

Educator clears up misconceptions about gifted learning

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Gifted education, the focus of recent stories in the Globe and Mail, has been generating spirited discussion among parents of learners across the ability spectrum. The series raises some excellent points, including psychologist Carol Dweck's advice that parents and educators should think carefully before using the gifted label with children ("Gifted" – What Is It Good For? Focus, Nov. 13); and the importance of avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach to gifted education. It's essential to attend to children's needs—educational, social and emotional—rather than get caught up in definitional issues. But the series perpetuates misconceptions and, from that perspective, does a disservice to the community.

Squashing misconceptions

There are good messages within the articles, but they don't come across as clearly as they might because they are couched in inflammatory words.

Such emotion-laden and provocative language deepens many parents' concerns and tends to skew readers' impressions. Giftedness is not a "bad word," nor is it "curse," a "prize," or "a life problem that needs solving." Comments such as "singled out as oddballs" or becoming "a kind of freak" are unfair. Emphasizing "quirky traits," "severe perfectionism" or "fidgeting" is misleading, and reinforces stereotypes. Like any group, advanced learners are not all the same, and most of them do not exhibit such characteristics. There is no one gifted profile.

Quite simply, gifted learners have exceptionally advanced subject-specific ability at a given point in time and in a particular context such that a student's educational needs cannot be well met without significant adaptations to the curriculum or other learning experiences (the definition developed by my colleague Dona Matthews and me).

In gifted education, the focus is on individual learning needs—and on matching instruction, resources and learning opportunities to those needs. It's about addressing educational mismatches. And, when this approach becomes an integral part of what happens at school, it is to everyone's advantage. Misconceptions disappear. More important, programming extends beyond any one classroom, as teachers share and adopt new ideas, meaning that standard practice throughout the entire school becomes more robust.

The quest for eligibility

As the series points out, there are problems with the "gifted blitz" (Young, Gifted and Striving, Life, Nov. 12). However, this is just one approach to identifying giftedness, and it's not the best. Most teachers will tell you that it is rarely the most effective way to assess children's capabilities.

Eligibility for special education, including gifted education, should be about learning needs. Intelligence tests give little information that is useful to the teacher and don't predict the speed, depth and direction of a child's future development. Ongoing assessments, in different subject areas, using a variety of tools (many informal, such as observation through day-to-day learning activities), reveal much more about a child's areas of strength and weakness, and whether instruction should be modified.

Ideally, students shouldn't have to experience high anxiety or "an event that can explode a child's current reality" before being given appropriate learning opportunities.

Competing for spots

Every child has the right to an education that is commensurate with his or her abilities. The series' observations about competitions for school placements raise some important questions. Why are parents desperate to get their children into these coveted programs? Is it because most schools aren't doing enough to challenge and engage children's intellectual and creative abilities?

Huge pressure on gifted programming is a logical consequence when children who could be learning at an advanced level and pace are bored and frustrated at school, and when teachers are not given the tools and support they need to address gifted-learning mismatches.

The right fit

There are all kinds of stimulating learning opportunities other than a full-time gifted classroom—which is not the best option for every child, and also has eligibility constraints.

The article *Three Families, Three Directions* (Life, Nov. 15), exemplifies some of the choices available. Other possibilities include mentorships; extra- and co-curricular programs such as those offered at the Ontario Science Centre; Web-based learning; leadership and community-based activities; flexible groupings; and talent development in areas such as music, art, sports and drama.

Making it happen involves differentiating instruction—planning, monitoring and providing challenges that are not too easy, not too difficult, and that change in response to children's changing needs.

Professional development

When teachers are offered opportunities to learn about giftedness and talent development, and to think constructively about approaches for working with exceptional learners—and when they are supported by administrators and by parents in doing so—everyone benefits.

However, teacher training and professional development in gifted education is sadly deficient. Too few teachers in Canada are being given the training, support and resources they need to do a good job of supporting the development of giftedness in children. The lack of emphasis is due in part to misunderstandings about gifted education and in part to competing educational demands, time constraints, funding allocations and other established priorities.

Last word...

All children benefit when gifted education is done well. There is a growing body of research that attests to this and, as noted in the *Globe* series, there are many ways to address gifted learning needs effectively.

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