

# Gray Matters

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## *Some Psychological Aspects of Giftedness and Life Success*

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There are many different psychological aspects of giftedness. It is important to note, however, that none of these psychological aspects appear in *all* gifted individuals. That said, one of the psychological issues that affects many gifted children and adults is perfectionism. Perfectionism is often presented as a negative trait, however in itself, it is not necessarily bad. As psychologist, Linda Silverman often says, if she must go to a brain surgeon, she hopes the doctor is a perfectionist. Striving toward perfection can motivate the highly able to do their best and use all of their capabilities. Without such strivings, records aren't broken, paradigms are not shifted, inventions and creations won't alter their domains. Perfectionism leads the talented individual to *practice* far beyond what might seem sufficient to others, whether it is challenging passages in a piece of music, a tricky maneuver for delicate surgery, the perfect word in a written passage, or one more turn in a dancer's pirouette. Perfectionism can be a negative trait, however, when it is paralyzing. This might take the form of people refusing to try something because they fear they might not initially do it well, they fear beginning something when its entire trajectory and outcome aren't assured, they are unable to accept less than perfection on *anything* or they fail to feel satisfaction in any endeavor (which can take the form of psychologically beating oneself up for never being good enough).

Another psychological aspect often assigned to giftedness is extreme sensitivity. This may be the result of always feeling odd and out of step with one's peers, being aware of the emotional aspect of events that others aren't aware of, or being on a path of higher development (as defined by Maslow or Dabrowski). In reading Alice Miller's *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, the reader may struggle with why the author felt these psychological issues were unique to the gifted. Miller meant gifted in a somewhat different way than is typical in the GT field, yet there is still something about adapting to deal with psychological harm that rings true for gifted indi-

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## *TAG Educational Advisor Meetings*

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All TAG Advisors are expected to attend the monthly TEA meetings. These will be held on the second Tuesday of the month from 8:30-11:00 at Spice of Life Event Center. Subs for teachers will be provided by the Office of Advanced Academic Services. There will be no meeting in March.

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## *Enrichment Activities*

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History Day - <i>Grades 6-12</i>	March 1, 2008 Front Range Community College
Science Fair - <i>Grades 6-12</i>	March 6&8, 2008 CU Glenn Miller Ballroom Awards at Fiske Planetarium
Destination Imagination - <i>Grades K-12</i>	April 12, 2008 Monarch HS
Literary Magazine - <i>Grades K-12</i>	April 15, 2007 (submissions due)

These are district sponsored enrichment activities. Additional student enrichment opportunities and competitions can be found on the website at <http://www.bvds.org>.

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## *Professional Development*

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Socratic Seminar Facilitator Training, will again be offered in the summer. John Zola will be the instructor and 1.5 professional development and salary credits are available. The class will be held August 4-6, 2008, plus one additional date in September to be determined by participants. It is scheduled to be offered at New Vista High School. Check the BVSD catalogue on Course InSite for more information and to register. Socratic Seminar develops critical thinking.

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## *Psychological Aspects and Life Success*

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viduals who have always felt out of sync with the common world. What Miller was trying to point out was that highly sensitive individuals feel harmed by psychological assaults that others don't even notice. They suppress and hide their sensitivity in order not to be further damaged as a result of their reaction to these assaults and slights. The brave face they put on and the slightly hysterical laugh are ways of protecting themselves from their intense feelings. In that sense, Miller's "gifted child" is education's gifted child, as well.

How adults support gifted children and their intense feelings while helping them become resilient and strong is the challenge educators face. How do we prepare them so that they are not beaten down by the world? If we believe that gifted children are also more likely to be highly sensitive, then it is necessary for us to raise awareness of the psychological needs of these children and provide a nurturing environment so that they can grow up to be as whole and undamaged as possible. We have succeeded in this task when these children can live in this world as strong, fulfilled, and satisfied individuals who can use their talents to the best of their ability. Psychologically damaged children who grow up to be psychologically damaged adults are not able to use their giftedness either for their own contentment or for the world's betterment. In *The Prodigy*, a biography of William Sidis, Amy Wallace writes a cautionary tale of such stunted development. Giftedness alone, as she points out, is no guarantee of eminence, much less achievement. Gifted individuals who develop both the feeling and thinking aspects of their personalities are more balanced and capable of living more fulfilling lives.

As above in the Miller and Wallace examples, failure to thrive isn't just about infancy. Children can fail to thrive in becoming competent adults, as well. There are those who suggest that IQ's in the 120-140ish range are optimal because this above average intelligence means tasks can be mastered and information understood, yet the intelligence isn't so stratospheric that the individual is a rare oddity among others (Gross, 2000). As far back as 1926, Leta Stetter Hollingworth defined this IQ range as "socially optimal intelligence." These above average individuals, they suggest, will fit in better socially with more average people giving them an advantage in the "real world."

In Goertzel and Goertzel's *Cradles of Eminence*, the authors point out certain experiences that eminent adults shared as they developed into high-achieving producers. Not all of these experiences would be considered beneficial to children, so the conundrum is how to help gifted children realize their potential by learning from the positive experiences (e.g.

homes that respect learning and achievement) without resigning them to the negative experiences (e.g. smothering mothers, failure-prone fathers) that many eminent people tend to have.

Gifted individuals are impacted by both nature and nurture. It is bringing all of these factors, both innate and environmental, that gives gifted children the capacity to be extraor-

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## *New Resources*

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*The Teenagers' Guide to School Outside the Box* by Rebecca Greene. This practical book explores the wide world of alternative learning from study abroad to internships, apprenticeships, mentorships, job shadowing, service learning, university coursework and independent study.

*Fighting Invisible Tigers: Stress Management for Teens* (Third Edition) by Earl Hipp. This book explores how teens are uniquely affected by stress that can increase impulsivity and risky behavior. While eliminating stress isn't realistic, possible or even desirable, it focuses on how young people can learn how to control how they respond to it. This book offers proven techniques that teens (and others) can use to deal with stressful situations in school, at home, and among friends. Teens learn current information on how stress affects health and decision making and learn stress management skills to handle stress in positive ways.

*What to do when Good Enough isn't Good Enough: The Real Deal on Perfectionism* by Thomas Greenspon. When you believe you must be perfect, you live in constant fear of making mistakes. Written for ages 9-13, this book helps kids understand how perfectionism can hurt them and how to free themselves. It includes vignettes, exercises, and a note for grown-ups.

*Differentiating Content for Gifted Learners in Grades 6-12* by Susan Winebrenner. This CD-ROM includes extensions, study guides and expert direction on how to differentiate in a broad range of academic topics. Included are more than 140 reproducible and customizable forms and templates plus detailed explanations on how to differentiate content for advanced learners in the secondary grades – even in AP and honors classes.

*The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* by Jean Sunde Peterson. This book and CD-ROM contain ready-to-use guides for group discussions about identity, stress, relationships, conflicts, and more. Included are 70 guided discussions – a full affective curriculum for gifted teens. Each session is self-contained and includes reproducible handouts and introductory materials suitable for experienced and new affective group leaders.

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dinarily successful adults. In spite of that, many adults admittedly believe they have not lived up to that potential, as pointed out by Barbara Kerr and Sally Reis among others. Underachievement is not “all or nothing” and not necessarily across all domains or experiences. Sometimes the same individual may feel s/he is an underachiever one minute and highly successful the next. These individuals may also feel successful in some aspects of their lives, and failures in others.

What the landmark longitudinal Terman study and others have found, however, is that in old age, people are more satisfied with the totality of their lives if their personal relationships have been emotionally fulfilling, even if their professional achievements have been less so. This sense of satisfaction is not so much the case if their professional lives have been successful, but they are emotionally isolated and have no fulfilling relationships. Research shows that there is a direct correlation between the degree of giftedness and the likelihood of introversion, yet even the most introverted individual doesn’t want to live completely alone and in total isolation. Some suggest that extreme introversion is yet another self-protective development in the gifted individual. It is important to point out, however, that those with the highest degree of life satisfaction felt they achieved in both areas of their lives - achievement and relationship.

Researchers often look for cause and effect in an attempt to design an optimal environment that will lead to professional eminence. Cause and effect is confounded, however, because there are many examples of people who as children had “all that money can buy” in terms of school resources yet who have never been professionally successful, and others who were quite disadvantaged in substandard schools who managed to make the most of their lives. Success also has very different meanings to people at different life stages and in different cultures.

If the true measure of success comes from those on the outside who point a finger and say “she was successful, he was not,” as measured by some sort of external standardized assessment of achievement, then the determination of success is easy. But if success is decided by the person at the end of life who believes that s/he put time and energy where it counted the most and did work that was personally satisfying and important, then it is harder for the outsider to measure success. Many believe that the desire to design experiences and environments likely to lead to success (given the elements of chance and those over which they have no control), is best dealt with by encouraging children to follow their passions, whatever they may be, so that the work they do is the work they love and to nurture their psychological needs for affiliation and connectedness.

## *BVSD Gifted Education Policy*

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In Colorado, gifted and talented students are included in the legal definition of exceptional students (CRS 22-20-103; CRS 22-26-101-104, 1 CCR 301-8).

The BVSD RE-2 recognizes the obligation to provide instructional and support services to all exceptional students K-12. Gifted and talented students are defined as those whose demonstrated or potential abilities are so outstanding that it becomes essential to provide them with qualitatively different educational programming. In the BVSD, these students are identified using multiple criteria including research-based assessments as endorsed by the district. Research shows there is a need for programming that provides opportunities for acceleration and fast-paced learning, complexity of thinking, and in-depth learning. In keeping with the accepted educational principles for serving gifted and talented students, such students will be provided appropriate programming designed to meet their cognitive and affective needs.

Above is Policy IGBB of the Boulder Valley School District, the district’s position on gifted education. This policy begins with a definition and the explanation that gifted and talented students are a category of Exceptional Student. This is encoded in state statute CRS 22-20-103; CRS 22-26-101-104, 1 CCR 301-8. Exceptional Students as a category also includes students with disabilities. Last spring Colorado joined the more than 35 other states where gifted education is mandated. Even prior to adoption of the mandate, the small amount of financial support earmarked for gifted education available from the Colorado Department of Education had a positive impact statewide. Through the years, all Colorado districts eventually came to accept funding and voluntarily stepped up to the plate on behalf of gifted students. From the beginning, BVSD recognized its obligation to provide instruction and support services to all categories of exceptional students, whether mandated or not.

Special student populations have a need for something different in order to ensure access to an appropriate education. In the case of students who are English language learners and students with disabilities, differences hold these students back from full participation unless some sort of special instructional strategies, support services, accommodations or modifications are implemented to make the curriculum more accessible. In the case of gifted children, the curriculum is accessible (although the gifted student may also be getting special services to address a need based on language or disability), but the gifted student may have attained mastery of the curriculum content (as designed for average students) before it is taught. This necessitates either a more complex and deeper investigation of the curricu-

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lar subject than is appropriate for average students or an acceleration of the pace of the curriculum delivery so that the gifted student has the opportunity to learn something new. In providing these “qualitatively different” educational experiences, gifted and talented students are assured of learning new information in their area(s) of strength, often before other students of the same age or grade are ready. This qualitatively different educational programming means that the student will be provided opportunities to explore curricular areas of strength in greater depth and complexity based on prior levels of knowledge, skills and mastery and at an accelerated pace to accommodate their faster learning capabilities (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 1994).

The next section is perhaps the most important clause. It states that gifted and talented students encompass both those who demonstrate their outstanding high level of abilities and those who are recognized as having the potential for developing such extraordinary high abilities. The obligation then follows that these students require different educational programming in order to meet their demonstrated and potential abilities. This is especially important for those students who are traditionally underrepresented and/or underserved in gifted education. This definition acknowledges that some students may have potential that is not yet realized in achievement. This may be due to many different factors such as poverty (Slocumb & Payne, 2000), language difference (Castellano & Diaz, 2002), cultural difference (Castellano, 2003), or disability (Baum & Owen, 2004). In addition, temporary factors might be impacted by events in the child’s life that affect their physical or social/emotional well-being.

This definition says that within BVSD, students will be identified as gifted by collecting a body of evidence to look for indications of giftedness and its potential. While not specifically mentioning which assessments and pieces of evidence will be gathered, it states that they will be research based and district endorsed. Research-based instruments are valid and defensible. By saying they are endorsed by the district, oversight is ensured so that there is some degree of supervision and accountability in place. It does not mention specific universal instruments out of an acknowledgement that different children will be able to show their strengths through different means (Gallagher, 2003; Van Tassel-Baska, J., 2003; NAGC, 1994). The goal in the gifted identification process is to find students’ strengths and abilities. Certain instruments may not be appropriate for all children if the instrument is not capable of finding that child’s greatest strengths and potential (NAGC, 1998). This, too, takes into consideration the differences in all children, but especially those that impact traditionally underrepresented and underserved populations including culturally, linguisti-

cally, ethnically diverse (CLED) students (Castellano, 2003), students from poverty (Slocumb & Payne, 2000), students with disabilities (Baum & Owen, 2004) or other categories (such as gender or sexual orientation) that appear underrepresented or underserved in a particular academic setting or environment. Additionally, as new, quality instruments become available, they may be incorporated into the menu of options available.

The next section addresses those characteristics of gifted and talented students that drive their unique educational needs. In almost all of the theories of giftedness, certain characteristics regularly appear (Silverman, 1993). Those characteristics at the heart of what can be manipulated in an educational setting are singled out. Gifted students are capable of learning at an accelerated pace, in greater depth and in more complexity than other children (NAGC, 1994). These three elements, depth, pace and complexity, are hallmarks of gifted children and their learning needs, defining key characteristics of what makes gifted students capabilities different from others. They also direct programming for these characteristics by addressing the capabilities with parallel elements that constitute appropriate gifted programming. Depth, pace and complexity are the qualitatively different factors that differentiate between educational experiences appropriate for all students and those appropriate for gifted students.

The final section states the obligation to provide not only for these children’s cognitive needs, but also for their affective needs. Many in education have pointed out that children must have their affective needs met in order to be able to learn optimally. If children do not feel safe, nurtured, comfortable and accepted, their ability to learn is inhibited (Silverman, 1994). NAGC states that “gifted children . . . require appropriate affective services including gifted-focused counseling interventions” (NAGC, 1995). “Because, by definition, gifted children differ significantly from others, these (affective) programs should be responding to the social-emotional or affective characteristics that distinguish gifted students from others” (NAGC, 1995). Additionally, the NAGC Program Standards include guiding principles for social-emotional guidance and counseling that specifically state gifted learners, in order to meet their needs, must be provided with differentiated counseling and guidance. They need to be provided career guidance, and should receive an affective curriculum in addition to differentiated guidance and counseling. If at-risk, they should be provided guidance and counseling to help them reach their potential (NAGC, 1998). Again, as cognitive differences drive appropriate academic programming, the affective needs of this unique population define appropriate social and emotional programming.

Together, the elements in this definition encompass those general features most necessary for a school district’s definition. BVSD policy gives a clear picture of gifted and tal-

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ented student receiving district programming. There are more specific elements that define subpopulations of gifted children, but as a policy becomes more specific, the district faces the challenge of finding a definition that does not necessitate exceptions. This definition is inclusive and can support all gifted students regardless of their unique characteristics, areas of giftedness or identified subpopulations.

As mentioned above, there are certain other factors that are often included in defining gifted students that are not specifically addressed in the BVSD definition. One of those is creativity (Piiro, 1998, 2004; Fishkin, Cramond & Olszewski-Kubilius, 1999). There are those who argue that creativity is a factor in all domains of giftedness and those who argue that creativity is a strength of its own independent of domain area (Piiro, 1998). There is no agreement in the field of gifted education about the role of creativity. Some, like Renzulli, consider it one of three essential components of all giftedness (Renzulli, J. & Reis, S., 1985). Others, as demonstrated in the Marland Report, consider it one of six areas of giftedness in itself (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1972). Piiro calls this the “tangling of giftedness and creativity” (Piiro, 1998). With supporting research from the University of Chicago studies of Getzels and Jackson, as cited in *Investigating Creativity in Youth* (1999), it is believed that some “threshold” of ability or intelligence, although not necessarily the highest, is considered an essential element of creativity. Gardner, Coleman and Cross, among others, believe the definition of creativity is that it redefines its domain. At its most general, it is a process that is expressed in many aspects of life *and* becomes expressed in increasingly more specific ways as age increases (Coleman & Cross, 2001). For example, when Howard Gardner (1993), wrote *Creating Minds*, his exemplars were individuals in each domain who redefined their field through the creative impact upon that domain. When one uses this definition, with few exceptions (such as Mozart) creative adults must first attain mastery of their domain – a benchmark virtually unattainable for children (Fishkin et al., 1999).

Many believe that all normal children have the potential for creativity (Rainey, F., 2006). In an effort to blend both of these philosophies (creativity as transformational in adults and creativity as accessible in children) one can recognize the potential to become a creative adult in a specific domain even if a child/student can not yet be transformationally creative in that domain area of strength. Creativity is, “a developmental process that becomes refined and restructured over the long term” (Coleman & Cross, 2001). Childhood, for even the most potentially creative person, is the time in which to attain or at least work toward that prerequisite mastery (Fishkin et al., 1999). Whereas these young people may experiment in their domain and may even make something novel, they can not redefine their domain until

they have reached that prerequisite level of mastery. Creativity can be assessed in adults by recognizing how it transforms and redefines a domain, but this working definition (see page 6) limits itself necessarily to children who are students as seen through an educational lens. For this reason, the BVSD definition does not include specific mention of creativity.

If one believes that all normal children are capable of novel and divergent activity that can be nurtured and which can *possibly* lead to transformational creativity, the educational setting is not necessarily charged to identify some children as having the potential for creativity and others not, to provide programming to nurture the creative potential for some and not for others. Holland, as cited in Colangelo & Davis (2003), concludes that the single best predictor of future creative achievement is past creative achievement. It is therefore most important for all children to have opportunities for novel and unique experiences in each of the domains and to allow them time to experiment and experience in their areas of strength so that some may become transformationally creative.

Another factor that many people mention as a characteristic of the gifted individual is their passion for their area(s) of interest. It is not possible with instruments at hand, to distinguish passion from interest. Passion contains in it the capability of reaching what Czikszenmihalyi (1996) calls the flow state, also difficult to assess. Assuming passion will show itself in school-defined tasks is inappropriate unless one limits giftedness to characteristics found solely in the school environment. The preponderance of work being done in the field of giftedness regarding underachievers is indicative of students whose giftedness is not readily assessed by virtue of their commitment to task (Whitmore, 1980; Rimm, 1986; Coil, 1992; Heacox, 1991). If students lack that task commitment in the school environment, they will not attain flow such that it can be observed and assessed by educators, even were such instruments available. These are the students who spend hours perfecting snowboarding tricks, writing rap music, or writing an underground magazine (where they attain flow) but are considered detached and disengaged in school.

There are some focus schools designed to nurture the gifted abilities of students to develop high abilities in specific areas. Most often these are in the arts or math and science. Often they require an audition, portfolio or other screening in order to insure that accepted students bring a high degree of motivation and passion to the school (Colorado Department of Education, 2006). By demanding passion and high motivation, issues of underachievement are mitigated, although they may not be completely eliminated. High levels of expectation and competition (either implied or explicit) bring with them other affective concerns that might need to be addressed through specialized affective programming. (The entire field of sports psychology has grown out of this

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recognition.) Private or small group instruction which is most common in areas of the arts, allows for a single-minded focus by the student on one area of strength. In private instruction, many of the affective and talent development needs are seamlessly woven together for a holistic approach that includes affective support, individualized ongoing assessment of achievement and personalization of instruction. Concerns in education such as the pace of instruction need not be concerns at all in a program that is entirely individualized. The BVSD definition, however, is for the gifted student who exists in a group (school) setting. For this reason the three interacting factors of passion, flow and task commitment, like creativity, are not included specifically in the BVSD definition.

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### A Working Definition of Creativity

by L. Coleman & Tracy Cross

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Creativity is a general process that is expressed in many aspects of life and becomes expressed in increasingly more specific ways as age increases. In children, the generalized process is expressed across a relatively broad range of abilities, interests, and activities, and creativity may be evaluated by comparison to age peers. As one becomes more experienced and committed to various areas of knowledge and skill, the generalized process becomes transformed by parameters established by the field of interest or domain. The importance of the generalized process is diminished, yet it is not lost. Rational and irrational elements, which enhance the creative process, are associated with interest in particular areas of human endeavor. In other words, creativity becomes more field-related, and its presence may be judged in comparison to criteria relevant to a field of inquiry. Thus, the creativity of a scientist differs from that of an artist. Within those categories, creativity is further differentiated, so that physicists differ from biologists, and sculptors differ from painters. The generalized process is rarely completely integrated into a field of interest. It is probable that the less specialized the process, the less likely it is that one will be identified as making a creative contribution to society. This description makes creativity a developmental process that becomes refined and restructured over the long term.

From *Being Gifted in School: An introduction to development, guidance, and teaching* (2001). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

