

HIGH-ABILITY LEARNERS:

THEIR RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND DIFFERENTIATION NEEDS

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A major issue in education is how schools most appropriately respond to a range of advanced students who should receive and benefit from higher challenges. The issue is compounded by the fact that all gifted and potentially gifted learners neither follow the same developmental trajectory nor are at the same point in their academic development. The term *high ability* includes a wider range of students who share the need to exceed the limits of a basic curriculum. Some of these students are above-average, high-aptitude learners, and/or high achievers who would benefit from differentiation and curricular modifications to ensure greater challenge in their regular classroom placements. However, some of these students are highly capable gifted learners who would benefit more from a combination of gifted programs and services beyond their regular classroom placements as well as enhanced differentiation and curricular modifications in their regular classes.

Differentiation for gifted students is multifaceted. It encompasses differentiation of:

- *Content*—important, meaningful, often beyond grade-level information and concepts to learn;
- *Process*—learning processes that require high-level thinking, adaptations, and open-ended applications to guide students in making sense of the content at a conceptual level;
- *Product*—relevant, often sophisticated ways to demonstrate learning accomplishments and profundity of thought; and
- *Instruction*—teachers employing best practices and researched-based, high-impact strategies at different levels of complexity and depth in all learning situations.

Current research and insights into giftedness increase our urgency to advocate for gifted learners at all stages of their development. We now understand the following key points:

1. The level of intellectual engagement by students is more important to their achievement than the number of learning assignments they complete (Sousa, 2009; Willis, 2007). We need to ask: “Do gifted students have opportunities to engage in work and replacement tasks that are relevant and personally challenging or are they merely assigned more work to do because they completed the task?”
2. The teacher is the most decisive school-related force in the achievement of students (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). We need to ask: “Do we support conceptual thinking more than memorization? Are we so dominated by standardized testing that we settle for *academic adequacy* rather than *academic excellence* with gifted students?” Excellence is relative to students’ changes as learners from their entry point of instruction to their current achievement level.
3. The differentiation strategies that teachers use to implement the curriculum are more important to student achievement than the content of curricula (Hattie, 2009). We need to ask: “Do our differentiation strategies enable advanced learners to reach their personal best rather than focus on a comparison with grade-level peers?”

Educators need to understand what can result if we overlook or fail to nurture advanced potential. No educator intends to minimize the learning opportunities or to lower lifetime achievement for any student. Nonetheless, when high-aptitude children are overlooked and underserved, social-emotional and cognitive development are more limited relative to their capabilities. Indeed, many noncogni-

tive variables are also less developed. Researchers regard noncognitive skills, such as intellectual curiosity, motivation, persistence, self-control, social intelligence, optimism, and conscientiousness, to be as predictive of student success and lifetime outcomes as IQ (Dweck, 2010; McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012; Tough, 2013; von Strumm, Hell, & Camorro-Premuzic, 2011). Without differentiation, support, and productive feedback, high-ability students may:

- Decrease their commitment to academic achievement.
- Demonstrate diminished enthusiasm for school-based learning.
- Appear less intellectual or able.
- Display less evidence of the struggle, persistence, or resilience that promotes continuous learning.
- Underdevelop the academic skill sets required by advanced content and processes (Assouline, Colangelo, VanTassel-Baska, & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2015; Dweck, 2010; Ford, 2011; Huang, 2015; Slocumb & Payne, 2011).

I am a lifelong advocate for gifted students. However, my educational objective for gifted students is not elitist as it is the same as my objective for every learner in all populations: Assess where students are in their learning achievements. Then, provide differentiation and instruction that ensure their continuous learning. That is not *elitist*; it is *ethical and equitable*. The inconvenient truth is that the appropriate pace and level of differentiation and instruction is not the same for all learners.

I feel called to defend high-ability students' right to the most appropriate environment that guarantees continuous learning opportunities. Initially, I only intended to advocate for the rights of highly-able students. Based on discussions and work with thousands of advanced students, I wanted to promote understanding from the students' perspectives about the ways high-ability children think, feel, learn, and experience self-actualization. However, as I

pursued this topic, it became evident that advanced students' rights are interdependent with their related responsibilities for learning and the instructional implications for the most appropriate and productive differentiation. In Figure 1, a parallel comparison of gifted and high-aptitude students' rights, responsibilities, and implications for instructional differentiation are proposed for discussion among advanced students and adults. Stimulating discussion rather than fostering agreement is the goal.

Consider sharing some or all of the ideas in the figure with other educators, parents of advanced learners, and our students with gifted or high aptitude. Elicit their perceptions and encourage productive communication through an exchange of ideas. Advocate the right for continuous learning and best instructional practices for advanced students through more rigorous learning environments. The first step is communication and shared understanding.

All students, including the gifted, have the right to learn at their highest level of readiness.

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	High-ability learners have the right to:	High-ability learners have the responsibility to:	High-ability learners need differentiation to:
1	The identification and nurturing of their advanced potential as early and consistently as possible regardless of age, special needs, language, or background experiential gaps.	Share their high-level ideas and unique problem-solving responses. They need to exert the effort required to demonstrate complex ideas and products so educators observe their potential in learning contexts.	Avoid the barriers to attainment that limit some individual's opportunity to demonstrate outstanding potential. Provide open-ended, problem-based experiences. Be alert to potential demonstrated through learning behaviors as much as products or test results.
2	A learning environment with developmentally appropriate high expectations and intellectually challenging work aligned to advanced capabilities at and beyond core standards.	Work productively while pursuing intellectual work with critical thinking, curiosity, passion, effort, and persistence that yield the life skills and habits of mind for success and achievement in multiple pursuits.	Implement curricular modifications, such as acceleration, cluster grouping, curriculum compacting, tiered lessons, problem-based learning, and individual inquiry. Communicate expectations for a greater degree of complexity and depth to promote students' excellence.
3	Teachers who have esteem for advanced students and are quite accomplished at differentiating instruction to elicit beyond grade-level achievement, personal satisfaction with learning, and autonomy.	Respect and be responsive to the culture of learning teachers work diligently to provide. They should respond productively as teachers demonstrate empathy for them and their impassioned learning interests as well as achievements.	Ensure instructors who exhibit a passion to teach advanced students while skillfully differentiating beyond grade-level content and facilitating individual inquiry. Avoid assigning teachers based on scheduling convenience or a teacher's turn for a gifted section.
4	Interactions with intellectual peers and age peers to experience a real-world balance between academic challenge and the social and emotional support that promotes resilience and joy in learning. Academic rigor and socialization skills are mutually beneficial.	Practice active listening and the language of diplomacy when interacting with others and responding to hard questions. They must model respect during social interactions to communicate with others rather than to others.	Artfully use flexible grouping for continuous learning. Base peer interactions on mutual needs and interests more often than peer tutoring or cooperative tasks that enable others to conclude solutions to problems previously understood by high-ability students.
5	Experience continuous learning by preassessing out of previously mastered work and advancing academically at a pace and level responsive to their learning profile and readiness.	Expend effort to learn while understanding that excellence should represent personal best rather than a comparison with grade-level peers. They should maintain records of personal progress and changes as learners.	Use preassessments and formative assessments to ensure a pace and level of instruction that fosters continuous learning. Evaluate curricula for the degree of challenge to engage intellectually demanding learning processes.
6	Replacement tasks that enhance conceptual understanding and construction of deeper meaning rather than "enrichment" tasks that require students to treadmill in place by merely focusing on repeated applications of understood concepts and skills.	Engage in intellectually demanding tasks rather than settle for easy accomplishments. They should avoid calling undue attention to themselves when engaging in replacement tasks.	Effectively reverse underachievement by ensuring replacement learning tasks based on interests and strengths. Promote rigorous intellectual accomplishments representing personal and utilitarian worth that impacts others.
7	Be called upon to respond in class proportionately to other students. They should not dominate class discussions or flexible group interactions nor should they be ignored.	To participate, interact, and collaborate by actively listening to build upon others' ideas rather than interrogate or intimidate peers. They need to understand and encourage the perspective of others as often as they share their point of view.	Ensure a positive, collaborative climate that tiers the complexity of questioning and interactions so all students explore the topic in an intellectually stimulating manner. Allow students to prepare responses in pairs; randomly call on one pair to respond.
8	The encouragement of diverse, content-rich, and appropriate but unexpected ideas rather than only simple, right-answer responses. They should feel inspired to question, adapt, and extend as much as accept the current wisdom.	Risk asking a provocative question, sharing a complex idea, and applying more sophisticated vocabulary rather than clam up and dumb down responses as a way to better fit in the class.	Encourage unique perspectives and complex responses by providing extensive opportunities for conceptual thinking involving open-ended problems related to change, issues, and ethics.
9	Become experts investigating interests that may seem unusual for their age. They seek specialized content at an early age, are intrinsically motivated by personally relevant topics, and experience joyful learning pursuing their topics for an extended time.	Develop a structure of knowing that fosters development of insightful generalizations as well as accumulation of vast amounts of information. They should experience higher levels of intellectual work as they become self-directed and self-corrective.	Promote authentic learning applications with technology, mentors, and in-person or online advanced classes to build upon students' learning passions, even when their topics are outside of the current curriculum.
10	A culture of respect enabling them to feel understood, accepted, and supported while maintaining their uniqueness, idealism, and intensity. They flourish with unconditional encouragement from at least one person who facilitates passions more than redirects learning solely to core curriculum or today's occupations.	Demonstrate respect for peers as well as seek respect from them, understand others' perspectives as well as expect others to understand their perspective, and develop a richer understanding of every person's worth. They should seek and interact with at least one person who can support their intellectual and personal progress.	Mutually respect all learners while reinforcing that differences are natural and valued. Respond to effort and social-emotional needs as well as foster achievement and giftedness. Facilitate gifted students' self-understanding and interactions with intellectual peers so they feel welcomed to use their intellect.

FIGURE 1. High-Ability Learners: Rights, Responsibilities, and Differentiation Needs. From Kingore, B. (2013). *Rigor and Engagement for Growing Minds*. Austin, TX: PA Publishing.