



SIG e-Newsletter



The Gifted Student

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Interview with an Expert

Del Siegle is an associate professor of educational psychology in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut where he is a teaching fellow. Prior to earning his PhD, Del worked as a gifted and talented coordinator in Montana. He is president-elect of the National Association of Gifted Children and serves on the board of directors of the Association for the Gifted. He is co-editor of the Journal of Advanced Academics and authors a technology column for Gifted Child Today. Del's research interests include web-based instruction, motivation of gifted students, and teacher bias in the identification of students for gifted programs.



Dr. Siegle will be the keynote speaker at SIG's Gifted Education Conference at Fairfield University on October 6th (see article below). His keynote is entitled, Getting to the Heart of the Matter: What I've Learned from Gifted Children.

The Gifted Student recently sat down with Dr. Siegle for an interview:

SIG: You speak about lessons you have learned about teaching gifted children. What is the most surprising thing you have learned?

DS: I don't know that they are surprising, but here are a few things I've learned. First, there isn't an all purpose gifted child. Just as children differ from each other physically, their gifts also differ. We will never find a perfect test to identify gifted children because there isn't a single type of gifted child. Joe Renzulli proposed two different classification areas of giftedness: creative producers and schoolhouse gifted. Creative producers are inquisitive problem "finders" and "solvers". Schoolhouse gifted students excel at academics. Sometimes the two overlap, sometimes they do not. Both have valuable gifts that need to be nourished.

Just as there isn't one type of gifted child, there isn't a "one size fits all" curriculum. Services for gifted children need to be customized to meet the talent area, learning style, and interest of the child. This is difficult in a school environment that supports everyone on the same page at the same time.

Gifted students don't always love learning everything. Their interests vary greatly and they have strengths and weaknesses. Gifted education should be about servicing the strength that brings the child to our attention in the first place. Gifted education is about talent development. We need to discover student

strengths and then enhance and develop those strengths to even higher levels.

Support and encouragement are paramount. Gifts do not develop without encouragement and expertise. We need to provide emotional support for gifted kids. Students need to know about their giftedness. I talk more about this with the next question on underachievement. We also need to find the expertise necessary to move students' talents to the next level.

SIG: You have done a lot of work on the topic of underachieving gifted students. What do you see as the most critical issue in the solution of this problem for parents?

DS: I think there are three important points that parents and teachers should consider. First, gifted students need to understand that they have something to do with their giftedness, and they need to learn to take responsibility for developing their gifts. Second, parents need to help their children understand that having to work hard does not mean one is not smart, and that working hard makes one smarter. Finally, parents need to help their children recognize cause and effect relationships in their lives.

I like Francoys Gagne and Joe Renzulli's conceptions of giftedness. Gagne differentiates between gifted and talented. He talks about individuals taking their gifts and turning them into talents. Renzulli notes that part of giftedness is applying task commitment to above average ability. Both of these theorists are talking about developing talents. Parents and teachers should demystify giftedness for their children. Children must appreciate that their giftedness is the result of their having taken their strengths and developed those strengths into talents. By helping young people realize that they have a role in their talent development, educators and parents go a long way to promoting an achievement-orientation attitude in young people. While it is true that gifted students often acquire skills more quickly and easily than their peers, they learn these skills over time. They may have taught themselves to read, or learned to read easily at an early age, but they still learned to read. It is important for gifted students to recognize that the talents they possess are acquired, and they are capable of further developing these talents and even acquiring new ones.

Because skills develop slowly over time, children are often unaware of the progress they are making. Taking the time to help children recognize their growth goes a long way to promoting this achievement-oriented attitude. Carol Dweck demonstrated that students who believe abilities can be developed, and are not fixed, are more likely to attempt challenging tasks. These students view new situations as opportunities to acquire new skills or to improve their existing skills. These students are more likely to persevere through difficulties than students who believe abilities are innate. Students who believe abilities are fixed tend to view their mistakes as evidence they lack ability. These students often view new or challenging situations as threats to their giftedness.

Gifted students also need to understand that because they find something difficult does not mean they are not smart. Young people often believe that if they need to work hard at school, then they are not smart. For some students, not trying preserves an image. They do not perceive "not trying" as poor performance. They can always say, "It wasn't important" or "I just rushed through it and didn't do my best." In fact, peers often perceive hard-working students as less intelligent than students who do well in school without making any visible effort. Parents can share with their children how their own efforts have paid off. Children need to understand that working hard makes them smarter.

Finally, children often fail to understand the consequences of their actions or inactions. The director of a large gifted program shared with me the story of a young man in his district. The young man had been identified as gifted and received services throughout his elementary years. He coasted through the program and produced average work. The district had a special high school program and did not place the young man in that program when he reached high school age. The young man complained to the director of gifted services about the decision. The director told the young man that since he had not taken advantage of opportunities from the elementary gifted program, there was no reason to place him in the

high school program. Being identified as gifted is not an entitlement. To have placed the young man in the high school program would have been a waste of resources. Gifted is just a label and it should not carry with it inalienable rights...what individuals do with their gifts is what is important. There are consequences for not developing gifts just as there are rewards for developing one's gifts.

We often forget what important models we are for our children. We need to model curiosity and wonder about the world around us. We also need to model learning more about that world and the questions we develop through our curiosity. It is one thing to stop and notice an unusual plant. It is another thing to search the Internet to identify that plant. While we often model the first, we also often fail to model the latter. By participating in the latter, we teach our children the importance of "going the extra mile".

SIG: Using technology in the gifted classroom is a hot topic these days. What can you tell teachers who feel much less capable in this area than their students to encourage them to use this exciting medium in their teaching?

DS: Don't be afraid to let the students teach you. My first encounter with desktop computers was during my junior year as an elementary education undergraduate. A foresighted mathematics professor invited me to attend an evening demonstration that was being planned for the university faculty. He would not reveal to me what was being demonstrated, but he insisted I would be impressed. That evening I sat in a large auditorium, mesmerized by a small Apple computer that displayed colorful bricklike blocks. "This is going to revolutionize education," my professor explained. He discussed using it in art, music, and writing. These were activities far beyond the mathematics applications his colleagues envisioned. The college purchased the Apple and promptly locked it in a large closet on the seventh floor of an administration building. Although my professor wanted to use the computer, he did not have time to experiment with it. As a student I had extra time, so he traded a key to the closet for the knowledge I acquired working with it. The symbiotic relationship worked and both of our technology skills grew. "Kids are going to love this," he said. "Just as you have more time than I do to learn with it, your students will have more time than you will to learn new things with it. Don't be afraid to let them teach you. They may have more time, but you have wisdom to apply what they discover." He was correct, and Educational Technology Lesson One: Don't be afraid to let the students teach you was not only good advice for working with students and technology, it probably was the best advice I could have received for working with gifted and talented students. It certainly is excellent advice when working with gifted students and technology.

SIG: What would you tell parents who are concerned that their children spend too much time in front of a computer screen?

DS: Concern over too much time on the computer probably translates into concern over too much time on the Internet. Kids love to communicate with each other online. Parents should consider restricting the number of hours they allow their children to chat, similarly to how they would monitor phone use. Children do need variety in their lives. Just as parents would not allow their children to solely spend every waking hour sitting in a chair watching television or reading a book, parents should not accept such behavior with children who are continually fixated to a computer. Children need opportunities for a variety of physical, social, and intellectual pursuits. While the time for each does not need to be evenly divided, balancing these activities based on the children's interests and personalities is important.

Research indicates that children who use the Internet spend less time watching television and more time with friends and family. Children who spend time on computers at home spend no less time reading or playing with other children. There are also modest benefits associated with home computing on cognitive skills and self-esteem. Unfortunately, young children who use computers at home for more than 8 hours per week tend to be heavier than those who do not use home computers.

Parents can use their children's interests to enhance their children's use of the Internet. Based on conversations that parents have with their children, they can help their children explore topics related to

special areas of interest. A child who is interested in baseball may wish to learn more about a favorite player or may be interested in developing a database of statistics related to his or her favorite teams. Such information is available on the Internet. By jointly exploring children's interests on the Internet, parents can assist their children in two ways. First they can help them become critical consumers of information. From an early age, children must be trained to develop a healthy skepticism of the validity of the information they find. This can involve comparing information from a variety of sources on the web.

Second, parents can also help children surf more effectively and efficiently. This includes modeling the best selection of keywords within a search. Many children quickly become discouraged when they cannot immediately find the information they are seeking. With some guided practice, children learn to quickly locate the information they desire. Blindly following links is not an efficient way to locate information on the Internet and is not only a waste of time, it is often unproductive. Parents can help children develop purposes and strategies for using the Internet and their computer.

Certainly writing papers on the computer and conducting research on the Internet are productive uses of time. Another use of computers involves specialized software. Computers increase the sophistication of products that gifted and talented students can create by allowing them to function in roles similar to practicing professionals. Computers allow students to produce products in a real-world fashion. For example, students can use a desktop publishing program to write, edit, and produce books or publications that rivals in appearance those produced by publishing houses. Today, students can access software that allows them to compose music, design buildings, and collect data with laboratory probes similar to practicing professionals in each of these fields. Thus computers permit students to develop their talents at a higher level of professional sophistication at an earlier age. The price of these programs has dropped dramatically over the last few years. These products allow gifted and talented students to function as practicing professionals. This not only accelerates the development of students' talents, it also enriches their learning experiences. For example, students can now edit and create professional looking movies. Ten years ago the cost of software and equipment to produce a film was prohibitive. Today, the software is packed free on many computers, and digital video cameras are commonplace. These uses of computers enhance student development and should actually be encouraged.

SIG: As President-elect of NAGC, what do you most want to accomplish in your upcoming term as President?

DS: I have four general initiatives that I hope to implement over the next three years. First, I hope to build endowments for some of the NAGC awards. As I have visited state conferences around the country, I have been impressed with the passionate support that local educators and parents show toward the presentation of the NAGC Nicholas Green Distinguished Student Award. It is humbling to be in the presence of these young award winners as I hear of their love of learning and compassion for others. The funds for the award that Maggie and Reg Green established to honor their young, gifted son who suffered an untimely and tragic death are depleted, and we need to replenish them. If 20 people in each state could contribute \$250 toward the fund, the fund would be endowed, and we would no longer need to worry about the award's continued existence. NAGC is offering a complimentary one-year membership to the first 20 people from each state who contributed \$250 to the fund. In my heart I believe there must be 20 people in each state who are able and willing to support this important effort. My goal is to have the fund endowed by the time I become President in 2007. It would be great if Connecticut could be the first state to reach the \$5000 goal.

I also hope to develop better systems so more members can become actively involved in the organization. People in gifted education are passionate about the field, and NAGC needs to find better ways to harness that energy to move the cause of gifted education forward. This will include finding a greater role for classroom teachers and parents in our organization. NAGC is in the middle of developing a new governance structure. No one knows how that will ultimately look, since the process still has about a year to go. I will be responsible for implementing that new structure, which will be a large undertaking.

This is a very exciting time for the organization and hopefully the new governance structure will create more open paths for members to participate in the organization.

We also need to increase member benefits. For many years, Gifted Child Quarterly was the only member benefit. Several years ago we added Parenting for High Potential and last year we started Teaching for High Potential. We also hope to increase the number of NAGC sponsored books. We have also committed significant resources to improving and expanding our website. As I put this year's national conference together, I've paid particular attention to the various stakeholder groups. I've tried to develop focus sessions that target the specific needs of NAGC members (sessions designed for parents, others for classroom teachers, and others for gifted and talented coordinators). NAGC needs to be the "go to" organization for information related to developing talent. We hope NAGC evolves into the major clearinghouse for the world on information related to gifted education.

Finally, we've spent a lot of time in gifted education preaching to the choir. We need to spread gifted education to other audiences. NAGC has begun to forge alliances with other groups. We are currently working with SENG to produce pamphlets for parents that can be distributed through pediatricians' offices. The project will assist numerous parents and pediatricians to recognize and help gifted kids. This is an exciting opportunity to help parents of young gifted children. This is the area where our parent specialist receives the most calls. We will be forming alliances with other groups as well, so that we can reach a broader audience with our message.

These are the priorities I have set thus far. Over the next year additional priorities will surface that the organization will need to address.