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# Attitudes of Gifted Children

Christy Folsom

Attitude is the gifted student's visible manifestation of inner adaptation to the environment. While there is much research describing factors that can lead to gifted students' negative attitudes towards school there is also a great deal of evidence that many gifted students are well adjusted and, therefore, quite likely to demonstrate positive attitudes towards school.

Lewis Terman, in his 1925 classic longitudinal study of gifted individuals, found that 60-80% of his research subjects had qualities of humor, truthfulness, conscientiousness, and leadership. Furthermore, these characteristics carried over into adulthood. In a review of research in gifted education that spans 70 years, Linda Silverman found that in addition to positive characteristics similar to Terman's findings, as a group, gifted children show diminished tendencies to boast, to engage in delinquent activity, to aggress, withdraw, or be domineering.

In research with gifted students in rural areas and small towns, Virginia Burney and Tracy Cross found that in spite of the challenges these students encountered with limited academic course offerings and few academic peers, many had positive attitudes toward school. Gifted students often described their small schools as having a family-like atmosphere. They experienced little stigma from being academically gifted and they had many opportunities for extracurricular activities which allowed them to be seen as more than a single dimension of giftedness.

Others find evidence of a positive attitude even when it is partially hidden in underachievement. Betsy McCoach and Del Siegle researched the differences between high and low achieving gifted high school students using the School Attitude Assessment Survey-R. Using this instrument, they assessed five factors that include academic self-concept, attitudes toward school, attitudes toward teachers, motivation/self-regulation, and goal valuation which means the value students' place on academic goals or school assignments.

In four areas, attitudes toward school, attitudes toward teachers, self-regulation, and goal valuation, McCoach found significant differences between the achieving and underachieving students. However, there was no significant difference in the academic self-concept factor. Regardless of differences found in the other factors, these students demonstrated a positive attitude about their learning abilities. Both groups were equally confident in their own intellectual abilities and inwardly maintained positive attitudes towards themselves as learners.

In Maureen Neihart's review of the literature on social adjustment in gifted students, she found the majority of studies to reveal high to normal levels of adjustment among the subjects. In reviewing discreet categories of adjustment, however, she found a correlation between the thinking processes of those with certain psychiatric disorders and highly creative adults. However, she cautioned against extrapolating these results obtained with adults to creatively

gifted children in the midst of development. Neihart pointed out that the psychological well being of a gifted child is related to the type of giftedness, the educational fit, and the child's personal characteristics such as self-perceptions, temperament, and life circumstances.

## **Factors that Influence Attitude**

Attitudes of the gifted toward school are as diverse as gifted children. Some of the factors that can influence the attitudes of gifted students towards school include age, type and level of giftedness, gender, race, disability, teachers, and curricula.

### ***Age, Type, Level of Giftedness, and Disability***

Attitude depends on the student's intellectual and emotional interaction with factors within the environment. Age, type, and level of giftedness can influence the attitude of gifted students from the youngest through the college level. In gifted children, mental age can be seriously out of sync with chronological age causing frustration for the child in a classroom where the content, processes, and pace are not commensurate with his capabilities.

Linda Silverman points out that there are many variations within the construct of asynchrony. The discomfort of asynchrony is more acutely felt by the most highly gifted children with 160 IQ and above. Leta Hollingworth noted that children between the ages of four and nine feel the social isolation most intensely, but when they were allowed to move to an appropriate grade level, the loneliness and social isolation disappeared. Neihart cautions, however, against assuming that children with IQs at 160 and above will necessarily experience social and emotional difficulties. She points out that, as with highly creative children, appropriate educational placement is essential.

A more extreme form of asynchrony that can affect attitude is experienced by children who are both highly gifted and have learning and emotional disabilities. While these students show high ability in abstract verbal reasoning outside the classroom, they may exhibit difficulties within the classroom with auditory and visual processing, handwriting, perceptual motor problems, dyslexia, or emotional challenges. When emotional and learning disabilities mask giftedness, the student acutely feels the frustration caused by the discrepancy between expectations, both personal and external, and actual achievement.

### ***Gender and Race***

There is a large amount of research on how gender influences the gifted throughout school and into adulthood. Barbara Kerr explored gifted girls' shifting attitudes toward their own giftedness in *Smart Girls*. Kerr and her colleagues also found that girls perceived giftedness to be more of a social liability than boys did, but that boys and girls were both positive about the academic benefits of being labeled as gifted. Yet, for gifted minority students, especially young black men, complex issues of racial identity further confound attitude in the area of academic performance. Ogbu suggests that underachievement in school is related to peer influence. Some young African Americans interpret academic achievement as a betrayal of their cultural group and adopt an

oppositional social identity in a response to racism and prejudice. Harper, however, found in his interviews with 32 high-achieving black male undergraduates at six major predominantly white universities that they felt supported in their leadership and academic pursuits by other black male students.

### ***Educational Fit***

Since gifted children's cognitive needs are closely and visibly interwoven with emotional well-being, attitude in school is most often a function of appropriate educational fit. Full-time self-contained gifted classrooms, part-time pull-out programs, and curriculum differentiation within the general education classroom are all structures used to provide gifted students with more appropriate educational environments.

Recent research on acceleration shows that acceleration is a valuable option in serving the needs of gifted students. A wide variety of acceleration alternatives have been examined including early school entry, grade-skipping, and early entrance to college with a variety of ways each method can be carried out. Concerns about the social-emotional effects of acceleration were found negligible in comparison to the positive academic effect.

A better educational fit is often needed to alleviate the boredom in an unchallenging classroom that can lead to underachievement. Lannie Kanevsky and Tacey Keighley investigated what boredom meant to 10 underachieving gifted students who were selected by school counselors in a suburban Canadian school district. These researchers uncovered pedagogical practices that these underachieving students felt would provide a better educational fit within their classrooms.

Like McCoach and Siegle, Kanevsky and Keighley found that these students were confident in their academic learning abilities. The students articulately described their learning needs in terms of five C's that represent control, choice, challenge, complexity, and caring. They wanted choices about the content they were required to study and more experiences grounded in the real world. They wanted hands-on assignments and processes that included high levels of thinking and involved their emotions and interests. The students wanted an increased pace of learning with fewer repetitions and more choice in the learning environment. They wanted choice in assignments, flexible time to explore a topic in depth, and an opportunity to select members for group work. The students wanted caring teachers who showed respect for them as learners.

## **Conclusion**

Gifted children are diverse and complex individuals. Many are well-adjusted hard-working students who achieve their academic and personal goals. Some are, as Delisle describes, gifted non-producers who are confident of their abilities but choose not to do school work that they consider inappropriate and irrelevant. Still others underachieve because of low self-esteem, lack of independence, and physical, emotional, or cognitive circumstances that affect learning. Yet, research studies that concern attitudes of gifted students toward school consistently point to a universal need for classrooms with knowledgeable, caring, observant teachers. Such teachers are aware of the learning needs of all students, including gifted students. They are able to design curriculum that meets both the intellectual and social emotional needs of students, and they can

recognize the need for appropriate placements that support each student in reaching his or her full potential.

See also: Teacher attitudes; Academic self-concept; Asynchrony; Emotional development; Guidance

### **Further Readings**

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Christy Folsom is an Associate Professor in the Masters Degree Program in Childhood Education at Lehman College, City University of New York, Bronx, New York. Her teaching and research focuses on the intellectual and emotional infrastructure of teaching and learning, project-based learning that includes self-organization skills; transfer of learning from coursework to P-12 classrooms, and change in teacher thinking and practice evidenced in student performance.

