

Connecting

for high potential • • • • • Summer 2010



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.

Topic for this month: Bored, apathetic, lost interest in school? Behavior problems? Don't despair. Try applying Cooperative Action Research!

A Teacher's View

Teacher: I am a fourth grade teacher, just completing a second year of teaching. I'm struggling with thoughts of "where I went wrong" with respect to some of my students. Several seemed bored, but one student really sticks in my mind — she gradually stopped participating; even in subjects I thought she would enjoy. The quality of her homework slipped, and, by the end of the year, she had become pretty much a loner... withdrawn from friends.

Teacher: I've been a sixth grade teacher for over 15 years. In each class, I have at least one or two students who express their overall dislike of school, often missing multiple days, especially during testing or when major projects are due. It's no wonder their grades suffer, but watch out, for parents are quick to offer a multitude of excuses when I give the low marks their children earned. By the time students reach middle school they should know what's expected of them. My job is to keep preparing them in the best way possible for what's ahead, but sometimes I feel like I'm really working at odds with the parents.

Teacher: I'm a new graduate of a teacher prep program, and spent a week this summer at a gifted education conference. I had assumed my job would be to be well prepared and able to deliver good curriculum in the most effective way; but now I'm learning that social & emotional issues, or perfectionism, or underachievement can change the dynamic in my classroom in dramatic ways. Since so much of what affects children is outside the classroom, I'm wondering what I can do that will help me work with so many different issues and so many different kids in the small amount of time I'm given.

A Parent's View

Parent: My daughter's first grade teacher reports that she is a "behavior problem" in class, as she hums, fidgets, argues, disrupts, and whirls her way through the day. While she's always been active and strong-willed, her behavior at home is clearly worse since she began going to school, but really, the terrible meltdowns are new. With the teacher's recent suggestion of ADD and social emotional issues, we've been asked to agree to a full evaluation. I'm concerned about long-term ramifications.

Parent: In 3 short years, I've watched my son morph from being so excited about school that he could hardly sleep at night, to a child who practically has to be dragged from the house to the school bus. He's obviously so unhappy... and only in the third grade. I don't even know how to begin to sort out what's happening and I don't want to be "one of those moms" who bothers the teacher but, at this rate (if he gets his way), my boy will be a fourth grade dropout!

Parent: As a little girl, my daughter always got the point of the lesson well before anyone else and she was top in her class. Now a freshman, it's a completely different story. I've been attributing her problems at school to being bored but last night I tried to help her with a paper and noticed that there were lots of things she really couldn't do. I was shocked and really worried. In the past, when I've tried to explain her growing boredom and apparent apathy to her teachers, they've told me to let her suffer the natural consequences of not turning in her homework or preparing for tests so I backed off. Now I'm sick to think that she's failing and I don't know what to do to help her.



Please copy and share this with other parents and teachers in your community who may find this useful.

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Not one of the scenarios on the previous page can be solved with a recipe-like template, for each evolves with a unique combination of factors (the individual child, family, particular school, teacher, community resources, etc.). Each situation is also complex. What we see on the surface offers only a glimpse of the full picture. So, looking for solutions based on a simple label (for example, boredom or ADD or behavior problems) will most likely not lead to a productive resolution of the issue. Instead, even the most experienced teachers and parents can benefit from some experimentation —what we're calling **Collaborative Action Research**. Don't be put off by the implied formality of the term. As you read the article "Action Research Step-by-Step: A Tool for Educators to Change Their Worlds" (*Gifted Child Today*, 2007) (www.nagc.org/chp.aspx) open your mind to using the principles of Action Research as an organizing guide for finding answers and insight into individual student problems.

Action Research allows interested parties to become joint researchers — to team together, pool information, and suggest possible options that could help students develop into successful learners. An optimal team is that of Teacher-Parent-Student or Teacher-Parent; however, there can be many different team contributors, depending on circumstances and need.

Think of Action Research as an opportunity for (a) trying something different for a specific amount of time; (b) keeping track of what happens; and (c) evaluating the results. If the results are positive, then keep doing what you were doing (until it doesn't work any more). If what you were trying doesn't work, then change course and begin again.

Action research begins with sharply focused questions...not an easy thing to do, especially when emotions are high and time is limited! Try starting from a positive perspective, rather than the negative. The first question to ask is "When is this child at his or her best?" From that vantage point, note the circumstances that have shown maximum engagement, behavior, and achievement either at home or at school. Now, begin to unravel the current problem.

1. Looking for clues beyond what's expected

AT SCHOOL

- Open up dialogue with the student's family early! It's not always easy to figure out what's going on with students who seem disengaged, for many times the problems have nothing to do with school at all. A wide range of circumstances at home, pre-conceived notions about expectations, overexcitabilities, and prior experience may be taking its toll on the development of the student seated before you. Talk with your students. Sometimes all it takes is a short walk down a hallway or quick "check-in" after class. A "how's everything going?" or "is everything alright?" can go a long way.
- Yes, there's usually more than meets the eye. Learn more about possible learning issues in the book *The Mislabeled Child: Looking beyond behavior to find the true sources—and solutions—for children's learning challenges* (Hyperion, 2006).
- Find new ways to incorporate your own interests, ideas, and personal stories into your lessons. Students are more apt to open up and share their own beliefs when they recognize similarities between themselves and the teacher.

AT HOME

- Boredom? Don't assume it's a result of repetitive, easily understood or mastered tasks. Signs of boredom can be symptomatic of work that is too difficult, as well. Children who "appear" bored may be overwhelmed by all sorts of environmental, social, emotional, or learning problems. For more, check "The Challenges of Boredom" at: www.nagc.org/chp.aspx
- Sensory integration disorders can also contribute to learning problems and classroom issues. Learn how one mother uncovered why her highly gifted son was struggling, and then found solutions in "Elementary Lessons for Mom" at: www.nagc.org/chp.aspx
- Food additives such as artificial colors, artificial flavors and preservatives like butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT) and butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) can cause adverse reactions such as hyperactivity, depression, and migraines. It has been suggested that gifted children with overexcitabilities may show more obvious reactions. For additional information, read "Soothing Overexcitabilities With Food" at: www.nagc.org/chp.aspx

2. Try something new (an informal study)

AT SCHOOL

- Friendships are where a child can learn the art of compromise, negotiation, mutual respect, and sensitivity to others. Good classroom learning extends beyond curricular topics. Including social and emotional development, in this case, the importance of friendships, can be successfully accomplished by using strategies offered by Jean Peterson in her book, *The Essential Guide to Talking With Gifted Teens*.
- In learning about friendships, it is also important to talk about bullying, which – once established – can distort children's views of normal social behavior. You'll find a series of interventions and strategies in *Bullying Among the Gifted: The Subjective Experience*. [www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx]
- Characters in current popular pre- and teen fiction and film are providing kids with mean, cliquish, manipulative models. Become familiar with what's being read and said, then add your rating to commonsensemedia.org and encourage your students to do the same. [www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx]

AT HOME

- Dr. Temple Grandin, a well-known autistic person, says her social relationship skills have been learned solely through visualization and intellect. "When I encounter a new social situation I scan my data banks for a model to guide me in the new situation ... I use these scenarios to guide me in different situations." Her list of 10 confusing rules (because they aren't uniformly applied) is in the book, *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships*.
- Poor nonverbal communication skills will limit a child's success both in and out of school. Most children learn social skills informally but, for some, it's necessary to explicitly teach nonverbal communication skills. Authors Duke, Nowicki, and Martin offer informal evaluations, as well as proven strategies to address the 4th "R" (think about reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, and Relationships) in *Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success*.

3. Check results, move forward, and keep searching for more information

- Whatever road you choose, look at the "data" you've accumulated. Reflection is an important aspect of Action Research. Try to focus on the following questions: "Did it work?" In what way? What was the benefit? How have things changed?
- Perhaps you've found success, and perhaps not. Either way, talk about results and observations with team members. Comfortable, frequent (but not necessarily time-consuming) communication is essential. If results weren't as hoped, be careful not to assign blame. After all, Collaborative Action Research is about trying new things to see what works.
- Parents and teachers who work together and include the student serve as powerful role models for problem solving. Children who learn by searching for answers, accepting the inevitable "errors" implicit in "trial and error," and ultimately deciding on workable solutions will be more likely to keep trying when they meet other challenges in the future.