



It's About the Abilities, Not the Deficits

By **Marcia Powell** and **Sharon Seaton**

Brand identity is carefully designed to make us feel better, so we drive Brand X or drink Beverage Y. Quick, check the tag on the back of your shirt or the brand of your shoes. Premium labels suggest quality to the user.

Unfortunately, a poorly applied brand or label can have just the opposite effect in education. Special education learners don't always feel special, gifted learners don't always feel like they belong, and oddly, we don't celebrate that English-language learners have already mastered another 'foreign' language. As educators, how can we move to celebrating student abilities with **people-first language**, rather than creating anxiety deficits?

Start With the Right Questions

Good teachers impact students by combining content, interests, and passions in the learning process. That doesn't need a label, but it does need an **essential question** that connects standards in a relevant way. Finding ways to shift from segregated standards to big ideas can sometimes be a challenge, but **virtual-learning communities** can help you find content choices handling the same topic in multiple ways. This wealth of materials can help your classroom move from one-size-fits-all approaches to personalization techniques. Gifted, ELL/ESL, and special education teachers can help with pedagogy strategies that can enrich your teaching toolbox.

Believe in the Potential of All Learners

Embedded into many national standards (Common Core, C3 Framework, and NGSS, to name a few) is the idea that all students can learn content. Ask yourself a hard question: Do you believe all students can learn your content? If you don't, or you are on the fence, you may be perplexed about how a student who is differently-abled may be best served in your classroom.

Critical in this effort is the need to limit your direct instruction so class time can be spent

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A vertical advertisement for Sparkfun Electronics. The background is dark with glowing, ethereal blue and green clouds. At the top, the words 'STEM ACTIVITY' are written in large, bold, white capital letters. Below this, the text 'Build an Indoor Cloud Display that Mimics the Weather' is centered in white. At the bottom, there is a white rectangular button with the text 'GET STARTED NOW' in black capital letters. The Sparkfun Electronics logo, featuring a red flame icon above the text 'sparkfun ELECTRONICS', is positioned at the bottom right of the advertisement.

helping students with difficulties. Flipping your classroom with a short podcast, creating a learning management system, and providing the option of sample problems, a short video, or content reading to engage the concepts of the day can be helpful to all students. Giving students choices gives them a vested interest in the content.

Different subgroups respond differently to the classroom. **Specific ELL strategies** may also help address the needs of a student with an IEP or 504 plan. **Compacted-learning** options for students are helpful because a student may be gifted in one area and have a learning deficit in another. Don't overgeneralize the learning label. One possible solution for math and science is the **"most difficult first" strategy**, which structures the evidence for understanding using an either-or assignment. Another option, for humanities, is differentiating the role, audience, format of evidence, and topic (**RAFT**) to help students use the tools they are most comfortable with to make their case. Modalities can vary for formatives to include a paragraph or concept maps, and then expand for summative assessments to include a newscast, an original play, dance, or song. The standards still guide the learning, but it's not a lockstep process.

Give Students Voice and Choice

Students choose how they learn, and they can frustrate teachers when they choose *not* to learn. But often, teachers struggle because both student and teacher lack alternative ways to master the content. Specialists in the school district can help bridge that gap by providing pedagogical supports and teaching strategies.

Give students the confidence to explore, analyze, and learn through failure as well as small successes by making frequent formative **assessments low-stakes** in terms of points. Colleges see the value of this as an **early-plus strategy** that can help identify struggling learners who need extra support. An abilities focus can shift the learning to the student, while support options, such as a scaffolded study guide, can help students who struggle with test anxiety and organization. Another option is to shift to **project-based learning** or use rubrics for summative assessments which provide clear expectations for students.

Personalization of the Need (Equalizing the Opportunity)

Some students are wired for mathematical comprehension and need to get better at reading, but both subjects need the cross-cutting concept of cause and effect. Teachers skilled in Marzano strategies use this realization to **build ideas through analogy and metaphor**, as this allows construction of the students' own mental models. **Newsela** can offer articles on the same topic written with varying **lexile** ranges to meet student needs. English-language learners have a cultural lens on global education and can offer new perspectives to historical studies. Students who have medical 504s often adapt by discovering online resources that help individual learning. Use your students' expertise. A label is meant to be a cautionary word of advice rather than a verdict on intelligence.

Listen and Encourage

Efforts to focus on student abilities do not excuse students from meeting standards. And sometimes, students struggle to master content. **Chunking** the content into small pieces is recommended as a device to create long-term learning pathways. Small pieces of supportive video clips (three minutes or less) or a three-problems-at-a-time approach may be helpful ways to lower the anxiety. Providing encouragement and teaching **perseverance** through repeated practice also matters. Students respond well to small opportunities for choosing their learning

paths, so lessons should always include that as a goal.

Acknowledge the Different Abilities of All Students

Students are a mix of potential and struggle. A career-and-technical student may also be a student who is gifted, or an ELL student may also be fascinated by fine arts or by STEM. No one size fits all. Learners may focus on whole-to-part or part-to-whole organization of ideas. Honoring these different approaches will often allow solutions never thought of before, or a path less traveled in learning a concept. Individuals who think in two languages already are operating at the synthesis level of **Bloom's Taxonomy** in some areas. At-risk and gifted students need emotional and social supports to help them develop to their full potential. While learning descriptors may be a starting point for student supports, let's avoid making them badges of anxiety. By blending labels for student needs and teaching strategies effectively, we'll be able to focus on the abilities and potential of our students.

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