

Kathy Hargrove, Ph.D.

“If I Had Only Known . . .”

MY introductory course, “Nature and Needs of the Gifted,” was unusual in the Fall semester this year because for the first time in a long time, most of my students had no background at all in gifted education. In today’s educational and financial climate, fewer and fewer districts are seeking certified GT teachers or encouraging educators to seek certification. Money is tight, and the emphasis in most schools is on lower achieving students, not gifted young people. In addition, many districts have decided that if all of the teachers go through required staff development—in Texas, 30 hours of training—that will “do the job” for gifted children. Judging by my students, this basic level of information has not made much difference in their knowledge and instructional skills. Teachers in my class are highly motivated and want to learn. They seem to care about meeting the needs of the gifted, but they just don’t know how.

I noticed these information and skill gaps from the first night of class, and about two weeks into the semester, I decided to record comments to document my observations. After a week or two, I asked the students to write and tell me how they felt about some of their questions and concerns. What I learned was revealing and a little frightening as well! Their comments showed me several things.

First, they buy into a lot of the prevalent myths about gifted children, such as the idea that they are always the most compliant of students and they will

always do “perfect” work. One of the class members said,

After a few weeks in class, I have realized that the label of “gifted” doesn’t mean I can generalize about these students. I thought I could have high expectations for them and be confident that each of them would automatically live up to my standards.

“I assumed way too much about what identification as gifted means,” said another teacher. “Now I realize that I have a lot to learn about the diversity of gifts and talents.”

A third student indicated,

I truly believed that the gifted had it easy in life and that they were always going to be happy and comfortable. I had no idea that gifted children could be so sensitive. I thought of them as “little adults” who have it all together and whose emotional development is always on a par with their cognitive development.

Second, in several cases they expressed the need for help in managing some of the behavior and instructional problems they were encountering in their classrooms.

Dr. Hargrove, what should I do about my “know it all” gifted students? They refuse to

take time to listen to instructions and are so sure they know a better way to do everything. Then they can't handle it when their grades are not A's.

Another teacher asked me if I thought it was really important to develop challenging curriculum and interesting lesson plans, since after all, "they all have computers and telephones in class to find out information for themselves."

A third educator was challenged by the constant demands to design creative and challenging lesson plans—to differentiate for the gifted—when there were so many other children in the class who seemed to need so much more. "And," she told me, "I don't get much encouragement to do this from my principal."

Another issue was how to draw the line between required assignments and allowing independent study. "Is this really practical?" a middle school teacher asked.

Finally, one teacher had decided that it was best to give the gifted students very structured assignments, because

my g/t students either need structure to keep them in boundaries or they just don't know how to think creatively—they are either all over the map or sitting there like sticks! I think the best way to handle this is to give them very simple and organized assignments and hold them to what I want.

Perhaps most disturbing were the accounts of teachers faced with lack of knowledge or interest from their administrators.

I had several kids that even as inexperienced as I am, I could see had a lot of potential. I worked

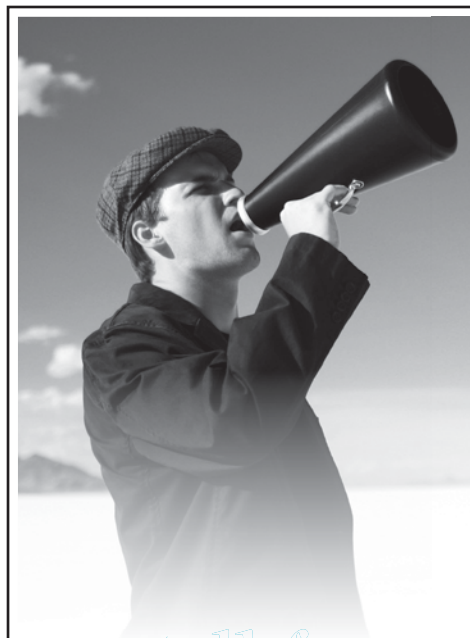
on nominating them, but the person in charge of gifted in my building said she just didn't have time to test any more children.

In another situation, an experienced teacher with a strong background in special education told a heartbreaking story about a kindergartner who showed many signs of giftedness. The teacher documented everything about the child and took the information to the principal. "Oh no, not another one," the principal said. "It's too hard to identify young children, and anyway, the children in this school are primarily from low-SES families. They won't know the difference if we ignore her for a while."

When instructional leaders discourage identification and fail to recognize caring teachers, schools are in real trouble. Perhaps this is the real issue. "If I had only known" how difficult it must be for beginners today, perhaps I would have planned my course differently. If I had only known how pervasive the lack of interest and concern is for gifted learners in many schools today, maybe I would have focused more on program rules and requirements for schools in my state. If I had only known how important it is to train skilled and knowledgeable advocates for gifted children, I might have spent some class time practicing advocacy. If I had only known, I might have worked harder at being an advocate for these children myself. I might have written more letters, made more phone calls, or visited more schools. If I had only known . . . **GCT**

Author's Note

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