

# Ten Things Teachers Need to Know About Gifted Students

by Janine MacAulay

## **1. They are students with special needs.**

Statistically, a student with an IQ of 135 is as far from average as one with an IQ of 65. The curricular modifications we are willing to make for students performing below grade level - changes in content, process, product and learning environment - are equally appropriate for students of high potential. It is unethical to allow a student to languish when she stands to learn nothing new in her current grade. Equality does not mean that all students receive the same services, but that all students receive the same opportunities to grow. Employing gifted students as classroom tutors and gophers denies them the right to learn new material at their ability level.

## **2. Gifted students don't "take care of themselves."**

Gifted students don't come to us having all the knowledge they need to reach their full potential. Teachers may find gifted students threatening or feel they have nothing to teach them. The reality is that classroom teachers are gifted students' best chances for having their gifts recognized. While gifted students may know more than their teachers about areas like astronomy, music or ancient history, they still need guidance in learning skills, such as organizing information, time management, using reference materials and seeing tasks to completion. They also need help in affective matters, such as dealing with perfectionism and the feeling of being different from their peers. When gifted students are left on their own, their skills diminish and their interest wanes. Behaviour problems may emerge, and the child's sense of self-worth is jeopardized.

## **3. They may require any of a range of services.**

Gifted students generally benefit from two types of curriculum modification - *acceleration* and *enrichment*. Through acceleration, the student completes the prescribed curriculum in less time. Acceleration strategies - such as early entrance to primary, skipping a whole grade, within-subject acceleration, curriculum compacting, telescoping, challenge for credit and early admission to college or university - increase the pace at which gifted students learn. Enrichment strategies may be employed when the student keeps pace with his age peers but has blocks of time available for in-depth study of a topic of interest. Independent studies, mentorships, study contracts, levelled assignments, extension activities, summer and weekend programs and school-wide enrichment activities are all ways that we can provide gifted students with the depth of knowledge they crave.

## **4. They are not all teacher-pleasing apple-polishers.**

Gifted students are typically portrayed as high-achieving, polite, model students who go on to become doctors. Some of them are our favorite students. They seem to absorb all we teach them and engage us in delightfully intelligent conversation.

However, while many gifted students find school very satisfying and stimulating, several more fly under the radar, troubled by common demons such as boredom, oversensitivity, disorganization, perfectionism, self-doubt, antagonism, sarcasm and immaturity. Some of our least-engaged students are expertly hiding gifts in one or more areas. After years of not being challenged in the regular classroom, many gifted students believe that people who are smart do not work hard. In fact, they may purposely hide their ability lest their true efforts

reveal that they really aren't gifted at all. Others may simply be uninspired. To quote Susan Winebrenner, author of *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom*, "I have rarely met gifted kids who won't do their work, but I have met scores who won't do the *teacher's* work."

### **5. They need opportunities to be with other students like them.**

There is a strange notion that gifted students should be doled out like apples, one per teacher. This is counter to what research states about how gifted students learn. Gifted students need time to be with their same-ability peers. In fact, the typical approach to cooperative learning (mixed-ability groups of 3-5 students) often does an injustice to gifted students. An extensive meta-analysis on ability grouping conducted by Karen Rogers (1998) has revealed that:

- Advanced students benefit from being grouped together.
- Like-ability groups are academically beneficial to all students when compared to mixed-ability groups.
- Pairing a low-ability student with a high-ability student academically benefits the low-ability student only.
- Grouping of any sort without curricular modification does not produce academic gains.

This is not to say that gifted learners cannot work with other students of different abilities but similar interests. But as with any group learning situation, students should not be kept in groups for extended periods of time if learning is not occurring.

A strategy which is growing in popularity in inclusive classrooms is *cluster grouping*, in which all gifted students in the same grade are placed together in an otherwise mixed-ability class with a trained teacher who differentiates curriculum for the gifted group. Cluster grouping helps ensure that gifted students' needs are met, allows for streamlining of outside services, and minimizes the expenses of widespread staff training when budgetary constraints are an issue.

### **6. The "gifted" label does not really matter.**

Labelling a child "gifted" does not change the learning needs that she had before the label - and the learning needs are what require our attention. In fact, some theorists in gifted education argue that the label can be damaging because it leads to a "who's in and who's out" mentality about gifted services. It causes students who are identified to be treated differently. It creates unnecessary anxiety in the student and parents.

### **7. They mature at different rates in different domains.**

*Asynchronous* or uneven development in physical, emotional, social, and cognitive domains occurs in all children, but it is more pronounced in gifted students because their intellect invites more adult treatment. In other words, the eight-year-old who is preoccupied with World War II may also excitedly anticipate the arrival of Santa Claus. The twelve-year-old future lawyer may cry when he loses a debate. The fifteen-year-old who is enrolled in university math courses may not be ready to date.

### **8. They exist across cultural, gender and socio-economic groups.**

Many of the students before us are commonly overlooked when teachers identify gifted students. Students of African Nova Scotian or Mi'kmaq heritage are at risk of not being referred for gifted programming in a system that ignores culture and diversity. Gifted girls still face social expectations that they hide their intelligence and put others before themselves. Twice exceptional students - students possessing both gifts and

learning/physical disabilities - face internal and external obstacles to revealing their talents. It is the responsibility of teachers to consider each child individually and not against a hypothetical image of a typical "gifted child."

**9. They need strong advocates.**

Gifted education is not without controversy. The world is not sympathetic to the plight of the gifted child. Gifted education is seen as elitist. Gifted students are believed to "take care of themselves." Ability grouping makes people uncomfortable. Teachers of the gifted are believed to have it easy. Parents of the gifted may be considered braggarts or possibly delusional, even though they are usually more adept at identifying giftedness than teachers are. Despite these obstacles, gifted students need administrators, teachers and parents who believe in their potential and seek to have their talents developed. Gifted education is not a frill - it is the nurturing of our future leaders.

**10. They don't need teachers who are gifted, but they need gifted teachers.**

Teachers of the gifted do not need to have high IQ scores and mile-long resumes. Instead, gifted students need teachers who are cheerful and enthusiastic about learning, value student discovery, employ flexibility in their classroom approach, and have a sense of humor. Most importantly, they need teachers who are genuinely interested in teaching gifted students, with all their quirks, challenges and diverse needs.