

Why Do We Consider “Those in Need” to be Synonymous with “Low-Achievers”?

Are we diagnosing students with Gifted and Talented—believing it to be an untreatable “disease”?

What is “special needs” and why do we [teachers] focus on certain students over others when this is discussed? This is an issue I have been thinking about for nearly two weeks. I have several students that are either “high-achieving” or “gifted”; what do I do for them? Honestly, I am not sure. This actually made me wonder about a teacher’s moral obligation to each student and what that encompasses. I feel a sense of duty to ALL my students—not only those that are “low-achieving.” Yet, no one seems to be talking about those students; and what does that say about society?

I have no “official” special needs students of any kind in my Western Civilization class. While I personally think that at least two should be considered—or are currently in the stages of being tested—I cannot be sure and do not feel comfortable self-diagnosing.

What I would like to consider, though, is the possible consequences of teachers choosing to aim their curriculum at particular students based on ability, or perceived ability. I am not referring to single lessons, but what of individual focuses overall?

I wanted to share the following:

I was one of the students in school that I now know teachers tend to call the “students who can teach themselves.” If a teacher assigned a reading, I did it. If a teacher assigned a paper, I’d write it. If a teacher gave worksheets, I would grumble, but mine were always done on time. I was called a “high achiever” and I worked hard for this.

One of my irritations in class was when I saw teachers that constantly played for the “low achievers.” Their curriculum and lesson plans were often geared toward that group of students. There were times when it became frustrating as a student because I felt a pang of injustice (on a personal level). In my high school mind, I was thinking: “Teach me! I’m sitting right here and I want to learn. Teach me.” But these teachers would focus and spend time and energy on those that didn’t appear to want to learn. I felt irritated—why was I expected to learn on my own, simply because the teacher(s) thought I could? I swore I would never be that teacher.

Funny how life works. I can’t help but worry about the students that are considered “low achievers.” I have personally thought before—without realizing it—that a student was not at risk because she could “practically teach herself.” Those students make life easier and can be rewarding in that when you say something, it happens. So, I naturally have focused a lot of my attention to reel in the students I haven’t already “caught.” I have become THAT teacher....and this worries me.

Why do we so often gear down? Why do our focuses as teachers so often fall on those whom we feel are have already “checked out” or are low achieving? Is there a way to reach the upper and

Charlotte H.S.
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Onnalee L. Gibson
Western Civilization
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the lower levels of achievement in the same lessons? If given the choice of who to focus our teaching on, why do we tend to focus where we do? In trying to always reach the lower achievers, are we sacrificing a possible higher level of thinking and curriculum for those of higher achievement? Who are we selling short either way we turn? These are the questions I am grappling with, now that I am in the role of high school teacher, not high school student.

I understand now better than ever why some of my teachers chose to do the things they did; but does that make it okay? The acceptable thing to talk about in TE is this idea of “reaching all the students—let’s aim for the low achievers. They need to be educated too!” All I am asking is that we consider those that are higher achievers. I don’t think it’s impossible to screw them up (even though I’ve heard teachers say that “those kinds” of students are self-regulators and are “nearly impossible to mess up...they’re going somewhere anyway”). Maybe we shouldn’t be so quick to judge in either direction. I don’t want to assume that my high-achievers are going to get it anyway so I better focus elsewhere.

I’ve been considering this for the past two weeks and am going to take high-achievement from yet another angle: what if a student in class is not only one of the self-regulating kids in the class, s/he could be considered “gifted and talented”?

Go to Yahoo!, Google, or Ask.com and type in “What is Special Education?” Your top search results probably won’t surprise you. In fact they will likely contain the information you were looking for in order to conduct research—definitions, clarifications, steps on how to teach, and ways to reach those who have been labeled as having a physical, emotional, cognitive, and/or learning disability.

But “special education” also includes those who are “gifted and talented.” Of course, its official meaning and application varies by state, so the number of students capable of receiving such a title can also vary. Further searches will lend the fact that in some states, such as Iowa and Arizona, gifted programs are mandatory as well as fully funded while others, including New York and Missouri, are neither. In Michigan, gifted programming is not mandatory and “some funding is available.” What is the most prominent take on the gifted and talented of our nation? It probably won’t be a shock, but it is actually mandatory and partially funded in a majority of states (one of the best visual diagrams I found for this information is on a website I’ve included at the bottom).

So what? Well, I’ve been thinking that with so many states referring to the “gifted” program as mandatory, or at least recommended, then why don’t we talk about those students more? Are we leaving out an entire category of “those in need”? I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that I was personally gifted in school (as per what I mentioned earlier), but I am simply trying to take this to the official level of what our duties are as educators. I am a bit disturbed that those students are not typically considered as we think of “special education.” Have we created apathetic students, indifferent with their learning? Does not being challenged ruin the drive to try harder—or to succeed at one’s full potential?

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Now, some suggest that there IS support for those with disabilities (special ed. and therapy classes) as well as the gifted (usually A.P. courses). But does that make the classrooms that most teach “mainstream” by definition? Since those avenues are offered (always for those with disabilities and sometimes for the gifted), is that responsibility then carried over to the general education classes or are we supposed to aim for the middle of the road and hope we get the outliers in the process? See, that makes me uncomfortable as an educator and a human being. Obviously in a perfect world this wouldn't be an issue, and some have the privilege of being frustrated with this topic and brushing it aside, but life isn't perfect and I am personally dealing with this. I am having a hard time grappling with the idea that someone can be basically diagnosed with giftedness and then...so what? I think people (in general) would be more outraged if I was referring to students with disabilities being “left behind.” What does that make the gifted, anyway? Those unfortunate enough to be considered afflicted with...abilities??

I feel like I have a moral obligation to ALL my students, but I am only one person with so much literal time on her hands—not to mention energy and ability. It is not my intention to be able to solve the problems of the world, but to simply consider broadening thoughts on those students who have been potentially left in the academic dust. Not every student that is gifted has been marginalized, not every curriculum aims down or out, and certainly this is not an all encompassing suggestion. But I am attempting to consider what I want my role to be in my own classroom: Aim for the middle and hope for the best? Or try to remember to reach up as well as out?

(http://specialed.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=specialed&cdn=education&tm=56&f=00&su=p554.2.150.ip_&tt=2&bt=1&bts=0&zu=http%3A//www.geniusdenied.com/StatePolicy.aspx)