



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

Unevenly Gifted

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Many parents bring their children to me for assessment of giftedness. I have gained a reputation as a professional who is especially interested and concerned about the levels of gifted because I am aware that one's level or degree of intellectual function can affect one's entire perspective and personality.

My clients have brought me another issue, however. Some children have only one or two areas that are amazing and advanced rather than being uniformly gifted. This article addresses the problems surrounding exceptional giftedness that is embedded in an otherwise ordinary young child.

As readers know, most educators are not well informed about gifted children, intellectual levels, or the value and validity of good assessment. Many people believe that a person is gifted or not gifted. Attention to degrees of intelligence is largely missing because most people do not view intelligence as being on a continuum. There is also a tendency to think of a person who is smart as needing to be smart in everything in order to "qualify" as smart. This viewpoint causes problems for children who have exceptional abilities in only one, perhaps two, domains. The general reaction to the parents' pleas for attention to the child's exceptional abilities is met with disbelief that the child is actually gifted because he is not performing well, or manifesting the talent, in other areas.

Three different ability domains illustrate the academic and personal confusion that commonly ensue when a child is unevenly talented. The selected domains from which I wish to generalize are language, numerical reasoning, and conceptual thinking. The reader should keep in mind that most teachers, and many parents, believe children should be well rounded. They devote a great deal of time and effort toward moving the lower areas up rather than supporting and promoting the unusual talent area.

Children who are exceptionally capable in language, those with excellent vocabularies and reading skills, are often assumed by their teachers to be stubbornly refusing to cooperate when it comes to math. In fact, my testing of children on the Stanford-Binet LM has shown me that parents and teachers commonly over estimate the IQ of such children. Language skills are highly visible, or at least audible. More of this group's members are girls than boys.

Further complicating the language gifted child's dilemma is that the achievement tests which are administered to elementary aged children usually do not have ceilings much higher than two grade levels above that of the children being tested. The mathematics section of such tests is usually merely computational, not numerical reasoning. A bright child who is highly gifted in language can score in the top percentiles in her weaker areas on achievement tests. This profile is the most likely of the unevenly gifted to be selected into gifted programs.

The ability disparity is when children are very high in numerical reasoning but much lower in their language abilities. These children cannot even demonstrate or practice their exceptional talent in the numerical domain because very little actual math is taught in elementary schools. Instead, numbers and arithmetic, the rote tools of mathematics, takes up at least the first four years. Parents are typically aware that their children possess high numerical interest and reasoning abilities before they enter school. Unfortunately, both the parents and the teachers are confused into thinking that memorizing and using number facts, doing computation, is the same thing. It is not, and most children highly gifted in numerical reasoning balk at or even become confused by all the memorization and repetition of working on computation and tables. This group consists of more boys than girls.

The frustration of spending so much time on language-based lessons, lessons that may not be interesting or particularly easy for the math-able boy, often leads to acting out and “bad attitude.” This child is the least likely to be selected for gifted services. Unfortunately, unless his ability is identified and addressed, such a child can learn to under-achieve, may lose confidence in his abilities, and self-select out of advanced paced opportunities when they are finally available. Again, the child who fits this profile may be above average in language but profoundly gifted in his specialty.

The final example of unusual isolated ability is conceptual thinking. There are many individuals, boys and girls, whom I have tested, who are exceptionally gifted in pulling together facts, figures, and concepts in order to recognize and solve problems. If they are average or typical in their language and numerical reasoning abilities, they continually confirm for their teacher and the other students that they are not really very smart and are “talking through their hats” most of the time. This child is very intuitive and very aware. He or she scores high on the section of the Stanford-Binet LM that calls for seeing relationships, noticing and picking out what is irregular or illogical. This is a definite talent, a needed and valuable ability. But, it is not part of the curriculum.

These talented children tend not to be good students and are unlikely to be selected for special services. When children have exceptional ability in conceptual reasoning, they can grow to be the inventive problem-solvers that society so badly needs. Friends and parents can see and appreciate the talent in every day life. But school life does not reward this type of thinking in elementary school. “Show your work” is anathema to the intuitively conceptual reasoner. When a child is exceptional in this domain and normal in all the others, he or she can be seen as a real nuisance in class. “Who do you think you are?” is a common reaction that might indicate the individual is talented as a problem-solver but does not yet have the supporting credentials. This child's self-image is at risk because the normal challenge of normal schoolwork can make him feel inadequate. It is difficult to see the big picture, as this child can, and have no one else climb aboard.

The last group of children need opportunities to speak often with older, more mature people who can give them positive feedback for their creativity and intuitive grasp of situations and problems. As their reading skills and knowledge base increase, these children will finally be able to accrue the credentials of good writing and a good factual base that makes for a more wide-spread acceptance of their observations and pronouncements.

In every situation I have found that simply knowing about the talent disparity and its meaning can be a tremendous help and relief to the individual and to the parents. We can work around unevenness once we understand that it is there. I encourage the family to recognize the value of the curriculum that is being taught, and when possible, I help them set up subject acceleration in their strength areas.

In conclusion, it is imperative that we recognize that exceptional talent can be uneven in people. Educational approaches that expect a gifted enrichment program to fit all these different profiles will miss too many children who are in need. Good assessment can be done early in a child's educational

career and the results, interpreted and used correctly, can greatly aid in not only the academic life of each child, but in the self-image, social, and emotional life, as well.