

Speech for Human Rights Commission

Ladies and gentlemen, Commission members, fellow presenters,

First of all, I would like to sincerely thank the Commission for the invitation to speak at this meeting. I consider it a privilege and an honour to have this opportunity to speak about the issue of disabilities within the education system. Hopefully, by this process, awareness can be raised, and barriers of discrimination can be broken down for the benefit for all of the children and adults within the system.

The disabling condition that I have come to speak to you about is the exceptionality referred to as intellectual giftedness.

What? Some of you may be thinking, How on earth is giftedness a disability? Let me explain. If I had to sum up the experience of a gifted child in one phrase it would be “out of sync”. Because of the asynchronous development of gifted children their physical, intellectual, emotional and social levels of development are all over the map. Such a child at 6 years old might have the physical development of a 5.5 year old, the intellectual development of a 9 year old, the emotional development of an 8 year old and the social development of a 10 year old. Unfortunately, another gifted 6 year old may have a very different combination of “ages” as characteristic of their development. So the child is out of synch with their age mates, gifted peers, the expectations of the adults in their lives, and perhaps even with their own bodies! Is this an advantage in a school setting? No. Can this combination of characteristics lead to difficulties with not only learning but also with interpersonal interactions and development of a positive self-image? Definitely-yes! Can these difficulties reach a disabling level of severity? If the proper modifications are not offered to the child--absolutely.

I will briefly touch upon the issues as they relate to gifted students following the headings utilized in the Human Rights Commission’s report.

Access to education

Gifted students entering the school system for the first time at age 4 or 5 are typically capable, intellectually, of working at the level of a Grade 1 to 2 student. Unfortunately, there is no Ministry of Education policy that allows for a child to either enter school early or enter at the Grade level at which they are functioning. Every child enters school with his/her agemates. Period. It isn’t until significant difficulties are encountered that the appropriate placement for the child is even discussed, and even then, there is no consistency in offering the gifted child access to the level or type of education needed to enable the child to reach his/her full potential.

Access problems don’t end there (in junior kindergarten). There is no portability of gifted program placement from one region of the province to another, or even from one school to another within the same school board. Despite provisions of regulation 181/98 that state that specialized programs and services will be offered to every

exceptional student who needs them, there are NO gifted programs in place prior to Grade 4 for the vast majority of school boards in this province, no secondary programs in place in several boards and even in those boards offering a range of services from Grade 1 to Grade 12, waiting lists are pervasive and the situation is worsening instead of improving.

Disability and other forms of discrimination

Gifted students are of every age, race, ethnic origin and socio-economic status. They are of either gender and they may have other co-existing conditions or disabilities. I have already touched on age discrimination by mentioning that most children are not screened for giftedness until age 8 (if at all) and that secondary students (aged 13 to 18) are not offered the same level of programs and services as elementary students. Access to secondary courses is not normally offered until age 13, and to post-secondary education until age 16. These restrictions exist even when the student is intellectually ready and has fulfilled the prerequisites at a younger age.

There are no statistics in Canada on the racial or ethnic make-up of children in gifted programs. American studies and statistics show very clearly that children of African and Hispanic origin and children from lower socio-economic groups are under-represented among children chosen to take part in gifted programs. We also know that many of the commonly used assessment instruments for screening for giftedness contain cultural and linguistic biases that render high scoring difficult for a child from a different cultural background or for whom English is a second language. In fact, the Ministry of Education, in its own document “Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation 1993” on page 15 makes reference to the fallibility of standardized testing in these students. Nevertheless, the situation remains that school boards in Ontario depend heavily on numerical cut-offs for the identification of giftedness. These cut-offs impose an unfair barrier to these students, resulting in a denial of specialized services to them.

Gender bias also appears to be alive and well within the education system as it applies to gifted students with a disproportionately high number of males being identified.

Co-existing disabilities such as Asperger’s, learning disabilities, ADHD and the full range of physical disabilities can and do co-exist with giftedness. Unfortunately, with the current funding mechanisms of the education system, there are ISA amounts that can be obtained for some of these conditions but no ISA dollars for students who are gifted only. Therefore the priority for assessment is on proving “fundable” disability and assessment for giftedness is done last if at all.

Negative attitudes and stereotypes

If you look at the anecdotes that form part of the submission, you will see that in every case there were false beliefs on the part of teachers, principals or fellow students that the child in question either a) couldn't possibly be gifted or b) couldn't possibly require any kind of change to his/her learning environment to accommodate giftedness. Almost as pervasive is the negative attitude that gifted children don't "deserve" any special consideration at all because giving it would detract somehow from the consideration given to "needier" children. What are the best practices for reducing stereotypes? Training of teachers to recognize signs of giftedness and respect those characteristics as an integral part of the child's psychological make-up would certainly help. Training of all school and board staff with regards to the equal rights of all exceptional pupils to be appropriately identified, placed and served without the payment of extra fees (and \$500 to \$1000 for an outside assessment is a user fee if ever there was one), and within a fair and reasonable time frame would remove a huge stumbling block. A third way to decrease negative stereotypes is via education of other children about giftedness. There are many examples among fictional characters and in real-life of gifted youngsters (Lisa Simpson springs to mind) that could be mentioned and discussed in the classroom. This would lead to a more positive view of gifted individuals in society as a whole.

Labelling

What can I say? The only way to obtain programs and services within the school setting is to accept the label of gifted. It has already been mentioned that other labels can co-exist with this one, and that they often take precedence over the gifted label for financial reasons. The Commission itself is cognizant of the fact that labels limit understanding and consideration of the whole child. Within the current structure they are unavoidable.

Appropriate Accommodation and Accommodation Process

Placement of a gifted student in a regular class in which he/she is the only such pupil will serve to paradoxically isolate them while integrating them. This is because appropriate accommodations require that the student's coursework will be different from that of his/her classmates. If the child is the only one doing the modified coursework this will be blatantly obvious to both the child and the classmates. My own son told a friend once "Do you know what they do to me in school? They isolate me!" He was referring to the fact that he was placed in a regular class but was the only child put at a desk in the back of the room with his different textbook and workbook and told to do his work quietly while the others did something else. Appropriate accommodation means having the same opportunities as the rest of the students and that includes the opportunity to work in a group, to take part in a class discussion, and be assisted by the teacher during

class time. Having those opportunities for a gifted child may mean being placed in a congregated class. In this case by being in a special class the child is more successfully integrated with his peers. The accommodation process must never be a one-size-fits-all or sort-by-label-only proposition.

Roles and responsibilities

Parents: their role is to advocate on behalf of their minor child, and their responsibility is to become (or remain) well-informed on the needs of their child, work with their child, educators, and government organizations to optimize conditions for their child, teaching him/her to take over the advocacy role at 16.

Students: their role is to be themselves and their responsibility is to allow the other stakeholders to help them to be the best version of themselves they can be
Educators: their role is to strive for the best education for each child, and their responsibility is to become or remain well-informed with regards to the abilities and disabilities of all of their students, to advocate for their students, to work with the child, parents and government organizations to improve learning outcomes for their students.
Experts: their role and responsibility to provide consultative services to parents, educators and government organizations

Government organizations: their role is to look at the “big picture” and make available the resources both human and monetary to enable each person to reach his/her full potential regardless of ability or disability. There is also a responsibility on the part of the Ministry of Education to actually enforce the regulations that they have in place and make certain that they are applied equally and fairly to all exceptional pupils. The Ministry turns a blind eye to ignored IPRC requests, ridiculously long waiting periods for assessment or admittance to programs, the complete absence of programs and services for certain exceptionalities and the lack of consistency and accountability that exists in this province. They have a responsibility to take corrective action on these matters.

Undue hardship standard

Accommodating a gifted student is not an unduly costly proposal in most cases. In fact, because gifted classes have a maximum size of 25 (which is the same as an average class size) and often contain multi-grade groupings, the incremental cost in terms of teacher salaries is quite small, the major cost is for transportation if the students are quite spread out geographically. Accommodating a gifted student by means of a withdrawal program is a little more costly since salary and travel costs of an itinerant teacher are involved. This cost is, however, spread out over perhaps a hundred or more students.

Accommodating a gifted learner in a regular classroom, if done properly, requires consultative services and professional development training for all teachers with such students in their classes. These costs tend to decrease with time as more and more of the teachers gain knowledge and experience. Every school board should be able to cover these kinds of costs out of their general special education budget. Thus, the question of

undue hardship arises primarily in gifted students with other co-existing conditions. These situations need to be looked at on a case-by-case basis, remembering that NOT dealing with the child's giftedness will impose an "undue hardship" on him or her.

In summary gifted students are disabled because they must form part of a system that is not geared to their needs. They also must endure negative attitudes and stereotypes and can be the object of scorn based on characteristics that are part of who they are and that they cannot consciously control. There is much that can be done to improve the situation within the education system so that gifted students will have equal access to educational opportunities and the chance to "Be all they can be" Thank-you.