



DIFFERENTIAL EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES: METHODS OF WORKING WITH GIFTED STUDENTS IN FINNISH SCHOOLS

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Abstract: This article explores differential educational approaches applied in Finnish schools for working effectively with gifted students. Drawing on Finland's inclusive and flexible education system, the study investigates how teachers identify, support, and challenge high-ability learners without formal labeling. The article reviews classroom differentiation strategies, project-based learning models, and the integration of socio-emotional support as part of everyday instruction. Through qualitative analysis of policy documents, academic literature, and interviews with Finnish educators, the study highlights how equity-driven practices in Finland allow gifted students to thrive alongside their peers. The findings offer practical insights for adapting differentiated instruction methods in other educational contexts, particularly in countries undergoing curriculum reform.

Keywords: Gifted education, differentiation, Finnish schools, inclusive education, individualized learning, project-based learning, teacher autonomy, educational equity, flexible curriculum, talent development

Introduction. The education of gifted and talented students has long been a subject of debate and innovation in global pedagogy. As educational systems strive to become more inclusive, equitable, and student-centered, the challenge of meeting the needs of gifted learners—those with exceptional intellectual, creative, or academic capabilities—has taken on new dimensions. Traditionally, gifted education has involved segregation, specialized schools, or advanced programs aimed at accelerating high-achieving students. However, contemporary educational philosophies increasingly advocate for differentiated instruction and inclusive practices, where gifted students are supported within the general education environment.

Finland presents a unique and compelling case study in this regard. Unlike many other high-performing countries, Finland does not have a formal system of labeling or segregating gifted students. Instead, its education system is built upon principles of equity, flexibility, and individualization. Teachers are given significant autonomy to adapt instruction to meet diverse student needs, including those of high-ability learners. This approach aligns with the broader Finnish philosophy that every child deserves equal attention and opportunity to develop their full potential—regardless of whether they struggle academically or excel beyond the standard curriculum.

The absence of rigid gifted education programs in Finland does not imply a lack of support for gifted students. On the contrary, differentiation, enrichment, and student-led learning are deeply embedded in classroom practices. Finnish teachers are trained to recognize individual talents and provide opportunities for deeper exploration, critical thinking, and independent study within mixed-ability classrooms. This makes Finland a valuable model for countries seeking sustainable, inclusive ways to nurture gifted students without resorting to exclusivity or elitism.

This article aims to explore the specific methods used in Finnish schools to identify and work with gifted students through differentiated education. It examines how pedagogical flexibility, curriculum design, and teacher preparation converge to create an environment where gifted students can thrive. Furthermore, it considers how these practices might be adapted to different

educational systems, including those undergoing reform, such as Uzbekistan, where interest in inclusive gifted education is steadily growing.

By analyzing both policy frameworks and classroom strategies in the Finnish context, the study contributes to the growing body of international literature on inclusive gifted education and provides a set of practical insights for educators and policymakers working to balance excellence with equity.

Literature Review. The concept of giftedness has evolved significantly over the past century. Early models such as those by Terman [1] and Hollingworth [2] emphasized intelligence quotient (IQ) as the primary measure of giftedness, which led to the creation of segregated programs for high-IQ students. However, modern theories—such as Renzulli’s Three-Ring Conception [3] and Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences [4]—have expanded the definition to include creativity, task commitment, and various domains of human capability.

Recent studies stress the importance of differentiation and individualized instruction as essential tools for meeting the educational needs of gifted students within inclusive classrooms. Tomlinson [5] defines differentiation as the process of modifying content, process, product, or learning environment to respond to the needs of all learners, including the most advanced. According to VanTassel-Baska [6], differentiated strategies not only enhance the learning of gifted students but also foster creativity and problem-solving in heterogeneous classrooms.

In the Finnish context, the literature shows a unique blend of equity and excellence. Sahlberg [7] argues that Finland’s success lies in its strong belief that high-quality education should be available to every student, regardless of ability. This philosophy is reflected in national policies that avoid streaming and ability grouping, instead promoting teacher autonomy and trust. Teachers in Finland are highly trained—holding master’s degrees—and are empowered to identify giftedness in flexible and informal ways, often using their own judgment and experience [8].

A comparative study by Tirri and Kuusisto [9] found that Finnish teachers use a variety of strategies to support gifted students, including open-ended projects, inquiry-based tasks, and advanced reading materials. These are often embedded into regular classroom activities, reducing the stigma that can come from being labeled as “different.” Moreover, the socio-emotional needs of gifted students are also prioritized in Finland, ensuring that they are not only academically challenged but also emotionally supported.

Research also shows that Finnish schools emphasize student voice and autonomy, allowing gifted students to set their own learning goals and pursue areas of interest. This is in line with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory [10], which suggests that learning is most effective when it occurs within the learner’s zone of proximal development and is guided by meaningful interaction with peers and teachers.

While Finland does not use a formal “gifted education” label, the system’s inherent flexibility and trust in educators create an environment where differentiated instruction and equity co-exist, enabling all students—including the gifted—to thrive.

Research Methodology. This study adopts a qualitative research design, aimed at exploring the nuanced pedagogical approaches used in Finnish schools for working with gifted students within an inclusive framework. Given the interpretive nature of the inquiry and the emphasis on understanding educational practices in their authentic context, qualitative methods offer the most appropriate lens for deep exploration.

Research Design

The research is structured as a descriptive case study, focusing on Finland’s national education system and selected comprehensive schools (*peruskoulu*) known for inclusive and student-centered teaching methods. The case study approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the principles, strategies, and challenges associated with differentiated instruction for gifted learners in Finland.

Data Collection Methods

To gather rich and multi-faceted data, three main sources were utilized:

1. Document Analysis
Finnish national curricula, teacher training standards, and education policy reports were reviewed. These included official publications from the Finnish National Agency for Education and the Ministry of Education and Culture (e.g., National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014). Policy documents helped frame the national approach to equality, inclusion, and differentiation.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews
Interviews were conducted with 10 educators from Finnish comprehensive schools, including classroom teachers, school administrators, and special education coordinators. Questions focused on how giftedness is recognized, how instruction is differentiated, and what challenges teachers face in supporting gifted students in mixed-ability settings. Interviews were conducted via Zoom in English and Finnish (with translation support), and each lasted between 30–45 minutes.

3. Classroom Observations (Virtual)
Due to travel limitations, virtual observations of Finnish classrooms were carried out through publicly available teaching demonstration videos, teacher training webinars, and online lesson showcases provided by the Finnish National Agency for Education and university partners. These observations offered insights into classroom routines, student engagement, and instructional differentiation in practice.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants and documents that are rich in information relevant to the research questions. Priority was given to schools and teachers with experience in differentiated instruction and those located in regions with diverse student populations, including urban areas such as Helsinki, Tampere, and Turku.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data. Interview transcripts, field notes, and policy texts were coded using an open coding approach, followed by axial coding to identify recurring themes. Key themes included:

Teacher autonomy in differentiation

Informal identification of giftedness

Integration of project-based learning

Emotional and social support strategies

Challenges of differentiation in inclusive settings

Triangulation across data sources ensured the validity of the findings, while member-checking was conducted with two interviewees to verify the accuracy of interpretations.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights into Finnish approaches, several limitations must be acknowledged:

The small sample size of teachers may not represent all regional variations within Finland.

Language barriers and reliance on translated materials may have affected the depth of understanding in some areas.

Observational data was indirect, relying on publicly available videos rather than in-person visits.

Despite these constraints, the study offers a robust exploration of differentiated educational practices in a high-performing inclusive education system and serves as a model for comparative educational reform efforts in countries such as Uzbekistan.

Research discussion. The findings from the document analysis, teacher interviews, and classroom observations reveal several key themes in the Finnish approach to gifted education, emphasizing equity, flexibility, and a deep commitment to inclusive pedagogy. These themes are discussed below in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

1. Informal and Holistic Identification of Giftedness

Unlike many countries that rely on standardized testing or IQ assessments, Finnish educators adopt an informal and ongoing approach to identifying gifted students. Teachers emphasized that giftedness is seen not as a label, but as a set of developing competencies that manifest differently in each child. Teachers are trusted professionals with the autonomy to observe and support students as individuals, using their own pedagogical judgment—an approach supported by Tirri & Kuusisto (2013) [9].

This flexible identification system aligns with Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences [4], recognizing various forms of talent, including linguistic, mathematical, spatial, and interpersonal. Teachers in Finland often identify strengths through regular classroom interaction, open-ended assignments, and discussions, rather than through formal categorization.

2. Differentiation as a Core Pedagogical Practice

Differentiation is deeply embedded in Finnish classroom practices. Teachers routinely adapt the content, process, product, and learning environment based on student readiness, interests, and learning profiles—a framework consistent with Tomlinson (2001) [5].

Common strategies include:

Offering varied levels of task complexity within the same lesson.

Allowing students to choose topics for projects or research.

Using tiered assignments and learning contracts.

Encouraging independent study and long-term inquiry.

For instance, one interviewed teacher explained how a high-ability student in a science class was allowed to design and present an original experiment, while peers completed standard lab tasks. This kind of autonomy not only challenges gifted students intellectually but also builds intrinsic motivation and ownership of learning.

3. Project-Based and Student-Led Learning

Many Finnish teachers reported using project-based learning (PBL) as a key method for supporting gifted students. PBL encourages deeper cognitive engagement, problem-solving, collaboration, and creativity—all essential for nurturing high-potential learners.

Gifted students often excel in open-ended tasks where they can explore their interests in depth. One participant shared that her students worked in interdisciplinary teams to develop sustainability projects, which required advanced research and presentation skills. These experiences resonate with the principles of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development [10], where learning is scaffolded through meaningful social interaction and challenge.

4. Socio-Emotional Support and Equity

A distinctive aspect of the Finnish model is the emphasis on socio-emotional support for all learners, including the gifted. Teachers shared concerns about the emotional needs of gifted students, such as perfectionism, isolation, or boredom. As a result, they prioritize creating emotionally safe classrooms that promote well-being, empathy, and mutual respect.

This humanistic approach is reinforced by Finland's national policies that value equity over competition. Gifted students are not given special privileges or segregated classes but are supported within the general classroom, which reduces stigma and enhances social cohesion.

5. Teacher Training and Professional Autonomy

One of the critical enablers of Finland's differentiated approach is the high quality of teacher education. All teachers are trained at the master's level and engage in continuous professional development. They are taught to identify diverse learners and implement adaptive pedagogy early in their training.

Interviewees consistently highlighted the freedom to innovate and lack of bureaucratic pressure as factors that allow them to focus on meeting individual student needs. As Sahlberg (2011) [7] notes, trust in teachers is central to Finland's success.

6. Challenges and Limitations

Despite these strengths, teachers acknowledged certain challenges:

Time constraints can limit the depth of differentiation.

Some gifted students require more advanced content than schools can provide without additional resources.

The absence of formal gifted programs means there is sometimes a lack of targeted support, especially in rural areas.

These findings suggest that even in a well-functioning system, supporting gifted learners within an inclusive framework requires careful balancing of resources, teacher workload, and pedagogical creativity.

Summary

In summary, Finnish educators manage to effectively support gifted students not through specialized programs, but by embedding principles of differentiation, autonomy, and inclusiveness in everyday classroom practices. This model contrasts with more stratified systems but offers valuable lessons for nations aiming to develop gifted education in equitable and sustainable ways.

Conclusion. This study has explored the distinctive and inclusive approaches used in the Finnish education system to support gifted students, with a particular focus on differentiation, teacher autonomy, and student-centered learning environments. The findings underscore the effectiveness of a model that avoids formal labeling or segregation and instead integrates gifted education into the fabric of everyday classroom instruction.

One of the most compelling aspects of the Finnish approach is its equity-driven philosophy, which seeks to ensure that all students, regardless of ability, have access to high-quality education. Finnish schools do not operate specialized institutions for gifted learners; instead, they rely on highly trained teachers who are trusted to recognize and nurture individual potential within diverse classrooms. This stands in contrast to many education systems where gifted students are pulled out of regular classrooms or placed in elite tracks, often reinforcing social and educational inequalities.

The emphasis on differentiation—tailoring instruction to the readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of students—emerges as a powerful tool for fostering giftedness in inclusive settings. Teachers use varied tasks, project-based learning, and open-ended assignments to stimulate critical thinking and creativity. These strategies are not resource-intensive but rely on teacher expertise, professional autonomy, and a classroom culture that values curiosity and self-direction.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of socio-emotional support as a core component of gifted education. Finnish teachers view emotional well-being, motivation, and social integration as equally important as academic achievement. They take proactive steps to address the challenges gifted students may face—such as boredom, isolation, or perfectionism—ensuring that they thrive both intellectually and emotionally.

The role of teacher training cannot be overstated. Finland's commitment to professionalizing teaching, ensuring all educators hold a master's degree and are trained in inclusive pedagogy, provides a strong foundation for effective differentiation. Teachers are not bound by rigid curricula or frequent testing, giving them the space to be innovative and responsive to student needs.

For countries like Uzbekistan, which are seeking to modernize and humanize their approaches to gifted education, the Finnish experience offers valuable insights. Rather than replicating expensive or elitist models, educational reformers can focus on improving teacher training, embedding differentiation into standard pedagogy, and promoting inclusive values that see giftedness as a fluid and multifaceted quality present in all classrooms.

Key Implications:

Teacher empowerment through advanced training and autonomy is vital for sustainable gifted education.

Inclusive differentiation can effectively support gifted learners without resorting to segregation or labeling.

Emotional development must be a central component of any gifted education strategy.

Policy coherence, professional trust, and classroom-level flexibility are more impactful than top-down gifted programs.

In conclusion, Finland's experience illustrates that it is possible to achieve excellence without sacrificing equity. Its approach to gifted education—quietly embedded within a broader inclusive philosophy—offers a realistic and inspiring model for nations aspiring to balance individual talent development with collective social good.

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