



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

The Emotional Needs of the Gifted

An Interview with Dr. James Delisle, Kent State University

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Gems: Dr. Delisle, your work figures prominently among our resources concerning the emotional health of our children and students. Would you please give us a context for our understanding?

JD: I see two key trends in the field of giftedness. Once we understand these trends, we can consider how parents and educators can provide for the emotional needs of gifted youngsters. Trend #1: The field of gifted education has put emotional issues on the back burner for years. With the increased push for accountability in schools, we now find more interest in academic achievement as an issue. However, the focus on "emotional achievement" has been almost completely ignored. Understand this: both educators and parents have historically looked at intelligence as a one-dimensional trait, accessible to evaluation by numbers. And although numbers -- even a high IQ -- can tell us something about the life of a child, numbers do not tell the entire story. In the past 20 years, we have come to see giftedness as something you do. But really, giftedness is someone you are! Trend #2: Our conceptualization of giftedness has gone awry; it has lost its focus. Two of the factors in this deterioration are multiple intelligences theory, and the education community's emphasis on giftedness as being synonymous with academic or creative achievements -- visible achievements. Multiple Intelligences: Simple, Convenient, Wrong This title for both a paper and an NAGC talk drew great attention to my concern that multiple intelligences theory (MI) perpetuates the myth that everyone is gifted. Educators grasp "multiple intelligences" to validate the premise that every child in their school has special abilities. And while it is true that many school children possess specific talents, we have gone so far over the edge in this MI stampede, we neglect the emotional needs of gifted children. Gardner's "theory"? although I believe the term "theory" is an overstatement? cheapens the concept of giftedness by segmenting it into specific, observable behaviors. Yet as every parent of a gifted child knows, it is the inner world of the child, which defines his/her giftedness. I would have no argument with his opinions if he had used the word "talent" rather than intelligence for each characteristic. But anything which strengthens the "every child is gifted" position inflicts grave harm both to services for the truly gifted, and to efforts to expand our understanding of giftedness. Giftedness = Achievement Much of this emphasis on giftedness as a product or behavior began with Renzulli's representation in the late 1970's of giftedness as "something you do." This view shifted the field's focus from giftedness as a "human condition" to what I see as merely a cluster of product-oriented behaviors. Let me explain. While producing a diorama can offer students a sense of achievement, and give teachers an identifiable task and result by which to evaluate performance, it does NOT recognize the essential difference of a gifted student from one who is not gifted. Again, the emotional component of giftedness is completely ignored.

Gems: Teachers say "I can provide academic challenge to my students, but how do I give them the support they need to operate in the classroom with success both socially and emotionally?"

JD: Let me share two of my recent trips. Last week I visited a school system in Texas. The students, in pullout programs from grades 1-5, graduate to a vastly different middle school setting in which they are assigned to inclusive classrooms. Gifted and talented specialists come to the class and "finesse" the curriculum for the G&T students. But that is not all! This school district has not only recognized the emotional needs of these students, but also planned to meet those needs! Incoming sixth graders take a one-semester elective that is basically an "emotional resource room." Using *The Gifted Kids Survival Guide* (Gailbraith and Delisle, 1996) as their "textbook" in this elective specifically for gifted students, they examine their experiences with the supervision of the staff person with whom they'll be working for years. Their questions are taken seriously, and responses come from those who "walk in the same moccasins," use the same vocabulary, have similar histories. This school district has thus reduced the transition trauma to these pre and early adolescents, and strengthened their relationship with the staff people in this new situation. Back to my own state, Ohio, for a second example. I visited a principal who said, "If we want inclusive services to be legitimate for gifted children, to do so, we'll have to spend MORE money on personnel, not less." So, the G&T staffing has gone from two people to six, and next year to eight! If gifted and talented children are to be served well in an inclusive classroom environment, this is what it takes.

Gems: Are you familiar with gifted and talented education programs in New York State?

JD: (sigh) I know your situation; I've seen its like in many states. Programs for gifted are few and far between, funding for many programs like your regional BOCES has vanished, state-level commitment/support has faded away, and inclusive education is used as an excuse to eliminate support staffing and additional programming that at least attempted to meet some needs of G&T children. Where there is something available, it focuses on content areas -- honors classes, accelerated entry into a foreign language, math or science level. This won't work to benefit anything more than a child's academic life -- a small part of his/her total being. Departmentalizing giftedness into content areas leads us back into the trap of thinking giftedness is a piece of a person. But if you are gifted, it is the essence of your being! Giftedness does not turn on and off at our financial and organizational convenience. It is the every-waking-moment reality of the gifted children in our families and our classrooms. First, we have to accept that. Then, we have to act upon it.

Gems: Dr. Delisle, you had some final comments?

JD: Yes. If parents and educators would insist that the emotional lives of all children are as vital -- perhaps more so -- than their academic achievements and abilities, then we might see more of a focus on this important domain of development. Structuring classrooms and schools to capitalize on the inherent respect that students have for learning is a beginning step. Advocating for more time for counselors to work with children on issues before they become problems is another. But let us close with this: The first step we must take is to reconceptualize our view of success and achievement to include the heart, not just the head. SENG, Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted can be reached at Kent State University, P.O. Box 5190, Kent, OH 44242. (330) 672-4450.

Information on the SENG listserv, a free forum for parents and teachers of gifted children, may be found on their web site at: <http://www.educ.kent.edu/CoE/EFSS/SENG/index.html>