

Connecting **for high potential**

Your Tear and Share Guide

NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students’ potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

This month’s topic: “Giftedness? What does the label mean...?”

A TEACHER VIEW

I’ve been teaching for a while now and every year I look forward to parent conferences with anticipation and trepidation. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to “see” each student from a new perspective: outside interests, experiences, and that strange alter ego that everyone has outside of the classroom. However, I dread the questions that can throw our meeting off track. I just never know how to respond to a parent who wants to know if their child is gifted.

Why are they so anxious to have their child labeled?

I think there’s already plenty of pressure and competition in life. We can’t all be the fastest or the brightest, but we can all strive to be happy, healthy, and productive.

A PARENT VIEW

I’m nervous about coming right out and asking if my son is “gifted” because I’m sure most people think their child is pretty special. But whenever I look at those checklists or read about how gifted kids behave, it sounds just like Charles.

For example, he became fascinated with geography. By the time he was starting kindergarten, he knew more about different countries in the world than most of the people on Jeopardy!

My husband says Charles is just clever and that gifted kids are amazing geniuses. So maybe he’s not a genius, but he learns so fast! People who meet him comment on how well he talks with adults. Why hasn’t the teacher tested him to see if he’s gifted? What should I do?

ADD, PPT, AYP, RFP, ESL...Most of us are familiar with what happens when discussions are full of acronyms or other specific jargon. Since there are obvious potential pitfalls, those who want to be certain they are understood try to avoid specialized technical terms, or else very carefully define them with the audience in mind. However, there is another more complicated way even familiar words can inadvertently contribute to misunderstandings – when they are used to mean different things in different situations or to different people. In this case, listeners or readers may think they understand the term or how it is used when they actually do not, so they may not ask questions to clarify.

Think about the hidden dangers (or comedies) of situations where we think we are *really* communicating our thoughts but are not! The word “gifted” is one of those difficult words – a term that carries a host of expectations and assumptions, implications and applications.

Robin M. Schader is NAGC’s Parent Resource Specialist. She is the mother of 3 grown gifted children. Her Ph.D. is in Educational Psychology/Gifted Education with research focusing on talent development and the parental role.

Rebecca D. Eckert is associate professor in Teacher Education at the University of Connecticut. Prior to receiving her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology/Gifted Education, she was a classroom teacher in a public middle school.

For more resources online, visit www.nagc.org.

1. Consider Your Own Perceptions

Are you clear on the term “gifted?” Those who have been exposed to an exceptional child in different contexts such as home, school, or concert hall will hear the word “gifted” through the filter of their own experiences and beliefs, so don’t automatically expect others to share your perspective. For example, when you hear the word “gifted” in conversation, do you think of actual achievement, or with regard to natural ability and potential, regardless of performance? Do you think gifted is only in the area of intellect? What about a child who excels in one area but fails in another?

- Even if you think you understand why a parent is asking about his/her child’s abilities, becoming adept at and comfortable with talking about giftedness requires a bit of fact finding and reflection. For example, listen to psychologist/researcher Carol Dweck’s ideas about intelligence and giftedness at: http://www.iub.edu/%7Eintell/dweck_interview.shtml
- Think about the ways gifts in different domains are viewed in your school and extended community. Also, what skills and abilities are valued within the cultural backgrounds of the families in your school?
- Since the 14th century, the word “gift” has been used to note a sense of natural talent; however, it wasn’t used as an educational label until the end of the 19th century. The term was simply used to describe students who were able to work through the curriculum faster, and whose work was measurably different from that of average students.
- The article *Parent Conceptions of Giftedness* offers insights into how beliefs can color the choices and opportunities provided for children. Read it at: www.nagc.org/uploadedFiles/Articles/Conceptions.pdf

2. What’s in a Label?

Yes, labels can be useful. In the best of circumstances, they tell us what to expect and anticipate. Imagine what would happen if we took the labels off of all the products in the grocery store. The amount of time and energy needed to make dinner would dramatically increase. The same concept underlies the use of labels in education. The use of “gifted” as a category should make it easier for adults to learn about and anticipate a child’s unique needs.

- Unlike special education, almost all decisions about gifted education are made at the local and state level causing great geographical variation in how the term “gifted” is defined. In fact, your school may not even have a gifted program while the district next door provides a full range of services. When you consider how confusing and frustrating this lack of uniformity must be for parents, plus the time you spend trying to find an appropriate instructional match for each child, the need for a formal “gifted label” that travels with a student throughout school seems much more practical.
- Labels also invoke emotional reactions. If used without care, the term “gifted” can carry a sense of “better than” rather than “different than.” In this way, it can become an educational status symbol. This shifts the focus away from where it is needed – unmitigated support of educational opportunities for the development of high ability, high potential children. For more clarity on the uses and misuses of the gifted label, read through the article “Labeling: To Tell or Not To Tell” from the California Association for *The Gifted Communicator* at: www.nagc.org/uploadedFiles/Articles/label.pdf

3. Expand Your Horizons...

Build a knowledge base about the many diverse people who have been labeled “gifted.” Then find or make opportunities to safely discuss stories, ideas and experiences.

- If you are ready to learn more about the many faces of giftedness, or what they might look like in various contexts, there are several options. Schedule time to talk with a gifted enrichment specialist colleague. Are there professional development opportunities available in your area through your local university or state gifted organization? Consider taking a summer course in gifted education or differentiation strategies.
- You can investigate the rich and varied backgrounds of successful people such as Ralph Bunche (1950 Nobel Peace Prize), Winston Churchill, or Eleanor Roosevelt. Rarely were these people considered exceptional as young students, yet from a hindsight perspective, few would argue with now giving them a label of gifted. The article “Cradles of Eminence” is available at: www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1421

*However, no two people see the external world in exactly the same way.
To every separate person a thing is what he thinks it is --in other words, not a thing, but a think.* - Penelope Fitzgerald