



Myriad Myths about Giftedness

Upon hearing the word "myth," one may think of Zeus on Mount Olympus or King Arthur at Camelot. However, not all myths come from history; modern myths exist as well. Some of the most prevalent modern myths in education surround giftedness and gifted and talented programs. Numerous lists of such myths have been published. In this article, we provide three such lists published by giftedness researchers.

[Myths about Gifted Students](#), by Joyce VanTassel-Baska and Susannah Wood

This concise and easy to understand list offers a brief explanation of the research-based "reality" that contradicts each of the following myths about gifted children:

1. They are aloof, proud of their own abilities, and care little for others.
2. They are good at everything and should be reminded of that when they fail to perform at high levels.
3. They do not need special programs as they will be able to perform at high levels regardless.
4. They have even profiles in respect to intellectual ability, academic aptitude, and social emotional development.
5. They benefit from being the second teacher in the room, tutoring others in greater need than themselves.
6. They work well in randomly assigned groups to ensure that the work gets done correctly.
7. They all enjoy independent work and are motivated to complete projects.
8. They all have pushy parents who expect the school to do more than is possible or reasonable for their children.
9. They are good students, rarely causing behavioral problems of any kind in class.
10. They are rarely at risk for educational achievement or attainment beyond high school.

Each myth is phrased such that the first word "They" could be replaced with the phrase "Not all gifted kids" to turn the myth into reality (click the link to see the entire list of myths and realities). In addition to explaining what research has shown the lives of gifted children to be like, it also briefly explains how these myths may have developed. As with many myths, things such as "they benefit from being the second teacher in the room" may appear accurate and fair on its surface. However, upon reading the research based "reality" it is much more difficult to believe the myth. It isn't always possible to have such research findings at your fingertips, but VanTassel-Baska and Wood provide an easy to read list of relevant and important research findings that help uncover and explain the reality behind the lives of gifted children.

[Gifted Children: Myths and Realities](#), by Ellen Winner (1996) Basic Books: New York.

Where VanTassel-Baska and Wood provide a brief explanation behind their list of myths, Winner's book begins with a chapter in which she lists each myth and its roots, clearly setting the stage for the rest of the book to explain the truth. Winner does so via a mixture of stories of actual gifted children and providing relevant research findings. Presenting these truths both briefly and then again in detail greatly helps make clear both what is believed to be generally true about gifted kids, as well as why the myths exist. Furthermore, Winner expands her scope of discussion beyond academic or intellectual giftedness to include other domains such as music and art as well, thus broadening the book's utility beyond solely academically gifted concerns.

In an attempt to better articulate the type of child she is writing about, Winner defined giftedness using

three traits:

1. Gifted children are precocious.
2. Gifted children not only learn faster than average or even bright children but also learn in a qualitatively different way.
3. Gifted children are intrinsically motivated to make sense of the domain in which they show precocity.

With this conceptualization as her foundation, she proposed nine myths that plague beliefs about the nature of giftedness:

1. Academically gifted children have a general intellectual power that makes them gifted in all school subjects.
2. The gifted are those children with high ability in academic areas. Children with high ability in music and art are talented.
3. Giftedness in any domain depends on having a high IQ.
4. Giftedness is entirely inborn.
5. Giftedness is entirely a matter of hard work.
6. Gifted children are created by pushy parents driving their children to overachieve; when pushed too hard by over-ambitious parents, these children burn out.
7. Gifted children are better adjusted, more popular, and happier than average children.
8. All children are gifted, and thus there is no special group of children that needs enriched or accelerated education in our schools.
9. Gifted children, especially prodigies, go on to become eminent and creative adults.

Winner concludes her book with a plea to researchers to create unified theories that explain both typical and atypical development. However, it is important to note that a single theory should not be confused with a singular way of raising and teaching all children, regardless of whether they are gifted.

[Gifted Child Quarterly Special Issue: Demythologizing Gifted Education](#). Fall 2009

Unlike the previous two lists that were mostly about gifted children, this special issue revisits and updates a list of myths originally developed in 1982 that revolve around gifted education.

1. The gifted constitutes a single, homogeneous group (Dr. Sally Reis and Dr. Joseph Renzulli)
2. The gifted constitutes 3% to 5% of the population (Dr. James Borland)
3. A family of identification myths: Your sample must be the same as the population. There is a "silver bullet" in identification. There must be "winners" and "losers" in identification and programming. (Dr. Carolyn Callahan)
4. We need to have the same scores for everyone (Dr. Frank Worrell)
5. Creativity is too difficult to measure (Dr. Donald Treffinger)
6. The cosmetic use of multiple criteria (Dr. Reva Friedman-Nimz)
7. Differentiation in the regular classroom is equivalent to gifted programs and is sufficient: Classroom teachers have the time, the skill, and the will to differentiate adequately. (Dr. Holly Hertberg Davis)
8. The Patch-On approach to services (Dr. Carol Tomlinson)
9. There is a single curriculum for the gifted (Dr. Sandra Kaplan)
10. Examining the ostrich: Gifted services do not cure a sick regular program (Dr. Ann Robinson)
11. Gifted education means having a program (Dr. Marcia Gentry)
12. Programs should stick out like a sore thumb (Dr. Joyce Van Tassel Baska)
13. You have to do it alone! (Dr. Dorothy Sisk)
14. Waiting for Santa Claus [Districts can wait for services and funding to be provided to them] (Dr. Cheryl Adams)
15. High ability students do not face problems and challenges (Dr. Sidney Moon)
16. Confusing "difficulty" and high stakes testing with rigor (Dr. Tonya Moon)
17. Gifted students do not have unique social and/or emotional needs (Dr. Jean Peterson)

18. It is fair to teach all children the same way (Dr. Carolyn Cooper)
19. Advanced Placement is an adequate secondary program (Dr. Shelagh Gallagher)

Coming largely from an education service perspective, each article in this special issue provides a clear articulation of each myth as well as a discussion and synthesis of the relevant research. Additionally, each article provides useful information for anyone working with school officials on how/whether services are provided for gifted students.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most significant feature of lists about the myths of giftedness is their diversity! There is some overlap, but each list also adds its own unique contribution. Moreover, some of the myths appear to be contradictory, such as Winner's myths about giftedness being entirely inborn versus it being entirely a matter of hard work (both are myths, but each is believed by many to be the truth).

There are many reasons for the development and persistence of these myths. Sandra Kaplan, in her article on the myth "There is a single curriculum for the gifted" wrote that, "myths are created and continue to exist because they explain phenomena that are not easily understood or appear to validate ambiguous ideas with ambiguous evidence." Another reason that these myths are perpetuated is that they can sometimes be true for some of the kids some of the time. The fact that a myth may be true for some gifted kids often makes it all the more difficult to debunk. For example, a person who meets one gifted child who performs at a high level without any special classes could incorrectly assume that this is the case for all gifted students. Advocates for gifted children cannot easily disprove a myth that has observable counter-examples. Because of this, it is important to keep foremost in mind the first myth discussed in the Gifted Child Quarterly special issue: "The gifted constitutes a single, homogeneous group."

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