



TIGER

Tennessee Initiative for Gifted Education Reform

Do Gifted Students Have Special Needs?

Every gift contains a danger. Whatever gift we have we are compelled to express. And if the expression of that gift is blocked, distorted, or merely allowed to languish, then the gift turns against us, and we suffer.
(Johnson, 1993)

In order to understand the true meaning of giftedness, it is necessary that we separate the concept from achievement. High achievers are those who are motivated to do well in school. Gifted students may be high achievers or they may be high school dropouts. They have learning needs that differ from other students, just as developmentally delayed students have different learning needs. When giftedness is seen as the mirror image of retardation, it becomes clear that we have a responsibility to meet their needs, whether or not they are high achievers.

Even gifted students who are achieving A's may be severely underachieving. The Talent Searches, which involve more than 150,000 junior high school students annually, demonstrates how this is possible. Seventh and eighth grade students who are at the 95th percentile in mathematics and reading in grade level assessments are eligible to take the SAT or ACT as above-level tests. These tests were designed for college-bound seniors and juniors. Some junior high school students score much higher on these assessments than their high school counterparts. In fact, some may score high enough to meet the entrance requirements for M.I.T. or Stanford when they are only 12. There are 12-year-olds who have attained scores of 780 or 800 on the SAT-M. When one of these students obtains an A in 7th grade mathematics, what does that A mean? Is the student sufficiently challenged? If this student has already mastered enough algebra and geometry to obtain a score comparable to that of a top high school senior, wouldn't the pre-algebra sequence be a waste of time—even if the student achieved all A's?

For gifted students, achieving an A is not the goal. The real purpose of education is to learn new information. Students who achieve A's based on what they have already learned are gaining daily practice in underachievement. All students have the right to struggle. Struggling is essential to growth. It means that the student is stretching to attain new power in learning. And gifted students actually enjoy struggling to master new material—if they haven't been so pruned into grade-getters that they are afraid of a challenge. Girls, in particular, are at risk for shunning challenges in favor of performing perfectly what they already know.

So how can teachers meet the needs of gifted students?

1. First of all, ask the students! Engage the students in academic planning. It is amazing what a heart-to-heart talk with a gifted student will reveal.
2. Assess what they have already learned before teaching them. There is no use in relearning what one already knows. This can be done by looking at achievement test scores, giving them pre-tests of the material to be covered, informal talks about the subject matter or teacher-constructed diagnostic tests.
3. Allow very advanced students to test out of courses—receiving credit for courses via examination.
4. There are excellent fast-paced courses for gifted students or college-level courses available on internet or via computer instruction. The Educational Program for Gifted Youth (EPGY) out of Stanford University is one such program in mathematics and creative writing. Students receive Stanford University credits for

engaging successfully in this interactive program. Allow students to substitute computer-based courses, internet courses, summer courses on college campuses, etc., for regularly paced courses.

5. Reduce the amount of drill and repetition to a bare minimum. Some students can learn as much attending class three days a week as others learn in five days, if two days each week are spent in review. Gifted students do not profit from review. It has the opposite effect. While they are waiting for the others to catch up, they usually get turned off to learning.
6. Engage students in high level independent study projects, preferably involving real problems in the community.
7. Mentorships and apprenticeships are excellent for gifted high school students.
8. Grouping gifted students together for instruction or for group projects stimulates them to higher performance.
9. Involve the students in community service projects. Give them choices of where they would like to be of service.
10. Do not have the gifted students teach the slower ones. They learn in a different manner and may be poor teachers. They need to be challenged and allowed to learn more difficult material. They are held back in their own learning when they are used as teachers' helpers. (The best teachers for learning disabled students are older learning disabled students who have mastered the material.)
11. Rigorous coursework is a must. Set high standards for students.
12. Encourage three years of a foreign language and exchange programs where students get an immersion experience in a different culture and language.
13. Gifted students have strong aesthetic interests. Make sure that they have room in their schedule to pursue one or more of the fine arts.
14. Provide opportunities for gifted students to accelerate. Continuous progress is imperative. Some students are ready for college at a younger age. Some can succeed in Advanced Placement courses in junior high school. Some should be co-enrolled in high school and college. The options for acceleration should be explained to students and their parents.
15. Counseling is an important provision for gifted students. They are often troubled by their differences, by difficulties they encounter in communicating with others, and by making career choices among many appealing options. Groups designed specifically for gifted students are the most effective. These can be formally conducted by a counselor or informally conducted, more as discussion groups, by an interested teacher.

Teachers have an enormous impact on the lives of gifted students. Underachieving students have been salvaged by one understanding teacher who took an interest in them. The investment of time and energy in differentiating the curriculum for gifted students can inspire them to have higher aspirations, to win scholarships, to choose demanding careers, and to use their gifts for the betterment of society.

REFERENCES

- Johnson, L. (1993). Thoughts on giftedness. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 5(5A), p. 15.
 Silverman, L. K. (1993). Counseling the gifted and talented. Denver: Love.

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