

## Personal Reflection on *B'Chol Dor VaDor's* Risk & Failure:

If you've ever struggled with or hoped not to struggle with anchor activities aimed at increasing engagement and enriching learning for gifted students, then this one's for you=

Sometimes, we teachers set out to meet a goal and, in doing so, challenge the success of another goal. It's like a pedagogical side-effect to a necessary pedagogical intervention. That was the challenge I faced when I aimed to increase engagement and make learning more meaningful for my gifted *Tanakh* students a few years ago.

Through extensive research and work, I developed an enrichment anchor activity for students who had demonstrated a unique aptitude for learning *Tanakh* independently, developing and supporting abstract ideas through concrete textual evidence. Many of my gifted *Tanakh* students had already learned the course content for both our *Chumash* class and *Navi* class. Others consistently demonstrated exemplary skills, a readiness for meaningful learning at an accelerated pace. They could learn a concept or skill at a fraction of the rate of the rest of the mainstream class. These students were bored in my classroom. Even worse, days would pass without them growing or learning anything new. It got to a point where their boredom would sometimes lead to disruptive behaviors. In creating the enrichment anchor activity, I hoped to resolve all of this. My curricular goal for the project was that it would allow for differentiation within our heterogeneous class by providing enrichment-ready students long-term challenges to complete alongside the regular class lesson. I also wanted the anchor activity to be appropriate for these students to work on both in *Chumash* and *Navi* class. I hoped that this differentiation would help maintain complete engagement from all of my students throughout the entirety of our time together.

As the enrichment project took off, engagement for these students was at an all-time high, but many challenges of a differentiated culture began to creep into the class environment. To help convey this experience, I will present each of the enrichment successes alongside its differentiation side-effect.

<b>?Success of the Enrichment</b>	<b>Differentiated Instruction Side Effect</b>
<p><u>The Launch Event</u></p> <p>For the launch event of <i>B'Chol Dor VaDor</i>, I set the mainstream students up with an independent assignment and took the enrichment students out of the classroom to introduce the project. I gave each enrichment student the assignment packet (see attached) in a folder that I personalized with her name. This exclusive meeting with personalized materials helped make these students and the anchor activity feel special. This was a unique opportunity exclusively for them.</p>	<p><u>The Launch Event</u></p> <p>I thought that the mainstream students would appreciate being able go through a lesson without the disruptive behaviors of the girls who were usually bored in class. But the mainstream perception of the gifted students was not that they were behaviorally challenging, but that they were the "smart girls." As such, my singling out of the enrichment girls was perceived by the rest of the class as a celebration of the academically gifted rather than an attempt to address behavioral challenges in the classroom. The mainstream students felt marginalized and excluded from a special opportunity.</p>

<p>The enrichment students were well aware of the learning taking place in the “regular” class and were eager to work on more challenging and engaging assignments.</p>	<p>Although the enrichment students knew what was going on in the “regular” class, the mainstream students didn’t know what the enrichment girls were up to. This persisted throughout every lesson in which the enrichment girls stepped out to research or work on the anchor activity. It didn’t help matters that when mainstream girls finally asked their gifted friends what was going on that the enrichment students responded with a secretive, “Oh, you’ll see...”</p>
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What I should have done differently:

While, yes, I wanted the enrichment girls to feel like they were being given a special opportunity, there was nothing gained by making the knowledge of this assignment exclusive. Maybe I should have included the rest of the students in the launch event. Transparency about what the project involved and about how this project would impact the day to day proceedings in our class could have made the culture surrounding the differentiation of *B’Chol Dor Vador* much more successful.

Making anchor activities available to all students could have also helped in avoiding these side-effects (more on this later).

Success of the Enrichment	Differentiated Instruction Side Effect
<p><u>The Challenge of Extra Work</u> I launched this project with gifted students in two parallel <i>Tanakh</i> classes simultaneously. One of the classes happened to include a group of support students; the other class did not. Interestingly, the girls from the class with the support students never complained about this anchor activity being extra work for them. When I noted this during our project reflection, they said that they already knew before the project was even presented that our class was one that strove to “meet the needs of each person and that might look different for each of us.”</p>	<p><u>The Challenge of Extra Work</u> The class that did not include the group of support students and, thus, had a far less developed culture of differentiation, did not take to the project as readily as the girls in the other class did. Initially, there was some pushback from the enrichment students who perceived this project as “extra work.” One girl even said, “Why are we being punished for being good at Torah?” I told the girls at the time that I <u>believed</u> them to be gifted and ready to take their experience of <i>limmud Torah</i> to the next level but that I didn’t actually <u>know</u> it. How could I recommend them to an enrichment track in high school if I didn’t even <u>know</u> whether they were capable of meeting such a challenge?</p>

What I would have done differently:

There’s something about my response to the (initially) challenging enrichment group that doesn’t sit well with me. I pulled the high school card as a motivator rather than focusing on something more intrinsically rewarding.

I think that had a culture of differentiation been established and developed in the second class as it had been with the class that included support students, the initial pushback would have been less (if at all). In hindsight, it is easy to say that, of course, I should have been differentiating more thoughtfully and consistently for my gifted students from the very beginning of the year.

There is some debate regarding how much a new teacher should know about his or her incoming students before getting to know them for themselves. There is concern that exposing a teacher to certain information from a student’s history may serve as a prejudice against that student. I take these concerns seriously. HOWEVER, I should have discovered these student’s particular needs significantly earlier in the year. A simple question to the class like, “Has anyone learned this *sefer* in depth before?” could have afforded the opportunity to intervene with appropriate differentiation from the get-go. To this end, I would encourage other teachers to be open to learning (at the very least!) objective, non-judgement-carrying information about their students as early as possible, even before the start of the school year. Knowing that a student is proficient in reading *Rashi* on her own or that she already learned all of *Sefer Shmuel* twice would give the heads up necessary to plan for appropriate differentiation early on. To set a tone and culture of differentiation from the very first lesson could help discourage the notion that an enrichment opportunity is a “punishment for being good at Torah.”

Since the time of this project, Yeshivat Noam has implemented a series of *Tanakh* benchmarks administered over the course of middle school to help measure students’ skill mastery in an objective way. I think benchmarks such as these can help prevent cases of teachers discovering giftedness far later in the year than necessary. Benchmarks allow for appropriate and consistent differentiation to take place.

<b>Success of the Enrichment</b>	<b>Differentiated Instruction Side Effect</b>
<p><u>Project’s Impact on Disruptive Behaviors</u>            Disruptive behaviors from my gifted students dropped significantly and allowed me to devote more time and mental strength to the rest of the class. So while the project obviously increased learning and engagement for my gifted students, it also increased learning and engagement for the rest of the class. Worded differently: I was meeting my goal of increasing engagement for my gifted students, and to my greatest delight engagement was increasing for the rest of my students as well.</p>	<p><u>Project’s Impact on Disruptive Behaviors</u>            Although disruptive behaviors from the enrichment students abated and the learning experience grew smoother for the rest of the class, contributions to the overall class from these gifted also decreased. The gifted students would quickly work through the regular lesson and then check out into their own work. They were no longer involved in class discussions, no longer challenging or supporting comments made by their peers. Our class dynamic was feeling less and less enriched. Furthermore, the lack of social interaction between the gifted students and the rest of the class only further polarized the feelings of clique-i-ness.</p>

What I should have done differently:

I think that in my desperation to reengage and challenge my gifted students, I set up parameters for completing this project that completely removed them from the community of the class. At the risk of

being perhaps too self-critical, I wanted them out of my hair. I wanted it to be that for any given *Chumash* or *Navi* class, the enrichment girls could finish the work for the regular lesson and work on their anchor activity. This was the wrong approach. By responding to their boredom in the mainstream class with an opportunity to remove themselves from the class, it was as though I was saying that the class did not need them. But the class did need them.

What I should have done was set more specific parameters for when and how to go about working on the anchor activity. For example:

- No anchor activities during class discussions
- If there is a green star on the board when you come into the classroom, that’s my signal to you that today is a no anchor activity day
- No anchor activities on Fridays

These modifications to the process of working on the project could help balance between giving the enrichment students the opportunity to develop their learning independently and incorporating their gifts into the overall learning experience and culture of the class. This could also help prevent the alienation of a group of students from the totality of the class’ learning.

Success of the Enrichment	Differentiated Instruction Side Effect
<p><u>The Fraternity</u> A strong comradery developed between the girls participating in this project. They were connecting over deep and meaningful learning. They were challenging each other and inspiring each other... over Torah! It gave me tremendous <i>nachat</i> to see them bond over something so profound.</p>	<p><u>The Fraternity</u> There were times during the project when mainstream students viewed the enrichment students as a sort of exclusive fraternity. This negatively impacted self-image for most of the class and even led to some interpersonal challenges. The mainstream students were completely removed from the enrichment girls’ learning even though the enrichment girls were still clued into and somewhat involved in the learning of the rest of the class.</p>

What I should have done differently:

I shouldn’t have waited until the end of the project to give the enrichment students the opportunity to share their work with the rest of the class. Something I would do differently with *B’Chol Dor VaDor* moving forward is to have mini-presentations of work throughout the project and not just at the end. This would allow for meaningful peer-review of work, a more open culture as to the special work being done without it feeling so secretive. Sharing the learning more often throughout the process transforms being “gifted” into a responsibility for “gift giving;” the enrichment students would allow for everyone in the class to have the gift of this inspired learning by sharing the work they are doing. Transparency about how much extra work and effort is involved in a project of this caliber may also help diminish any jealousy towards projects’ participants.

Success of the Enrichment	Differentiated Instruction Side Effect
<p><u>Project's Impact on Engagement</u></p> <p>The rigor and depth of learning allowed for these gifted students to explore <i>Tanakh</i> in new ways. One student reflected, "In school we always learn one <i>sefer</i> of <i>Tanakh</i> at a time- and that can be really interesting- but there's also so much that you can learn about something by seeing how it connects to other ideas and events in <i>Tanakh</i>. This project gave me the opportunity to do that."</p> <p>Meaningful engagement increased for the mainstream students, too. Enrichment students worked on <i>B'Chol Dor VaDor</i> independently freeing me up to spend more of class time with students who were struggling in <i>Tanakh</i>.</p>	<p><u>Project's Impact on Engagement</u></p> <p>The independence involved in this project also hindered meaningful engagement. A lot of the work on <i>B'Chol Dor VaDor</i> took place outside of the classroom. Most commonly, the enrichment students would go to work in the <i>Beit Midrash</i>. Without my supervision and with the looming temptation of a good friend nearby, there were quite a few days when the enrichment students would spend their anchor activity time chatting and giggling.</p> <p>It was challenging for me to maintain the necessary level of engagement with my enrichment students as they worked on their anchor activities. In planning the project, I developed it in such a way that I could be relatively "hands off" from my enrichment students during class time and that all of the feedback and check-ins they would receive from me would be via e-mail or comments on their work outside of class time. One of the major challenges of this initiative was that it was a lot of work for me to give meaningful, individual feedback for this project. A "regular" class was still going on alongside this anchor activity.</p>

What I would have done differently:

The same way that I developed an independent-learning lesson for my mainstream students during the launch event, I wish I would have built more time into the curriculum to spend more face-to-face time with the enrichment students as they worked on their projects. This would have concretized their accountability (rather than being accountable to a phantom GoogleDoc commenter whom they were barely interacting with in person). It would have also given me more consistent opportunities to check in not only on the product of their work but also on the process.

The hours I spent at home reviewing students' work took their toll on other areas of my teaching (and sleep). Looking back, I should have invested more time in developing peer-review skills among the participants of the enrichment project. While this would have taken considerable time on my part initially, it would have freed me up significantly down the road for the duration of the project.

Success of the Enrichment	Differentiated Instruction Side Effect
<p><u>Parent Feedback</u></p> <p>Because of the project, a history-buff parent excitedly shared that he had begun looking for trends in post-biblical events that took place on the dates of <i>Pessach</i> and that his research had led to fascinating conversations at the <i>Shabbat</i> table each week. Parents were so excited and grateful that their daughters were experiencing such a meaningful</p>	<p><u>Parent Feedback</u></p> <p>Some parents of enrichment students were concerned over their daughters' social development in my class. Parents of mainstream students expressed concern that the opportunity for rich, inter-textual learning was hardly being afforded to their daughters. Some parents shared that they felt that their daughters could, if given the opportunity, also finish the "regular" work early and independently and then be able to move on to</p>

opportunity to develop their <i>Tanakh</i> skills.	something like the anchor activity.
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What I would have done differently:

Many of the suggestions for promoting a more positive and less alienating social culture have already been shared. I think that these suggestions could have prevented the social concerns that parents raised.

A colleague of mine, Dr. Malki Lanner Feuer, developed a whole treasure trove of anchor activities for all of her students. The activities she created range in degree of difficulty, skills involved, duration needed to complete it, and a myriad of other factors. She makes these anchor activities available to all of her students. Each student is responsible to always be working on an anchor activity. I think that Malki’s model could have afforded my mainstream students the opportunity to also achieve more sustained and meaningful engagement. Yes, the caliber of *B’Chol Dor VaDor* called upon skills and knowledge that only the enrichment students had shown a readiness for; however, mainstream students should not have been excluded from the opportunity to make the most of potential class “down-time.” Incorporating Malki’s model, I could have met with each student and suggested certain anchor activities based on their personal achievements of content and skill mastery. While this would have been of tremendous benefit to student engagement and learning, including all students in the opportunity for anchor activities would have also helped promote tolerance and respect towards those working independently from the rest of the class.

Success of the Enrichment	Differentiated Instruction Side Effect
<p><u>Exhibition/Final Presentation</u>            Students participating in the project presented their work and process to the class in a model-<i>seder</i>-esque setting. This allowed for students to iterate their symbol prototypes through constructive peer and audience feedback.</p> <p>The exhibition was a rewarding experience for the rest of the class as well. The mainstream students were finally getting a window into the world of what was, until that point, an exclusive project. They saw how many hours of work went into the project. <i>B’Chol Dor VaDor</i> was finally appreciated as a privilege rather than a reward.</p> <p>“This whole time,” one student admitted, “I just assumed you were ditching class because you knew it all already. But now I see that you weren’t ditching us; you were getting this ready for us. Thank you!”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Why didn’t I do this earlier!?</p>

What I would have done differently:

As I suggested earlier, opportunities to share progress and achievement should have been incorporated into many earlier parts of the project. This project spanned weeks, months even, and waiting until the end of the project was far too long. Students could have presented their work as early as their completion of the initial source work. For an additional presentation of process, I think the class would have enjoyed seeing the Chains of Connectivity. These mini-exhibitions would also include the rest of the class in the learning and unpacking of these events in *Tanakh*. Perhaps, a thorough presentation of the source work by the enrichment students could allow for all students to take a shot at the fun Chain of Connectivity.

To be entirely open, throughout the project, I consistently doubted whether it would be worth it to try *B'Chol Dor VaDor* again with subsequent classes. All of that doubt melted away as soon as the learning was shared and made open to all of my students at the exhibition.

One student reflected that, "I learned from this project that being smart and creative is not really something to be proud of unless you work hard to really do something with it. Other kids sometimes hate me for being smart and then I feel bad telling them that any gift also comes with challenges. I am really proud of the work that I did and that's what makes me feel proud of myself. When my friends see that it's my work and effort that I'm proud of, they don't think I'm being full of myself."

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One final note about things I would have done differently (though it is not related to differentiation): I wish I would have asked students to consider in what ways their theme or idea is already incorporated within the *Seder* experience.