

2017

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Recommended Citation

Shilvock, Krista M. (2017) "The Plight of the Gifted Student: A Call to Action," *Empowering Research for Educators*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/ere/vol1/iss1/7>

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The Plight of the Gifted Student: A Call to Action

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Abstract

With so many needs in today's public education classroom, we cannot forget the needs of those who excel in the classroom, too. Gifted students face severe neglect in class due to the appearance of their competence and maturity. However, we quickly face losing the contributions of a major group of students as this neglect causes them to lose interest in their own education. As teachers, we must challenge ourselves to help gifted students reach their potential just as we attempt to do for all subgroups of students. A poll of 22 gifted students confirms these frustrations and needs of students. They often find themselves singled out due to the stigma of a gifted label by not only peers but also teachers and other school staff. This stigma results in intense pressure, social isolation, and extra work for gifted children. Creating a classroom climate and curriculum suitable for gifted students will help all students succeed in school.



It is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to use it well. – Rene Descartes

Growing up as a stereotypically frustrated Talented and Gifted (TAG) student in small town Iowa, gifted education quickly developed into a passion of mine after entering the education world. With so many gifted education programs facing inexplicable funding, staff, space, and entire program cuts, in South Dakota especially, I feel led me to share my story and frustrations, the same story and frustrations so many gifted students face in everyday public education. Schools have so many needs they must focus on, but we cannot neglect our gifted students merely because they appear more self-sufficient than the average student we work with on a daily basis. We have made so many excellent strides towards helping students with special learning needs, English language learners (ELL), and children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. We must begin those same strides for our gifted populations, too.

No universal definition of a gifted student exists. No national selection criteria exist. No curriculum standards exist (Callahan, Moon, & Oh, 2017). Too many stereotypes exist. Too many misconceptions exist. And too many students do not receive an education that sets them up for later success in life. Why should we focus so much time and energy on the students who already get it, who will try no matter what we ask of them, and who already have a much better chance at success later in life than most students? Renzulli, the foremost expert on gifted education, and Reis (2014) answer this question for us:

The first purpose of gifted education is to provide young people with maximum opportunities for self-fulfillment through the development and expression of one or a combination of performance areas where superior potential may be present. The second purpose is to increase society's reservoir of persons who will help to solve the problems of

contemporary civilization by becoming producers of knowledge and art rather than mere consumers of existing information (p. 16-17).

Needless to say, our society will struggle to advance without gifted minds.

What do you think of when you think *gifted*? If you ask several people for their definition. Those definitions may overlap, but chances are they vary at least slightly, if not drastically. So many people have different ideas of what constitutes a gifted student. That is not to say they are wrong, it is merely to illustrate the wide range or perhaps even spectrum of gifted education that exists. How can we hope to identify all of these students and hope to provide them with the proper services? Right now, we probably cannot, but we must at least take small steps in the right direction. Currently, every district decides for itself the identification and education of gifted students. Therefore, there exists a lot of discrepancy and independent ideas, perhaps even based in opinion and not research, on gifted populations' education. Many schools do the best they can for these students but lack the resources to fulfill these needs.

While gifted students face many issues, I want to focus on their frustrations in a general education classroom to help us understand why these students do not receive a quality education and to give us focus for how to best help them. My three biggest frustrations in a classroom as a gifted student were 1) the majority of homework as busy work, 2) no time extensions to explore topics into further depth for assignments, and 3) expectations to carry a group or partner who traditionally did not do their share of group work. I still see these same frustrations in my students now as a teacher. After polling some current and former gifted students from my classroom, I received many similar frustrations to my own. These students also gave me what the summation of what these three frustrations equals: disinterest in school. Imagine the pressure from teachers for perfection in class, the lack of flexibility in the classroom to pursue your own interests, and the stigma from peers regarding your academic

ability. It is no wonder we do not see the maximum potential from these students or even minimum efforts from some.

Gifted education techniques should help benefit all students, not just those labeled gifted, much like ELL, special education, and dyslexic techniques help all students (Heilbronner & Renzulli, 2016). Therefore, I ask you to consider these three questions in response to educating your gifted students:

1. How can you assign quality homework and projects that benefit all students without limiting their talents because of a due date?
2. How can you allow your gifted student, or any student, to explore and engage in topics they find passion in without assigning them extra work?
3. How can you assign groups where group members challenge one another rather than a few carrying the load?

As mentioned before, your techniques for gifted students will benefit all students. You do not need to have the label " gifted " in order to change the world. But those with that label need more than what most of us currently offer. With so much differentiation that needs to happen, I realize your workload grows larger and larger. But I hope by thinking through some strategies for your gifted students you can engage an even larger majority of your students which would cut back on your workload. We do so much for our students and often appreciate the efforts made in class by our gifted students. How can we repay them the joy they bring to our teaching careers?

References

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