

No Gold Stars Allowed!

What Gifted Children Need from Their Teachers

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When I use the “g” word in staffrooms, there’s always the chance of causing contention. Advocating for the needs of the “gifted” and allocating resources to enrichment can be met with discomfort among teachers. I understand. The world of gifted education can seem elitist. Teachers did not get into this business to focus on the clever kids who are “going to be fine, anyway.” We are working 12+-hour-days to change lives! When our weakest students master a new skill or understand an important concept—that is when we know we are making a difference.

Of course, the notion that gifted students “are going to be fine, anyway” is a great misconception. If we don’t tailor education to meet needs, our brightest students can become underachievers or at-risk children struggling with emotional or behavioral problems. In truth, gifted education is nothing more than quality differentiation. It simply requires that we design curriculum, pedagogy, resources, and environments to suit learning readiness. It is about providing every student with engagements that are challenging and appropriate, so they thrive at school.

That sounds straightforward, right?
Well, let me introduce **Miss Perfect**.

Miss Perfect helps us understand why many gifted students are overlooked at school. She represents 90% of gifted students who enter our classrooms. Her innate potential allows her to achieve at a higher level than the age-cohort, so in the classroom, she is a model student. She achieves great results, always does the right thing, and is popular among staff and peers. Can you name this child in your class? What’s wrong with this picture?

Here’s the problem. She’s playing us. At a very young age, Miss Perfect learned how the school system works. By watching and listening, she learned which behaviors and work products elicit positive feedback. She thrives on our approval, so much so that she is now reliant on the structure and directions we provide. She is rapidly losing the ability to think for herself, while mastering the art of getting a “gold star” with the least effort possible.

She is so busy looking to us for guidance, that she is not developing her own interests. She is not becoming an independent, motivated, or creative person. Most alarmingly, she is developing a very fragile self-concept. While confident to approach tasks in which she has previously succeeded, she avoids taking risks, is terrified of failure, and has limited resilience. On a daily

basis, she plays it safe. The work she is producing, which we keep applauding, doesn’t come close to matching her true capabilities.

The 4 Cs: What Teachers Can Do for Gifted Students

Challenge!

Raise the bar! Set tasks and expectations beyond current capabilities. Design problems with no clear answer, or multiple solutions. Ask paradoxical questions. Set tasks where key pieces of information are missing. Support students emotionally, but challenge them to reach beyond a safe zone of thinking. Acknowledge feelings of uncertainty, and watch as they gradually develop an internal sense of fulfillment, based on the joy of learning, rather than a desire to please or “get it right.”

Change Praise to Conversation

Stop praising the outcome and break the cycle of approval. Engage in dialogue where students are expected to discuss ideas, ask questions, and express feelings, instead of giving correct answers. Try replacing, “What a great story!” with “Where did you get the idea?” *Let them* decide the worth of the work, in order to develop personal standards of success.

Choice

Provide open-ended tasks, with elements of choice and self-direction. Stand back as they begin to flex creative muscle and manage their own learning.

Chill Out

Provide ample time for unstructured play, experimentation, and exploration. Allow students to produce anything or nothing, as a result of this time. By removing the system they know so well, these children will begin to see themselves and the world differently. Over time, capitalize on their interests by facilitating in-depth inquiry in areas of passion.

Every day, teachers tailor their lessons to meet the skills, interests, and abilities of students. We must remember to pay careful attention to Miss or Master Perfect, who is easily overlooked, in the midst of a diverse class. If we are complacent about the needs of our brightest students, we risk impeding their academic and emotional development.