

Introduction

This book is for teachers who would like to do more for advanced students but feel unequipped to do so. This may be because of time constraints, a perceived lack of information on gifted education, or the loss of funding that once provided helpful resources for teachers. Whatever situation you face, this book offers quick and immediate help in supporting your efforts to assist students who need more than the regular curriculum can provide. The idea for the book emerged because we kept seeing the struggles of teachers who wanted to assist these students but felt overtaxed by their other responsibilities. Frequently, in workshops or seminars or in private emails, we would hear such comments as the following:

“What can I do right now in the class I’ve planned for tomorrow?”

“What do I do about this kid who finishes everything in half the time as everyone else?”

“How can I be expected to adjust every single thing we’re doing?”

“Do you have anything we can use in this school that doesn’t require reading a long textbook with complicated instructions that only someone with no other responsibilities could possibly do?”

“We’re desperate in this school. We lost our funding for gifted kids, and because parents are upset, the principal is now pushing us all to differentiate more. Is there a way to simplify this?”

“I’m not an expert in gifted, and I don’t have time to become one so I can help the three kids in my class who need it.”

While we are not suggesting that an entire field can be conveniently boiled down to a few tips, we feel there is a great need today for some simply stated principles that any teacher can use without having to take

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a course in gifted education, redesign a curriculum, or attend multiple workshops to understand. This volume has a far less ambitious goal: to offer a guide of proven strategies that teachers can tailor to the needs of their advanced students in a way that is both manageable and appropriate to their circumstances. In many cases, particularly those that involve creative processes, these strategies have the added benefit of extending the education of *all* students, not just those who learn quickly.

The book assumes that readers have little time, few funds in their schools for gifted education, and might have little training as well. It further assumes that readers care not only about children struggling to keep up but also about those on the other end of the spectrum—the ones who seem eager to do more but rarely have the chance to develop their gifts. The benefits of this volume are the following:

- Its brevity! Each chapter is short and to the point to accommodate the schedule of busy teachers.
- It challenges the deficiency mentality of “not enough money, time, or expertise.” So what? Some things you do well, and you can assist advanced learners in your class.
- It starts with you, the teacher—your unique abilities, your circumstances, your students—rather than forcing you to reach goals that, for the present at least, are not realistic or practical.
- It helps you create a reasonable and workable plan that will benefit not only your fast learners but everyone else as well.
- It helps you focus on what *you* would like to do in your classroom. In an ideal world, what would you like to do? The book helps you take a small piece of that ideal and do what you can.
- It provides simple ways that you can engage students, vary levels of challenge for different ability levels, and find appropriate resources.
- It demonstrates how effective and inspiring creative strategies can be—how well they integrate into existing lessons, relate to curriculum standards, and benefit children at all levels.
- It also shows how to tackle more ambitious projects for advanced learners in *manageable ways*. Doing independent studies, reader’s theater productions, or any other long-term endeavors need not demand an inordinate amount of planning and organizing.
- It offers examples of strategies from classroom teachers that stimulate advanced learners to think more critically and apply their abilities in new ways. Subjects include language arts, social studies, math, science, and the arts.

Credit for this book is due to the teachers who shared their lives with us—not only those who explained what they do for advanced students but

also those who reported some frustrations they faced. “So much of what I read or learn in a workshop could only work in an ideal setting,” one told us. This sentiment surfaced repeatedly, and brought us to this question: Is it possible to provide ways to support the advanced students without studying long treatises on the subject, without workshops (which schools cannot always provide), without major reorganizing of one’s classroom? The answer is yes. However, this brings us to another question: What does it mean to support advanced students?

The eight chapters in this book attempt to answer this question. The first three look at the immediate circumstances of classroom teachers—both the challenges they face and the resources and possibilities at their fingertips. Chapter 1, “Understanding Advanced Learners” provides practical insight into the needs of advanced learners and how we, as teachers, can respond to them, despite limited human and material resources, planning time, and other challenges. Chapter 2, “Making the Most of Your Resources” focuses on *what we already have* (rather than what we lack) and on how we can use existing resources to expand learning opportunities for those who most need them. Coming from the classroom, these strategies can immediately meet, at least, some needs of advanced students, can often enrich the classroom for all students, and can do this without causing undue stress on our time and resources. Chapter 3, “Creating Appropriate Goals for Advanced Students,” explores how we can determine reasonable and workable goals for helping advanced students. Examining the different educational needs these learners have, the chapter guides us in deciding what we can *reasonably do* for them in our present circumstances.

Chapter 4, “Meeting the Needs of Advanced Students: Strategies to Begin,” and Chapter 5, “Meeting the Needs of Advanced Students: Strategies to Extend Learning,” clearly delineate the progression from simpler to more complex adjustments for advanced learners. The goal is to show how, through the simplest adjustment in a source or thinking process, we can immediately create more challenge for gifted students. From these simpler changes, we develop the confidence and flexibility to attempt larger projects that can potentially benefit *all* our students. Being able to shift between simpler to more complex strategies is an important skill today. Teachers quickly need to be able to determine how they can tailor an assignment for more advanced learners in one lesson and then, in another, develop a more ambitious plan (e.g., an independent study or an integrated arts process). These strategies become more evident in Chapter 6, “Teaching Advanced Students in Language Arts and Social Studies,” and Chapter 7, “Teaching Advanced Students in Science and Mathematics.”

The book concludes with Chapter 8, “Keeping Yourself Inspired.” We wanted to include this chapter because, in the stories shared by teachers,

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we found so many were challenged to find time to replenish themselves. Many said that the students fed *them*, gave them energy and inspiration. Nevertheless, the daily demand to prepare students for standardized tests and ensure that they all achieve a prescribed level of competence in all subjects wore on their spirits. This chapter suggests some helpful ways for teachers to step back from the fray and consider the things in their lives that revive and inspire them. Returning periodically to these sources keeps their imaginative powers alive and nurtures their growth in the classroom.

We hope this book will be a helpful guide for teachers, not a stern taskmaster requiring that they give up their peace of mind to find a path they can follow. All educators who care for the untapped talent in our schools and feel the tragedy of its loss in the hurried pace of defensive schooling want to do something. Yet they also have to “be real,” as one teacher put it, about their circumstances and responsibilities not only to the other students but also to administrators and parents. This book acknowledges the realities that many teachers face but also asks, Where are the opportunities? Where are the cracks in the window, the little open doors, and the sparks of interest that can ignite the imaginations of young minds? It offers what we hope will be helpful responses to two pertinent questions: What can we reasonably do? And are we doing it?

Theodore Roosevelt put it aptly when he said,

*“Do what you can,
with what you have,
where you are.”*