

“A Guide to Teaching the Gifted: What We Need to Know...and Why We Need to Know It”

1. Do you think it is necessary to identify gifted students?
2. What are the benefits once a child is identified?
3. Are there negative effects on a child who is identified as gifted?
4. Do you agree or disagree with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, children learn best when they are reaching just outside their comfort zone?

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Fall 2010



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A Guide to Teaching the Gifted: What We Need to Know...and Why We Need to Know It

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As a teacher, I am constantly bombarded with questions when it comes to educating my most advanced students. Such questions come from every side, but the most pressing ones come from my own conscience. In striving to be the best teacher I can be, I am constantly asking myself whether I am meeting the needs of *all* of my students.

The population known as "gifted" is often the most overlooked. People often assume these students are just fine on their own. After all, they would probably pass the state test even if they didn't show up for school all year! Others think that calling some kids "gifted" fosters elitism and makes other children feel inferior. Given these opinions about gifted students, I asked myself whether it is even necessary to have such a label. Why do we care who is "gifted" and who is "not gifted"? Should we lose the label altogether and just look for what Renzulli

(2005) calls "gifted behaviors"? Using "gifted" as an adjective rather than a noun is certainly appealing. Borland (2005) suggests that we dispense with the idea of gifted children altogether. He proposes that we instead focus on providing appropriate modifications to curriculum and instruction for *all* children, since every child is different on an individual (and not *categorical*) level. In this way, there would be no need for labeling or classifying children, as their differing needs

and readiness levels at any given time would be recognized and addressed.

I wish it were that simple. Unfortunately, there can be no aid for meeting students' needs if there is no identification, and there can be no identification without a definition. However, given the controversy over the "g" word, it would be prudent to use it only when doing so will serve a greater purpose. To that end, I suggest a definition of giftedness that is needs-based. Teachers need to be able to identify children who are

gifted only when it is a necessary step toward meeting an individual student's needs. A good teacher should almost always be able to provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences for students who fall within two standard deviations from the norm. Labels only become necessary when the teacher needs to provide something more than what can

typically be provided through differentiation within the regular classroom. Being able to identify the gifted students will help guide a teacher's actions both within the regular classroom and in reaching out to other resources when necessary.

Identification and Education: Why and How?

There are three basic reasons a "gifted" student may need to be identified, whether formally or informally. (See Figure 1)

1. To better understand some of the social and emotional issues that may accompany advanced cognitive abilities.
2. To qualify students for specific pre-existing special programs for the gifted such as school-sponsored after-school

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programs, a pull-out program, or special summer camps.

3. To be aware of a greater need for differentiation in the classroom, and in some cases, to validate a drastically modified curriculum.

Social/Emotional Issues

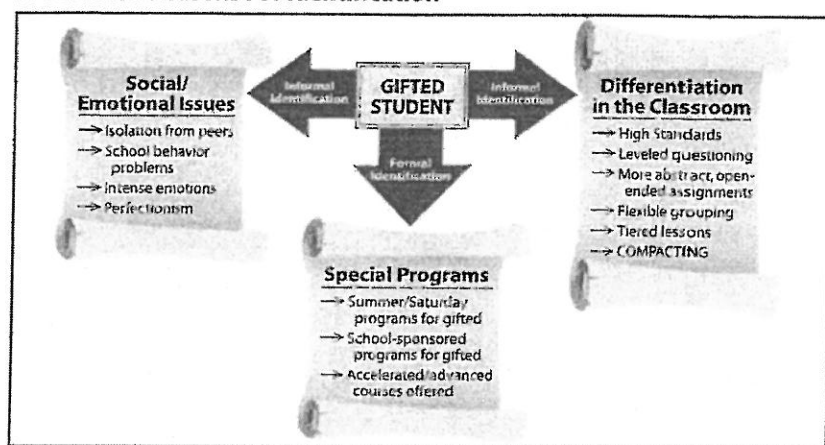
Due to their advanced cognitive abilities, gifted students may experience certain issues more intensely than their peers. This leads to certain social and

dened with students. Additionally, many regular school counselors are not trained to understand and counsel gifted students. These students' social and emotional issues are numerous and serious, but who can help them in their time of need? With the ideal situation in the back of our minds, we need to think about what we as teachers can do *now* to help gifted students cope with such issues.

Identification. The identification process rooted in social and emotional behaviors is usually quite informal and relies upon observation. Just like a physician, teachers must be able to observe certain

difficulty connecting with their peers may benefit from a class or program for the gifted where they will be able to interact with students more like themselves. Teachers can also make parents aware of the issues, recommending that they learn more about their child's particular issues. Once the problem is identified, the adults in a child's life will be able to react more appropriately to each situation, and thus ease the often misunderstood relationship between the adult and the child. The table that follows shows how identification can alter the way a teacher reacts to a student's social and emotional needs.

FIGURE 1: 3 Reasons For Identification



emotional problems that are often misunderstood or ignored (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Here are a few examples of the most common of these issues:

- ★ Isolation—difficulty interacting/connecting with peers
- ★ Behavior—frustration and boredom may lead to school behavior problems
- ★ Intense emotions—depression, anxiety about world problems (e.g., hunger, war, and death)
- ★ Perfectionism—intense fear of failure; unrealistic, self-imposed standards

Many experts in the field have recommended that counseling be an integral part of any program for the gifted. (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Although this would be extremely beneficial, the fact remains that school counselors are often overbur-

dened with students. Additionally, many regular school counselors are not trained to understand and counsel gifted students. These students' social and emotional issues are numerous and serious, but who can help them in their time of need? With the ideal situation in the back of our minds, we need to think about what we as teachers can do *now* to help gifted students cope with such issues.

behaviors and provide a timely and accurate assessment. Identifying a problem early may make all the difference in a child's development. To do this, teachers, and others in the school building need to have some basic knowledge of these issues. Simply being aware that there are social and emotional issues connected to giftedness may help teachers and others connect the dots. This minimal goal can be met through a one-time professional development session for the entire school, with the possibility for additional follow-up training for those who express more interest.

Intervention. An understanding and supportive teacher presents the greatest variable in the education of a gifted child. Behavior problems caused by boredom can be remedied through more challenging class work, once a teacher recognizes that there is a need. Students who have

Special Programs

Special programs for gifted students are varied in design, intensity, frequency, and purpose. Part of a teacher's job may be to recommend a student for a school-sponsored gifted program. This could be anything from an after-school enrichment session that occurs once a week to a full time, self-contained gifted class.

Identification. Schools usually use a combination of criteria to select students for gifted programs (VanTassel-Baska, 2005). The tools of identification should match the program, of course. For example, a student would not take written test to get into advanced band. Similarly, a 500-word essay may not help determine whether to place a student into an accelerated math class. Since each program has specific qualifications and objectives, the identification process must be *formal*. Teachers must follow whatever formal identification process the school requires.

When teacher recommendations are used, the teacher must be able to answer questions about the student being considered. Objectives of the program must be made clear, in order that the teacher will be better equipped to answer the questions and identify students who would be a good match for the program.

- ★ 1. Is this domain in the student's strength and/or interest area?
- ★ 2. Does the student possess the prerequisite knowledge?

Identification Makes a Difference

SITUATION	Without Identification	With Identification
Max is disruptive in class. He frequently interrupts lessons to call out ideas or make a joke.	Max is disciplined with increasing severity. Trips to the vice principal become frequent. Max begins to see himself as the "bad kid" and, fed up with the system, ends up dropping out of high school.	Max's teacher recognizes that he is bored and frustrated. The teacher begins to provide more challenging work for him and also recommends him for accelerated learning in an advanced course. Max finds renewed interest in school, and by the end of the year his behavior problems are less evident.
Max is very upset every time he receives any grade below 100.	Max's teacher tells him that his grades are very good and he should be proud of himself. Max is never satisfied by a brief remark, and eventually this fear of failure causes him to underachieve, first by not turning in assignments and later expresses itself as an unwillingness to participate in any extracurricular activities.	Max's teacher recognizes aspects of perfectionism, speaks to his parents about it, and together, through suggested resources and strategies, try to help Max understand and deal with his perfectionism, recognizing it as a characteristic of his giftedness to be overcome.

3. Does the student have the ability and/or motivation to keep pace?

4. Would the student benefit from this program? How?

Carefully considering these questions should help any teacher decide whether to recommend a student for a given program.

Intervention. Matching a specific student, or keeping an eye out for other under-identified students suited for the program presents the largest role for the regular classroom teacher. To avoid elitism and conflict, teachers are also responsible for cultivating an accepting environment to support differences in students' learning needs. When necessary, teachers should articulate that special school programs and services exist because students learn differently, and learning experiences that these students require are often not provided in the regular classroom. Students should come to understand that they are being given learning opportunities that are best for *them*, regardless of what other students in the class may be doing.

Differentiation in the Classroom

The first essential component to helping gifted students in the regular classroom is to have consistently high expectations. In my experience, children will only work as hard and perform as well as we expect them to perform. Therefore, try to keep the bar as high as

possible to encourage growth, good work habits, and self-efficacy. Teaching to the middle or low end of the class is not only frustrating for the gifted kids, but will actually be counterproductive for the majority of students. According to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, children learn best when they are reaching just outside their comfort zone. A challenging environment with plenty of support from the teacher is an ideal way to reach a larger pool of students, keeping them all engaged.

While maintaining high expectations is a helpful way to keep students challenged and engaged most of the time, there are times when teachers must alter the content, process, or product in some way to meet individual needs. There are many and varied ways to differentiate, from leveled questioning to tiered activities. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2001) offers a comprehensive guide for teachers to the why, what, and how of differentiating at all readiness levels. Incorporating some of these differentiation strategies will help classroom teachers challenge an even greater range of students.

There sometimes comes a point when the curriculum itself is the problem, and teachers must make more drastic adjustments. The most effective way to do this is through curriculum compacting (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992). This strategy allows the most advanced students to prove what they

know and move on to more developmentally appropriate activities, projects, skills, and/or curriculum concepts.

Identification. The identification process for classroom differentiation is largely informal, but teachers must be able to support their decisions. Much of the identification process rests on knowing students very well. In the beginning of the year, teachers should administer a learning styles inventory, an interest inventory, and a placement test in each subject. It is beneficial to keep records, so that at any time, recommendations can be made.

Intervention. Once the students have been identified, the process becomes a bit more formal, but extremely flexible. Tomlinson (2001) presents a number of differentiation strategies that can be utilized as interventions. Curriculum compacting, mentioned previously, is also a flexible strategy for advanced differentiation that all teachers may implement in their own way. Once intervention strategies have been targeted for a specific student population, professional development is necessary to give teachers the background knowledge needed to understand how to go about using them and the confidence to succeed. It is also essential that there be an individual available for support should anyone have questions and concerns.

Conclusion

There is much to be done to improve the educational experiences of gifted chil-

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are quite adaptable in presenting curriculum, and as a result, students can become involved and excel in everything from paleontology to editing a literary magazine. Hank and Casey Ramey, parents of Parker Ramey said, "We can appreciate the fact



that his classrooms do not have ceilings that limit his potential for learning. This new learning environment has restored the spark in our son's eyes." Teacher Teresa Haymore sums it up best when she says, "Teachers respect the various areas of giftedness and encourage every child to explore his or her passions."

Da Vinci Academy students also have the opportunity to take high school courses for credit and there is hope for the school to offer dual enrollment for both high school and college credit in the near future.

When Leonardo da Vinci stated, "It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things," he must have had the future staff and students of The Da Vinci Academy in mind. It provides the opportunity for 21st Century Learning at its best! ■



Future Problem Solving Program International

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dren in regular classrooms throughout the country. Teachers are the front line. Theorists in the field of gifted education have produced volumes of research, articulated lofty conceptions, and designed some excellent systems and models. However, it is up to the teachers to implement these ideas effectively. All regular classroom teachers, and those being trained to teach, should be educated about the characteristics and needs of the gifted and talented children. They should also have access to the resources, services, and programs available to schools and districts. Identifying a child as gifted is only useful if some action results from it. Teachers need help understanding when and how to identify gifted students, but most importantly, they need to understand why. ■

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