

Grading Gifted Learners: What is Fair and Equitable?"

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Although I spent a good amount of my k-12 years working with underachieving gifted students, for the most part, "I am my grade" or "I am my accomplishments" rings true for gifted and talented students who are willing to play the school game. For most gifted or talented students, perfectionism and fear of failure are at epidemic levels. For their entire school history, most GT students have gotten their personal and academic ego fed through being the best, fastest, and earliest done. This school profile is built through the attention of parents, teachers and even classmates. Good enough is not good enough when "who you are" is hanging in the balance. What this means frequently is that even one more point, although it may not change the grade, is worth fighting for.

Now the students I worked with, the underachieving gifted and talented students, were not motivated by grades. Based on earlier school experiences, they simply refused to play the school game. Daily work was useless, complying with rigid guidelines for projects was stupid, taking notes or keeping a log was a waste of time. These students could most often blow the top off standardized and summative assessments but would not produce the work that they deemed not necessary or even more troublesome to them...redundant. In a traditional grading system, they paid the price of not playing the school game through their end of term grades.

The guidelines that I suggest for maintaining fair and equitable grading practices for gifted and/or talented students are as follows:

1. If you are in a standards-based grading process, the question that is being asked is "Did the student or didn't the student reach the goals established for this course/class over the grading term?" Thus, reaching the grade/course goals is "A" work even if they got there early. The goals and the grading process stay steady for all learners.
2. If the school *authentically* accelerates or enriches a course/class then the goals *should be beyond* the grade level goals. In this case, the grade is again based on the course/class standards but they are known, *advanced* standards.

3. Commit to “instead of *not* in addition to..”. If gifted and/or talented students are asked to engage in enriched, extended or enhanced tasks, this should be in replacement of work assigned to students who are still working toward the goal.

Differentiation for GT students is not piling it deeper. They should not need to do all the “regular” work and then also be asked to complete enrichment, extension or enhancement tasks. Grade on accomplishment of course/class goals not the advanced work.

4. As appropriate compact and eliminate curriculum goals through assessment. If it appears that a student is truly above and beyond or way past others in their understandings, teachers may use assessments to test students out of redundant or unnecessary tasks. The essence of compacting is to find school time to engage the students in investigations that would take them more deeply into a topic or theme or engage them in more complex work than would be appropriate for other students. Grade on accomplishment of course/class goals not the replacement work.

Two of the conundrums of applying the fairness and equity guidelines above are: How do we motivate students to engage in more complex, in-depth tasks? How do teachers remark, evaluate, rate, or grade the enriched, extended, enhanced or replacement work?

Let’s start with the advanced, accelerated courses/classes. Historically, the drive to getting higher grades meant that if offered an advanced, enriched, honors, AP, IB course, it resulted in needing to work harder or do more work for the same grade as in a *regular* section/course. This practice drove hordes of highly capable students away from such courses. As the University faculty member who admitted students to university honors courses, I know that admissions pays a whole lot of attention to exactly which courses candidates list on their transcripts and whether they were successful in accomplishing the goals of the course. How do we know that the student can be successful in our university if we have no evidence that they can handle academically demanding coursework? From my experience, admissions would rather see a “B” in a demanding course than an “A” in a basic course. Students need to know this.

Then, how do we remark, evaluate, rate or grade enriched, extended, enhanced or replacement work? And what motivates the student to take on such learning

opportunities? First, something I learned from my gifted underachievers: The key to motivation is interest! Students need to be engaged in the planning and execution of advanced work. This could be through co-planning with the teacher or through giving students choice in advanced content, complex processes or innovative products. Then, this work needs to be graded based on attainment of agreed upon standards or goals.

If end of term grades are based on attainment of grade level or course goals during a grading period, then how do we report on advanced work? My suggestion is through another reporting format, another side of the report card. In like fashion to the school's reporting system, the "other side of the report card" would communicate student progress on standards or goals established for the advanced work. Thus, a dual grading system is established, one for the grade level or course goal attainments and another for the enriched, accelerated, extended, enhanced or replacement work.

A short-cut method suggested by Carol Tomlinson is to enter end of term grades with notations related to their level or degree of challenge. Thus A(++) could indicate accomplishment of grade level/course goals and attainment of goals of advanced work. A(+) reports accomplishment of grade level/course goals. A(-) reports accomplishment of goals in a modified program of study reflecting below grade level goals. Her suggestion creates greater clarity in the students' accomplishments over the grading period.

The grading practices for advanced, enriched or accelerated goals need to nurture a growth mindset in our gifted and/or talented learners. "I am my grades", the fixed mindset, is reinforced in traditional grading practices. Rather than a continued drive to accumulate points to earn a grade, gifted and talented learners need to focus on their learning. This can be supported through fair, equitable grading practices that both convey their accomplishments and recognize their pursuit of "above and beyond" goals.

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Wormeli, R. 2018. *Fair Isn't Always Equal*. 2nd ed. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers. Information contributed to Chapter 17, pp.225-239.