

The Holy Grail

A Parent's Guide to Finding the Appropriate Educational Environment for Gifted/2e Children

By Dr. Michael Postma



The Holy Grail: Finding the Appropriate Educational Environment for Gifted and Twice-Exceptional Children, A Parents Guide

They laughed, they cried, they clapped, sang, and danced in the aisles. Well, sort of. There certainly were some tears and a standing ovation. What, pray tell, am I talking about? The encore of an outstanding concert? The premiere of a particularly moving movie picture? The closing speech at a political convention? No, I am referring to a regular Public School Board meeting in Minnetonka Minnesota in the spring of 2009. A School Board Meeting? Really?

Yes. This particular meeting, a special information session, was designed to allow parents of the newly constructed Minnetonka Navigator Program, a specialized magnet school for students with high intellectual potential (including twice-exceptional students) to voice their questions and concerns after its inaugural year as a 'school within a school' Program to meet the needs of students with extreme intellectual, social, and emotional needs. As the principle designer and director of the Program, I along with my two colleagues, teachers Ms. Sandy Katkov and Mrs. Alison Alowonle (we started with just two classrooms) sat for almost two hours listening to the parent body expressing their gratification for the opportunity to finally see their children thrive within an educational environment. It almost seemed that they had collectively won the lottery and while there may not have been singing and dancing there certainly was much laughter, applause, and a not a few tears shed.

So, why does this matter? What was so significant about this scene? Well, it matters because scenes like the one described above have become far too infrequent at the national level, perhaps even internationally. In the modern era of NCLB (No Child Left Behind) with its emphasis on 'bringing up the rear', locating an appropriate setting dedicated to the holistic (not just academic) needs of the gifted, and especially, twice-exceptional child is akin to finding the much sought holy grail. Far too often parents are forced to 'choose', sometimes in error, what they believe might be the best 'fit' for their non-typical learner. Regrettably, even with the best of intentions, most schools cannot properly accommodate the educational needs of the gifted or 2e child, much less provide for them an avenue to build the solid emotional foundation needed for meaningful growth. So, what is a family to do? By far, this question ranks as the most common query I receive in my consulting practice and thus, deserves adequate answers. In my twenty plus years of working with gifted and twice-exceptional students in a variety of public school environments, I have learned a few strategies that just might help the frustrated parent to navigate a convoluted system called public education, and ultimately, find the appropriate educational environment for their child.

Before we delve into these strategies it is important to understand that this advice has to be taken with the knowledge that every child, every family, and every situation is different. Having worked with hundreds of gifted and 2e students, I have yet to find a singular systematic strategy that works on a universal level. Each child is unique. Each child requires a distinctive approach to teaching and learning based on his specific learning style and cognitive makeup. In short, each child must be matched to a suitable learning environment that understands and embraces her individual needs. Perhaps, this is why it is so difficult to find a school that can accommodate this reality. To be sure, I am not sure such an educational Eden exists, but I do know that there are some that come very close by adhering to some of the principles outlined below.

Equipping Parents by Asking the Right Questions

While this may seem very basic, asking good questions is a strategy that most parents do not employ when seeking out an appropriate educational fit for their child. Many assume that the school will have the best interests of the child in mind once the student is enrolled. In all honesty I do not know of a school or District that deliberately abuses this assumption, but I know many that are ill prepared to accept the fact that the gifted and/or 2e child requires a specialized educational plan in order to experience success. Additionally, many School Districts just do not have the resources in place to be able to provide the type of environment conducive to the exceptional learner. It is therefore essential for the parent to be armed with the right questions before making decisions in regards to enrollment.

Now, I do understand that many parents, due to budget constraints or other factors, may not have the privilege of being able to make a school choice however, they still retain the right to ensure their child is receiving the best possible education within their designated school system. I am hopeful that this information will be of assistance for them as well.

Proper Identification Procedures:

Identification of both the gifted and 2e child is of immense importance to the success of any properly maintained gifted program. Controversial? Yes. Avoidable? No. The point of comprehensive identification procedures is to make sure that the right student is in the right seat, and while that may reek of inequality to some, it is actually the most impartial methodology for ensuring student success. No parent wants their child in a classroom that is too difficult or too rigorous. This incongruity will only lead to frustration, anger, and low self-esteem. Similarly, the same is true of a classroom that is too slow or too easy. Again, the discrepant nature between the classroom and the child leads to boredom, irritation, despondency, and behavioral problems. In the life of the intellectually gifted child, this description is often a reality. Even within schools designated as those serving the needs of gifted children I have witnessed the slow demise of academic integrity due to the misunderstanding and misuse of proper identification techniques resulting in enrollment of students who struggle to keep pace thereby affecting the learning of the entire classroom.

It is, therefore, essential for parents to ask the right questions about identification procedures for both fully inclusive gifted programs and part-time programming. Here are a few useful questions to ask:

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1. What are the identification procedures? Programs designed for intellectually gifted programs should require standardized intellectual assessments such as the WISC-V (Weschler Scale of Intelligence) or the SB-5 (Stanford-Binet) in addition to other forms of evidence such as student portfolios, classroom simulations, and even parental interviews. The Navigator Program required all of the above (with the exception of the SB-5) before making decisions on student enrollment and while this may seem like too much we found it essential to ensure the harmony of each classroom. One caveat in identification is the dilemma faced by the twice-exceptional child. Twice-exceptional children are often missed by standardized approaches due to weaknesses in one or more areas of the assessments. For the parent of the 2e child it is essential to ask about the use of discrepancy models (those identifying large discrepancies between scores on the sub-tests within the standardized assessment) or lack thereof. The lack of proper identification procedures for 2e children is rampant across the nation (See: Gilman, Lovecky, Peters, Postma, et al, 2014) and parents must understand what is at stake.
2. Does your identification policy match your programming? Many a gifted program has floundered on this particular question even though the answer is quite simple. If you are running a program for high achievers then it is not necessary to use a standardized assessment approach. A high IQ score does not always mean high achievement. In fact, many high IQ students struggle to achieve due to a variety of factors including stress, classroom environment, social/emotional issues, etc. A good program for gifted and 2e students will take into account these factors and thus insist on a proper standardized approach to assessment as these same assessments can reveal much information about the child beyond academics.

3. Are your identification procedures culturally competent? Much has been written about the issues surrounding standardized testing and cultural relevance (Ford, 2004 and others). For parents of gifted children from non-white populations it is essential to ask for supplemental assessments that can identify students using a variety of approaches (creativity assessments, visual assessments, other non-verbals etc.) in addition to those already in place. Similar to the twice-exceptional child, minority children are too often ignored or misdiagnosed and thus are not identified for the right programs.
4. Who is providing the assessment? And, how is the procedure controlled? A licensed psychologist familiar with the characteristics of both the gifted and 2e child must perform a legitimate standardized assessment. Again, a simple concept but an essential one. On too many occasions I have had to work with a distraught parent bemoaning a 'bad' experience with a licensed psychologist unfamiliar with the nature of the gifted child and to a greater degree, the twice-exceptional child. I have seen ugly test events leading to meltdowns, inaccurate scoring, invalid assumptions on the part of the proctor, and much more. The lesson? Ensure the right fit between the child and psychologist. Secondly, It is also important to ask how the identification procedures are controlled. Is the school using one or two qualified psychologists or are they allowing parents to 'shop' for assessors? Beware the latter. A school using proper and consistent controls (i.e. a legitimate psychologist or two who can collaborate and provide a consistent approach) tends to experience less controversy and more accuracy in enrollment.

There may be much about identification and assessment that deserves a more thorough coverage than what I have provided; a simple reference search on gifted and assessment will afford the curious parent multitudes of research, opinions, and advice. Nonetheless, it is essential to understand the basic premise that proper identification for the proper program is paramount to the success of both the child and the program itself.

An Empathetic Staff:

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This might be a difficult question to ask a public school official given the potential number of teachers any given gifted or 2e child will see during the course of his school career, but it is an important one. In my experience, the number one predictor of success for the gifted/2e student is the classroom teacher. Those teachers that both understand and empathize with the daily experiences of these children provide them the opportunity to achieve great heights, and at the same time, avoid the deep valleys that to often characterize their school experience. As an administrator I have hired many a teacher responsible for the instruction of gifted children have always looked for empathy first, even before experience. If the potential candidate could not express the subtle intricacies that can define the 2e child, relate to their emotional fragility, speak with knowledge on the importance of building trust relationship with each child, or the need for flexibility and complexity, I was forced to move on to the next candidate. In fact, I have turned down a number of candidates with years of experience who lacked the above qualities. So, what kinds of questions can a parent ask of both the school and, hopefully, the teacher as well? The following outlines a few basics:

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1. How have you provided a safe and supportive environment for your gifted/2e students in the past? It is here that the potential teacher should chat about using time to build relationships with the student by getting to know them personally (interests, learning styles, dislikes, etc.). They will also refer to the need for flexibility, understanding, providing 'safe' spaces for learning (and social/emotional support), as well as pacing, rigor, and curricular approaches conducive to gifted learners. In the course of questioning it will become evident whether or not the teacher does understand and empathize with your child.
2. Provide specific scenarios unique to your child and ask how the school/staff can accommodate for their specific needs. Again, without empathy or understanding the typical response will be short and sweet or the standardized: 'We believe all children have unique gifts and work to make sure all are learning'. This is a popular response and one that is well meaning but is rarely a reality. If a school or teacher cannot be specific, they generally do not have the knowledge, much less the right empathetic approach, necessary to consistently reach your child.

There are many more questions that can be asked but a few pointed questions can reveal the schools approach to gifted and/or twice-exceptional learners. Practice developing a few good questions related to your child and you will glean much from the answers you receive.

Proper Social/Emotional Programming/Support

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Adequate social and emotional support just might be the most critical challenge facing parents of gifted and twice-exceptional children. I have always maintained that without a solid foundation in these two crucial zones, our children will always struggle to adjust to the complex arena that is life. Without proper training and support at both the school and the home-front, the gifted and twice-exceptional child will struggle to cope. In an upcoming article on the development of the twice-exceptional brain (this applies to gifted children as well), I explain the delayed development of the limbic system (responsible for emotional regulation) and its effect on social/emotional control. We sometimes call this effect asynchronous development; a fancy term whose meaning can be described as follows: while our kids appear advanced cognitively, they lag behind their peers in the areas of social and emotional development and appear socially and emotionally delayed. It is this asynchronous state that demands the need for simultaneous programming in both academics and social/emotional growth. One cannot thrive without the other and vice versa. In fact, I firmly believe that without that social/emotional basis, our children will struggle to maintain the consistent learning curve that they are capable of. Within the design of the Minnetonka Navigator Program we deliberately set aside time to teach social and emotional skills using Art Costa's *Habit's of Mind* along side other practical tools such as situational simulation. I know of other gifted programs that incorporate physical exercise regiments aligned to emotional stability. Each morning the students participate in these exercises before being introduced to the academic exercises for the day. It is programs that support the idea of social and emotional development in combination with a rigorous academic syllabi that can provide the holistic approach to instruction that will pave the path to your child's success. Therefore, in the process of seeking a educational institution for your child, it is good to add this piece to your repertoire of questions:

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1. What is your philosophy on the social and emotional development of your students? It is here that you are listening for a response that speaks of a balanced approach to academics and social/emotional development. Any professional working with gifted and especially twice-exceptional children should understand the importance of this balance and be able to articulate why.
2. What particular materials are used to teach these skills? While I believe it is important to have a curricular approach, the types of materials can range from a set curriculum to daily exercises to the use of simulations to teach skills such as self-control, tolerance for ambiguity, conflict response, organization, etc. What is important is that there is an effective procedure in place that is used on a consistent basis.
3. Does the school maintain extra support (counselors, social workers, school psychologist) for the classroom teacher? Are there facilities (safe places) for children that have a breakdown (many younger g/t and 2e kids experience tough days and sometimes just need a safe zone to reset themselves away from the classroom)? The classroom teacher cannot always deal with every issue that crops up in the classroom and it is essential, especially within a school for gifted children, to have experienced, professional support for the children.

The Right Curriculum:

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Over the last couple of years curriculum has, once again, become one of those hot topic buttons. Most recently it is the idea of the Common Core that has seen its share of wide-scale opinions. Unlike many, I am not opposed to the idea of a common core as a standardized approach to what our child need to know and be able to do, yet I do take umbrage with the belief that it is good for all children. That simply is not true. The fact is that our intellectually gifted youth need more, much more. To expect them to be satisfied with the curricular norm is absurd. They have the innate capability to digest enormous quantities of information, the inherent curiosity to learn all aspects of an idea, issue, or topic, and the need to explore materials at a greater depth using differing perspectives. So why are we preventing them from doing so? Why do so many schools continue to teach a lock and step approach that inhibit its students from exploring interests, gleaning data, or reaching their cognitive potential? The fact is that gifted (and 2e) kids need to sate their natural curiosity to learn. They need to *experience* the love of acquiring knowledge; not the dread of rote mechanization, or the drone of mundane oration. To borrow a phrase from the Scott's adman 'you need to feed their brains'. I understand the pressure many schools and teachers feel to 'follow the curricular map', nevertheless, there are ways to do just that and still teach the gifted mind. Strategies such as curricular compacting, use of formative assessment to determine pre-existing knowledge, use of a thematic approach to teaching and learning (our kids love this), and other such strategies can alleviate that pressure and actually move the class closer to the end goal at a quicker pace. One size does not fit all...it never has.

Use of the following queries may assist the parent to determine what curriculum is being employed and if it is suitable for the gifted/2e child:

1. Could you provide an outline of the grade level expectations/outcomes? Every school has a website or copy of their baseline goals for each grade level. A simple analysis of your child's current threshold compared to the grade level expectations can give you a basis for what to expect. Remember, the curricular map may not give you a comprehensive outline of all that is taught. It is important to ask follow up questions if you are interested in a more detailed view.
2. What avenues are available for students that are beyond the curriculum? Each school should have a detailed plan in place that deals with students that are assessed to be beyond the grade level standards beyond 'more work'. It is okay to ask about leveled or tiered classrooms, independent investigations, higher-level instruction, and even grade acceleration (full or partial). Too often gifted children are given more work (not better work) or given chores in the classroom to keep them busy. This is not acceptable, as every child deserves to learn at a level that fits its needs.
3. Does the school follow a textbook based approach or is the use of supplemental materials common practice? I have yet to witness a dynamic learning environment whose main source of information is the text. Not that use of a text is wrong. It is just very limiting. There exists a vast array of valuable material available for teachers (especially today) to compliment and enhance student learning. To be sure, the text cannot sufficiently accommodate the gifted learner.

An Appropriate Curricular Approach (planning, staff development):

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Perhaps more vital to the success of the gifted/2e learner than the actual curriculum is the curricular approach, or, how the teacher instructs her students. A knowledgeable teacher will use whatever tools are necessary to ensure that the students attain maximal growth in the classroom setting. One such tool is the use of formative, or ongoing, assessments. In a classroom that is partially or even fully comprised of gifted or 2e students it is essential to be able keep tabs on their growth through each unit taught. This begins with the use of diagnostic assessments that can determine what a student already knows, what they may partially understand, or if they need to be instructed in all aspects of the unit. As the unit progresses the use of formative assessment becomes valuable in gauging the rate of student growth and understanding. These formative (non-graded) assessments allow the teacher to then plan an instructional path for both the group and the individual. This is known as differentiated instruction. While some, such as my good friend Jim Delisle, believe differentiation is not as effective due to a lack of training, resources, and the reality of highly heterogeneous classrooms (Delisle, 2015), it is nonetheless still an effective tool in teaching the gifted given the teacher has enough time to plan sound units and is provided with ongoing staff development.

Another strategy to look for is the use of thematic units. Thematic units allow the child to contemplate multiple approaches to the understanding of a larger concept that is tied to one or multiple standards. For example, studying the cause and effect of conflict could be used to learn about America's involvement in different wars rather than the standard chronological approach.

I also believe that allowing our children to engage in exploring the depth and breadth of study rather than simply 'covering the curriculum' can be extremely effective in engrossing students in learning at a high level. In fact, I believe this approach is more effective than grade or subject advancement, given the classroom can accommodate for this strategy.

Other strategies to watch for include appropriate pacing; gifted and 2e children can absorb information at a rapid pace especially in their areas of strength or interest; systematic grouping, learning centers, hands-on instruction, the adherence to essential questions to drive understanding and much more. To be sure, volumes could be written on the numerous teaching strategies that serve to enhance the instruction of both the typical and non-typical learner. These are just a few.

While formulating questions on teaching approaches may seem fairly self-evident I have provided a few poignant questions for those interested:

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1. What would you say is the predominant approach to teaching and learning? Look for words and phrases such as holistic instruction, appropriate pacing, flexibility (this a big one), flow of instruction, higher order thinking skills, and of course, well designed differentiated units. A little probing goes far in determining the nature of the classroom.
2. How much staff development does your staff receive on working with gifted and/or twice-exceptional students? Unfortunately, budget cuts and competing agendas have limited staff development at most schools. Learning is a life-long process for students and teachers alike and if the system does not encourage consistent development for the teaching staff you will encounter teachers that do not know or understand the issues surrounding gifted education. Similarly, the effective classroom requires adequate planning time for staff. In most cases, our teachers are asked to teach five or six classes but only one for planning. This is certainly not adequate time to prepare for the complexity of the modern classroom. Regardless, it is not a bad question to ask.
3. Please describe the general flow of the classroom. How does your staff (you) approach a unit from planning to completion? This is a detailed question but remains an important one. While you may not receive a comprehensive answer the school should be able to articulate a general picture of how learning occurs within the classroom.
4. What is your policy on homework? Nothing kills curiosity and a passion for learning as much as busy work and for the most part, that is exactly what homework is. In reality, homework should be limited (allowing for other extra-curricular learning experiences) and a natural extension to what has already been taught. For more info on this topic I have written an article entitled *The Homework Dilemma*, which is available upon request.

Conclusion:

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Finding the ideal educational environment for your gifted or twice-exceptional child can be taxing and difficult. There are few schools that are able to embody all the ideas and ideals that I have presented, however, there remain a number of good schools that, at the very least, able to partially equip your child with a decent educational experience. In addition, I know that there are thousands of teachers that truly have the best interests of your children at heart and will go to great lengths to protect them. Nonetheless, you still have to do your homework. Gifted and twice-exceptional students are complex learners requiring specialized approaches to teaching and learning and they deserve nothing but an educational environment that not only accepts their differences, but embraces them. It is my hope that you and your child find your educational Shangri-La; I know they are out there somewhere, if you do your research.

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