Myths about Gifted Students

Many myths about gifted students exist. Some are close to the truth for specific individuals while some are wildly outrageous. Here are some myths and realities.

**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. 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). These students tend to display highly altruistic behaviors, doing things for other people simply because they care. 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. While it is true that some students may be good 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).

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). 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.

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. 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. 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.

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

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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 be 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.

Second, gifted students are not always challenged by or have the desire to teach others below their ability level. Fiedler (2002, p. 110) states 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 simply because they know the gifted student can do it. Gifted students have the right to an appropriate education which challenges them and provides them an environment in which they can achieve and succeed.

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. Gifted students can become unmotivated to do any academic work, especially that which they have already mastered or which seems irrelevant. 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, 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. 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: 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. “Pushy-ness” can be diminished by active support, reassurance, information, and plenty of active listening on behalf of educators.

**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 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.

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 interested 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. 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 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.