Differentiated teaching may seem a daunting task but it can be planned for and organised in the classroom in many ways. Below, we introduce you to some of the ways in which you can help to structure learning for exceptionally students by addressing their particular needs.



By task

A variety of tasks are set which relate to the same activity. Exceptionally able students can begin at a higher level, miss the first activities or move through the work at an increased rate. This may also mean missing out some of the work.

Benefits

Exceptionally able students can make rapid progress and work can be better matched to their abilities while less able students can also make appropriate progress. The tasks can be phased so those exceptionally able students move on to increasingly more difficult work.

By outcome

The same content, material, stimulus or task is used for all the students in the class. This works at its best when the outcome of the work is not prescribed or when the task is open-ended.

Benefits

Different outcomes can be sought so that exceptionally able students can extend their thinking. The class can work as individuals or in groups.

By resource

Different types of materials are provided to different members of the class. All the class might be answering the same questions or researching the same information but the resources used will be matched to ability. Less demanding work may have less dense text with more illustrations. More demanding resources may have more dense text and a richer, more complex structure. Exceptionally able students can use more demanding word banks, data files or image banks.

Benefits

Exceptionally able students can research the ideas in greater depth

and their thinking skills will be extended. Less able students will be able to achieve at a similar level as they have less complex resources.

By dialogue

The most regularly used form of differentiation is by dialogue. Exceptionally able students often only need to have a basic outline of the work explained to them. This can be a quite sophisticated explanation which sets high expectations and assumes high levels of understanding. Less able students will need a full explanation, with more detailed examples and perhaps even further illustration of the ideas and expectations. The use of targeted questioning to elicit a range of different responses, including high-level responses from exceptionally able students and small group discussions, can also raise the challenge.

Benefits

Exceptionally able students can make more progress by being encouraged to develop a higher level of understanding and moving on to more demanding tasks as soon as they are ready. Differentiated language is used by the teacher to challenge the thinking of the exceptionally able and to increase the level of thinking and discussion.

By support

All students need an equal amount of support from the teacher. For exceptionally able students it is the nature of the support that should be varied. The support time available to exceptionally able students may well be used to question the student, to encourage them to explore ideas more deeply, to introduce alternative ways of approaching the work or exploring extension into ICT systems.

Benefits

The work of teachers is better targeted to individual needs and will increase the level of interaction.

By pace

Some exceptionally able students thrive when asked to work at a fast pace, as they do not need all the small steps to be explained. They can deduce for themselves the next step in a process. They are often able to master complex tasks quickly and like to move rapidly through the early stages. In contrast, there are occasions when exceptionally able students actually work more slowly and painstakingly produce work of greater length, detail or complexity. This is often the case in creative or imaginative work.

Benefits

When asked to work at pace, some exceptionally able students move onto high-level work quickly and therefore stretch their abilities. By contrast, when they are allowed more time to complete tasks they can achieve increased levels of attainment and more highly 'finished' or inventive outcomes.

By choice

Given the opportunity to select work for themselves students can choose activities that they find more interesting and matched to their abilities. Students can be given an opportunity to select from a range of starting points, materials, subjects or processes. They may also choose to extend or adapt the set work themselves.

Benefits

Exceptionally able students can make choices and work with ideas that are well matched to their interests, enthusiasms and abilities.

In this short article we have been able to offer you just a brief glimpse into the ways in which differentiated teaching can help exceptionally able students. By now your school will have received a copy of the *Guidelines for teachers of exceptionally able students*, from which this advice has been taken. You can also download the guidelines from the NCCA website, at www.ncca.ie/publications.