

# In Defense of an Appropriate Education for the Gifted Child



What Does the Right Education for the Gifted/2e Child Look Like?

By Dr. Michael Postma (2006)

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Finding the appropriate educational environment for the highly gifted child can be tricky. Most school systems are not set up to understand or educate this very unique learner. Whether it be a shiny eyed youngster eager for intellectual grazing, or the disillusioned teenager, beaten down by the systematic failure to meet her educational needs, parents face an ominous choice: to keep their child in the public school setting where chances are that their child may suffer intellectually, socially, and emotionally, or, to select an educational alternative that may not vary greatly from that of the public system. Is there an alternative? Can we, a community rich in resources, not afford to adapt our schools to the educational needs this child? Can we continue to ignore a burgeoning resource that just might provide the next generation of local, national, and global problem solvers? It may have been a former administration's model to leave no child behind, but in the process, we have forgotten to let every child grow. It is not only in our best interest to do so, but it is also our moral obligation to raise every child to reach the apex of human potential.

Historically, there have always been numerous obstacles to educating the highly gifted; the greatest of which is traditional infrastructure. Schools, teachers, curriculum, classrooms, schedules, administration, educational theory, and societal norms have all played a part in the systematic dismissal of intellectual potential of our gifted youth. We have created a system of public and private education geared towards the development of the average students in congruence with the congressional ruling 1975's Education for all Handicapped Children Act. Not that this is wrong. All children deserve the right to free and appropriate education designed to fit their potential. However, to put it simply, our system does little, if anything, to accommodate for children with exceptional gifts in the area of cognitive ability. To be fair, attempts have been made to repudiate this trend by instituting new initiatives such as schoolwide enrichment programs, and/or classroom differentiation. Yet, with very few exceptions, these measures have failed the highly gifted student, due in part to the extreme complexity that characterizes this inimitable learner who arrives at the educational feast with the extreme learning characteristics and extraordinary academic, social, and emotional needs. Indeed, schoolwide enrichments, characterized by literature circles, grouping strategies, accelerated math groups, or learning extensions, are often used only after required work is complete and may only be incorporated as 'in addition to' or 'busy' work. Even in the event that this work may be an ongoing classroom strategy, it often fails to reach the highly gifted student. Differentiation, a popular educational strategy designed to level instruction based on the student's ability, interest areas, or readiness, is hardly comprehensive or widespread. When incorporated, it is limited in its effectiveness due to lack of teacher training, large heterogeneous classrooms, and the dearth of planning time a teacher receives on a daily basis. In addition, it is difficult to reach the highly gifted student who requires complexity, appropriate pacing, depth and breadth of instruction, and the use of decidedly differentiated materials. Consequently, the highly gifted child does not participate in guided instruction. Rather, she is left to her own devices on a consistent basis and may learn very little within the regular classroom environment. Who is this child, one might ask, and why is it so difficult to teach him?

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Part of the difficulty lies in the reality that each and every highly gifted child is a unique pupil. They present different learning profiles, different interests, vary in terms of intellectual potential, and learn at different paces and in diverse ways. In addition, many present characterizations of asynchrony that make it exceedingly difficult to nail down physiognomies of the 'prototypical' highly gifted learner and thus, make it difficult to create quality instruction on a consistent basis. Nevertheless, there are common features that can be identified to assist in serving their educational needs. In her book, *High IQ Kids*, gifted education authority, Dr. Karen Rogers, says this:

"The keys to schooling these children are to link them whenever possible with the others close to them in intellectual functioning; to provide consistent, daily challenge with appropriate pacing and little practice; and to accelerate their exposure to content and skills they will need to be successful in college and in their adult lives. Their teachers must move away from the teacher versus student mode of operation and focus on the facilitator/learner relationship, in which the teacher and student work together enjoying learning and implanting the child's foundational learning outcomes." (Rogers, 2007)

This summary was formulated based on a compilation of research from Dr. Rogers and other gifted and talented theorists such as Mirica Gross, Linda Silverman, Deidra Lovecky, W. Dahlberg, and of course, one of the foundational scholars in the field of gifted and talented education, Leta Stetter Hollingsworth, who, alongside Lewis Terman, initiated the very first long-term studies on the lives of the highly gifted individual. Thanks, in part, to their pioneering work, we now have a better grasp of who the highly gifted child is and how they learn best within an educational setting. We have also learned that there are varying levels of giftedness. A child identified as gifted and talented at the low end of the IQ spectrum has a very different learning profile than that of a highly or profoundly gifted child. They learn in different ways, they require varied pacing guides, and vary in terms of social emotional development. For the highly gifted child, it should be noted that social emotional development may be delayed in opposition to their high intellectual ability. For the average gifted learner, this asynchronous development may be less pronounced, thus requiring a different approach to teaching and learning.

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The IQ score or intelligence quotient, while still controversial, remains the single best predictor of intellectual potential for a large part of the general population (there is some argument over its effectiveness in assessing minority populations and/or students of poverty where a more comprehensive approach to identification is required). This score can be obtained with the use of IQ assessments such as the Stanford-Binet V intelligence scale, or the WISC-5 (Wechsler Scale of Intelligence for Children). IQ scores generally appear in the form of a Bell Curve with the average mean score situated at between IQ 100 to 110. As the score increases, the assumption is, so does the cognitive capacity of the individual, and vice versa. One standard deviation within the curve equates to 15 points. To illustrate this more clearly, one may look at the standards of identification for special education which generally require an approximate IQ score of 85, or one standard deviation below average. Using the same logic, you can identify different levels of giftedness. On average two standard deviations, or a score of IQ 130, is considered to be in the gifted range. Gifted individuals, it is widely believed, can be served by a school system that stresses the need for continual differentiation of curriculum, provides stream enrichment opportunities, and has teaching staff that, in general, understands the gifted learner. Given this level of instruction and lower instances of pronounced asynchrony, the average gifted child can succeed in both school and beyond. That being said, a score of IQ 130 remains the lowest level of giftedness. Yet, many identified gifted and talented score above this unwritten baseline. The fact is that the higher the intelligence, the more profound the need for providing a specialized education within a focused environment. Gifted students can be identified with higher intelligence scores on a spectrum that ranges from gifted to the highly gifted, and even to the exceptionally or profoundly range. It is these students that we must seek to educate in the appropriate manner as they are rarely successful in traditional educational settings. It is true that intelligence scores are just numbers. Still, it is also true that these numbers are laden with significant implications; the greater the intelligence, the greater the need for academic intervention. Certainly, there is ample evidence to suggest that as intelligence increases, so does the need for academic event intervention, in an exponential manner. In short, the cognitive differences separating two students whose intelligences are recorded at IQ 130 and IQ 135 respectively, are less prevalent than if those same two learners were diagnosed with IQs 140 and 145 respectively. Thus, the greater the IQ, the greater the need for early intercession. To simplify the point, if special education requirements begin after a single standard deviation below the norm, one could postulate that the same actions be taken for the gifted child scoring at least two standard deviations of the average learner or beyond. Within a lock and step approach to education that emphasizes standardized growth targets, the educational needs of the gifted, and especially that highly gifted child are being ignored. As outliers, the highly gifted child does not represent the majority of students within the classroom or even a small percentage of it. As such, this child is often disregarded, stuck in a consistent pattern of repetition and educational ennui. The numbers do not lie. Special education programs consistently represent more than 30% of a school district's budget whereas gifted programming represents less than 1% of that same budget. One can postulate that staff development and training follows the trail of funding. In general, teachers are not prepared nor given sufficient training to understand or meet the needs of this educational enigma; an outlier whose learning characteristics differ greatly from that of the average child.

The highly gifted child is a very different type of learner. They develop both metaphysically and cognitively in a different manner than the typical child and thus require a different approach to instruction. Recent research by neuroscientists studying the gifted brain and body have revealed a developmentally physical and mental anomaly in gifted children; one that differs exponentially, the higher the level of giftedness. These same neuroscientists have found that the gifted brain is physically different than that of the average person. It is both larger and contains more connective white matter; the neuro-strands in the brain that connect each element of the brain to another. In layman's terms, this means that the gifted brain has a greater capacity to embed and distribute information. In addition, that distribution occurs at a more rapid pace than the average person. Implications for the classroom are many. For instance, the gifted child requires rapid pacing within instruction to be able to function at a proper cognitive level. That same child needs learning be both complex and varied with an emphasis on depth, breadth, and intricacy. To put this into context; given the opportunity, the gifted learner could conceivably begin high school after 5 or 6 years of comprehensive educational access, thereby rendering the current system, one, that requires nine years of instruction to ensure high school readiness, obsolete. The societal and educational implications are enormous. From a societal standpoint, we have an untapped potential of persons who, given access to appropriate educational settings, just might apply those gifts toward some of the greatest problems plaguing our planet. Problems such as the unequal distribution of resources, emerging infectious diseases, violence, climatic ship, and much more. From educational standpoint, the concept of building the system of learning comedy the gifted student is hard to imagine or even comprehend. From an educational standpoint, the traditional environment cannot come close to meeting this child's potential and is almost unusable to the highly gifted student. This system, and age defined, lockstep, antiquated approach to education characterized by a fairly rigid curriculum, is not and cannot accommodate the needs of the highly advanced learner. In addition, the current teaching population remains inadequately trained to education, feed, and cultivate this unique learner. A brief examination of coursework required of the collegiate level preservice teachers speaks loudly to this glaring deficit. Very little guidance in the area of gifted education, if any, is required of new teachers to complete a license in the field of education. Paired with the fundamental lack of district professional development, and the lack of state funding for gifted education, there remains a scarcity of knowledge and/or willingness to accommodate for the needs of the gifted child. This dilemma pushes highly gifted students into a state of alienation as described by author Stephanie Tolan. They are 'stuck in another dimension' (Tolan, 1985); one wherein the disengaged highly gifted child participates in the act of schooling, rather than in the act learning; a reality that may propel the gifted child to develop negative attitudes towards education, leading to systematic underachievement, nonproduction, isolation, frustration, negative behaviors, and a general loss of interest in the 'game' of schooling.

Another common trait amongst the high is uncommon ingenuity. In-born cleverness with which the gifted child can detect underlying elements and patterns of relationships, ideas and multifaceted structures. Combined with their ability to understand and synthesize a broad range of opinions and ideas in abstract terms, the highly gifted child can be envisioned as a different kind of learner. Furthermore, an unrelenting drive for intellectual curiosity, especially in areas of interest, is common amongst the highly gifted population. In layman's terms, this means that the highly gifted individual can quickly detect meaning and patterns relating to the curriculum; unravel, synthesize, and apply that information; and draw conclusions at a rapid pace, turning a single lesson into a multilayer system of inquiry and exploration that can last for hours at a time, when given the opportunity. The regular classroom, or even one that is highly differentiated, is generally not equipped to handle such a divergent learning process. In general, teaching is based on conceptual block building, informed by small caches of curriculum, taught at a pace that ensures all learners will be meet the desired learning goals. Then, and only then, can the instructor move forward to introduce a new concept or idea. Indeed, this should be the goal of the classroom teacher. However, within this common scenario, the highly gifted student is often left waiting for the rest of the students to catch up. The gifted child, bestowed with extreme advanced high order thinking skills, has made logical leaps and connections within the lesson and may not only find herself far ahead of the class, but also a very different conclusion. As the scenario repeats itself day in and day out, we can begin to perceive why the highly gifted child might be alienated from the regular classroom; isolated and even, in a state of perpetual depression.

Additional attributes of the gifted child are their unusual capacity for memory. This memory, accompanied by a long concentration span (this may be unusual in twice exceptional learners who generally tend to come from the ranks of the highly gifted), accounts for the vast deposits of information that may reside within the child's bank of knowledge. Gifted students use their intellectual curiosity to pursue in-depth investigations into topics or issues that they find interest in. It is not unusual to find the gifted child spending countless hours engaged in a project that consumes them to the point of ignoring basic and necessary life functions such as eating, drinking, socializing, or even sleeping. This prolonged intellectual engagement may seemingly display illogical twists and turns, and often leaves the end result doubt; a puzzle to the untrained eye. However, this dogged pursuit of intellectual knowledge is often the goal, rather than the result. To the highly gifted child it is the joy of curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge that is as important, or perhaps even more significant, than the product. Certainly, the knowledgeable teacher will understand this and encourage the development of small achievable goals to push the gifted child towards an outcome. In the current age of standardization assessment, it seems the goal of production outweigh the process. Indeed, it is the foremost motto of any capitalist society; to produce; an ideal that is not lost in the educational system which finds itself devoured by standardized assessment. The highly gifted mind just does not work this way. Production is merely a means to survival. It is the drive to be curious, to engage in exploration and wonder that resonates with the gifted child much more than the shallow nature of humanistic greed; a fundamental gift that leaves her at odds with schools driven by societal norms. Likewise, the lock and step approach to instruction within the average school aimed at standardized achievement does not allow for a prolonged, in-depth investigation, pockmarked with logical leaps, fits and starts, periods of contemplation, multiple pathways, and precision. Even the most progressive classroom would struggle comply with this style of learning, let alone allow it to ensue on a regular basis and, once again, it is the highly gifted child who remains on the outside looking in.

Accompany the need for a sensible reality, is the gifted students advanced degree of emotional sensitivity complemented by an extraordinary code of ethical behavior, unusual intensity, and a deep understanding of compassion. Polish psychologist, Kazimierz Dabrowski's ground breaking work in 'positive disintegration; a theory that postulates the schematic disintegration of the gifted child when faced with the reality of existence within an alien world, theorizes that children at both ends of the intellectual spectrum are apt experience over-excitability, or intense sensitivity to their surrounding environments. Combined with a powerful internal drive, the child formulate shape what Dabrowski calls, the 'developmental potential' of a person. Gifted education professional, Sharon Lind, summarizes the theory in this way:

"Over excitability's are inborn intensities indicating a heightened ability to respond to stimuli. Found to a greater degree in creative and gifted individuals, overexcitabilities are expressed in sensitivity, awareness, and intensity, and represent a real difference in the fabric of life quality experience." (Lind, 2001)

It is not unusual for gifted students to be deeply affected by the events that surround and shape their world. In an age of increasing uncertainty, fueled by national and global destabilization easily accessed through multiple media outlets, the gifted child is continually being bombarded by sensitive information that can affect the psychological well-being of the student in a myriad of ways, from a resolve that might drive the child to participate in making a difference, to an apathetic paralysis, defined by a sense of aimless hopelessness. Whatever the degree, the gifted individual must learn to cope at an early age with the burden of living in an unruly, dishonest, and often barbaric world. It is no secret that many gifted individuals, burdened by the sensitivity, have made the adjustments to overcoming hopelessness and depression to make significant global contributions. Famous intellectuals such as Martin Luther King Jr., Stephen Hawking, Marie Curie, and many others come to mind. It is also unfortunate that others succumbed to this intense disintegration, ending their lives before their due time. Prolific authors Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway serve as examples of this. I have also been personally acquainted with such tragedy in my tenure working with highly gifted children. The implications for classroom are enormous. The sense of personal and communal security embedded in the classroom is an essential piece to learning for all students and imperative for the gifted child. A phenomenological research study conducted by P Susan Jackson (Jackson, 1995) in the mid-1990s on highly gifted adolescents highlights this need. In this study, it was found that due, in part, to their profound sensitivity, sense of failure, and the shame that accompanied their inability to "fix themselves, highly gifted students difficult reduced had reduced capacity for mental functioning in the areas of synthesis, processing, and delayed reactivity, which served hinder their usual exceptional problem-solving capabilities" (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). Furthermore, Jackson noted that the same individuals had the capacity to hide their symptoms and thus remained undiagnosed. This begs the question, how many other highly gifted individuals, suffering from some sort of affective disorder, are populating our schools, undetected, misidentified, untreated? Perhaps most important lesson to be learned is the necessity to embed social/emotional instruction into our schools with the object of teaching self-awareness and/or coping mechanisms to gifted students. To be sure, it is rare to find such social emotional instruction or curriculum designated to assist the gifted child in the traditional classroom.

Another common feature that might alienate gifted child in the regular classroom is their tendency towards argumentativeness and stubbornness. This delightful mannerism, coupled with an extreme sense of justice, can become a disturbance within the classroom and can be particularly magnified by the gifted student's conviction that their own interpretation of ideas and beliefs are always correct. Incidentally, they usually are. One can only envision the chaos that may ensue, when a particularly knowledgeable student challenges the system. In the ensuing battle for control, it is the student that loses, inevitably leading to further alienation and disillusionment with schooling. Further evidence for significant changes to the education of the highly gifted child.

So how might one employ best practices and methodologies for educating the Highly gifted student? And, who is best fit to undertake this task?

The most important element in the education of the highly gifted child is the classroom teacher. Regardless of the type of programming in place, it is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to deliver engaging instruction, build a trusting relationship, assess student growth, and accommodate when necessary. The late John Feldhusen, former professor of education at Purdue University, and the creator of its Creative Thinking Program, believed that any teacher employed within a gifted program, especially those working with highly gifted students, must be gifted themselves. "Teachers of the gifted should be gifted. This aids in understanding and communication" (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Who better understand the educational needs gifted child than the teacher was personally experienced at one time, living and breathing within the traditional school system? Who better to understand this unique child, than one who has lived under the same cloud of misunderstanding and survived to tell the tale. Leta Hollingsworth, suggested that the two most desirable traits the teacher the gifted are ones that firstly, are knowledgeable about the needs of the student both educationally and effectively, and secondly, able to conceive themselves as a facilitator of knowledge rather than the bearer of wisdom (Colangelo and Davis, 1991). In addition, other theorists in the field of gifted education have postulated on the desirable teacher competencies needed to teach the gifted child. Hultgren and Seeley (1982), as well as Nelson and Prindle (1992), reported the following teacher qualities based on their surveys gifted and talented teachers and students. These qualities, in no particular order, are high intelligence, engagement in high intellectual pursuits, adherence to excellence and achievement, an enthusiasm for talent, compatibility with talented people, and a broad base of knowledge. Feldhusen (1997), adds the following characteristics; confidence and maturity, facilitator of learning, adaptability to various points of view, organized but flexible, innovative, responsible to individual children, nonjudgmental, able to teach self-assessment, a continued appetite for learning, skilled in counseling, facilitator of independent research, as well as, an aptitude for teaching higher order thinking skills. There may not be a teacher on earth that encapsulates all these qualities, however, the point being that, in the process of hiring teachers for gifted learners, and in particular, highly gifted learners, a close examination of potential teacher attitudes and credentials is required. Failure to do so may result in an unfavorable, perhaps even unpleasant relationship between both teacher, student, and the students' family.

If quality instructors are an integral part to the ideal educational programming of the highly gifted child, of equal importance is curriculum and pedagogy. Consequently, it is critical to develop an appropriate programming that will promote the understanding, development, and proliferation of their extraordinary gifts. Given the evidence presented earlier in regards to the extraordinary characteristics and needs of the highly gifted student, this task should not be taken lightly. Undeniably, it is comprehensible that a completely different type of program must be designed in order to achieve this task. A program that is flexible, fluent, rich in resources, multifaceted, interest driven, compacted, and perhaps, most importantly, accelerated. And one that is defined by independent individualization of instruction and accommodation of unique needs. Indeed, a program that is both comprehensive in terms of accessibility to a variety of educational domains, and characterized by continual formative assessment that enables the classroom teacher to better understand the educational path of each and every student, is a program that is ideal. Of equal importance is the type classroom setting. A classroom characterized by intellectual homogeneity should be a prerequisite. By this I mean a separate, singular environment catering specifically to the highly gifted child. Such a setting fosters in-depth explorations, intense discussion, collaborative instruction, and a safe environment in which the children can express themselves. Four research studies conducted by James and Chen-Lin Kulik (Kulik, 1985; Kulik and Kulik, 1982; 1984; 1990) have shown that large-scale academic gains across all subject areas have been found when gifted learners are placed in full-time programs. Kulik and Kulik, recommend this model and state unequivocally that this type of environment may be the only setting in which the highly gifted child is able to achieve to his greatest potential. This dynamic setting reduces the risk of underachievement and eliminates the social and emotional isolation of the gifted child from grade level peers. Mirica Gross, a professor of gifted education in Australia author and scholar, studied the factors influencing the social adjustment and acceptability of high gifted children in the traditional public school setting. Her findings suggest the need for specialized programming in support of the highly gifted child:

“The results of this study suggest that whereas ability grouping with age-peers, or a moderate degree of acceleration, or a combination of these and other intervention procedures may be an appropriate response to the academic and social needs of moderately gifted students, they are not adequate to the needs of the exceptionally and profoundly gifted. Extremely gifted students require a carefully designed and monitored program of radical acceleration, linked to ability grouping, and individualized instruction. Keeping them with age peers is not the way to ‘socialize’ these children. If we isolate them from true peers (intellectual peers) in the heterogeneous classroom we place them in the position of being the one-eyed man in the country of the blind who, far from being king, is feared and ostracized because he has vision or, perhaps because of what he can see.” (Gross, 1994)

I would argue that almost all gifted children can benefit from specialized instructional environments although it is the highly gifted that could truly benefit from such a program. Dorothy Kennedy’s study of a highly gifted nine-year-old boy within a heterogeneous classroom environment supports this type of model:

“If highly gifted students are defined both academic and social success, it seems clear that asynchronous development must receive attention. Individual education plans must be developed to provide clear goals and direction for both cognitive and affective areas. Classroom teachers, gifted education specialists, the student, parents, and guidance counselors or school psychologist should all be involved in the process. Contracts or other strategies can provide useful structure. They must be flexible enough to allow for new interests as they develop, and they should consider out-of-setting opportunities such as work with a mentor or participation in after-school or Saturday programs in the universities or museums.” (Kennedy, 2002)

Are we willing? Are we able? What type of catalyst is needed to recognize that the gifted child merits an educational system designed to meet their specific learning needs? Perhaps, even more importantly, how long will we wait before acting to address the glaring lack of comprehensive educational alternatives necessary to provide an acceptable and beneficial setting for our highly gifted children? When will we begin to treat them as equals, rather than educational pariah? If we are truly a society that cares for the needs of our children; if we truly believe that no child should be left behind, we then have the ethical and moral obligation to act; to build programs that can accommodate the holistic needs of all students regardless of their ability. We must adjust our educational standards to accommodate the needs of all our children, not just those that fit the mold of traditional educational expectations. If we continue on the pathway of ignorance we will all face the consequences of losing yet another generation of our nation's most precious resource. We will all be stuck in the dimension of societal mediocrity.

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