

# Social/Emotional Needs

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## On Chance and Being Gifted

**T**his column examines the role of chance in the lives of gifted students. More specifically, it illustrates how being gifted (whether or not one is identified as being gifted and the experience of being gifted) is affected by a particular chance factor. Specific examples are used to illustrate different manifestations of chance factors that affect the lives of gifted students.

Because there are so many chance factors that potentially affect the psychological development of gifted students, I have sorted them into categories. For example, there are genetic, lifestyle, environmental, overarching vs. instance, experiential, and coincidental chance factors. To do justice to this topic, a series of columns will focus on the chance factors and gifted students.

The most obvious examples are the chance variables associated with the genetic makeup of a gifted child's parents. The point of noting this factor is to emphasize the sheer power of the psychobiological influence of the gifted child that is a function of the genetic makeup of the parents. Consequently, when children are born, they are not really a clean slate; they have many predispositions, tendencies, and potentialities.

Another important chance factor is the location of a child's birth and upbringing. Imagine an intellectually gifted child born in Stockholm, Paris, Milledgeville, Moosejaw, Trinidad, the Shoshoni and Arapaho Reservation, and so forth. Clearly, each location has significantly different histories and cultures. Hence, where gifted children happen to be born affects whether and how they might be identified as gifted and what their experiences will be.

When a gifted child is born is also quite significant. For example, imagine being a gifted student in science and math in the late 1950s in the United States. Because of the political uproar after the launch of Sputnik, great interest and money was put into gifted education in math and science. Now imagine the same gifted child whose abilities were in language arts. Little interest existed at that time for those gifts.

Another example brings the topic closer to home. I call it the family variables in context. Imagine a gifted girl, Jane, whose extraordinary skills are in the area of language arts. She lives in a medium-sized city in the United States. Her father is deceased, her mother works two full-time jobs at minimum wage to support the family of four, health care is not provided, and the gifted child at age 9 is the oldest child and, therefore, often misses school to help care for the other children. All three children spend hours at home without adult supervision and minimal books are available in the home.

Another gifted child, Tony, lives in a small rural community. He attends second grade in a school of 50 students in grades K–12. There are two teachers and one aide for the entire school. Tony's parents are ranchers on a small plot of land. The family has no

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television or computer. The boy's extraordinary abilities are in math.

Tony's new friend is a gifted boy named Juan whose parents are employed as migrant farm workers. They only live in Tony's farming community for about 2 months a year. At other times of the year, Juan's family moves across three other states. Juan likes Tony's town, partly because he gets to go to school there.

The last example is Brenda, a 16-year-old who is top in her school class. She is also an outstanding athlete. Both of her parents are well educated; her father is a brilliant college professor. She has lived her life in a small college town and has grown up spending a great deal of time on the university campus. The family lives in a fine house with several computers and hundreds of books spread throughout the home.

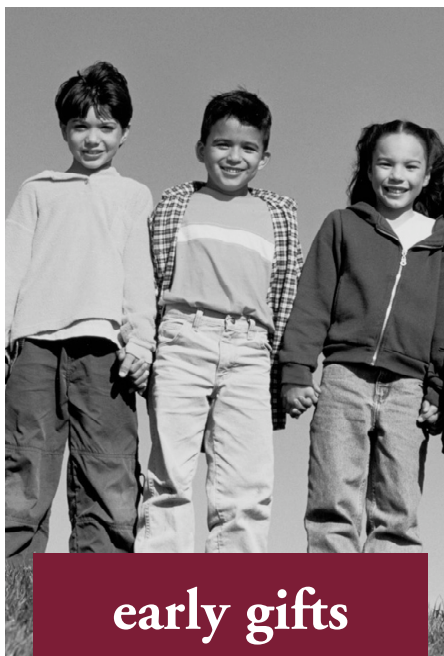
What is remarkable about the examples given of Jane, Tony, Juan, and Brenda is that they are real people living in the same state—Wyoming—at the same time in history (names were changed to protect their anonymity). Implicit in using these life cases to illustrate different children with gifts and talents is the importance that chance factors play in the individual child's capacity to reach his or her potential. Given the information shared about them, little of the actual likelihood of each of these children reaching his or

her potential is emanating from his or her own potential and specific qualities, *per se*. Rather, it is easy to see how chance factors have played a significant role in their lives to date. However, the fact that they were identified as gifted and were receiving (what I deemed to be) appropriate gifted education services creates hope because it means that the myriad forms of variation in conditions and types of abilities that have been described were still understandable to professional educators who work in the schools of Wyoming. So, while genetic make up cannot be transcended, it does not have to create insurmountable hurdles to identifying and serving gifted students. We merely need to remind ourselves that our science and pedagogy must emanate from the idea that gifted students are the most diverse (heterogeneous) group of people to study because they can vary on the most number of variables. The fact that chance exists in so many ways means that the training of school personnel must recognize and attend to these factors.

One of the most powerful chance factors that will affect a gifted child is that of the socioeconomic status (SES) of his or her parents. The research on SES and achievement is clear: There are certain factors of poverty that mitigate against school success. I contend that the achievement gaps between

what is possible and what is actually accomplished among our gifted students from the poorest families is the greatest of any group of students. Although everyone can agree that all students should be expected to reach their potential, gifted students from the lowest SES are at the greatest risk for underachievement. However, as the brief case descriptions of a small number of gifted students in Wyoming illustrates, the poor gifted child, although quite diverse in background and circumstances, can be identified and serviced.

Why are teachers in the schools in Wyoming able to meet the needs of the gifted students described above? The state struggles with severe financial swings in its economy in ways that affect its schools. It is a rural state with many one-room schools remaining. Many years ago, when I served as president of the Wyoming Association for Gifted Education (WAGE), it was clear that school districts had differing definitions of giftedness and programs often were created, lived, thrived, and ended on the basis of individual teacher's work. I participated in numerous discussions with long-term teachers of the gifted who revealed many of the same difficulties most states experience today. For example, they described how they felt alone in their commitment to gifted students; that there was not enough



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## On Chance and Being Gifted

money to work on behalf of gifted students and too little general support provided by administrators; that the state department did not emphasize gifted education enough; that they did not have enough resources generally; and that, because there was only one university in the state to provide training, too little training was available to them. Even with all these potential limitations, the teachers were able to identify the various manifestations of giftedness, understand the other chance factors that affected the gifted students' possibilities of reaching their potential, and then create learning conditions that were appropriate and beneficial. I believe that some intangible factors that exist in the unique state of Wyoming are important in understanding why the teachers were so successful. The state was settled by independent people who endured certain hardships to live there. I also think that the state's history of accommodating vast differences among its students is due to the degree to which it is rural and its history of one-room schools. These factors created a mindset that "teaching to the needs of each child" must be the rule, rather than the exception. Therefore, some of the tenets of differentiation existed in Wyoming long before the recent resurgence of the concept.

Because this column has focused on the role of chance factors in the lives of gifted students, why not sum up with a statement of how important these factors are? The field of gifted student education has evolved over the years to the point where many advocate a gifted services model, rather than a specific programmatic model. The former has the advantage of being able to attend to the individual needs of students, while the latter example generally requires identification approaches that match a type of gifted student to a typically narrowly conceived program.

An ongoing limitation with the programmatic model is schools' having enough programs to accommodate all gifted students. In small schools, a critical mass of students has proven to limit specific programs that are offered. This evolution lends itself to schools being better suited to deal with the diversity that gifted students manifest, including their chance variables. Assuming that attention is paid to the goal of accommodating all gifted students' needs in school, then Jane, Tony, Juan, and Brenda's needs can be met. Allegiance to programs is not the same as allegiance to students.

The first step school personnel need to take is to accept the challenge of meeting all the needs of all gifted students. Secondly, educators need to understand fully the diversity of giftedness. The third step is being able to identify as many chance factors as possible, separating out those that are to the advantage of the gifted student from the ones that cannot be dealt with. To accomplish this, the child's psychological development will need to be considered in a sophisticated manner. A planned set of services that draws on any necessary resources available to the teacher will become the tools of trade. In other words, the classroom becomes the home base, not the student's entire world.

Because the chance factors affecting students is an important topic in gifted education, a second column will follow that includes the following issues of chance factors: proximity to experts, changing school districts, types of gifted program, interest and gifts, siblings, personality variables, accidents, and fortune.

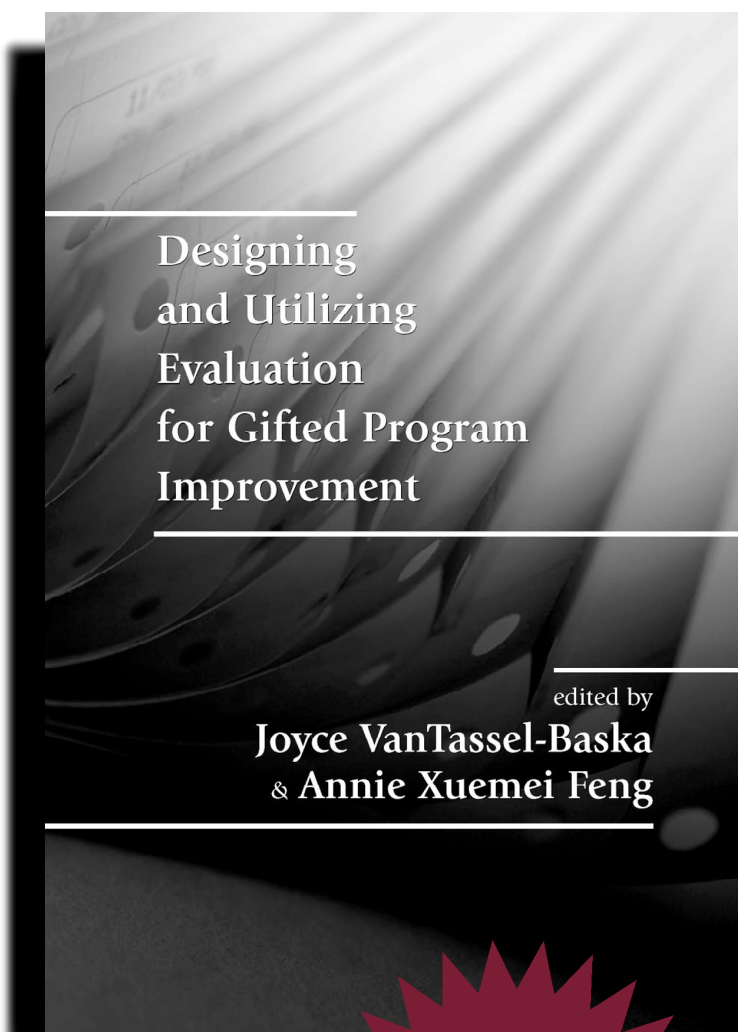
Imagine what is possible for our gifted students if all teachers had the appropriate training and support for meeting the needs of gifted students. **GCT**

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