

GIFTED 101

TAGT is a statewide professional membership association serving more than 3,000 educators, parents, and supporters of gifted youth across Texas. Membership demographics vary from those with many years of experience to those who are new to the field of gifted education. The Gifted 101 column, written by current TAGT Board members, is designed to explore broad topics that guide and shape gifted education in Texas and beyond. TAGT is hopeful that this regular feature in *TEMPO* will effectively address the needs of members at all experience levels. Email jjcolburn@txgifted.org with ideas on topics to be addressed in future Gifted 101 columns.

5 Myths About GIFTEDNESS

BY BRENDA K. DAVIS

MYTHS ABOUT GIFTEDNESS are powerful forces that can alter perceptions about gifted students. Such myths are difficult to discredit and can have lasting effects on the identification of gifted students and the provision of services. Although these myths may be true in a particular instance, they do not hold in every situation or for every person.

In 1982, *Gifted Child Quarterly* devoted a special issue focusing on 15 common myths about giftedness. Twenty-seven years later, in 2009, the myths were revisited. Researchers at that time agreed that all of the myths from the 1982 compilation still existed and, in fact, included four new ones! This brief review will examine five myths that continue to be significant for the field of gifted education. Confronting these myths may help flesh out the underlying issues that keep our most able students from reaching their potential.

MYTH 1: ALL GIFTED STUDENTS ARE EXACTLY THE SAME.

One of the most damaging myths to gifted

education is the idea that all gifted students come from one homogeneous group (Reis & Renzulli, 2009). Gifted students can be found in every socioeconomic level, race, and ethnicity. Even within the gifted population, a wide range of diversity exists. Some may have intellectual potential whereas others are athletic, artistic, or musically inclined. Some show high emotional intensity, and others may be more introverted and sensitive. Researchers have identified common elements of giftedness, such as motivation, advanced interests and communication skills, inventiveness, and advanced problem-solving ability, but caution that gifted students do not exhibit all of the same characteristics and that ability levels can vary in a particular domain (Reis & Renzulli, 2009). Gifted students manifest a wide range of characteristics; thus, no standard of giftedness can be determined (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002). Giftedness is not a fixed way of being, but is developmental in nature; for some students with potential it can be nurtured with encouragement, time, and effort (Reis & Renzulli, 2009).

MYTH 2: GIFTED STUDENTS DO NOT HAVE UNIQUE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS.

Society often misperceives high-ability students based upon stereotypes of self-assured, well-adjusted students who perform at the highest levels and who are highly capable of dealing with social or emotional concerns (Peterson, 2009). Gifted children have vulnerabilities as well as advantages (Andronaco, Shute, & McLachlan, 2014; Peterson, 2009). Gifted children share common characteristics that affect the way they experience the world and are often characterized by their intensity and intellectual, psychomotor, sensual, emotional, and imaginal overexcitabilities (Bailey, 2011). These overexcitabilities can vary in strength, but usually are more extreme in gifted children than their less able peers (Peterson, 2009). Overexcitabilities in gifted children are frequently misunderstood. The highly imaginative student who daydreams in class is viewed by the untrained eye as misbehaving and off-task. These overexcitabilities can lead to gifted students' intense reactions to daily life events, for which children may need extra support and reassurance.

In addition, uneven profiles of intellectual, physical, and social and emotional development can lead to particular problems for gifted students. A gifted child might not be socially and emotionally developed compared to his cognitive level. Asynchronous development can add to the feeling of isolation when a highly advanced child tries to interact with his same-aged peers.

Each gifted child's needs stem from interaction between the child, talents, relationships, and his environment (Cross, 2011). By bringing attention to this fact, we may help loosen the hold this myth has on the lives of gifted children.

MYTH 3: FAIRNESS IS TEACHING ALL STUDENTS THE SAME WAY.

Our democratic society implies equality and fairness for all, yet fair doesn't always mean equal. It is not uncommon for some parents and educators to view gifted education as discriminatory and believe the only way to achieve fairness is to instruct all students in a class the same way (Cooper, 2009). It is ironic that most people recognize that *not* providing needed services to a special education student isn't fair; however, providing alternative teaching approaches or a different curriculum for gifted students is viewed as a form of elitism. All students deserve an education that is appropriate to their level of functioning. If we first recognize that gifted children function at different levels than their peers, teaching gifted students *like* their peers isn't fair. Individual differences must be recognized and honored. High levels of learning are not attained with mediocre or one-size-fits-all approaches, but by considering and tailoring toward individual needs and interests (Cooper, 2009). When individual needs are recognized and adjusted for, students have the best chance of reaching their full potential. Gifted students require challenge through different instructional methods, pacing, advanced curriculum, and time to work with other gifted students in order to satisfy their intense motivation to learn.

MYTH 4: GIFTED CHILDREN'S NEEDS ARE ALL MET IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM.

In the past few years, with budget cuts and limited resources for gifted education, gifted specialists, gifted pull-out programs, and other services have been replaced with the model that gifted children's needs can be met in a regular education classroom through

differentiated instruction by a regular education teacher. Differentiation targets learning tasks by content, process, and product to meet individual student needs. Differentiation is a tool that can be used for *all* children. This shift in thinking is an encouraging move toward incorporating gifted education into regular education (Dai & Chen, 2014).

However, in today's classrooms, teachers spend valuable time preparing children to pass standardized tests (Sisk, 2009). Teaching test-taking strategies and giving practice tests leaves little time to individualize work for students. Teaching a standard curriculum to the whole class is attractively efficient, but not effective in discerning the needs of gifted students (Assouline, Colangelo, Heo, & Dockery, 2013). In reality, teachers lack training in differentiating instruction or misunderstand how differentiation works (Hertberg-Davis, 2009). Some believe that differentiation of instruction takes too much time or that gifted children need no special intervention (Hertberg-Davis, 2009). It is unrealistic to expect the regular education teacher to provide for all of the needs of the gifted child with or without differentiated instruction (Sisk, 2009). Professional development can help change teacher attitudes toward differentiated instruction, but it usually only emphasizes academic needs and disregards emotional concerns (Sisk, 2009).

Differentiation of instruction for gifted students should occur not only in regular education classrooms, but also within homogeneous group settings (Hertberg-Davis, 2009). Researchers suggest that gifted children need time with like-minded peers (Cross, 2011). Researchers consistently find gifted students encounter more positive experiences in gifted classrooms or advanced classes (Fredricks, Alfeld, & Eccles, 2010; Vogl & Preckel, 2014). Researchers estimate nearly 70% of gifted students spend

time in classrooms that are not adequate in supporting their educational needs (Assouline et al., 2013). A regular education teacher needs preparation and training and cannot be the lone provider of services for gifted students.

MYTH 5: GIFTED CHILDREN CAN MAKE IT ON THEIR OWN.

The mere fact that gifted children are intellectually advanced poses problems in an education system that views the gifted as needing no intervention. Gifted students may appear to not have problems or face any challenges because they usually perform above grade level in school. Some are happy and secure and may perform well in many areas. Schoolwork is easy for them because they have already mastered a concept before it is taught.

What others may not see is the gifted child masking her abilities to fit in with grade-aged peers, or the twice-exceptional student whose giftedness is hidden by a learning disability. Gifted students' multipotentiality can lead them to have interests in several areas, such as academics, music, and sports. Lack of time and pressure to succeed in pursuits can overwhelm a gifted student's coping mechanisms (Moon, 2009). Students may need help with time management and planning. In addition, many gifted students' interests vary greatly from their peers. The lack of shared interests can cause gifted students to experience isolation in school. School becomes a place to endure rather than flourish.

Gifted students can experience underachievement from a lack of challenge in classroom activities (Fredricks et al., 2010). These students lose interest and become behavior problems in class or apathetic toward class instruction. Gifted students may appear to "have it all together," but without challenging curriculum, supportive environments, interested and trained

educators, and acceptance, gifted students will have limited opportunity to fulfill their potential. Gifted education advocates who recognize that gifted students cannot survive on their own are the key to helping these students.

Myths persist for a variety of reasons. Parents may believe some of the myths of giftedness because they lessen the responsibilities of raising a gifted child (Moon, 2009). Educators may lend support to these myths because they believe that treating all students the same is fair. Likewise, policymakers find the myths appealing because they can ignore gifted students' needs and allocate funds to other sources (Fredricks et al., 2010; Moon, 2009). We cannot continue to disregard the individual needs of gifted students. We must challenge these myths to help change the perceptions of education stakeholders.

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Brenda K. Davis, M.A., is a professional school counselor and a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Psychology at Baylor University. She has more than twenty years experience as a school counselor and educator and is currently the district gifted and talented coordinator for Bosqueville ISD. She serves on the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented Board of Directors. Her interests include social and emotional issues, gifted females, and creativity. She may be reached at Brenda_Davis1@baylor.edu.