

Challenges and Rewards of Teaching *Connected* Students

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Teaching talented and gifted students while addressing 21st-century fluencies, the set of skills reflecting the times we live in, can prove both challenging and rewarding to student and teacher alike. Extensive influence of digital technologies, such as wireless networks and mobile devices, are indicative of today's lifestyle. Education research is looking beyond the acquisition of traditional literacies to the integration of new digital skills, so digital tools are now widely used in the classroom. For many talented and gifted learners, innovative critical thinking and creative problem-solving are already a part of their innate mindset. They are highly capable of complex and non-linear interactions, but are also overly reactive to partitioned or non-structured learning environments. The question for teachers becomes how to focus these young learners within the realm of a world that demands overlapping digital and real-time goals. The challenge for gifted learners is how to center themselves in an environment that truly calls for excellence in all areas, and constant shifting of cognitive gears.

Multipotentiality, a word coined by Dabrowski, may be apparent in one or more traits of a gifted child. This talent can take the form of intellectual, imaginative, or emotional sensitivities, and often manifests itself in the classroom with the potential for high academic and artistic achievement. Students with *multipotentiality* tend to excel in many fields, often at a young age. Growing up gifted in the Net Generation can be very confusing, because there are so many emerging areas to explore! All opportunities are equally as enticing to a gifted child who

inherently possesses the ability to multitask, creatively brainstorm, and rapidly absorb information. For this group of specialized learners, teachers must be highly aware of the unique social and emotional challenges they face. Their specialized learning needs may go unrecognized, as their challenges are not as easy to detect as classmates who sometimes have academic struggles. Fast brains and non-linear thinking may be desirable in today's classroom, but too much of a good "think" can quickly lead to imbalances.

Even though talented and gifted students have a heightened capacity to learn, *multipotentiality* can also make them vulnerable, leading to conflict and stress in their lives. Some students consider their talents a burden. They may have difficulty making friends or finding true intellectual peers. Age-appropriate social and emotional interactions may be less than satisfying for them. While these students are usually eager to tackle academic challenges, they are often their own harshest critics, trending towards perfectionism. Others may feel bored or uninspired in school. Gifted students may exhibit uneven academic development, at first craving an intellectual challenge but then lacking the social, emotional, or physical maturity to advance. Teachers need to be highly aware of the unique traits of talented and gifted students within the midst of the *connected* classroom; taking into account the specific personal needs that will help these children utilize full intellectual potential.

Perfectionism may also manifest itself as a trait of *multipotentiality*. Perfectionist students may silently fear they will not be accepted by others if their academic performance is less than excellent. Tendencies towards perfectionism may also appear in other pursuits, for example, a desire to excel in performing arts, athletics or other competitive fields. Imposing unrealistically high expectations on themselves, these students may feel immobilized by their own over-reaching goals, and, at times may be reluctant to take risks that will lead to self-growth.

Teachers, parents, and coaches alike must all take a role in guiding students with perfectionist tendencies. If a gifted student is successful in his or her endeavors, it happens because of hard work and tenacity—not because a child is perfect.

Underachievement is another common trait of the intellectually precocious child. While the gifted student may exhibit a high tendency for *multipotentiality*, the student may disengage from the learning process. In school, the student may exhibit poor study habits and time management skills. This is because the student experiences the world with great intensity and sensitivity, flitting from one interesting thing to another, but unaware of the self-imposed obstacles. In this situation, the adults shaping the student's life need to offer challenges that inspire the child to focus and experience prolonged success.

Accelerated learning, in its many forms, may help gifted students learn at a pace that is aligned with their abilities. Teachers who work with students exhibiting *multipotentiality* face a specific balancing act. Not only must teachers recognize the unique traits inherent in their students, they must constantly keep students engaged in the learning process. In addition to offering rigorous academic work, the teacher must advise the student at a holistic level, encouraging the student to care of his or her body, mind, and spirit. It is important to address the students' focus, discipline, and personal routines in order to build healthy lifelong learning habits.

Sometimes students with so much talent and potential have difficulty reaching decisions about their education and/or career. The question "What do you want to be?" is open-ended to a child who excels in many things. Fortunately, for these students, if they have supportive families, nurturing teachers and coaches, and flexibility to exercise their unique learning styles, they can enjoy their youthful learning. Ultimately, young people with *multipotentiality* will find a unique

niche for themselves in the rapid emergence of so many new social, cultural, and economic frontiers.

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