

Chapter 2

The Mind of the Child: Intellectual Development

The first edition of this book went to press in 1987, the year Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr. published *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature*,¹ one of the first calls to action regarding our nation's school system. Soon the rising awareness of crisis in our educational system generated a storm of studies and programs to reform and restructure the schools, resulting in major new developments such as mainstreaming, homeschooling, competency tests, and charter schools. In the early years of the 21st century, while concerns over terrorism and war overshadowed domestic issues, our nation's public schools continued to struggle with questions that had been raised more than 20 years earlier.

The world of gifted education has not been unaffected by these events. Any consideration of the intellectual needs of gifted and high-potential youngsters must be set within the context in which they currently live and go to school. What do these children need for optimum intellectual development? What obstacles face teachers and school administrations as they try to meet those needs? How can

parents identify gaps and compensate for them at home? And what is the role of books and reading?

The Need for Intellectual Development

While concern for the *emotional* development of bright and gifted children is a relatively new addition to the educational scene, efforts to help them meet their *intellectual* potential have long been discussed, researched, and implemented. In many school districts, tests and inventories help determine IQs and learning characteristics of even very young gifted children.²

Some universities have developed programs to prepare teachers in gifted education. One of these, the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary, provides curricula in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies for high-ability learners that can be used by parents and teachers of gifted students wherever they may be.³ Other universities focus on providing students with special opportunities. For example, the Indiana Academy invites gifted Indiana students to spend their junior and senior years of high school on a small campus near Ball State University, where they can benefit from being with other bright teens and from the nearby university. In addition, there are several talent search programs that offer challenging summer programs for gifted students in grades 7-12. These include Northwestern University, Johns Hopkins University, Duke University, and the University of Iowa.

The programs above offer valuable resources for gifted children and the adults who teach them. However, the implementation of gifted education in local schools varies dramatically, leaving families frustrated in their search for the best schools for their children. As of 2005, only one state requires coursework in gifted education for regular classroom teachers, and less than half the states require that teachers working in specialized programs for the gifted and talented have graduate credits or a teaching certificate with an endorsement in gifted education. In 2007, 40% of the states in the U.S. did not require public schools to identify and serve gifted children.⁴

As our high-potential students attempt to find their place in the sun, they receive mixed messages from the world around them. Pointing to the impact of anti-intellectualism in American society, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent*, a 1993 report on the education of gifted children in the United States, attests:

*As a culture, we admire and reward the brilliant, creative mind after it has invented something practical or produced tangible results. Yet we are not inclined to support those who want to pursue an artistic or intellectual life, and we find ways of discouraging those who wish to do so.... [Responding to this discouragement,] students say they want to do well, but not exceptionally well, because it is more important to be accepted by the "in crowd" (which) is not the "brain crowd."*⁵

A little more than a decade later, a powerful book titled *Genius Denied: How to Stop Wasting Our Brightest Young Minds* by philanthropists Jan and Bob Davidson highlighted the same message.⁶ In this book, Professor Tracy Cross, the Executive Director of the Indiana Academy, commented on the recent trends in education:

*In essence, being passionate about academics holds no currency in schools that plan for the masses and put their focus on minimum-competency tests. What does hold value in such a setting? Compliance, complacency, a friendly, outgoing personality, and enthusiasm for working in groups are valued. Showing interest and participating in "in-the-moment," teacher-led activities, plus "going along," are often the lessons learned.*⁷

The path is not smooth for our gifted students—especially those whose interests are academic or intellectual. While they may find excellent educational offerings in their schools, these are certainly not universal. Their fellow students—and in some cases, their teachers—do not necessarily understand and welcome their gifts or their interests. And the manner in which their intellectual needs are

addressed—or not—will have an impact on their current and future emotional development.

We must begin by recognizing that intellectual development is an emotional need for some intellectually gifted people, especially the highly gifted. In fact, psychologist Dr. James T. Webb asserts that “profoundly gifted children are ones for whom intellectual stimulation and/or creative expression are clearly emotional needs that may appear to be as intense as the physiological needs of hunger or thirst.”⁸ Dr. Linda Silverman concurs, stating that the neglect of appropriate educational opportunities for gifted children “affects their morale, motivation, social relationships, aspirations, sense of self-worth, and emotional development.”⁹ For these students, meeting intellectual needs is not a purely intellectual task; there is a driving force behind it that must not be denied. Adults who seek to help gifted children grow will be most effective if they acknowledge and reinforce this imperative to learn.

Imagine the frustration of an athlete who isn’t allowed to run, jump, or swim. This gives some inkling of the frustration of a bright child denied the chance to challenge her mind. To have curiosity satisfied; to experience a wealth of diversity in ideas, places, and people; to explore all the world and find a place in it—all of this is a legitimate need for these youngsters. Ultimately, meeting that need will benefit all of us.

Intellectual Needs as Emotional Needs

A bright or gifted child has extraordinary abilities, each accompanied by needs—a need for the ability to be developed and used, and a need for the child possessing it to become creative and eventually able to produce something of value to himself or others. For unusually talented people, the point is not merely that where there is an ability, it is best to develop it. Rather, an intellectually gifted child will not be happy or complete, and certainly not self-fulfilled, until he is using his intellectual ability at a level approaching his full capacity. It is important that parents and teachers see intellectual development as a requirement for these children and not merely an interest, a flair, or a

phase they will outgrow. One young artist explains, "I have a hard time *not* painting. I paint about 10 hours a day. Painting is my life." Another student says simply, "I read because I can't help it."¹⁰ It is often harder work—less relaxing—for an intellectually gifted person to read lightweight material than to dig into a book that has some hefty new information to offer. Gifted adults who relax by learning to play a musical instrument or by reading in a foreign language are expressing the same drive for mental stimulation. These activities are not work for them; they are pathways to being fully alive.

Recognizing intellectual development as a need can help parents cope with the frustration that they may feel when a child reads or tinkers or practices an instrument for "too many" hours per day. It can also help teachers find patience when a child insists on working endlessly on a project or report, threatening to hold up the progress of the rest of the class.

Intellectual Overexcitability

A helpful way of thinking about this drive to understand comes from Kazimierz Dabrowski's intriguing ideas about developmental potential, which were introduced in Chapter 1, and his concept of intellectual overexcitability. These ideas can help adults appreciate not only the need for intellectual development, but also the strength of feeling behind it.

Piechowski, a student of Dabrowski, listed characteristics of intellectual overexcitability that may be familiar to those who deal with gifted youngsters: probing questions, problem solving, curiosity, concentration, capacity for sustained intellectual effort, voracious reading and starting on difficult books at a young age, a wide variety of interests, theoretical thinking (thinking about thinking, moral thinking, development of a hierarchy of values), independence of thought (often expressed in criticism), and processes of self-monitoring and self-evaluation.¹¹ All of these characteristics are part of the drive to learn, to know, and to understand.

Piechowski also states that intellectual overexcitability has more to do with "striving for understanding, probing the unknown, and

love of truth than with learning per se and academic achievement."¹² More recently, he describes it as "an avidity for knowledge and the search for truth—expressed as discovery, questioning, and love of ideas and theoretical analysis."¹³ It is this extra sense of urgency about *knowing* that underlies the need of some gifted children for intellectual development and that causes them to say, "I read because I can't help it."

Intellectual overexcitability, like the other overexcitabilities that Dabrowski lists, is not always understood or valued by those who may not discern how it contributes to the development of gifted individuals. Thus, gifted students quickly realize that it is often best to diminish their enthusiasm for learning. To counteract this dampening that may occur in a mixed-ability classroom, reading and book discussion with other gifted students can provide a welcome venue for expressing intellectual interests in a setting where these students can be accepted.

"Can you tell your readers how awful it feels when you have to go for two days without reading?" asked one young man when he learned that I was writing this book. A 19-year-old German student described to me why he was drawn toward a career in university teaching: "When I read about culture, then I am happy!" Both of these young men exhibit the unusual intellectual intensity that Piechowski describes.

Not everyone who has high intelligence also has a passionate interest in intellectual pursuits. For those who do, however, learning about the work of Dabrowski and Piechowski often brings reassurance, along with a shock of self-recognition.

The Child in Charge

Some bright children seem to lose touch with their drive to understand. Although as preschoolers they were exceptionally eager to learn, by the middle elementary grades, their intellectual curiosity appears to be dulled, and they are willing to settle for half-hearted efforts in school. "A lot of research shows that if gifted people aren't challenged, after a while they lose interest in challenging themselves," says Judith Shuey, who heads PEG, a high school/college program for gifted girls at Mary Baldwin College.¹⁴

Just as gifted children must achieve a sense of identity that incorporates their unusual abilities, so must they recognize early that the drive to understand is part of who they are.¹⁵ At the preschool and primary levels, parents and teachers should help talented children know this about themselves: learning is a source of pleasure for them. The acknowledgement “*I enjoy learning*” should be integrated into their developing self-concepts.

Whatever steps adults take to satisfy the child’s curiosity and enrich her experience, their underlying attitude that learning is important—not only for its own sake, but also *to the child*—is vital and must gradually be adopted by the child. Ultimately, the responsibility for keeping curiosity both satisfied and piqued must shift to the child as she makes decisions that enable her to continue learning. The knowledge that she *needs* to learn and that it is up to her to meet that need is part of her survival kit.

Characteristics and Needs

Many writers in the field of gifted education provide lists of intellectual characteristics of gifted children at all ages, and these behaviors are sometimes used in conjunction with scores on ability tests, such as the CogAT (Cognitive Abilities Test), to determine eligibility for school gifted programs. Lists of intellectual characteristics can also be used as a springboard for identifying the intellectual needs that they imply. The following compilation of three such lists¹⁶ groups intellectual characteristics of gifted youngsters into three categories: verbal, thought-processing, and performance. Following each set of characteristics is a list of related intellectual needs, derived in part from Dr. Barbara Clark’s examples of problems that may appear in work patterns or in getting along with others if the needs are not met.¹⁷

Verbal Characteristics and Needs

Gifted children in general:

- have a large vocabulary and are able to use advanced terminology correctly