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Keynote Topic:
Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms for Gifted Students: For Our Sakes - For Their Sakes

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• Gifted and At Risk: Navigating the Challenges of Life
• @Risk: Building Resilience
• Gifted Dropouts: Life after High School
• Diamonds in the Rough: Identifying and Serving Low-Income Students

...and more!

Gifted Kids At Risk
Spring 2007: Volume 19, Issue 3
# Gifted Kids At Risk

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Publisher’s Perspective

Dorothy Knopper

Unfortunately, our children are at risk for many reasons...poverty, ethnic diversity, physical handicaps, learning disabilities, dropping out. The writers in this issue of *Understanding Our Gifted* direct their articles to some of these problems, including descriptions of resilient gifted kids who overcame negative factors in their lives—and sadly, tales of young people who didn’t make it.

My years in gifted education, as parent and educator, have convinced me that there is another at risk factor for gifted children that must be included in the above list...It is giftedness itself. Gifted children must deal with unique characteristics (e.g., intensity, sensitivity, and perfectionism), challenges, frustrations, and expectations. When these aspects of giftedness are combined with other at risk factors, as they often are, life may become overwhelming.

In 1983, Free Spirit published *The Gifted Kids Survival Guide: For Ages 11-18* by Judy Galbraith, followed in 1984 by Galbraith’s *The Gifted Kids Survival Guide: For Ages 10 & Under*. The two books confirmed my belief that gifted children are at risk. If these kids are not at risk, why would anyone write and publish survival guides for gifted kids? Fortunately, we now know more about risk factors for gifted children, and we are able to offer appropriate support. Galbraith, in the first *Gifted Kids Survival Guide*, expresses the hope that gifted kids will gain the knowledge to “understand, accept, and celebrate...[their] giftedness.” As parents and teachers, we are in a position to help them deal with risks and achieve success.

Please share your opinions, your successes, and your needs. Contact Editor Carol Fertig: cfertig@earthlink.net
How can gifted students be at risk?

Every large urban environment is a tale of two cities that is comprised, in part, of the haves and have-nots. The public schools in these environments are a reflection of the greater society that exists and serves as reality for its citizens. In many of the largest public school districts in the United States, there are communities primarily inhabited by the wealthy, privileged, and/or well educated. The children of these families attend excellent schools where the expectations for achievement are high, the curriculum is taught by experienced and credentialed instructional staff members with advanced degrees, and the involvement of parents in the education of their own children is clearly evident. More often than not, these communities include a large percentage of whites.

In the same large school districts, there are other communities where poverty, despair, and feelings of isolation are the norm. These environments may include a high incidence of gang involvement and violence; drug use; domestic violence; single-parent families; teenage pregnancy; immigration; and a citizenship that is culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse. Many children of these families attend schools in older facilities where they qualify for free or reduced lunch, are eligible to receive Title I services, have an inexperienced teaching staff, and are provided older and fewer resources to supplement the curricular programs of their schools. In these communities, involving the parents in the education of their own children is challenging and often frustrating. For children identified as gifted, options may be limited; consideration must be given to the at risk nature of their reality.

Gifted kids at risk represent a societal conundrum. On one hand, they are identified as intelligent, bright, and having great potential. The formal institution that has identified them is viewed by many as the only way to escape a way of life that may be unhealthy, confusing, and often dangerous. On the other hand, there are peer and community influences that have such a strong hold on these gifted individuals that navigating through the chaos of their world prevents many of them from actualizing their success.

Who Is At Risk?

In the field of gifted education, those identified as at risk may include student groups who have been historically underrepresented—among them those who are poor, minority, and/or culturally and linguistically diverse. Typically, the most at risk students are considered those in poverty. Living in poverty often limits equity, access, and opportunity as well as basic life experiences that many of us take for granted (i.e., a trip to the zoo, local museums, and visiting the public library). Matters are further compounded when the student also comes from a home where a language other than English is spoken. Communication between school and home adds another challenge that must be considered. The following cases represent gifted students, from different environments, with whom I have worked.
Navigating, continued

Dylan is a 10-year-old gifted white male who lives in a community of upper class and middle upper class families. He attends his local public school where he is enrolled in a full-time gifted education program. His parents have provided him with many of the privileges associated with being well-off. He has traveled extensively throughout the United States and abroad; attends concerts, plays, and other events sponsored by the city or local university; and has access to the latest technological advances. Dylan also takes music lessons, is a Boy Scout, and has a stay-at-home mom.

Miguel was identified as gifted using a nonverbal performance-based measure of intelligence. He lives in a geographically isolated community. His school receives Title I funds because 96 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Instead of a full-time program that would meet Miguel’s educational needs, he is served in a part-time program. His parents have acknowledged that he is a smart boy but are limited in their efforts to help him. Both parents are predominately Spanish-speaking, have less than an 8th grade education, and are migrants who work long hours in the fields. After school, Miguel is expected to care for his younger siblings until his parents get home. In his community there is no grocery store, movie theater, or park.

It is clear that Miguel is at risk and is routinely placed in at risk situations. His limited experiences may prevent him from fully actualizing his gifts, talents, and potential. Miguel is determined to make something of his life, and despite attending a rough and tough middle school, he is doing exceptionally well and excelling academically.

If They Are Gifted, How Can They Also Be At Risk?
One of the most perpetuated myths in the education of gifted children is that they can make it on their own because they are so smart. This is far from the truth, especially for gifted students who live in poverty, are non-English or limited English proficient, and who reside in a rough part of town. Many of them exist in a world of conflict and contradiction and are put in situations where navigating every day challenges is difficult and demanding. Certain social/emotional behavior characteristics are often evident in poor, minority, and culturally and linguistically diverse students whose worlds are in conflict. Many of these children are confused because of the mixed messages they receive from individuals and institutions in their daily reality.

School culture is driven by such democratic principles as following rules, doing the right thing, taking turns, and demonstrating good citizenship. In this environment a plethora of rules and regulations exist, designed to establish order in the public education of the masses. As a parent of four gifted children who have attended or are currently attending public schools, this whole democratic idea appeals to me. I want my children to be exposed to this environment. However, the expectations of the school are often in direct conflict with the socialized environment of many of our diverse gifted students. That is, the “street life” and peer group of these very intelligent and academically advanced students often take precedence over doing well in school. Therefore, many feel a stronger bond to their peers when the social pressure to fit in with the school community norm is simply too great. As a result, many students do not realize their true potential during the normal school day.

At risk gifted children must also contend with the world of the home, which is often in competition with both the expectations of the school and the socialized environment of these students. Parents may want their child to honor and respect tradition, culture, and language, while maintaining ties to the old ways and their country of heritage.

Yes, these children may be gifted but they are also at risk.

Another characteristic associated with at risk gifted students is anger. They may be angry because of the limited choices over which they have control. The very nature of conflicting worlds is also cause for anger. Feelings of isolation are the result of not being understood. For many of these intelligent children, the realization that they are different from both their families and friends impacts them socially and emotionally. Despite having been identified as gifted, often through the use of alternative assessments, some of them continue to have gaps in their achievement in the area of language. What, then, should be the focus of their gifted education? How do we honor their strengths, while closing gaps where they exist?

Related to anger is fear. The fear of these students is not knowing what will happen to them. The fear is letting themselves down and not knowing how to stop. Being unprepared for what the future holds is also a burden for them. All of these conflicting emotions are exacerbated if there are no role models—or wrong role models. These gifted kids can also be at risk because clashes with family, their socialized environment (street life and peer groups), and the school each create a system of values, beliefs, and expectations that may be discordant.

What Comes From Being At Risk?
The social and emotional toll on the lives of these gifted children cannot be dismissed. Being at risk often leads to opportunity, both good and bad. What can happen when people care enough to give their time and provide opportunities for these students to be successful?

Antonio’s parents are both laborers and uneducated. His mother is verbally fluent in English and Spanish but struggles in her ability to read or write in either language. His father is an alcoholic and is verbally, emotionally, and physically abusive. The police have been called to the home on several occasions because of domestic violence charges. Antonio
Navigating, continued

and his brothers and sisters spend an inordinate amount of time running the streets of their neighborhood. His siblings are associated with teenage pregnancy, drug use, jail time, and the fringes of gang activity. They all know Antonio is special; he is the smart one. His teachers are aware of his home life because they have educated his four older siblings. They also see his potential by the ease in which he masters grade level curriculum. His achievement test scores along with the results of an IQ test validate his intelligence and ability.

Because of his background at home and at school, Antonio was selected as one of five students in the entire 6th grade class of over 100 students to participate in a city-wide school exchange program. Each month during the school year he and the four others would visit a particular school, populated by a different cultural, religious, or racial group of students, to discuss educational and social topics of interest. He became fascinated by the diversity found in the city. This single opportunity opened his whole world as he embraced the idea that life existed as it did outside his barrio. In the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, he was elected to student government. In high school he took gifted and honors classes in English and social studies, often being one of a few males, and occasionally being the only Hispanic male in the class. During my interview with Antonio, it was clear that his 6th grade experience changed his life. Sure, there are some sad stories typically related to what comes from being at risk. This is not one of them. Rather, it is a story of hope and promise of what can happen to a child if he is simply given an opportunity.

What Can We Do To Minimize the Risk?
The peer group and the way of the streets have an allure and appeal to students that many cannot ignore. Here, they find the comfort and support that they do not receive at home or at school. How do we as educators begin to counter these outside influences—especially when clashes exist between family, peer group, and school, including values, beliefs, and expectations of each that are discordant? The answer, in part, lies in providing these at risk gifted students with opportunities designed to empower them.

The content of the curriculum should be culturally and linguistically sensitive to build positive cultural identity. At the same time, the foundation of what a gifted education entails should be honored and validated. That is, the curriculum experience provided these students should emphasize content, process, and product; critical thinking and problem solving; creativity and divergent thinking; content area standards, benchmarks, and expectations; and take into account their social and emotional needs.

Capitalizing on their cultural and socialized norms empowers these students to form collaborative work groups based on interests, needs, and levels of readiness. Of course, the use of differentiation strategies should serve as the core of instruction. In addition, opportunities for these students to learn their history and background are important to their sense of identity, directly impacting their social and emotional well-being. Often, there are resources within the community in the form of family members, nonprofit social service agencies, and cultural organizations with which partnerships can be formed.

What Causes Some At Risk Gifted Kids to Succumb to that Risk?
If we knew the answer the world would be a much better place. This question is also highly personal and subjective. I share similar stories with some of my Hispanic and African-American colleagues of the challenges we faced growing up poor and gifted and living in a socialized environment with competing values, beliefs, and expectations. Why did we make it while others like us did not? What causes some gifted kids who are at risk to succumb to that risk? This all depends on personal circumstances.

Little Jamal was both book smart and street smart. Because his single mother worked two jobs to make ends meet, he spent a lot of time with his “home-boys,” running the streets of the city. He often returned home late at night to find his older brothers drinking, partying, and engaging in other self-destructive behavior. The expectation was that he would also indulge in such behavior. As smart as he was, he fell behind in school and followed the way of his brothers who he saw as role models. They provided him love and support that he could not get from his mother or the school. Little Jamal succumbed because he had the wrong role models. It is sad to think about the wasted years of his life. Unfortunately,
Navigating, continued

having no role model or the wrong role model happens all too often in the lives of gifted at risk youth.

Ana was raised in a restaurant environment. Even as a very young child she had to work after school, cleaning and washing dishes. This was a family business where all members were expected to pitch in. Over the years, Ana excelled in school. Once identified as gifted, she thrived being with other kids like herself. Her teachers reported that her short stories were magical, taking the reader through wonderful fantasies of fiction. In middle school she received above average grades and was routinely recognized for her creative writing. Life was good until her mother became ill and could not work. Her father required Ana to spend additional hours at the restaurant for the good of the family. Eventually, Ana missed more and more school and wound up dropping out despite her abilities. She was not bitter about her decision to leave school. In her eyes this was the greatest gift she could give her father and mother.

There are so many stories like this. Many of us cannot imagine the lives of some of our most gifted students. As educators we must put forth our best efforts with hope that we have enough influence to change their lives. We must do what we can to help these very bright children resist negative influences. It is our duty to do so; it is our responsibility.

Overcoming the Risk

Strong resiliency often allows these students to adjust quickly and be successful, regardless of their environment. As at risk gifted students continue to persevere and successfully apply their coping skills, they often develop increased levels of confidence and assertiveness. The ability to comprehend the power of reflection, even at early ages, serves as a further motivator to break cycles of poverty, illiteracy, and abuse, and they may become keenly aware of the consequences related to making bad choices. So, in part, there can be a conscious decision to avoid the status quo and related risk factors.

Personal Reflection

This conscious decision is a part of my own personal story. Early in my life I knew that I did not want to be like so many of the men in my community—uneducated, poor, dependent on drugs or alcohol, adulterers, abusers. I saw firsthand the negative effects associated with these destructive behaviors as a child growing up in such a household. Members of my peer group were dropouts, gang members, drug addicts, and teen parents. Although many of the boys and girls were my friends, I knew I did not want to be like them. Education was the key to my future.

It was not until I met Laura, an older girl in my neighborhood, that I realized the importance of doing well in school. She was a scholar-athlete who had heard from my classmates that I was one of the “smart ones.” Our families knew each other, but the relationship was distant. Laura took me under her wing and served as a mentor. She was the first to suggest that I go to college. The thought had never entered my mind. No one in my family had ever gone to college nor talked of it. I do not blame my parents. They had bigger problems than my future. Upon reflection, I was one of the lucky ones who was able to overcome the many challenges that we faced in our poor Hispanic barrio. This example speaks to the power of a mentor—of someone who cares, motivates, and guides.

The silver screen has a history of telling stories about gifted and talented students who come from the harshest communities and backgrounds. The Blackboard Jungle, To Sir with Love, Stand and Deliver, Dangerous Minds, and the latest, Freedom Writers, are but a few examples. The message in each of these movies shows hope coming from a teacher who has a genuine desire to make a difference in the lives of students. The teacher is the mentor, the motivator, and the one individual in the school who the students grow to love and respect. Just because children come from at risk environments does not mean that they are automatically marked for failure.

At risk gifted students are untapped talent resources of our nation. Their resiliency, perseverance, intelligence, and academic aptitude set them apart from their classmates. However, the day-to-day realities of their lives are often obstacles in our attempts to challenge their potential. When they fall down we need to be right there to pick them up, brush them off, and continue to guide them in the right direction.

The gifted education classroom can serve as a haven for these students, providing them with opportunities to showcase their gifts and talents, engaging them in honest conversations about their situations, and using strategies like bibliotherapy to cope with their situations outside of school. Those programs that are flexible and adjust to meet the needs of diverse students are the most effective.

Regardless of where they come from, these bright students have a right to a gifted education that embraces who they are as individuals. The circumstances of their socialized environment are often beyond their control. These are children, young people, who are trying to make the best of the hand that life has dealt them. Our job is to help them be the best they can be. You or I can be the one individual who makes a difference in the lives of these brave, courageous, and resilient children. They are worth the effort.

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@Risk: Building Resilience

Lou Lloyd-Zannini

What are some methods for building resilience?

Which gifted kids are at risk?

Potentially all.

For what are children at risk?

Typically, they are at risk for underachievement.

Many gifted children and teens live with the same sorts of family factors that place the general population at risk. These include chronic illness, substance abuse, significant academic underachievement of parents/guardians, low socioeconomic status, teen pregnancy, and teen parenthood. Sadly, another predictor of risk for gifted kids may be the inappropriateness of their educational settings.

An appropriate educational environment should positively influence gifted students; however, the environment may actually exacerbate risk factors if it doesn’t provide differentiated curriculum; affective support; and freedom from fear of verbal, psychological, or physical abuse.

Fortunately, the advanced cognitive and affective skills of gifted children provide them with abilities to advocate effectively for themselves. In fact, the best tools that gifted children possess may be their own voices.

When studying those who are at risk, one finds that resilience is important in overcoming the challenges of life. Simply stated, children who are resilient are better prepared not only to survive, but to succeed. If we can help gifted children develop resilience, we can empower them to overcome risk-related problems and to advocate effectively for their own safety, well-being, educational needs, and general happiness.

Research (Selig, Arroyo, Lloyd-Zannini, & Jordan, 2006) has highlighted four categories of behaviors that promote resilience.

- intrapersonal relationships
- interpersonal relationships
- increased competency
- working effectively with persons in authority
@Risk, continued

The suggestions presented here are general in nature and need to be adapted to fit the needs of individual, unique, gifted children. Because of different personalities, some children need firmer approaches, while others require only the opportunities to try. Because of ages and levels of maturity, some children respond better to tangible rewards or praise, while others seek acceptance of and respect as competent members of the family or class. So remember to keep the ages, maturity levels, and personalities of children in mind as you consider the following.

Methods for Building Resilience
Perhaps the best way to avoid or overcome underachievement is simply to plan to succeed and then to monitor one’s progress along that path. One part of building resilience in gifted children involves helping them to internally adjust the levels of challenge, regardless of what is presented to them. What better environment in which to practice this skill than the educational one? Effective goal setting and realistic performance monitoring are important resilience building tools.

Over the years, I’ve been astounded by how many people are not able to articulate their goals. As a former commission-only salesperson, I know painfully well the truth of the adage that those who fail to plan, plan to fail. Resilient people plan carefully and then carry on even in the face of adversity. They know what their goals are, and they are unwilling to forsake the journey toward their aspirations just because the road has become a little bumpy.

Invest time with children to look at goals, both for long- and short-term. Help them plan educational goals for the next school year. What do they want to achieve? How will they go about doing that? Remember that many gifted kids have already started down career paths by the time they’re in the fourth or fifth year of school, so it’s vitally important to plan for how they will reach their desired end points. Be sure that the goals are achievable, observable, and measurable, and that they are written down and kept somewhere that is accessible for regular review and encouragement.

During the academic year, periodically encourage bright children to review goals that they have set, and realistically measure how well they are doing. This isn’t a time for recriminations if there’s little progress. Rather, it’s a time for encouragement to examine what impediments have arisen and how to overcome, to reconsider and/or revise goals if they are not realistic, and then to continue moving forward toward their successful attainment. Setting goals, keeping them fresh in mind, and working to accomplish them help to build resilience.

As goals are reviewed together, there is the opportunity to help build another trait of resilience: the ability to deal effectively with criticism—an intrapersonal skill. Often, criticism is heard as personal condemnation, rather than commentary on observed performance. Helping a youngster to recognize that a performance critique is not a personal attack empowers her to seek and build on criticism and develop tools to critique her own performance. Criticism, when effectively managed, can provide an incredible opportunity to grow personally and professionally—and thus to maximize achievement.

Gifted children must learn to communicate their goals effectively to those who can help. Students need to learn to become their own best advocates.

One lesson stands out from my early career years: My responsibility to be an effective communicator. I am responsible for sending a clear, understandable message. I am responsible for listening carefully to the response and to clarify when necessary. I am responsible for rephrasing and paraphrasing, for gently but consistently presenting the message until it is heard and has received an appropriate response. In short, it is my responsibility to be certain I have been heard.

Good communication skills don’t just happen. They take practice. To build resilience in students, help them develop effective communication. Remember that body language and eye contact, along with tone of voice, are as important in the communication process as the words spoken; so invest time on developing good nonverbal communication habits.

Practice active listening, which includes nonverbal acknowledgments (i.e., nodding in agreement). Ask questions to gain clarity. Rather than jumping to conclusions, hear others out fully. Admit mistakes. All of these actions communicate to others that they’re important. They encourage the listener to want to hear and help—an important step in advancing goals.
Help children understand how to seek help from persons in authority, whether it is to get a schedule or plan of learning adjusted or to seek assistance in alleviating a negative social situation. The need must be communicated efficiently and effectively, utilizing all available communication skills. The problem should be stated clearly along with some possible solutions. (The latter demonstrates resourcefulness, a trait treasured by busy administrators and counselors.) Next, students should continue politely but insistently to ask for assistance until it is forthcoming. Successful self-advocacy, a skill for working effectively with those in authority, and realistic self esteem, which is based upon accomplishment, improve resilience.

By working on all of these skills, gifted students in our homes and schools do much to reduce their levels of risk. ♦

Reference


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Gifted Dropouts: Life After High School

Shana M. Shaw
Mary K. Tallent-Runnels

How do gifted high school dropouts fare later in life?

[Editor’s Note: This article is based on research conducted at Texas Tech University, using information from the National Education Longitudinal Study (1988-2000).]

Sylvia is a single mother of three children. Her 8-year old son, John, was born during the spring semester of Sylvia’s senior year. She dropped out of high school to take care of him and live with John’s father. Less than a year after John was born, Sylvia became pregnant with Lily. Two years later, she was pregnant again with Dylan. She was 26 when the children’s father left his young family. He sends money, but it does not cover all their bills. Sylvia and the children have moved in with her parents; she looks for a job while the two oldest are in school and her mother watches Dylan. Sylvia receives food stamps to help with the cost of groceries and is on a waiting list for low income housing. Sometimes she thinks about how things could have been different, but she does not dwell much on the past. She knows that no one at the companies to which she applies would ever imagine that she was placed in advanced or honors courses throughout junior high and high school. These employers only see Sylvia’s lack of education, and though she would like to get her Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) and eventually start taking classes at the local community college, her responsibilities make returning to school impossible at this time.

Sylvia is an example of a young, intellectually gifted woman who, due to a teenage pregnancy, left school before graduating. Unfortunately, her life is fairly average among young, gifted female dropouts; teen pregnancies are often the impetus behind the decision to leave school. In fact, if one event seems to distinguish a gifted high school dropout from a gifted high school graduate, it is probably a teenage pregnancy.

What, if anything, do the adult lives of intellectually talented dropouts and high school graduates have in common? Can giftedness help someone overcome the obstacles associated with not having a high school diploma? We looked at significant categories such as the attainment of education, employment, and certain aspects of their private lives and found that discrepancies between gifted dropouts and gifted high school graduates become apparent in adulthood.

Educational Differences
After high school, it seems that gifted dropouts and gifted graduates begin taking dissimilar paths in life. About 75 percent of the dropouts in our research not only did not finish high school but also did not seek equivalency degrees. With this in mind, it is not surprising that most dropouts had also not received college diplomas by the time they were in their mid-20s, while most of the gifted high school graduates had either obtained degrees or were currently enrolled in colleges or universities. These numbers represent potentially ominous bodings for dropouts. We live in a world where rapid technological advancement requires people to be more educated than in decades past. These talented individuals may...
always be at a disadvantage in their careers due to lack of education.

**Employment Differences**

As the dropouts and graduates moved into their mid-20s, the gap between them widened in terms of salaries, health insurance benefits, and employer-supplied retirement plans, but there were also areas in which the dissimilarities were relatively negligible. For example, while graduates earned an average of $10,000 more annually, fewer than 10 percent of the graduates were more satisfied with their jobs than dropouts. Both groups considered their work to be of consequence. The bottom line is that the graduates were making more money while employed in more secure and stable jobs than the dropouts, but job satisfaction and perceived job importance among the two groups was comparable.

There was a significant difference between genders with respect to employment. Most males, regardless of their status as dropouts or graduates, were employed. On the other hand, fewer than half of the female dropouts were employed, while female graduates were employed at almost the same rate as their male counterparts.

**Personal Differences**

Several variables were investigated to describe the personal lives of dropouts and graduates in their 20s.

To provide a more complete picture of the personal lives of graduates and dropouts, we studied the types of households these individuals created. We included variables such as tobacco and/or alcohol consumption and participation in elections. We were pleasantly surprised by the fact that not all our predictions turned out to be correct—in particular, we were wrong when we expected dropouts to consume more tobacco products and alcoholic beverages. We assumed that dropouts would participate in more self-destructive behaviors, but we were incorrect. In both groups, about one in four people smoked cigarettes. Also, about 60-70 percent of the survey respondents reported that they occasionally drank alcohol, but very few people in either group seemed to do so excessively.

The last group of variables we looked at investigated the civic involvement of the graduates and dropouts. At the age of 26, the graduates and dropouts were different in terms of their involvement in community and civic affairs. For instance, about 80 percent of graduates were registered to vote, while only 63 percent of dropouts were registered voters. Even more dramatically, only 27 percent of dropouts voted in the 1996 presidential election while over twice as many graduates (about 63 percent) voted in the same election. If high school dropouts, who are statistically more likely to be reliant on federal aid programs, are not participating in local, state, and national elections, they are also not protecting their interests and needs.

**Which Gifted Are Most At Risk for Dropping Out?**

Renzulli and Park (2002) found that many gifted dropouts come from economically disadvantaged families. Parents of dropouts completed fewer years of school than parents of graduates, suggesting a cycle of academic difficulty that follows these individuals and their families. Dropouts reported that they left school because they did not enjoy it, they were not keeping up with their work, or they had found jobs. Females reported that pregnancy and/or parenthood were major factors in their decisions to leave school. Altogether, the most significant predictors of academic failure in high school were socioeconomic status, student pregnancy/parenthood, and parental educational levels.

**Recommendations for School Administrators, Teachers, and Parents**

Letting students know the possible future impact of dropping out of high school may deter them from doing so. Students who are gifted and at risk for dropping out do not fail because they are incapable of completing their schoolwork; there are other reasons. If these youngsters do drop out, alternatives such as the GED should be discussed.

We recommend that panel discussions be conducted by dropouts who are in their 20s. During these discussions, those who have dropped out should give their reasons for doing so, how they feel about that decision, and what difficulties it has caused them. Discussions should include students who were identified for gifted programs.

Additionally, alternative programs should be developed for students who become pregnant, allowing them to stay in school. Many high schools across the country have already established ways to support mothers-to-be as they stay in school. These programs also help teach the young women to become better mothers or to find paths to adoption.

There are no easy answers to the issue of school dropouts. The problem has been studied by many and needs continued examination. The myth that all dropouts who are gifted leave because they are bored in school is not supported in our work.

**Reference**


Shana M. Shaw is in a doctoral program at the University of Texas, Austin. Her interest is in projects centered on gifted students and their education.

Mary K. Tallent-Runnels is associate professor of educational psychology in Texas Tech University’s College of Education. Her research interests related to gifted students include learning and study strategies, problem solving, and perceptions of the future.
Children who live in poverty are frequently at risk for underachievement. This is not to say that poverty automatically causes lack of achievement, but being poor can certainly take its toll. Gifted low income students can be compared to diamonds, which can only be formed under conditions of extreme heat and pressure. Both diamonds and impoverished young people have the potential to be brilliant, but in students that brilliance will not be forthcoming unless teachers and parents apply positive pressure in the form of encouragement and strong support.

Factors that contribute to poor achievement in low income students include four concentric rings of influence: culture/family, school, social, and psychological.

Concentric Rings of Influence: Achievement & Underachievement

In their book *Inequality at the Starting Gate*, Lee and Burkam (2002) stressed that the opportunity gap between low income and high income begins before students come to school. In the homes of those who are poor, there are not as many books available, parents do not read to children as much, and in general these young people are not exposed to academics. These factors inhibit students’ learning once they are in school.

**School**

When teachers have not been trained to work with students of poverty, they tend to focus on the weaknesses of these young people. This is often
referred to as deficit thinking (Ford & Grantham, 2003), which hinders referral for gifted education screening because the teacher is focused on the child’s weaknesses rather than his strengths.

“When teachers have not been trained to work with students of poverty, they tend to focus on the weaknesses of these young people.”

Schools in poor areas tend to have fewer resources (Barton, 2003; Kozol, 2005). There may not be access to updated books, technology, or high quality teachers. In addition, high schools in poor communities are less likely to offer AP classes (Barton, 2003), further limiting opportunities. The outcomes for students who attend such schools are disconcerting. Consider what happens to gifted students and those with high potential when they are not challenged.

**Social**
While it may be difficult to admit, injustices exist not only in society, but also in school. It is too often assumed that people are poor because of their own doing. Conversely, it is believed that those with wealth have earned their success. Circumstances that are beyond one’s control are not considered.

Students from impoverished areas may tend to score lower on tests than high income students because they have had fewer learning opportunities growing up. Also, gifted education policies regarding identification usually do not take into account how poverty affects test performance. Under-identification of children living in poverty may occur.

**Psychological**
Self-perception, which is determined by self-concept, self-esteem, and racial identity, affects achievement, as does the desire for success and self-efficacy. Whiting (2006) states that low income students may not have as much confidence in their school abilities as other students. Further, they may be less motivated in school, especially if they do not understand the value of getting good grades. If poor students do not come into contact with high achievers, they may not understand the relevance of school.

Low Income Students: At Promise
Understanding the four rings of influence (Figure 1) should be regarded as important information on which to build. Many poverty stricken students are resilient and able to overcome their backgrounds. They are capable of achieving the brilliance of diamonds through our consistent pressure of high expectations and support. We can intervene to change these at risk children to students at promise for success. The following recommendations can help to support low income students:

- Create talent development programs in school settings that nurture potential.
- Eliminate any policies and procedures that negatively affect poor students. When possible, fees should either be on a sliding scale or be waived altogether, and transportation to events should be provided.
- Teachers must realize that impoverished situations may adversely affect students during screening and assessment for gifted programming, and appropriate measures should be taken to level the playing field. During screening and assessment, pay attention to students’ economic levels, recognizing that lower income students may be gifted underachievers.
- Provide students who are both gifted and underachievers with counseling and support in the form of tutoring and the direct teaching of study skills and test taking skills.
- Assign students to mentors who can motivate and encourage.
- Have motivational speakers visit classrooms.
- Take young people, as early as possible, on college tours to encourage them to continue their education after high school.
- Work with parents/caregivers to encourage academic achievement at home.
- Encourage families to have their children participate in before- and after-school activities, as well as summer programs for gifted students.
- Raise expectations for students in lower economic conditions, focusing on their strengths. High expectations

“ If poor students do not come into contact with high achievers, they may not understand the relevance of school.”

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**Understanding Our Gifted, Spring 2007**
are evident when the curriculum is rigorous.

No one truly knows what students are capable of doing academically and intellectually; no one truly knows what students are capable of becoming later in life. We must invest in all our young people, giving them the necessary assistance and encouragement and applying the supportive pressure they need to develop the brilliance of academic diamonds.

References


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Gifted students and those who work with them need to understand that differentiation and support based on individual need is key to developing potential. By assembling case studies of youngsters that are based on the perceptions of students, parents, and teachers, we can better understand and accommodate the needs of these learners.

The Study
Through a longitudinal study focused on identification policy that is inclusive of underrepresented gifted students (Van Tassel-Baska & Feng, 2003; Van Tassel-Baska, Feng, & deBrux, under review; Van Tassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, in press; Van Tassel-Baska, Johnson, & Avery, 2002), a team of researchers developed case studies of special needs gifted students from four groups.

- low income African American
- low income Caucasian
- twice exceptional
- high nonverbal/low verbal

The purpose of the study was to more fully understand these youngsters—particularly their characteristics related to aptitude, achievement, gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity—and how these characteristics interact in school settings. Children profiled in the study were identified as gifted four to five years prior to the study, allowing exploration of student reactions to gifted program participation. Researchers probed to understand social relationships as well as family issues, involvement, and support. Students’ learning styles, preferences, and talent areas outside of academics were investigated. The team delved into perceptions of giftedness and internal factors such as motivation, persistence, and skills of management and organization.

The Findings
Across the varied perspectives of students, parents, and teachers, participation in the gifted program was seen as positive. Students saw the benefits in the form of more challenge in the classroom, faster paced studies, and opportunities to be in classroom settings with like-minded peers focused on learning. When asked about participation in the gifted program, one student noted, “It makes you feel smart, and people there are like each other.” Parents, too, remarked on beneficial aspects of placement in the program. Children were given more challenging homework and the opportunity to participate in outside projects. Increased self-esteem and confidence were observed by parents and teachers. After her son was identified and placed in gifted classes, a parent of a twice exceptional
Profiles, continued

One mother shared an anecdote about her son: “He has a strong sense of himself. He knows what he wants to do, and he does it. Once, he disappeared in the airport. His father and I were frantic. He had gone on by himself to the gate. We have to keep a rein on him because he has no fear.” About a gifted student who was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), a teacher stated, “She is a strong student with an A right now, probably ahead in everything in this class. She is definitely a deep thinker.” One teacher of a low income student commented, “Her work is correct, and she does more than expected.” These quotes typify the intrinsic motivation in many of the children studied.

Students sometimes appeared to be unaware of learning problems that were perceived by adults. One student was seen by his teachers and parents as unmotivated, lacking a strong work ethic, and having poor academic performance. From his perspective, he was just the opposite. He portrayed himself as outstanding in math and one of the best in his honors class because he always did his work.

Parents focused on their children’s heightened self-esteem and confidence gained from recognition of their skills and placement in gifted classes. One father said about his son, “His self-esteem is great; he feels good about himself and what he is doing. He is very determined; if he thinks something is right, he sticks to it.”

Teachers were aware of learning strengths and problems, in particular those related to perceived motivation, organization, and social skills. The science/math teacher observed that a low-income African American student was analytical, highly motivated, and an auditory learner. She said, “He can break down word problems. He pushes himself; he strives for excellence. He often likes to question why: ‘Why does that rule work every time?’” As far as weaknesses, she stated that “if he doesn’t get something the first time, he wants to move on to a different question.” Combining all three points of view—those of student, parent, and teacher—enabled researchers to see a more balanced picture of the child.

Themes among Groups of Students

Low Income African American Students
This group enjoyed the experience within the gifted program, and identification as gifted improved motivation, enhancing the eagerness to learn. Participation in gifted classes increased self-esteem and confidence. As a group, these young people had many and different creative outlets for self-expression outside of academics. Their teachers tended to perceive them as loners, yet the students felt it was important to maintain strong peer relationships outside of their gifted group. Strong family support was noted.

Barrett is an African American 8th grader in an urban middle school. In spite of a difficult life, he is a highly motivated and disciplined student with a strong desire to learn and perform at high levels in all subjects. The gifted program experiences have been a boost for him to learn more and to aspire toward higher goals. However, he is also vulnerable. He is reserved in a class with children from more advantaged backgrounds. His critical mind, inquisitive spirit, and intuitive problem-solving ability are recognized by his teachers as real strengths.

Low Income Caucasian Students
These students, their parents, and teachers all recognized a positive academic and affective impact of the gifted program experience. Parents and teachers saw these students as having diverse and creative talents. About half of the group was perceived to have learning problems such as lack of motivation, time management, and organizational skills. Most families were involved in their children’s education.

Terry is an 8th grader in a rural middle school. His test scores, his mother’s description of his developmental history, and his science teacher’s observations offer evidence of his intellectual abilities and academic potential. He is verbally gifted; however, he lacks basic skills to organize himself and his time. Terry is confident of his abilities, is happy-go-lucky, and is not perturbed about his current performance. He is well-liked, has many friends, and is considered a leader. His mother does not appear too concerned about his motivation because she believes he is smart enough and will make it to college with a scholarship, if he chooses. Terry’s teachers,
however, are exasperated by his lack of effort, which they attribute to poor work habits.

Twice Exceptional Students
Comments of both children and parents were positive regarding the impact of the gifted program on the twice exceptional. However, further questioning revealed that these students had a number of issues, including low motivation, hypersensitivity, poor organization skills, and negative behaviors. A lack of teacher accommodations for disabilities was evident.

Janice appreciates the learning benefits she experienced in her gifted language arts class last year. At the same time, she understands that she did not succeed in the class because of her disorganization, struggles with family issues, and lack of motivation and persistence. Her strong critical and creative reading, writing, and thinking abilities stand out as strengths. ADD and giftedness shape how she functions in school—successful in some tasks, unsuccessful in others. The social-emotional issues she faces as a twice exceptional student also appear to contribute to her uneven performance in school. Peer relationships vary, depending on the group.

Betty feels there are both positive and negative aspects of participating in the gifted program but finds it a challenging experience overall. While the opinions of her mother and her teachers vary somewhat about her strengths and weaknesses, it is apparent that Betty is highly motivated, self-confident, and social. Teachers appear to disagree on her writing talents, however. The gifted teacher sees her as less creative in this area, while the regular classroom teacher sees her as a strong writer.

Using the Research to Make a Difference
Each story provides a snapshot and a deeper understanding of a student. When teachers understand their students more fully, they are better able to create environments for learning in which students thrive. Use of these descriptive stories can be combined with a framework for analysis, exploring aspects of gifted student learning, social-emotional needs, and making informed decisions in the best interests of students. For example, a generic framework for case analysis (Fenwick & Parson, 2000) would have teachers

* identify the most important facts related to each gifted student’s nature and needs
* pinpoint relevant issues
* discuss actions which address the issues, as well as pros and cons of each
* determine the most desirable actions based on the analysis

To narrow the analysis to a more specific focus (e.g., social-emotional needs of gifted learners), use of a framework would ask educators to

* identify risk factors, issues, or problems related to social-emotional needs of the student
* support each with evidence
* recommend interventions and supports which address identified risk factors, issues, or problems

Use of descriptive cases brings a reality to the needs of gifted students, makes the issues come alive, and allows educators to grapple with the complexities of how best to respond to student needs. Further, organizing information into some type of framework creates the likelihood that teachers will transfer learning to new situations.

Clearly, the snapshots of middle school students can be used as tools to push teachers and administrators beyond the misconceptions they may hold about atypical gifted learners to deeper understanding of the nature and needs of giftedness. The student profiles can assist teachers in differentiating instruction for students with particular preferences and styles, as well as students who have uneven profiles in terms of their academic strengths and weaknesses.

This study of special needs gifted learners underlines the importance of finding students with potential and placing them in gifted classes. Even though some types of students included in this study may not have opportunities to participate in highly challenging academic classes, they do tend to develop more skills when placed in rigorous courses.
Profiles, continued

It is noteworthy in many of the cases that students have some extraordinary strengths and some areas of weakness. The lesson of building on strengths to develop areas of weakness is fundamental. Many gifted young people must be taught skills of organization, time management, and working with others. When teachers focus on what students have rather than what they do not have, youngsters begin to develop the notion of hard work, persistence, practice for improvement, and use of trial and error to understand what works and what doesn’t.

References


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What do at risk gifted children look like?

I am elitist when it comes to fighting for the personal needs of gifted children. My soapbox approach to talking about at risk gifted students originates from my experiences with them in the classroom. The term “gift” has an immediate positive tone to it, like when someone gets a puppy for Christmas. But, what if that gift is not little and cuddly? What if the gift is an elephant? It is a lot harder to feed and clean up after an elephant, it doesn’t jump into your lap, and you can’t cuddle it. Some gifts with which children are born are not all that great. There are many categories of at risk gifted children, each with a separate set of needs. Among these categories are profoundly gifted, gifted with LD, gifted and emotionally disabled, and an increasing number of gifted youngsters who try unrealistically to be perfect.

In what ways can we reach these at risk students? The key is appropriate education. Many programs do not meet the needs of this population, but teachers who are champions of very able learners have an intrinsic sense that enables them to identify atypical gifted students.

My first experience with a student at risk began with Tom at a suburban elementary school where I was a teacher of the gifted. I walked by a tall, lean boy who was fumbling at his locker, obviously hiding something. I stopped to say hello and asked how he was doing. “I’m not doing anything!” he piped and became more nervous. My instincts told me to stay by his side and investigate further. When he realized that I was not going away because of his attempts to “dis” me, he blurted out, “I’m going to annihilate this place.” I looked into his locker and saw something that shocked me. Peering into his private space, I recognized a series of wires and batteries and some material looking like putty. “Is that a bomb?” I asked. “It’s not finished,” he whispered. Glad that there was no traffic in the hallway, I sat down on the floor with him. “Don’t tell Mr. Brown (the principal). He hates me!” Listening to the quality of this 6th grader’s discussion and his articulate description of why school was intolerable for him, I gleaned that Tom was very possibly gifted. I convinced him that I had to take his contraption out of the building. Placing the device into my cart, I told him I would find him later and took it out to my car.

When I entered the faculty room at lunchtime, I mentioned Tom’s name and asked if anyone had him in class. The vocal eruptions of angst against Tom fueled my passion to help this troubled student, a young person I found in my path, needing help. I was determined to have him evaluated for the gifted program in the hopes that he would come to class, and I could work with him.

Tom’s family was temporarily homeless, and his mom signed the evaluation paperwork from their current home, the family car. His full scale score of 147 on the WISC intelligence test legitimized my instincts. He now was eligible to attend the pullout gifted classes and have an IEP.

Tom was upset that he had to attend class with a “bunch of nerds.” My lesson plan was to investigate the nuclear accident at Three Mile...
Elephant Gift, continued

Island (TMI). When provided the general details, Tom was angry at the lack of responsibility of the workers at the site. His rage against a school system that didn’t meet his needs transformed to rage directed at those who caused this spectacular accident. Tom shouted, “What? How in the world could that have happened?” and started quizzing me about the island complex. I could not respond to his demands for details and justification, and I told him, “You need to find out the facts so we know more about this!” Tom spent countless hours researching the incident and searched everywhere to find information.

He then built to scale a six-foot replica of the entire TMI complex and intricately labeled it. With a pointer, Tom presented his research and model to all the gifted classes. Other teachers asked to have him share his TMI research with their classes. The principal, who no longer saw Tom as an adversary, scheduled him to speak in other schools. When the requests surpassed his available time, Tom made tape recordings of his oral interpretation and distain for the lack of proper equipment, planning, and obvious risk to the local community, especially the nearby school playground. For the first time in Tom’s educational career, he began getting positive instead of negative attention. The bottom line is: Tom’s grades dramatically improved, and every year after that his performance skyrocketed. He graduated with a four year scholarship to Purdue.

Many at risk gifted students are not as fortunate as Tom. Rick manifested a strong sense of perfectionism. If he did not believe he could achieve a task in perfect fashion, he would not try it at all. Rick was quickly labeled an underachieving gifted student. Underachievement is a complicated characteristic of some gifted youngsters, and it is difficult to recognize, treat, or reverse. I recently received a call from Rick’s mother. She wanted me to know that her son’s experiences as a member of our Middle School Problem Solving Team, then called Olympics of the Mind (OM), had made him very happy. Sadly, she also wanted to let me know that, at age 24, he had taken his life. She was aware that I tried to keep him on task in school by rewarding him with challenging activities. Unfortunately, he did not believe that he could succeed on a daily basis and failed to graduate from high school. His future then became one missed opportunity after another.

Some gifted children are labeled as profoundly gifted—bright beyond our calculations of their abilities. Billi heard her 1st grade teacher recite the nursery rhyme, Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon.... An avid fan of space discovery, she could not help but boldly interrupt with the question, “But…what happens in reentry?” She could not imagine anything but a “crispy critter” cow after such an experience. Her inexperienced teacher responded, “Billi, sit down and act like a 1st grader!” The vocal disapproval of her teacher embarrassed Billi. She moved back behind the other students seated on the floor and hid under a table. She would not soon offer such an insightful question in this class. She needed an advocate.

Matt was given the Structure of the Intellect (SOI) Assessment, which measures 180 ways of thinking. His scores in scientific thinking charted at the upper middle school range, yet he could not meet his 2nd grade level expectations in reading and, therefore, was placed in an LD classroom. Because of his high scores in scientific reasoning, Matt was eventually included in the gifted program and energetically began the opening activity, building a tall structure out of toothpicks and mini-marshmallows. When he began building an equilateral geodesic dome and quoting statements from Buckminster Fuller (inventor of such domes), the other children gravitated toward Matt as he eagerly explained the soundness of his structure. Matt succeeded that year because his reading assignments now were introduced and practiced through the lens of scientific discoveries. He became the leader of his school’s OM team and led them to victory at the state competition, using a robot that picked up a glass of water and broke a balloon while traveling through a maze.

If you are a teacher of the gifted or a regular education teacher who can recognize and also like the way bright students operate, become their advocates. Identify those students who you know are bright but may mask their abilities. Give them a reason to participate in challenging learning situations. Discover their passions and areas of potential. You can’t cuddle an elephant in your lap, but you can value its strength.

Gae Anderson-Miller is the Pennsylvania State Affiliate Director for International Future Problem Solving. She has been a teacher of the gifted, a principal, and coordinator of a graduate gifted education program.

“Tom’s family was temporarily homeless, and his mom signed the evaluation paperwork from their current home, the family car.”
While we have learned much from special education about using an array of services, from the least restrictive to the most restrictive learning environments, public schools still base many instructional decisions on a child’s chronological age. Are the child’s interests best served by being grouped all day solely by the number of years lived? What does a gifted child do while he waits for everyone in his age group to catch up? For gifted students, the most restrictive environment is often the regular classroom, even when differentiation is incorporated.

We understand and have compassion for a child who may be 11 with a 6-year-old mind, but sometimes educators do not understand nor appreciate the inverse: a 6-year-old with an 11-year-old mind. Society still seems to look at the child with high abilities as a privileged individual, and the attempt to meet this child’s needs is somehow considered elitist. We want all students to have excellent teachers and reach optimal performance—and the word “all” includes gifted children. Providing a less restrictive environment makes school a safer place for these students to be different from the norm.

While educational systems try to make positive changes, we still haven’t totally figured out how to meet the academic and affective needs of our highly able students. School reform can be a slow, evolving process. Financially-strapped educational systems hampered by a lack of appreciation, an overwhelming number of students, and limited facilities are looking for quick and inexpensive fixes that will take care of the needs of all learners. The most current solution seems to be differentiation.

Differentiation implies that the instructional needs of all students will be met in the regular classroom. It is a wonderful teaching concept, but when decision makers view differentiation as the only solution or, more seriously, as a rationale to eliminate or reduce funding for additional services to the gifted, the concept is misused.

Is it true or even possible that all students’ academic and affective needs—despite their chronological ages, mental ages, differences in learning and interest styles, economic situations, diverse ethnicities, strengths, and weaknesses—can be met by one teacher in the classroom? This scenario calls to mind a feat of plate-spinning that not even the best of magicians could aspire to do well.

What are the best ways to meet the needs of gifted students in grades K-12? Educators from the Northside Independent School District (NISD) asked many questions as they examined their G/T and enrichment programs. Fortunately, the state offers Texas educators some guidelines in answering those questions. The Texas State Plan for the Education of the Gifted and Talented requires that school districts offer three types of service components.

- Identified gifted and talented students must work with others who are not identified as gifted.
Services, continued

- G/T students must be given the opportunity to work together as a group with other identified gifted students.
- The G/T student must be given time to work alone.

Notice that these services range from the most restrictive environment (the regular classroom) to the least restrictive environment (individual services). Therefore, each school district must provide an array of continuum of G/T services.

Believing that all students need a variety of approaches, the school district decided to make certain all children are a part of the picture in the array of offered services. Notice that the bottom level of the pyramid in Figure 1—its foundation—is where differentiation of instruction begins. The classroom is the perfect place to start meeting the needs of diverse learners. Enrichment and acceleration begin at this level, and meeting various needs is done continuously throughout the school year. If differentiation is done properly, all students stand to benefit.

Continuing up the pyramid, the next level provides the school with a gifted/enrichment specialist and a resource room. This specialist is an academic leader who helps meet the specific needs of a special population—in this case, gifted students. The specialist works with the content teachers, assisting them in planning for differentiated instruction that occurs in the regular classroom. The gifted/enrichment specialist may also go into the classroom to work with the teacher to assist students in extending creative and critical thinking skills.

A resource room is filled with a variety of supplementary materials that may be used by every teacher on campus. This level of service allows the specialist to have a direct and indirect impact on student learning.

"...when decision makers view differentiation as the only solution or, more seriously, as a rationale to eliminate or reduce funding for additional services to the gifted, the concept is misused."

The third tier of the pyramid offers a variety of services. Credit by examination is available for any student at any grade level. If the exam is passed, students receive credit for a course or an entire grade level. This option is often more successful at the secondary level, since the student must only show mastery of one content area versus the entire year of course work in all the core content areas (reading, math, science, social studies) required of elementary students.

EXCEL mathematics, honors, pre-AP and Advanced Placement, and dual credit courses are offered to any capable secondary student. NISD also has four magnet high schools based on student interests, and many of our highly able students decide to go that route. Some work toward the Distinguished Achievement Program, the highest level of graduation diploma in Texas.

Pullout enrichment provides a learning environment where the specialist offers enrichment and/or acceleration services to any student (not just those identified as gifted) capable of going beyond prescribed instruction. This pullout component is analogous to a content mastery center (CMC) with a high-end learning focus. The mainstream or advanced content classroom teacher selects the participants. Even bright students may have gaps in their learning, so the group working in the pullout enrichment center may vary throughout the year, allowing students to spend time in the regular classroom when necessary. It is a win-win scenario: the kids receive services they need in addition to what is already occurring in their content classroom, they get to work with other students who also need more advanced work, and they are able to have the specialist as an instructor.

Another bonus of pullout enrichment is that the classroom teacher has fewer students in her room during enrichment
time and can focus on those who may require more direct
teacher instruction. Now, what classroom teacher wouldn’t
welcome having fewer students to teach even for part of the
week?

This level of service directly and indirectly benefits
everyone in the school community. A new set of student
classroom leaders tends to rise to the top when the layers of
highly capable learners are removed for pullout enrichment
services. The process is often a new awakening for both the
students and teachers who stay in the regular classroom. I
heard one child say, “When Juanita leaves the class, it’s my
turn to shine.”

The top level of the pyramid fulfills the state requirement
that gifted students have time to work with other identified
students. The Advanced Learning Programs for High
Achievers (ALPHA) provide services exclusively for gifted
students. A less restrictive learning environment is provided
for gifted students at this level. ALPHA is structured in three
sections. One is a brief time to focus on social and emotional
issues. The gifted/enrichment specialist is often the person
on the campus most equipped to handle affective topics.

The second section focuses on metacognition, with the
emphasis on teaching creative and critical thinking skills
(i.e., Multiple Intelligences, Talents Unlimited, de Bono’s
Six Thinking Hats, Bloom’s Taxonomy, Creative Problem
Solving, etc.). Our belief is that students need to know,
understand, and do different kinds of thinking. Labeling
their thinking is one way to help kids pull from their toolkits
the items needed for different learning situations.

The third part of our working with the gifted is to teach content
in which the thinking skills can be applied. The content
integrates math, science, social studies, and language arts.
It usually involves student interest and is heavy in research
requiring primary and secondary sources. Identified G/T
students are pulled together anywhere between 90 minutes
to 5 hours a week in grades K-6. Some middle schools offer
a 7th and 8th grade elective course, called G/T studies, that
maintains a more relaxed, less restrictive environment than
what is expected in most content courses.

ALPHA high school students may enroll in a G/T leadership
elective course as freshmen or sophomores, as well as
participate in other gifted services. Seminars, which are
modeled on professional conferences with a keynote speaker
and breakout sessions, are based upon student interests.

As a result, not every G/T high school student may wish
to attend each seminar. The last, but important, service is
an independent study mentorship course which is offered
to juniors and seniors. In this course, students chose a field
of study and spend the school year conducting extensive
research and working with a professional in that particular
field. Each student culminates his work by producing a
product/performance which makes a contribution to the field
and which is evaluated at the professional level by a mentor
and other experts in the field.

One size doesn’t fit all. By offering learning opportunities
in a variety of settings and groupings we can better serve all
students. By providing an array of services that support the
regular classroom teacher we bolster learning opportunities.
In the end, this helps to meet the needs of gifted young people
and provides the least restrictive environment.

Priscilla Ramirez Lurz is the Coordinator of Gifted and
Enrichment Programs for the Northside Independent School
District in San Antonio, Texas. She has been a public school
educator for 28 years, 18 of which have been in the field of gifted
education.
A few weeks ago I had a phone call from the principal of a large elementary school. She was faced with a dilemma and wanted my advice….or did she?

Julie, a teacher with special training in gifted education, was urging the principal to accelerate Stuart, a highly gifted 2nd grade student, into the 4th grade at the end of the current school year. Julie had assessed Stuart’s math and language skills using above-level testing and found he was working at the 5th-6th grade level. He was a mature, good-natured boy whose sense of humor was more like that of the older students. His current classmates simply couldn’t understand his jokes. By contrast, in the school chess club he played with and was happily accepted by older children.

I tried to reassure the principal that Stuart seemed like an excellent candidate for grade advancement, but for every point I made she came up with a counter-argument. If acceleration was such a successful intervention, why didn’t more schools use it? She perceived that Stuart would certainly have gaps in his knowledge even if they weren’t showing up at this early stage. Children shouldn’t be hurried through childhood. He might be accepted in the chess club because that caters to children in many grades, but the older students would reject Stuart in the more formal classroom setting.

After a half hour conversation, I realized that nothing I said was going to convince this well-meaning but anxious principal that Stuart could be accelerated without harm to his academic or social development. Her final comment to me was, I believe, sincere and heartfelt: “I know you’ve had a lot of experience with this, and I am grateful for your time, but you know, I just can’t risk it.”

A Nation Deceived
The title of A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students (Colangelo, Assouline and Gross, 2004) vividly illustrates the central problem with the underutilization of acceleration for academically gifted students in the United States (and, by association, Australia). We deceive ourselves with a frightening array of myths and misconceptions about acceleration.

- We tell ourselves that acceleration means hitting the gas pedal and forcing children through school faster than they can cope. (It doesn’t; it means releasing the brake!)
- We worry that allowing bright kids to move ahead will upset the other children. (By contrast, students are accustomed to talented age peers moving ahead of the class in sports and music.)
- We fret that gifted kids may be bright academically but won’t be mature enough to cope with older students. (Actually, gifted students tend to be advanced in their emotional and social maturity, although they may not show this in classrooms where they are bored and friendless.)

Like the principal of Stuart’s school, we tell ourselves that safe is better than sorry; doing nothing is better than making a decision that may turn out to be wrong. And that, perhaps, is the greatest misconception of all. “The evidence indicates that when children’s academic and social needs are not met, the result is boredom and disengagement from school” (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004. Vol. 1, p.6).

Forgetting Our Own History
Lewis M. Terman’s classic study of 1,528 intellectually gifted and talented children, which formally commenced in 1921, is reportedly the longest longitudinal study ever conducted in education or psychology. An element of this study is the detailed investigation Terman and the researchers, who continued after his death, made of the academic and social outcomes of acceleration.

Almost half of Terman’s subjects could read before they entered school. On standardized tests of academic achievement, they consistently scored an average of 40 percent ahead of their age peers as they progressed through school. Twenty percent were permitted to skip all or part of 1st grade. By the time they graduated from high school, 10 percent had skipped two grades and another 23 percent had skipped one (Terman & Oden, 1947). Fully one-third of these gifted students were accelerated! In high school, despite so many of them being younger than their classmates, they consistently scored in the top 10 percent of their classes in achievement. They enjoyed school.

Many more of Terman’s subjects went on to college than was customary at that time. Indeed, around 65 percent of the men and almost 60 percent of the women went on to take advanced degrees. Students who were grade accelerated were more likely to enter and successfully complete postgraduate study than equally gifted students who had not been accelerated.

A 1977 survey of the students in the Terman study, when the average age was 67, asked them to look back on their lives and rate the satisfaction they had found in various areas. The responses of people who had been accelerated were generally more positive than those who had not. Those accelerated reported significantly greater satisfaction in their work, recreational activities, and social activities and friendships, than did those who weren’t accelerated (Cronbach, 1996).
From the long-term findings of this study, it was determined that academically gifted students of IQ 140 or above “should be promoted sufficiently to permit college entrance by the age of 17 at latest and that a majority in this group would be better off to enter at 16” (Terman & Oden, 1959, p. 72).

Why, then, when acceleration proved so overwhelmingly successful for young people, are we so reluctant to use it today?

Exceptionally Gifted Students—A Group Seriously At Risk

Since 1983, I have been conducting a longitudinal study of 60 young Australians of IQ 160+ (Gross, 2004). Young people at this level of intellectual ability appear in the population at a ratio of fewer than 1 in 10,000. I have argued that keeping children of IQ 160 in classes where the average IQ is 100—four standard deviations below theirs—is as indefensible as placing a child of average ability in a class of children with an average IQ of 40 and expecting the average child to achieve academically and develop fulfilling social relationships (Gross, 2006). Yet, unhappily, 33 of the 60 children in my study spent all of their school years in the regular classroom.

Seventeen of the 60 students in this study were radically accelerated by three or more years over time. None of the students has regrets; indeed, several say they wished their acceleration had started earlier! In every case they have experienced positive outcomes both academically and in their socio-affective development. Several entered college between the ages of 11 and 15. All graduated with extremely high grades and, in most cases, university prizes for exemplary achievement. All are characterized by a passionate love of learning, and almost all have gone on to obtain PhDs.

In every case, the radically accelerated children have been able to form warm, lasting, and deep friendships. They believe this is because their schools placed them with older students to whom they tended to gravitate. Those who experienced social isolation earlier say it disappeared after the first grade skip. The majority are married or in permanent or serious love relationships. They tend to choose partners who, like themselves, are highly gifted.

David, now age 26, speaks for many of this group who were not accelerated: “All through my years in school, teachers would say, ‘Yes, I understand that you know most of this, but hang on....next year will be different.’ But the next year would be just the same, and the year after that and the year after that again. Grade 12 wasn’t quite so bad because the curriculum was new in some respects, and the following year I had the carrot of university dangling in front of me to keep me going. By this stage it really was all that did keep me going. And I was shattered to find that first year of university math was year 12 all over again. And the pace was still too slow. I started to get depressed and went to the university counseling service, and you know what they said? ‘Yeah, first year’s pretty boring. It’ll be better next year.’ I was speechless. What I wanted to say was, ‘So when am I going to start learning?’”

Having known this group of exceptionally and profoundly gifted young people since their early or middle childhood years, I am certain that each of them would have benefited from grade advancement, while the vast majority should have been radically accelerated. Perhaps their teachers, like the principal of Stuart’s school, felt they “just couldn’t risk” allowing their students to move ahead. But for these young people, not to “risk” acceleration is just too great a risk.

References


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Surfing the Net: Interventions for At Risk Gifted Youth

Sandra Berger

Many factors may contribute to gifted students being at risk for underachieving, including poverty, English as a second language, and learning disabilities. Sometimes, underachievement may be caused by a combination of backgrounds and environments.

Poverty in childhood puts gifted learners at risk due to lack of educational resources and opportunities for achieving. Compared to more privileged peers with strong family support, poor children may be underrepresented in gifted programs. According to Robinson (2003), equity efforts in gifted education should be directed toward high ability learners living in poverty.

Students with English as their second language may come from families that rely on their children to act as interpreters with the outside world, a time consuming task that might interfere with homework, recreation, and school attendance. For these families, it is a challenge to interact with teachers or administrators.

Many gifted students have disabilities (e.g. ADHD, dyslexia, physical problems) that cause them to be academically disadvantaged. While there are tools and strategies that can be used to help these students, they may not be available to classroom teachers.

Too often teachers and students are left to sink or swim in a regular heterogeneous diverse classroom. When gifted and other individualized programs are eliminated, it is up to teachers and parents to provide the support those students need. Many possible interventions remain consistent in working with a diverse student population. These include:

• Providing mentors for children who need outside support. Talking with an “expert” can inspire a student to pursue interests and passions, or simply spark his curiosity and build on the classroom curriculum.
• Facilitating family involvement in school. When the adults in a child’s life are working together to support that child, impressive results are possible.
• Using community resources such as the library or professionals willing to talk about their careers. Young people need to hear about the relationship between school and getting jobs or training for careers.
• Employing multiple means to identify strengths and talents. At times, initial identification of underachievers is difficult because students may exhibit behaviors that appear inconsistent with talented children. These behaviors may be caused by personal difficulties.

Developing curriculum and instructional strategies that are individualized to focus on student strengths. It is important to match the learning environment in and out of the classroom to the student’s learning style whenever possible.

Keesha came to the United States with her family when she was 12, and they were very poor. Each child was expected to work; school was an afterthought. Nevertheless, Keesha was able to keep up with her schoolwork and had an after-school job that helped the family. Her parents looked forward to the point where Keesha would drop out and work full-time, but Keesha’s teachers and counselor had other ideas. Occasionally they would say, “Keesha, you should take geometry (or some other academic course) because you will need it for college,” or “Keesha, you write lovely poetry. Have you thought about college and a career as a writer?” Keesha had not thought about college because she knew she couldn’t afford it. But the teachers continued to encourage her, and in 12th grade they helped her with financial aid forms. If Keesha’s teachers and counselor had not encouraged her, she might have dropped out of school and just dreamed of going to college.

Carlos was an immigrant from Mexico. His family came to the United States in hopes of making enough money to feed and clothe all their children. As soon as he arrived at school, he was put in a class of 45 students. Some of the students spoke no English; some spoke a little English. They were from Korea, Vietnam, China, Columbia, and many other countries. There was only one trained teacher for children who learned English as a second language. The teacher’s job was to help them learn English while preparing them for state mandated tests. Carlos found that learning English was not difficult. He enjoyed school and loved tangrams and other manipulative puzzles in the classroom. The children in his classroom role-played one another’s customs and lifestyles, using clothing, household items, tools, pictures, and other artifacts to add reality to the dramatization. Parents who spoke English also shared information about their cultural backgrounds. At the end of the school year, state testing blotted out all the other activities, and Carlos had a difficult time because, although he spoke English, no one taught him how to take a multiple choice test.

Alicia had difficulty transitioning from middle to high school. During her first year in high school, everyone was willing to wait for her to adapt, but by the beginning of her second year, she was finding ways to get into trouble, and her grades were on a downhill slide. She could not recognize her own strengths, and when asked about her favorite subject, she didn’t have a clue. Her mother took
her out of school for three months. During that time she met with a school sanctioned tutor at the local library. The first thing she learned was how to learn. Alicia has ADHD as well as other disabilities, and learning had been a puzzle of mismatched pieces. Her disabilities were not as obvious during elementary school because the curriculum was not challenging, but high school was another matter. Working with the tutor, she began to understand her own strengths and talents. Her tutor became her mentor and showed her how to use the library and select appropriately challenging materials. The high school in her neighborhood had more than 2,000 students, many with severe problems. It was not a good match for a teenager with ADHD. So she transferred to another public high school where she was much happier. The new school offered a different structure with smaller learning communities, allowing teachers to be more receptive and take time to listen to students. Their methods and techniques included small-group work, problem-solving assignments, and individualized instruction—a dramatic difference from the “one size fits all” education in her previous high school.

Web Resources

The Value of a Mentor
by Stephanie Hood

giftedhomeschoolers.org/articles/valueofamentor.html
Includes helpful articles on learning styles, assessment and testing, education alternatives, and the twice exceptional.

Family Involvement in Education: How Important Is It? What Can Legislators Do?
by Karen Bogenschneider & Carol Johnson
familyimpactseminars.org/reports/fis20two.pdf
Suggestions for improving family involvement in the schools

Suite 101
www.suite101.com/reference/gifted_teens
Good articles surrounding the use of community resources.

What is Differentiated Instruction?
by Carol Ann Tomlinson
www.readingrockets.org/article/263
Gives examples of instructional strategies that focus on student strengths and learning styles.

Learning Style
www.metamath.com/lsweb/fours.htm
Explains different types of learning styles and how to work with them.


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The Affective Side: Does Overresponding Put a Gifted Child At Risk?

Jean Strop

When we think of at risk gifted students, we often envision children with deficiencies. We assume that there must be an absence of skills, strong guidance, positive role models, positive relationships, or other advantages that normally help students to succeed. However, some young people are at risk, not because they don’t have all of the necessary resources, but because we deprive them of life’s lessons by doing too much for them. These at risk children are overprotected and may not learn to take care of themselves.

In some families, the child’s giftedness may become the focal point, dictating key decisions, activities, and parenting strategies. Consequently, all the child’s wants may be perceived as needs. Parents may fear their role and additional responsibilities of nurturing a gifted child. They may strive to create a stress-free life for their young person and consequently an unhealthy way of living. The child’s giftedness may become valued more than the individual herself, possibly placing her at risk to underachieve.

Consequences

Parents who overprotect a gifted child may make excuses for his behavior, based on the giftedness. For instance, parents may feel that a child’s misbehavior in school is the direct result of not getting his needs met and consequently being bored. They may think that difficulties with classmates stem from peer jealousy. Stretching the truth may be excused because of the child’s extreme creativity. While these certainly can be reasons for behavior problems, they are not necessarily the only possibilities. It is important for students to learn all the possible causes and consequences of their behaviors.

Resilience

When parents attempt to keep a child’s life both stress-free and boredom-free, the student may mishandle normal stressors of life. He may not be able to deal with frustration and, therefore, may be at risk for underachievement patterns. When adults handle most issues for a student, he may not develop the requisite skills to self-advocate, negotiate, and communicate his needs in an appropriate manner. Lack of resilience may become debilitating, putting children at risk for negative means of coping.

Self-esteem

If key individuals define a child through her giftedness, the student may identify herself through that singular parameter, as well. If she cannot be the highest achiever, the first to complete a task, or the one who can achieve with little or no work, she stalls. Underachievement may be blamed on boredom, poor teaching, and meaningless assignments, while the problem is really her fear of not being the best. Her self-esteem may be affected. She may lose confidence and pursue only activities that come easily, avoiding areas of more challenge. It takes a strong self-esteem to risk attempting difficult tasks and tasks that are not favorites.

Interpersonal Relationships

An overprotected student may develop poor interpersonal relationships for the following reasons:

• She may not learn to differentiate needs from wants. Consequently, she is at risk for becoming very demanding of others.
• He may be insulted if others don’t respond to him immediately. This can result in anger and resentment toward those who aren’t meeting his perceived needs.
• She may become manipulative and treat others as objects or vehicles for getting what she wants.
• He may respond negatively to anyone who provides constructive criticism or who puts limits on his behaviors. Because he may appear very self-righteous, he may push others away with his sense of entitlement.
• She might be both unwilling and unable to respond to others with empathy, to abdicate leadership in some situations, or to compromise when necessary.

Parents Must Know Their Own Needs and Issues

Know yourself as a parent. Understand how a child’s giftedness touches off your own needs and unresolved developmental issues. For instance, if you still carry resentment about how you, as a gifted person, were or were not treated, you are likely to project those feelings onto your child. You might intervene in situations to help him avoid the same pain you experienced, when it is actually best to allow him to work things out on his own.

If you saw yourself as competing with your peers and/or siblings when you were young, you are more likely to overrespond to your child’s giftedness as a means to vicariously maintain your childhood experience. Her giftedness and concomitant performance may become more important to your ego than to hers. If you believe your gifted child is smarter than you, it is easy to fall into the trap of being so awestruck by her giftedness and abilities that you forget to treat her as a child; instead, you may see her as a means for “winning” in your own life competitions.

Many parents who feel they were not well parented may overcompensate, doing more for their child than is healthy. The quest to be a perfect parent may be destructive. Though
Affective Side, continued

expressing love and caring is essential, pampering may create (in the child) a sense of internal helplessness.

Responding to the Child as Child First.
No matter how smart a child might be, how verbally mature he appears, or how grown-up he acts, it is important to maintain one’s role as a parent, rather than as a friend. This entails setting limits, expecting cooperation, and maintaining healthy boundaries. It is important to teach logical consequences for behavior by discussing and consistently enforcing them. It is also important to model appropriate ways to be assertive about getting needs met, as well as helping young people make the distinctions between needs and wants. Children should be allowed to experience stressors, disappointments, upsets, and even boredom, discussing and sharing with parents these experiences and how to deal with them.

While it is important for parents to help children understand their weaknesses, adults should not try to “fix” all these weaknesses; rather, they should help young people understand and cope with them. If the emphasis is on eliminating all weaknesses, the student may believe that perfection is not only possible but expected.

Parenting a gifted child is a challenge, but trying to be the perfect gifted parent may cause you too much pressure and also deprive your child of learning important life skills. If you happen to get lost along the way, remember: Your child is a child first, gifted second. You are a parent first, parent of a gifted child second.

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First class biographies are written about important people from whom important lessons can be learned. Students have opportunities to examine and learn about their courage, perseverance, work ethics, and how they have used these traits to enrich the lives of others.

Biographies appear at all reading levels and in a variety of modes including picture and chapter books, adult volumes for secondary gifted readers, and memoirs. Collective biographies share the lives of many individuals, often within specific topic areas.

New biographies match virtually any topic, including music. Jonah Winter, author of prize-winning picture book biographies Frida (Scholastic, 2002) and Diego (Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), leaves the world of painters to examine the life of one of the greatest and most inventive geniuses in the world of jazz. Dizzy (Scholastic, 2006) traces the life of the inventor of bebop, John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie. Winter pulls no punches, describing Gillespie’s abusive childhood in the South to his ultimate adult triumphs as the “Prince of Jazz.” His life and gifts came into full flower when he moved north to New York City. Dizzy demonstrates the value of persistence to acceptance and success.

Many recent biographies profile the pantheon of jazz music greats. Such entries include the poetic collective biography, Jazz ABZ: An A to Z Collection of Jazz Portraits (Candlewick Press, 2005), penned by Wynston Marsalis and illustrated by Paul Rogers.

Jazz-inspired works include Andrea Davis Pinkney’s Ella Fitzgerald: The Tale of a Vocal Virtuosa (Hyperion, 2002); and Charley Parker Played Be Bop (Scholastic, 2004) and John Coltrane’s Giant Steps (Simon & Schuster, 2002), both written and illustrated by Chris Raschka.


An Otsego, Michigan elementary school recently devoted its all-school musical completely to American jazz. Easily read biographies such as Chris Raschka’s Mysterious Thelonious (Scholastic, 1998) were invaluable to teachers introducing all students to legendary giants of jazz music.

“Memoir” is a particularly slippery word in the field of biography. Typically, memoirs describe milestones in the lives of people, and they may be written by the subjects themselves or by others. Two recent jazz-inspired memoirs deserve high praise.

Racism plays a central role in Sue Staffacher's Bessie Smith and the Night Riders (Penguin, 2006), in which the great blues and jazz singer faces down cowardly members of the Ku Klux Klan on a hot North Carolina night in 1927. Although Staffacher’s dialogue is fictionalized, her Author Notes provide the true account of an extremely courageous woman of enormous talent.

Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue (Charlesbridge, 2006), by Anna Harwell Celenza is a perfect example of memoir as a single event in her subject’s career. Celenza’s narrative solely highlights the “forced” creation of the great American musical composition, Rhapsody in Blue. Without consulting the composer, orchestra leader Paul Whiteman told New York City reporters that George Gershwin would perform a completely new composition at a concert scheduled less than five weeks later. Gershwin first learned of the challenge in newspapers and found himself with the unenviable task of having to produce a lasting work of music in a remarkably short time. Celenza’s memoir, based on notes penned by the composer, reveals how the creative process sometimes works. JoAnn E. Kitchel’s striking watercolor illustrations capture wintry urban landscapes, circa 1924, and the flavor of 1920s concert halls. Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue skillfully describes a significant event in a great composer’s life, and it also is an example of the increasing use of multimedia in biographies for gifted readers. Enclosed within the book is a music CD featuring both an authentic piano roll rendition of Gershwin’s first performance of his rhapsody and a contemporary interpretation.

### Biography Formats

The popularity of interactive and multimedia book arts has not escaped publishers of fine biographies. A beautiful recent entry in the field of autobiography is Beatrix Potter: A Journal (Penguin, 2006). Period photographs and memorabilia augment this portrait of one of the great creators of children’s literature. Three-dimensional sketchbooks, programs from art exhibitions, facsimile letters to and from the author’s brother Bertram, reproductions of Victorian Christmas cards and stamps, maps, images of British coins, fold-out letters, storybooks, and even children’s games (complete with rules of play) complement the narrative. Inserted in the oversize back cover page is a miniature edition of The Tale of Peter Rabbit.
Cinema fans will discover a loving tribute to Audrey Hepburn in *The Audrey Hepburn Treasures: Pictures and Mementos from a Life of Style and Purpose* (Atria Books, 2006), compiled by Ellen Erwin and Jessica Z. Diamond. The Academy Award winning Best Actress (*Roman Holiday*) ultimately achieved fame as a tireless and selfless worker and spokesperson for UNICEF. Readers can spend hours exploring Hepburn’s unique life via personal photographs, movie stills, and three dimensional representations of birth announcements, Christmas cards, personal letters, and even movie scripts complete with Hepburn’s own notations.

Two admirable pop-up books serve as biographical tributes to men who, like Beatrix Potter and Audrey Hepburn, placed their indelible stamp upon 20th century art and culture. *Frank Lloyd Wright in Pop-Up* (Thunder Bay, 2001) presents six of the architect’s masterpieces, including the “Falling Water” house and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, thanks to expert paper engineering by Keith Finch. Authentic blueprints and the biographical narration by Iain Thomson are first rate, but it is the six three-dimensional constructions that best make known the genius of one of the most remarkable architects of all time.

*Alfred Hitchcock: The Master of Suspense: A Pop-Up Book* (Simon & Schuster, 2006) by Kees Moerbeek proves that interactive art provides as much pleasure and appeal for mature readers as pop-up books for younger book lovers. Moerbeek utilizes three-dimensional replications of pivotal scenes from Hitchcock films including *Saboteur*, *Vertigo*, and *Torn Curtain*. The narrative speaks to the perfectionism and rigorous work ethic of the man who many critics consider to be the greatest film director of all time. Especially enjoyable elements of this particular Hitchcock tribute are the interior fold-outs that disclose the director’s trademark walk-on appearances in his films.

**Biographical Activities**

Two of the best approaches to biography are paired and parallel reading. **Paired reading** occurs when students read biographies of notable subjects together. A primary age gifted reader may savor David A. Adler’s sterling account, *Lou Gehrig: The Luckiest Man* (Harcourt Brace, 1997), illustrated by Terry Widener, while a parent, teacher, or other more senior academic “buddy” simultaneously reads Jonathan Eig’s adult biography, *Luckiest Man: The Life and Death of Lou Gehrig* (Simon & Schuster, 2006). Both readers share new information from their respective biographies and supplement each other’s knowledge. Fine book discussions can occur between enthusiastic readers. Paired reading increases the pride and confidence of young readers when they emulate reading the “grown-up” subject matter of mentors.

**Parallel reading** happens when multiple readers enjoy biographies of the same subject written across a wide range of reading maturity levels. Teachers first build a “stepping stone” collection of biographies about a heroic subject that ranges from picture book biographies all the way to scholarly adult volumes. Libraries and bookstores have biographies that span an array of reading levels, including those about Anne Frank, Leonardo da Vinci, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Georgia O’Keeffe. Allow students to discover their own reading level choices. Energetic conversations about the facts, courage, and contributions of well-chosen subjects may lead to jointly created classroom and media center exhibits or student-generated web pages.

Two parallel reading tips are worth noting. First, gifted students are typically voracious readers, and stepping-stones of noteworthy biographies can be shared with adults. Second, it should be emphasized that picture book biographies can be challenging to higher level thinkers. Indeed, an excellent introduction to a survey of a distinguished person’s life may be a read-aloud from a stunning picture book biography. It is important for students to know that illustrated biographies were created by exceptionally gifted adults and are appropriate and challenging for advanced readers.

Here, fresh from the Benjamin Franklin tercentennial (1706-2006), is a stepping-stone example.

**Picture Books**

Gene Barretta’s *Now & Ben: The Modern Inventions of Benjamin Franklin* (Henry Holt, 2006) has a unique approach. The fun of Barretta’s tribute begins with a timeline of Franklin’s inventions (e.g., swim fins, bifocals, odometer, lightning rod, and both writing and library chairs); his social commitments to his fellow citizens via the first-in-America public library, sanitation and fire departments, hospital, and postal service; plus Franklin’s discoveries and experiments in science and with natural phenomena (e.g., the initiation of daylight saving time and the discovery of the North Atlantic Ocean’s Gulf Stream). Barretta’s watercolor cartoon illustration cleverly introduces Franklin as a writer, printer, diplomat, musician, statesman, postmaster, humorist, scientist, inventor, philosopher, cartoonist, and humanitarian. The greatest benefit of *Now & Ben* is Barretta’s side-by-side comparisons of Franklin’s achievements and contributions and how most of them remain important today.

**Chapter Books**

One stellar chapter book biography about Franklin is Candace Fleming’s *Ben Franklin’s Almanac: Being a True
**Book Bag, continued**

*Account of the Good Gentleman’s Life* (Atheneum, 2003). Fleming utilizes a scrapbook model to reveal the myriad facts of Franklin’s genius, astutely imitating one of his own exceptional creations, *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (1732-1758), the best selling secular book in America in its day. *Ben Franklin’s Almanac* presents a scholarly and dynamic narration of Franklin’s life, but it is all the more inviting due to the inclusion of period maps, newspaper articles, etchings, cartoons, engravings, and paintings. The quotations of Franklin and his contemporaries make this tribute especially fascinating and enlightening. Fleming provides a first-rate bibliography and an excellent page of websites about Franklin’s life and history.

**Adult**

Secondary gifted students and adults will discover an even more encyclopedic view of Benjamin Franklin books either penned by himself or by learned historians and biographers. Three shining examples include his *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), introduced by Lewis Leary; H. W. Brands’ *First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (Knopf, 2002); and Walter Isaacson’s *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2003).

Whether reading a memoir about Bessie Smith daringly confronting the Ku Klux Klan or Benjamin Franklin’s eight perilous crossings of the Atlantic Ocean to benefit humanity, biography affords reading to gifted readers that is worth pursuing. ❖

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**More on Benjamin Franklin....**

**Biographies**

*A Picture Book of Benjamin Franklin*
David A. Adler
Holiday House, 1991

*The Amazing Life of Benjamin Franklin*
James Giblin
Scholastic, 2000

*The Remarkable Life of Benjamin Franklin*
Cheryl Harness
National Geographic, 2005

*The Life of Benjamin Franklin*
Yona Zeldis McDonough
Henry Holt, 2006

*How Ben Franklin Stole the Lightning*
Rosalynd Schanzer
Harper Collins, 2002

*John, Paul, George, & Ben*
Lane Smith
Hyperion, 2006

**Chapter Books**

*B. Franklin, Printer*
David A. Adler
Holiday House, 2001

*Benjamin Franklin: Scientist and Statesman*
Brenda Haugen & Andrew Santella
Compass Point, 2005

*Benjamin Franklin: A Man of Many Talents*
Kathryn Hoffman Satterfield
HarperCollins, 2005

*Benjamin Franklin*
Tom Streissguth
Lerner, 2002

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