

Big Ships, Small Ships, Friendships, and Competition: Things to Consider

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Editor's Note: *The research in Gifted Child Quarterly (GCQ) provides insight into many aspects of gifted learners but may be two or three degrees of separation from classroom practice. Here, Petra Gyles and others focus on friendship and competition in the classroom, summarized from a Spring 2009 GCQ article by Dr. Bruce M. Shore and others entitled, Competitive Goal Orientations, Quality, and Stability in Gifted and Other Adolescents' Friendships: A Test of Sullivan's Theory about the Harm Caused by Rivalry.*

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Friendships contribute to development of self-concept, perceptions of self-worth, and social skills such as perspective taking, communication, and conflict resolution. Strong, healthy friendships might guide children toward healthy psychosocial development (Bukowski, 2003; Kerns, 1996; Sullivan, 1953).

The proportion of gifted children reported as introverted is higher than in the general population (Cross, Neumeister, & Cassady, 2007). Among highly gifted children, Silverman (1993) reported this as large as 75%. Age peers may not readily relate to gifted children's particular interests (Matthews & Foster, 2005), and gifted children may have difficulty finding friends with similar interests (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). An introverted disposition combined with unusual interests might result in bright children distancing themselves from others and vice versa (Janos, Marwood, & Robinson, 1985).

The common wisdom is that gifted children prefer to work alone in a quiet learning environment (e.g., Davis & Rimm, 2004). However, the supporting research is actually quite varied, and the belief that gifted children always like to work alone misses the more important question of why (French & Shore, 2009). Gifted children have a stronger preference for working alone when they do not feel supported by others, or feel taken advantage of based on their abilities, such as repeatedly acting as a tutor for the other students without reciprocity (the "free-rider" effect) (French, 2007). There may be benefit to gifted students in learning situations grouped by ability, either separate classrooms or cluster-grouping, for they will find themselves in a peer group with similar goals and motivation.

Although gifted students may prefer grouping by ability for academics, they may prefer heterogeneous grouping for social-emotional reasons. Some gifted children base their self-concept or self-esteem on being smarter than others (Adams-Byers, Whitsell, & Moon, 2004). If a child is used to performing at the top of the class and is moved to a classroom of same-performance peers, he or she may no longer feel exceptional. Mixed-

ability grouping meets the short-term needs of some bright children. Long-term, however, inflated self-concept based on comparison to less able peers encourages other-referenced rather than task-oriented goal orientation.

Gifted Friendships and Competition

In other-referenced goal orientation, individuals compete to outperform others. In task-referenced goal orientation, motivation addresses personal improvement—competing against oneself (Schneider, Fonzi, Tani, & Tomada, 1997). Gifted students, generally, are more task-oriented than nongifted students, who are more other-referenced in academic and athletic contexts (Schapiro, Schneider, Shore, Margison, & Udvari, in press).

A pivotal theory by Sullivan (1953) warned that competition could be harmful to friendships, except among young boys. Research focus has shifted to the nature of competition. Competitive goal orientation, where the end result is most important, has also been found to be a variable (Schapiro et al., in press), and so students with task-oriented competitive goals, where the process of self-improvement is the main focus, have fewer friendship conflicts than those "seeking a win." In gifted friendships, having task-oriented competitive goals is also related to greater friendship stability, perhaps due to gifted children being more sensitive to potential negative consequences from competition based on winning and losing. For gifted girls, friendly competition, rather than absence of competition, predicts friendship stability more than other positive qualities such as feelings of closeness or security.

Gifted children identify fewer positive qualities in their friendships (companionship, help, security, and closeness) than nongifted children (Schapiro et al., in press). Perhaps friendships between bright children require a smaller number of pillars supporting the friendship. We are not exactly sure why this is true but we are exploring the possibility that gifted children have friends for specific purposes—a friend to make music with, a friend to hang out with. Other children may seek broader support from all their friendships.

Also, gifted children may be less easily swayed (less "field-dependent") by the influences of others (Shore, Hymovitch, & Lajoie, 1982). Other children have comparably more transient or malleable interests and are more inclined to adopt each others' interests or hobbies. Gifted children, however, are characterized by very intense interests (Clark, 2007), the commitment to which may enable them to retain more of their uniqueness throughout the course of a friendship.

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5 Parents must encourage creativity at home.

Creative thought occurs more often at home than at school, and parents should be aware of this. Students who are allowed to develop their creative and intellectual abilities outside the classroom may find varied areas of success in the future. Parents who encourage reading, intellectual interests, and good study habits, coupled with open-ended questioning, storytelling and creative resources in the home allow their children to experience all that creative thought has to offer. There are a wealth of summer programs and camps available to students across the United States. Teachers can encourage parents to explore these resources by sending out a notice or posting links on their webpage.

Creativity is everywhere. From the buildings we live in, to the art at a museum. It is in the toothpaste tube we use in the morning, and the box spring we lay down on at night. Creative thought is an important piece of education, and it belongs in the curriculum. It is only through the individual expression of creative ideas that students can begin to recognize their own talent. Visit the following link: http://www.mycoted.com/Category:Creativity_Techniques for the most up-to-date resources relating to creative strategies. This website is compiled by Mycoted Science and Technology. ■

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

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Encouraging Task-Orientation

Encouraging task-oriented competition facilitates strong, stable friendships. One way to achieve this is by rewarding self-improvement. For example, teachers can shift the grading scheme toward comparison to the student's past efforts. In tasks that are inherently competitive, teachers could provide instructions that encourage mastery and self-improvement (e.g., adding or elaborating skills) (Butler, 1989), rather than a focus on the final evaluation or result.

While promoting friendships, it is important to consider children's individual social needs. Some children only need or want one or two friends, whereas others seek many. For some gifted children, quality or a particular quality may be more important than quantity. Friendships are tested when competitions are presented. Consideration to the needs of gifted children should be taken when offering competitive situations. ■

References

References available online at the THP homepage:
<http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1498>

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