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## Independent Study Approach and the Educational Needs of Gifted Learners

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### Abstract

*The concept of giftedness is diverse because it connotes different things in certain contexts. Cognitive giftedness as intellectual prowess enables the learners to demonstrate a high level of thinking, reasoning and retrieval of facts and figures. Therefore, cognitively gifted individuals learn faster and better than their age groups. The implication of this accomplishment among the precocious students is that they have educational needs which the general school programmes and services do not meet. This is essentially contributing to the dropout rate among the gifted in our schools. Therefore, as an approach to meeting these needs, independent study is advocated in this paper. The approach is a planned research process that develops cognitive and creative skills in gifted learners. It is a stage-by-stage endeavour that caters for the learning styles, preferences and abilities of the students. The impact of the approach on gifted learners is beyond the frontiers of the classroom or school environment as it fosters the students' social performance. At this juncture, the teacher, as the programme facilitator, guides and motivates the students throughout the exploratory pursuit of interest. As a matter of recommendation, professionals in the field of gifted education are enjoined to make a case for independent study (learning) for the gifted. The cognitive and creative expression of the students will be given room for if the approach is incorporated. It is also recommended that curriculum planners, designers and developers should factor independence study into consideration to meet the educational needs of the gifted in an inclusive system.*

**Keywords:** Independent study, approach, educational needs, and gifted learners

### Background

Giftedness, as a cognitive endowment, indicates (potentially) outstanding abilities of individuals whose skills, qualities and achievements distinguish them from a general group. The construct denotes exceptional intelligence and high academic performance, which positions the children and the youth ahead of their age group. Generally, gifted individuals have more advanced cognitive skills than their mates. Such endowed individuals tend to demonstrate their gifts and talents through reasoning ability and an excellent memory. They can master concepts more easily than their contemporaries. However, individuals manifest giftedness at different points of development. For instance, among potentially gifted children, speaking and reading early might be observed, because the little minds exhibit these language skills at a tender age. In some cases, demonstration of abilities might begin in adulthood. As remarked by Adelodun (2017), giftedness is central to the total personality makeup.

Nigeria's National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) considers gifted and talented individuals as children and adults who have or possess a very high intelligence quotient and are naturally endowed with special traits. These children and youth are currently insufficiently challenged by regular school programmes, therefore requiring services and activities not ordinarily provided by the system. Thus, there is the need for a differentiated curricular provision that will meet the educational needs of these learners. In the process of meeting these needs, organizing instructional programmes that deliver quality educational services is key. The instructional programmes appropriate for this set of people demand logical and practical organization for its ideal execution and such that peculiar learning needs of the gifted learners can be catered for. The programmes or curricular provisions should be structured to strengthen the memory, performance, thinking and evaluation of the learners (Al-Khataybeh & Al-Tarawneh, 2017).

In organizing a programme for the gifted, there should be a multiplicity of approaches adopted wholly for pedagogical purposes. By this, the



programme provides a continuum of learning experiences that metamorphoses into the development of an advanced level of products and opportunities to accelerate in areas of strength when implemented correctly. From the foregoing, it could be argued that gifted learners need specialized instructional programmes, materials and experiences that are to enable them to realize their full potential. Ozoji, et al (2016) identify ways by which the classroom teacher could provide programmes that enrich intellectually gifted learners. An additional course could be offered to the gifted child that will increase the workload of the child. The teacher can also challenge the gifted children with additional reading assignments. This could be done by involving the children in reading extra literature books and then allowing them to share their experiences with the rest of the class, with emphasis on the precise content of the readings. The gifted could be allowed to work independently seeking answers to problems and sharing their findings with the rest of the children in the class.

The techniques above point to the fact that independent study is a strategy that is accepted and ideal for the gifted in the school setting. Davidson (2017) notes that the strategy is a programme that accommodates the gifted which ensures their needs are met in the school setting. Independent study, also known as self-directed learning is a resourceful instructional strategy that enriches gifted students in the school context (Adelodun & Asiru, 2015). In this case, a lot of work is done in the classroom setting. That is why classrooms are to be structured to allow each student, regardless of their ability levels, to learn at his or her own pace, and in such environments, gifted students can maximize their potential and abilities (Adelodun, 2013). This assertion justifies independent study as a strategy to adopt in the education of individuals noted for high intellectual capability. Several definitions have been given to the concept by scholars in gifted education. Bayram-Jacobs & Hayirsever (2016) view the independent study as a student-centred provision that involves students working in small groups or individually to investigate self-selected topics related to the curriculum and their interests and strengths, concluding in the development of a product to demonstrate the learning required.

Dean (2015) also considers the concept as a planned research process that is similar to the process used by practising professionals. Independent study is an enrichment strategy that serves the purpose of in-depth understanding of a topic, providing an opportunity to develop independent learning and research skills and developing self-directed learners who can investigate real-life problems in areas of interest and value to them Khalid, et al (2020). In the same vein, Carson (2012) finds independent study as a strategy that improves the academic performance of gifted learners, increases their motivation and confidence, gives them greater awareness of their limitations and their ability to manage them. Allouch(2017) establishes that the programme offers the gifted learners the opportunity to choose topics, methods and products which foster interest and prevent boredom, resulting in greater task commitment. From the definitions above, independent study, as an enrichment strategy or package, provides the opportunity and time to explore in-depth topics as gifted students comprehend complex ideas more quickly, learn rapidly and in greater depth. It also remains a fact that the independent study process is a function of an orchestrated plan. This strategic plan includes an introduction, topic selection, topic organization, asking questions, a study method, information collection, product development, information presentation and evaluation of the study (Inayati, 2015).

Jacobs (2014) identifies three main types of independent studies: investigative, conceptual and ways of knowing. Investigative independent study involves setting a question or problem that gifted students investigate to find a solution or an answer. The conceptual type revolves around developing an in-depth understanding of a topic through a range of experiences. Ways-of-knowing form examines topics from several or different perspectives. Although the steps or components of an independent study may vary slightly, depending on the type of independent study and the study question, such stages generally involve Inayati's (2015) plan above. The study incorporates agreements and contracts which are formal negotiations between teachers and students who specify the content, process, product and timeline for the study (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015). It should be noted that an attachment of work conditions to the independent study and specification of clear



work expectations are an integral part of the negotiation. This is the introductory aspect of the study.

The next stage is topic selection. This component is important as the topic motivates students to continue with their studies (Adhikari, 2020). At this juncture, it is essential to identify a student's interest and prior knowledge about a topic to sustain their motivation throughout the study. Johnsen and Goree (2009) recognize three domains of topic choice: self-selected, related studies and circular studies. This first is based on students' interests and what they want to learn. The second is after being exposed to a subject through teacher-directed lessons, students select a topic while the last is all about students selecting a topic of interest from a teacher's prepared list of topics based on a subject matter. Teachers may need to help students organize and map out their study topics to guide them in developing specific questions or problems. This is essential because good study questions lead to successful quality independent studies (Johnsen and Goree, 2009). Sahu, et al (2021) view Blooms' taxonomy as a model used for asking questions. In the same manner, various methods of research should be understood by teachers and students to ensure the methods are appropriate to the topic and commonly practised by experts in their fields of study, thus authenticating the research. Jacobs (2014) opines that students should complete a written plan of their research methods while Naibaho (2019) identifies planning, action, observation and reflection as methods of research among the students.

Information collection is the step to be taken after a study method. Developing a strong knowledge base requires extensive reading and research of a variety of sources of information such as audio-visual sources, artefacts, literature, numerical records, internet searches, library searches, interviews and surveys. Likewise, students require assistance in analyzing and interpreting results using methods appropriate to the field of study (Arts, Science or Commercial Department). Ayverdi, et al (2014) suggest that graphic organizers could be used to organize and display information that is involved in analyzing and evaluating issues, solving problems or making decisions.

Products are tangible evidence of student learning and are valid assessment tools that

provide the learner with individuality and creativity in deciding how to exhibit the knowledge the individual has gained (Cukurova, 2014). Therefore, products should not be limited to a written report. Products should match those required in the field of study, for example, a naturalist would keep a journal and attach pictures as examples (Johnsen & Goree, 2009). Teachers teach the skills and requirements of product development. A host of product ideas exist. Hoornaert et al. (2017) recognize an array of new product ideas while Grandhimathi & Devi (2015) are of the view that products of independent learning should be based on students' learning styles and preferences. Meanwhile, Serrat (2004) remarks that the original product is disseminated to an appropriate audience.

### **Significance of Independent Study to Educational Needs of Gifted Learners**

Independent study as an approach to facilitating the enrichment among the gifted students occupies centre stage in the educational development of the learners. The enrichment option has been found a good and reliable means of educating the learners. As a result of its nature, which is in the form of acceleration, sophistication and novelty, independent study is tailored towards inculcating a professional attitude in the learners while using their interests and abilities. As pointed out by Kopzhassarova et al. (2016), the approach stimulates critical thinking and logical analysis, develops abilities and initiative of the individual students and develops a sense of individual responsibility for the pursuit of a goal and personal achievement and satisfaction in successfully pursuing the goal. Singh (2014) considers the relevance of independent study as catering for the needs, readiness, interest and learning preferences of gifted learners while Sam et al. (2012) observe that the instructional strategy allows the students to experience beyond the classroom. From the observation of Sam et al. (2012), it could be established that gifted students require a differentiated curriculum that allows for preferred learning styles and creative instincts to be put to expression in the classroom domain and beyond the school environment.

The impact of independent study in improving gifted students' learning unequivocally goes beyond the frontiers of classroom learning



experiences. It enhances their social competence and performance in everyday affairs. The qualitative effect on the learners contributes, in no small measure to their overall development since the strategy is based on the aptitude and abilities of the students. Emphasizing the significant use of the strategy, Zhong & Xu (2018) point out that the programme is aimed at solving real-world problems and engaging the students in the behaviour of experts in the selected fields. The programme aims at fostering confident, connected, actively involved and life-long learners (Ozdayi, 2019; Abdullah, et al, 2019). It develops thinking and problem-solving skills, initiatives and the skills required to foster independent learners and promotes excellence, innovative inquiry and curiosity (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015). Watson & Watson (2016) examine qualitative differentiation (independent learning) as a programme that personalizes and individualizes instruction to match the needs of individual students to ensure they are challenged and reach their full potential.

Furthermore, Demirci (2017) has found out that independent learning enables students to take an active role in the classroom as they can engage themselves in activities given and work independently. This allows them to be independent learners and get ideas on the action they could expedite to improve their weak areas. Independent study has been found productive in influencing a positive change in the academic performance of the learners. In a similar development, Thanh (2010) reports that the student-centred strategy strongly encourages interactions between students in an academic setting. The enrichment approach is found to encourage verbal and mental activeness among gifted learners. It also rewards different qualities in students such as independence, individuality and different classroom etiquettes.

Trivedi (2013) also affirms that independent study makes a teaching-learning process student-centred. The approach makes an interactive and innovative learning environment that enhances productivity among the learners. It is equally helpful by providing an opportunity for collaborative and cooperative environment for learning as well as helping the learners to manifest their potential more comfortably. Independent learning enables the students to work on self-paced instruction and prefer to work on course projects independently. One of the

most significant needs of the independent study approach is making available facilitators who guide the students to define and frame the problem, establish realistic goals and timelines, become aware of a variety of available usable resources, identify both a product that the study will arrive at and an audience for the product and evaluate their study patterns.

### **The Responsibility of the teacher in the adoption of independent study**

As a relevant stakeholder in the adoption of independent study, the teacher has different roles to play if the programme or instructional package will be successful. According to Sam et al (2012), the teacher is crucial to the success of the independent study. The teacher guides the students through the process of the study. He is an advisor or a facilitator who helps them identify and define topics, set clear and specific objectives, establish a realistic time frame, construct a workable research study programme, monitor their progress and evaluate their outcome. The teacher communicates with the parents of the learners on what an independent study involves, the reason for using it and the expected role of parents in the study. Martinez (2015) sees a parent as a coach or mentor in the study process who helps the gifted to meet deadlines and access resources. Anyway, the individual parent working as a mentor has a similar interest with the student and the success of an independent study is dependent on the student fulfilling his responsibilities (Thompson, et al., 2014).

While students often have the curiosity, interest and motivation to pursue an independent study, they often lack the self-direction and skills required to achieve the set goals; therefore, the teacher guides them through the process (Rosenshine, 2012). Inayati (2015) also remarks that the teacher helps the students by guiding them through completing the requirements of a learning contract or agreement, taking responsibility for making decisions, collecting information and meeting deadlines. The teacher also teaches the skills and requirements of product development. Independent study has been found to contribute immensely to the teaching-learning process such that has an innovative and effective impact on the learners and teachers alike.



## Conclusion

Gifted learners have different educational needs when compared to other students in an inclusive system. Such needs have given rise to a differentiated curricular provision in terms of programmes and services. As an approach to catering for the student's learning styles, abilities and creative behaviour, an independent study has been found all-encompassing. The instructional strategy is very dynamic and its approach requires a well-planned layout. Importantly, the teacher is to instruct or teach in a creative manner that brings out the innovations in the learners. He is to guide the students through the process. The gifted learners increase their learning and exploratory skills through independent study. The school system and the home have significant roles to play in the workability of independent study. The school management determines the adoption and practise of the instructional strategy while the parents lend a helping hand, in terms of guidance and resource availability to gifted students. If successfully used in our schools, independent study or learning promotes creative skills that translate to enabling the gifted to contribute their quota to our society by solving some of the problems confronting us today.

## Recommendations

Curriculum planners and designers have a role to play in effecting positive change in the education of the gifted in Nigeria. Such individuals should plan, design and develop school curriculums that accommodate independent study. This flexibility or differentiation will cater for the educational needs of the gifted. With this end in view, professionals in the field of gifted education should be consulted for clearly spelt-out information about the gifted and the incorporation of an independent study into the curriculums. School administrators should equally solicit sensitization in terms of in-service training programmes, workshops, seminars and/or conferences for teachers on the use of independent learning for the gifted. Because of the exploratory nature of independent learning, administrators are to ensure that schools are stocked with relevant books, journal articles, magazines, newspapers, Internet facilities for the gifted. The teacher is to emphasise the relevance of instructional materials when the students are engaged in the independent study. He is to

facilitate the process and motivate the students. The gifted learners are to use the independent study to their advantage by discovering facts useful for their general well-being while their parents should serve as role models to them.

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