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The Dangerous Diminishment of the Term “Gifted”

By Julie F. Skolnick M.A., J.D.(<https://www.withunderstandingcomescalm.com/profile/julies/>)



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There is a movement afoot to substitute the term “advanced learner” for gifted. This is an attempt to “dumb down” a moniker that stands for way more than intellectual acumen and to couch the change within the misleading goal of making enriched learning available to all. Unfortunately ridding the world of gifted programming results in under serving anyone who needs special attention, including culturally and economically diverse learners.

A better approach is to stop focusing on semantics and start creating interventions that

address different learners' needs.

People often approach me to tell me how much they dislike the term “gifted” or “twice exceptional.” They tell me “All children have gifts.” I don’t disagree, but I am also clear; all children are NOT gifted.

Here is what we know:

We know that around six percent of students enrolled in special education are twice exceptional. We know that across the board, gifted does not discriminate – the same percentage of gifted kids are found in all cultures and economic strata. We also know that gifted kids learn better, feel better, and are better set for success when they are amongst peers who understand their life experience. This inner perspective of the world includes existential considerations, deep empathy, and critical thinking.

Putting a five-year-old who worries about California wild fires with a bunch of kids who are still learning their letters provides a fast track toward depression and anxiety for that gifted kid. We know from our gifted and 2e adults the importance of meaningful and relatable work, empathic colleagues, and bosses who allow for individualized thinking and problem solving. Giftedness is a lifelong existence.

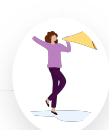
Gifted skills are not taught. They are inherent. Those in the “advanced learner” camps would have us believe that anyone can be gifted if they try hard enough or are given high expectations. I believe they truly think they are solving a problem of race and privilege by attacking the idea of giftedness.

In a recent article appearing in the Washington Post, A war of words over ‘gifted’ and ‘advanced’ programs exposes deeper issues, the author, Jay Mathews, complains that those with high academic potential but lacking academic achievement are left behind. He lauds the fact that “In the last four decades, [he] has watched and listened carefully to teachers who have, against heavy odds, succeeded in raising achievement significantly for children NOT considered gifted.” He goes on to list all the opportunities their parents did NOT have.

No one is going to argue with the importance of good teaching. Everyone supports access to enrichment and best practices for all kids. But that doesn’t address gifted learners’ needs and their social emotional challenges. Ironically Mr. Mathews supports a recommendation for “after-school, weekend and/or summer activities” which likely leaves out culturally and economically diverse kids. They typically live far from enrichment sites and transportation is an issue because their parents need to work; not to mention, the affordability of such programs.

The issue with education far surpasses labels and the best approach is to focus on each child individually. Yet, we know this is impossible. What teacher has time to devote to each of the sometimes thirty-five to forty kids in their class? How can one teacher be trained to address all differential learners? The importance of truly gifted classrooms (not AP or IB courses), is to meet the gifted child's learning needs and life approach which is significantly different than her neurotypical peers.

In a recent interview by Lifehacker, I was asked to talk about gifted myths. The author, a former teacher and parent of 2e kids, after going through ten myths about giftedness concludes that, “[t]eachers and caregivers need to look at the whole child, including the social emotional struggles that might be unique to a gifted child. Gifted kids thrive when given opportunities to be around other gifted students—kids who think like them, and who can work and learn the way they do.” I couldn’t have said it better myself.



[\(https://www.withunderstandingcomescalm.com/profile/julies/\)](https://www.withunderstandingcomescalm.com/profile/julies/)

AUTHOR: JULIE F. SKOLNICK M.A., J.D. ([HTTPS://WWW.WITHUNDERSTANDINGCOMESCALM.COM/PROFILE/JULIES/](https://www.withunderstandingcomescalm.com/profile/julies/))

Julie Skolnick, M.A., J.D., is the Founder of With Understanding Comes Calm, LLC, through which she passionately guides parents of gifted and distractible children, mentors 2e adults, and collaborates with and advises educators and professionals on bringing out the best and raising self-confidence in their students and clients.

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