

Myths about Gifted Students

Myth #1: *They are aloof, proud of their own abilities, and care little for others.*

Reality: Just like their non-gifted peers, some gifted children display these characteristics and some do not. This myth generally springs from the fear of the idea that if gifted children learned together, they would develop an attitude of elitism, superiority or condescension.

However, gifted students who are grouped together in learning environments typically learn that they may understand some academic topics better than their peers than other topics (Fiedler, Lange & Winebrenner, 2002). Gifted students may find that **learning together is a more humbling experience** than learning in their typical classroom as they discover a more realistic assessment of their own abilities when compared to others of similar ability, and acknowledge that there are some students who are just as knowledgeable and experienced in topic areas or more so than they are (Fiedler et.al., 2002). Delisle and Galbraith (2000, p. 24) quote Linda Silverman who writes, “contrary to public opinion, when the gifted are placed in classes together, they do not come to the conclusion that they are ‘better than everyone else.’ Rather, they are humbled by finding peers who know more than they do.”

In addition, the **trait of sensitivity** is one of the five primary social/emotional characteristics of gifted students described by Lovecky (1992). Gifted students with the characteristics of sensitivity often display compassion, empathy and a desire to decrease the suffering and pain of others (Lovecky, 1992). The pain and suffering of others often resonates with these students to the extent that they feel the emotions of other people. In addition, these students tend to display highly altruistic behaviors, doing things for other people simply because they care.

This ability may be what Howard Gardner (VonKarolyi, Ramos-Ford, & Gardner, 2003) described as **interpersonal intelligence** or an individual’s ability to be “sensitive to, accurately assess, and understand other’s actions, motivations, moods and feeling...and act productively” on that understanding. Piechowski (2003) and others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) have suggested that this sensitivity, heightened awareness of others’ emotions, compassion and empathy may be **emotional intelligence** which encompasses an individual’s perception, appraisal and expression of emotions as well as understanding and analyzing emotional information, regulating emotion and emotional facilitating of thinking.

This heightened degree of sensitivity, coupled with early moral concern for global and societal issues, often **galvanizes these gifted students to initiate altruistic and other-centered projects** such as community charitable and volunteer programs to benefit others (Lovecky, 1993). These students are the future Florence Nightengales and Nelson Mandelas.

Myth #2: *They are good at everything and should be reminded of that when they fail to perform at high levels.*

Reality: Gifted students vary in their abilities to perform just like any other group of students.

Students who seem to “have it all” can mislead educators into thinking that they need little help or support in the development of their talent (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). “Although in the past we’ve tended to stereotype gifted students as exceptional ‘across the board,’ **few are actually good in everything they do**” (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 67). While it is true that some students may be good at a wide variety of things and some are truly exceptional in some areas, all students have different learning styles, performance abilities, production rates and quality of work (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). For example, some gifted students are poor test-takers (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002), others are poor at organization and time management, and still others have difficulty with homework. Some gifted students have a learning disability which may mask their giftedness or interfere with production of academic work (Silverman, 2003).

Talent development implies that a **gifted individual must learn, practice, and refine their raw abilities** over time in order to produce quality work or performance (Gagné, 2003). To do so, the individual must encounter periods of personal and professional growth through challenge, struggle, success and failure. Delisle and Galbraith (2002, p. 28) cite Benjamin Bloom as stating, “no matter what the initial characteristics (or gifts) of the individuals, unless there is a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education, and training, the individuals will not attain the extreme levels of capability.”

The implicit internalized belief that a gifted student should “be good at everything” and is guaranteed success can **create enormous feelings of personal failure, self-doubt and distress when the student encounters his or her first experience with struggle and failure** (Cross, 2002). Cross (2002) uses the illustration of Thomas Edison as an example of how “being good” even at one thing, such as the light bulb, took years of experiments, trial and error and perseverance.

Myth #3: *They do not need special programs as they will be able to perform at high levels regardless.*

Reality: “Gifted learners must be given stimulating educational experiences appropriate to their level of ability if they are to realize their potential” (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 91).

“Would you send a star athlete to train for the Olympics without a coach?” (NAGC, 2006). Gifted students, like all students, **need a supportive and**

challenging education in order to develop their talents; however, there is no guarantee that gifted students will perform at high levels in their current educational settings. Because gifted students are gifted, and hence **different in their intellectual, affective and educational needs**, they require programs which meet those needs in order to capitalize on their abilities and support them in their continuance of high levels of performance. Currently, a little over one-half of the potentially gifted learners in the United States are reported to be receiving educational services appropriate to their needs (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 91).

Lack of appropriate challenge and rigor in either traditional educational classrooms or in specialized gifted programming results in students feeling frustrated, bored, and isolated. Many choose to underachieve, negating the belief that left to their own devices in traditional educational settings they will undoubtedly succeed. Rimm (2003) cites a variety of research supporting the fact that half of gifted students do not perform up to their tested abilities, that between 10 and 20% of high school dropouts test in the gifted range, and that 15-40% are at risk for underachievement. Rimm (2003, p. 424) writes: “being intellectually or creatively gifted does not assure educational or creative success or productivity. There are risks and pressures that accompany high intelligence that detour potentially high-achieving children...”

Delisle and Galbraith (2002, p. 91) write that each person, including each gifted child, has the **right to learn and be challenged** in that learning at the level most appropriate to their growth and which proceeds most effectively from their level of development. VanTassel-Baska (2003, p. 174) states that a **key belief in gifted education is that because gifted learners have different learning needs, educational curriculum must be adapted to designed to accommodate.** The vehicle for this learning environment can be the traditional classroom setting or special gifted programming, provided that **teachers have the appropriate training to meet the needs of gifted students** and that the curriculum is both rigorous and effective. Michael Jordan required hours of practice and coaching to hone his jump-shots; Virginia Woolf needed years to cultivate her written work and neither experienced being perfect at basketball or writing from birth, both needed an environment which educated, challenged and supported them in order to refine their talent.

Myth #4: They have even profiles in respect to intellectual ability, academic aptitude, and social emotional development.

Reality: Gifted students develop at different rates from their non-gifted peers and at different rates in developmental areas.

One of the most fascinating traits of gifted individuals is “asynchronous development.” The Columbus Group (1991) described asynchronous development as gifted individual’s “advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different

from the norm” (Silverman, 2002, p. 32). Hence, gifted students’ cognitive development is typically more advanced than their same-age, non-gifted peers. (Silverman, 2002). Asynchronous development is used to describe the mind of 16-year-old adolescent in the body of a 10-year-old child, along with the stress, struggle and excitement which comes from that disparity.

Typically asynchronous development, or out-of-synch development, describes the rapid growth of a **gifted student’s intellectual abilities which can outpace their social, emotional and physical growth**. As an example, a six-year-old gifted child may be able to “see” in his or her mind’s eye a piece of sculpture or “hear” a piano piece and desire to either create or replicate these pieces but may lack the fine motor skills to mold clay or push the piano keys with accuracy. This **discrepancy between their intellectual ability and physical ability may lead to intense frustration** and feelings of inadequacy which can challenge these students if they have not yet developed the necessary emotional coping skills needed to work with these situations (Silverman, 2002).

Delisle and Galbraith (2002, p. 29) provide a reminder that there is no one “portrait” of a gifted student. Talent areas and personalities an individual needs are as diverse as in the non-gifted population. Christina and Dante Gabrielle Rossetti, while brother and sister, were dramatically different in their abilities and temperaments yet they are both considered gifted in the arts.

Myth #5: They benefit from being the second teacher in the room, tutoring others in greater need than themselves.

And,

Myth #6: They work well in randomly assigned groups to ensure that the work gets done correctly.

Reality: Gifted students benefit from working with others of their ability level.

Requiring gifted students to act as a second teacher to those students who do not understand a concept of an assignment is inappropriate for several reasons. First, **non-gifted students do not consider gifted students as role models**, and many resent having someone who appears to always successful trying to teach them (Delisle & Galbraith, 2003). Winebrenner and Devlin (2001), citing Shunk in 1998, state that in order to be a positive role model the discrepancy in ability levels cannot be too high between the role model and the audience the role model is intended to motivate. Traditional students may prefer someone with an ability level closer to themselves than a gifted student who seems to be able to outperform all members of the group.

Second, **gifted students are not always challenged by or have the desire to teach others below their ability level**. Fiedler, Lange and Winebrenner (2002, p.

110) state that the students who **learn the least** in any given class are actually the gifted students. By attempting to utilize gifted students as teachers and helpers, they can inadvertently rob the gifted students of “consistent opportunities to learn through real struggle” and learn the necessary study skills and adaptation to challenging work (Fiedler, et.al. 2002).

Third, randomly assigned groups or groups in which the gifted student is the teacher or leader **may lead to the other students “opting out” of the required work** or passing the bulk of the assignment to the gifted student (Winebrenner & Devlin, 2001) simply because they know the gifted student can do it and may even feel pressured to do a good job for the teacher or to please the group.

Gifted students benefit more by working and interacting with peers of their ability level. Copious studies have pointed to the fact that **allowing gifted students to work together in the same class can produce positive results and even “dramatic improvements”** (Kulik, 2003, p. 274). Gifted students have the right to an appropriate education which challenges them and provides them an environment in which they can achieve and succeed. This environment does not require them to teach but to learn. “The goal of appropriate education must be to create optimal learning experiences for all” (Fielder, et.al., 2002, p. 111).

Myth #7: They all enjoy independent work and are motivated to complete projects.

Reality: Just like their non-gifted peers, gifted students are not always motivated or enjoy doing independent work.

Because traditional education is tailored to non-gifted students, many gifted students are introduced to material which they have already learned. Because of their rapid assimilation of information, high retention rates and advanced reasoning, typically they need fewer rounds of repetition for mastery and require more advanced material to analyze. Gifted students can become unmotivated to do any academic work, especially that which they have already mastered or which seems irrelevant. **Inappropriate instruction for gifted learners includes repeated requirements to fulfill assignment they already know how to do on material they’ve already mastered** (Tomlinson, 1997)

Independent projects have been a resource for teachers of the gifted, but implementation of these projects should be rigorous, regulated and supervised. Many make the assumption that having a gifted student sit in the back of the class and flip through a book or complete puzzles or complete miscellaneous assignments is appropriate; but not only does it cut him/her off from the rest of the class, it is obvious to the student that they are just “filling-in” time (Tomlinson, 1997, ¶10). Independent learning projects should be comprehensive, reflective, and fulfill the district’s and state’s requirements for student learning along with providing for the student’s ability and need for advanced levels of

analysis and synthesis. The teacher should be involved at all times in independent work, not limited to “quizzing” the student on content learned, but helping them make meaning of the material, analyzing the cognitive strategies used to master it, applying of the material to other areas and facilitating continued discovery of their talent with relation to the project.

Even the most productive and learning-oriented gifted student given the most challenging of independent projects needs help sustaining motivation. Teachers may need to encourage, discuss with and model successful motivational strategies if these are not already in the gifted student’s repertoire. Producing quality work is difficult and fraught with trial and error. Gifted students need support and mentoring through task completion just like any other group of students. Would an Olympic tri-athlete be given a road map, a bike, and swim gear and sent on their way? No, they, like gifted students, require careful coaching, motivation, training and challenge to complete their difficult and exciting journey.

Myth #8: They all have pushy parents who expect the school to do more than is possible or reasonable for their children.

Reality: The “pushy-ness” of parents is often a result of continued stress and struggle with minimal success with schools.

Gifted students, like all students, come from a wide variety of familial, cultural, racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds; however, the majority of the parents and guardians of these students are concerned with their gifted student’s achievement and academic success. Often, families of gifted students come to their child’s school frustrated, worried, fearful and angry which can come across to educators as “pushy” or even aggressive. “Early in their child’s school career, parents may have high expectations of schools and feel disappointed and frustrated when those expectations are not met” (Moon, 2003, p. 388). Moon (2003) cites Feldhusen and Kroll (1985) who surveyed parents of gifted elementary students and found that 61.1% of parents felt that their child’s intellectual needs were not being met. However, Delisle and Galbraith (2002) point out that some parents don’t draw any attention to the needs of their gifted student for fear of singling them out.

Yet, many families of gifted students are under stress due to prior negative interactions with schools which appear to not care about their gifted child’s abilities or meeting their needs. Some parents are confused about the “label” of giftedness, how students are identified as gifted, or how their child will be served according to that label. Some are frustrated and befuddled by trying to interpret test-scores and need additional information, resources or services. Some families assume that because their child has been identified as gifted that they will be receiving special services and are often bewildered when those services are not provided (Moon, 2003). When gifted students become bored, begin to underachieve, or are suddenly met with challenging coursework which requires

more effort, parents can become alarmed. Coupled with this stress are parent or guardian feelings of guilt and anxiety over not being able to provide for their child's needs, pressure to be a responsible and responsive parent, and often anger and frustration with not being able to understand their child's gifted behaviors (Moon, 2003; Colangelo & Dettman, 1983).

Conflicts between families and schools can occur when the schools and families differ in the belief that the current curriculum being offered in the schools is rigorous and challenging enough for gifted students. Parents who disagree with the school's stance may feel they have to be active advocates to get the rigorous education their child's ability requires. On the other hand, educators in schools who are actively responding by providing gifted programming can feel threatened and distressed when parents of gifted children choose not to participate or enroll their students due to anxiety about the use of the gifted "label" or other value conflicts (Colangelo & Dettman, 1983; Moon, 2003).

"Pushy-ness" can be diminished by active support, reassurance, information, and plenty of active listening on behalf of educators. Simply listening to determine where the conflict in values or expectations lie between the school and the parent can help both parties better serve the gifted student.

Myth #9: They are good students, rarely causing behavioral problems of any kind in class.

Reality: Gifted students, like all students, are diverse in their behaviors and attitudes.

Many people conceptualize "gifted" as a well-behaved, high-achieving white female, sitting up straight in her seat, ready to learn and succeed. Consider the following children: the child who seems to come up with the right answer to a math question without ever documenting the steps, the student who seems to know more about the Civil War than the teacher, the first-grader who can never seem to stop asking questions, or the adolescent who refuses to turn in his science homework unless every formula is absolutely perfect, the high-schooler who would rather paint than talk on the phone or go to the mall with other teens, or the sarcastic joker who sits in the back of the class with a nearly-perfect SAT scores but who chooses never to turn in assignments. Would these students be considered well-behaved or even normal? Perhaps not, but they are gifted.

Gifted students, with their rapid learning rates, insatiable curiosity, increased retention, and divergent thinking can sometimes appear threatening and/or irritating to both educators and students alike with constant question-asking and behaviors that seem to be showing-off (Silverman, 1993). **These students love to learn and desire to dialogue** about what they find fascinating, sometimes oblivious to the boredom and irritation of classmates when they illustrate the finer points of the scientific method. These students **spend hours researching and**

learning about areas that they love and are passionate about, to the extent that many know more about a topic than the classroom teacher or can discuss at length, topics outside the boundaries of the text book. Because not all students can learn this fast, **gifted students are often forced to remain silent and bored in classrooms** where other students are just starting chapter three when the gifted student has finished the book.

Gifted students who are introverts **require time alone to think and process** what they have learned and experienced, which can appear to other, more extraverted, adults as displaying antisocial behavior (Silverman, 1993). **The class clown may be gifted but bored and unchallenged**, hence her homework scores average zero but she can take social studies tests and make the highest grade in the class. The sixth-grade joker may be able to understand and participate in advanced levels of wit, satire and sarcasm yet can't see the point of dissembling for other people's benefit (Silverman, 1993). Non-conformity, questioning of rules, and a keen sense of justice, all of which are gifted traits, may appear to be a student who, while obviously intelligent, is rebellious, anti-social, and maddening.

Gifted girls' academic performance can suffer in middle and high school and teachers can be bewildered by their sudden lack of interest in school, while **gifted males often feel torn** between being popular, being athletic and being academically successful, often choosing the former two fields for achievement over the latter (Kerr & Nicpon, 2003). **Students from minority backgrounds may choose to "opt out" of academic success** for the social penalty they must pay if they achieve and are accused of "acting white" (Evans, 1993; Ford, 2003).

Often, what educators see as behavioral problems or pathologies, may simply be the **manifestations of giftedness**. Likewise, not all gifted students are perfectly behaved or desire to learn in the traditional classroom setting. It must be emphasized that **no two gifted children "look" the same**. Many are completely invested in their academic success and are well-behaved and some are not. Albert Einstein was non-traditional in the way he dressed and behaved and refused to do any school work that didn't interest him, yet most consider to be one of the most eminent men of the last century, if not all time.

Myth #10: They are rarely at risk for educational achievement or attainment beyond high school.

Reality: Gifted students are at risk for educational achievement beyond high school if their intellectual and affective needs are not met and/or if their community, home or school environments are not supportive.

Rimm (2003) cites deLeon (1989) as stating that of the top 5% of United States' high school graduates, 40% do not complete college. One of concern which may prevent gifted students from achieving include experiences with classrooms and educational environments which are anti-intellectual, consider gifted

programming to be elitist, have a rigid adherence to lock-step learning which cultivates boredom, foster cultural/racial prejudice or power struggles and which allow learning disabilities to go unidentified (Rimm, 2003).

A second area is that of the home. While parents of both gifted underachievers and gifted individuals of eminence both were concerned with the achievement of the gifted person, the former was characterized by a lack of modeled intrinsic or independent learning, positive commitment to career, or a respect for school (Rimm, 2003). Interesting enough, parents of underachieving gifted students often demanded more rigor and challenge in the schools (Rimm, 2003). Families of gifted children who do not believe in, or who have cultural or religious beliefs concerning higher education may not facilitate the student's pursuit of this particular opportunity.

A third area of concern is that of the societal or communal context of the gifted students. Sternberg (2003), in his explication of giftedness, sites the importance of environments in the development of intelligence. Environments in which gifted students find themselves have different definitions of, and rewards for, success (Sternberg, 2003). **These differences in environment may conflict with the gifted student's, parent's or school's notion of success.** Environments which are not resource-rich or which do not provide for opportunities can impact a gifted individual's current and future success (Sternberg, 2003). Societies also have various rewards for success based on gender-role expectations such as the superwoman who can advance in her career and has a perfect marriage and achieving children, or the successful male who has a high-paying, fast-paced job and the "perfect 10" wife (Kerr & Nicpon, 2003).

A last area which impacts current and future achievement is **intrapersonal factors such as temperament**, commitment to a task or project, will-power, motivation, intrinsic rewards for learning, self-management, and capitalization on strengths and compensation or correction for individual areas of weakness (Gagné, 2003; Sternberg, 2003). These individual factors are vital in the pursuit of higher education and success in those environments. However, even more important is the fit between the gifted individual and their future paths. Hence, **career and college exploration** as well as the clarification of values, abilities and dreams, as a group effort by family, community members, the school and the gifted student is critical to their future success (Greene, 2002).

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