

Thoughts on Gifted Students and Cooperative Learning

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1. **“Labeling” Gifted Children:** The first comment I want to make is people often categorize gifted students as “nerds” or as having poor social skills. I worked with gifted students in elementary and high school for 5 years and I found you could not pigeonhole them into those categories. They were just as diverse as the regular population. I had popular kids, nerds, cheerleaders, average Joes, etc..... Now, I did have some that fit the stereotype but it always got under my skin when people would say that gifted kids were a certain way. There were just as many differences in the gifted population as the regular population of students.
2. **Achievement Gains** – I think this whole area is misleading. In the US, we identify kids with IQ tests which basically filters out kids who are good at Logical Mathematical and Verbal Linguistic tasks – some spatial. Most of these kids are scoring in the 98%ile or above already so there is no way to document significant achievement gains for them, especially on norm-referenced tests. If anything, they will regress to the mean the next time they take a test. That just happens statistically and has nothing to do with what instructional model is being used.
3. **Limited Definition:** As noted in #2, the US really limits the definition of “gifted”. In fact, it often varies from state to state. Most are labeling kids who are talented in reading or math. They are not looking at other areas. When a teacher uses a range of structures that include Multiple Intelligences and Thinking structures, gifted students are stretched and other students are recognized as well. It may be somewhat humbling to some of those kids and helps them to realize that others have talents and strengths they may not possess.
4. **Social Skill Benefits:** Most of us would agree that EVERYONE including gifted children could improve social skills. This is especially true for children who succeed academically. For example, listening, coaching, polite waiting and empathy or tolerance are social skills that many (not all) gifted kids lack. Many of them process information so quickly and therefore don’t often get much practice with these skills. Let me share a real-life example. I have a relative that works in the medical profession. She is at a high management level and has the opportunity to work with extremely talented and bright people. Unfortunately, the majority of her job consists of helping with “people” issues that involve the need for better social skills. It seems that those who are very intelligent struggle with listening to others, valuing different opinions and supporting ideas that may be different. In addition, they often have trouble communicating in ways that people feel valued. Gifted students need so badly to be in classrooms where cooperative learning is used consistently. I think if students went through 10 years of being in teams, it would make a huge difference!
5. **Friendships:** Some (not all) gifted students have trouble developing friendships. The teambuilding and classbuilding in a cooperative classroom certainly help this area. Classmates would get to know them for something other than their “smartness”. They may find they have more in common than they think!
6. **Value:** In a cooperative learning classroom, gifted kids are valued for their knowledge. Other students want them on their teams. Not to do the work because we make sure individual accountability is present, but for what they have to offer. In traditional settings gifted students are seen as the “one to beat” and are often criticized or made fun of.
7. **Engagement:** My husband Vern (school superintendent) brought up the point that utilizing cooperative learning makes for a more engaging classroom for gifted kids. Because these students have so many more opportunities to respond, they can actually expand their thoughts and explain their thinking in a way they wouldn’t be able to in a traditional setting. Sometimes the only time

they get to do this is when they are pulled out. When a teacher uses structures like Talking Chips or Timed Pair Share, gifted kids can participate at a much higher level if they choose.

8. **Enjoyment:** A cooperative learning class is more fun!! This applies to all kids but gifted kids especially complain of things being boring. That isn't typically the case when they get to interact in cooperative learning teams. Both of our girls are very bright and both would much rather be in a team than in a row!!
9. **Coaching:** Another thing I think is important to mention is a little hard to explain but I will try! I think gifted kids really benefit when they are put in a coaching role. They learn to break down content, look at it a different way and therefore expand their understanding. For many, content is pretty easy through school but eventually they are going to run into content that is difficult. I believe when they do, they will use those skills they developed as a coach to tackle the new content.

In closing, I am not saying that a cooperative classroom should be the only solution for meeting the needs of gifted students; however, I do believe that this type of classroom allows for gifted students to be "gifted" all day, not just during pull-out time. Utilizing structures in a regular classroom allows most of those students' needs to be met in the least restrictive environment. Sometimes we get caught up in wanting gifted children to "stand out" but what does that really mean? Can they still stand out and flourish when they are a strong functioning member of a team? You bet!