

# Introduction

Gifted kids are so much more than high grades and test scores. You probably know that already; that's why you're reading this book. But for teachers just starting out (or burning out, or overwhelmed with the day-to-day concerns of their job), it's sometimes difficult to see past all that achievement and potential to the child, adolescent, or teen who may be filled with anxiety, pressured to be perfect, lonely, alienated, confused, and unsure of what the future might bring.

We can both remember the specific incidents that first called our attention to gifted kids' social and emotional needs.

**Jim:** Craig entered my life and my classroom at the same time. A fifth grader, he was fascinated by anything intellectual, and his sensitivity often caused him to see life from an altruistic angle seldom observed in boys his age. He drove his teachers nuts, though. He seldom finished anything he started, for once his fascination for a topic was sated, he felt it was time to move on. For two years, Craig was enrolled in my gifted program, and for two years, I had to fight to keep him there. He wasn't your stereotypical high-achieving gifted child, but he was, indeed, a gifted child. I came to realize that the greatest needs he had were not in academics, but in the social and emotional realms of growing up gifted. Craig, and others like him, have guided my life ever since, and they have shown me the importance of looking beyond high achievement and glossy projects to find the gifted child beneath the academic veneer.

**Judy:** Early in my career as a gifted education specialist I worked with teens. One day, three boys hung around after class, and I overheard them talking. "Now I get to go be my family's identified patient," one said. Another asked, "Have you ever taken a Rorschach test?" The third said, "I'm seeing a psychiatrist." I suddenly realized that all three students had personal experience with mental health issues, and I wondered: What about the others? It was a wake-up call for me. Not long after, another of my students attempted suicide. When I looked at my program with new eyes, I saw that it was based entirely on meeting gifted kids' academic needs. It occurred to me that if a student's mental health is off-center significantly, or even a little, what point is there in trying to push academic challenge when that's usually the easy part of life for gifted kids? I made it my personal mission to educate myself about mental health, and to balance my academic program with life skills—learning about oneself and others.

It's important to know that there isn't a big difference between addressing students' academic and emotional needs. You don't have to be a counselor with a degree. You don't have to have all the answers. We certainly don't! What we do have are years of experience working with gifted kids, studying gifted kids, reading about gifted kids, getting to know them, caring about them, and trying our best to help them.

We wrote this book to share what we've learned, to share what other experts say (including gifted kids themselves), and to give you some strategies, activities, and ideas you can start using right now to support the social and emotional needs of your own gifted students.

## About This Book

■ In **Chapter 1: What Is Giftedness?** we describe the general characteristics of gifted children and some problems associated with those characteristics. We present various definitions of giftedness and invite you to come up with your own definition. We spotlight many of the myths and misconceptions about giftedness (including the pervasive, pernicious myth that gifted education is "elitist"), and we consider the "gifted" label. This chapter includes two important information-gathering tools: a "Teacher Inventory" and a "Student Questionnaire." We strongly encourage you to complete the inventory and have your gifted students complete the questionnaire. Both will provide you with valuable insights.

■ In **Chapter 2: Identifying Gifted Kids**, we wonder (as you do) why identification is so complex, suggest ways to improve the identification process, look at some questionable practices in current identification methods, and present common questions about identification—along with answers we hope you'll find helpful.

■ In **Chapter 3: Emotional Dimensions of Giftedness**, we describe some of the challenges gifted kids face from within and without, including super-sensitivity and perfectionism. We talk about different ways of being gifted and focus in on three categories of giftedness which may predict emotional needs: gifted girls, gifted students from ethnic and cultural minorities, and gifted children with physical and learning differences. We point out some trouble signs you can watch for, including symptoms indicating that a student may be deeply depressed or even suicidal.

■ In **Chapter 4: Being a Gifted Teacher**, we empathize with you and the challenges you face in your job. We understand; we've been there! We offer some ideas for explaining gifted education to parents, colleagues, administrators, and others who may not understand what you do or why it's necessary to do it ("Aren't all children gifted?"). We consider what makes a good gifted education teacher and suggest

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specific actions you might take to build your own strengths. Then we offer strategies you can use to create a supportive environment for your students, both as a group and one-on-one.

■ In **Chapter 5: Understanding Gifted Kids from the Inside Out**, we describe the difference between self-image and self-esteem and identify specific issues gifted children and adolescents face that set them apart. Then we present several activities related to those issues that help gifted kids explore their perceptions, consider their lives, learn more about themselves, be their own advocates, and like themselves more.

■ In **Chapter 6: Underachiever or Selective Consumer?**, we consider a label that's often applied to gifted kids who don't live up to others' expectations: "underachiever." We distinguish between underachievement and nonproduction, which we prefer to call "selective consumerism." We review the literature and research on what has historically been called "underachievement." Then we suggest strategies for reversing patterns of underachieving and selective consumer behaviors through curricular and counseling interventions.

■ In **Chapter 7: Understanding Gifted Kids from the Outside In**, we present a series of group discussions you can use to help students explore and understand the "Eight Great Gripes of Gifted Kids." The "Great Gripes" are problems and feelings that gifted kids have identified as common to their experience: being bored in school, dealing with others' expectations, worrying about world problems and feeling helpless to do anything about them. The "Great Gripes" aren't new; in fact, gifted kids first told us about them almost twenty years ago. It's significant that these issues still loom so large in their lives. Our discussions allow students to explore them in depth and feel more empowered to cope with them.

■ In **Chapter 8: Making It Safe to Be Smart: Creating the Gifted-Friendly Classroom**, we focus on ways to make gifted students feel welcome, wanted, and able to be themselves. We discuss the relationship between self-esteem and school achievement. We introduce the idea of "Invitational Education" and present specific strategies you can use to make your curriculum, grading procedures, student evaluations, classroom environment, and even your disciplinary procedures more supportive. We also talk about ways to feel better about yourself as a teacher.

Our goals throughout this book are to call attention to gifted students' issues, problems, and feelings; to support your efforts on behalf of gifted kids; to answer some of the "tough questions" you may have (or be asked by others); and to provide you with concrete, easy-to-use strategies and activities for meeting students' social

and emotional needs. The goals of the strategies and activities are to help gifted kids understand what giftedness means; to invite them to embrace giftedness as an asset in their lives; to inspire them to take more responsibility for their learning and their actions; and to help them build lifeskills for dealing with perfectionism, conflicts with others, self-esteem issues, and other mental-health concerns.

The strategies and activities you'll find here have been used in many classrooms, some for many years. We're confident that you'll have success with them, too. Watch what happens as your gifted students learn to understand and accept themselves, understand and accept others, and realize that being gifted is a blessing, not a burden.

## ***A Few Words of Encouragement***

Naturally, we have no idea what kind of gifted program you teach in—or even if you teach in a gifted program. Maybe you're one of the lucky ones, with a full-time program or even a gifted magnet school that's strongly supported, generally understood, and adequately funded (at least for now). Maybe you staff a resource room where gifted students spend part of each day. Perhaps you're a "pull-out" program teacher who travels from school to school, spending an hour or two each week with each group of gifted students (and you have many groups). Maybe you teach an enrichment class, AP (Advanced Placement) classes, or an after-school, weekend, or summer class for gifted students. Maybe you're a mentor to a gifted child.

Or maybe you're a "regular" classroom teacher, where your inclusive, mixed-abilities classroom may include students who range from highly gifted to gifted, "average" students, those who have learning differences, kids at risk, students who are severely disabled, homeless kids, students for whom English is a second language, and recent immigrants who don't yet speak English. If so, you're probably being asked by your administration to differentiate the curriculum, or you will be at some point in the not-too-distant future.

Differentiation means changing the pace, level, or kind of instruction to meet each student's individual learning needs. In a time when gifted programs are being challenged or eliminated, differentiation is a way of ensuring that gifted students are given the learning opportunities they need. Depending on your situation, these opportunities may include curriculum compacting (compressing curriculum material into a shorter time frame, and allowing students to demonstrate mastery of content they already know); ability grouping (putting gifted students together for instruction in a particular subject area); flexible grouping (putting students together on an assignment-by-assignment basis); cluster grouping (putting all identified gifted students of the same grade level in the same classroom, usually one led by a teacher with training in gifted education); or individualized instruction (independent study projects).

Whatever your own situation might be, and however many gifted students you teach, we hope you know how truly essential you are. Over and over again, gifted students have told us about teachers who have made a tremendous difference in their lives. Gifted adults get misty-eyed when remembering grade-school teachers who took the time and made the effort to know them and guide them. Yes, you'll have bad days, maddening days, frustrating days, and days when you wish you'd followed a different career path altogether. Join the club! But please . . . keep teaching.

And please be willing to deal with the emotional lives of your students, not just their intellectual needs. Actually, working with students' affective needs may be (in the words of one teacher) "the best thing we can do for them." In an average busy day, with a tight schedule and loaded curriculum, it seems difficult to depart from the teacher's guide to deal with feelings. But as many people have pointed out, if students don't have good self-concepts and good interpersonal relationships, everything else comes to a screeching halt.

Affective education belongs in the teacher's guide. And that's what this book is.

## **Stay in Touch**

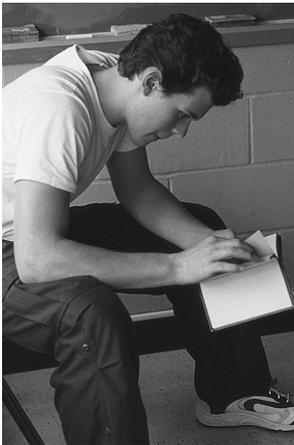
We'd love to hear from you. Please let us know what's been helpful in this book, what works for you (and doesn't). Are there other strategies and activities you've discovered or developed that seem especially effective with gifted kids? We'd appreciate your sharing them with us. Are there stories from your own experience that make a point, illuminate a need, or support the importance of gifted education? Send them our way. We're always learning from "teachers in the trenches"—people like you. You may contact us by regular mail or email:

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We hope to hear from you. And we wish you continued success in your efforts to understand, teach, and encourage social and emotional growth among the gifted students in your care.

*Jim Delisle, Ph.D.*

*Judy Galbraith, M.A.*



## Emotional Dimensions of Giftedness

*“The less a person understands his own feelings, the more he will fall prey to them. The less a person understands the feelings, the responses, and behavior of others, the more likely he will interact inappropriately with them and therefore fail to secure his proper place within the larger community.”*

—HOWARD GARDNER

How gifted kids feel on an emotional level doesn't always match logically with their intellectual capabilities. Brighter doesn't necessarily mean happier, healthier, more successful, socially adept, or more secure. Neither does brighter necessarily mean hyper, difficult, overly sensitive, or neurotic. In terms of emotional and social characteristics, brighter may not mean anything “different” at all. But while gifted kids don't have common personality traits, they *do* have common problems.

Like members of any minority, gifted students may feel insecure just because they're different from the norm. Teenagers and preteens in particular desperately want to be like everyone else, and any difference, whether positive or negative, is cause for anxiety. But sometimes gifted kids are very different; they may feel isolated, alienated, or “weird” as a result. “They have so many problems connecting with other people,” teachers have said, “there's a sense of isolation that gets bigger and bigger as years go by, unless some interventions are made.”

The educational community has been quick to dismiss the emotional problems of high-achieving students for many of the same reasons we have dismissed their intellectual needs. Perhaps we have too many other kids with worse problems. Perhaps we think that smart kids don't need our help. Many of us may not realize that some of our brighter students are, in fact, in quite a bit of trouble. They don't necessarily look needy; they seem to have it all together.

Accustomed to conquering intellectual problems logically, students themselves may deny their emotional problems by saying, “I'm supposed to be smart. I should be able to think my way out of this.” Or, because they are smart, they can successfully delude themselves or rationalize their behavior.

Finally, many of us may realize that gifted students suffer emotionally, but we aren't sure how to handle it.

## Challenges from Within and Without

Evidence is accumulating that certain challenges to emotional balance may come automatically with exceptional intellectual ability or talent. Challenges may come both from within the person and from without. Challenges from *within* include being, by nature, highly perceptive, highly involved, super-sensitive, and perfectionistic. Challenges from *without* come from conflict with the environment. They surface in the “Eight Great Gripes” kids have about school or parents or friends.

Of course, not all students suffer all of the problems described here. Some have few adjustment problems generally and feel fine about life. Others experience difficulty in four or five areas. A student’s needs will depend on his or her maturity level, type of intelligence, environment, and a whole host of other personality characteristics.

### Extra Perception

Consider, for instance, the effect that being highly perceptive to stimuli (sounds, sights, smells, touches, tastes, movements, words, patterns, numbers, physical phenomena, people) would make in one’s daily life. While other people might agree, “These two colors match,” the artist says, “No, they don’t.” The musician hears the difference between a note played perfectly and one played slightly off-key. Howard Gardner speaks of the poet as someone who is “superlatively sensitive to the shades of meanings . . . to the sound of words . . . to the order among words.”<sup>1</sup> Whether their medium is one of language, art, social action, or physics, gifted persons are profoundly sensitive to small differences—and those differences make all the difference.

### High Involvement

Sensitivity may breed a certain irritation with the “insensitive” and unusual preoccupation with interests, tasks, materials, and questions. While other children seem comfortable letting thoughts come and go and relatively unconcerned with unsolved problems and inexact answers, gifted students dream repetitively of treasured problems, pictures, patterns, or concerns. They are obsessed with the intricacy or beauty of phenomena at hand. The creative composer constantly hears tones in his head. The mathematician dreams of proofs; the writer carries precious fragments of verse in her memory. Gifted individuals perceive greater levels of complexity in the world around them, and they find this complexity interesting and meaningful.

## Super-Sensitivity

In addition to being exquisitely perceptive of and receptive to stimuli, sensitivity in the gifted can also mean moral or emotional sensitivity. Many gifted students are super-sensitive to ethical issues and concerns that are considered unimportant by their peers. They may be highly moralistic. They may be quick to judge others. However, this doesn't mean that intellectually precocious children are always emotionally mature for their age. In many cases, kids are both emotionally immature and intellectually advanced at the same time.

### The Creative Mind

by Pearl S. Buck

The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To him, a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and failure is death.

Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create—so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, his very breath is cut off from him. He must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency, he is not really alive unless he is creating.

## Perfectionism

Perfectionism is not a good thing. It is often misperceived as a good thing, and it has been described as a good thing, but it is not. What is good is the *pursuit of excellence*, which is something quite different.

Perfectionism means that you can *never* fail, you *always* need approval, and if you come in second, you're a loser. The pursuit of excellence means taking risks, trying new things, growing, changing—and sometimes failing. Perfectionism is *not* about doing your best or striving for high goals. Instead, it can block your ability to do well. And it can take a heavy toll on your self-esteem, relationships, creativity, health, and capacity to enjoy life. Because perfection isn't possible, deciding that's what you want—and that you won't be satisfied with anything less—is a recipe for disappointment.

Gifted people of all ages are especially prone to perfectionism. This may be rooted in the awareness of quality. They know the difference between the mediocre and the superior. Once they see how something “ought to be done” (ought to sound, ought to look), they may naturally want to do it that way. And they may drive themselves (and others!) crazy in the process. This is why gifted students need support to persist despite their constant awareness of “failure.”

Many of the problems students have with high expectations are reinforced by the environment, particularly if they have had a string of early successes (and a history of lavish praise and encouragement to keep up the stellar work). As Ruth Duskin Feldman, a former Quiz Kid, explains: “Whatever I accomplished, it never seemed enough. I had the nagging feeling I should be up there at the top, as I had been in my youth.” She also speaks of intelligence as a trap. When exceptionally bright and capable children (like the Quiz Kids) are:<sup>2</sup>

*. . . accustomed to easy success and . . . are praised for work requiring modest effort [they] may not develop discrimination or learn to meet a challenge. When these children grow up, they seek applause constantly without knowing how to get it. Children held to impossibly high standards and deprived of praise may get caught in a cycle of hopeless, misdirected perfectionism, trying to please parents, teachers, or bosses who never can be satisfied.*

## Perfectionism At-a-Glance

### How a Perfectionist Acts

- Overcommits himself
- Rarely delegates work to others
- Has a hard time making choices
- Always has to be in control
- Competes fiercely
- Arrives late because one more thing had to be done
- Always does last-minute cramming
- Gets carried away with the details
- Never seems satisfied with his work
- Constantly busies himself with something or other
- Frequently criticizes others
- Refuses to hear criticism of himself
- Pays more attention to negative than positive comments
- Checks up on other people’s work
- Calls himself “stupid” when he does something imperfectly
- Procrastinates

*continued . . .*

### What a Perfectionist Thinks

- "If I can't do it perfectly, what's the point?"
- "I should excel at everything I do."
- "I always have to stay ahead of others."
- "I should finish a job before doing anything else."
- "Every detail of a job should be perfect."
- "Things should be done right the first time."
- "There is only one right way to do things."
- "I'm a wonderful person if I do well; I'm a lousy person if I do poorly."
- "I'm never good enough."
- "I'm stupid."
- "I can't do anything right."
- "I'm unlikable."
- "I'd better not make a mistake here, or people will think I'm not very [smart, good, capable]."
- "If I goof up, something's wrong with me."
- "People shouldn't criticize me."
- "Everything should be clearly black or white. Grays are a sign of confused thinking."

### How a Perfectionist Feels

- Deeply embarrassed about mistakes she makes
- Disgusted or angry with herself when she is criticized
- Anxious when stating her opinion to others
- Extremely worried about details
- Angry if her routine is interrupted
- Nervous when things around her are messy
- Fearful or anxious a lot of the time
- Exhausted and unable to relax
- Plagued by self-hatred
- Afraid of appearing stupid
- Afraid of appearing incompetent
- Afraid of being rejected
- Ashamed of having fears
- Discouraged
- Guilty about letting others down

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Adapted from "Perfectionism at a Glance" in *Freeing Our Families from Perfectionism* by Thomas S. Greenspon, Ph.D. (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc., 2002), pp. 9-10. Used with permission.

## Uneven Integration

Challenges to emotional peace can also come from within when a student's intellectual abilities are out of sync. For example, a student who has strong conceptual and verbal skills but a reading disability may feel quite frustrated. Someone with strong spatial ability but weak drawing skills is likely to be similarly stymied. A person may be talented athletically, but too shy to compete in team sports. Within each of us, certain abilities may or may not combine gracefully or productively.

Although in the past we've tended to stereotype gifted students as exceptional "across the board," few are actually good in everything they do. This type of integrated ability is both rare and exciting. More typical is the student with demonstrated ability in one academic area, or who can transfer one process skill into a number of different content areas. This same student may be a lousy speller or lazy in math, have terrible handwriting or poor study skills.

Yes, even gifted kids can have poor study skills. As a teacher, you'll need to watch for this and offer help as needed. Regardless of how smart they are, some gifted kids may be clueless about how to organize their time, organize their learning environment, keep track of daily and long-range assignments, take good notes, and more. There are many resources available on how to develop strong study skills, including many written for students. You might want to build a classroom library and hand out books as appropriate. At times, you may need to offer one-on-one instruction.

## The Eight Great Gripes

Some of the challenges to emotional well-being come from without—from the individual's conflict with the family, school environment, peers, or society in general. These are the gifted students' common problems—the "Eight Great Gripes" identified through interviews with gifted and talented kids and included in both the "Student Questionnaire" on pages 40–45 and the activity on pages 129–130.

1. No one explains what being gifted is all about—it's kept a big secret.
2. School is too easy and too boring.
3. Parents, teachers, and friends expect us to be perfect all the time.
4. Friends who really understand us are few and far between.
5. Kids often tease us about being smart.
6. We feel overwhelmed by the number of things we can do in life.
7. We feel different and alienated.
8. We worry about world problems and feel helpless to do anything about them.

Activities and discussions for each "great gripe" are found in Chapter 7: Understanding Gifted Kids from the Outside In.



## Making It Safe to Be Smart: Creating the Gifted-Friendly Classroom

*“A gifted teacher opens your mind to help you with your life.”*

—BOY, 10

Mrs. Sanders was a remarkable first-grade teacher. She had 28 students in her class, including three who did not speak English and several more whose backgrounds, interests, and abilities made cluster grouping difficult. There are many qualities about Mrs. Sanders worth mentioning here—her varied teaching strategies, her effective use of praise—but most special was what she did at the end of each day.

As the children were preparing to go home—“walkers” on the right, “riders” on the left—Mrs. Sanders made a point to take each child and either squeeze a shoulder, rub a head, or make a funny face to encourage any frowners in the group to smile. Each gesture was accompanied by a verbal statement, such as “Good answer in math today, Mary!” or “Nice high-tops, Jeff!” Each child, each day. A different gesture, a different expression.

Why did she do this each day, with every student? Her answer was simple, straightforward, and indicative of a teacher for whom 110 percent is typical:

*I have no idea what happens when the students leave school. Some ride on the bus and get ridiculed; others go home to an empty house; still more rush around from ballet to soccer to who-knows-what. I have no idea, and I have very little control. But I do have control over how each student will remember his or her last moment of the day with me, and that memory will be a fond one.*

Mrs. Sanders did admit that on some days, with some children, it was tough coming up with a positive statement. (Once she was overheard saying, “This was a good day for you, Eric. You didn’t bite me so hard.”) “But they’re worth it,” she said. “I dig until I find something good.”

Even the smallest act can make a big difference. You probably know this from your own experience. Now imagine how effective frequent, deliberate, consistent efforts to reach out, support, and encourage children can be.

This chapter presents activities that will help you create the kind of classroom where students feel welcome and wanted. As you read through them, you may find yourself wondering, “Aren’t these ideas good for *most* students? What makes them especially good for gifted students?” In fact, many of the activities *are* good for most (if not all) students. Gifted students may respond to some of them at a depth that other students do not. Still, we challenge you to encourage all of your students to dig deep within themselves and produce work that reveals something about their minds, hearts, and/or personalities.

## ***Self-Esteem and School Achievement: A Natural Link***

Gifted children are, first and foremost, children. Their feelings, needs, and wishes are more like those of other children than they are different. This being so, the comments that follow may lead you to ask, “But isn’t the development of self-esteem good for *all* children?” The answer, of course, is yes.

Still, there are at least three reasons why this section is here, in a book about the social and emotional needs of gifted children.

1. Gifted children, often more aware of reactions of others toward them, may begin to develop their self-esteem at a very early age.
2. Since many gifted students tie their success in school to their worth as a person, early attention to self-esteem enhancement is essential.
3. The belief that perfection is an attainable and expected goal limits some gifted children from giving themselves credit—and experiencing a personal sense of worth—for many of their lesser achievements.

If you read educational or psychological literature, it’s tough to find a writer who does not link self-esteem with school achievement. This is as true in articles in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* as it is in *Family Circle*. No writer (at least none of whom we are aware) states publicly, “Who cares if you think you’re worthless? You can still learn, can’t you?” Everyone, from everyday people to eminent scholars, seems to agree that attitude affects performance.

## Remembering Mr. Walls

*by Frank Davies, fourth-grade teacher*

Ken Walls was an amazing person. Very unpretentious and not gushy with praise. But his underlying belief was that he treated students with respect and dignity. He encouraged us to follow our interests and would be very flexible in going with individuals' choices. He never shouted or put us down. I knew that he believed in me, and I saw him make some amazing changes in other students, too.

We were about 14 to 15 at the time—a bunch of little so-and-sos. Our class was basically remedial and we were just waiting to finish school. Yet, when we were in Mr. Walls's class for that couple of hours a week, my fellow students and I became responsible and responsive, and we took pride in our work.

Ken Walls didn't come down to our level, he invited us up to his. He asked our opinions and yet he was also very strict, as there were very clear boundaries in place in his classroom. But the bottom line was, he liked us and we liked him.

## Which Comes First?

If there is any disagreement about self-esteem and school achievement, it comes in the form of a chicken-egg conundrum: Which comes first? Does a solid sense of self encourage a person to want to learn more, or does successful learning make an individual gain a more positive sense of self?

An important question, perhaps, and an intriguing one, but we're afraid our response is, "Who cares?" We already know that self-esteem and school achievement occur in tandem, so the question of which precedes which is as meaningless as trying to remember which half of a happily married couple first said "I love you" to the other. If the marriage is working, the point is moot.

## A Daunting Task

Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said, "The ablest man I ever met is the man you think you are." Quite an optimistic comment, especially coming from a man whose legs were permanently disabled by polio. When he first contracted the disease, his political career appeared to be over. He went on to become president of the United States.

It's a daunting task, being an educator, bearing the responsibility for shaping both academics and attitudes. Accountability, as defined in today's schools, often measures

the easy stuff: the math facts memorized, the commas placed correctly, the historical events accurately sequenced. But the true measure of an educator's teaching performance is not so readily determined.

No computer-scanned bubble sheet measures how our students feel about learning, or their biases toward self and others. These indexes, the true value of learning and education, elude detection and measurement, sometimes for years. And even if we could measure attitudes and biases (there are self-esteem scales available to do just that), we might pick up general trends, but not specific thoughts. For instance, answering "I like to take challenges" on a score sheet is one thing, but signing up for an honors chemistry course where receiving a B is likely is quite something else.

So, those brave educators wishing to enhance both students' self-esteem and their achievements must be content with knowing the immediate impact of their actions. Some changes will be noticeable, while others will be stubbornly absent (at least in the short term). But as Mrs. Sanders knows quite well, ripples expand as they leave the central core.

## **Building Self-Esteem: One Teacher's Approach**

A teacher we know very well worked for several years as a resource teacher of gifted students in a rural school district. She worked in four different buildings, seeing about 30 first- through sixth-graders at a time (4 schools x 30 students = 120 students per week). A difficult task, even for an expert juggler.

Meeting with each group of students only once per week created some gaps. Projects that were expected to be completed in the interim sometimes got "forgotten." Resource books, outlines, and note cards stayed buried under math texts and more pressing homework assignments. On a more personal note, some students' lives went topsy-turvy from one week to the next. Pets died or ran away, best friends moved, new babies arrived, school awards were won. A lot occurred between one Monday and the next that affected the students' attitude and performance.

In an effort to learn more about her students, the teacher introduced "New and Goods," a time period (15 minutes or so) that began each resource-room class. During New and Goods, students met in a group to review the past week. Each child (and the teacher, too) was given the chance to share something new and good that had occurred since their previous meeting. Talking was encouraged, though not required, but most children took advantage and spoke of something real, something personal, something only theirs. Occasionally, as the groups became more intimate and trusting, a child would ask to share a "new and sad" or a "new and bad." This was allowed. The purpose of New and Goods was to communicate; the content of what got shared was an individual choice.

As the year moved on and the pace became more hectic, class schedules became less predictable. Still, New and Goods began each resource-room meeting. The children demanded it. Having been given the chance to express themselves freely and without criticism (a key point), they were not about to forgo this special time. Projects could wait. First, they wanted to talk about themselves and learn about each other.

New and Goods is just one example of an activity that promotes both self-esteem and achievement. It requires no materials, no budget, and no preplanning; in other words, it's a teacher's dream. What it does require is a belief that listening to what children say is important, and a willingness to take the time to do so within the confines of a classroom schedule.

If you're in a regular classroom setting where you, as a teacher, see your students every day, New and Goods may not seem as necessary. Right?

Wrong! Just as middle-school educators have discovered success with the incorporation of "advisory groups" into the daily or weekly calendar, it's vital to get to know our students from the inside out. (In typical advisory groups, one teacher is responsible for 10 to 15 students, who often stay together as a group for two to three years. Discussions and fun activities are planned for these 20-minute sessions.) Without this time for more personal interaction, kids may feel lost in a sea of faces. Advisory groups, or classroom-based activities meant to encourage self-exploration and knowledge, are more necessary than ever in this age of rampant testing and prescribed curriculum.

## From the Field

"These . . . meetings have several advantages. They help us identify and resolve problems, develop a closer working relationship with the family, and show parents that the school is an institution that cares about children. After seven years, we have found that these meetings usually produce positive changes in academic achievement and behavior."

—Penelope de Mello e Souza

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"Counselors Set Steps for Smooth Transitions," *Middle Ground* 4:3 (February 2001), p. 23.



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