Using the TABs Scale to Encourage Creativity

Dr. Mary Frasier’s Traits, Aptitudes and Behaviors (TABs) is a versatile and flexible instrument for designing talent development opportunities for students from diverse populations. The TABs instrument represents the basic characteristics of giftedness that can be recognized within and across a variety of economic, cultural and linguistic groups. Such was the case in our recent work with a school focused on equitable programming for all students where teachers in the upper elementary were interested in building a creative problem solving (CPS) program as enrichment for students. The teachers wanted to identify students who would be able to contribute to the program in several different ways. We (the university partners) shared with them that in good CPS environments, you want to be able to spot students that have strong writing, communication, leadership, and idea generation skills. Together, we designed a creative environment and observational structure where students could work on a creative task under the direction of graduate students, while teachers functioned as careful observers noting their students' strengths using the TABs scale. Such observations allowed teachers to view their students in dynamic ways while using the TABs form to guide their observations and thus highlighting students who demonstrated motivation, interest, problem solving ability, and creativity.

In addition to collecting TABs data on each student, the team of teachers and graduate students reviewed writing samples and discussed students who showed potential to benefit from the program through demonstrated behaviors. One interesting part of the discussion focused on a student that graduate students had identified as a really great idea generator. Yet teachers seemed to focus on the fact that this student had difficulty completing their classwork, staying focused on tasks, and collaborating with others. They were able to recognize the students’ potential but were hesitant to include the student in the CPS work because of some of the behaviors aforementioned. Through the discussion, however, the university-school partnership team realized that sometimes traits, aptitudes and behaviors may not come in positive manifestations, but can still be indicators of promise for high ability programming. Students who are creative can sometimes seem out of step, be seen as different by their peers, be nonconformists and focus on unusual or dark content. Part of the conversation around the students was this idea that sometimes creative behaviors can manifest in what some might consider negative ways. This was a light bulb moment for the teachers who were able to see creative behaviors in new and different ways. In the end, the team decided that it was in the best interest of the student to include him in the CPS work. Although he experienced challenges in the program, being able to creatively contribute to the overall work of the group served as a great benefit to him and helped him develop his sense of self. Using the TABs, the team learned to look at the “above ground” manifestations of talent, but that those manifestations might not always be what their school culture expects or wants.

Another important lesson from this work highlights the difficulty in observing creativity (or other key indicators in the TABs instrument) of students if we do not first make space for that creativity to be practiced. Creative behaviors do not happen in a vacuum. Teachers have to consistently provide opportunities for students to practice creative thinking skills, develop products that utilize creative thinking and be introduced to creative ways of achieving their end goal, whether it is a classroom task or a summative assessment of learning. Below are two ways that we have seen creative strategies used in classrooms that also provide space and opportunity for creative behaviors to develop. What interesting ways can you use creative strategies?

1. When holding a discussion in your classroom, make sure to develop thoughtful prompts ahead of time that ask students to innovate or generate new ideas. For example, in an engineering class that centers on a particular set of skills for a build, pose the following question: Is there something that you can observe in nature that might aid you in developing your build? Or in Language Arts, when discussing a particular character from the novel study, juxtapose their attributes to another character from a different novel previously studied. In what ways is Atticus Finch from To Kill a Mockingbird similar to or different from Bryan Stevenson of Just Mercy?

2. When asking students to perform research or build, background on a particular area of content, allow them to utilize a variety of items, including primary and secondary resources, as well as accessible technology sources. If students are investigating the impact of the 1960’s on their particular area of the United States, have them invite community members who were alive at that time to be a classroom speaker or to interview them in person or through Zoom. Likewise, you might have students who are studying probability and statistics in math. Task them with finding fun game resources like Shodor’s Rabbits and Wolves or Advanced Monty Hall, and have them create their own ways of interpreting the data in addition to the specific analysis tools you provide.