Beyond the Gifted Stereotype

A new understanding of giftedness reveals many kinds of gifted learners and new ways to meet their learning needs.

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How can Andy be gifted? He can't even read at grade level. And what about Sally? I saw her I.Q. score, and it was only 115!" Can a child who is a nonreader be gifted? Is an intelligence test score the only, or even the best, indicator of giftedness? Is giftedness doing what the teacher says and doing it well?

Sometimes preconceptions get in the way of understanding changes. Research has revealed new insights about giftedness and new ways to teach the wide range of gifted learners, but educational practice has not always kept up.

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Unfortunately, the characteristics and needs of gifted learners receive little attention in the general education literature, often leaving teachers and administrators less able to address gifted students' needs. What are some of the myths, half-truths, and misconceptions that may still be influencing teacher and administrator decisions?

The Myths

Gifted students are a homogeneous group and need only one differentiated curriculum. The presumption is that gifted learners as a group march to the beat of a different drummer—and that they all march to the same beat of the same different drummer. Following this educationally harmful myth, school districts have created one-dimensional gifted programs and curriculums.

The old concept of giftedness, which applied to only one kind of learner, has given way to recognizing multiple talents. Some gifted students are advanced learners in multiple subjects and achieve in such traditional ways as scoring above grade level on standardized assessments. Other students may exhibit talent in a single area, such as expressive writing or advanced mathematical reasoning, but not in others.

New concepts of intelligence have provided a fresh lens for looking at talent and ability in students. The multiple intelligences described by Howard Gardner (1983, 1993) include talents in areas outside of traditional school disciplines. Robert Sternberg (1986) describes other special talents, including creative intelligence—the ability to develop innovative ideas, find new ways to extend the major ideas in a discipline, or create new paradigms that challenge traditional interpretations.

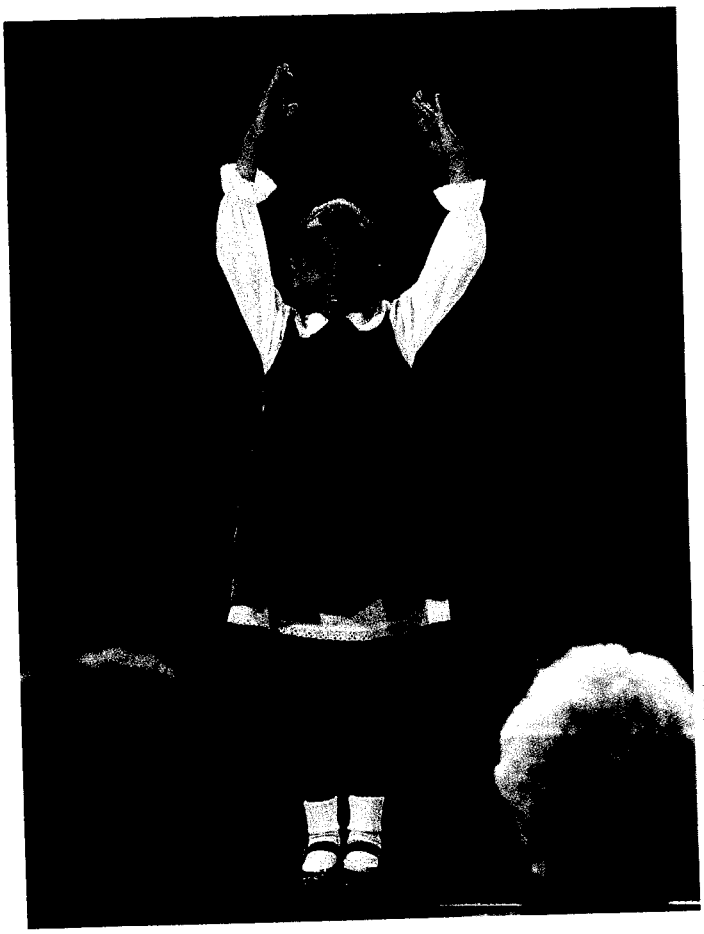
All gifted learners exhibit advanced understanding or the ability to learn at an accelerated rate, but a gifted student may not have the same level of capabilities across all areas. A student may be exceptionally advanced in one subject and need tasks that are more complex and abstract, but may not be as advanced in other subjects.

Gifted students also have different interests, learning styles, and motivations. To assume that all gifted students like to read, work for grades, or organize their efforts skillfully is a mistake. Cultural mores and behavior may mask manifestations of talent. For example, cultural background may discourage a student from demonstrating talent or from speaking unless asked a direct question.

Believing that all gifted students are alike results in the notion that schools only need to provide a single program to meet their needs. The differences among gifted students suggest that offering the same curricular options to

all of them—acceleration of all gifted learners, weekly pullout programs with the same activities for all gifted learners, or occasional enrichment activities in the regular classroom—will often result in a mismatch between learner need and instructional opportunity. Instead, we need to consider multiple ways to plan appropriate instruction for gifted students.

Giftedness is determined before students come to school. Our job is to find the gifted learner and develop the giftedness that the child already has. This half-truth has resulted in the naive neglect of many gifted students and in what appear to be racially or socioeconomically discriminating services for gifted students. Many students come from homes with plentiful opportunities to learn numeracy, prereading skills, and the social and behavioral skills that ensure school success. For these students, the teacher's job is to identify extraordinary levels of learning and to differentiate the learning experience for students who have already mastered or can easily master new concepts. We can quickly spot these students, and we have done a reasonably good job of identifying them.



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Many other equally able students, however, have not had opportunities to learn the skills that would have prepared them to benefit from initial school experiences. Some have not developed the traditional skills in language expression that the school culture expects for demonstrating exceptional thinking or learning ability. Others do not have a behavioral repertoire that responds to the structure of the elementary school environment. For these students, the teacher must become a developer of talent (Renzulli, 1994), creating classroom environments that use a variety of learning tasks, lessons, assignments, and assessments and providing an engaging curriculum. The teacher's challenge is to hook the learner with interesting and personally relevant learning and not underestimate the learner's potential. Students will live up to our expectations for them. Far better to err by setting high expectations and see students' talents emerge than to set low expectations and never give students the occasion to excel.

Gifted students will learn anyway. All students learn all the time. But what are they learning? Are they making the most productive use of their learning time? Are they learning anything new? Students' successes constitute the greatest reward of teaching, but it is often easier to mark success by how a student performs rather than by what the student has learned, particularly when teacher success is measured by student performance on high-stakes, grade-level assessments. Students may not be increasing their knowledge, understanding, or skill if they come to the classroom with a level of performance that exceeds what the grade-level curriculum requires.

Further, our students learn values and attitudes at school, and we should be concerned about what they learn. Is Kevin learning that school is a waste of time and teachers have little to offer because he already learned this content before he came to school? Is Amanda learning an attitude of disrespect or contempt for other students because she can do all the tasks assigned to her group while the others struggle to complete one or two tasks or have no success at all? And is Catherine learning habits of laziness because she never exerts any mental energy to complete her assignments yet still receives As on her report card?

An appropriate learning activity for gifted learners is to teach less advanced learners. Under the impression that teaching helps the gifted student learn content more thoroughly and that struggling learners benefit from peer teachers, educators often assign gifted learners to teach other students. If gifted students have not fully learned or clearly understood the material, then perhaps teaching others may be of benefit. No evidence exists, however, to show that teaching enhances understanding after a student has mastered the content or skills.

To assume that the gifted student is a good teacher for struggling learners is the more egregious error. Without any training to be a teacher, the gifted student does not have the ability to diagnose learning problems, to reflect on ways that the other student might learn better, or to develop a repertoire of alternative teaching strategies. Further, the gifted student's advanced understanding of or more subtle reflections on a concept or skill could impede the less proficient learner's mastery of the

subject. Some argue that the gifted learner serves as a model for other learners; however, research indicates that learners are more likely to successfully model a peer who is slightly more advanced in performance level than one whose performance differs greatly (Schunk, 1987).

Gifted learners are always high achievers. Case studies of successful college students with learning disabilities verified that these students often go unrecognized because teachers have categorized them as below-average achievers (Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1995). Poor reading or writing achievement—the coin of the realm in classrooms—has often stymied performance not just in language arts, but also in all subjects where information acquisition and demonstration of learning rely on the quick and masterful display of verbal skills. Because these students lacked opportunities to display achievement and learning in nontraditional formats, teachers did not notice their high levels of cognitive performance. Although teachers sometimes nominated them for gifted programs, they usually did not receive services because of low test scores—most often in verbal skills.


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Even the identification of the students' learning disabilities often came late in their school careers because, ironically, they did not demonstrate sufficiently low levels of achievement. As a result, they did not receive the services or accommodations that would have allowed them to demonstrate their talents.

Bonnie Cramond (1995) has also noted the overlap in the defining characteristics of students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and those of creativity. She cautions that educators should be open-minded about the possibility that behaviors that are perceived as difficult—inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity, difficult temperament, deficient social skills, and academic underachievement—may be indicative of creativity or giftedness, possibly in combination with ADHD. A student's inattention may be boredom with a curriculum that presents no challenge, and gifted students characteristically exhibit high energy levels that teachers may perceive as hyperactivity.

The second mask of giftedness is underachievement. These students perform well on standardized assessments or exhibit extraordinary performance outside of school, but because they fail to earn high grades in school, teachers may consider them as average or even below-average students. If students are performing at high levels in other environments, we should reflect on why the curriculum is failing to stimulate the same enthusiasm and accomplishment in the classroom. Standards are supposed to ratchet up the curriculum, but some standards and their accompanying tests may only set minimum standards that present easily cleared hurdles and do not require much effort from an advanced learner. What can we do to create a level of challenge that will raise those bars?

The gifted learner is going to do just fine without any special interventions on the teacher's part. Are all gifted students doing just fine? Many gifted learners do not receive recognition, and many others while away the day until after school when real learning can begin. That doesn't seem just fine.

Creating Classrooms of Learning: First Steps

Assess, Assess

Each student brings a different challenge to the teacher. To create responsive education experiences for many kinds of giftedness and to challenge gifted learners, teachers must assess students continually—first, to determine the students' current level of performance; then, to assess the rate at which students can learn when the learning experiences best suit their background experiences and strengths in learning style and productivity; and finally, to ensure that the students are continuing to learn throughout the year.

Use existing data from local and state assessments. Although these tests rely heavily on the ability to respond to verbal stimuli, they can provide useful information on the strengths of some students. For students who are achieving above grade level, teachers should conduct assessments throughout the year to ensure that those students are learning new content or familiar content in greater depth and complexity.

Find open-ended opportunities for performance to gauge what students already know. For example, a teacher can begin by considering, "In what

ways might I find out what my students already know about the life cycle of a plant?" Or a teacher can ask students to draw a cartoon strip that illustrates the life of a plant from birth to death, or encourage very young students to act out how a seed becomes a flower.

Rather than looking only for students whose performance is uniformly high, look for students with peaks of performance. High performance on solving problems or geometric concepts, for example, may indicate a special talent in mathematics.

Construct learning activities to engage students in a variety of ways and provide different options to demonstrate achievement. In particular, look for opportunities to assess learning strengths that do not require advanced language skills, particularly reading and writing. For example, allow students to view a film of *Hamlet* before discussing it and then look for students whose insights are reflective of deeper understanding of theme or character. Or give students the opportunity to use graphic organizers to represent the relationships among physical, cultural, social, and political geographies of a country. Reading and writing are obviously crucial skills, but students who cannot learn or demonstrate learning because of language difficulties or disabilities need recognition and an appropriate curriculum.

Learn the ways in which cultural or social differences inhibit performance among the students. For example, students in some cultural groups learn not to attempt public performance at all until they achieve complete mastery. Educators may judge these students as far less competent than they really are. In these cases, teachers should seek ways to create the opportunity for performance not inhibited by the students' cultural mores.

The first step in awakening and developing the talent of the gifted student is to move beyond our stereotypes of the gifted learner and create new ways to bring out and encourage talent. Several programs funded by the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Act of 1994 have been successful in creating new images of talent. For example, Project Support to Affirm Rising Talent (START), a collaborative project on minority talent development with the Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools, North Carolina, used Howard Gardner's model of intelligence to create specific performance assessment tasks through which students could demonstrate verbal, logical-mathematic, and spatial abilities. More important, teachers modified the curriculum to encourage students who had different styles of learning.

Create Many Kinds of Challenge

Learning the student's strengths is of little value if we do not create learning experiences that reflect an attempt to modify the learning experience of the student in light of our new knowledge.

Research indicates that a learner is more likely to successfully model a peer who is slightly more advanced in performance level than one who differs greatly.

Accommodate the complexity and creativity in students' thinking and problem solving and their knowledge in language, mathematical, spatial, musical, and artistic arenas by creating a rich variety of opportunities for performance. For a unit on tropism, for example, offer an open-ended challenge: "Show how the sun affects the way a plant grows and how other features in a plant's world may change the way it grows."

Compact the curriculum. This simple modification creates a challenging curriculum and many learning opportunities for gifted students and reduces the boredom that develops when students sit through instruction in skills and basic facts that they have already mastered. Research has found that gifted elementary school students whose teachers had eliminated 40–50 percent of the curriculum achieved as well or better on standardized tests as gifted students in a comparison group that had not had a compacted curriculum (Reis et al., 1993).

Address the curriculum at many levels of sophistication, creating high-end learning activities at increased levels of abstraction, complexity, depth, and pace of instruction while still addressing the common standards of the core curriculum. Follow Carol Ann Tomlinson's guidelines (1995) for increasing the level of challenge for gifted learners. For a science standard that requires students to identify and understand the uses of simple machines, for example, challenge gifted students to compare and evaluate the efficiency of a variety of simple machines that carry out the same task, requiring the students to define efficiency and then to create a series of tests to evaluate the machines.

Offer ways for students to become involved in individual learning activities that will motivate and challenge regardless of cultural or social backgrounds or particular learning strengths. The complex instruction model (Cohen et al., 1994) suggests ways to modify the depth and complexity of a lesson. For a history unit about the impact of the industrial revolution on society, for example, ask students to examine pictures of sweatshops, folk music of the period, muckraker literature, and historical documents. Students with varying areas of strength can all contribute to the discussion. Asking the class to compare and contrast the industrial revolution with the more recent revolution in technology offers advanced students opportunities to use abstract and complex thinking skills and also draws on all students' experiences with technology (Kaplan, 2001).

Encourage group investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1994) to open ways for students to use their special abilities and learn the skills necessary for becoming high-level creators and problem solvers. Students in a group investigation select problems in their community, country, or the world that

relate to the unit of study. Students may elect to examine evidence of the illegal use of immigrant labor, for example, and propose solutions.

By challenging the myths about giftedness and by taking these initial steps in assessment and creative instructional strategies, our classrooms can begin to address the learning needs of all students, including the many kinds of gifted learners. ■

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