Motivating Adolescent Gifted Learners

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Adolescent gifted learners are some of the most complex students a teacher will encounter in his or her career. Not only are they experiencing adolescent development, which has its own issues, but they are gifted on top of it. Trying to keep adolescent gifted learners motivated, engaged, and productive is a never-ending battle. This article shares some of the reasons adolescent gifted learners underachieve, as well as practical ideas teachers can employ to keep their students on track.

Why do Adolescents Underachieve?

Successful students have learned to adapt to the educational setting through the many challenges they encounter. Gifted students often don't encounter sufficient academic challenges for them to build the skills they need to adapt to a rigorous setting. This lack of challenge can be a reason they have too little or too much of what is required to thrive in school. Additionally, there are many reasons students can run into the "can'ts." (See table below.)

Unlocking Underachievement

This article focuses on the one challenge most prominent in the battle of underachievement: Motivation. Overwhelmingly, the underachieving adolescent gifted learners I've worked with tell me they don't feel the need to achieve. They don't find the work valuable or interesting. To help teachers develop students' intrinsic drive to learn, I propose five principles of curriculum and instruction.

Principle 1: Make it Relevant

Adolescence is a time for personal growth and development. During the middle school and early high school years, youth are struggling to develop a sense of identity, are growing into their bodies, and are working out mood and emotional reactions. The adolescent brain is also undergoing enormous amounts of change through circuit refinement, pruning, and connection-making. These cognitive changes signal a shift in how adolescent youth approach learning. The connections made during the teen years will most likely hard-wire the brain for the future. For instance, youth exposed to theater, dance, music, and the arts during adolescence will stay attuned to them in later years. Conversely, students who are disengaged academically, socially, or physically during the adolescent years most likely will stay this way for years to come.

It is essential that middle school and high school teachers help students find themselves in the curriculum. For instance, in social studies students can identify a social issue that is important to them. With assistance, they can map out ways they can impact the situation either directly or indirectly. Another way to help students connect with the curriculum is through interest-based surveys or discussions. This will help you as the teacher focus your topic discussions or project work toward what interests students.

Suggestions for making curriculum and instruction relevant:

- Allow students to share themselves or their passions with the class.
- Provide time in your day for students to meet in interest-based small groups to find commonalities and develop bonds.
- Have students start thinking about career pathways—built on their personal interests—then contact experts in those fields and bring them into the classroom to share their schooling careers.

Principle 2: Make it Meaningful

When students find curriculum and instruction meaningful and relevant they are more likely to engage in the learning. Meaningfulness in curriculum occurs when learners are able to see themselves in the learning or find the information they are learning immediately useful. Lessons that incorporate personal experiences, authentic productions, and self-reflection can bring the curriculum alive for the adolescent gifted learner. For instance, a child may connect with a situation experienced by a character in a novel, or feel open to express his or her feelings during a role playing activity.

Suggestions for making curriculum and instruction meaningful:

- Use metaphors, similes, and analogies to make unfamiliar topics familiar.
- Use mnemonic devices, acronyms, or acrostics to help learners with lists and orders of items so that they can map or visualize the decision making process.
- Use mind maps to connect seemingly unconnected topics.
- Use elaborative rehearsals such as mock trials, role-playing, and simulations.
- Integrate personal stories (both the students' and yours) into the content.
- Connect the content to what is current (use the media and/or Internet).

Principle 3: Make it Rigorous

Rigor involves the advancement of intellectual engagement that requires learners to stretch beyond their comfort zone to reach what Vygotsky termed their "zone of proximal development." A student's zone of proximal development is defined as the difference between what a child can do with help and what he or she can do without help (Morris, nd).

Rigor also involves the use of complex thinking, which is the cognitive process that requires sophisticated forms of and

Reasons for Underachievement

TOO LITTLE:	TOO MUCH/MANY:	CAN'TS:
Motivation Challenge Interest Self-efficacy Impulse control Perseverance Ability to control perseveration Balance in life Product orientation	Self-confidence Other activities Procrastination Self-pity Dependency on others Distractions Ideas	Can't determine the individual tasks from the greater project Can't put thought into action Can't follow through Can't fail Can't get organized

(Adapted from Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000)

interactions between creative thinking, critical reasoning, and advanced levels of inquiry, problem-solving strategies, and metacognition skills. Bloom's Taxonomy provides an excellent scaffold for building a framework of increasing rigor. Curriculum that is created for gifted learners must extend to the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).

Suggestions for making curriculum and instruction rigorous:

- Teach critical, creative, and effective thinking strategies throughout your content areas—and encourage students to use them. (See Edward deBono's CoRT Thinking Program: http://www.edwdebono.com.)
- Teach the metacognitive skills of self-reflection, summarization, and effective memorization strategies (see mnemonic devices, acronyms, or acrostics above).
- Use brainstorming and SCAMPER techniques to help students create new and original products.
- Help students apply content knowledge to applications across disciplines using authentic products.
- Use more complex/abstract concept development to encourage deeper investigation and understanding. Example: For the concept of "cycles," students can examine the simple/concrete examples of water, air, and the seasons in order to examine what characteristics define the concept. Following this would be a discussion of the complex/abstract examples of the concept found in politics, economics, and philosophy.

Concept Development: Cycles

SIMPLE/CONCRETE	COMPLEX/ABSTRACT
Water Air Seasons	Political Economic Philosophical

Principle 4: Make it Safe for Intellectual Risk Taking

Many gifted adolescent learners were not exposed to learning experiences that required sustained intellectual effort during their elementary years. The lack of true challenge early did not provide them the opportunity to learn how to struggle, make mistakes or persevere at tasks that require complex thinking. Teachers working with adolescent gifted learners must create safe and supportive learning environments that allow learners to take intellectual risks. Students should be exposed to strategies and techniques for dealing with failure, keeping organized, and maintaining persistence.

Suggestions for making curriculum and instruction safe for intellectual risk taking:

- Show learners how making mistakes leads to incredible inventions (share the book: Mistakes that Worked by Charlotte Jones and John Obrien).
- Play up problem-solving techniques—give them many types and help them identify when to use them.
- Encourage students to work outside of their preferred learning style.
- Offer learners appropriate strategies for dealing with stress: meditation, exercises, the arts, taking deep breaths, or listening to soothing music.

By offering instances of "failure" and allowing for the re-working of solutions through positive criticism, the teacher can strengthen the overall comfort ability of being incorrect.

Principle 5: Make Choices

Students are motivated to learn when meaningful choices are offered. Student ownership and responsibility for the learning increases, and creative production is strengthened. Choices can be accomplished in a variety of ways:

- Allow for students to choose different ways to demonstrate what they know
- Allow students to develop and investigate topics of interest
- Allow students to use a variety of materials and resources to complete projects and assignments.
- Provide for various seating arrangements or grouping arrangements in the classroom.
- Allow students to create their own evaluation rubrics and types of assessments.

Choice Menus

An excellent way for teachers to provide for choices in the classroom is to create *choice menus*, which are a formatting strategy for differentiating curriculum and instruction. Choice menus should allow students to:

- Use their preferred learning style,
- Incorporate their personal interests into their learning, and/or
- Study a topic in depth.

The first step in constructing choice menus is to decide what the "essential learning" is in the unit or project students are to complete. Essential learnings are the big ideas, concepts, themes, or generalizations that make the topic/unit of study important to future learning.

Second, decide how the menu will be arranged. Teachers can arrange the menu so that it focuses on learning profiles/styles, interests, or students' need to go into greater depth. Choice menus for gifted students can be created to either replace or supplement the regular curriculum. Remember that choice menus are not intended to be MORE work, but to be more engaging work.

Third, build your choice menu by integrating Bloom's Taxonomy and Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory (or other learning styles you prefer). Ensure the learning experiences scaffold to higher, more complex activities that move to authenticity. For an excellent template for constructing choice menus, see the Matrix Plan or Integration Matrix in Diane Heacox's book *Differentiating Instruction In the Regular Classroom* (2002, pp. 80-83).

Finally, keeping gifted students motivated to learn can be accomplished through engaging, interesting and rigorous challenges.

Key to getting and keeping gifted adolescent students motivated is by building the drive to achieve from extrinsic to intrinsic. Teachers can begin with external rewards (such as prizes, passes, and so forth), but they must move toward developing the learner's internal drive to succeed. As Sternberg and Grigorenko state in *Teaching for Successful Intelligence*, "Internally motivated individuals are able to maintain their motivation over the rising and falling of external rewards" (2000, p. 85). Developing internal forces comes from the learner's passions and engagement with content. Hooking the gifted adolescent through their interests will build the skills necessary to do well in future challenging courses.

Resources

Erwin, J. C. (2004). *The classroom of choice: Giving students what they need and getting what you want.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Feinstein, S. (2004). *Secrets of the teenage brain: Research-based strategies for reaching & teaching today's adolescents.* San Diego, CA: The Brain Store.

Heacox, D. (2002). *Differentiating*