

Gifted girls

Smutny, J. F.
Understanding Our Gifted
Open Space Communications
Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 9-13
Winter 1999

This article by Joan Smutney addresses some of the issues gifted girls face once they are in school. Gifted girls may feel they have to pay a high price for their talent because they are treated differently by their peers than the girls of average ability. They may also find that gifted boys are encouraged much more than girls. At times, these girls do not even realize they are gifted, they just know that they are different and sometimes feel like they are strange or something is wrong with them. The article outlines traits of gifted girls and recommends avenues to take with these children to help them to be able to express their potential rather than trying to hide their gift or adapting to an average life.

"Just recently," reports 5-year-old Samantha's mother, "she drew a very accurate representation of the world on a napkin. In her drawing she identified specifically Africa, Europe and Asia, as well as individual countries, like Italy and Turkey. In kindergarten, they've looked over a map of the United States."

"At age 2, she heard Copeland's 'Rodeo' used in a TV ad," Elizabeth's father related, "and identified both title and composer from having heard it once before. In school Lizzy, now 6, does 5th-grade reading and spelling words. Basic principles of science were also too easy for her, so the teacher designs different curriculum just for her in all those areas."

Emily's parents sat together, with the mother speaking as her husband nodded. "Our daughter's in 1st grade but goes to 2nd for math. The teacher was discussing the commutative property of addition with the class, saying that 3 plus 5 is the same as 5 plus 3. She then asked about subtraction--was 5 minus 3 the same as 3 minus 5. The other students all said 3 minus 5 was impossible, but Emily said it was possible and that it would be 'a number under zero. 2 under.' All by herself, she'd 'invented' negative numbers."

In the above instances, parents describe their young gifted daughters at a time in their lives when the world is a fascinating and wide-open field for understanding and discovery. It is a time often remembered wistfully in later years, when these same children begin a gradual retreat from their talents and lose interest in school. Many parents I know refer to this earlier period and wonder how the wide-eyed, buoyant and energetic girls they used to know became stricken with shyness, isolated from their peers and apathetic about learning, leaving all those many talents and interests barely visible.

Gifted girls often face a range of social pressures in schools, causing them to shift priorities. In an accepting home environment, they may have felt free to be themselves, to pursue with energy and interest any subject that intrigued them. But in school, the desire for friends, a disinclination to stand out, fear of ridicule, along with the need for acceptance, often impel gifted girls to make their abilities appear ordinary or even nonexistent. One parent observed: "My daughter has become very, very shy and doesn't want to stand out in any way. As a result, she's reluctant to express information that would indicate that she knows anything beyond what's asked of her."

Special Needs of Gifted Girls

Gifted girls from all ethnic, geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds are living an invisible life in classrooms across the nation. Kerr (1994) observes: "A society that wastes female brilliance has made it the norm for gifted women to lead an average life, and gifted women have largely adapted to that norm" (p. 171). The subtle and not-so-subtle messages downplaying the value of female achievement often begin early and accumulate over time. By age 11, many gifted girls do not know they have talents. Others, who know, guard it as a well-kept secret. This means that the abilities they could use to develop their potential are instead wasted on adjusting others' expectations (Eby & Smutny, 1990).

For gifted girls, the discrepancy between ability and self-image may assume different forms, depending on their unique characteristics and background. Gifted girls may be those who:

- achieve well but remain blind to their accomplishments;
- perform poorly despite their high ability and attribute their poor performance to low intelligence;
- are disinterested in school or achievement and excel socially, sometimes assuming popular leadership in negative ways.

These behaviors are signals that gifted girls need help--signals that will become increasingly faint as they grow older. Researchers have discovered that many girls, especially in the junior and senior high school years, have ambivalent feelings about self-expression and experience a conflict between "caring for themselves and caring for others, between their understanding of the world and their awareness that it is not appropriate to speak or act on this understanding" (AAUW, 1992, p. 12).

So, the question may arise: What do gifted girls need that all girls do not? The answer is that while all girls need an ongoing support system for their development and freedom, gifted girls require support that is particularly sensitive to the dilemma that talent brings to the position of females in our society. Gifted girls face a quandary. They have abilities urging them forward, prompting them to explore all that education has to offer, yet education does not run to meet them. When boys ask questions, call out their answers (sometimes without raising their hands) or engage in debate, adults tend to see the signs of eager minds at work. Girls receive reprimands or disapproval for behavior deemed aggressive, pushy, unfeminine or impolite. This message is not lost on gifted girls.

Gifted girls assume all sorts of extra burdens that educators need to understand. Often they don't know about their own gifts and talents. They only know they're different and, for many, they perceive that this difference is somehow strange or wrong.

Consider the story of Leah and her early schooling, what amounts to an object lesson for girls, their parents and teachers. Leah's mother was a visual artist who stimulated her bright young daughter's imagination with books and art projects. Leah entered school as an unidentified gifted child but brimming with the stories and imaginative worlds she had invented. Most of the 1st-grade work bored her, except drama, an area in which she had free reign to imagine and explore. She looked forward to her class's daily drama time, which inspired her and made her feel free. But her mother grew concerned when Leah, who had always talked to herself and run around imagining things, started withdrawing from usual activities and staying up very late, far beyond her bedtime, to carry on with her creative play. Eventually, her mother met with school officials, and Leah was sent to the library during drama time. The little girl was crushed; the only spark of her day had been taken away and she never knew why. All she knew was that this thing she had--what was later understood as her gift, an imaginative force that drove her to explore and discover more and more worlds--was wrong, an unacceptable bent that would get her in trouble. Because she was only 6, believed in this "wrongness" of her passion and didn't want to get into trouble, she didn't question the decision, never spoke of her disappointment. This was the unfortunate beginning of a long and unsatisfactory school experience for Leah; she buried out-of-sight all that made her unique and devoted herself to anticipating others' demands and expectations. How might have things been different for this child if she'd been recognized and encouraged to use her own voice?

In addition to their acute sensitivity, gifted girls play mental games with themselves--learned games they do unconsciously--in response to the conflicting expectations they experience both as girls and as talented people. Two examples frequently explored in the research are:

"The Horner Effect" or fear of success, in which girls purposely hold back because of a need to please others (rather than compete with them), a need that is more intense with gifted than average girls (Kerr, 1994)

"The Impostor Phenomenon," in which girls feel pressured to explain away their success since it goes contrary to social expectations and their own self-image. They maintain that they performed well due to luck or because people did not evaluate them properly (Kerr, 1994). Adults need to develop strategies for helping gifted girls negotiate around this emotional mine field.

Many talented girls need to learn to recognize their own gifts and the emotional challenges that accompany them (Garrison, 1989). As a group, girls receive far less reinforcement than boys. Research has proven that the content or quality of teacher responses to girls' work differs significantly from that offered for boys' work. Based on a three-year study of more than 100 4th-, 6th- and 8th-grade classrooms, Sadker and Sadker (1994) identified four kinds of teacher response: praise, acceptance, remediation and criticism. "While males received more of all four types of teacher comments, the difference favoring boys was greatest in the more useful teacher reactions of praise, criticism and

remediation. When teachers took the time and made the effort to specifically evaluate a student's performance, the student receiving the comment was more likely to be male" (AAUW, 1992, p. 69).

Adults who are not aware of the unique sensitivities of gifted girls may inadvertently encourage destructive behaviors. Alas, sometimes, too much praise and confidence in a girl's ability may make it difficult for her to admit she needs help or result in dismissing her requests altogether. Ellen had this problem. She had considerable musical talent--at a young age she had perfect pitch and played quite expertly on the piano, but she couldn't read music. No one taught her because she already seemed to know how. When she tried to persuade adults that she couldn't, they would actually say things to her such as, "Oh don't be silly; of course, you can. Look at how you play!" Her desire to please increased her fear of failure and, eventually, of having her "flaw" discovered. The expectation that she should be able to do something which she had never learned to do set up her faulty, but not uncommon, logical model. Before too long, any gap in her knowledge made her feel that she was really a fraud. Not being able to read music sowed the seeds of low self-esteem, which her musical talent only intensified. People continued to expect her to perform at an extremely high level, while she herself struggled against this missing piece of musical education. Ellen came to expect extraordinary performance from herself, without having taken the steps or experiencing the freedom to learn and secure a solid musical foundation.

Gifted girls can progress beyond self-defeating assessments of themselves when supportive adults listen to their concerns, questions and comments, and then go on to offer validation and reassuring responses that provide direction for their work. Ellen knew what was missing in her piano playing, but no one listened to her. As a result of her experiences, she began to doubt the value of her own voice--a common experience among girls (Gilligan, 1982). What she needed were sincerely listening adults who would have believed what she was telling them and then honored her requests for information.

Characteristics of Gifted Girls

To identify gifted girls in the classroom, educators really must draw from multiple criteria. Rather than rely on test scores alone, teachers should be alert for behaviors that indicate giftedness. Following are some general guidelines for detecting talent in gifted girls.

1. Become familiar with a range of gifted behaviors common in the general population of gifted students. Examples include:

Academic Behaviors

Reads voraciously and retains what she reads

Communicates ideas well both verbally and in writing

Possesses superior analytical and conceptual abilities

Explores issues from multiple points of view

Creative Behaviors

- Expresses unusual, out-of-the-ordinary points of view
- Demonstrates special ability in the visual arts
- Shows promise in performing arts (music, drama, dance)
- Manifests improvisational ability in a variety of contexts

2. Become aware of the special challenges of gifted girls:

- Low self-esteem
- Apathy, based on resignation or feelings of inferiority
- Fear of taking risks
- Exaggerated concern about being accepted among peers
- Ambivalent feelings about talent
- Conflict between cultural identity and school achievement

3. Examine the signs of potential giftedness in this population. While each girl expresses talent in very unique ways, common indicators include:

- Discrepancies between performance and self-concept
- Discrepancies between average or low test scores and exceptional originality, imagination and insight in independent projects or assignments
- Disinclination to participate, despite signs of talent or ability
- Sudden, unaccountable appearance of some ability in a seemingly average girl
- Misbehavior in class that shows ingenuity (despite its disruptiveness) or reveals leadership ability
- Notable contrast between school performance and the abilities, achievements and/or activities reported by parents or community members

Contexts for Discovering Giftedness in the Classroom

In order to find the behaviors that indicate giftedness, teachers need to broaden the range of activities in which talent can occur. Tests and in-class assignments do not always reveal talent in many gifted girls. They may appear to be average students until some unique challenge inspires them. Teacher and parent observations, as well as a greater variety of student projects, will produce a clearer, more detailed view of girls' abilities (Eby & Smutny, 1990).

Gathering information from a variety of sources is even more vital for gifted girls from other cultures and from socioeconomic backgrounds which add unique stresses to their school achievement. Torrance (1977), a pioneer in identifying talent in culturally different and lower-income children, maintained that giftedness often occurs in behaviors that are easier to observe than to measure. He created a list to encourage teachers to think along new lines. The list provided useful examples of talent in populations that do not have all the advantages of a white, middle-class environment. Following are some of these indicators as a guide for locating talent in culturally different girls:

Ability to improvise with commonplace materials and objects

Articulateness in role playing, sociodrama and story telling

Enjoyment of and ability in creative movement, dance, dramatics, etc.

Use of expressive speech

Enjoyment of and skills in group activities, problem solving

Responsiveness to the concrete

Responsiveness to the kinesthetic

Expressiveness of gestures, body language, etc. and ability to interpret body language

Humor

Richness of imagery in informal language

Originality of ideas in solving problems

Problem-centeredness or persistence in problem solving.

Emotional responsiveness (p. 26)

In the context of formal schooling, peer pressure to underachieve among culturally different students is strong, especially where many of the teachers and administrators are white. In addition, many girls find the competitive structure intimidating and isolating. Gilligan's (1982) research on the moral psychology of women demonstrates how girls adopt an ethic of caring that conflicts with the competitive structures

of the classroom. Many culturally different and low-income students experience academic achievement as a betrayal to their social group.

Consider Lakesha's story. An attractive African-American junior high student, she sat silently in the corner, never speaking. Although Lakesha was extremely bright, she was shy and performed more like an average student. Added to her discomfort was the fact that her good looks attracted the attention of the boys who enjoyed staring at her and making remarks just loud enough for her to hear. Lakesha felt uncomfortable about this, because it seemed to make the other girls, with whom she wished to be friends, feel hostile toward her. In response, she retreated into herself. One day, the teacher showed a film about several American artists, including Georgia O'Keeffe. Lakesha was enthralled. As she looked at the O'Keeffe paintings, she felt she could dive into the vibrant colors and shapes and never come back. After the film, the teacher asked the students to write responses--stories, poems, essays--about what they had seen. Lakesha wrote a startlingly beautiful and eloquent poem, which was sincerely admired and praised by both teacher and the other students. This one experience represented a turning point for Lakesha, who continued creating poetry, allowing her considerable writing talent to flourish. The opportunity to choose other ways to explore a subject creates neutral ground, as well as freedom from the constraints and pressures of more conventional assignments. In this case, the simple alternative of a poetic medium gave Lakesha a whole new view of herself as a student.

Another strategy which can bring buried talent to the surface is small-group activities or paired work with students with whom gifted girls feel a freedom to express themselves. This can be particularly effective in math and science, where, for reasons having nothing to do with competence or talent, female achievement in all socioeconomic populations has lagged significantly behind male performance (AAUW, 1992).

Another girl, Magdalena, had mathematical talent. Her mother remembered how quickly she computed the prices in the grocery store and how she enjoyed calculating what they would save if they bought the cheaper brands. Magdalena was a Latina who attended a school where the other Latina girls, her best friends, did not share her academic interests or drive. But Magdalena continually resisted placement in groups with students who shared her intellectual needs and who performed at her level; over time, she was becoming an average student. As with Lakesha above, sometimes individual acts can influence a person's self-perception and approach, and so it was also with Magdalena. Her teacher gave the class a math problem, allowing students to work with friends. Magdalena quickly grouped together with her two best girlfriends, both of whom were very weak in math. Throughout the exercise, she enjoyed helping them understand the concepts, and, in the process of answering her friends' questions, they discovered a new approach to the problem. Because her friends benefited from Magdalena's talents and felt affirmed by their joint success, she felt renewed encouragement to express her academic gifts. Recognizing this small spark, the teacher looked for such opportunities and incorporated more "elective groupings" in her lessons.

Cooperative activities that focus on invention and exploration will offer teachers more opportunities for discovering math and science talent in gifted girls and encouraging them to develop their gifts. This would be especially helpful for gifted minority girls who feel they have to pay, at least initially, a high social price for exceptional achievement.

It is important to understand that identifying gifted girls demands more than simply expanding the methods of identification. Concerned teachers may need to consider at least some minor changes in the instructional strategies and activities they use. Girls cannot express talents for teachers to identify if the conditions for their expression do not exist. Even a few activities, integrated now and then into the regular curriculum, can encourage them to take risks.

Gifted girls crave freedom. They long for someone to see who they are, open the often closed door of their minds and say, "Go, fly!" Since they cannot give themselves permission to fly, they need the aid of a discerning adult. For gifted girls, a sensitive, caring teacher may be all that stands between quiet resignation and the beginning of fulfillment of their potential.

Torrance (1983) perhaps provides the best guidance for the gifted girl who is unsure of where to turn when he suggests:

1. Don't be afraid to fall in love with something and pursue it with intensity and depth.
2. Know, understand, take pride in, practice, develop, use, exploit and enjoy your greatest strengths.
3. Learn to free yourself from the expectations of others and to walk away from the games that others try to impose upon you. Free yourself to "play your own game" in such a way as to make good use of your gifts. Search out and cultivate great teachers or mentors who will help you accomplish these things.
4. Don't waste a lot of expensive energy trying to do things for which you have little ability or love. Do what you can do well and what you love, giving freely of the infinity of your greatest strengths and most intense loves (p. 78).

Joan Franklin Smutny, Director of the Center for Gifted at National-Louis University in Illinois, teaches graduate students. Her books include *Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom*; and *The Young Gifted Child: Potential and Promise, an Anthology*

References

The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation. (1992). *The AAUW report: How schools shortchange girls*. Washington, D.C.: AAUW Educational Foundation and National Education Association.

Eby, J.W. & Smutny, J.F. (1990). *A thoughtful overview of gifted education*. New York: Longman.

Garrison, C.N. (1989). The emotional foundation of gifted girls. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 2(1), 1, 10-12.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Kerr, B.A. (1994). *Smart girls two: A new psychology of girls, women and giftedness*. Dayton: Ohio Psychology Press.

Sadker, M. & Sadker, D. (1994). *Failing at fairness: How America's schools cheat girls*. New York: Scribners Sons.

Torrance, E.R (1977). *Discovery and nurturance of giftedness in the culturally different*. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Torrance, E. P. (1983.) *The importance of falling in love with something*. *Creative Child and Adult Quarterly*, 8 (2), 72-78.

Permission Statement

Reprinted by permission, Open Space Communications, www.openspacecomm.com.

This article is provided as a service of the Davidson Institute for Talent Development, a 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to supporting profoundly gifted young people 18 and under. To learn more about the Davidson Institute's programs, please visit www.DavidsonGifted.org.

The appearance of any information in the Davidson Institute's Database does not imply an endorsement by, or any affiliation with, the Davidson Institute. All information presented is for informational purposes only and is solely the opinion of and the responsibility of the author. Although reasonable effort is made to present accurate information, the Davidson Institute makes no guarantees of any kind, including as to accuracy or completeness. Use of such information is at the sole risk of the reader.