

Competing with Myths about the Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Students

by Tracy L. Cross

As a person who has dedicated himself to the study of the psychological and experiential lives of gifted students, I have encountered widely held myths and associated practices that have negative effects on the social and emotional development of gifted students. These myths are common among parents, teachers, administrators, and gifted students. As a wise person (Lao Tsu) once said, “Nothing is more difficult than competing with a myth.” Doing so, however, can create tremendous opportunities for people. Recall that it was not that long ago that myth prevented women from competing in long distance foot races.

The following list includes some of the most common and insidious examples of myths pertaining to the social development of gifted students. I hope that by discussing these examples, gifted students will be better served and barriers to their well-beings will be broken.

Myth 1. Gifted students should be with students their own age. The worry expressed here is that something inappropriate or untoward will occur if different age groups spend time together. Parents, teachers, and administrators worry that groups of multi-age children will struggle with exploitation, intimidation, inappropriate modeling, and sexuality. This prevailing myth undergirds some advocates’ preferences for educational models that emphasize enrichment rather than acceleration. The logic is as follows: “We should keep the students together even if they have already mastered the material.” Some believers of this myth will claim that research supports this point, but in fact they are mistaken. Writers have published this sentiment, but research does not support this idea. In fact, in my research with Larry Coleman, it is clear that gifted students need opportunities to be together with their intellectual peers, no matter what their age differences (Coleman & Cross, 2001). While there are plenty of appropriate reasons to provide enriching educational experiences, these decisions should not be made out of fear, worry or myth; they should be based on the needs of the students.

Myth 2. Gifted students are better off if they spend their entire school day amidst same-age, heterogeneous classmates. The claim is that if we allow gifted students to be clustered together through one of any means available, they will be unable to get along with others later in life, and this experience will cause emotional distress. Middle school principals and some middle school teachers regularly expressed these feelings. This concern includes the belief on the parts of the adults that gifted students, to be happy, must become socially astute. Becoming socially astute requires that gifted students spend as much time as possible in heterogeneous classroom environments. Once again, the claimed research that supports this myth is virtually nonexistent. Imagine all the opportunities students have to interact with other people. Church, sports, clubs, meals, camps, are just a few examples. Sacrificing learning and creating frustration based on this myth is unethical, in my opinion. This problem increases as the students develop and their knowledge base increases within a specific discipline.

Myth 3. Being perfectly well rounded should be the primary goal for gifted student development. Please note the carefully chosen phrase, “perfectly well rounded,” as opposed to “somewhat well-rounded.” Many parents, teachers, and administrators believe that it is their role to ensure that gifted students are perfectly well-rounded. To that end, they will encourage, prod, goad, push, threaten, and yell at gifted students to get them to spend less time engaged in their passion areas, so they can engage in something the adult wishes them to do. A very common example is that of an introverted gifted student who has great facility with computers. Adults will drag the child away from her passion to get her to participate in something she may loathe. While adults in each of these roles should be concerned with the well-being of gifted students, requiring them to engage in activities for which the gifted student has no interest (e.g.,

going outside and playing, or spending time with other children you do not choose to play with during the school day) as a means to make them happy later in life is misguided. Much of the research on successful gifted adults has revealed that they spent considerable amounts of time, often alone, in their passion areas as children. A more reasonable approach is to encourage and nurture other interests in the child rather than sending them the message that they are unacceptable as they are. For example, sending gifted children to a residential summer program can do wonders to broaden interests within a community where they feel emotionally safe and accepted for who they are.

Myth 4. Being gifted is something with which you are just born. A corollary to this is that things come easily when you are gifted or being gifted means never having to study or to try hard in school. This naive notion of giftedness, while intuitively proper, can be debilitating to gifted students' development. Many teachers, parents, administrators, and gifted students hold this belief. It is not informed, however, by research on talent development and development in general. Moving from an entity notion of giftedness to an incremental notion, wherein talent is developed with hard work and some failure, is a much healthier and more nurturing experience of being a gifted student (Dweck, 1986). This change in understanding of giftedness is of particular importance before age 10 or so. That is because a school's curriculum tends to get more focused as it moves toward middle school. Many gifted students experience this change as personal failure, causing self-doubt and distress, because they have internalized intellectual struggle as failure. To change this belief merely requires teaching gifted students about the two definitions, exposing them to models who failed in the process of great accomplishment (e.g., Thomas Edison) and having them go through processes that include struggle as part of growth.

Myth 5. Virtually everybody in the field of gifted education is an expert on the social and emotional development of gifted students. An extension of this is that every adult (parent, teacher, school administrator) is an expert on the social and emotional development of gifted students. The field of gifted studies is quite small, often yielding professionals in the field who are called on to be experts in numerous areas. This regularly plays out with a high percentage claiming expertise and being called on to provide wisdom on this topic. Another reason for this situation is the fact that we were all students once ourselves and that, supposedly, makes us familiar with gifted students' lives. This is similar to my having played football as a youngster and now claiming expertise equivalent to that of Peyton Manning. Many factors combine to create situations where competing advice—sometimes by people who mean well, but do not know the research on the social and emotional development of gifted students—is given. As the field of gifted studies grows and matures, I think that children would be better served by having the expertise of those who specialize, rather than relying on a model that requires its experts to know a little about everything associated with the field.

Myth 6. Adults (parents, teachers, and administrators) know what gifted students experience. This plays out on issues such as being around bullies and drugs, sexuality, and social pressures. In addition to the usual generational differences, in many ways, contemporary experiences are different from the experiences of previous generations. For example, many gifted students go to school fearful of schools as unsafe environments. Gifted students of today are often surrounded by guns, and when not, still perceive that they are. In short, the vague red menace of previous generations has been replaced by generalized anxiety and fear; fear that the media has exacerbated and kept alive in ways that are inescapable by today's youth. The hubris of adults to believe that they know what gifted students experience on a daily basis is mind-boggling. Consider these two facts: the suicide rate of adolescents rose more than 240% between 1955 and 1990, and suicide is the second leading cause of death of this age group (Holinger, Offer, Barter & Bell, 1994). Is it possible that our children live in a somewhat different context than adults did at the same age? If parents can observe classrooms more often, talk with their gifted children, asking for descriptions of their experiences, then a much richer understanding is possible.

Myth 7. Being too smart in school is a problem, especially for girls. This myth has many facets to it. It represents adults' worries about their own feelings of acceptance; concerns about fears associated with standing out; the typical antiintellectual culture of schools; the reflection of society's under evaluation of high levels of achievement; and the often mentioned, intuitively based association of high levels of intellectual ability with low levels of morality. The obvious consequence of this myth is the nurturing of incredibly high percentages of our students who underachieve in

school. A large proportion of American students with gifts and talents have developed social coping strategies that use up time, energy, limit their opportunities, cause bad decisions to be made, retard their learning, and threaten their lives. These behaviors and beliefs about self make perfect sense when one perceives the mixed messages about being gifted in their school's social milieu. We must provide support for these children as they navigate the anti-intellectual contexts in which they spend much of their time.

Myth 8. All kids are gifted, and no kids are gifted. This myth is most often expressed by administrators and occasionally by teachers. The reasons for these two beliefs are predictable given the developmental differences that manifest across the grade levels. For example, while in the elementary grades, which are thought to have a more amorphous curriculum than the later grades, teachers typically perceive manifestations of potential for extraordinary work as indicators of giftedness. As the child moves toward high school where the curriculum tends to be quite focused, with distinct disciplines being taught by teachers passionate about the subject areas they teach (we hope), giftedness is often determined as meaningful only as a manifestation of success within the specific courses. Middle school represents some of both of these operative definitions of giftedness.

Another important aspect to this belief is the primary motivator that led teachers and administrators to pursue their profession. For example, when you ask elementary teacher candidates what they want to do most, they will tell you that they want to teach young children. Secondary teachers tend to say that they want to teach math, English, and so forth. Middle school teachers often hold very strong views about the specific age group of students they have chosen to work with. These teachers and administrators often describe the primary school-based needs of middle school students in terms of social needs and their need to learn in a protective environment that emphasizes the students' developmental frailties. A rigorous educational curriculum is seldom the highest priority.

Another undercurrent to these positions is that being gifted is tied to the assumption that gifted children are better than other students. This is a very unfortunate connection, because it encourages adults to hold the position that all kids are gifted or no kids are gifted. James Gallagher, a wise man in the field of gifted education, once said "When someone claims that all kids are gifted, merely ask them 'In what?'" Being gifted eventually has to be in something. While all kids are great, terrific, valuable, and depending on your beliefs perhaps even a gift from God, they are not all gifted in the way the term is used in the field. Giftedness is not an anointment of value. A person who shows extraordinary ability for high levels of performance when young and, if provided appropriate opportunities, demonstrates a development of talent that exceeds normal levels of performance, is gifted.

I hope that providing a list of some of the pervasive and insidious myths that affect the lives of gifted students will inspire us to take action on behalf of the students. If we challenge these myths with examples of good research, provide appropriate counseling and create learning environments where students with gifts and talents can thrive, then many of these myths can be eliminated. Let us work to help all students have an appropriate education, including gifted students.

References

- Coleman, L. J. & Cross, T. L. (2001). *Being gifted in school: An introduction to development, guidance, and teaching*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Dweck, C. S. (1986). Motivation processes affecting learning. *American Psychologist*, 41, 1040-1048.
- Holinger, P. C., Offer, D., Barter, J. T., & Bell, C. C. (1994). *Suicide and homicide among adolescents*. New York: Guilford Press.

Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D., is George and Frances Ball Distinguished Professor of Gifted Studies at Ball State University and the executive director of the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities. He may be reached at the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306-6055; email: tcross@gw.bsu.edu.

