

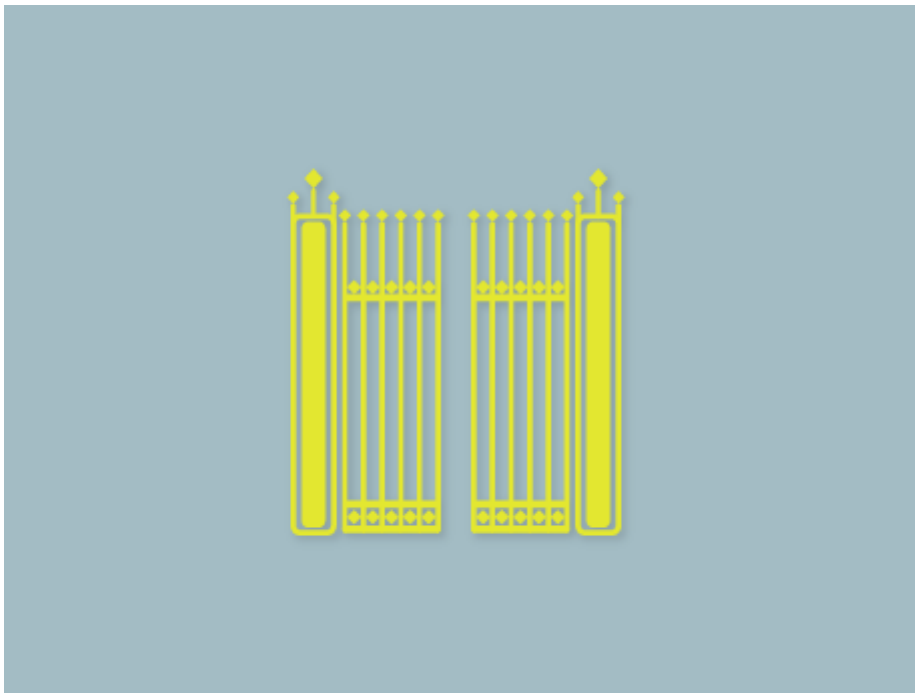
## TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

# Debunking Myths about Gifted Students

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I teach all kinds of students, from struggling learners to students classified as gifted, or GATE (Gifted and Talented Education). Each group, and each subgroup within each group, has different characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses. With every group, there are generalizations made that do a disservice to, well, servicing the students within them.

In terms of teaching GATE students, there are misconceptions that many teachers have that don't help to reach those kids efficiently, much less successfully. We are teaching in an era, not just of differentiation, but also of individualization, and as such, we have to acknowledge that the generalizations that have formed about certain groups not only don't apply to many individuals, they don't necessarily apply to the group as a whole at all.

### How Students Qualify for GATE

In order to become a GATE student, a student must pass a certain test(s) to qualify. What many don't know, however, is that the tests don't result in an overall assessment of gifted in every subject. That is, a student who is marked as "G" on your enrollment list might indeed be GATE in math, but not necessarily in language arts, or visa versa.

Their designation might have been, in part, due to oral speaking ability, but not in writing. You get the idea. Think of it this way: In middle school, in particular, you get a wide variety of student appearances. This effects how people perceive a student, and it isn't always accurate.

Labels sometimes cause the same inaccuracies. Just as the biggest middle schooler, the one who is taller than most seniors in high school, might also frankly be the youngest in maturity, so are GATE kids assumed to have it all together. For some, they do. For others, however, their advantage can also be their challenge, and until we speak freely of our assumptions and compare those to the reality, we won't be able to fully help GATE students achieve their potential.

### Confronting Our Assumptions

Which brings me to a short list of assumptions we tend to make regarding those kids who qualify as GATE:

**#1) GATE = honors:** Don't get mad at me, but GATE does not necessarily mean honors. It might, but it also might not. I have a number of GATE students in my honors program, but I also have many of them in my mainstream program as well. A student might qualify as GATE, but that doesn't mean that they have all their responsibility ducks in a row. They might still struggle with follow-through, for instance. They might be so compulsive with their work that they never feel it's worthy for submission. Conversely, they might also not see the need to do the work being asked, or might be so bored with it, that they find doing the work a waste of time. It could also simply be a maturity issue.

Remember, emotional maturity is not what GATE stands for. To combat this, I try to be transparent with students about why an assignment has value. I also try to give students as much choice as possible in what they read or in how they show me what they've learned. I also adapt assignments for certain students based on conversations we have. I adapt or even eliminate assignments if I can. After all, I want to ensure I will get the best from them.

**#2) As long as we are challenging their brains, then we're servicing their needs:** Sometimes their challenge is not in intellect, but in other traits. Working with GATE students can be, for a teacher, exciting and frustrating all at the same time. While this isn't true of every GATE kid, many have issues with collaboration and empathy, in particular with other students that they feel aren't up to their standards. I'm not sure if this comes from those qualities that make them GATE or if they are simply buying the publicity of being an outlier in many educational situations, but I have certainly seen it time and again.

Nevertheless, it's really important that any GATE program doesn't just work to develop the mind, but also the heart. Have students work in a project-based learning unit that is geared towards service learning. Have them mentor younger kids. But don't avoid having them work with their own peers in a diverse group. The very fact that many GATE programs treat them as exceptions feeds the students' inability to work with others well. Besides, everyone has something to teach everybody.

**#3) GATE students know how to speak up for themselves:** GATE students don't always know the right thing to say. Just because a student is in GATE doesn't mean they can communicate eloquently. They are still a work-in-progress as many students are. Help them learn how to speak sensitively.

Things don't always come out right, and not all GATE kids understand the value of reflection. Help them script how to say no to a peer who won't do their work. Help them to also choose wisely. Many GATE kids think they can do it all, but then collapse in the process. Time management might not be their strength. Help them to tell you when it's too much. Remind them it's not a pride issue.

**#4) Gifted kids don't need scaffolding:** This can't be further from the truth. They might need a different kind of scaffold, but they still need guidance and academic guardrails. For instance, in my writing class, many of my GATE students absolutely know how to write in complete sentences, but they continue to write in epic paragraphs, struggling with organization, or can't function with a page limit that exists to help them get to their point.

I'm not trying to stifle their creative process; I'm just trying to make sure that they understand that more doesn't always equal more. So I've developed scaffolds to help them rein themselves in and make more targeted decisions.

**#5) All their parents are uber involved:** Just because a student has been identified as GATE does not mean that you can expect their parent at every meeting or to respond to your calls or emails. In other words, you still must be that student's advocate. You still need to make sure you are fighting for that kid, even if they have so many cards stacked in his or her favor. You will need to identify that child's needs, their strengths and weaknesses.

Sometimes teachers tend to focus on the needs of at-risk and mainstream students and write off the needs of gifted ones. But the fact is that the GATE student before you might not have anyone in her corner at home. The GATE student before you might still be going through trauma at home just as any other student might.

Misconceptions about all Student Groups

Just as I believe every educator should teach at-risk children during his or her career, I also believe that every educator should experience both the joys and challenges that go along with teaching GATE students. Because it helps combat yet another myth: that they are somehow the easiest group to teach.

Sure, they can be exciting and creative and their questions can make a person really think. But, as with every designation, the misconception can quickly become the reputation. The fact is that a teacher needs to see through any label and into the needs of the student who bears it.

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