

COLUMN

# Challenge vs. Differentiation: Why, What and How

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Traditionally, challenge has been determined by a set of descriptors left to the interpretation of educators, parents, and gifted students. Common adjectives attributed to work or assignments labeled as challenge include difficult, hard, fun, exciting, enrichment, novel, and special. A reexamination of the concept of challenge underscores its value as a measure to assess the adequacy of differentiation and/or a differentiated curriculum and not merely the descriptor for a differentiation or a differentiated curriculum. Following are some of the questions that are predominant in applying the challenge as a measure or assessment tool for the efficacy of differentiation as a curricular structure to accommodate the gifted:

The concept of a “challenge” often is perceived to be synonymous with the concept of differentiation and/or a differentiated curriculum. The lack of distinctive and specific identity for the term *challenge* has minimized its meaning and diminished its potential and relationship to the definition, design, and delivery of a differentiated curriculum for these students. While differentiation is based on the composition of elements to develop a curriculum structure, a challenge can and should be considered to be the basis for deciding the efficacy of what is included (and what is excluded) in forming a differentiated curriculum. A major concern to be resolved is whether differentiation is or is not aligned to the concept of challenge.

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Today’s interpretation of a challenge should be aligned to the match between the learner and the learning experience. The concept of challenge should be considered as an integral feature of a process that recognizes and responds to giftedness and gifted learners. Readiness and appropriateness are central themes to identify and define a challenge. Readiness refers to the connection or associative quality

The following table exemplifies some of the misunderstandings that seem to represent the multiple meanings of the concept of challenge and some of the consequences of these misunderstandings:

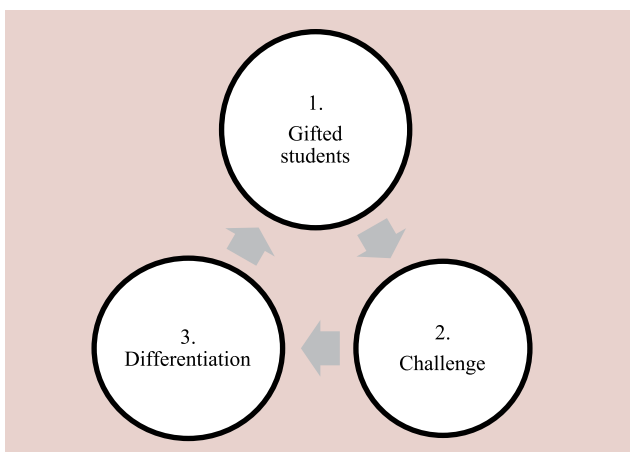
Today’s interpretation of a challenge should be aligned to the match between the learner and the learning experience. The concept of challenge should be considered as an integral feature of a process that recognizes and responds to giftedness and gifted learners. Readiness and appropriateness are central themes to identify and define a challenge. Readiness refers to the connection or associative quality

Patterns	Descriptor	Consequences
Challenge	The concept of challenge is generalized and applicable to all learning experiences and resides within the context of a differentiated curriculum.	The concept of challenge loses its unique signature to identify and support the necessary learning for gifted learners.
Challenge	The concept of a challenge is recognized as the foundation or rationale for a differentiated curriculum.	The concept of challenge becomes a means to the goal to provide for gifted students rather than a goal in and by itself for the gifted.
Challenge	The concept of a challenge is a decisive criterion for examining the value of the elements for inclusion with a differentiated curriculum.	The concept of challenge is a measure of what best meets the appropriate academic, social, personal needs of learning experiences for gifted students.

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Questions to ask	Consequences to ponder
What is the relationship between the basic or core curriculum and the challenge?	As state and national standards become more sophisticated and academically demanding, the concept of challenge for gifted students undergoes changes. In other words, the concept of challenge is fluid rather than fixed and requires reexamination over time.
How is the challenge assessed as a prerequisite to create a differentiated curriculum as well as an outcome of students' participation in a differentiated curriculum?	There needs to be two forms of assessment for a challenge: one that assesses the effects of the challenge on the gifted learner and a second that assesses the effects of the challenge on the goals and outcomes of the differentiated curriculum in which the challenge is located.
How is a challenge defined and redefined with relationship to individualized and/or group learning to ensure its significance?	The challenge is both specific and general as it serves individual and groups of gifted learners.

between the learner and learning experience. Pertinent points of inquiry are the following: Is the challenge within or outside of the reach, of the learners; what are the ramifications to prepare the learner for the challenge? Appropriateness refers to the degree to which the learning experience reinforces the academic, personal and/or social needs, interests, and abilities of the learner. Within this definition is a concern for relating the challenge to either a gifted learner individually or the group of gifted learners generally. Therefore, the concept of a challenge as a process depicts its role as a result of comprehending the nature and needs of the learner(s) and translating these understandings with clear and precise tenets to construct and implement a differentiated curriculum.



Dictionary definitions of a challenge state that it is a “difficulty that is stimulating.” With respect to gifted education, a challenge can be defined as the types of learning experiences to facilitate the decisions to select the necessary elements to comprise a differentiated curriculum.

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**Bio**

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