

TALKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERIES

VOLUME 9

GIFTED EDUCATION

INFORMATION BOOKLET



This pamphlet is one of a series of resources prepared by the First Nations Schools Association (FNSA) and First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) to share information about how to support all First Nations students, regardless of their needs.

FNSA MANDATE:

to collaborate with First Nation schools to create nurturing environments that develop learners' pride and competence in their First Nations language and heritage and equip them to realize their full potential within self-governing First Nations communities.

FNESC MANDATE:

to facilitate discussion about education matters affecting First Nations in BC by disseminating information to and soliciting input from First Nations. FNESC's primary goal is to promote and support the provision of a quality education to First Nations learners.

We hope that these pamphlets provide a useful overview of key special education topics, representing an introduction to issues that some people may want to investigate in more detail. Anyone who requires more information or has specific questions is welcome to contact the FNESC/FNSA special education staff.



Published 1998, Updated February 2018

© First Nations Education Steering Committee and First Nations Schools Association, 2018
Suite 113 - 100 Park Royal South, West Vancouver, BC V7T 1A2 www.fnesc.ca

Phone (604) 925-6087 | Toll-free in BC 1-877-422-3672

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

WHAT IS MEANT BY GIFTED?

Of course, all children have unique talents and things they do particularly well. In that way, all children are “gifted”.

For the purpose of special education, including learning programs and services, however, “gifted students” are defined in a more specific way.

Gifted students are also sometimes called highly capable, talented, or high ability students. For simplicity, this pamphlet uses the term gifted to encompass all of these “categories”.

In terms of Special Education, a gifted student is defined as a learner who has a higher than usual capacity for learning or achievement. This capacity may relate to one or more of the following aspects:

- Academic achievement, such as language (literacy) or numeracy competence
- Creativity
- Leadership
- A specific discipline, such as the arts or athletics

Generally, gifted students are innovative thinkers who are able to see multiple approaches to problems and work out unique and unusual solutions.

NOTE: in this pamphlet, we use the term “parent” for simplicity, but the information is intended to be inclusive of all family members/caregivers of students with special needs. FNESC and the FNSA respect and appreciate the invaluable contributions of everyone who works to support all First Nations students - regardless of their special talents, gifts, or challenges.

Identifying Gifted Students and Understanding Their Particularly Talents

Since gifted students are so diverse, they exhibit a variety of characteristics at different times. However, there are common characteristics that many gifted individuals share:

- Unusual alertness
- A capacity for rapid learning, often putting thoughts together quickly
- Excellent memory
- An unusually large vocabulary and complex sentence structure for their age
- Advanced comprehension of word nuances, metaphors and abstract ideas
- Enjoys solving problems, especially with numbers and puzzles
- Often self-taught reading and writing skills as preschooler
- Deep, intense feelings and reactions
- Highly sensitive
- Thinks in abstract, complex, logical, and insightful ways
- Idealism and a strong sense of justice at early age

- Significant concern with social and political issues and injustices
- Longer attention span and intense concentration
- Preoccupation with his or her own thoughts – a ‘daydreamer’
- An ability to learn basic skills quickly and with little practice
- A habit of asking probing questions
- A wide range of interests (or extreme focus in one area)
- Highly developed curiosity
- A strong interest in experimenting and doing things differently
- A tendency to put together ideas or objects in unusual / uncommon ways
- A keen and/or unusual sense of humor
- A desire to organize people / things through games or complex schemas

- A vivid imagination (often having imaginary friends in pre-school)

When students are suspected as being gifted, a formal assessment can be completed to better understand their strengths. Assessment procedures will usually involve:

- Formal testing and indicators of the student’s intellectual ability, aptitudes, and creativity;
- Teacher observations, including anecdotal records, checklists, and inventories; and
- Records of the student’s achievement, including assignments, portfolios, grades, and accomplishments.

Many assessment processes also involve parents’ perceptions of their child’s strengths and abilities.

Characteristics of Gifted Students

It is important to avoid overgeneralizations about any learners and the same is true for gifted students. There are all kinds of gifted children, but some of their common characteristics are highlighted here.

Many gifted children ...

- Learn to read early, read widely and quickly, and have large vocabularies
- Learn basic skills more quickly and with less practice
- Are better able to construct and handle abstractions
- Can work independently at an earlier age and can concentrate for longer periods of time
- Often have high levels of energy, which can be misdiagnosed as hyperactivity
- Usually relate well to parents, teachers, and other adults, and may prefer the company of older people rather than their peers
- Like to learn new things, enjoy exploring the unusual, and are highly inquisitive
- Tackle problems in a well-organized, goal-directed, and efficient manner
- Exhibit a natural motivation to learn and can be very persistent

Gifted children may also ...

- Show keen powers of observation and an eye for important details
- Read a great deal on their own and prefer materials written for older students or adults
- Display a questioning attitude and seek information regularly
- Know a great deal about a variety of topics, which they can often recall quickly
- Readily grasp underlying principles and quickly see similarities, differences, and anomalies
- Deconstruct complicated material by separating it into components and analyzing it systematically

Gifted children's creative abilities may also be exhibited as ...

- Flexible thinking, using many different alternatives and approaches to problem solving
- Original thinking, seeking new and unusual ways of combining information
- Seeing relationships among seemingly unrelated objects, ideas or facts
- Emotional sensitivity
- Imaginative thinking
- Excitement about expressing their opinions and ideas

Cautions Related to Gifted Students

It is important to keep in mind a number of cautions for students who are considered gifted.

- Gifted students rarely have strengths in all areas and it is important not to set unrealistic expectations that they are highly unlikely to meet.
- Some gifted students can have hidden learning disabilities that may go unnoticed for years because the students are able to compensate for their difficulties. These undiagnosed difficulties can sometimes make it increasingly difficult for the student to excel, which can lead to depression and/or behaviour problems.
- Gifted students often demonstrate high levels of independent thinking, which can be misinterpreted as questioning authority or other behavioural issues.
- Some students' high levels of curiosity and energy can result in them being labelled difficult.
- Many gifted students would rather work alone than in groups, which can limit their development of social skills.
- Their long attention spans and concentration can make it difficult for some students to readily shift from one activity to another, as they may stay absorbed in an interesting activity for unusually long periods of time.
- A heightened level of emotional sensitivity can cause strong reactions to events that may be less disturbing to some other children.
- Perfectionism is a frequent challenge for the emotional well-being of gifted students.
- Gifted students may not fit in well with their peers, sometimes being seen as "bossy," "brainy," or a "know-it-all," - potentially making it difficult for them to keep friends and resulting in them being lonely.
- Some people believe that gifted students do not need extra supports because "they are smart enough to learn on their own". But without appropriate encouragement, guidance, and challenging learning experiences, many gifted students become bored or frustrated and may become underachievers or may drop out of school.

Relevant Education Practices

Gifted and talented students require education programs that will challenge them in regular classroom settings, as well as enrichment and accelerated programs, to enable them to make continuous progress in school. The following practices have been shown to be effective in helping gifted students meet their full potential (National Association for Gifted Children, www.nagc.org).

- The practice of **educational acceleration** has long been used to match gifted students' abilities and talents with optimal learning opportunities. Acceleration occurs when students move through the conventional curriculum at rates that are faster than usual. Among the many forms of acceleration are grade-skipping, early entrance to kindergarten or college, dual-credit courses, and subject-based acceleration (such as when a fifth-grade student takes a middle school math course).
- **Curriculum compacting** condenses, modifies, or streamlines the regular curriculum to reduce repetition of mastered material. "Compacting" what students already know allows time for acceleration or enrichment beyond the basic curriculum for students who would otherwise be simply practicing what they have already mastered.
- The practice of **grouping**, or placing students with similar abilities and/or performance together for instruction, has been shown to positively impact student learning gains. Grouping gifted children together allows for more appropriate, rapid, and advanced instruction, which matches their rapidly developing skills and capabilities.
- **Pull-out and other specialized programming options** occur in a variety of ways, such as special classes in a subject or interest area; a special school; afterschool, weekend, or summer programs; Advanced Placement or other dual-enrollment courses; distance learning; and other similar services.

Suggested DOs

- Like all students, gifted learners need rich learning experiences, relevant content, activities that encourage them to process important ideas at a high level, and products that allow them to address meaningful problems. They need classrooms that provide both structure and choice, and help them achieve more than they thought they could.
- Good teaching for gifted learners is paced in response to the student's individual needs. Often, these students learn more quickly than others their age, and as a result they need a more rapid instructional pace. At the same time, advanced learners may sometimes need more time so they can achieve a depth or breadth of understanding needed to satisfy their capacity for knowing. Flexibility and student involvement in determining the right pacing is key.
- Gifted learners can benefit from a higher "degree of difficulty" in their talent areas, including content, processes, and products that are more complex, more abstract, more open-ended, and more multifaceted. They often need less teacher-imposed structure, and may (but not always) be able to function with a greater degree of independence than their peers.
- Gifted learners often learn and make very good grades with relative ease in school. They may see themselves as expected to make "As," get right answers, and lead the way. Then, if tasks become more difficult for them, they may perceive this as threatening. For this reason, gifted students must consistently be challenged with work that is an appropriate level, so that they learn to take risks, persist, and seek out appropriate help when needed.

Remember ...it is very difficult to understand and predict a student's abilities. It has been reported that ...

- Einstein was four years old before he could speak.
- Sir Isaac Newton did poorly in grade school.
- When Thomas Edison was a boy, his teachers told him he was too stupid to learn anything.
- A newspaper editor fired Walt Disney because he had "no good ideas."
- Leo Tolstoy flunked out of college.
- Louis Pasteur was rated as mediocre in chemistry when he attended the Royal College.
- Winston Churchill failed the sixth grade.

Suggested DO NOTs

- Teachers should not expect gifted students to do things they already know how to do and then to wait for others to learn how. Many advanced learners are regularly expected to complete assignments that are based on materials, ideas and skills they have already mastered, rather than being pre-assessed and assigned more advanced materials, ideas and skills when they demonstrate competency.
- It is not useful to ask students to do “more of the same stuff faster”, such as reading more books that are too easy and doing more math problems that are not challenging. This is neither skill building nor enriching.
- Gifted students should not be isolated in the classroom and expected to just learn and practice on their own.
- Gifted students should not “fill time” – completing puzzles, doing repetitious worksheets, etc.
- It is inappropriate for gifted students to spend substantial time in the role of tutor, spending considerable time on a regular basis teaching what they already know to students who are having difficulty.

Overall, gifted students need a great deal of understanding, as it can be difficult to feel different and isolated from peers. They also need a balance of challenging but realistic expectations, as well as encouragement to take risks and help learning to deal with failures.

And remember... providing basic training for all teachers to help them recognize and serve advanced students can be very advantageous and ensure that all students have their unique needs identified and adequately addressed.

REFERENCES

OTHER VOLUMES AVAILABLE IN THE
TALKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERIES:

VOLUME 1: AN OVERVIEW

VOLUME 2: AN INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS / FAMILIES

VOLUME 3: INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS

VOLUME 4: A PARENT'S GUIDE TO INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS

VOLUME 5: SPEECH AND LANGUAGE ISSUES

VOLUME 6: ATTENTION DEFICIT / ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVE
DISORDER

VOLUME 7: FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDERS

VOLUME 8: AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

VOLUME 9: GIFTED EDUCATION

FOR MORE INFORMATION:



FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION STEERING COMMITTEE
FIRST NATIONS SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

#113 - 100 Park Royal South, West Vancouver, BC V7T 1A2

604-925-6087 | Toll-free in BC 1-877-422-3672
info@fnesc.ca

www.fnesc.ca