

## The Gifted Tag

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They have IQ's that are well above average but, too often, exceptional students have school experiences that are subpar. It turns out that those with great powers of comprehension are frequently misunderstood.



Reed Ball started playing Monopoly with his family at age three—and beat them. In the early 1980s, he was one of the first kids to have a “portable” computer, a 10-kilogram Amstrad PPC512. Reed brought it to class until one of the school’s bullies knocked it out of his hands and down a stairwell.

Reed was a math whiz, and used to correct his teachers’ science errors. When they warned him he would get lead poisoning if he kept stabbing at his own arm with a pencil, Reed replied, “actually, it is graphite.” Just before he graduated from high school in 1991, Reed developed software for a major oil company that converted old blueprints into working documents. He began his studies for a degree in mathematics that September, but flunked out a year later. Then, when he was 21 years old, Reed Ball swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills. He died quietly with his pet kitten, Solis, beside him and his computer still on.

“Reed never fit in,” says Jennifer Aldred, one of his longtime schoolmates. “My heart broke for him.” Aldred recalls Reed’s math skills and his heavy computer, but what she remembers most about Reed was how he used to twist his slender body around the legs of his desk. He would tie himself into such knots that the caretaker would be summoned to rescue Reed by taking apart the desk with a screwdriver.

Reed’s entanglements serve as an apt metaphor for the school life of severely gifted children. For those who feel weird and wrong and struggle to find like minds among their peers, school itself can be a contortion. Reed’s exceptional life and early death inspired Aldred into a career in gifted education. She and her colleagues work to help children like Reed untwist. His tragedy reveals what can be at stake for these kids. Our most brilliant children are among our most vulnerable. The challenge of teaching them is finding a way to nurture their souls and ease the burden of their extraordinary minds.

“Giftedness is a tragic gift, and not a precursor to success,” says Janneke Frank, principal of Westmount Charter School and a local guru of gifted education. “The gifted don’t just think differently, they feel differently. And emotions can ricochet out of control sometimes.” To speak of giftedness as a disability seems counterintuitive. Part of the problem is simply semantic; the word “gifted” suggests an advantage and does not conjure up the intense challenges these children can face.

Intelligence test results also fail to tell the whole story. Quantitatively, giftedness is rather easy to define. A child is considered gifted with an IQ at or around 130—about 30 points higher than those of us with average brains. But IQ scores alone don’t reflect the range of psychological issues that trouble many gifted students. Gifted children might express heightened physical sensitivities to light, touch and textures. Parents of some gifted children have to cut the tags out of their kids’ clothing, for example, or buy specially-designed socks with no seams. More serious, though, are the emotional challenges. Gifted children are more prone to depression, self-harm, overexcitability, and learning deficits. A gifted student might be so paralyzed by her own perfectionism, say, that she refuses to hand in any assignments. The same 10-year-old who can set up the school’s computer system with the proficiency of a college-educated tech might also throw a tantrum like a toddler if she’s not invited to a birthday party. Another child might be so affected by a piece of music that he won’t be able to focus on anything else the rest of the day. For these “twice exceptional” children, emotional intensity is the evil twin of high intelligence.

Aldred, too, was an eccentric and gifted child. She traded her eraser collection for a classmate’s cast-off eyeglasses, and fashioned herself a set of braces from metal paperclips she pilfered from her teacher’s desk. “I was delighted with the look,” Aldred says, even though the glasses made her eyes hurt and the paperclips lacerated the inside of her mouth. “When I smiled, blood dripped down my teeth.” Eventually Aldred modified her design to include eyeglass frames without lenses and plastic-coated paperclips that didn’t cut her gums.



Aldred believed with heart-pounding certainty that her school was the sort of enchanted forest or magic kingdom she read about in the books she loved. In addition to the glasses and fake braces, Aldred wore gowns, crowns and glitter-covered wings to school to be ready when this magic revealed itself. Aldred had absolute faith the dream world she yearned for was perpetually at hand. Looking back, Aldred wonders if this fantasy represented her own contortion. Like Reed's twisted body, Aldred's belief in magic was her way of coping with a real world that made little sense to her. "It was an attempt at resiliency—to somehow scream 'but this is what I see', even when a thousand forces tried their best to tear it from me."

Those forces succeeded eventually. Aldred's teacher confiscated the glasses and banned her from raiding the paperclip jar. Aldred started to leave the wings and crowns at home. "Parts of me died in those early years," she says. "When I started teaching, the only thing I wanted to be sure of—especially working with gifted kids—was that no part of them died."

In Aldred and Reed's time, schools offered little programming for gifted students. Aldred briefly attended a "cluster group" at Prince of Wales Elementary. The school administration yanked the smartest kids from each grade out of their regular classes and grouped them together for special learning. No doubt the developers of the program meant well, but the effectiveness of the pull-out class seems rather dubious. "We sat in dark rooms where we imagined different ways to build stuffed animals and played chess for a while," Aldred remembers. Colin Martin—Aldred's cluster classmate who used to play Monopoly with Reed, on multiple boards at the same time, in Reed's parents' basement—says the program aided the school bullies by assembling all their favourite victims in one convenient location.

After graduating from high school in the early '90s, Aldred left Calgary for Queen's University, where she completed honours degrees in English and fine arts, followed by a bachelor of education with a focus on gifted learning. She returned to Calgary for her practicum and, by coincidence, ended up teaching back at Prince of Wales. By this time, more sophisticated programs were available for Calgary's gifted students. Prince of Wales was one of five schools running the Calgary Board of Education's Gifted and Talented Education program, or GATE. In addition, Westmount Charter School offers "qualitatively differentiated educational programming" for gifted students. Both programs require potential students to undergo psychological assessments and score high on intelligence tests to identify their giftedness.

At Prince of Wales, Aldred was charged with teaching English literature to GATE students. She'd taught Shakespeare's plays to "regular" teenagers in Ontario, and suspected she'd have to find simplified versions for her younger charges at Prince of Wales. She was wrong. "They just got it," Aldred says. Her gifted students took to the poetic language immediately and grasped the metaphorical elements in the text better than students 10 years older. When Aldred taught a unit on Arthurian legend, her students showed no interest in the illustrated children's anthologies Aldred brought for them. Instead, they looted the stack of academic treatises and primary source material on Aldred's own desk. One nine-year-old girl hauled away a 900-page copy of *The Mists of Avalon*. She read the entire book that night and returned it, exhausted, the next morning.



What delighted Aldred most about her first gifted class was that despite their sophisticated grasp of the material, the GATE students were still children. They believed in magic the same way she used to. "Intellectually, they were at a university level, but they were trapped in these little kid bodies that still believed in unicorns," Aldred says. Their enthusiasm for the material astonished her. The day after she read aloud the first three lines of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one of her students came to class dressed as the Queen of the Fairies. Some of these kids acted as if they'd been waiting their whole life for Aldred to bring them Shakespeare, or Sylvia Plath, or Margaret Atwood. "For me, as a teacher, it was a dream come true," Aldred says.

After her practicum, Aldred earned a master's in gifted education at the University of Calgary. By then, her experience convinced her that gifted students should have their own classrooms and not be scattered among the general school population. "I believe hugely in a congregated setting," she says. To argue against integration also feels counterintuitive. The separation of the gifted may seem unfair and discriminatory; parents of "regular" kids often wonder why resources and special classrooms are devoted to gifted students. Kathy Stone, the mother of gifted twin boys, remembers an irate father standing up at a meeting with a school superintendent to protest funding a gifted program. "I am so sick of hearing that elitist crap," Stone remembers the man saying. He called gifted kids arrogant, complained that they already have everything, and rejected the idea that they needed 'country club programming.' "Kids are all the same and should be treated the same," he continued.

Nearly all teachers and parents of gifted students, however, consider congregated classrooms essential. "People say it teaches the kids not to get along in the real world," Aldred says. "I believe it is about survival." Gifted kids need a place where they can feel safe and accepted for all their various intensities. A place where they can be themselves, quirks and all.

Janice Robertson agrees: a congregated gifted program may well have saved her son's life. Janice had long been concerned about Mark (both their names have been changed). He was an exceptionally smart kid who taught himself to read by the time he was two years old. But a darkness always hung behind Mark's brightness. "He would say things like, 'I'm just going to hurt myself,'" Janice remembers. He used to bang his head on the floor and once, when he was three, pointed to a digger on a construction site and said, "I'm going to ask that digger to dig a hole and put us in it and bury us."



decided they couldn't wait. The whole family moved to Calgary and Mark started the GATE program at Hillhurst Elementary. After about a year into the program, Mark settled down and his grades improved. "He wasn't as bored. There was not as much need to create chaos to keep himself entertained." Most importantly, though, was that Mark had found his tribe. "People understood him better. He made more intellectual connections." Occasionally, Mark clashed with kids "outside his little clan," Janice says, but never with his fellow GATE classmates. These were his people.

Mark continued with the GATE program until Grade 11, when he enrolled in a hockey program at Athol Murray College of Notre Dame in Wilcox, Saskatchewan. (A true eccentric, Mark played goal.) Now he studies engineering at Queen's University. As it turns out, his roommates in Kingston are old classmates from the GATE program in Calgary. Without that program, Janice says, Mark would have fallen apart. "I honestly believe if we hadn't gotten him into that segregated program he would have dropped out and started dealing drugs somewhere," Janice says. "Mark would have ended up killing himself or someone else."

Not all students feel saved by gifted education, however. Alyssa Morgan needed to be saved from her gifted program. Morgan had always been an odd kid. For as long as she can remember, she has never been able to stand tags on her clothing and can't wear anything made out of corduroy or polyester. "I've worn jeans and a cotton T-shirt for basically my entire life," she says. Morgan started to notice her own giftedness in Grade 3 when she started to find school unbearably dull. Morgan often snuck out of her classroom to read books in the library. When she did attend class, Morgan pestered her teacher with constant questions. "It was like an itch I couldn't scratch," Morgan says. "The thirst to know and understand everything."

Morgan's parents didn't worry too much about their daughter's eccentricities until Grade 4 when a substitute teacher—and mother of two gifted children—recognized something exceptional in Morgan's misbehaviour. The substitute teacher suggested testing Morgan's IQ. She scored a 137 and started in the GATE program at Nellie McClung the following year.

In a way, Morgan was lucky she was such a pain in the ass. Gifted boys tend to act out much more often than gifted girls. Young males tend to combat their boredom by disrupting the class. Often their frustrated teachers send them to be tested for behavioural problems only to discover that the little monsters have off-the-chart IQs. Gifted girls, however, are more likely to turn inward. Their silent brooding may be interpreted as nothing more than feminine coquettishness, and their giftedness may be overlooked.

Initially, the GATE program was everything Morgan wanted. "The first two years I was in that program were incredible," she says. Her teacher assigned expansive projects to the class. They discussed concepts, shared ideas, and approached each piece of curriculum from several angles at once. "Every single day I was coming home bursting at the seams with all of this," Morgan says. At the family dinner table, Morgan rambled on about how she learned about pi. About Archimedes. About the pay system of the ancient Incas. "It got to the point that my parents said 'You need to stop and let everyone else talk about their day as well.'"

The GATE teachers at McClung knew how to manage the various excitabilities and sensory issues of their students. Morgan's Grade 6 teacher, Michelle Odland, gave the students regular "body breaks." Allowing them to get up and run around the class a few times a day helped their concentration. Odland also wrapped everyone's desk in sheets of paper so that they could doodle nonstop if they needed to. When some of the more sensitive kids complained about the

constant buzz of the fluorescent tube lighting, Odland strung up Christmas bulbs everywhere to provide a calmer, quieter light. “She would constantly ask ‘What’s bugging you?’” Morgan says. “This was a teacher who understood we weren’t just a bunch of kids that were really, really smart. She offered us emotional support.”

But Morgan’s dream education ended when she left McClung and started junior high at John Ware. In an effort to tend to their diverse learning needs, the administration divided the GATE students into two groups Morgan termed the “Perfects” and the “Clods.” The Perfects were all high-achieving gifted kids—those who could sit still and listen to their teacher and, therefore, scored higher on tests. Morgan, on the other hand, was a Clod. The Clods, Morgan says, “were all over-excited. All hyper-sensitive. There were sensory issues running wild.” Chaos reigned in the Clod classroom. “No one could sit still. We were all talking back and yelling over each other.”

The Clods’ teachers lacked Mrs. Odland’s talent for teaching gifted kids. Instead of assigning big projects, most teachers handed out worksheets. Students were not encouraged to debate concepts anymore, and were expected to simply sit, listen and behave. “We did not have enough teachers who actually understood what gifted is.” Before long, the students turned on each other. Gifted students are rarely bullies, but without an outlet for their various intensities the Clods of Nellie McClung vented their frustration on Morgan. The teasing and abuse escalated throughout junior high and into high school. Morgan hid most of what was happening from her parents. “They were aware there was bullying, and would give advice and pep talks, but they were not aware of the levels I was being attacked,” she says. Morgan did not elaborate on the details of all she endured, only that the incidents culminated in something she calls the “Terrible Awful.” She finally fled the GATE program altogether in Grade 11.

Now 21, Morgan is studying journalism at the University of Vancouver Island. Her gifted eccentricities endure. She hauled 400 books into her tiny dorm room when she moved in, for example, and recently spent an entire night reading all the case files and grand jury testimony in the Michael Brown case in Ferguson. The “Terrible Awful,” though, still haunts her. Morgan’s doctor recently diagnosed her with PTSD. “I did not handle what happened to me the appropriate way,” Morgan admits, but she believes much of the blame lies with her GATE teachers. “The people who failed us were those who didn’t know what gifted was,” Morgan says. “Had my teachers been better, none of this stuff would have happened.”

Mercifully, Morgan’s story is an anomaly. Most gifted students thrive in the programs designed for them. But her experience exposes the vital role of the teacher in gifted education. Congregation, though essential, is not enough for some of these students. They need educators who possess a holistic understanding of giftedness. In Canada, no specific training is necessary for gifted-education teachers. In the U.S., teachers of the gifted need to have special certification. “Here you just have to be alive,” Frank says. Very few teachers possess a gifted-focused master’s degree like Aldred.

Principals and administrators assign teachers to gifted programs based on interviews and on the teacher’s interest. At Westmount, Frank looks for teachers who display flexibility in their thinking and are intellectually honest. An ideal teacher of the gifted must also be creative and humble. “If you are paralyzed by someone being smarter than you, please do not go into giftedness,” she advises. Above all, Frank says a teacher of the gifted needs to understand that “these students are wired differently.” Gifted teachers “encourage students, in their authentic search for self, to make conscious choices towards the good.”

Empathy is key. For this reason, Frank believes the best teachers of the gifted are gifted themselves. She understands the suggestion may rankle some, but no one understands the nuances of giftedness better than those who have endured them first hand. Thankfully, gifted education tends to self-select for gifted teachers anyway. Many of those who apply to teach gifted programs, Frank says, display the same exceptional traits their potential students do.

Frank and Jennifer Aldred both admit that there is little gifted students can learn from their teachers, at least intellectually, that they cannot learn on their own. These exceptional kids can speed through a year's worth of school board curriculum in a matter of hours. "I will never know more than they do," Aldred says. They need teachers and programs that focus not on the magnificence of their brains, but on the fragility of their hearts. "Unless their heart is intact, no learning can happen," Aldred says. She quotes from Galway Kinnell's "Saint Francis and the Sow," a poem she teaches her literature students:

...sometimes it is necessary

to reteach a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on its brow  
of the flower  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely

"I can't teach them anything," Aldred says. "But I can reteach them their loveliness."