

Preparing for High Achievement

Working at the Edge of Competence

BY MAUREEN NEIHART



Jackie, a fourth grader, has neither the patience nor the tolerance for frustration that she needs to persevere with the more challenging work she is facing in her school's new accelerated language program. She often cries over homework and complains that the work is too hard or boring.

Adrian, an eighth grader, resists his teachers' and parents' encouragement to enroll in honors classes for high school. Although he is a fast learner with a good memory and excellent study skills, he is hesitant about taking on more challenging work because he's not sure what grades he'll earn. It's a risk he thinks he doesn't want to take.

Jackie and Adrian illustrate what can happen when high ability students have had a lot of easy success and too little experience with disappointment, rejection, or setbacks. They are not used to working hard and are unprepared to handle the emotions that arise with unexpected outcomes. Since they don't tolerate moderate levels of distress well, they prefer to stay in their comfort zone, completing tasks that they've already mastered. They shrink from challenge.

A willingness to work at the edge of one's competence is the second of seven habits of mind that drive performance. Without it, even the most talented individuals do not go very far. The edge of competence is the place where students have to reach and where they must work with others who have similar interests, abilities, and drive. The most important step in nudging students toward their edge of competence is to get them out of their comfort zones: provide challenging curriculum that requires effort. In addition, we can also:

- create risk-friendly environments and relationships
- teach students to view their mistakes with affection
- require them to take realistic risks

In risk-friendly environments and relationships, students are encouraged to take reasonable chances and set their own goals for

some of their work. Working at the edge of competence means that a lot of mistakes will be made. We don't want students to avoid risk, nor do we want them to always strive to minimize mistakes because that is not the way to develop ability. We want students to extend themselves, to reach and expect mistakes, especially when they are learning something new. They need to view mistakes as learning opportunities and believe that failing doesn't make them a failure.

Consider, for instance, what might happen in a classroom where one of the daily goals is that everyone makes at least two mistakes and keeps track of them. Imagine how student attitudes might change if teachers were to ask them, "What mistakes did you make today?" Teachers who make it a habit to regularly share with their students what they are learning from their own mistakes, positively influence their students' attitudes and behaviors about working at the edge of competence. We learn to view our mistakes with affection when we participate in a culture where worthy mistakes are celebrated as acts of courage and mistakes made at the edge of competence are valued for their learning potential. Through our own modeling, by setting expectations, and by praising students when they take risks, we can establish the norm that our classroom is a place where people take chances and where taking chances is an essential part of learning.

In his memoir, *On Writing*, Stephen King described how he collected rejection slips when he was sixteen, adding one after another to a nail on the wall of his attic bedroom until it was full. The quantity of rejection slips did not discourage him. He understood that every rejection presented an opportunity to improve his writing and that only by accumulating a critical mass of rejection slips was he likely to be published. So, too, many of our most capable students will learn to view their mistakes with affection when they learn to expect and even plan for mistakes.

Since working at the edge of one's competence always involves risk, an essential step in empowering talented students to reach their potential is to teach them how to take realistic risks. We can help them understand the need for realistic risk taking by first asking them to define risk. What does it mean to take a chance? Many will say that risk taking means to do something where the

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outcome is uncertain or where there's a possibility of failure. Others will say it means to do something that takes them out of their comfort zone. A few may say it means to do something dangerous.

Realistic Risk taking is described by three characteristics:

- It is purposeful because its aim is to develop courage and persistence.
- It is sound because it is grounded in the needs, interests, and abilities of the individual.
- It is authentic because it is personally relevant and meaningful.

With our students, we can explore the ways in which realistic risk taking relates to healthy personality, achievement, and satisfying relationships. We can discuss the lives of people they admire or emulate. What kinds of risks do they see these people taking? Do they think there is a relationship between risk taking and leadership? Can they illustrate their points with examples? We can use the activity below with both elementary and secondary students to expand their understanding of the concept of risk and its relationship to achievement. It can be done as a writing assignment, a discussion prompt, or as an art or multimedia project.

Risk Taking and Achievement

- Think of someone whose accomplishments you admire or respect. It can be anyone, past or present. It can be someone you know personally or someone who is famous. In one or two sentences describe what this person has achieved that you admire.
- Consider what this person has risked in order to realize his or her achievement. Consider the chances he or she took socially, emotionally, physically, or intellectually, and list as many of them as you can. If the person is someone you know well, ask them to share one or two risks they took when they

were your age that helped them reach their goals.

- Do you think this person could have accomplished what he or she did without taking some of these risks? Explain your answer.

Some Strategies to Try

Working at the edge of competence can unnerve us if we aren't prepared. It helps to have a plan. Invite students to consider what might make it easier for them to take realistic risks. Would it help to have a model or to see someone else do it first? Would it be easier if they took the risk with a friend or with a group? Perhaps they need to start small and work up to larger risks, or, maybe they need to limit the time they spend on the risk initially and increase their time gradually. Perhaps they would feel less pressured if they gave themselves permission to not be perfect, or to be embarrassed, or even to fail.

Gender differences in risk taking exist. Research on patterns of achievement among talented women suggest that bright women fail to realize their aspirations as often as men do. They are less willing or able to take realistic risks at critical juncture points in their lives. Although school age girls are as willing to take risks as boys, studies indicate that by late adolescence and early adulthood, women's aspirations decline, and they become more risk avoidant. This difference contributes in part to the persistent achievement gap between men and women. Fear of taking risks is an emotional component that slows many women's achievement and ambition. The literature suggests several things we can do to help gifted girls take realistic risks. We can encourage them to:

- participate in sports
- postpone dating and romantic involvement until their education is complete
- practice independence
- participate in single gender activities and classes

Taking realistic risks and working at our edge of competence is about recognizing things that make us a bit nervous and agreeing to walk through them because doing so will equip us to do greater things. We must encourage talented young people to experiment, to explore, and to consider possibilities, especially if these seem out of reach. We must help our students see dissatisfying performances and disappointing outcomes as platforms from which to launch the next big effort. They need to imagine themselves doing those things of which they dream. ■

Resources:

- Gelb, M.J. (2003). *More balls than hands: Juggling your way to success by learning to love your mistakes*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Ilardo, J. (1992). *Risk taking for personal growth*. Oakland, CA: Harbinger Publications.
- Neihart, M. (1998). *Systematic risk taking*. *Roeper Review*, 21, 289-292.

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