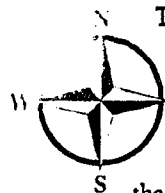


Nine Truths About Working with Gifted Students

Lea Ybarra



There is no one "silver bullet" that works to educate gifted children. This is the key lesson that we at the Center

for Talented Youth have learned in our 25 years of working with gifted children, their families, and their schools.

What follows is a list of nine key truths that have emerged from over two decades of focusing on the varying needs and strengths of these students.

A good gifted program needs a thoughtful mission. The best programs have clearly articulated goals and a plan to achieve those goals within a defined time frame. Creating a small committee for gifted education, involving teachers with an interest in this area, can help build a school's expertise in serving its brightest students. Planning thoughtfully, identifying and incorporating best practices, helps avoid building a program based on a pastiche of well-meant but ineffective notions.

Engaged teachers make it work. Some years back, our teachers created a list of desirable qualities for teachers of the gifted. These teachers should:

- know the subject;
- expect excellence;
- learn from and listen to students;
- teach with a sense of humor;
- possess mental flexibility; and
- draw upon a variety of teaching strategies.

Specialists are invaluable. Educating gifted children can be complicated because their learning styles are different. While one may be perfectly attentive, another may be a dreamer. Some may have strong skills in math but be weak in language arts. About 8 to 10 percent of the children identified in our program also have a learning disability, such as ADHD, dyslexia, or auditory processing

issues. In all these cases, a qualified specialist can help provide additional teaching tools and techniques.

Parents are key partners. As educators, we sometimes think we're doing a good job with gifted students. But a look at messages posted on parent listservs can be eye-opening, and sometimes a little depressing. There are lots of involved parents who think we can be doing a better job.

Above all, parents of gifted students seem to want highly customized curricula for their children. Although staff limitations and broader curriculum mandates put limits on what can be done, it's useful to know what motivates parents and to learn of possible accommodations to meet the expressed needs of their gifted children.

Individual learning differences are the rule, not the exception. Be prepared to educate what Dr. Mel Levine so aptly refers to as "all kinds of minds." Gifted children can be like Teresa, who got a near-perfect math SAT score in seventh grade but worries about her grades. Or Jeremy, who scores very high on standardized tests but forgets to write down or turn in homework assignments. Or Edward, whose test scores fall below his teachers' high assessments of his cognitive skills. Schools that have students like these—and most do—need a gifted program that's flexible and customizable.

Challenge stereotypes and prejudices about gifted education. For example, is grade-skipping of gifted students harmful? Yes, some say. No, conclude the authors of *A Nation Deceived*, a 2004 study of gifted education. It observes that "America's schools routinely avoid academic acceleration, the easiest and most effective way to help highly capable students. While the popular perception is that a child who skips a grade will be socially stunted, fifty years of research shows that moving bright students ahead often makes them happy."

Gifted children have abilities that may or may not show up on tests. It's important to remember that while tests have value for the "cognitive inventory" they can reveal, it's also important to bear in mind what tests cannot capture, such as motivation or in-depth knowledge of a particular subject—like the third-grade student in our program who knew all the capitals and countries in the Middle East, as well as their major exports and dates of independence.

Gifted children and their families benefit from professional expertise and advice. Gifted children may have educational requirements that go beyond the ordinary. In the past two decades, many programs have emerged that enable students to work beyond school walls at a faster pace or more deeply within an area. Parents, especially those with limited educational background themselves, will welcome any information you can give them about reputable providers, particularly those that offer significant financial aid for students from families with low or modest incomes.

The key to success is flexibility, flexibility, flexibility. Gifted children display so many different temperaments, and such diverse academic and learning profiles, that a dogmatic approach won't work for all of them. Schools need flexibility to serve their gifted populations. Innovative staffing and scheduling options, such as team-teaching, cross-grade and in-grade interactions, and looping, can help staffs work more flexibly with students.

Given the right environment, the capacity for gifted children to learn can be eye-opening. But we need to set programs for these children on thoughtful and clear paths. Above all, we must appreciate the wonderful diversity of this special group. If we can do this, we are truly helping gifted children fulfill their considerable potential.

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