

GT is NOT... by Tamara J. Fisher

from [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/unwrapping\\_the\\_gifted/](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/unwrapping_the_gifted/)

In my dozen years working as a Gifted Education Specialist, I've encountered a number of people who hold misconceptions and misperceptions about what Gifted and Talented Education is all about. These misunderstandings about GT are – sadly – common, and I've discovered them in all walks of people: community members, regular classroom teachers, administrators, parents of non-GT kids, other students, society as a whole, and even parents of GT kids and the occasional GT Specialist. Certainly not everyone misinterprets the purpose of Gifted Education, but it does seem to be the balance of attitude and opinion that many people hold towards GT. It is hard work to dispel these misperceptions! My goal today is to “re-frame” these misconceptions for you with new language that can help you explain to others what GT is really all about. (Special thanks to my middle and high school students and to my co-author, Karen Isaacson, who contributed a handful of these ideas.) Each of these begins with a misunderstanding – a statement of what GT is NOT (or should not be), followed by a statement of what GT actually IS (or should be).

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GT is NOT a reward for kids who behave well in class and turn in perfect work. Rather it IS an academic necessity for children who *learn differently*. Their learning and abilities are significantly different from the norm. Yes, some gifted kids do behave well and turn in perfect work, but so do many high-achieving, hard-working, teacher-pleaser kids. Gifted kids can also be the ones who act up in class or who don't turn in ANY work because they're sick of learning about pronouns for the fifth year in a row when they had it the first time.

GT is NOT a program for kids with exceptional grades. Rather, it IS a program for kids with *exceptional abilities and potential*... who may or may not have exceptional grades to show for it.

GT is NOT fun for fun's sake. Rather, it IS often fun for the sake of challenge and learning. “Fun” to these kids is reading the dictionary, debating stem cell research, a chess tournament, taking a challenging class, solving a difficult problem or puzzle, and spending ten solid hours on their own intellectual pursuits. Just because they're having fun in the process doesn't mean that “fun” is the main or only goal.

GT is NOT extra work to fill extra time. Rather, it IS an intellectual enhancer to fulfill potential. These kids don't need “more of the same” or busy work. They don't need you to keep them busy or quiet with more worksheets or extra credit. They want and NEED to learn! And that means providing them with opportunities for work and learning that are at THEIR readiness level – not at their age peers' readiness level.

GT is NOT for kids who are “better” or “more special” than other kids. Rather, it IS a program for kids who think and learn dramatically differently from the norm. *All* kids are special. But “gifted” does not equal “special.” (See [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/unwrapping\\_the\\_gifted/2007/08/its\\_a\\_learning\\_difference\\_3.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/unwrapping_the_gifted/2007/08/its_a_learning_difference_3.html))

GT is NOT about fun and games. Rather, it IS about challenge and hard work. Just because some of that challenge and hard work comes in the form of games or fun activities doesn't mean there isn't a purpose far greater than “fun” at issue. (See [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/unwrapping\\_the\\_gifted/2008/01/chase\\_the\\_challenge.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/unwrapping_the_gifted/2008/01/chase_the_challenge.html))

GT is NOT a program only for good kids. Rather, it IS a program for kids who need more depth, breadth, and a quicker pace. Some of them are good, well-behaved kids and some of them aren't. It is NOT and never should be a “reward for good behavior.” *It IS about meeting their learning needs*. It's not about

rewarding the kids who make Teacher happy. It's about *actually teaching* the kids who are beyond where we might have expected them to be.

GT is NOT a test of what the kid does know. Rather it IS an opportunity for the kid to go beyond – into what he DOESN'T know.

GT is NOT a privilege!!!! Rather, it IS an essential need for children whose pace of learning dramatically out-steps other kids. (If only we would let them show us!) School should be about giving each kid what he or she needs to **learn** and progress on from there. GT is a way to do that for our gifted students. A “privilege” is something special bestowed upon one group but denied to others. GT isn't about “bestowing” on some and “withholding” from others. It is simply **ONE PIECE OF THE WHOLE PUZZLE** through which we give each what he or she needs.

GT is NOT a self-esteem booster for children who seem to need one. Rather, it IS a sincere validation of ability. Recommending a child for GT only because you think it will be good for the kid's self-esteem will likely only do harm to the child's self-esteem because he won't be able to keep up. The pace IS different! I already know that singing isn't one of my gifts. Joining an Honor Choir wouldn't *boost* my singing-self-esteem, it would obliterate what little there is. We should stretch kids within, to, and beyond their potential, not however-unintentionally snap them by leaping them beyond their breaking point.

GT is NOT about preparing kids to “save the world” someday or “find a cure for cancer.” Rather, it IS about reaching kids who learn differently TODAY. This “saving the world” argument in favor of gifted programs is one of my biggest pet peeves. I even hear people in my own field use it sometimes. These kids need GT and other accelerated learning opportunities because they learn differently TODAY. What they do with their talents and abilities in the future is up to THEM, not us. Yes, many of them *will* make many amazing contributions to society. But so will many who are intellectually average and below-average. To assume that ONLY these kids will “save the world someday” strikes me as elitist, arrogant, self-serving, and close-minded. I don't disagree that there's a high likelihood that these kids can and will do amazing and important things in the future, things that society will benefit from. They *will*, no doubt about it. But – especially in America – we *all* have the opportunity to do amazing and important things. Think of the pressure on a CHILD when he or she gets the message or impression that we EXPECT him or her to “save the world” someday. The goal of a gifted program should not be to create a future class of eminent individuals and world-savers, the goal of a gifted program should be to reach kids where they are, stretch and challenge them to progress to the next level(s) of their potential, and equip them with the skills to stretch, advocate for, and fulfill their potential on their own into the future. It is THEIR talent, not ours. THEY get to decide what to do, or not do, with it. We are here to meet them where they are TODAY and help *guide* them into the future, not direct them into the future. GT is about meeting kids' learning needs, not about predicting the future.

GT is NOT a “club” to belong to. Rather, it IS a peer group where gifted kids can feel like they actually belong. Many of my students have told me that my classroom (i.e. GT class) is the only place where they feel like they can actually be themselves and are accepted as such. We don't have secret passwords or handshakes, we don't have an oath or uniform or slate of officers. Just as some kids feel like they “belong” in the band room or on the football field, these kids feel like they “belong” when they're around intellectual peers.

GT does NOT address only academic needs. Rather, it ALSO addresses social and emotional needs and validates gifts and talents. We do these kids a disservice if we provide them with an opportunity to accelerate their learning (skip a grade in Math, for example), if we haven't previously and also provided them with opportunities to learn the social and emotional skills that will enable them to successfully tackle and *conquer* that challenge. Additionally, some of these kids can be crippled by perfectionism,

procrastination, and high expectations. Pursuing and fulfilling their talents and potential will mean needing to learn how to overcome, or at least manage, those kinds of issues.

GT is NOT about pressure to fit a label or stereotype. Rather, it IS an opportunity for expression and exploration of one's unique self and various abilities. Gifted children are incredibly diverse. We cannot expect them all to be Spelling Bee champions and chess masters, wearing glasses and pocket protectors, suffering from allergies and social isolation, and reading under the covers with a flashlight. Sure, some are like that, but others have pet snakes, are quarterback of the football team, spend spring nights bringing baby calves into the world and summers cutting hay and moving pipe, change hair color once a month and shop at secondhand stores for vintage 80's clothing, or miss a week of school because mom needed the older child at home to babysit for the little ones so she could make it to her court date. GT is a place where these kids can be who they are and explore their potential.

GT should NOT be an experimental group led by whoever is available. Rather, it SHOULD BE a group that loves to experiment led by knowledgeable and trained staff. Unfortunately, some schools end up filling their gifted positions with whoever is available. Breathing? Need a job? You're hired. I know of many who have used the position to "get a foot in the door" and then transfer into a classroom as soon as an opening became available. Sure, that's strategic, but is it in the best interest of these kids? In many states (including my own), **NO** prior knowledge about gifted kids and their learning needs is required to fill a gifted specialist position. We don't hire football coaches who don't know what a touchdown is. We don't hire band directors who don't know what an eighth note is. We don't hire special education teachers who don't have the required extra certification, knowledge, and expertise. We don't hire biology teachers who don't know the structure of a cell. And yet we're somehow apparently okay with hiring gifted teachers who don't know about twice exceptional, curriculum compacting, telescoping, asynchronous development, and perfectionism, let alone common characteristics of the gifted. The great ones do go on to learn these and other necessary pieces of knowledge, but not because they are required to – rather, because they want to so they can be better at what they do and because it helps them do what's best for the kids.

GT should NOT be an optional offering, if convenient. Rather, it SHOULD BE a high priority because there are kids who need it. In many places, this isn't the case, though. In my state, where both state law and state accreditation standards mandate that schools identify and provide services for gifted students, only about 40% of schools claim they actually do so. There is no consequence for the schools that don't meet that portion of the accreditation standards. The only consequence falls onto the shoulders of the gifted students who are at the mercy of luck that they will get a teacher who recognizes their learning needs and does something on her own to try to reach them. Educating kids shouldn't be an optional convenience. It should be a high priority. We SAY it's a priority. But when it comes to our nation's gifted students, are we really educating them if research shows (<http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/NRCGT/reiswest.html>) that they already know, on average, about half the year's material before the school year even begins?

GT is NOT an easy A. Rather, it IS a challenging learning opportunity that is graded according to progression. One of my high school students contributed this item to the list. She said some of her friends thought she kept signing up for Advanced Studies because it was an easy A. "They don't seem to understand," she said, "that this is always my hardest class, year after year, and I work my tail off to learn and accomplish what I do in here. I keep signing up for the class because this is where I get to LEARN, not because it's a cake walk. It's everything but!"

GT is NOT a surplus offering for kids who have surplus knowledge. Rather, it IS an academic intervention for kids who don't learn like other kids do. **ACADEMIC INTERVENTION**. Let's start calling it what it IS so that we can help those who misperceive begin to understand what GT is *really* all about.