

A young girl with dark skin and braided hair is smiling and holding a globe. She is wearing a pink turtleneck sweater. The globe is positioned in front of her, and she is pointing at it with her right hand. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting like a classroom.

# Recognizing **Gifted** **Students:** A Practical Guide for Teachers

by **Sandra Manning**

By watching for certain behaviors and characteristics, teachers in the general education classroom can identify and better understand exceptional students.

Today, more than ever, student diversity typifies the general education classroom (Tomlinson 2004). In most classrooms, the range of cognitive abilities is vast. Inclusion and legislative mandates challenge general educators to design and implement teaching and behavior management strategies that will ensure success for all student groups—including the gifted and highly able. Research indicates, however, that a majority of teachers have little specific knowledge about this group of children (Archambault et al. 1993; Robinson 1998; Westberg and Daoust 2003; Whitton 1997).

Lacking awareness of the characteristics and instructional requirements of high ability students, teachers are at a disadvantage. This article explores the characteristics of gifted children and offers the general classroom teacher tips and ideas for understanding the gifted children they teach.

### Defining 'Gifted'

High ability students have been labeled in many ways. Currently, the label "gifted" is used to indicate high intellectual or academic ability, and "gifted education" is recognized as the educational field devoted to the study of this student population. However, defining "gifted" is no easy task. The earliest use of this word to identify high ability students was by Lewis Terman in 1925 (Stephens and Karnes 2000; Morelock 1996). This usage came on the heels of the first IQ test developed in the early 1900s by Alfred Binet (Morelock 1996; Morgan 1996; Sarouphim 1999). Terman identified students scoring in the top 2 percent in general intelligence on the Binet test or a similar measure as gifted (Clark 2002).

Over the years, many definitions of this term have been proposed by scholars and researchers. From natural talent awaiting development (Gagne 1995; Tannenbaum 2003) to the ability to use life situations successfully (Sternberg 2003), the common factors in defining giftedness appear to be potential and opportunity.

"Gifted students routinely exhibit academic and emotional traits that may be described as intense and, at times, even extreme."

Clark (2002) defined "gifted" as a label for the biological concepts of superior development of various brain functions. These functions, according to Clark, may be manifested in the areas of cognition, creativity, academics, leadership, or the arts. Clark subtly emphasized the natural aspects of the child's ability, as opposed to learned aspects, and most nearly matched the popular definition of the word gifted—"endowed with a special aptitude or ability" (Webber 1984, 295). Clark (2002, 25), however, went on to say that "Growth of intelligence depends on the interaction between biological inheritance and environmental opportunities." With this phrase, Clark inferred a union of the nature/nurture debate, designating giftedness as partially due to inherited traits of information processing with an integral portion attributed to the environmental experiences the child encounters to develop those traits.

Less formal definitions of the word gifted include those offered by parent groups and gifted students themselves. Russell, Hayes, and Dockery (1988, 2) reported a definition created by a parent group: "Giftedness is that precious endowment of potentially outstanding abilities which allows a person to interact with the environment with remarkably high levels of achievement and creativity." Gifted student Amanda Ashman (2000, 50) defined being gifted as "not

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something that you can develop. You are born with a capacity for knowledge. Learning and understanding come naturally for the gifted.”

These definitions further the meaning of giftedness as an endowment of natural ability apart from learning that takes place in the home or at school. Unfortunately, these types of definitions have given the field of gifted education the reputation of elitism (Morelock 1996) and perhaps have been the impetus of the popular myth that “gifted students will get it on their own.” To refute that myth and highlight the need for talent development in all students, growing interest in the idea of multiple intelligences has challenged the singular idea of “general intelligence or g” (Gardner 1983; Von Károlyi, Ramos-Ford, and Gardner 2003) and suggested that strengths in many areas more aptly define giftedness in individuals. Further, Sternberg (2003) advocated in his theory of successful intelligence that giftedness is manifested in individuals who are able to take the raw materials of their life situations and transform them into successful experiences. Renzulli (1978; 2003) added that task commitment and creativity must be considered when defining giftedness.

Whether giftedness is inherited, developed, manifested in the ability to manipulate life situations, or a result of some combination of these ideas, it is imperative for the regular classroom teacher to be cognizant of the fact that high ability students are in the classroom. Because these students are present, teachers have a responsibility to create a learning environment conducive to gifted student success.

### Characteristics of Gifted Students

One key way classroom teachers can broaden understanding of gifted students is through knowledge of the general characteristics intellectually gifted children exhibit. Characteristics in the cognitive and affective domains most commonly appear in general classroom behavior and, therefore, may be observed by the classroom teacher.

Table 1 highlights general cognitive characteristics of intellectually gifted students. Notice that gifted students often possess an intense desire to learn about their own interests. Their ability to think at abstract levels earlier than same-aged peers and form their own ways of thinking about problems and ideas indicates that intellectually gifted students need advanced content and choice in learning activities. Gifted students’ high energy levels and ability to extend the range of projects signify that independent studies may be an option for differentiating instruction for these students.

**Table 1. Cognitive Characteristics of Intellectually Gifted Students**

• Process and retain large amounts of information
• Comprehend materials at advanced levels
• Curious and have varied and sometimes intense interests
• High levels of language development and verbal ability
• Possess accelerated and flexible thought processes
• Early ability to delay closure of projects
• See unusual relationships among disciplines or objects
• Adept at generating original ideas and solutions to problems
• Persistent, goal-oriented, and intense on topics of interest
• Form their own ways of thinking about problems and ideas
• Learn things at an earlier age than peers
• Need for freedom and individuality in learning situations
• High desire to learn and seek out their own interests
• Abstract thinkers at an earlier age than peers
• Prefer complex and challenging work
• Transfer knowledge and apply it to new situations
• May prefer to work alone
• May be early readers
• May possess high energy levels and longer attention spans

(Chuska 1989; Clark 2002; Silverman 2000; Winebrenner 2001)

Varied behaviors and preferences arise from giftedness. An awareness of the social and emotional characteristics of gifted students can further help teachers understand many of the classroom behaviors they observe in these children. For example, the gifted child’s desire to share knowledge may be seen by others as an attempt to show off and may lead to peer rejection. Gifted students’ high expectations of themselves and others can lead to perfectionism, personal dissatisfaction, or feelings of hopelessness (Clark 2002). Table 2 gives an overview of the

**Table 2. Affective Characteristics of Intellectually Gifted Students**

• Possess large amounts of information about emotions
• May possess an unusual sensitivity to the feelings of others
• Possess a keen or subtle sense of humor
• Possess a heightened sense of self-awareness
• Idealism and sense of justice appear at an early age
• Develop inner controls early
• Possess unusual emotional depth and intensity
• Exhibit high expectations of self and others
• Display a strong need for consistency in themselves and others
• Possess advanced levels of moral judgment

(Chuska 1989; Clark 2002; Silverman 2000; Winebrenner 2001)

characteristics of intellectually gifted students in the affective domain.

Gifted students routinely exhibit academic and emotional traits that may be described as intense and, at times, even extreme. They are more curious, demanding, and sensitive than their typical developing peers. Gifted children are unique and require parents and educators to modify both home and school environments to meet their strong need to know. Modification is imperative if gifted students are to reach full potential.

Teachers should keep in mind that the traits listed are not exhaustive and that every gifted child will not display each characteristic stated. In fact, intellectually gifted students referred to in the literature as atypical may display their giftedness in other ways. There are many groups to consider when identifying an atypical gifted student, including, but not limited to, non-English speaking students and students from low socioeconomic circumstances. Unfortunately, research has shown that teachers often overlook atypical gifted students and refer a disproportionately high number of European-American children with “teacher-friendly” characteristics such as good behavior and high academic achievement to gifted education programs (Plata and Masten 1998; Bonner 2000). This reality points to the need for additional information on the characteristics of atypical gifted students such as listed in Table 3.

Many traits of atypical gifted students are evident in all intellectually gifted students. However, a strong

**Table 3. Characteristics of Atypical Gifted Students**

• Ability to manipulate a symbol system
• Think logically
• Ability to use stored knowledge to solve problems
• Reason by analogy
• Transfer knowledge to new circumstances
• May possess creative and artistic abilities
• Resilient; able to cope with trying family situations
• Take on adult roles in the home
• Strong sense of pride and self-worth
• Exhibit leadership ability and independent thinking
• Possess a strong desire to learn about and understand their culture
• Display a strong inner will
• May display a heightened sensitivity to others and the world around them

(Bonner 2000; Hebert and Reis 1999; Schwartz 1997)

sense of family, responsibility for adult roles—such as assuming additional tasks in the classroom setting, inner-strength, and self-worth—are key factors for the classroom teacher to look for in recognizing atypical gifted students. These children have the same general abilities as many gifted students. Yet, because of cultural differences or lack of early experiences, they may not display the typical characteristics of intellectually gifted students that often are considered by teachers when making referrals to gifted education programs.

### Classroom **Behaviors**

Because of the unique characteristics gifted students possess, teachers need to be aware of the ways in which these attributes manifest themselves in observable classroom behaviors. Some behaviors can be troubling to the classroom teacher; however, being aware of their root causes will help teachers more fully meet gifted students’ needs and build positive relationships vital to meaningful classroom experiences.

The following classroom problem situations (Clark 2002; Winebrenner 2001; Smutny, Walker, and Meckstroth 1997) are offered for consideration.

- Unfinished work may be the result of varied interests and inability to narrow down a topic. Poor work habits might also reveal student feelings that he or she already knows about a particular topic and does not feel the need for practice.
- Poor class work by gifted students is often a sign of disinterest in subject matter. Gifted children may question the appropriateness of classroom activities to their needs, but will work diligently and well on topics of high interest.
- Sensitivity to the attitudes and perceptions of others may cause gifted students to fall into the perfectionism trap or to fear failure. These feelings can lead to unfinished work, procrastination, or underachievement.
- Poor group work often is the result of gifted students’ feelings that they will have the burden of the group’s work. Gifted students also may prefer to work alone because of feelings that their ideas will be misunderstood or unappreciated by the group.
- Bossiness in group work could be an indicator of younger students practicing their leadership abilities to find the most effective leadership style. Overbearing behavior also may stem from



gifted students' desire for control in their lives and their characteristics of independence and nonconformity.

- Slow workers who are gifted may be ensuring that their work is perfect.
- Behavior problems in gifted students could be a result of boredom or the feeling that class work is too easy or beneath them.
- Being the "class clown" may be the result of the gifted student's keen sense of humor being exhibited in unacceptable ways. The behavior also might be an attempt to gain acceptance among peers who may perceive the student negatively because of his or her "gifted" label.
- Emotional outbursts or periods of withdrawal in gifted students may be due to their highly sensitive natures.

### Close Observation

Given that gifted students clearly do not always exhibit classroom work, behavior, and dispositions that are "teacher friendly," how can classroom teachers make informed decisions about the children they refer for gifted education programs?

A list of pertinent questions follows. An affirmative and detailed answer to some of these questions regarding a particular student might serve as a signal to begin observing the child more closely and keeping anecdotal records to document patterns of behavior. Such activities not only aid teachers in identifying the student for assessment, but also provide valuable information on the frequency of gifted behaviors to professionals who eventually may assess the student formally for gifted education services.

- Is this student highly verbal in spoken language, written language, or both?
- Does this student use art materials either creatively or uniquely?
- Does this student offer insightful contributions to class discussions that are of interest to him or her?
- Is this student able to comprehend, synthesize, or evaluate story material in unique ways from personal readings or from teacher read-alouds?
- Does this student have unique or varied interests?
- Is this student highly passionate or excited about his or her own interests?
- Does this student have a strong sense of family or interest in family-related topics?
- Does this child get good test grades but often turns in poor class work?

### Final Thoughts

This sampling of characteristics and concomitant problems points to the need for classroom teachers to heighten their awareness of issues related to gifted students in their classrooms. Keeping abreast of research and information by reading journals devoted to gifted children and gifted education is a good starting place. Becoming more reflective by asking internal "why" questions to understand the root causes of student behaviors will help teachers as they strive to provide the most meaningful education for all the students they teach. ■

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