

Understanding Advanced Learners

In any kind of teaching, we always begin with what the students bring to the classroom—their level of skill and knowledge, their abilities and talents, their deficits, their learning styles, and their interests. No matter how many curriculum guides fill their files or how many times they have to bend to a new policy or procedure from their district, conscientious teachers are guided most by the needs they see right in front of them. They walk into their rooms and immediately know that Maya will probably know half the answers without instruction; that Billy will be at work on his latest cartoon (when he really should be practicing his math skills); that Nehir, a new arrival from Turkey, will turn in twice as much work as necessary because her parents want her to make a good impression; and that Jason’s homework will look like he did during recess (which he often does).

Advanced learners need many things. They need *acceleration* so that they can progress through the curriculum at their learning pace, which is significantly faster than those at their grade level. They need at least some *creative experiences* so that they can experiment, invent, and apply what they’ve learned. They need materials with which to work their ideas and explore new lines of inquiry. Many also need *sensitive handling*, as they may feel socially isolated because of their passion for learning.

These are a great many demands, particularly for teachers already pressed for time and resources. It might be that their district has no commitment to advanced learners and little funding to support teachers who want to help them. It might be that the focus on achieving

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proficiency—a legacy of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act—has made kids who exceed proficiency a lower priority. Or it might be that the economic downturn has proven hazardous to districts that once funded gifted education. Teachers who care about this population live in difficult times. They cannot allow these children to slip through the cracks untended by a system that claims to educate *all*. So they try to create manageable ways to make adjustments where they can—often juggling multiple learning needs in one classroom.

This is not new. Since the days of the one-room schoolhouse, teachers have had to become flexible in responding to different levels of ability, knowledge, and skill. The difference is that today's teachers come under considerably more regulation and scrutiny. The moment they enter the classroom, they have to face a predetermined curriculum, mandated benchmarks for student achievement, and a system of testing that often precludes much more than test preparation in the weeks preceding it. This is not to diminish the importance of curriculum development and accountability. But it must be admitted that tests often fall short of measuring what they set out to measure. A poor-performing school can undergo a transformation in revitalizing its teachers, mobilizing its parent base, and increasing student achievement and still find itself falling short in test scores. It must also be admitted that teachers, pressed from every side to cover the required content so that students achieve minimum competence, can often do little more. What Toni Morrison (1996) has called “our busied-up, education as horse-race, trophy-driven culture” (p. 13) sets the tone and pace of our schools. Survival becomes the goal rather than the vibrant, lively art of teaching and learning.

FACTORS THAT HINDER THE RECOGNITION OF ADVANCED LEARNERS

“What is the largest challenge you face in trying to meet the needs of advanced students?” We’ve been asking this question to Chicago-area teachers during the past year. Here are some of their responses.

“Human resources are definitely a problem in our district. We are trying to get a good program for gifted students set up, but the district is unwilling to hire new staff to help fill the positions needed to meet the board/community’s expectations.”

“Our district does not recognize nor offer programs for gifted students until they reach fourth grade. Admission is mainly based on test scores rather than input from other sources. Albert Einstein wouldn’t have made it in the program!”

“Sadly, I think limited human/financial resources are beginning to take their toll in our district. Schools who have fewer children identified are seeing their services greatly reduced. The identification process has been streamlined, which may cause some children to be missed. I am fortunate to be at a building that has more children identified and a very supportive administrator, but districtwide, I’d say it’s resources.”

“Lack of planning time to assist advanced learners while I am also meeting the needs of lower and average students. I don’t have any help in my classroom so it’s hard to balance all the different levels of students.”

“The focus in many schools is on struggling learners rather than challenging the advanced learners. NCLB has created an unequal focus on improving test scores rather than providing enrichment opportunities. This causes many high-performing students to be overlooked.”

“Top three challenges include the following: (1) insufficient parent involvement, (2) the need for community support programs for the gifted (both for the adults and children), and (3) a lack of networking among schools on the west side (inner-city Chicago) about what kinds of gifted programs their schools offer.”

Teachers cite various challenges to knowing and responding to the needs of advanced students, but the following are among the most common:

Time spent on testing. The high-stakes testing in many districts means that teachers often feel they can’t breathe much until after they’ve administered the tests. Since advanced learners generally achieve higher scores, they seem better off than those who do not.

Curriculum restrictions. Teachers work in prescribed content with benchmarks already established for moving students through the curriculum. Most teachers are quite expert at adjusting things as they go along. But every teacher feels the pressure to bring students to the same level of mastery in all required content areas so that they enter the next grade with the skills and

Common Complaints About Standardized Testing (Schrag, 2000)

- The pressure for high test scores kills innovative teaching and curricula by galvanizing schools to focus on test preparation in the months preceding exam time.
- Standards on which the tests are based are too vague.
- Tests are unfair to poor and minority students as well as those who don’t test well.
- Tests overstress young children and are often too long.
- Low test scores result in punishing consequences, whether or not a school is improving the quality of education.
- Children can’t discover things for themselves when the focus shifts from active learning to the test-taking skills.
- Standardized tests don’t measure what students really know and what they can do.

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knowledge they need. This pressure is often a restraint on alternatives: creative processes, independent or small-group projects, and cluster groups.

Funding. It is no surprise that, in the present economy, funds for gifted education have declined and, in some communities, entirely evaporated. This means that the services, whether in the form of a gifted teacher, coordinator, or a pullout program, may no longer be relied on to assist gifted learners. Teachers who are accustomed to a specialist handling advanced students don't see themselves as equipped to pick up the slack.

Knowledge. Another hurdle teachers face is the concern that they lack expertise in gifted education or that advanced students need more than they can provide. Exposure to gifted education is helpful, but not necessary. Providing opportunities for them to experience real challenge and advance at the level of their ability is a matter of designing choices that allow for more accelerated learning, creative thinking, and interest-based projects. Many teachers do this to some extent already—by finding areas in their curriculum where they can increase the level of difficulty for more advanced learners. Others arrange for students with particular gifts to study a subject in a higher grade, or they locate parent-mentors willing to work with students on independent study projects related to the curriculum.

Resources. Frequently, the material and human resources are lacking or seem to be so. High-ability learners need different kinds and levels of source materials that allow them to expand their imagination and hunger for knowledge. When assisting them, teachers have to consider the range of material resources in their rooms and how well they provide for advanced students. Human resources are equally important. Teachers, parents, community members, artists, scientists, writers, and others can offer enrichment, project ideas, guidance, and practical assistance in the classroom, all of which benefit advanced students.

Attitude. Teachers who want to help advanced students often face resistance from peers or administrators because of a bias against gifted education in general. This comes in different forms. "Gifted kids don't need as much as other kids" is one. Another is, "Why should we spend time and money on such a small percentage of our student body?" The first argument—that advanced students don't need as much as others—assumes that care for students who are not learning should only occur on the lower end of the spectrum. Advanced students spend a lot of time repeating what they've already learned or waiting for others to catch up, a situation that can cause real harm over time (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). The second argument—that we should not spend much time or money on a small percentage of students—would never be said about low-achieving students. All students deserve to learn, whoever they are and whatever challenges or abilities they possess.

Do you think that gifted learners should be a priority?

Consider these facts (Turner, 2009):

- Federal funding focuses primarily on helping kids, especially struggling kids, reach basic proficiency. Since gifted students typically exceed proficiency, the schools have little incentive to challenge them, especially as they could face serious consequences for not meeting NCLB goals.
- Compliance with the NCLB law has increased the trend to starve the already meager budgets for gifted education. Only 23 states have funding for gifted children in this country. More than half of them (13) eliminated the funding in the 2008–2009 school year to balance their strained budgets.
- Because programs for gifted learners depend so heavily on local districts or states, they vary widely. It is common to have a district with special classes and services next to several others with nothing at all. After spending funds to raise achievement for their lowest achievers, poor urban and rural schools typically have nothing left for their most promising students.
- Parents of gifted learners are fleeing the public schools as they realize that NCLB forces teachers to leave the high-ability students to their own devices and focus primarily on raising the achievement of struggling learners. This translates into little opportunity for gifted students to use higher-level thinking skills, to accelerate learning, or to explore creative or imaginative ideas.
- According to leading experts in gifted education, the lack of a national commitment to gifted and talented children will not only prove harmful to the students but to the country itself, as the years of neglect take their toll and the next generation of innovators cannot compete in the global economy.

The Children Left Behind

The plight of advanced learners practically becomes a nonissue in the high-pressured environment of schools today. Teachers often notice students who finish their work quickly—the doodlers and daydreamers who are too few to warrant an overhaul of the curriculum but too potent of a presence to ignore. Many teachers enjoy these children. They pose interesting questions, offer new solutions, and love to expound on their many opinions. Eagerness surrounds them as they work. Over time, however, their energy dissipates as they slacken their pace, hold themselves back, and censor themselves to avoid the annoyed looks and sighs of peers. These children are *left behind*—behind their own ability and potential as learners—to the same degree as those who struggle to keep up with the academic demands of their grade.

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Talented young mathematicians and writers cannot thrive in a school where teachers feel driven to bring all students to grade-level proficiency by 2014, a priority that often translates into basic and often slow, lockstep lessons. In “education as horse race” (in this case, the race to minimum proficiency), learning focuses more on the finish line than the journey. Advanced learners—especially the creative, spirited, and independent ones—care more for the journey. The unforeseen discovery, the hot pursuit of new knowledge, the testing of a novel idea transport them from the small world of the textbook to a vast universe they can see, feel, and understand. Because gifted students do well in the horse race, their problems may appear nonexistent to the school. Who would guess that a child who makes excellent grades and knows most of the year’s curriculum is actually at risk of underachievement? Such an idea seems counterintuitive.

The failure of our most promising youth is a quiet tragedy. E. Paul Torrance (1980) gives us the sad example of Tammy Debbins, a gifted first grader from the projects with an IQ of 177 who had an imaginary friend. The school didn’t understand Tammy’s needs and couldn’t provide the kind of adjustments that would have developed her abilities. By third grade, Tammy’s academic performance had become average. Torrance reported that she never used her talents in later years and that her greatest frustration in life was that she wasn’t “very smart” (p. 152).

Underachievement is underachievement, whether it’s a student treading water in the standard curriculum or a student getting straight A’s. Without understanding that these learners need more than the standard curriculum to grow and develop, most districts fail to support teachers’ efforts to accommodate them. This next teacher told us her story:

My superintendent does not believe in segregating students by ability levels. So advanced students are doomed to sit in a class mix with all levels and all behaviors. As my district gains more low-level special needs students, the higher-level kids have begun to lose their motivation to stretch themselves and seek enrichment. For years, I have fought the case that gifted students need to be ability grouped with, at the very minimum, students of average ability. I finally won my argument, and this year I have one class of students whose standardized scores placed them in the above-average range. The change in their motivation is startling. I have created a challenging program for them and eliminated what they consider the boring, repetitious work. I must assume they can and will independently read conceptual material and can devote class time to enriching and fun labs and activities. I have told them, in no uncertain terms, that I will not accept mediocre from them in my class. To date, I have seen positive outcomes.

We have to consider what a life of easy achievement does to students over the long haul. They become used to collecting A's like prizes they can win with minimal effort; they begin to disengage from school as a place to learn. Others, like Tammy Debbins, lose sight of their gifts and slide into a life of underachievement and invisibility. They achieve as far below their ability as any other student targeted by the NCLB Act.

What are your greatest challenges?

- What makes supporting advanced learners difficult for you?
- What services does your school offer?
- What resources does your school offer?
- What is the attitude toward these kids in your community?
- How are your advanced students doing?
- What would you like to do for them if you could?

THE ADVANCED STUDENTS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Many teachers can easily spot advanced learners through academic performance and test scores. Yet high ability does not always show itself so clearly. A student might have an unstable home environment that distracts her from attending and participating in class, or she might be a child who simply does not test well. One helpful way to expand our understanding of whom the advanced students are in our classrooms is to explore their thinking, learning, and behavior patterns in three broad categories:

1. Advanced intellectual ability
2. High degree of creativity
3. Heightened sensibilities

In this book, we use the term “advanced” rather than “gifted” to include the many students who can demonstrate their need for greater academic challenge, but who may not be formally identified as gifted.

1. Intellectual Ability

Intellectual ability includes academic aptitude—talent in areas emphasized in school, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies. More broad, intellectual ability also embraces a range of skills and

thinking processes that some may consider less intellectual such as intuition, experimentation, instinct, or inspiration. Academically able children can absorb, synthesize, and analyze information easily. They may be advanced readers with precise and detailed memories, able to digest new concepts quickly, comprehend meaning and application, and use logic and critical thinking in complex ways. Yet these academic gifts often accompany a deep curiosity about many things, a need to question and challenge convention, and a desire to know why certain phenomena are as they are. When you think of intellectual ability, think about the *whole person*.

How do your students show intellectual ability?

- Prefer to work and play independently
- Can multitask—concentrate on two or three activities simultaneously
- Prefer the company of older kids and adults to that of children their age
- Read books and magazines intended for older kids and adults
- Show interest in cause-and-effect relationships
- Want to know the reasons for rules—and the reasons *behind* the reasons
- Learn quickly and apply knowledge easily
- Show an unusual grasp of logic
- Have an advanced vocabulary for their age
- Love math games, playing with number concepts, and figuring out how to solve math problems in unique ways
- Seem extremely precocious—talk or think like an adult
- Show asynchronous (uneven) development—may be highly precocious cognitively while demonstrating age-appropriate or even delayed development emotionally or socially
- Love to know and give reasons for everything
- Argue or debate about the logic of ideas, rules, or actions

2. Creativity

Educators and parents have long seen creativity in their children. However, creative ability is difficult to measure. In schools that rely on standardized tests to identify advanced learners for special programs, the imaginative student with a quirky sense of humor may not qualify. Creative children apply logic to problems, explore solutions, and synthesize relevant information. Where they differ is in the creative way they do all these things.

Creative thinkers tend to push logic to its limits. Instead of saying, “If this is so, then this must also be so,” they say, “If this rule applies here, can it also apply to this other situation? Can I adjust it to make it work? If not, why not?” They feel an inner impulse to look for what’s new and unfamiliar.

You might find their school papers framed in clever doodles. Faces of imaginary beings peer out from the corners. Some creative kids are day-dreamers who find it difficult to stay on the beaten path. They always want to know what mysteries lie in wait for them around the corner, up the next hill, or beyond the horizon.

How do your students show creative ability?

- Discuss or elaborate on ideas in unusual ways
- See many possible answers to questions or solutions to problems
- Are extremely curious, ask many questions, and question the answers
- Enjoy making discoveries independently and solving problems in their own way
- Like to play with words (rap, poems, jingles)
- Have a long attention span for things that interest them
- Become so involved that they're not aware of anything else
- Have many unusual hobbies or interests
- Have elaborate collections and are passionate about them
- Have a vivid imagination
- Invent games, toys, and other devices
- Think of new ways to do things
- Like to create by drawing, painting, writing, building, experimenting, storytelling, or inventing
- Enjoy singing, playing an instrument, dancing or moving rhythmically, or pantomime
- Respond to music, are able to improvise tunes and rhythms, or compose songs
- See patterns and connections that others don't see, even among things that appear unrelated
- Tend to rebel against what's routine or predictable

3. Sensibilities

When advanced students are learning, they connect to the process in a deep, internal way, absorbing the world through every pore. Life provides them with multiple and complex sensations. They may be stopped cold by the sight of Canada geese flying south at dusk, overwhelmed by the pounding beat from a passing car radio, energized by blowing leaves, or fascinated by a thunderstorm. They're often acutely attune to their senses—the feel of mud squishing through their toes, the spicy smell of baking gingerbread, the warmth of a fire near cold feet. While most children respond to sights, sounds, smells, and sensations, gifted children tend to feel everything in more depth and detail. Their impressions often stay with them a long time.

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High-ability children may also show their gifts through empathetic responses to other people's struggles. They feel the sadness or distress of family members, relatives, or friends, and they recognize the fear of a dog who feels threatened. They offer friendship to an ostracized classmate or defend a bird trapped in a vestibule from the harassment of less sensitive children. Advanced students also tend to ask many questions about world problems—poverty, war, or pollution—and express genuine concern for the victims of injustice or hardship.

Do any of your students seem overly intense?

Overexcitabilities

Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902–1980) identified five domains of what he called "overexcitabilities" or "supersensitivities," which he concluded were *inborn* and resulted from a heightened ability to respond to stimuli. They are the following: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional. Most commonly found in gifted and creative people, these overexcitabilities do not represent quirks of character but express much deeper qualities in the way they sense, experience, and process life around them (Lind, 2001).

The primary sign of this intensity in the emotional domain is an exceptional sensitivity to everything around them, a depth of feeling they try to mask but can rarely control. For these students, all senses seem to be amped up to a high level, and their emotions come into play whether they're relishing an interesting math problem or watching a lunar eclipse. In today's climate of facile diagnoses, they may look like children with emotional disorders. Their daily experiences invoke a wider spectrum of feelings that they find overwhelming at times.

Think about your students. Do any of these characteristics sound like them?

- Intense emotional extremes
- High sense of drama around minor events
- Heightened sense of responsibility
- Concern for others
- Feelings of being overwhelmed, inadequate to deal with large problems
- Strong sense right and wrong, of injustice and hypocrisy
- Detailed memory for feelings
- Timidity and shyness
- Loneliness
- Problems adjusting to change
- Struggles with depression
- Need for security
- Physical response to emotions

See also the following:

Daniels, S., & Piechowski, M. M. (2009). *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability and emotional development of gifted children, adolescents and adults*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Another sensitivity commonly found in advanced learners is intuition—an insightfulness that enables them to see and feel things beyond their years, to read a person or situation beyond the surface appearance. That same intuitive ability enables them to work through a math problem or science project in a new way. An insight simply comes without any conscious reasoning process. Intuitive people suddenly sense something they can't explain logically. A child might say, "I don't know how I figured this out. I just had a feeling it would work."

For many advanced students, the downside of emotional sensitivity is perfectionism. Accustomed to excelling at many things and receiving praise for their accomplishments, they feel pressured to reach higher peaks with each endeavor. Unaddressed, this problem is a thief, robbing students of the joy they once felt in learning for its own sake. Perfectionists often put off starting projects because they can't bear to attempt what they can't do perfectly. The freedom and energy that once inspired their pursuit of knowledge gradually give way to stress about how they appear to others.

How do your students show their supersensitivities?

- Show fair leadership in organizing games and activities and in resolving disputes
- Have a well-developed sense of humor and use it to ease tensions and bring joy
- Tune into the speech patterns, behaviorisms, and vocabulary of different people and imitate them with uncanny precision
- Are very active, have trouble sitting still
- Like to discuss philosophical ideas such as the nature of creation, love, justice, and equality
- Express unusual sensitivity to what is seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled
- Show sensitivity to the feelings of others and empathy in response to others' troubles
- Express concern about world problems such as endangered animals, racism, pollution, and poverty
- Show a willingness to follow intuitive hunches even if they can't immediately be justified
- Demonstrate high energy, focus, and intensity
- Are frustrated by imperfection in others and in themselves
- Are extra sensitive to criticism
- Show intuitive sensitivity to spiritual values and concepts

Factors That Affect Advanced Learners

The popular profile of smart students—quiet, studious, and alone, with their noses in a book most of the time—may hold true for some. But

apart from the differences in learning style or inclination that might make one child an incessant builder and another writer, other factors influence the way advanced children behave and function in the classroom. Consider the following as you observe your students:

Disabilities. A physical, emotional, or learning disability may overshadow an otherwise highly able child. It's common for a student to be twice exceptional—to have both exceptional gifts and a disability. When this is the case, schools often focus on the disability, leaving the young person's exceptional abilities unnoticed and unchallenged.

Age. Though a number of schools provide services for gifted students, rarely do they offer them before the third grade. Yet advanced learners—whether identified as gifted—have as much of a need for growth and challenge in the younger grades as in the later ones. A second grader who reads a middle school novel or a third grader studying aerodynamics on his own is most likely learning below his potential. Without any opportunities to use these talents in school, students can become detached or apathetic about learning early in life.

Gender. Gifted girls and boys face unique challenges in school. Social stereotypes about gender seep into peer relations from the first day of class. Kids with acute observation and understanding pick up the cues and expectations that tell them what is or isn't "cool" behavior. A gifted girl may censor her voice or camouflage her ability because she doesn't want to draw attention to herself; few girls in her class demonstrate much interest or ability in math or science, both subjects she loves. Gifted boys suffer similar pressures to conform—particularly if they want to pursue talents in subjects considered unmasculine, such as the arts or poetry.

Culture. Highly able students from minority, bilingual, or other cultural backgrounds face unique obstacles to their development. For example, many children from other countries have to deal with family pressures to pursue careers in specific fields—such as business or medicine—and this may cause them to avoid subjects they secretly love. A child who speaks another language at home may not be proficient in English, and thus her difficulties with reading and writing may mask her true verbal and analytical abilities.

Family stresses. Economic, work, and family pressures can make sensitive gifted children preoccupied with worries outside of the school. Even in relatively supportive homes, students might have practical problems that distract them from their work: a lack of space for study; a noisy, cramped living environment; or the daily pressure to care for other children. From these circumstances, they perform significantly below their ability.

Without knowing about the family and culture at all, teachers can easily overlook these diamonds in the rough.

Practical Ways to Assess Advanced Learners

Knowing your advanced students' abilities and level of skill and knowledge doesn't have to involve a long assessment process. Always do what is reasonable given your time constraints and the specific information you need. Part of assessment is to realize how much you already see and know. A quote by Charles Peguy is apt here: "One must always tell what one sees. Above all, which is more difficult, one must always see what one sees" (Peguy quoted in Smutny & von Fremd, 2010, p. 35). To best serve the students in your class, turn first to the essential concepts and skills you'll be introducing in a subject and then explore where their strengths, abilities, experiences, and interests lie.

Observe. You begin with observation, something already ingrained in your daily life as a teacher. The checklists in this chapter provide a starting point for noticing specific indicators of ability in your students. Divided into three domains (intellectual, creative, emotional), the lists may also remind you of past events and sharpen your observation of specific traits that seemed insignificant before. Who are advanced learners? How do we find them? Though some teachers rely on test scores to identify exceptional ability, testing rarely goes far enough. You might have a reclusive young child in the corner who doesn't test well but who writes science-fiction stories, using principles of physics that she's learned in a workshop. A teacher once told of a five-year-old child named Mario who read more into test questions than his peers did. When asked what the color of coal is, he checked all three choices: black, purple, and gray. When questioned about his response, Mario replied, "It's black when I see it inside, it's purple when I see it in the sun, and after it's burned it's gray." (Smutny, Walker, & Meckstroth, 1997, p. 124).

Use multiple criteria. The use of *multiple criteria*—different venues and media for children to show what they can do—provide more ways for you to assess student behavior, thinking, social relations, emotional maturity, assignments, and so forth. Observing them respond to a broader spectrum of learning experiences leads to a more complete picture. A map project, a poem, a reenactment of a famous political debate, a research report, and a three-dimensional geometry experiment are ideal contexts for probing their interests, thinking strategies, and creative ideas. What does all this data tell you about their learning needs in the current unit?

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Assessment ensures that you have the information you need to determine (a) how prepared the students are for the work at hand; (b) what skills, knowledge, and abilities they bring to a new unit or lesson; and (c) what adjustments may be necessary to ensure that they advance at their pace and level. Quizzes and tests have their usefulness in establishing a child's level of mastery as well as in identifying potential problems. But the strategies in the following chart widen the lens considerably and provide more information for you to draw on as you design alternative learning experiences for advanced students.

Informal Consultations	Direct Observations	Portfolios and Anecdotes	Charts and Checklists
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parent consultation• Teacher-child conversations• Peer sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Main teacher• Resource teachers and aides• Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student work• Anecdotal records• Notes and grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Checklists• K-W-L charts• Rubrics

Preassess. When beginning a new unit, you need to know how much of the content your advanced students already know, what skills they have, and where the gaps in knowledge and conceptual understanding are. Without this information, it's difficult to gauge their progress or know if you're meeting their needs. Your preassessments can cover a significant portion of a whole unit, include critical and creative thinking, and/or target specific skills you want students to master.

Preassessment not only tells you where children are in their understanding but brings their prior knowledge to bear on a new lesson. It can be motivating for students to realize, "Oh, I already know some things about this!" Many teachers use K-W-L charts (Ogle, 1986) where students describe what they *know* about a particular topic, what they *want* to know, and what they *learned*. The chart becomes a building block to a new learning experience. After they've participated in class, practiced a skill, or applied a newly learned process, they return to their list of what they know; they then make corrections where they see them and review what they want to learn to see if they've found the answers to their questions. There are other options besides K-W-L charts, but we mention them here because they're simple to use and apply to the immediate learning goals in your unit.

Starting a new endeavor is always the hardest part. It often seems to be a lot of trouble, with too little time or support. Why would we do this? With respect to advanced students, the answer can only be because it is the most humane thing to do. And being humane surely must rank among the most important qualities of any educational system. Without any intervention, advanced learners live like caged birds, imprisoned by attitudes, policies, and practices that won't allow them to be themselves. William Blake's statement, "No bird flies too high if he soars with his own wings," expresses the spirit of the chapters ahead and our desire to release the potential in every child. We hope you will enjoy the journey ahead!

PARTING THOUGHTS FOR YOUR JOURNEY

Begin simply. If you care about advanced students, which you do if you're reading this book, then you probably have some grand schemes to implement. Break them down into small pieces. Start small!

Observe, observe! Don't rely too heavily on test scores, which can be misleading. Use the checklists as a guide and rely more on what students do and say, as well as how they express themselves.

First things first. Obviously, you have priorities as a teacher, and these are rarely of your making. Clarify how much of your time and resources they demand. Then, see if there's a way to provide more challenge for advanced learners while fulfilling other responsibilities. It need not be an either/or situation.

Know their gifts. As with all children, advanced students are also highly individual. They might have exceptional scores in mathematics but are also creative, relishing the chance to pursue unusual solutions. Become a keen observer of all the idiosyncrasies of your students—their interests, learning styles, work habits.

Reach out. We have heard too many stories of promising students coming to life because of the sympathetic ear of a teacher. As obvious as this may seem, it is a fact that small acts of kindness can be transforming moments. Giving a little time to a treasured interest of a child and affirming her ideas can break the isolation as nothing else can.