

**Educating Gifted and Talented Students:
An Educational Paradigm**

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Abstract

Gifted and talented children share some unique characteristics that must be understood by counsellors, and teachers. These children need to be identified in order to provide challenging education that they so desperately need. When not feeling challenged, these children report being bored, which results in feelings of exhaustion and stress. Gifted and talented children are very sensitive to their surroundings, and are often bullied by jealous students. A school that provides advanced methodologies, understanding counsellors, and educated teachers can help to reduce these problems, motivating the gifted and talented students to excel above and beyond their potential.

Understanding how gifted and talented students function and learn is critical to their success. Gifted and talented students share many characteristics and have a strong desire to be challenged. Counsellors must be very perceptive of who the gifted children are in their schools and be able to assess their needs. When teachers understand how the gifted students function and learn, they are better able to provide differentiated curriculum in order to achieve student success. School personnel need to be aware of their gifted population's unique needs and develop programs to keep these students challenged.

Qualities of a Gifted Child

Gifted children share the same characteristics as average children, but have a stronger need to achieve and fit into social situations. These children have very high expectations and want to be the best in everything, which often clouds their vision of reality and makes them highly sensitive to criticism and feelings of exhaustion (Rakow, 2005). They are more aware of their environment and are able to sense and feel more than the average person, causing them to feel anxious (Peterson, 2007). Many high achievers find that being popular and smart is difficult, because they are faced with bullying and resentment from jealous peers (Francis, 2009; Wood, 2010). For example, Ashley (a pseudonym), who attends a high school in Manitoba, is constantly being harassed because she is smart, athletic, musical, attractive, and gets along with the boys. Like other high achievers, she deals with jealous girls trying to "put her down" every day, in an attempt to bring her down to their level.

Gifted children need to excel in everything, which makes all new situations very stressful. They try to fit in with all peer groups in an attempt to figure out exactly where they belong (Rakow, 2005). Ashley has never been able to get close to anyone and finds that she is always moving from group to group. Children of this nature have to learn to accept themselves and deal with both the challenges and failures that they face, while promoting growth within themselves (Rakow, 2005). Gifted children have many needs and a vast range of abilities that require attention (Gavin et al., 2007). Some studies have found that gifted children will deal with their stress through suicide, eating disorders, substance abuse, and dropping out of high school (Peterson, 2007).

In school, talented students are easily bored and show signs of depression when they are not able to advance in their studies (Rogers, 2007). Problem solving is an important part of learning for gifted children: they require advanced curriculum and need to be challenged constantly (Gavin et al., 2007; Graffam, 2006). They are self-motivated and prefer to work

independently, as opposed to regular learners (Rogers, 2007). Ashley chooses not to work in groups anymore, so she can avoid dealing with the lack of effort produced by others. However, acceptance from peers often outweighs the academic need to succeed (Francis, 2009). Many gifted children appear to function and fit in the same as other children do; however, they are often either overwhelmed or disengaged and feel stressed about peers and school, especially when they can not advance in their studies.

Role of the Counsellor

Counsellors are aware of many student risk factors, but they very rarely perceive the risk factors of a gifted learner (Peterson, 2007). A counsellor's success with a gifted and talented student relies on a recognition of giftedness itself (Wood, 2010). If a counsellor fails to identify who the gifted learners are, problematic behaviour may be the result. This behaviour is due to boredom and lack of motivational and challenging classes for the students to enrol in (Peterson, 2007). Counsellors play a big role in helping gifted learners in intangible areas such as self-acceptance and self-esteem (Wood, 2010). Gifted students are often set apart from others and need a counsellor to help them understand themselves as gifted. Counsellors must be fluent in the developmental aspects of giftedness, such as asynchrony, excitement for learning, intensity, need to achieve, need for mental stimulation and comprehension, desire for precision and/or perfection, moral awareness, and introversion (Wood, 2010). Counsellors can determine giftedness through Clinical Assessment of Behaviour (CAB) tests to determine students' level of cognitive functioning (Bracken & Brown, 2008). Once they have discovered the gifted student, it is important for school counsellors to assist gifted learners with their self-doubt and unrealistic perfectionism in their academics, and to help them deal with the stress that they put upon themselves (Wood, 2010). Overall, the goals of a counsellor should be to identify the gifted students' fear of failure and need to be perfect, aid students in finding compatible peers, and assist them with self-expectations.

Role of the Teacher

School districts must be proactive toward gifted education, and provide teachers with the necessary training for success (Rogers, 2007). School districts have to provide proper programs, train educators, and identify subjects that will be selected in the gifted program. It is critical that the teachers of gifted learners are well-trained (Graffam, 2006). If teachers are not properly trained, the gifted learner is often at the mercy of that teacher who becomes overwhelmed by the overload of differentiated instruction (Rakow, 2007). As a result, the students do not meet their academic needs. Differentiated instruction is important for teachers to achieve success with gifted learners (Graffam, 2006). If teachers are not aware of how to teach gifted learners, they run the risk of not recognizing who the gifted learners are, and differential learning is not as effective. When gifted learners are not motivated in the classroom, and are forced to learn the same material every year, problems arise due to disengagement (Rogers, 2007). In past years, Ashley sometimes felt that she did not need to attend certain classes, and she was very bored in a class that continually addressed the needs of the low achievers. If she missed one week, she still ended up being ahead of the entire class. She came to the point where she did not even want to go to school. Gifted education in schools therefore requires proper teacher training.

Students who are taught differentiated curriculum make noticeable gains (Gavin et al., 2007). Accelerating the curriculum one or two grade levels results in a stimulating and challenging classroom that keeps gifted learners challenged and free from boredom (Wood, 2010). Teaching gifted learners involves teaching the curriculum at a faster, more advanced pace that is two or three levels above grade level (Graffam, 2006). Gifted learners who are challenged and given opportunities to advance in their learning can therefore increase their

achievement levels from one to three years of growth (Rogers, 2007). Teachers need to excite these students and have them look “outside of the box,” beyond the pages of curriculum (Graffam, 2006, p. 123). Student growth will increase yearly, assuming that challenges are consistently provided at advanced rates (Rogers, 2007). Students are more intense on learning and achieving when they are self-directed and under the strict guidance of a well-trained teacher. Teacher success depends on the ability to understand gifted students and acquire the skills needed to instruct them (Graffam, 2006).

Methodologies

Advanced classes, cluster grouping, acceleration, pull-out, and compacting are some options to assist gifted learners. These learners excel academically when placed with similar students in advanced differentiated classrooms (Rogers, 2007). The exchange between individual learning and group learning works well for gifted learners, as the learning process is not slowed down (Graffam, 2006). When Ashley was placed in an advanced math class, she found that learning was much easier, since the learning process was not stalled by low achievers. When curriculum is compacted, students learn at a faster pace and become more excited with content. This type of learning, in turn, results in positive attitudes and an increase in performance (Rogers, 2007). Regular classroom teachers often are not qualified and do not have the resources or motivation to implement a program for gifted learners. Curriculum must be delivered to gifted learners at a consistent rate in order for them to succeed without being bored (Rogers, 2007). Treating gifted learners as professionals, and providing an option for advanced learning, have been effective tools for success (Gavin et al., 2007).

Cluster grouping is another option, whereby small groups of high achievers are put together to learn advanced work (Rakow, 2007). Students can also learn through self-directing their own curriculum, and developing their own standards and goals to advance their knowledge (Rogers, 2007). The success of one school, The Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY), is attributed to programs that are tailored to the high intellectual abilities of gifted children (Ybarra, 2005). Options for gifted learners include grade acceleration, early entrance to kindergarten, international baccalaureate courses, academic acceleration, grade skipping, and pull-out groups for gifted learners (Rogers, 2007). Pull-out programs that provide challenging curriculum can be effective and often have better instruction with a qualified instructor). Whether schools use cluster grouping or separate programming, it is imperative that the school and the educators determine what approach is best suited for their gifted and talented population, and have well-trained professionals and programs in place.

The programs that exist outside of the regular classroom seem to more beneficial for both teachers and gifted students. Teachers are generally better trained and do not feel as exhausted offering differentiated instruction to their students, who in turn reap the benefits of an accelerated and challenging learning environment. As a result, the students are more excited to learn and have a better attitude toward their own learning (Rogers, 2007). Therefore, it is significant for teachers to assess students who are gifted and then provide the programming that will inspire them to excel (“No Child,” 2010).

Conclusion

Gifted students, although unique and talented, tend to encounter problems with bullying, boredom, and underachievement. However, with understanding counsellors, educated teachers, and challenging curriculum, these problems can be reduced. Responsive teachers and counsellors play an important role in identifying gifted children’s mixed feelings of what exactly is expected of them at school and home, where they can feel accepted and enjoyed.

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