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Nurturing Potential through Passion Projects

When a student is designated as gifted and talented this identification is often based on potential. Developing potential is essential to ensure that students come to realize their strengths and utilize their abilities doing something that is meaningful for them, and ultimately to society. Utilizing the strategy of independent study to develop passions provides a pathway to guide students in the journey of developing personal interests. As Schader points out: *if we hope our gifted children will actualize their potential, we must not only cultivate in them the qualities of perseverance, practice, and persistence, we must also guard their enjoyment and enthusiasm for learning* (Schader, R. 2006). As with any endeavor, one needs to make it their own and the following suggestions provide a framework to begin:

- **Identifying an Interest or Passion Area:** It takes time browsing and searching topics for some students, while other students have been waiting a lifetime to be able to study an area. Schader suggests the following when supporting student study:
 - *There is no gold standard for discovering interests. While some children appear hard wired for certain topics, others may take a more smorgasbord approach. Not everyone comes with an inner need or a driving passion. It can take time and serial exploration of "curiosity areas."*
 - *Reach out to other adults who have the [light in their eyes](#). Look for mentors within areas that intrigue your child.*
 - *There are social benefits to pursuing interest areas. Age isn't much of a concern. Within interest areas, the requirement is willingness to learn, try, explore, and work. Think of cross age chess clubs, philatelic groups, computer animation, graphic design, or train/transportation buffs: Interest peers as opposed to age peers.*
 - *Read biographies and encourage your child to read meaty biographies, as well. Learning about the paths taken by others is a powerful way to re-energize a child who isn't engaged. You will also find clues to tuck away in your toolbox of ideas for future needs (Schader, R. 2006).*

- **Tools to Get Started:** There are a multitude of resources to support student investigation.
 - [The Autonomous Learner Model](#): *Optimizing Ability* provides a tool to find your target passion (Betts, & Kercher, 1999).
 - Creating a **K-U-DO** for their outcome is a strategy in which students elaborate on what they need to **Know** (including vocabulary and facts), **Understand** (big concepts), and will be able to **DO** (skills) based on their project study.
 - [The Practical Strategies Series for Gifted Education, Independent Study for Gifted Learners](#) provide definition and Implementation strategies (Johnsen and Goree 2005).
 - **Content standards** provide a foundation of study that students can investigate at a deeper level and align their work to concepts being studied.

- **Organizing Thinking and Research:** There are a number of resources to guide in an independent study. Students who are familiar with [Thinking Maps](#) find this to be a valuable resource for organizing thoughts. Some noteworthy sources include the following:
 - [How to Develop an Authentic Enrichment Cluster](#) by Joseph Renzulli
 - [Teaching Gifted Kids in Today's Classroom](#) by Susan Winbrenner & Dina Brulles
 - [The Ultimate Guide for Student Product Development and Evaluation](#) by Frances Karnes & Kristen Stephens
 - The [Independent Investigation Method IIM](#)

- **Monitoring Progress:** Progress monitoring is essential to determine current status and next steps. Keeping a student log provides a brief description of the project, a timeline for completion, and presentation plans. This record documents what was accomplished during the previous session, progress on the timeline, and plans for the next work session.
- **Timelines:** Timelines will vary for students, and flexibility is key. Some intense studies can take months, quick investigations may last only a few weeks. Progress checks provide accountability for longer timelines. Flexibility is important if a student starts a project he or she does not wish to complete. Closure needs to be provided with the student in terms of a progress check and an interview, because providing closure to an activity that proves not to be of interest is important. Students can learn from these "dead ends" what they are *not* passionate about.
- **Sharing Results:** It is important for students to have the opportunity to share research in a meaningful manner, not just completing a standard report. It might mean that a student built an object, performed an original musical composition, designed a recipe/cooking creation, or wrote/drew an observation log. An authentic audience to share findings validates the student's work. Sharing can take the form of publication, presentation to an interested cluster or mentor, or speaking before a public forum.
- **Assessment:** A student/and/or teacher/parent created rubric provides the foundation to assessment. Project planners, logs, and self-evaluations, support this form of assessment.

Interest is a powerful force in nurturing potential of our gifted learners. The opportunity to discover and investigate passions engages students in applying skills they have learned in an authentic meaningful way. Providing a framework to investigate and share findings creates a powerful opportunity to read and write to learn rather than just learning to read and write.

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