

HIGH ACHIEVERS AND GIFTED LEARNERS CAN THEY MIX?

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This is one of those eternal problems for us all, arising from the fact that in the nature of things, there are always going to be fewer genuinely gifted children than there are high achievers, so it's always going to be difficult, even in larger schools, to create a separate class for gifted learners. In smaller schools, it can be difficult even to create a small withdrawal group solely of the genuinely gifted.

Does this really matter? Can we solve the problem by making a combined class which acknowledges that all the children are of well above average ability, even though some will be considerably more so than others?

The difficulty with this solution is that it assumes that the difference between gifted learners and high achievers is primarily one of quantity.

In fact, we are dealing with two groups of children who learn in completely different ways and who experience school in very different ways and who may have quite different needs and issues as a result.

It is complicated by the fact that it is generally much easier to identify the high achiever than it is to identify the gifted child, and then further complicated by the fact that gifted children are extremely diverse in themselves, more so than any other group of children. Further again, there are some gifted children who are quite comfortable working in the high achiever environment and it's important for us not to forget that.

All of that said, the evidence strongly suggests that if at all possible, it is preferable, for at least some of the time, to provide separately for these two groups of children.

It may help us to look at the nature of the differences between the two groups.

In essence, high achievers are children who fit very comfortably into the normal school system. Their approach to learning is primarily to focus on mastery of the given curriculum. They have the capacity to do this to a very high level, and they show a very high level of motivation in doing so. They finish set tasks, and generally present their work well and take pride in doing so. They do well in exams and generally eventually leave school with a raft of certificates and prizes to attest to their accomplishments. They tend to relate well to their teachers and are often described as a pleasure to teach.

They may be leaders amongst their classmates - they are often captain of the team, school prefect, etc - , but they are not generally shakers and stirrers. They are not strongly inclined to question or test the rules, but rather to seek to perform to a high level within these guidelines. Their self esteem is usually healthy, and on the whole they seem to have few social problems.

We certainly need to support these children in maintaining their successful progress and to value their achievements, but, broadly speaking, they cause us less worry than their gifted counterparts. They have much to contribute to school and later, potentially, to community life. Their greatest risk areas, one might hazard to say, lie in becoming complacent about their apparent superiority or, conversely, in attaching their identity too closely to outward measures of success and not being able to deal with failure, so these are the things to insure against in working with them.

Gifted learners, on the other hand, focus on what they perceive to be important and of interest and in those areas, they can go well beyond the given curriculum. They are extremely intense about those interests, and it is that intensity of focus that gives them their potential ability



ultimately to enlarge human knowledge and understanding and perception. They have the capacity to change the world and to make it a different place, in large ways or in small. George Parkyn wrote that "Humankind as a whole has everything to gain from such individual specialisation and unbalanced dedication to one set of values. Gifted individuals ... contribute to the richness of life of all humankind." Renzulli in his most recent work, *Equity, Excellence and Economy in a System for Identifying Students in Gifted Education: A Guidebook* (2005), writes that "history tells us it has been the creative and productive people of the world, the producers rather than consumers of knowledge, the reconstructionists of thought in all areas of human endeavour, who have become recognised as 'truly gifted' individuals."

But this does not make for an easy childhood, and it certainly does not make for an easy adjustment of the child to school - or of the school to child. As far as learning goes, it means we are dealing with a child who may find many aspects of the normal school programme frustrating and irrelevant and who is not motivated to persist when he/she has already demonstrated a grasp of a topic. If he/she thinks the topic worthwhile, the concern is to push on to the next step, with extraordinary intensity of concentration and effort. But if he/she does not perceive the topic as worthwhile, then there is huge impatience with wasting time and a real reluctance to perform/conform. Gifted learners are much more inclined to initiate projects than are the high achievers - and much less inclined to finish projects solely to meet some externally imposed presentation standard. Thus we can get very erratic levels of performance from these children.

Alternatively, some, especially gifted girls, agonise over the conflict between trying to meet school expectations on the one hand, and on the other, following what their instincts are imperatively telling them to do, and this can cause extreme anxiety, especially when the child responds by striving to suppress those imperative urges.

Then too, with the gifted learner, we are dealing with a child whose work can so often leave us awestruck and sometimes deeply moved at the insight and originality and understanding that



has produced it. They are indeed passionate children. Socially and personally this makes them vulnerable, and so self esteem is often not tremendously positive, sensitivities are heightened, and the development of social skills may be delayed as they search unsuccessfully for others like themselves with whom they can truly share and learn the skills of companionship. For these children, coming into a group with like others can be a profoundly astonishing and sometimes crucial healing process.

This is why the issues are so different for these two groups of children. Therefore, if we put them together on a fulltime basis or as the only form of provision we offer either group which recognises their high ability, then we will inevitably find a conflict of needs.

This is difficult for both groups. Because our high achievers are in the majority and because it is actually easier to meet their needs, it is likely to be the case that their needs will predominate. But it may be difficult for them to comprehend the justification for the presence in the group of children whose work is so much more erratic than their own, and without very sensitive guidance, there is some risk of the gifted child coming to be looked down on in this context. At the same time, the gifted child, aware that he/she has been placed in a supposed high ability group but unlikely to be aware of the technical difference between him/herself and the high achiever, may be puzzled by the responses of the others in the class, may experience increased self doubt, will almost certainly continue to feel frustration with the learning opportunities provided, and may end up rejecting authority and becoming a rebel against school and learning.

In short, however we achieve it, we do need to find an opportunity for gifted learners to spend time with other gifted learners. One of the leading researchers in this field, Karen B. Rogers, summarised the findings of many studies when she wrote in an article in the prestigious Roeper Review in 1993, re-published by the editors in 2002 as still a leading summation: Gifted learners need some form of grouping by ability to effectively and efficiently accomplish several educational goals, including appropriately broadened, extended and accelerated curricula.



... The pacing of instruction, the depth of content, and advancement in knowledge fields, which these students must have, cannot be facilitated without a variety of ability-grouped arrangements. There can be some real benefit in allowing gifted learners and high achievers to work together on occasion on specific projects such as a Science Fair, where their different skills can support each other and in a context where mutual understanding and respect can be encouraged. Such work can also provide an opportunity for previously unrecognised gifted learners who, perhaps for social reasons, have simply been performing at the high achiever level, to find a situation in which they can safely “emerge.” Given the difficulty attached to identifying such children successfully, this is a valuable point to bear in mind. Nonetheless, this type of “mixed ability” grouping should be in addition to, not as a substitute for, opportunities for genuinely homegeneous grouping arrangements.

When we reflect on all these comments, perhaps what comes through most clearly is the need for whatever we do in school to start from the premise that its aim is to serve the needs of the child, whatever those needs may be, and that therefore we must build systems which are sensitive and perceptive in the assessment of those needs, and flexible and realistic in their fulfilment. To quote Rogers again, “One size does not fit all”!

