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## MYTHS AND FACTS about giftedness

# GIFTED AND TALENTED EDUCATION

**Myths:** for decades, myths related to gifted education have had detrimental effects on providing quality instruction for gifted and talented students. These myths have distorted the perception of not only what gifted students need in the classroom, but also what they can offer to society now and into the future.

**Facts:** Below is a list of some common myths in gifted education, complete with the facts needed to, hopefully, dispel these myths. “If we allow ourselves to challenge, question, and probe some of gifted education’s myths, we can develop new models and approaches that will be practical, cost-efficient, and readily implemented in the schools” (Treffinger, 2009).

Note: the following information uses the term ‘Gifted’ as opposed to ‘Gifted and Talented’ as referenced in the National Association for Gifted Children source material.

### Myth 1: All students are gifted in some way

**Fact:** Everyone has a personal strength, something we do better than we do other things. Equally, we all have a personal weakness, something in which we do not excel. We don’t confuse personal weaknesses with disabilities. Equally, we should not confuse personal strengths with gifts.

The essence of giftedness is advanced development. Students who are gifted have the potential to perform at levels significantly beyond what might be expected for their age. A student can be intellectually or creatively gifted. He or she might be physically gifted or gifted in some area of social-emotional development. But giftedness in any area means ability well beyond the average.

This ability requires modifications to the regular curriculum to ensure these students are challenged and learn new material. ‘Gifted’ does not mean ‘good’ or ‘better’; it is a term that allows students to be identified for services that meet their unique learning needs.

### Myth 2: There are no gifted and talented students at our school

**Fact:** Until the mid 1980s, definitions of giftedness and talent used in Australia were mostly based on performance and children or adolescents who were identified as gifted were usually the successful, motivated students who were already achieving. Over the last ten years a majority of Australian views have changed. Gagné defines giftedness as having natural abilities significantly beyond what might be expected for one’s age; however, Gagné also acknowledges that giftedness may or may not be evident within the classroom. Gagné suggests that approximately 10%, at least three or four students in a mixed-ability class of 30, could be gifted; another three or four could be physically, intellectually, creatively, socially or perceptually gifted. He states that some gifted students may have well above average ability but may have not yet been able to translate this into above average performance.

### Myth 3: Gifted students will succeed regardless as they are gifted

**Fact:** While gifted students can have an extraordinary level of potential and ability, their high aptitude for learning can easily go to waste if it is not fostered properly. Gifted students have learning needs that require a special education program. Characteristics such as a passion for areas of interest, intense curiosity, and the ability to manipulate abstract ideas all point to the need for a responsive school environment. An extensive research study found that between 18% and 25% of gifted and talented students dropped out of school. Gifted students need teachers who will challenge them (Renzulli, 1991).

#### **Myth 4: Gifted students learn at the same pace as other students**

**Fact:** In a mixed ability class, the student who is fastest at memorising information can do so as much as 12 times faster than the slowest student can. With more complex information processing, as in higher order thinking, the fastest student can be four times faster than the slowest student. Their capacity to learn at a faster rate than other students is one of the most common characteristics of gifted students. This means that they have the capacity to learn the curriculum more quickly than others. For example, gifted students are more likely to retain science, mathematics and foreign language content accurately when taught 2-3 times faster than 'normal' class pace. They are significantly more likely to forget or unlearn science, mathematics and foreign language content when they must drill and review it more than 2-3 times after mastery.

#### **Myth 5: Acceleration placement options are socially harmful for gifted students**

**Fact:** Gifted students often feel bored or out of place with their age peers. Studies have shown that many students are happier with older students who share their interest than they are with children the same age. Their advanced intellectual development, their reading and play interests, and their relative emotional maturity, may lead them to seek access to older children who are at similar developmental stages. Therefore, acceleration placement options should be considered for these students. Acceleration can place advanced students with others of similar ability, reducing anxiety and abnormal social behaviour.

#### **Myth 6: Mixed ability groups enable gifted students to model or help students of lower ability and this is highly beneficial to all students**

**Fact:** In reality, average or below average students do not look to the gifted students in the class as role models. They are more likely to model their behaviour on those who have similar capabilities and are coping well in school. Seeing a student at a similar performance level succeed motivates students because it adds to their own sense of ability. Watching or relying on someone with high-level capabilities does little to increase a struggling student's sense of self-confidence. Similarly, gifted students benefit from classroom interactions with peers at similar performance levels.

Research has found that gifted students unpack problems by considering the whole then its parts when processing, rather than thinking about the parts of a problem to build to a whole picture, as is the case with most other students. It is often difficult for gifted students to reconstruct 'how' they came to an answer. Asking gifted students to explain their processing to students who think differently to them can be highly frustrating for both and is not conducive to learning.

#### **Myth 7: Gifted education programs are elitist**

**Fact:** Programs offered to gifted students can be seen as elitist if they contain activities from which all students would benefit. If a program has activities that every student should be doing, or have the capability to do, then it is whole-school enrichment rather than an enrichment program specifically designed to meet the unique needs of gifted students.

Gifted programs provide appropriate education for children who need a special challenge: that is, a modified curriculum, accelerated pace, in-depth explorations, manipulation of ideas and questions requiring higher order thinking, like-ability small group projects and independent study. The purpose of such programs is to help develop students' strong academic and creative needs that may not be met in the regular classroom. A gifted program is not suitable for all students.

#### **Myth 8: That a student cannot be gifted if they receive poor grades**

**Fact:** Gifted students, just like any other student, may underachieve. There are a number of reasons why a student may be underachieving including a lack of motivation, lack of resources, learning disabilities, and social, economic, or psychological pressures. Regardless of why a gifted student may be underachieving, or to what extent he or she is underachieving, the child is still gifted, meaning he or she has the potential, based on effective identification, to achieve at high levels. Like others, gifted students need to be motivated and taught in an appropriate manner suited to their needs so that they can reach their maximum potential. Research strongly supports the view that high teacher expectations can positively influence the academic achievement of students. This is especially so for underachieving students.

## **Myth 9: Gifted students are easy to identify because of their level of performance and/or positive behaviours**

**Fact:** Teachers wanting to identify their gifted students sometimes make the mistake of looking only for positive behaviours or may associate giftedness only with high performance. However, gifted students who are frustrated, bored or switched off learning will rarely be feeling positive about their school experiences or manifesting their feelings in positive ways. A behavioural checklist is a useful tool for teacher nomination. It may facilitate structured observation of both positive and negative behaviours in students.

Parents are a valuable source of information on both the positive and negative characteristics of their children. Teachers are often sceptical that parents overestimate their child's abilities; however, parents more often underestimate their child's abilities.

## **Myth 10: Gifted students are happy, popular and well adjusted**

**Fact:** Many gifted students flourish in their community and school environment. However, some gifted children differ in terms of their emotional and moral intensity, sensitivity to expectations and feelings, perfectionism, and deep concerns about societal problems. Others do not share interests with their classmates, resulting in isolation or being labelled unfavourably as a 'nerd'. Because of these difficulties, the school experience is one to be endured rather than celebrated. It is estimated that 20% to 25% of gifted children have social and emotional difficulties, about twice as many as in the general population of students. Gifted students require support from home and from school.

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