

A Message to New Teachers of Gifted Children

By James R. Delisle, Ph.D.

Dear New Teacher:

Twenty-nine years ago, I unlocked the door to my first classroom. The room that greeted me was a small, square box at the end of a long hallway, filled with 15 desks distributed randomly around the room. My desk, perched on its side in a corner, was just slightly larger than the ones my students would occupy. No matter—with a full house of kids wearing various special education labels, I figured my desk would be used more for storage than for sitting.

Two degrees I possessed: a bachelor's degree with dual certification in elementary education and mental retardation and a master's degree in teaching children with behavior problems. At that time, we called these kids "emotionally disturbed," a blame-the-victim term for students who thought school was irrelevant. Little did I realize when I entered that classroom for the first time so long ago that, during the 3 years I taught special education in that hardscrabble New Hampshire village, I was getting well prepared for my next professional challenge: teaching gifted children.

In recognition of your decision to enter this profession that has become my life's passion, I thought I'd offer some guidance as to what you might expect as you enter the volatile, exciting, and (at times) exasperating field of gifted child education. Of course, your situation is unique, as has been mine, but the following common denominators that underlie our field of study will probably surface at some point in your career. So, here are some things worth knowing from a veteran educator who learned them the hard way:

Gifted Child Education is Layered with Politics

Every teacher and administrator you encounter will have an opinion about the merits of giftedness and gifted programming. A few will embrace you wholeheartedly (especially true if their own children are gifted), but many more will treat you skeptically. "Aren't *all* children gifted?" some will ask smugly. You will need to do all you can to *not* say something snide in response to this generalization's absurd premise. This attitude of pegging

all children as *anything*—athletic, artistic, smart, kind—is a naive attempt to equalize unequals. Perhaps an answer like "I'm here to serve children for whom the regular curriculum is inappropriate, just as in all other areas of special education" will placate a few, but be prepared to be chastised as extraneous by some educators whose vision of the possible for gifted children's promise is myopic.

Don't be Misled by Academic Achievement

Some of your school's highest achievers are not gifted, and some of the most gifted children you will meet are not high achievers. For years, many educators have equated intelligence with productivity, ignoring the needs of capable children who take nothing from school . . . so they give little back. If you have one of these children in a gifted program—say, in a weekly pull-out class—there will be all manner of hoots and honks to remove said child from the gifted class until he or she "earns the right to be there by performing well in other classes." When this occurs and gifted programming becomes a bargaining chip, rather than the educational necessity that it is, you have stopped being a teacher and have become a broker. Don't go there. Instead, you need to take the next step . . .

Advocate, Advocate, Advocate.

All children in your school need an advocate—someone who believes in the irrefutable sanctity of their simply being individuals. For many students, your advocacy is easy: rewards for good work and behavior and an occasional "How's it goin'?" in the hall. But, some of your gifted students will need something deeper and more personal. They will need you to believe in them when they, and others, don't. Remember, when you are a smart kid and everyone knows it, it is very easy to disappoint people who value performance above all else. In fact, some of your B+ students will consider themselves underachievers, as will their parents or teachers who believe these kids aren't "living up to their potential" (whatever *that* means!). Caress this child emotionally; let him or her know that grades are a small and often insignificant measure of success. If your gifted students are caring, giving, introspective, and committed to relevant learning, they are more successful than are the straight-A students who possess none of these attributes. Yes, your advocacy efforts will also involve speaking to parents, educators, and community members about the needs of gifted children, but the front line of advocacy is that boy or girl in front of you who wants to be acknowledged and accepted as a human being, not just a "smart kid."

Don't Believe Everything You Read

In some ways, gifted child education is an entrepreneurial field, small enough to have a few "gurus" who pronounce how good their work is . . . as long as you follow every step in their latest \$34.95 book. Over the years, I've questioned the legitimacy of some of these claims of success, whether it involves the merits of multiple intelligences, the Enrichment Triad Model, or our field's latest panacea, the clarity-deprived Parallel Curriculum Model. I'd have more confidence in the merits of these innovations if the people who developed them actually implemented them in a real classroom like yours. Sadly, most have not. I'm not advocating that you totally dismiss these or other models for teaching gifted children, yet I advise you to be both eclectic in your collection of ideas and critical of claims of success that seem too good to be true—because they often are. Some of the best methods of teaching came from Socrates, the 17th-century scientist Comenius, or, the most neglected experts in our field, Virgil Ward and Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Gifted child educators have done too little to acknowledge the utility and timelessness of these individuals' approaches to educating children. So, heed my advice: Look to the past, not just the present, in your quest for excellence in approaching the education of gifted children.

It's Okay to be "Awed"

The night that I arrive home from a day of teaching gifted kids when I am not bursting to share with my wife at least one story that caused me to see the wonder of their vibrant young minds is the day I will retire. When times get tough, politics get dense, budgets get cut, and criticism piles high, you have one place to turn that will *always* renew your spirit: the gifted children you teach. They look to you for wisdom and guidance; you need to look to them for support. If you get the privilege to know gifted kids who continue to connect with you long after they leave your classroom, then you will truly know what it means to be a teacher.

Well, colleague of mine, I hope that the excitement you feel in this, your first year of teaching gifted kids, sustains you throughout your career. You have entered a wonderful field, one capable of transforming lives, including your own.

Enjoy the ride!

About the Author

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