

I. In my opinion, these types of projects are true assessments of what students have learned because they tend to gravitate toward the choices that favor their own particular learning style, and consequently, they do well because they can show me what they know in the way that they know best. I have found that the products my students present to me provide me with an effective tool for building relationships with them because they have the freedom to demonstrate their understanding in a way that is completely unique to them.

Finally, my experience with independent studies has proven to be successful. I have found that allowing students to choose their topic to demonstrate a particular skill is very beneficial because they have the freedom to study something that is meaningful to them. Also, the types of products that they create will be specific to their own particular ability levels.

Successful Collaboration

My teaching experience has taught me one very important lesson: Collaboration is crucial! Due to scheduling problems with planning time, our school cannot plan units by cross-curricular teams (including math, science, language arts, and social studies). However, during my first three years of teaching, I was fortunate enough to work very closely with another language arts teacher who had the same philosophy about teaching and learning that I did. We both believed that all students can learn, and we both were passionate about offering them challenges that expanded their minds and were enjoyable and fostered creativity in the process. We collaborated daily and often fed off one another in our planning of units. Once we were comfortable with one another, we decided to approach the eighth-grade social studies teacher and plan some activities that extended the students' learning of social studies concepts while in language arts class. Perhaps our most successful language arts–social studies collaboration resulted when we planned to read the Revolutionary War novel *My Brother Sam Is Dead* as the students were studying the Revolutionary War. The students loved it, and so did we! As we read the novel, I actually called upon the students to clarify some questions I had periodically, based on what they had learned previously about the war. It's a very gratifying experience to see students begin to make connections from one subject to another. When they master this skill, they are truly demonstrating higher-level thinking skills. My heart smiled as I listened to both my students who are gifted and talented and those with lower ability rattle off war facts without even blinking. Again, setting high expectations for everyone in the

room paid huge dividends because students of varying levels gained confidence in their academic abilities.

Working With Parents and Families

While collaboration with other teachers has been beneficial for me, close contact with parents and families is also important. In fact, in some cases, it has saved me. I have had several students who were obviously gifted, yet they were unmotivated and were underperforming academically. When I realized that these students were underachieving, my first inclination was to contact the parents to ask for suggestions concerning tapping into their child's interests. I realized that if I could tweak assignments to cater to the children's areas of interest, they would be much more likely to get involved and have an appropriate learning experience. The line of communication was beneficial both ways, however. Making parents aware of the situation also gave them the chance to ask me for suggestions about ways to inspire their children at home. Although I have had many students who rose to every occasion and performed to the absolute best of their ability, I have had just as many who were less than excited about school because of sheer boredom and complacency. Those individuals definitely require more work, but inspiring them is worth all of the effort—for the student, the parent, and the teacher.

Advice for Making Inclusion and Collaboration Work

When students who are gifted and talented are involved, open-mindedness and flexibility are critical in making inclusion and collaboration work. I believe that the key to success in these situations is to appreciate each student for what he or she can offer the class. It is the teacher's responsibility to know each student's strengths and needs and to continuously assess his or her progress in order to promote academic growth. Modifying activities to fit students' needs, regardless of their ability level, is critical in providing appropriate learning experiences. Although I have always respected my students with gifts and talents, I have tried very hard to let all of my other pupils know that I value them just as much and to convey the message that everyone can learn something from someone else. I believe this philosophy creates an atmosphere of community, and when everyone cares about and helps everyone else, it's a truly productive, magical learning environment.

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