

A TIGHT-BUDGET APPROACH TO GIFTED EDUCATION

Together, the teacher and the parents can form a support group for the gifted child.

“My gifted student is such a help to me. She does my math grading, checks all my spelling tests, records them, and hands them back to the students.”

“I have two very intelligent students who help the other students practice oral reading during language-arts classes. They are my aides during the day. I rely on them to get my work done.”

These are typical comments about gifted children’s role in the classroom. Many times, the academically gifted student is seen as a teacher’s aide and peer tutor for the other students.

But the question is: “What are we doing *for* those gifted students besides using them as unpaid help in the classroom?” How would you answer?

“We don’t have the facilities to accommodate a gifted program at our school.”

“I don’t know enough about the gifted to be much help to them.”

These responses typify the fears of teachers who are faced with the dilemma of having one or more “special” students to deal with in an already hectic classroom. How can a teacher deal with a gifted learner, a full schedule, and no budget?

BY GAIL RITTENBACH

Identify the Gifted Student

Perhaps the student you think the least likely to be gifted is the one who most needs to be saved from boredom and from becoming a potential dropout. The gifted student isn’t always a model student.

To identify students with unusual talents, the following guidelines may serve as a starting point for further testing and identification. If one or more of your students exhibit several of these qualities, you may have a gifted student in your class.

- Preference for older children and adults in a social setting;

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- Intensity to accomplish a self-set task;
- High energy level;
- Tolerance for clutter;
- Discrepancy between intellectual level and physical development;
- Behavior and achievement problems;
- Astounding knowledge base in one or two areas beyond the scope of teachers and parents;
- High moral reasoning and a sense of justice;
- Extreme emotional expressions and outbursts of joy or grief;

- Self-doubt in social settings; and
- Need for specialized academic services.¹

Teacher Concerns

Once you recognize giftedness in your classroom, don't panic.

You can still be an effective ally of a student who knows more than you do about some subjects. Teachers can't pretend. Students, gifted or not, respect the teacher who becomes a facilitator and co-learner.

You can give gifted students opportunities to expand their knowledge.

Taking the role of facilitator rather than information-giver will decrease your anxiety about not knowing more than such students, and will give them a wealth of material to learn that otherwise might never be available from a teacher who thinks everything must be mastered before it is shared.

Dealing With Parents

Parents of the gifted student or students in your classroom need support. Together, the teacher and the parents can form a support group for the gifted child. If parents come to you and ask for some specifics on how to deal with their child, the following ideas can be useful for both parent and teacher to use:

- *Avoid comparisons.* Gifted children don't like either favorable or unfavorable comparisons. Don't allow school personnel or visitors to the home to refer to the gifted child's abilities in relation to those of other children.

- *Avoid bragging.* When a teacher or a parent puts a child's abilities on display, the child gets the subtle message that in order to be accepted, he or she must perform. However, if a child is asked first, in private, for permission to share and is given specific feedback on assignments that show improvement over previous work, then this verbal encouragement can enhance the child's concept of progress and accomplishment.

- *Avoid praising the child.* Instead, praise the *act*. Try to avoid comments such as: "You're such an Einstein! Just look at this physics grade!" Instead, find ways to communicate approval of the results:

"Your grade in physics shows you worked hard; what were some of your favorite topics?"²

Promote Interaction

Sometimes, gifted students feel isolated. Many students find it a burden to live up to what adults expect of them, and at the same time try to find friends to whom they can relate. Isolation is a factor in much of the unhappiness of the academically gifted student.

Allow students, across age levels, to talk together periodically about things

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such as dating fears, how to relate to peers, and how to prepare for high school or college.

Most highly talented students tend to worry about the state of the world, the economy, conservation, and end-time events. It would be helpful if some time were set aside for them to discuss some of these topics.

One way to allow students the opportunity to identify with others who have similar concerns is through books. Reading a book about someone with some of the same problems helps students learn about alternate ways of resolving difficulties. At the very least, it tells them, "You're not alone; someone else has had to deal with the same challenges you do." All of us like to know we're not the only ones with problems!

Using multi-age grouping when appropriate is an inexpensive way to help the gifted child relate to others. Why not allow a second-grader to join a seventh-grade math class? How about letting a third-grader with writing talents join the yearbook staff? Wouldn't a young student enjoy having recess with older students, thereby providing him or her with an opportunity to chat with students who have the same vocabulary level?

Encourage Gifted Girls

Many times, gifted girls go unnoticed in school because of their need to fit in. Many times, a talented girl will "dumb down" in order to be one of the crowd. Other factors also affect academically gifted girls. Consider the following:

- Gifted girls more closely resemble

gifted boys in their interests than they do other girls.

- Gifted girls have high career goals.

- Highly gifted girls are often loners who get little recognition.

- Gifted girls take less rigorous courses in high school than do gifted boys.³

Career counseling is one approach that even a small church school can take advantage of with no budget impact. Allow gifted girls (and boys) access to members of the community. Invite people into the classroom to explain what they do and how they prepared academically for their careers.

It is important for girls to see female role models in business, industry, engineering, mathematics, research, and medicine to challenge the perception that girls need only to consider service-oriented professions like teaching and nursing. Observe the interests of your gifted girls, and give them the opportunity to connect with real-world role models.

Provide Role Models and Mentors

That brings us to one of the most significant things teachers can do for their gifted students. Having a gifted student in the classroom does not require investing in a "gifted" curriculum. Most gifted students would benefit more from having a mentor who can encourage new ideas, listen to their concerns, and lead them gently into new discoveries.

Meeting with a mentor on a regular basis helps encourage gifted students and lessens the isolation they feel when they have no one to bond with intellectually. The gifted child needs a person, of any age, who can relate to his or her interests.

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Gifted girls need special attention.

The mentor could be a retiree who comes to the school, an employed professional who volunteers at lunch or after the workday, or someone arranged for through the parents. Whatever the arrangement, gifted children benefit greatly from having a mentor; and women in particular.

Barbara Kerr, in her description of the Kaufmann studies of Presidential Scholars, says that the women Presidential Scholars "who had had mentors earned salaries equal to those of men. Only the women Presidential Scholars who had failed to find a mentor were in low-salary occupations."⁴

Provide Blocks of Time

The gifted student needs an opportunity to acquire and use higher reasoning skills. Usually, gifted students have the ability to concentrate for long periods of time. Since they master daily lessons so quickly, they often finish with their work early. These little bits of time in between lessons don't allow such stu-

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dents the long stretches of time needed to delve deeply into a project.

One suggestion is to give the day's lessons in one packet to work on in the morning, and then allow the student the remainder of the day to pursue personal interests. Having time to work on projects is a welcome reprieve from boredom for these students.

Ellen Winner, in her insightful and provocative book, *Gifted Children*, observes that: "Gifted children are intrinsically motivated to make sense of the domain in which they show precocity. They exhibit an intense and obsessive interest, an ability to focus sharply, and what I have come to call a rage to master."⁵

Read to Learn About Giftedness

Recognizing the attributes and needs

of gifted children is a great first step toward dealing with them in your classroom. The next step is to educate yourself about their emotional and educational needs. You may be surprised at how inexpensive it is to help the gifted student. The important needs such as time and having someone to relate to can go far in keeping our brightest students from being bored and tuning out at school.

Some excellent material to get you started includes the following:

- *Gifted Children: Myths and Realities*, 1996, by Ellen Winner. Printed by Basic Books, a division of Harper-Collins, ISBN number 0-465-01760-6. The wife of Howard Gardner, Winner has written a very readable book that shows how to recognize, nurture, and educate the gifted child. It was first published in 1996 in hardback, and is now available in paperback.

- *Smart Girls Two: A New Psychology of Girls, Women, and Giftedness*, 1994, by Barbara A. Kerr. Published by Ohio Psychology Press in Dayton, Ohio, ISBN number 0-9107-7-25-1 (soft-cover). Based on her experience as a gifted female, Kerr offers practical advice on how to find gifted girls.

This book is filled with helpful tips on providing gifted girls with the tools for reaching their potential.

Encourage the Use of Talents

Teachers have weighty responsibilities—shepherding young lives, meeting the expectations of parents and the church/school board, not to mention their own home responsibilities. But nurturing the gifted student's untapped potential can be one of the most important things a teacher does for a student whose gifts can bless the church, the community, and the world. ✍

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REFERENCES

1. James R. Delisle, *Guiding the Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Youth: A Practical Guide for Educators and Counselors* (New York: Longman, 1992), pp. 174-175.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-196.
3. Barbara A. Kerr, *Smart Girls Two: A New Psychology of Girls, Women, and Giftedness* (Dayton, Ohio: Ohio Psychology Press, 1994), pp. 109-127.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
5. Ellen Winner, *Gifted Children: Myths and Realities* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), pp. 3, 4.