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143 and Above: An Investigation of Academic Solutions for Gifted Students

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Beyond the traditional challenge of higher education originally highlighted by Binet more than a century ago, which consists in limiting low student performance, there is a second one, less common, which aims at improving the learning experience of abnormally intelligent students, scoring above the Mensa 143 admission threshold. The latter are both gifted and weak: gifted in terms of intellectual capabilities, and weak in terms of complex relationships and societal fragility. The objective of this article is then to investigate the case of gifted students in order to improve their teaching and learning environments. Beside a presentation of problem-based issues, this article also introduces the concept of intelligence and highlights gifted characteristics and traits.

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1. Introduction

“People who find any noble trait to intelligence probably do not have enough of it to realise that it is eventually nothing else but a curse.” E. Ionesco

Gifted people are a source of varied emotions for the ones who have to deal with them, should it be within the family circle, at school, university, work, or even via social media. Most of the time, we hardly know how to behave with ‘different’ people, whatever this difference could be. Indeed, when the source of difference is psychological, the exercise is even more complex since it can lead to unexpected psychodrama sessions, some kind of social comedy into which the actors never really master their role. It is even worse when we do not suspect the type of difference we have to deal with. And abnormal intelligence fits this frame since gifted people are often naturally considered simple minds while it is actually exactly the opposite.

When young, the traits that characterise gifted people can easily be mixed with the ones defining certain pathologies that are responsible for low performance at school, isolation, rejection from societal groups, and severe incapacity to communicate (Ramsden, 2011). With the help of recent technology, information and data about ‘different’ children now spread faster so parents are more aware of the issue (Blackwell et al., 2007). Yet, the problem remains because just like not knowing that someone is gifted can lead to the development of mental and behavioural pathologies, wrongly believing that someone is gifted can also negatively impact a life. The topic is then critical despite the fact that more and more specialists tackle the issue, and earlier in a lifetime than it used to happen.

Whether gifted people have been diagnosed early or not, their traits remains, and they all go through the same difficulties: they are misunderstood, they feel desynchronised, and they often hide their capabilities just to try and feel that they belong to a norm. Such a behaviour makes them better accepted by their direct environment, but it also creates a distortion between their real ‘self’ and the ‘self’ they have imagined, sometimes leading to depressions, cyclothymic reactions, or even more severe pathologies such as autistic or schizophrenic tendencies.

Those difficulties are not new to gifted people. They have to deal with them from childhood, since intelligence is inborn, not acquired. The real challenge is to be able to manage the various environments into which subjects live and work throughout their evolution: school, university, employment, in other words all primary, formal, and informal groups.

In the realm of an extensive investigation aiming at improving students' experience (Campbell et al. 2001), this research (1) summarises the concept of intelligence, the performances of higher intelligences, and the characteristics of gifted people; (2) provides a guide for identifying lately or non-diagnosed gifted students; and (3) investigates the possible solutions that exist to make them optimise their higher education years without suffering from their difference.

2. The complicated word and world of intelligence

Attempting to measure intelligence is certainly as challenging as controversial (Nisbett et al., 2012). This is mainly due to the high number of variables that are supposed to contribute to define intelligence, such as genetic inheritance, educational level, social environment, or cultural influences. The place given to the *g* factor (Spearman, 1904) is also important; the latter, named *g* for 'general' is the central factor all tests can relate to (Walton & Spencer, 2009). This factor is able to explain 40 to 50% of the standard deviations that exist from one IQ test result to another, since we can define intelligence as a combination of both general skills and more specific ones according to the task performed (Fischbein, 1980).

The substantive 'intelligence' roots in the Latin word *intelligentare*, *i.e.* the faculty to understand. Intelligence can then be defined as the group of mental functions that are capable of conceptualising and rationalising ideas. In a wider perspective, intelligence is the tool that helps species adapt to circumstances according to the outcome of a prior analysis and evaluation of a given situation (Neisser et al., 1996).

Intelligence divides into 8 distinctive categories (Gardner, 1999; Koestenbaum, 2003; Goleman, 2005; McGlone & Aronson, 2006): lingual, mathematical, musical, spatial, kinesthetical, naturalist, impersonal, and intrapersonal. At this stage, it is relevant to distinguish between crystallised intelligence, *g*(C), and fluid intelligence, *g*(F). In the first case, the subject acts smartly thanks to stored knowledge and experience while, in the second case, the subject is naturally able to fix issues and imagine creative solutions without using any specific knowledge or reminding previous similar situations' outcomes (Coyle & Pillow (2008). We then often talk about 'working memory' vs. 'pure intelligence'.

3. The Meanders Of A Gifted Brain

The human brain processes information by sequence or by arborescence (Colom et al., 2010). In the first case, a situation is considered and then processed before switching to another task. In the second case, the subject starts the process with a thought, not a situation. This thought then opens the door to many others, thus producing a multiplication of thoughts that eventually take him/her away from the original concept. The initial thought is left aside due to the sudden number of neuronal connections that take place. The latter leads to mental hyperactivity, and the brain's work is then constant. In such cases, data spread faster: there is a .05 meter/second connection speed increase per extra IQ point. To be able to focus on a task or on a priority, the human brain then needs to delete some information to make some space available, just like any computer does. In the case of a gifted subject, this process does not happen. All data is received, processed and analysed, both permanently and equally. Latent inhibition malfunctions and unnecessary information is then kept, which sometimes makes 'normal' people misunderstand why gifted subjects give so much importance to secondary or even tertiary issues.

Gifted people often have a right hemisphere that is more developed than the left one; it is the contrary for left-handed people of course. Such encephalic hemisphere dominance makes the subjects able to fix problems without any need to follow the way that theoretically makes a question reach an answer. This is the reason why gifted people most of the time fail in explaining their results or the path that drove them to a specific conclusion. Such a trait also explains why gifted children or students fail their exams: they can hardly explain their own logic, way, and methods, an information that is often required by instructors who naturally give more importance to reasoning than to results, even in mathematics. Such cases root the origin of the lack of early diagnosis from parents or teachers since children or young students who do not perform are often considered stupid or lazy while they should indeed receive special attention.

This last observation is not the only false perception that the society has about gifted individuals. Most of the time, we wrongly believe that they can increase or lose their faculties, are very happy thanks to their abilities, have a high level of self-esteem, are geniuses, or benefit from an active social network. But the reality is far from such beliefs:

- Intellectual performance never changes (Bedart & Dhuey, 2006); it can vary due to depression stages, exhaustion, or unexpected emotions, but unless suffering from sudden brain pathologies, capacities remain. What can change is the relative level of performance of a subject taking a test among different sample structures. Since IQ is measured through comparisons, sample modifications can impact the results (Flynn, 1987; Wicherts et al., 2004). But the natural cerebral abilities of a subject remain the same through a lifetime.
- Loneliness is a gifted person's best friend; differences always socially isolate, especially when they do not create any expression of empathy from the social environment: when the subject's situation is unknown, gifted people are never congratulated since their performances are normal; yet, their mistakes are systematically pointed out since someone gifted 'obviously cannot fail'.
- Self-esteem is rarely high among gifted people. Their difference brings so much more pain than satisfaction that they have the natural tendency to refrain performance and hide capabilities, as well as remain silent when their input would yet be very enriching. This extra cautious behaviour often makes people consider gifted subjects highly pretentious.
- Gifted individuals who are considered geniuses are very rare; as previously mentioned, the differences between someone considered gifted and a genius are probably only a question of perception and communication. All geniuses are gifted. But all gifted people do not make part of a genius list. To do so, the talented people should benefit from a supportive and accurate environment. Art is a good example of such issues. Unfortunately, since they are 'gifted', it never comes to normal minds that they should get special care: why help someone strong? This leads to isolation, failure, lack of confidence, and eventually to behavioural modifications in order to look normal. In such circumstances, *i.e.* considered as intelligent enough to manage anything or perceived as stupid, a high majority of gifted people never have opportunities to use their talent, and eventually perform less than the average.
- As a result from all of the above, gifted people have very few friends; their constant distrust, their excessive emotional reactions, and their critical mind often keep them away from any serious friendship. This is also true and even worse within their professional environment since competition adds to judgement.

The reality of a gifted state is then much less attractive than expected. Indeed, complications arise in all aspects of life since those inborn elements show up in multiple stimuli detection and situational happenings.

4. Gifted Individuals' Main Characteristics And Traits

Gifted people are remarkable in grabbing and analysing their surroundings. Such subjects watch everything, see everything, and notice everything: they literally dissect everything. Whatever the stimulus, gifted people always find a way to extract a meaning and anticipate the linked implications. This is due to the permanent use of their senses. Even focused on a sharp task, they perceive every detail, which makes them always notice imperfections. The latter are unacceptable for them: things have to be perfect or not to be. Everything is then permanently scrutinised, making the social relations complicated due to the level of requirements that gifted people impose to everyone and in all circumstances. These are the reasons why they often develop obsessional and compulsive behavioural pathologies leading to rejection and isolation from the society.

Gifted individuals are also extremely sensitive. They often perceive what others feel before they even express it. So they are sometimes considered 'magicians' by being able to 'read the souls'. Since they know how to listen, they develop strong empathetic characteristics, which often naturally make them attracted by careers in law, education, or charities since they need to give time and help others as much as they need to be loved. They also are loyal and honest. They cannot stand injustice, and their reactions are often violent when they believe they have been cheated - even if it is not the case; their perception often commands their actions more than the reality does.

This level of sensitivity makes them able to perceive what others can hardly imagine. What is common for others is a huge source of information for the gifted person. They feel any change, lie, manipulation, or other stimuli able to provide information that contradicts traditional communication routes; they are like a mood barometer. And frequently, they feel the truth. Yet, again, this capability to analyse and read the other one often ends in creating a feeling of fear and doubt towards the gifted subject.

In terms of activity, gifted individuals need to do things by themselves, as well as be busy all the time, if possible through stimulating activities. They can hardly remain inactive. They always need to learn, discover, experience, test, analyse, and improve in varied fields. A negative side of this source of energy is to give up something after relative success has been met, only because things are too slow or because the subject has reached a level of knowledge and understanding considered sufficient and satisfactory enough to switch to new challenges instead of going deeper in the original direction.

Gifted people quickly feel bored, especially when they have understood most of a situation or skills components, or when someone who does not impress them provides those skills. All in all, they prefer broadening their scope than focus and specialise. These are the reasons why gifted subjects' resumes or research outcomes often present fields of skills and investigation that have absolutely no link one another. Those various observations lead to the conclusion that most gifted people choose to hide their possibilities in order to protect themselves from the judgement of others. It then sometimes leads to serious misunderstanding of one's place in the society: as gifted, they are rejected, and as normal, they are not themselves. In both cases, the sufferings are high; and once adult, only one third of individuals holding gifted traits shall live a normal life, even without fully using their capabilities; the remaining two thirds shall end up in developing benign pathologies such as personality disorders, or facing more severe consequences such as having to cope with autistic, paranoid, cyclothymic, or psychotic tendencies.

5. Higher Education Challenges For Abnormal Intelligences

Being different is never easy to assume, unless decided. This is true whatever the nature of the difference. *Raison d'être* can always be found in subversive behaviours. But when differences are inborn or inherited, it is not a choice of life; it is rather a burden to live with. The smaller the group of influence, the higher the complication to manage interpersonal relations; and among the various influence groups listed by psychologist, *i.e.* reference, aspiration, dissociative, primary, formal, and informal, the formal group is certainly one of the hardest to manage since it concerns working partners or students. This research focuses on the latter in order to keep investigating ways to increase the quality of student experience, and imagine solutions for gifted students to be allocated some space among people who have the natural tendency to point out differences rather than absorbing them after questioning their own existence.

Gifted students can usually be identified thanks to the following indicators (cf. Tables 1 to 3). Those indicators provide a detailed list of situations that gifted students have to deal with, as well as the impact they have on other students and academic professionals. Such indicators serve as a base to investigate possible support solutions.

6. Investigation Of Possible Support Solutions

The challenge of managing abnormally intelligent students is a serious issue for instructors. Pretending that nothing has been noticed is not the solution. Yet, focusing on gifted students for the sake of optimising a rare talent or to benefit from a special teaching experience cannot justify any lack of interest for other students. The situation, although not so common, deserves special care and prior preparation because inaccurate behaviours could have serious consequences.

The elements presented in this article should guide and help instructors in identifying potential gifted students. The academic staff should do this exercise since, as we have seen it, gifted students would do everything they can to try and hide their differences. They will then never clearly express their needs; they would rather send some signals, more or less consciously, and develop traits that are directly related to their condition. It is then the mission of the instructor not only to get ready to cope with such situations, but also to remain focused on his/her students' reactions. Too often, instructors only seek low performing individuals or at-risk students, but they forget the opposite, which requires similar care, sometimes even more due to the sharp edge separating such performances from personality disorders.

Indeed, the data shown in tables 1 to 3 are there to serve as a possible reference for instructors who would like to broaden their teaching mission (Herrnstein et al., 1986) by including the possible identification of gifted students. Now in terms of management of those individuals - so after identification - it would be relevant for instructors to try and implement the following, as per the criteria presented in tables 1 to 3:

- **Academic Performance:** Observation is essential but triangulation is also fundamental (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). As we have discussed it, focusing on one information only, *e.g.* high GPA or irregular performances, is not enough to reach the conclusion that we are in the presence of a gifted subject. Instructors should then be both cautious and conscious that data triangulation is implemented to make sure that all information has been considered and that the student is a real gifted case. Now from a more operational perspective, instructors should diversify their teaching and assessment methods in order to provide all students with an adapted dimension for expression. In the case of gifted students, one good solution lies in proposing more formative resources and assessments than summative ones.

- **Emotions:** As far as emotional traits are concerned, there is certainly no better way to deal with affective deviations than through communication and listening. The role of the instructor would here not only be to identify gifted students but also to lose no time in referring them to their academic advisor for special follow up. This solution is very efficient, mainly because of two factors: (1) the student receives care from different vectors, making him/her feel surrounded and considered, and (2) discussion with the academic advisor can take place outside the group, thus allowing more sincerity and probably enhanced freedom in reaching the root of complex psychological elements to deal with.

- **Teamwork:** Last but not least, in a world widely spreading knowledge-based economies, where nothing can be achieved without human synergies and team spirit, there is less and less space for gifted people despite their potential valuable contributions. And this is also true at the student stage. Such individuals are never given the support of a group to perform. Actually, the contrary happens: since they are so strong, no help is provided, first because they theoretically do not need it, and second because their performance is not only systematically questioned, but also scanned to see where and when they could stumble and fall. Such a behavioural philosophy leaves little space for support and care. Team work should then cautiously be organised around gifted students, for example by inviting them to focus on one specific technique only in order to leave others some room for existence too, and by, again, communicating a lot within the team in order to balance contributions and performances without anyone to feel limited in his/her work, should it be due to a lack of skills or to a capabilities restriction.

7. Conclusion

Through various intelligence-related information and data, this research has presented the main traits, characteristics, and challenges faced by gifted people, with a special focus on gifted students, mainly in terms of teaching and learning processes. We came out with the identification of three main fields of concern, namely academic performance, emotions, and teamwork. Those fields need to be carefully considered if academic environments want to improve their care for gifted students. Identification of such individuals certainly is a first and great step towards improvement, yet insufficient if not followed by the implementation of concrete academic techniques and processes.

The main role falls in instructors' realm of responsibilities; they should be able to identify indicators of abnormal intelligence, accept it, and then act accordingly. In this regard, we recommend to strongly developing communication, should it be on a group basis in class through teamwork or on an individual basis with the help of the academic advisor.

As far as teaching and learning techniques are concerned, although the intended learning outcomes should not be changed, an efficient way to improve gifted students' integration is to diversify teaching and assessment techniques as much as possible. For example, imagining hybrid teaching and assessment techniques integrating most of the 8 categories of intelligence certainly is a serious option. Further solutions could investigate the possibility to work in smaller groups, propose adequate study plans that would be more demanding, or increase the part of formative input as compared with the traditional summative approach. Yet, beyond those various techniques, it is now agreed that whatever the methods, nothing would be efficient without a sincere capability to listen to those students, as well as without upstream education and raising awareness of peers.

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Table 1: Usual Gifted Students' Traits And Their Negative Impact On The Other Academic Actors From The Academic Performance Point Of View.

Trait / Symptom	Impact / Consequence in Class
Academic Performance	
Very high GPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors do not suspect any atypical behaviour • Grade changes (<i>i.e.</i> failure) is neither understood nor forgiven by both the academic actors and the student's relatives
Expressing lots of curiosity but most of the time for things that are not course or topic-related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The instructors do not support deviation from the course content, which negatively impacts the student's curiosity and future will to speak up
Very mature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course contents might not always be adequate for such brains
Hesitant in answering questions by fear to be identified as much smarter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste of a great potential leading or mentoring resource
High understanding of complex things while showing difficulties in grabbing simple concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is probably the worse consequence of gifted students: they are considered stupid while it is the exact opposite
Way to ask questions to the instructor that supposes both defiance and competition to challenge any source of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors feel embarrassed or upset instead of surfing unexpected intellectual challenges
Possible important grade standard deviation proving the student only works according to what is considered relevant or source of interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to a lack of interest in some topics, the student is often considered either good in science and not in literature since this scheme matches traditional beliefs of intellectual selectivity and capability. Indeed, a low grade is only linked to a lack of stimulation, not to a lack of skills
Rare/abnormal performances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Such performances raise jealousy from both other students and sometimes even from instructors

Table 2: Usual Gifted Students' Traits And Their Negative Impact On The Other Academic Actors From The Emotions Point Of View.

Trait / Symptom	Impact / Consequence in Class
Emotions	
Systematically doubting about everything with the consequence to have sometimes difficulties in making final, relevant, or justified decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student loses lots of time and is not able to respect deadlines • Other students feel frustrated by a possible group disorganisation
Imaginative and creative	• Instructors identify individualism instead of potential
Reactive and very impatient	• The student gets easily angry
Lightly paranoid (<i>i.e.</i> paranoid personality trouble tendencies)	• The student does not participate, either in class or in any activity
Showing signs of stress and anxiety such as nail biting or hair pulling	• Instructors perceive those reflexes as signs of boredom or daydreaming
Regular moments of dreaming in class	• Instructors believe the student does not understand while he/she actually does so much that he/she is learning nothing new
Lots of empathy	• Since intelligence at its highest stage compiles intellectual and emotional capabilities, such students naturally go to the ones who have understanding difficulties in order to help them; this is badly perceived since they are accused of advising without showing the example due to their own bad results
Sudden access of anger	• Hiding their real personality and capabilities sometimes reach a point that requires extraversion; the student is then considered irascible while this trait should eventually be interpreted very differently
Sad look in class	• Most of the time such students think about ways to cope with their differences rather than focus on the course content; they feel sad because alone and misunderstood; instructors naturally believe the student suffers from personal issues, which, again, takes them away from the real diagnosis
Physical isolation from other students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When alone in class due to intellectual distortion, a gifted student is then often alone outside the class too • This intellectual and physical isolation always strengthens all of the original feelings and forsaking
Introversion	• The student is considered shy while this inward-looking behaviour is only another defence tool
Violent emotions towards common emotional stimuli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just like with anger, a wide range of extreme emotions sometimes spring due to different tolerance threshold as compared with usual students • Those reactions remain misunderstood and qualified as simple moody issues while the distress is real and deeply rooted in the subject

Table 3: Usual Gifted Students' Traits And Their Negative Impact On The Other Academic Actors From The Team Work Point Of View.

Trait / Symptom	Impact / Consequence in Class
Teamwork	
Follower when in team work - as opposed to leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student does not use his/her full potential • The student tries to hide as much as possible from any exposure
Often frustrated by others' lack of speed and performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student considers others as responsible for any delay, mistake, or negative output
High and quick working load capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group members tend to require more involvement from the concerned student
Difficulties to work in teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar to other traits' impact, all groups often naturally reject the different ones