



What is this “gifted” thing anyway?

This is a question I am asked—in one form or another—on a regular basis. I find myself pausing, assessing who is asking, how much they may or may not understand, how open to the idea of “gifted” they may be, and then mentally searching through all of the definitions and descriptions about gifted I know, to carefully craft an answer that has the best chance of sticking and being understood. Why is answering this question so hard?

I find there are several main reasons that this is such a difficult question. First, the word “gifted” is loaded. It turns people off. It seems to suggest that “gifted” people are more special and better than people who are not gifted. It seems to imply that gifted people “have more” so it not only puts them in a position of being seen as elite, but also as not needing “more” of anything because they already have more than most.

The next reason is that such different criteria are used to determine who is gifted (and who isn’t). Some people consider gifted individuals the top 2% on an IQ test; others use the top 5% and the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) recently changed its definition to include the top 10%. The field is split, with some believing we cannot “water down” the criteria for those considered highly gifted because it diminishes those who *are* really different and need more accommodations. Others believe we need to broaden the definition to include larger numbers in order to impact education policy and funding so gifted kids receive more appropriate services.

Another concern is the different gifted categories. Most people seem to agree that the categories or types of giftedness include: intellectual, academic, visual and performing arts, creativity, and leadership ability. However, how many schools

have gifted programs for learners other than academically gifted? If you are creative and not in a program that emphasizes or encourages creativity, are you still gifted? If you are a leader among your peers, but have academic learning problems and do not score well on tests, are you still gifted? If you are an advanced musician but your school does not have a music program, are you still gifted?

Thus, many ways are used to define and recommend children for gifted programming; but what does that really mean?

Then there are the multiple definitions of gifted. Some describe giftedness as showing “advanced development” in the categories listed above. Others state that giftedness is “advanced ability and/or potential,” while still others prioritize talent, or abilities that result in a product, or advanced level of performance as the prime evidence of giftedness. Finally, there are many who explain gifted individuals in terms of their personality characteristics, and describe them to be more “driven,” “intense,” and “sensitive” than those who are not gifted.

I think about all of these things when trying to answer that seemingly simple question, “What is this gifted thing?” I find myself smiling at the person who is asking, and knowing that I have a very short window to educate them about a group of individuals who have great potential to impact our world, but who also are at great risk of not being able to bring their abilities to fruition.

BRIDGING THE GAP

While the question seems simple and innocent enough, it is a really important one that represents both a lack of understanding of this group of individuals as well as the *opportunity* to explain what “this gifted thing” is. You may be talking to someone who

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can make decisions that impact gifted kids; or help a parent or teacher better understand a gifted kid; or explain giftedness to another who is curious or misunderstanding.

I have found that giftedness, and the accommodation and differentiation needed, is misunderstood by most people. While our field is not united about what giftedness is, the even larger issue seems to be how we explain what giftedness is to those outside of our field—teachers and other educators, parents, other family members, or the public at large. These are the people who influence gifted children on a daily basis through their feedback. It is this feedback or messaging that is internalized and used by gifted children to form their identities.

Through my years of sitting in school meetings and parent counseling sessions related to gifted children, I have found that the most critical piece in bridging the gap in understanding is to *join* the person or people I am speaking to. It is important to understand where others are coming from when trying to explain who a gifted child is and what his or her needs are. Separating gifted children from the rest is often necessary in terms of explaining differences; however, separating them from others without attempting to also join them, results in a differentness and isolation that often does not result in the needed understanding, differentiation, and accommodation that can help a gifted child survive, and ultimately thrive.

My experience has shown me time and time again that all people want to be understood and heard. That includes the person who is asking the question about the “gifted thing,”—whether it be the administrator who is responsible for an entire district, the teacher who is needing to meet the needs of all her students, or the parent who may be exhausted and exasperated by his or her gifted child. Their experiences need to be heard and understood in order for my message about a gifted child to be heard. I need to join them where they are so I can successfully explain to them about who a particular gifted child is, and the needs of gifted individuals.

WHAT TO SAY SO PEOPLE WILL LISTEN

So what do I do? I find myself with a few different ideas or phrases that I keep in my back pocket. I decide which ones to use based on my audience and my ideas about their motivation to understand a gifted child. I try to use language which I feel will be meaningful to the person asking the question with the goal of providing an opportunity for a new understanding of a murky and confusing term.

Here are some of the phrases and ideas that I use to explain giftedness and gifted children:

- They tend to have advanced thinking and see things differently than most their age
- They tend to have an unexpected, yet remarkable understanding of things well beyond their years
- They tend to be more intense, sensitive, and driven than others their age
- They often know much, or all of the school work in their grade and beyond
- They can often act both older than peers in some things and younger than their peers in others

The above descriptions are meant to be just that—descriptions of gifted individuals that set the stage both for empathy of the experience of the gifted child, and the accommodations and differentiation that can literally make or break a gifted child’s development and experience. I chose which description or descriptions to use based on what I think the receiver will resonate with—intensity, sensitivity, drive, advanced ability, creative and divergent thinking, or all of them. I am looking for them to nod their head and say or show some sign of understanding. This understanding then leads to the next important step—what a gifted child needs.

If and when I get to this point, I often reply:

- To be challenged intellectually
- To be given academic material at their current level of knowledge
- To be with others who are true peers—who are like them and value them
- To be accepted for who they are

I often say that working with and teaching gifted kids is not rocket science. It merely requires understanding who they are and what they need. Yet, understanding gifted kids and giving them what they need continues to be a challenge for the vast majority of people. All of us who work with gifted kids have a calling. Our mission is to describe gifted children to others so they are better understood. We need to understand why we are being asked the question, and figure out the best way to explain it so it is heard and understood. If gifted children are better understood, then it will be easier to get them the resources they need to grow, develop, and thrive. So, “what is this gifted thing anyway?” What will you say...? ■



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