

EXPERT APPROACHES *to* SUPPORT GIFTED LEARNERS

Professional Perspectives, Best Practices, and Positive Solutions



A Collaboration with the California Association for the Gifted

Edited by Margaret Wayne Gosfield, *Gifted Education Communicator*

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“Expert Approaches to Support Gifted Learners gathers a dream team of practitioners and researchers in an accessible volume full of practical recommendations. Each chapter is well written, engaging, and rewarding. This remarkable collection is comprehensive in the areas covered and in its range of perspectives and should be useful to anyone interested in the education and psychology of gifted students.”

—Felice Kaufmann, Ph.D., consultant in gifted education

“Here is our essential resource to nurture our brightest children’s spirits and minds with wisdom, respect, and crucial information. These authors deeply know our gifted learners from the inside out.”

—Elizabeth Meckstroth, M.Ed., M.S.W.

Senior Fellow, Institute for Educational Advancement

*Guiding the Gifted Child, Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom,
and Acceleration for Gifted Learners, K-5*

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*For Sheila Madsen
In memoriam*

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FOREWORD

Sally M. Reis, Ph.D.

It's a pleasurable task for me to write a foreword to this book. I have been a fan of the *Gifted Education Communicator* since its inception. One reason is that its editor, Margaret Gosfield, has always worked to keep this journal true to its mission: to present practical applications of best practices for educators and parents of K–12 gifted learners—the target audience for this book. I like this book because of its hopeful outcome: to generate interest in and develop expertise related to best practices in giftedness and talent development and the challenges and decisions that accompany this process. I also like this book because the authors raise many important questions and offer both common sense and research-based responses.

With its wide variety of authors and selections, this book represents a comingling of old and new in the field of giftedness and talent development. Widely published respected scholars in the field have written some of the thirty-six articles. A number of selections are written by people who may be lesser known to some readers but have many years of experience, high levels of knowledge, and excellent ideas that can benefit talented children. The book also includes some new voices that present fresh perspectives about growing up gifted and LD (learning disabled), parenting a gifted/LD child, visual-spatial learners, and growing up gifted and gay.

The points of view represented are diverse, and yet they reflect recurring themes: giftedness is multidimensional, it can continue to develop across the childhood and later years, and multiple strategies must be employed to enable more students to develop their gifts and talents; moreover, the expression of giftedness is diverse, and the manifestation and development of talents and gifts occur in diverse ways under very different circumstances for different young people.

This book is a high-quality compendium of past reflections, current strategies, and future directions both for the field and for a very diverse group of high potential children. Parents and educators—and in turn the gifted learners they support—will benefit greatly from this wise, straightforward, and thoughtfully conceived book. It is my hope that it will be the first volume in a series of helpful collections of practical articles to help teachers learn new practices and ideas, and help parents better understand their choices and actions in order to support their children.

Sally M. Reis
University of Connecticut, Storrs

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and parenting gifted children can be exceedingly demanding, and even frustrating, given their tendency to devour information, ask questions endlessly, and embody social and emotional traits of greater intensity than is typical. In addition, their often uneven (asynchronous) development can result in a child with the reading skills of a twelfth grader, the social skills of a second grader, and a chronological age somewhere in between. Adults often don't know how to reconcile these differences. Where can actively engaged and sometimes frazzled educators and parents turn for assistance?

Expert Approaches to Support Gifted Learners provides practical information that busy K–12 educators and parents can use now at home and in school. The authors whose work is compiled here are experienced and experts in the field of gifted education.

The articles in this book first appeared in the pages of *Gifted Education Communicator*, a quarterly journal for educators and parents of K–12 gifted children sponsored by the California Association for the Gifted (CAG). The journal was launched as a national publication in the spring of 2001; it has since published hundreds of articles and columns providing perspectives, strategies, and solutions that parents and educators can use in their daily interactions with gifted learners. *Expert Approaches to Support Gifted Learners* brings this practical information to a wider audience.

The primary focus in this work is on the social and emotional needs of gifted learners. Much has been written about challenging and supporting the intellectual needs of gifted learners, but in order to master and develop their cognitive functioning—and to lead lives of satisfaction and productivity—gifted learners need guidance, encouragement, and support in their affective functioning as well.

The book is divided into four parts:

- **Part 1: Understanding and Nurturing Gifted Learners** addresses social and emotional characteristics of gifted individuals that set them apart from other learners and provides expertise and strategies to address these issues.
- **Part 2: Making Gifted Education Work** focuses on the importance of careful planning for and implementation of programs appropriate for gifted learners. It includes discussions of program design, assessment, identification, and grouping as well as detailed guides for specific classroom activity.
- **Part 3: Seeking and Serving Special Populations** concentrates on subpopulations within the larger pool of gifted learners who are marginalized in a variety of ways. These students include those who come from minority and low socioeconomic families, gay and lesbian youth, visual-spatial learners, and English language learners.
- **Part 4: Parents and Educators Teaming Together** emphasizes the need for educators and parents to work together in providing the support gifted learners need in order to reach their high potentials.

Read the whole book to get an overall guide to caring for gifted learners. Or, if you have a specific or pressing concern right now, skip to an article that addresses that issue. Each article is briefly introduced so you can quickly discern whether it covers information you need at the moment. Though some articles may seem geared toward one audience or the other, all of them can be of use to parents and educators both.

It's true that raising and educating gifted children can be challenging, but armed with knowledge—and a healthy dose of respect for the kids—it also can be extremely rewarding.

Margaret Wayne Gosfield

PART 1

UNDERSTANDING AND NURTURING GIFTED LEARNERS

Gifted children tend to experience feelings more intensely than most children. As a result, they may feel deep concern for justice or unfairness and deep empathy for others, have a higher capacity for reflective and global thinking, and feel great frustration when the pace or level of learning is slow or low. All kids deserve an understanding and nurturing educational environment, and for gifted kids that need is no different. But the intensity of gifted kids' feelings requires that parents and educators use different approaches with gifted kids than they do with mainstream kids. This is paramount and necessary for gifted learners in order for them to engage in and demonstrate well their intellectual abilities and talents.

The writers in Part 1 share techniques, strategies, and knowledge that can help educators reach their gifted students. In the following essays you'll learn ways to support and encourage gifted learners to more fully realize their potential and actualize their dreams.



Lessons from Bright Learners About Affect

Carol Ann Tomlinson | SPRING 2002

Carol Ann Tomlinson, Ph.D., teaches at the University of Virginia in the Curry School of Education. She is program coordinator for the Educational Psychology/Gifted Education department where she teaches both Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy and Curriculum and Instruction. She serves as codirector of Curry's Institutes on Academic Diversity. She is the author of twelve books on the topics of differentiated instruction and curriculum, as well as many professional development materials and more than 200 articles. She is a past president of the National Association for Gifted Children.

The social and emotional well-being of gifted learners is often neglected in preoccupation with their cognitive abilities. Carol Ann Tomlinson reminds us that “bright kids are kids first.” And as bright kids, they have special challenges not faced by other young learners. Among these are misperceptions about uneven development; the need for self-efficacy; the use or misuse of “intellectual power”; and negative images. She reminds teachers that we must never take “for granted my role as one who shapes the human psyche as surely as I shape the human mind.”

I'm on board with Robert Fulghum (*All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*). Nearly everything I know that's important in life, I learned in some classroom or other. Mostly, however, the lessons I retained seem to have

taken root when I was a teacher—not a student. That’s the case when it comes to my perspective on the affective needs of bright kids. Bright kids were the ones who quietly (well, sometimes quietly) and patiently (nearly always patiently) taught me about their feelings and emotions—just as they were my mentors in learning about their bright minds.

Here are a few of the principles they taught me. The lessons have served me well.

Bright kids are kids first. Bright happens to be a trait they have, but it is not who they are. It’s important to look for and acknowledge all the things they are. Not only is that honest, but it’s freeing. If I get the sense that there’s only one trait that really matters to other people—one trait on which I am constantly judged—that trait becomes a heavy burden.

Bright kids have basic needs. Because bright kids are kids first, they have the same basic affective needs all other kids have: safety, security, belonging, achievement, affirmation, and so on. They may learn quickly, but they still need to feel like the teacher invests in them—just like all other kids need that sense of investment. They may talk a good game, but they still suffer self-doubt, as do all humans. They need partners in a long journey to share their joys and fears alike. In other words, bright kids need sensitive teachers—no more than do other kids—but no less either. We often see verbal prowess as a sign that a student is immune to the sorts of affective yearnings we recognize in other kids. Not so. (And be careful with young kids who are both tall and bright. They’re doubly likely to be dismissed as past needing us.)

Bright kids vary in their affective needs. Because bright kids are like other kids in most ways, most of them will not have serious emotional problems. Some bright kids will have remarkably few problems. Some will have some problems at some times. Other bright kids will have more of an on-going struggle with affect and emotions. Adults make a mistake when they assume that if a kid is smart, emotional problems will be part of the package. Adults also make a mistake when they assume that smart kids have it made, and will work through everything on their own.

Affective Snares Bright Kids Encounter

Most of the affective snares bright kids encounter are a result of a negative interaction of two variables: brightness and basic human need. In other words, all people need to feel a sense of belonging. If a student's speed or level of thought causes him to feel rejected, there is a negative interaction between high ability and the basic human need to belong. All humans need to feel safety. If a highly able learner consistently feels insecure asking questions important to her in a class, she will not feel safe, and there is a negative interaction between a need generated by her ability and a basic human need. A great teacher continues to ask the question, "What can I do to make certain that each student in this classroom feels safe, valued, accepted, and challenged?" Such a teacher understands that what feels safe to one student may not to another, and what is a celebratory achievement for one student is not for another. Nonetheless, using benchmarks such as Maslow's hierarchy of human needs provides us a lens for examining what is going on in our classrooms and how a student's particular profile can interact with needs of every individual to create a unique perspective on the classroom.

Simultaneous maturity and immaturity. It's okay if a bright kid is both too mature and too immature at the same time. The same third grader who ponders questions related to cosmology may get the giggles as a result of the most inane humor imaginable. The same middle schooler who wows you with his adult-like judgment may also want to curl up next to a parent on the couch. The same high school student whose knowledge of computers astounds everyone in the school may not be able to make sense of the theme of a short story or read social signals from peers. Advancement in one area is no guarantee of advancement in another—or even of "typical" development in other areas. That unevenness in encounters with the world can be frustrating for some bright kids. It's helpful if adults "get it," and aren't frustrated, too. Parents and teachers who give such kids ample opportunity to soar where they can—as well as acceptance, safe haven, and gentle guidance for growth in the trickier areas of development—are the most helpful. In other words, the child needs to know if you can happily participate with him in a very adult-like conversation and get a charge out of his giggles, too!

The need for self-efficacy. One of the greatest affective needs of many bright kids is one we seldom identify or address; that is the need for self-efficacy. Self-efficacy develops when a person encounters challenges that seem beyond grasp, but which the person surmounts after all. For highly able learners, it's possible—indeed likely—to progress through year after year of schooling with no genuine challenges in view. The bright student excels on tasks that are challenging for someone else, and we reward that “achievement” with an A—our hallmark of excellence. Over time, a series of outcomes evolves. The bright student has a sense, whether tacit or explicit, that something dishonest is taking place. Not only do teachers look dishonest, but school also looks fraudulent, and the students themselves know they are accomplices to the fraud. Simultaneously, the students are becoming addicted to “easy success”—an oxymoron in the arena of real life. They come to fear challenge, to resent it, to avoid it, and they fail to develop the coping skills necessary to do battle with the complex challenges that would give them a sense of honorable achievement, and power in the face of life's inevitable hurdles. A great teacher for bright kids insists on challenge, and is also a full partner in the sometimes frightening journey toward accomplishment at a new level of demand.

The issue of intellectual power. Bright kids often need some guidance in “the care and feeding of power.” High ability is a kind of power. Finding oneself in possession of that power can be exhilarating, frightening, and confusing—especially for someone who, like all school-age learners, is young. Bright kids may thus need adults who help them determine that power itself is neither inherently good nor inherently bad, and that the outcomes of power depend on the use that is made of it. Bright kids need teachers and parents who help them understand that the mental power they possess is fine. They need teachers and parents who help them place limits on their use of the power, so that it does not seem overwhelming. That is to say, some young people can make articulate arguments in favor of doing things they are not experienced enough to handle. Adults often need to look beyond the verbal acuity and understand the need for “fences” that say, “No trespassing here.” These sorts of fences separate young people from terrain that is too perilous for inexperience—albeit verbally impressive inexperience. These fences define safety, even though they may be encountered with protest.

Bright young people often need teachers and parents who help them understand that their mental power will affect both themselves and others. Sometimes the effect will be positive, sometimes negative. Bright young people need teachers and parents who help them “read the signs” of impact and make decisions about the use of mental power in reasoned and sensitive ways. In a way, brightness is a sort of currency and bright young people need help in understanding how to invest it in ways that both honor the holder of the currency and reflect a sort of philanthropic respect of others.

The problem of negative images. We place some bright young people at a disadvantage in school because we do not understand that the negative affective messages they receive are virtually impenetrable barriers standing between them and patterns of achievement. That is the case for many low economic and minority learners for whom school is anything but the gateway to recognition and development of their high ability. In a time when special education classes are often disproportionately overrepresentative of low economic and minority learners, and when gifted education and advanced classes are often disproportionately underrepresentative of low economic and minority learners, the affective message impedes cognitive development. Students of color and poverty hear the message clearly, “Achievement is not really yours. This won’t work for you.” The message is reinforced when my face and my history are not in books I read. It is reiterated when school does not connect with my language, my neighborhood, my family, and so on. It is likely that understanding the imperative of building affective bridges to cognitive achievement for bright kids from low economic and minority backgrounds is our next step in the very steep learning curve for educators who truly care to make schools and classrooms doorways to self-actualization for all who come our way.

Watch the Kids

They bring notebooks and laughter and backpacks to school. They come with minds—ready or not—for learning. They come also with emotions, spirits, and affect—invisible and essential in becoming what they are becoming each day of their school lives. We’re understanding more and more fully the power of ongoing assessment of student understanding and adjustment of instruction based

on those insights. We aren't fully teaching until we also understand and practice the power of ongoing assessment of student affect and adjustment of what we do in the classroom based on those insights.

In the end, that's what the kids taught me about affect and bright learners (and others)—caring, watching, reflecting, asking, adjusting—and never taking for granted my role as one who shapes the human psyche as surely as I shape the human mind.