## Video Transcript: Understanding High-ability Students From the Inside Out

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KAREN GREEN:  
Hi I'm Karen Green. Welcome to this presentation titled ‘Understanding High-ability Students From The Inside Out’.

Why this topic? We know that the emotional well-being of students plays a huge role in both their attitude to learning, as well as their learning outcomes. When we know why students are behaving in particular ways and what drives them, we're in a far better position to be able to make appropriate adjustments and cater for their academic needs.

Here are the elements that will be covered during this presentation. The terminology that I'll be using. Questions to consider about meeting the needs of high-ability students that can be discussed as a whole school. How high-ability students vary from each other. The high-ability students who are at a higher risk of non-identification. The asynchronous development of these students. Checklists for helping you to identify who these students are. Some of the well-known misunderstood traits, the needs of high-ability students. And where to begin, from your perspective, as a school.

So, what is the Student Excellence Program? It's being developed to place a spotlight on students with high-ability.

The focus is on high-ability students who are already performing significantly ahead of their age peers in one or more learning areas, as well as students who are capable of performing ahead of their peers. These students are not performing in this way at the moment, for a range of reasons that we will look at during this presentation.

As you can see, the Victorian state schools are being supported to identify and support students in a number of ways. The students are being supported with programs, the teachers are being assisted, and the schools are also being given funds to spend on this program.

The term high-ability has been chosen to broaden the scope of the Student Excellence program and ensure that schools across the state consider students with regard to all of their offerings from every learning area.

The label of giftedness is not wrong, but the term invokes something that may only apply to a few students. There is a need to cast a broader net. We need to be thorough in our identification of students who might have fallen through the cracks.

This is really important from the student's perspective, so that they can get a sense of achievement and realise their goals, but it is also important at a community level, where there is much to gain from tapping into the abilities of all students who will, in turn, make great contributions to society through their achievements.

The reason that I am mentioning the terminology here, is that, throughout this video, there will be reference made to gifted students and giftedness. This is because much of the research in this field uses these terms.

Some of the students in your program may have been tested by a qualified psychologists and found to be in the gifted range after undertaking an IQ test. Most of your students will not have been tested in this way.

It is really important that you understand that I'll be talking very broadly about high-ability students. They will obviously not all have all of the characteristics that are presented here. Some of the students in your school, as I said, may have already been tested and have an IQ score. For those students, this quote is really powerful.

In the classroom, gifted potential is not an IQ score, but the individual's ability to learn spontaneously in ways that lead to understanding of a higher quality.

Teachers don't interact with intelligence. They need to interact with how students learn, what they know and how they use their knowledge." Labels can come with their own problems, and sometimes, they provide clarity for parents, teachers and students themselves, but sometimes they add a layer of pressure and fear that high-ability students cannot manage. We will look at this further towards the end of this presentation.

So, for that first group that I mentioned, those students are already performing at a high level, it's relatively easy for teachers to identify these students. They run faster and have better balance than the others in the team. They can draw in three dimensions, while others are drawing in two. They can write poetry that shows extraordinary insight. They can solve complex maths problems, often, without having been taught them. They can ask deep probing questions about a social issue. They can design a web application without formal lessons. And they can lead other students with maturity.

So, how have these students been able to do so well. I'm not trying in this presentation to get into the nature/nurture debate, but we know that, for these students we're discussing, their high abilities are a result of a combination of many factors, including physical and personal traits, general intelligence and opportunities. They have innate and acquired differences to their same age peers.

The Student Excellence Program is about identifying students from all learning areas. This means that all teachers are tasked with identifying students who are already, or who can perform at a high level in their subject area.

The interesting thing here is, is if the curriculum that's being taught is in a lockstep way, it's sometimes difficult to get an idea of a student's potential.

In the classroom, we tend to get back what we assess. And if assessment tasks and criteria are not open ended with opportunities for students to develop this skill, then it proves difficult to know the potential capabilities of many students. Some will forge ahead irrespective of any limitations in curriculum provision, but there are some that we will discuss here, that will do what is necessary to get by.

I know one underachieving high-ability student who recently said, upon completion of year 12, Well, that was an interesting game. Let's see what happens next." The richness of curriculum and assessment tasks often influences the quality of the product.

So, creating an ideal learning climate for these students. There is definitely a direct relationship between the taught curriculum and how students behave. They respond to their environment. Some do really well in the environment provided and some don't.

We collect and collate a lot of academic data about our students. As you will see, some high-ability students have complex emotional needs, so it's really important to gather data about their emotional well-being as well. By using the content descriptions in the personal and social capability in the Victorian curriculum, we can teach self-awareness strategies explicitly. Many high-ability students will really benefit from this.

Separating a student's emotional report card from their academic one, we can't separate them. Our emotional well-being has an enormous impact on our ability to learn, and we know that when students feel understood, that they're being asked to learn things that make sense to them and that they can relate to, they are happier and more engaged.

We know this as adults as well. If we're physically unwell, stressed, unmotivated or fearful, we need to be in the right frame of mind to learn. We are unlikely to conform with requests to think or act in ways that don't match our ethical standards.

We find it difficult to undertake tasks that seem to us to be a waste of time. We learn best when we can see the rationale behind what we're learning and we're happiest when we can take ownership of our learning and pursue topics or concepts that capture our imagination and spark our passion.

It's exactly the same for high-ability students.

These are some questions that you can consider as a whole school.

How does your school identify high-ability students? Is there a testing regime that's followed? Do you have standardised tests for class placements? How does your school extend these students within the classroom and in extracurricular activities? How effective are these approaches to extension? How does your school celebrate high-ability students? And what and how do you communicate to your school community about your approach to supporting these students? Is the community involved in any way, and if not, how could they be? What do we know about these students?

There is an enormous body of research about these students. There are scientific, psychological and educational books written about high-ability students.

There are also theoretical models about giftedness, where experts have distilled the factors that contribute to a student being able to display their talents in a particular domain or learning area.

This group is diverse and display their abilities across many domains of learning. Students may have high ability in one or two domains but may have low ability in other domains.

They may have high ability in one specific domain, and average ability in others. They are not a homogenous group, that is a really important thing to remember while we're looking at this.

How do they vary? They vary in abilities. They may demonstrate gifts and talents in a single area or across a variety of learning areas.

They differ in aptitudes, they may have a learning disability or a physical disability.

They vary in their levels of giftedness, so two students who have abilities in the same field may not necessarily have the same abilities in that field.

They vary in achievement.

Some of them are achieving at high-ability in a mild way, a moderate way, a high, a very high or a profound way.

Some underachieve for reasons that we will explore in a minute, and they're hiding in plain sight.

Some of them come from diverse backgrounds, and they're found in all cultures, socio-economic levels and geographic locations.

And there are unlimited range of personal characteristics that also affect the identification of these students, but also shows the variance of amongst them.

Which students are at a higher risk of non-identification? The students who most often go under the radar are here. There are things that get in the way of teachers seeing what they can do. We need to be really, really careful not to see a problem first.

Learning or physical disability can do exactly that. We may be seeing their disability or problem before we actually can identify the level of their capabilities.

Students who come to school, perhaps with no breakfast, or without resources at home that will help them study, they are also at risk.

Students that are culturally diverse with English as a second Language. They may have limited language skills to express their complex and abstract thoughts.

Some students might be geographically isolated and have limited access to technology and other resources.

For some students, their love of learning has been dimmed by years of repetitive and unchallenging curriculum.

And there are students who deliberately camouflage their abilities for peer acceptance. That is called the forced choice dilemma, and we will discuss that a little later on.

Gathering information about students is an ongoing process for teachers. When teachers start a new year, the immediate role that they face is to get to know their students. They essentially put together the pieces of a puzzle in order to understand individual student's strengths and weaknesses.

During this presentation, I'd like you to consider ways that we can put together the pieces of the puzzle for a couple of your students. Building these puzzles requires a lot of patience and insight, as does teaching.

So now, I'd like you just to consider two of your students. Student A is relatively easy to identify, as I've already mentioned. As we move through this video, I'd like you to consider if this student could perform at an even higher level.

And your student B is the one that isn't performing yet, at the level that they could. And they're probably the ones that were on the previous slide when we were talking about the risk of non-identification.

What is asynchronous development? Many high-ability students display asynchronous development. They can be many ages at once. Asynchrony is the term to describe the mismatch between cognitive, emotional and physical development of high-ability students. Their judgment, in fact, lags behind their intellect.

Think of a 7-year-old high-ability girl. She's reading at a year six level, she's performing maths tasks at a year four level, she may have fine motor skills that are at about a grade 2 level, and socially, she's operating at a level far below her same age peers.

Or let's consider a 15-year-old boy who is attending catch up classes for maths but comes to extension withdrawal classes for literacy skills that he has in abundance. He is a student that is a real student that I taught, who used to walk around the school at recess and lunchtime bumping into people because his head was always in a book.

And this is a boy who is now an accomplished playwright. So he's asynchrony certainly showed in terms of his maths and his literacy skills.

Think about Ben, who was a foundation student sitting in a bus at the bottom of the Rialto Towers, while his classmates were all going up to the observation deck. This child refused to get out of the bus. He went hysterical.

And the person was with him, one of the parents was with him trying to understand what had bothered him.

And his response was, he didn't want to go to the very tallest building in Melbourne at the time, to the top of it, because planes fly into tall buildings. He was deeply concerned about his classmates going somewhere where they may be hurt. That was his understanding of the world, but his emotions couldn't manage it.

Or another student, who was a prep student on his very first day. When I went in to meet him, he gave me a tour of his classroom and we got to the dress ups corner. And he said to me, "Gee, this is an interesting place. It looks a little bit dark and cobwebby to me though, don't you think?"

And then, when it came time for him to go to swimming lessons, he refused to get in the water because he knew that unless you could swim, you might drown, and he was getting in the water when he couldn't swim.

So when we observe these asynchronous behaviours, we need to ask questions of the parents, and previous teachers and the student themselves to work out the puzzle. Sometimes parents also need help in understanding and managing this asynchrony.

So, what insights can be gleaned when we understand this asynchrony?

There's an example of a little girl that I'll call Sarah, who was in Grade 1. I was running an enrichment program in the school, and the students were nominated by teachers.

The head of the school called me in one day, to ask me if I knew anything about Sarah, who I hadn't heard anything about, but whose parents had just had her tested by a psychologist and she had scored on the 99th percentile.

So, I went looking for Sarah, and I ended up in her classroom, where the classroom was quiet because all the students went out, and I asked the teacher about this student.

She seemed a little surprised that I would be considering this student, because she described her as a daydreamer who hadn't provided her with any insight into having high-ability at all.

I then went to meet the child in the art room. And the art teacher looked at me in the same perplexed way. I sat down with Sarah, and she was definitely quiet day dreamy, and very timid and very quietly spoken.

So I organised a meeting with the parents, Sarah's parents, and the class teacher. And we met two different Sarahs.

The teacher described a very shy, quiet child who did the minimum amount of work to get by, and the parents described a child who was so excited when she got in the car after school to share everything that she'd done.

She was reading books, multiple books at a very high sophisticated level for her age, and she also sent quite amazingly well-written postcards to her grandparents who lived interstate.

So, once we identified that there were two Sarah's, I provided the class teacher and her parents with some reading material about high-ability students and their traits, and the asynchronous development, as well as the forced choice dilemma that we will talk about.

What happened was, six weeks later, we found that Sarah, in fact, had totally changed her attitude in the classroom, because the teacher knew what to look for.

So, we're really looking at identifying students who may be hiding in plain sight and explore the reasons for that.

So now, please consider student A, who you just identified as a student who is performing significantly ahead of their peers. Can you identify asynchronous behaviour or development in this student?

Think about whether or not this may be holding this student back from performing at an even higher level.

It's not about the glory of better marks, but it's so they get a greater sense of satisfaction as a learner. This, in turn, will positively affect their self-esteem.

What about student B? Is it likely that this student's asynchrony is getting in the way of their learning, limiting achievements and causing confusion?

Another example of asynchronous development is really, really poor handwriting. And a lot of teachers are not aware that high-ability students can have really difficult to read writing themselves, but it doesn't mean that they don't have amazing ideas and great things to write.

Some high ability students have trouble spelling, which means that they limit their own vocabulary that they use while they're doing some writing.

So their vocab could be miles more sophisticated than their spelling ability, and they will compensate by just writing down a really simple synonym instead of a really advanced word that they know that they can express.

So sometimes, with even younger students, you can actually get them to do a drawing before they do their writing, and you will see the elaborate nature of their thinking. And then you can actually help them write those words that they really want to write. Checklists for high-ability students.

They ask a lot of questions, they’re highly curious. They are inquisitive, they remember details. They have a passion for learning, sometimes in a narrow field that becomes all-consuming for them.

This can lead to it sometimes being really difficult for them to transition to a new topic. They often want to master one topic before moving on.

They may also have a passion for learning things that are not being taught. They become bored or disruptive, or maybe just switch off. They're intellectually curious and they ask a lot of questions that other children may not even consider.

These students, when they're young, these children often drive their parents a bit nuts with their constant questioning.

Many of these students are abstract thinkers. They have the ability to think about things that are not actually present, and they look at broader significance, the broader significance of ideas and information, rather than concrete details. They can make generalisations and test out ideas.

These students have flexible thinking, and they can explore ways to think about things that are not usual, and it's an executive skill that is a key aspect to problem solving.

They use a variety of strategies to work something out. They would be, in my opinion, the perfect desert island companion, because they thrive on ambiguity, and sorting out conundrums and solving problems.

It's immensely satisfying for these students to solve a problem that seems, at first, to others unsolvable.

They have a very clever use of humour, and it’s quite sophisticated humour, sometimes, for their age, and they will be students that will get the teacher jokes that most of the other students will not.

They have a superior vocabulary. It's sophisticated language that uses discipline-specific language in the correct context.

They enjoy adult discussions. They will often gravitate towards adults, particularly in circumstances, perhaps, on yard duty. Where I can remember a little boy who was probably the most high-ability, had the highest ability of a student that I'd ever met, and he would be wandering around with me when I was on yard duty.

And one day, he said to me, "So, let's discuss the moons that go around, all the different moons that go around all the different planets. And I had to say to him that I seriously only knew about the moon that went around Earth.

His response was to stand akimbo with his hands on his hips and say to me that he thought that I was doing that typical teacher thing, which was making him tell the teacher the answers, even when the teacher knew the answers themselves.

He was an extraordinary boy in grade 2. He had a physics teacher that was teaching him in (UNKNOWN) physics. In Grade 1, he'd been going up to Grade 6 maths. He was really asynchronous in his development, because sometimes, he really had difficulty getting on with his peers.

These students have advanced reading ability. They read and understand material that is way ahead of their same age peers.

And they have sophisticated interests and get great pleasure from reading. They're immersed in another world when they're reading and the library is often their favourite place.

Bibliotherapy is an interesting thing that can be used with these high-ability students to understand their own abilities. And it's where they read literature or biographies featuring high-ability children or adults that they can relate to.

These students have a great retention of knowledge and they also learn at a very fast rate. They sometimes only need one to two repetitions of something for mastery, they move beyond the core and skills stuff really quickly and they have a detailed recall of facts.

I remember one student coming to me to let off steam. She was in grade 5, and she was fuming about what had just happened in her classroom.

And she was quite a beautiful child, was unusual to see her this upset, and she was really cross with her teacher, because she said that, in grade 2, her mother had told her that length times width equals area, and she was quite OK with it being told to her again in grade 3.

She said that she learned in grade 4 formally, but then her teacher who, as I said, she adored, had just decided to say it again and she was in grade 5. And she was extremely frustrated with this repetition.

They have a very strong sense of justice.

They empathize with those less fortunate.

They sometimes want to save the world.

And they will stand up for other children who they think have been poorly treated.

They don't tolerate unfair decisions, and they'll often be very vocal about their displeasure when rules are changed at the last minute, even if it's a rule change that they might benefit from.

For example, I remember a student in year 9, who complained about an extension on an assignment that he hadn't yet handed in. The teacher was giving an extension. He pointed out that would be unfair for those who'd already done the work if the teacher, in fact, extended the due by date.

These students often have a very long attention span.

They can concentrate and focus on an area of interest for a very long period of time.

And they have that ability to concentrate and be in flow, that delicious feeling when time stands still and the brain is being fed and nurtured.

I think we can all relate to having that experience, being so wrapped in learning something about which we are passionate that we don't want to break the magic spell.

Unfortunately, the way that school days is structured, students caught in flow often have to move to another classroom or go out for a break.

That will result, for some students, in quite a bit of frustration.

These students are also into independent learners. They are quite self-directed and autonomous. They also have a high level of responsibility and commitment.

They set attainable goals, and they can learn to accept their own limitations, realise the things that they are really good at and the things that they aren't.

And they are quite tolerant of peers in a group, generally.

They don't tolerate though, being asked to look after weak students on a regular basis and become their tutors.

These students have strong feelings and opinions, they listen to others. They show concern or interest. They consider other people's points of view and they're very aware of the feelings of other people.

This early moral concern can cause some issues if teachers are not prepared.

I ran a session with six students who came to withdrawal classes once a week. And sometimes, the sessions were open-ended discussions about things that were in the news or had caught the students' interests.

One of these sessions that - in one of these sessions, the conversation moved to the pros and cons of allowing euthanasia to be legalised, which is a fairly heavy topic for this age group, it was a robust discussion, and all the students shared their feelings very openly.

The bell went while we were still in the middle of the discussion. And as I would normally do, I would shuffle the students out, to out the door to go to their next lesson.

And I knew that young Mia was supposed to be going to science, so I was bustling around, and she stood firm and stared at me and said. You won't do that to me. She said, "You can't make me go to science now, not after you've opened up a can of worms about people who choose whether they'll live or they'll die." She said, "No, I'm not going to science.

And so, she burst into tears. And I spent that session looking after her, and I did learn a lesson then, that you can't really just open up the emotions for these students and not make sure that they're OK. They're original and creative.

They come up with ideas that are way out of the box if they're given time and they're provided with the opportunities to do that sort of thinking.

They have high energy levels. In terms of their own interest areas, they'll be very passionate and busy looking at things that they really love and they can organize their time well.

And they're immersion learners. They want to know everything, as I said before, about a topic.

And they become an expert quite quickly, by talking to people, and researching and really burrowing in to find out what's going on.

So, imagine that you're a student with most or some of the traits that have just been identified, and you are in an environment where those traits are not valued.

What might happen to your level of interest, your desire to stay on task, your self-esteem, your behaviour, your tolerance, your opinion of school and your desire to share your opinion?

Let's have a look at what we know about the underachieving high-ability students.

They often have incomplete work, and ironically, that is due to their perfectionism.

They are so used to doing really well, sometimes, they come and hit a roadblock.

By the time they get to, say, year seven or year eight, where they haven't had to learn how to study, they haven't really had homework, because they've finished all the work that they've needed to do already, and so, they're stuck in a place where they're not necessarily doing as well as they know they can.

It's really important not to pathologize perfectionism, because we do value perfectionistic behaviour when it leads to things in the world like scientific inventions and the ability to build buildings correctly, but when a student's perfectionism turns into obsession and anxiety, then we need to take note and look at some intervention strategies.

A surprisingly simple way to stop some students from going over the top for an assessment piece, is to provide clear and concise rubrics, so that the student can see exactly what's required and won't spend too long on things that are not part of the actual assessment task.

Sometimes these students are really disruptive and oppositional. And this is deflecting them, because they want to save face about not achieving to their potential, so they'll be masking things.

They're often really disorganised. So a visit to their locker will be an explosion when you open the door.

Sometimes these students have their belongings scattered all over the school, so as you walk down the corridor, you'll find their ruler followed by their pencil case, followed by their blazer.

And sometimes, we look at these students a bit like being nutty professors. We need to help them with organizational skills. They often have difficulty studying.

So, it's what I said before, that they haven't necessarily had to do it. And because a lot of them have got this capacity to think in an abstract way, they're complex abstract thinkers, they don't necessarily see the concrete things, like study skills and test taking are not necessarily something that come naturally to them.

Some of these students are really quiet middle grounders, and they're really happy with average. And the forced choice dilemma is something that these students experience. And I'll discuss that in a minute.

Sometimes they're socially isolated preferring their own company, a bit like the little boy who followed me around on yard duty, because they can't find anybody to have meaningful talks with.

So, what is it about these students that will give them away every now and then. Every now and then, they'll laugh at a joke that you're surprised that they get, they'll say something incredibly profound, and they'll show some unusual insight and empathy.

So, we have to be really forensic in our investigations of what these students are saying and doing to see if we can identify them.

So, the force choice dilemma that I mentioned before, is where there's a conflict between two normally complimentary drives of intimacy and achievement that can turn into a dilemma.

So, Miraca Gross says that, many highly gifted children retreated behind a mask of social conformity."

Is that what some of your students are actually doing now?

Are they careful to maintain the peer group and to be part of the team, or do they want - are they just doing that so that they don't actually - they're not out on a limb with their peers?

What are some misunderstood traits in these students? The hyperactive talkative student could just have this enormous amount of energy that they need to burn off.

So many students like this will get something written on their reports that they could perform better if they stopped talking, or perhaps we need to give those students opportunities to talk more, present their findings, become a leader in a debating team, make sure that they do drama.

Find the areas that they can use these skills, so that they're not a problem for them. They are often nonconformists, and we would say that they're basically walking their own path.

What it is, is really, their independent. They can think for themselves. The ones that are really challenging us and pushing the limits, they're doing that because they are so curious to find out things, that's why they do it often.

Being disrespectful and stubborn. Sometimes that is a side effect of this strong willed nature, and they do need to be shown and told that some of their behaviours are not acceptable, but if we can understand where it's coming from as teachers, we can perhaps show them in a slightly different way than giving them detentions or asking them to write an essay about why they must behave well.

The oppositional ones could be abstract thinkers and they're seeing so many different things too, sometimes the students in the class and also the teacher.

Sometimes the extremism that they show that's so focused is just their intense focus. That's how they operate in the world. They do think differently.

Being critical or judgmental is, possibly, because they have high expectations of what actually happens at school and what teachers should be giving them to do, so they develop their own judgments about that.

The show offs could be the exceptionally verbal skilled students that I was talking about.

Immature cry-babies sometimes are those highly sensitive students, like the little boy in the bus who wouldn't get off the bus.

That can come across as quite immature, but in actual fact, it's this huge level of sensitivity.

The fussy worrywarts often are perfectionists.

And those students that you get a little bit sick of standing on their high moral ground, it is because they have a strong sense of justice.

What do these high-ability students need?

They need appropriate curriculum and assessment tasks that are high order open-ended inquiry-based that gives them choice.

They need opportunities to work with like minds.

Some high-ability students love things like Tournament of Minds, for example, or Future Problem Solving that gives them opportunities to work with students who are solving the same problems, but also have similar high abilities.

They need an ability to take risks to develop their resilience.

School is the place for them to learn what it's like when they can't do something.

And we need to provide that safe place for them, that they don't have to produce perfect work, and they can do things, like I mentioned earlier, read bibliographies of people who have actually failed, there's plenty of famous people who will write about and talk about their failures and what they led to.

They need mentors and intellectual peers.

So, one school that I know, a secondary school, actually set up opportunities for the year ten students, they were very close to a university, they set up opportunities for these high-ability students to go and work with mentors that were lecturers in a chosen field that they loved, and that worked really well.

They need management with their stress, to deal with their anxieties. They need to understand that those anxieties are OK to have, but there are ways to manage them with mindfulness, or meditation or making sure that they mix up and keep a balance in their life.

And they do need help with study skills. Just telling them to go home and study something, for these students, by the time they get moving through secondary school, they can't retain everything in their head.

They need to have some strategies, whether it's using graphic organizers, I have shown many high-ability students the ways to use mind maps, for example so that they can access information really quickly and easily by synthesizing it all on a mind map, that they can reproduce in an exam situation. That works really well.

So these students need balance. They need opportunities to participate in other activities like sport, drama, chess, sustainability programs, external competitions that they can go into.

We need to give them an array of things to show them different things that they can do, that they might become quite passionate about.

They need to deal with expectations, and these are expectations that they have of themselves, their parents might have some expectations.

Many parents will say to their students, we're doing the most for you that we can, because we never had these opportunities." And we've all heard those stories before, they lead to quite a layer of stress for some students.

They might be competing with their siblings who've gone before them and have done brilliantly.

And there's constant reference to those students in the school or your son, so as brother or sister, "Oh well, I wonder if you're going to do as well as them?"

The community is - the general community that they mix in, are they placing some pressure on these students?

We need to speak to the students about this if we pick it up, and we also can talk to the parents to find out what's going on.

We need to avoid repetition of what they already know.

We need to make sure that we give them work that is at their level.

So, one very enthusiastic maths teacher had a year 8 group, who were really high-ability maths students, were about six of them in his class, and he had sent away to get some materials from another university interstate.

He was really excited, one day, at recess to come and show me what he'd just grabbed from the office, and this material had arrived.

And I knew that he had maths in the next session, and I said, "Well, that's great. You can give this to these kids next period."

And he said, "Oh, I don't think I can, because we've just started a chapter on fractions."

And I said, "If you were to give those students the end of chapter test now, how would they go?"

And he said, "Oh, they'd all get 100 per cent."

And I said, "Then they don't need to do that chapter on fractions, they need to do this enriched material that you've just got."

And he was happy to take my advice, but still concerned about what he would write on the report about these students.

And I explained to him that the report wasn't the essential thing, the most important thing was to give the students what they needed.

We need to provide a differentiated curriculum for these students, that gives them ways to work - they're allowed to work on things that are different to their peers, that's perfectly OK.

One of the things that Fred Pascoe, a well-known researcher in this field, said, the questions to ask to identify whether or not a curriculum is differentiated for high-ability students, there's three questions.

“Should all children do it? Could all children do it? Would they all want to do it?"

So, if the answer to any of those questions is yes, then it isn't differentiated for high-ability students.

These students also really love the opportunity to work on projects and assessment tasks that give them a chance to present their findings to real life audiences.

So, presenting to a school council about an issue, presenting to a local council in an area, writing to politicians.

So, imagine now, that you are a high-ability student in an environment where your needs are met. What might happen to your level of interest now, your desire to stay on task, your self-esteem and behaviour, your tolerance and your opinion of school, and your desire to share your opinion?

No doubt, your attitude will have changed, and you will be thriving.

So, where will you begin as a school? There are lots of different ways to provide appropriately enriched programs for high-ability students. Each school will identify the best options for their schools and their context.

You begin with an analysis of your school community, of your cohort.

You identify the different sorts of students we've mentioned, the type As and the type Bs.

Liaise with parents to glean more insights into your student's needs and what they're like at home.

Listen to the students. What are they saying? What do they want as learners?

Carry out an audit on your curriculum provision. Are there specific programs in place for high-ability students already?

If yes, how are they evaluated? Are the evaluations being used to inform the next part of your program?

And if no, where will you start? This is the question about labels or tagging. Is it okay to be tagged as a high ability student, is there a stigma attached?

So, it really is a case-by-case decision. And it does depend a bit on age, whether or not students need to know. If they've had an IQ test, for example, what their IQ score is. There's quite a bit of debate about whether that's helpful or not.

There was a lady that came up to me at the end of a parent information talk, where I was giving some insights into who these high-ability students were from both an academic perspective and a social and emotional perspective.

And a mom of a teenager came up to me, very tearfully, at the end of the talk. And she said, I have an appointment for my son to go and see a psychiatrist next week, not a psychologist, because I've spoken to the GP and we think there's something really wrong with him."

And she looked through the checklists that I'd given her, particularly the social and emotional, and she said, He almost ticks every box here. And what you have said is that he's really high-ability and probably in the profound area of high-ability.

So, there's possibly not anything wrong with him. He just has these amazing abilities." So, I think that the attitudes that are held by the students, the teachers and the parents really have their genesis in the leadership of the school. That's what my experience has been.

Leadership teams, and especially principals, set the tone for academic achievement. Just as schools have awards for sport, great schools also acknowledge achievements in lots of other learning areas and really promote that.

So, we really need to make sure that we're not placing pressure on these students through labels, and consider once again that forced choice dilemma, whether or not that's why some students aren't achieving.

High-ability, we really need to remember, it doesn't just mean thinking in more advanced ways than peers, it means that they think differently.

One student in a selective entry school told me that he actually fitted in with different groups in the school quite deliberately. He quite deliberately, even in this selective entry environment, joined the rowing team to fit in with the sporty kids, and he joined the chess club to fit in with the boffins, and he took drama to make sure he fitted in with the creatives.

So even in that environment, he was very careful that he made sure that he got acceptance through all of those different groups.

Linda Silverman includes a helpful illustration in her book, ‘Counselling the Gifted and Talented', and it really provides food for thought regarding the emotional well-being of high-ability students.

Imagine that you live on another planet in another solar system, in which everyone is convinced that, in order for his children to have appropriate social adjustment, they must be grouped with children who are of similar height. That way, no one feels bigger or smaller than anyone else, and it's easy to place team sports.

You happen to be extremely short. In fact, you're in the bottom two percent in height. So you have been grouped with children three years younger than you are who are the same height.

You're nine years old and they are six. You will be with this group for the next 12 years. There's no way out of this situation, because everyone on the planet agrees that this is best for your social adjustment.

So, it's just food for thought about where we place students, what we do with them.

Grouping is also contingent on the Vygotsky Zone of Proximal Development. This learning process requires students to attempt tasks slightly more complex than their level of mastery.

This principle stipulates that learning is progressive and should not ignore prior competence and achievement, thus, differentiating through grouping is necessary to effectively move students through the learning process according to their zone of proximal development.

There are lots of different strategies for curriculum differentiation.

So, finally, I would like to say that teaching these students is fabulous, it's great fun. Understanding who they are and what makes them tick is awesome.

And it's also really important to stop and take a deep breath and realise the role that teachers play.

Often, we don't know the impact we've had, but we do know that we do make an impact.

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