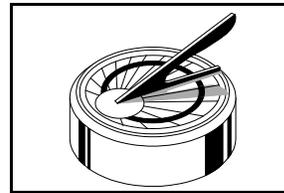


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location, available scholarships, and staff qualifications. Since there are few official requirements for fulfilling academic standards in summer camps and institutes, parents should be particularly cautious about whether they will be worthwhile for their children's educational and social needs. During the last several years, summer enrichment and advanced learning programs have been increasing rapidly across the nation primarily because the number and types of regular school year gifted programs have seriously declined.

Parents should obtain the following information before enrolling their children: (1) Written goals and objectives. Will the program/course provide exposure to new courses and experiences or offer rigorous academic study? (2) Qualifications of the instructors. What previous experiences do they have teaching gifted children particular subjects? (3) Use of challenging books and materials. Do they stimulate children's interest and motivate them to work at progressively more advanced levels? (4) Extensive opportunities for hands on and independent learning. For example, do science courses offer opportunities for lab work and projects? (5) Opportunities for children to interact through teamwork, problem solving and social events. Can children meet/play with each other without direct adult supervision?

The tuition for many summer programs is beyond the means of most families except those at upper income levels. To overcome a new type of educational discrimination that smacks of genuine elitism it is important that summer enrichment programs offer generous scholarships for qualified children in financial need. The Center for Gifted at National-Louis University deals with this problem by having low tuition and numerous scholarships. Joan Smutny, director of this summer program, makes every effort to assure that all children who are qualified and want to attend will be given the opportunity, regardless of financial status. I recommend her book, Underserved Gifted Populations: Responding to Their Needs and Abilities (2003, Hampton Press, Inc.) as an excellent resource for identifying low-income and disadvantaged children for these programs.

The current issue of *GEPQ* contains two very interesting articles: (1) study of students' attitudes concerning the International Baccalaureate Program by Rita Culross, Claire Dawkins and Emily Tarver of Louisiana State University College of Education; and (2) examination of adults' attitudes concerning the impact of gifted programs on their lives by Franny McAleer of Duquesne University. Both of these articles are written by experienced and successful educators of the gifted. Michael Walters discusses the great American essayist and thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

As the end of the school year approaches, many parents are preparing to enroll their gifted children in special summer programs. The range of programs is great in terms of goals, courses offered, length,

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## **Student Perceptions of the International Baccalaureate Program: A First-Year Perspective**

**By Rita Culross, Professor   Claire Dawkins   Emily Tarver**

**Louisiana State University   College of Education  
Baton Rouge**

### **Background**

Since 1950, the number of families living and working in other countries has grown exponentially. Professional workers employed by global companies may be posted to work sites on other continents as part of their job responsibilities. When those workers bring minor children with them, they seek high quality education that includes emphases on second language learning, global perspectives, critical thinking skills, and tolerance of diverse peoples (Hayden & Thompson, 1995).

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme has arisen in response to the needs of such families and is now offered in more than 70 countries (Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1996). Founded in 1968, the IB strives to offer an education that fosters compassion and understanding of other cultures, that encourages lifelong learning and the acquisition of higher order thinking skills, and that insists on world-class standards of achievement and knowledge-acquisition.

Because of its emphasis on both breadth and depth, its focus on higher order thinking skills, and its high standards, IB has been touted as one possible option for gifted students in the United States (Poelzer, 1994). Research examining the achievement of students in the sciences indicates that students in IB classes outperform their counterparts in regular classes in all areas of science (Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1996). The IB also has been demonstrated to result in advanced placement in college for diploma graduates of the program (Benbow, 1998). Sadly, the IB is underutilized as an option for gifted and talented students in US high schools (Van Tassel-Baska, 1998).

This study was undertaken to examine the perceptions of bright high school students during the first year of its implementation. Although the high school does not have a formal “gifted” program, characteristics of the students participating indicate very high levels of achievement among the target group.

### **Description of the Study**

LSU’s University Laboratory School (hereafter referred to as the “Lab School”) began implementing the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme during the 2001-2002 academic year. IB emphasizes the development of the “whole” person. IB students not only pursue higher level course work in more depth and breadth, but students also participate in a creativity, action, and service component, take a Theory of Knowledge course, and

write an extended essay. The curriculum emphasizes critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and exposure to a wide variety of views within the context of six academic subjects: math, experimental sciences, a primary and a secondary language, arts, and individuals and societies. Students must pass external, criterion-referenced examinations to receive an IB diploma.

Because of the School's emphasis on continuous improvement and because of a relative lack of evaluation data on IB programs as a whole, the Lab School Director asked the researchers to conduct a study, evaluating the first year of the program. After consulting with the Director and the IB faculty, the research team elected to focus on the perceptions of the students of their experience in the first year of the program.

The Lab School is a public school whose students on average consistently exceed the national average on standardized achievement tests. More than 90% of the faculty holds a Master's degree or higher, and student dropout rates are quite low (i.e. <1%).

The initial class of high school students to enroll in IB held junior standing during the 2001-2002 academic year. Students who applied to the IB Diploma Programme participated in an interview, secured teacher recommendations, and had their test scores and grades reviewed by the IB Coordinator before being accepted. Students were required to be performing at or above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile on the school's standardized tests and to have a minimum GPA of 2.75. (In fact, more than 50% of the class achieved at the “proficient” or “advanced” level on state tests in English, math, science, and social studies.) Only two students who applied to the IB Programme were not accepted. Approximately 1/3 of the junior class was accepted into the IB Programme. Of the 25 IB students all but one participated in the study.

### **Methodology**

At the end of the first year of implementation, all students were interviewed by the research team to ascertain their perceptions of the program. Students were asked about the effect of the program on their academic and social life; about the perceptions of teachers, parents, and peers of the IB; about gender differences among students in the program; and about other short-term and long-term effects of the program. Each student participated in an open-ended interview with one of three

research team members. All three interviewers received brief, advance training on interview techniques. The interviews occurred during study hall on school days in the month of May. Interviews took between 20 minutes and one hour, depending on the interviewee's length of responses. The interviews were tape-recorded and were transcribed by a fourth team member for later scoring. Two team members who had not participated in the interviews then scored each interview. Multiple scorers were employed to ensure consistency across both scorers and interviews. Categories of responses for each question were generated and tallied, providing both general trends and trends by gender.

### **Results**

Responses to individual questions are given below, followed by a more general summary of results. Because some students did not respond to all questions and because some students provided multiple responses to individual questions, total responses do not sum to 24.

#### **Question #1: Why did you decide to enroll in IB?**

Nearly all the students (23) saw participation in IB as an aid in later college enrollment, either as better preparation for college or as an advantage in the admissions/scholarship application process, particularly at selective schools. More than half of the students (14) responded "to challenge self" or "to be challenged" as a major reason for enrollment. Six students cited parental desire as a factor.

#### **Question #2: From your experience how is IB different from the typical classroom setting?**

Ten students saw IB as providing an environment more conducive to learning. Students mentioned fewer behavior problems, a lack of "slackers," and fewer distractions as characteristic of IB classes. IB students see their fellow IB students as wanting to learn. Multiple students also cited more one-on-one interaction with the teacher, smaller class sizes, and more work as significant differences between IB classes and regular classes.

#### **Question #3: Describe your study habits in IB. How much do you study? How do you study? Have your study habits changed since enrolling in IB?**

Students described a great variety of study habits from reading over homework to listening in class and then reviewing notes, to studying farther in advance of tests, to cramming. No one strategy dominated the answers, although multiple students discussed their problems with procrastination. Although groups were mentioned as a study strategy, most (18) students preferred to study alone. Girls were more likely to consider study groups than boys, but still preferred solitary study as a primary technique. The number of hours studied per night varied from 0 to 5 hours with 2-3 hours per night being the norm. Most

students noted a positive change in their study habits since enrolling in IB, citing better time management, better planning, less procrastination, and better organizational and listening skills.

#### **Question #4: How has IB impacted your life, both academically and socially?**

Although students cited lower grades as the number one change academically, the number of students (4) giving this response was still low. At least two students each cited "more stressed," "made my writing better," "work harder," "learning more," and "more challenging" as the biggest changes academically. Responses to the impact on academics varied widely on this question, but individual responses largely reflected positive changes.

Although 14 students said that IB had "no effect" or "not much effect" on their social life, multiple students described some tension between IB and non-IB students. Some IB students feel isolated from non-IB students.

#### **Question #5: What is the overall view of the IB program from the perspective of other students?**

Half of the students described a rift between IB and non-IB students over the perceived privileges that IB students receive. Although five students characterized the interactions as "playful teasing," other students perceived such interactions as hurtful.

#### **Question #6: What role did other students have in your decision to enroll in the program? What role did your parents play? What role did your teachers play?**

Half the students said friends were a positive influence in IB participation, either because friends also chose to be in IB and/or because the students did not want to be separated from their friends.

Half of the students said their parents encouraged their enrollment in IB and were supportive of their participation. Two students reported that their parents were opposed to their participation, and two students said one parent was supportive and one parent was not.

A third of the students (8) said teachers had encouraged them to enroll in IB. A fourth of the students (6) said the teachers had no influence on their decision to enroll, while only one student felt the faculty discouraged his/her participation.

#### **Question #7: Are your friends enrolled in IB? How does that influence your performance and/or attitudes about the program?**

Two thirds of the students (16) reported that "some" or "most" of their friends were also in IB classes. IB students felt that their friends encouraged them to do better, that they worked harder because they competed with their friends, that they studied with

their friends, and that having friends in the program provided a built-in support system.

**Question #8: Does the IB program contribute to prestige for boys? How? Does it contribute to prestige for girls? How?**

More than half of the students (15) felt that IB did not contribute to increased prestige for either girls or boys. Fewer boys than girls are enrolled in the program, but the students do not perceive that the effects are different on boys than girls.

**Question #9: What view do you think teachers have about the IB program?**

A third of the students (8) believe teachers perceive the program as positive and are supportive of it. The students recognize that teaching IB classes puts pressure on the teachers to learn new teaching techniques and requires more work, particularly in preparing for class. A small number of students feel non-IB teachers influence students to think negatively about IB. Overall, IB students see IB teachers as excited about their work, interested in teaching students who want to learn, and enjoying their teaching assignment.

**Question #10: Have your teachers' expectations/opinions of you changed since you started IB classes?**

More than half the IB students (14) believe that teachers' expectations of them are higher than before. Work is harder, more effort is required, and grading standards have increased. This is balanced, according to some students, by teachers who seem more understanding, and who "see you as a person rather than as a student."

**Question #11: What are your parents' perceptions of IB and its influence on you?**

Parents appear to be evenly split in terms of their perceptions of IB. Parents who view the program as positive see the program as worthwhile and are supportive of it. These parents think IB is a real opportunity that is challenging their child and helping him/her grow as a student. Parents who have negative views of the program feel it is too stressful and that the school and teachers were not prepared to implement the program.

**Question #12: What do you feel are your greatest strengths and assets? Does IB cultivate those talents? Why or why not?**

A fourth of the students (6) see writing as their greatest strength. A third of the students (8) cited math. Three students each chose the sciences or history, while two students each chose foreign languages or sports. Those students who cited writing as their strength felt IB did a good job of cultivating that strength. IB requires a lot of writing and emphasizes organizing and structuring one's thoughts. Students who cited math and the sciences were equally divided on whether IB strengthened those

areas. Some who cited math as a strength did not feel IB math was significantly different from regular math classes.

**Question #13: What do you feel are your greatest weaknesses? Has the IB program helped you to overcome these weaknesses? Why or why not?**

The number one weakness cited by students was procrastination. Students agreed that IB helped them with time management and organization. A fourth of the students listed writing and English as their major weakness. All but one of those students felt IB improved their writing skills by requiring them to do more writing. They also felt the teachers were very good in helping them with their writing problems.

**Question #14: Do you feel that you are encouraged and challenged to become a leader by the IB program? Why or why not?**

Students were equally divided on whether IB encouraged them to be a leader. Among those students who did feel encouraged to be leaders, CAS (Creativity, Action Service Program) was cited as an important reason. Students who disagreed felt IB emphasized academics more than leadership, attracted students who were already leaders, or focused on individual thought over group goals.

**Question #15: Do you feel that you are living up to your potential? How does IB help or hinder you in living up to your potential?**

Eleven of the students felt they were living up to their potential while eight or one-third of the students said they were not. The remainder were unsure. Those who felt they were living up to their potential felt IB helped them by challenging them, encouraging creative thinking, requiring them to do more, and improving their time management and study habits. Those who felt they were not living up to their potential did not see IB as hindering them. Most felt it was their own fault that they were not taking advantage of the opportunities in the program.

**Question #16: What are your plans after completing IB? How does IB fit into your long-term goals?**

All of the students planned to go to college after completing IB. Many seek admission to very selective institutions such as the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Vanderbilt University, Tulane University, the University of Texas, the University of Virginia, Duke University, New York University, LSU, Boston University, and the University of Georgia. Intended majors of the students include pre-medicine, theater, journalism, English literature, law and government, art, and education.

Students perceive that IB will help them get into a better college, receive advanced placement, and make them more competitive for scholarships. Students also perceive that IB will make them

a better student, with greater knowledge, improved writing skills, and more effective organizational and time management skills.

**Question #17: Comment on the CAS and extended essay components of the program.**

More than half (13) see the CAS requirement as helpful. Students felt CAS was enjoyable, and they liked giving back to the community. They felt CAS forced them to be more well rounded and would look good on college applications. Those who disagreed cited one or more aspects of the requirement as disagreeable. Those who dislike sports did not like the activity portion; those who disliked the service requirement objected most of all to "writing it up"; others felt the time requirement was unreasonable.

Ten of the 24 students found the extended essay beneficial. Time, again, was cited as the biggest drawback to the essay. Other students felt there was already enough writing in the program. Students felt initially overwhelmed by both requirements and procrastination resulted for some students.

**Question #18: Rate IB on a scale from 1 to 10 in terms of challenging.**

Three-fourths of the students (18) rated IB as an 8 or 9. Those students perceived IB to be challenging but not impossible. Three students rated IB a 7, and 3 students rated it a 10. No student perceived IB to be lacking in challenge.

**Question #19: If you could make IB better, how would you change it?**

More than one student gave the following as suggested improvements in the IB program:

- a. Have more experienced, better-trained teachers. (5)
- b. Provide more preparation in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. (4)
- c. Spread out the workload over time and courses. Too many assignments in different classes are due at the same time. (3)
- d. Increase communication among IB teachers. (2)

**Question #20: Please add any other comments you would like to make about the IB program.**

More than one student made the following suggestions.

- a. IB is a challenge but worth it. (2)
- b. IB is a good program overall, but I wish we didn't stand out as much. (2)

**Summary of results:**

Students who chose to participate in IB did so to gain an

advantage in the college admissions process, particularly at selective institutions, and to better prepare themselves for college study. IB students see IB classes as providing a more conducive learning environment that broadens their horizons, increases their breadth and depth of knowledge, and improves their writing skills and their study habits. The program is perceived to be quite challenging, but not overwhelming. Effects on students' social lives are perceived to be minimal. Friends had a positive influence on enrollment in IB, even more than parents and teachers. Wanting to be with friends, as well as drawing from friends for support, were reasons for choosing IB. There appear to be few, if any differences in the perceptions of male and female students about the program. IB students perceive that teachers' expectations of them have increased since entering the program. With respect to their parents' views of IB, there is a mixed perception, with about half supportive and about half having reservations about the program. IB students also have a mixed perception about whether the program encourages leadership. Most see the CAS and essay requirements as beneficial, although initially overwhelming. The biggest identified area of concern is the interaction between IB and non-IB students. From the students' perspective the program could be improved by mending the rift between the two groups of students, providing more preparation in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, spreading the workload over time and courses, increasing communication among IB teachers, and providing better trained teachers.

**Cautions and Recommendations**

The results of this study reflect the perceptions of the students in the initial year of the program. Perceptions are always just that, perceptions, and more specifically, the perceptions of one constituency involved with the program. These perceptions should be coupled not only with those of the faculty, parents and other constituencies but also with objective test data. Moreover, the results reflect the view of students in the first year of the program and may or may not be shared by future students, particularly as changes in the program occur.

Based on this somewhat limited data, schools implementing IB might want to consider incorporating the following recommendations:

1. In a school setting where there will be both IB and non-IB students, teachers and program administrators should look for ways to blend the two groups of students. Given IB's emphasis on intercultural understanding and critical thinking, it is important to cultivate an atmosphere of respect and collaboration.
2. Be watchful of the perceived stress of some students in the program. While a minority of the students may perceive the program as stressful, schools might consider offering stress management workshops or sessions with the guidance counselor for those students who do feel overwhelmed.

3. Increase parental support through better communication about program goals and expectations.
4. Provide additional professional development opportunities for faculty teaching IB classes. Stimulate communication among IB teachers and between IB teachers and non-IB teachers.
5. Prepare students in advance for the IB diploma program by clarifying program expectations and goals and by modifying curricula in the years prior to entrance.

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## Learning that Lasts a Lifetime: Former Students Tell Us What Works!

By Franny Forrest McAleer Author, Teacher, Instructor  
Duquesne University Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Have you ever heard one of your students say – “You are the best teacher!” “Your class is the best!” If so, why? Or think about your own “favorite” teacher or “best” class. Why does each hold that honor? Stories from former students have fascinated me throughout my career. When students return to talk with me or I go to their weddings or other special events, I ask, “What do you remember from your days in school?” “What experiences were most valuable?” “Which teachers made a difference?” “Which classes and skills do you remember?” “Which lessons helped to shape your life?” “Who embraced your passion?” This article is based on my passion for teaching and learning and interest in the impact that certain teachers and learning experiences have on students, learning that lasts a lifetime. They reiterate the **power of the process**.

There are two significant experiences from which this article takes root. The first was in June of 1985. The phone rang and it was Joan, the parent of a former student. She asked if I had a copy of a seven minute silent movie reminiscent of the 1890’s in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her daughter, Lisa, had helped write

and produce this movie as a sixth grade enrichment project extending the regular social studies and language arts curriculum. I ran to check, and sure enough I found it, The Grievous Grievous of Gertrude Goodbody! But why did she want a copy of this after so many years? Lisa was graduating from UCLA with her master’s degree and attributes her success to this particular enrichment project; one thought of, designed, developed, produced, and assessed by her sixth grade gifted classmates. At the age of 23 Lisa believed that the gifted program challenged her in many ways and this particular project, The Grievous Grievous of Gertrude Goodbody, was the reason she received the National Science Endowment Award for her research into obesity, discovering the possible connection between the endocrine system and weight gain when smokers stop smoking. Her work earned a fellowship to Cornell University so that she could continue her research and work towards her medical degree. Since then she completed her degree and is a doctor at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Because of my curiosity about the significance of that

enrichment project, I met with Lisa and she wrote the following to explain the importance of creativity and pursuing what you love:

“How many school children are excused from regular classes in order to be tied to a railroad track? To produce and market products for Kids Unlimited, our student created and operated a company? To compare products in a bakery shop, wholesale and retail? To explore the snow woods looking for tracks and hypothesizing and brainstorming from what you find? Not many! Yet how many children pursue masters, doctoral and medical degrees? Probably just a few! But what correlation can be drawn between these? They both nurture the joy and excitement of learning.

“My most memorable years of school were during my participation in the gifted program working on enrichment activities. All of them were fun, challenging and different. I was given the freedom to discover and ask WHY! Some classmates thought that being an entrepreneur, producing a movie, building a futuristic city, and acting as president of a company were just fun. The objectives were not always apparent, which made them all the more exciting, but they were valuable lessons to be learned.

“Through these experiences I discovered Spain by experiencing its language, dances and food. The 1890s came alive by acting in a student-created movie, listening to our barbershop and brass quartets, writing a news report about the Oklahoma Sooners, creating a new song “Deep in the Heart of Pittsburgh,” and having a 1890’s picnic in the park. Teamwork, finance, and democracy were the objectives achieved by selling stock in our start up company, electing directors, making products to sell, and showing a net profit. And we did it with a fifty per cent (50%) dividend paid to our investors. Economics in action!

“Instead of reading, hearing or watching, I was doing! I believe to this day that my most meaningful experiences are those in which I am an active participant. From these, I realize that I had the potential to use my mind to create something of importance and value.” (Lisa Jias, 1993 in “Challenging Students Through Extension and Exceptional Learning,” Journal for Quality Outcomes Driven Education, McAleer, 17-19.) In June of 2000 the second significant moment occurred when I entered Duquesne University to teach the graduate course, Teaching Gifted and Talented Students. There in the front row was Melissa Kirsch Munnell. She had been identified as a gifted student in the late 1970s and was a student of mine for five years in elementary school. Now she was in my graduate course working towards her Master’s degree in Special Education. It had been twenty years since she had been in the elementary gifted program. Melissa was married, a teacher, older, more mature, but had that same twinkle in her eye, passion for learning, intensity, and an endless stream of questions. Curious! Energetic! Asking WHY? Just like she had done twenty years before! It was exhilarating! Familiar! Boundary breaking!

Over the years I have enjoyed hearing former students return to tell me what they remembered about school and particularly my classroom. So I was enthusiastic about her proposal to create a final project that would reveal what her former classmates in the elementary gifted program remembered as being significant in their lives. On the last day of class, Melissa presented research which is the heart of this article (Melissa Kirsch Munnell, 2000). Data from articles written in the past as well as new responses have been added as I continue to investigate what learning lasts for a lifetime in the lives and careers of our students.

The importance of this topic was magnified in November of 2001 when a keynote by Dr. Sally Reis presented success stories of her former elementary gifted students. After attending a wedding of one of her former students, Dr. Joseph Renzulli remarked about the enthusiasm of the students as they reminisced about their elementary gifted program and the many ways in which these students had achieved in areas of their interests after they had graduated from college and graduate school. Sally continued by presenting the stories of several students and the lifelong impact of Triad Level III investigations. Dr. Reis encouraged teachers to investigate the impact of gifted programs on students nationwide (Reis, 2001).

Today, with this research in mind I reiterate a statement I had written in 1993 – “School experiences that make a difference in our students’ futures are the PROCESS experiences, the ‘doing’ activities, the lessons in which our students put themselves into the content and use knowledge in a significant, creative, and personal way.” (“Challenging Students through Extension and Exceptional Learning,” Journal for Quality Outcomes Driven Education, McAleer, 18.)

Many of the experiences and activities impacting these students’ lives and careers are initiated and expanded upon as students and teachers create new ideas together. Teachers act as facilitators of learning, “guides on the side.” Risk taking and experimentation are encouraged. Imagination, inquiry and possibilities are stressed, while self-esteem is nourished. “Success breeds success” clearly is a guiding belief. As students learn skills, understandings, and concepts, they are challenged to use, apply, and transform them to a meaningful level, one that would last a life time. The opposite occurs when students are asked to remember information and take a test to determine the quantity of ideas they remember. In these types of experiences motivation and involvement are diminished significantly. Boredom sets in; creativity and independence are discouraged and sometimes extinguished.

This powerful contrast in learning from routine tasks that produce boredom to higher level process tasks that elicit independence and autonomy is expressed by Lauren. Her initial years in school were riddled with routine and “simple” learning. Then the transformation began. In fourth grade an opportunity to explore her creativity, the Invention Convention started her metamorphosis.

Lauren's reflections about her experiences in "regular" and "gifted" classrooms are heard over and over by parents and educators. "If I were to speak about my experience in the gifted program, I think the main theme that comes to mind is: Eureka! Unique! Starting in kindergarten my mom would get calls from my teachers, "Why does Lauren take so long to do her work? Why doesn't she see the simple answer? Why does she ask so many more questions than the other children? The directions are clear. Why does Lauren make funny noises when she's thinking? Why can't she stay on task? Why is she so dramatic?" The teachers' stance was that I was oversensitive, hyperactive, and over-analytical. Why wasn't I the same as everyone else? It was too much work on their parts for me to be different. Why couldn't I just get with the program?" Does that sound familiar?"

In fourth grade an enrichment option began to change Lauren's perception about herself and learning, then her life: "In 4th grade I finally got with their program, but I wonder what I lost in doing that, in being contained, giving in to routine. At some point I learned of an interesting opportunity to use my creativity: the Invention Convention. I would come up with the craziest ideas possible and invent products that no one else had ever dreamed of, and I got to share my ideas with others. High school students would judge our inventions, but my favorite part of the convention was the award ceremony at the end, where this one teacher would tell us how great it was that we were all different, that we were so uniquely creative. Some years I won a prize, but every year I loved that Invention Convention. Through this same teacher I found a program called Odyssey of the Mind and was further rewarded for my unique creativity. Then in high school I was lucky enough to get to know this same creative teacher just a little better through weekly sessions for the gifted students in the ninth grade. Unlike all the other teachers I'd ever had she yelled at me for being quiet and polite! She said she wanted to hear my thoughts. They didn't have to be well thought out and typed; I could just shout them out. She taught us to understand the differences in our personalities and thought processes, to appreciate, to value them. She said her one goal was to cultivate analytical thinkers."

In summary, Lauren captures the essence of the responses of all the former students quoted in this article. "All my life people told me to stop over thinking things, to stop being so different, and this one teacher restored my faith in the boundless possibilities that come out of uninhibited creativity. Every time I do or say something that is different from everyone else, I picture this teacher there with me saying, 'Eureka!'"

What then do former students encourage teachers to do in our classrooms to prepare them for life, their careers, and success? Seven basic factors stand out that students tell us are significant in bridging the gap between school and their lives and careers –

1. Exploration of Interests or Passions
2. Knowledge and Use of Thinking Processes
3. Development of the Skills of Collaboration and

Teamwork

4. Development of Self-Confidence
5. Creation of Positive Self-Esteem
6. Encouragement of Curiosity
7. Development of Leadership Skills

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Let's look at what former students say (N=8) about the life-long impact of each of these factors.

### 1. Exploration of Interests and Passions –

"Exploring my interests not only helped me to weed out areas that I had little interest in early on, but started me thinking about future interest, career paths long before my peers. My thoughts of going to medical school were first planted there."

"To find my true being!"

"Enthusiasm for and love of learning"

"I was encouraged to explore my passion and change the curriculum to explore it fully. I surprised myself with the complexity, intensity, and depth of my work when I created the Human Automobile, combining fourth grade health and my love for cars."

"I feel really strongly about my experiences in the gifted program during the elementary years. For once, I wasn't swimming upstream in a boring, repetitive styled classroom. It was like so many of us could bloom by being free to really think without much of the prescribed boundaries."

"Time researching and creating in biology was unlimited. I was able and encouraged to continue my science experiment from year to year through middle school, high school and college. This enabled me to pursue my passion and work in-depth to make a significant contribution to this field."

### 2. Knowledge and Use of Thinking Processes to Create Independent Thinkers –

for example, Bloom's Hierarchy, Six Thinking Hats®, Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, Independent Studies, Mentorships, Apprenticeships, Problem Solving Models, Decision Making Ten Systems, Implications Wheels, Futures Wheels, Personality and Learning Profiles, Creative Problem Solving, Spontaneous Thinking Strategies, Content + Process + Product Based Learning Objectives, SCAMPER, ....

"Independence! Autonomy!"

"Imagination, creative and critical thinking, flexibility, open-minded...."

"Our curriculum was a 'paradigm shift' from what I had been used to."

“The most important skills imparted to me from this setting were critical thinking ones.”

“... thinking beyond the status quo.”

“Not once did anyone tell me that I was ‘wrong’ or ‘doing it the wrong way.’ I guess I’ve lived my life in accordance to those phrases.”

“The gifted program provided me with positive/increased opportunities with the outside world and has enabled me to succeed as a person, husband, and a father.”

“To create at unstoppable rates”

“I ponder the idea that there are always two sides to every story.”

“To think for myself, to ask the question that I still ask: ‘WHY?’”

“Learning was fun and exciting, and didn’t always have to involve drill and practice and traditional ‘tests’ and ‘quizzes.’”

“I learned that my ideas were not odd or unimportant.”

“I can remember learning that experimenting wasn’t about producing right or wrong results. Any result, good or bad was informative. It was about the experience. One of my particular projects focused on creating a unique recipe and as simple as that sounds, the process allowed me to go from gathering the goods and information to assessing positive, negative features, and then altering it until I had created the best result. It was about the process – all of the types of thinking that go into it.”

“Gifted education might be one place where the focus is less on testing for achievement and more on other measures of success. Students are able to create their own goals and their success will not be measured by a simple score out of a hundred.”

“My CFO just asked me to find a way to accurately project and account for rebates our company will receive from one of our manufacturers. It is of high importance since the rebating will give the company a competitive advantage only if we are able to create a unique system for the whole process. My response reflects what I learned in the elementary gifted program, “Eureka!” It has been approximately 20 years since I created the “BACK-UP BUDDY” during our invention unit, but I live my life through shades of gray, in the realm of creativity.”

“What I feel was primary was the focus on ‘Natural Creativity’ – I learned to apply creative thought fundamentally – meaning that we were constantly presented with opportunity and challenge to openly and purely approach something... anything. There were no scripts and so the “learning” developed naturally and as a result of the creative and curious mind. I feel several of our projects, be they IEPs, selected topics, or co-operative

projects, all shared this primary element. We learned to explore, to think critically and uniquely simply by having the hands-on opportunity to come to our own conclusions.”

“...teach them to fish and they will eat for a lifetime...” Learning to Learn, that’s what will last a lifetime. We learned to learn. The program allowed us to think fully, and in hindsight, to realize what we had done.”

“Did I mention that I wish I could go back to my gifted classroom for a few months? Even now, as an adult, I don’t think the critical concepts would be any less relevant or any less effective. In fact, it would be a refreshing and rut-breaking gift to my mind. Thinking should never get stale!”

“The gifted program was the most influential learning experience of my entire life. I learned how to think creatively, think outside of the box, to think differently ...things that make me the unique person I am now. It helped me develop into a free thinker and be open minded to different types of ideas.”

### **3. Development of Skills of Collaboration and Teamwork –**

“Creating our film, *The Return of Rip Van Myrtle*, was the pinnacle. It was collaborative and challenging and above all, it was truly ours. There was no script handed down. The ideas were developed by the collective and critical thinking of all of us. It was assessed and refined and the result was a unique thing.”

“Collaborative learning was much more relaxed and, usually, more fruitful. We developed skills of cooperation and teamwork.”

“Collaboration with intellectual peers gave me a better understanding of cooperation, teamwork, and leadership at a much higher level.”

“I learned that my ideas were not odd or unimportant. I was not looked down on because I thought differently and spoke my mind about topics or readings.”

“I am so glad that I got the opportunity in the gifted program to compete in *Odyssey of the Mind (OM)*, an international competition focusing on creative problem solving and teamwork... OM is the best competition in which I participated. OM takes creativity, brainstorming, teamwork, decision making and problem solving to a new level. Why? Because you have to do it with a team! I learned how to solve difficult problems that need creativity. With my team I learned to listen and not jump to a solution quickly. All I heard in college was ‘You have to be a good team player!’ ‘You have to be able to learn to play different roles on a team.’ ‘Employers look for team players and leaders.’ Well, the future looks great for George, Tony, Ben, Brad, Glen and me because from fifth until our senior year, we honed those skills by working together on OM for months at a time and are proud to have achieved the level of World Finalists and World Rantra Fusca Outstanding Creativity winners.”

"I remember working with a group of students to create, *The Grievous Grieves of Gertrude Goodbody*. We were a team excited to study the period in history between 1890 and 1899, a period of change and innovation in Pittsburgh. We were given the opportunity to produce any kind of product to show what we were learning related to the theme. We brainstormed key ideas about Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: the geography of the area; the lives and contributions of the people who imagined and built Pittsburgh, such as Carnegie, Mellon, and Frick; the arts and music of the time; entertainment; family life; ethnic cultures, to name the main topics. We worked together and wrote a play using these ideas, *The Grievous Grieves of Gertrude Goodbody*, a silent movie set during this decade in the town of trolleys. Gertrude depicted a young girl's struggle with the villainous landlord and a mother who was unable to support her family. When her rent went unpaid, Gertrude was taken from her mother as payment, tied to the trolley tracks by the villain, and as the trolley drew dangerously closer, the Pittsburgh Hero came to her rescue, untied Gertrude, took care of the villain, and everyone lived happily ever after. The seven minute silent movie was written, created, produced and directed by the students with the help of an old Super 8 movie camera. Everything was done by us, not with the purpose of theatrical perfection, but with emphasis on imagination, creativity and spirit of cooperation and collaboration."

"I remember two things that I did in school, and both were in the gifted support class. One was the design and construction of the Urban Rapid Transit, a complete transportation system used in our visionary utopia, the 'City of the Future.' The other was writing, filming, acting in and directing *The Grievous Grieves of Gertrude Goodbody*.

#### **4. Development of Self-Confidence –**

"The belief that my ideas and work have value..."

"I felt more open about trying-out for things that interested me, but for which I had no prior knowledge or skill. There are many positions that I filled because no one else had tried-out or asked about them. The infectious enthusiasm demonstrated by my gifted support teacher and the rest of my cohorts gave me confidence in myself in interview situations and the like that I do not feel would have been present, if my education had been purely traditional. Over the past three years, I have had about a dozen interviews with major teaching hospital department chairpersons that were a breeze because I felt 'on similar grounds' with these other 'smart' folk."

"Confidence in myself and the fact that my creative ideas would be accepted and even praised at a very early age..."

"In elementary school I had my first truly exhilarating experience when I discovered that I could create; create ideas that were worthwhile, important, and valuable to me and others. It gave me the self-confidence that my ideas were significant and important."

#### **5. Creation of Positive Self-Concept and Self-Esteem –**

"Most of all, I think gifted education made me think better of myself. No longer afraid of being smart, I felt comfortable hanging out with a bunch of other smart children. I developed confidence there that would carry-on into future endeavors. Trying a 'different approach' didn't feel unorthodox. I have recently made two major career changes, and I feel that without a prior early experience of being somewhat adventurous, that this may not have happened."

"The teacher made me love my uniqueness."

"I learned that my ideas were not odd or unimportant. I was not looked down on because I thought differently and spoke my mind about topics or readings."

"Change, inquiry and imagination were stressed, while self-esteem was nurtured."

"I was encouraged to try more complex things and ultimately learned independence."

"I realized that I had the potential to use my mind to create something of importance and value."

#### **6. Encouragement of Curiosity –**

"Gifted education was just plain fun. Whether it was an architectural field trip or starting our own mini-business, gifted education provided me with a welcome break from the standard math, science, English, etc. We were challenged in a manner that was fun and informative. I try to use similar techniques when teaching med students and junior residents."

"I feel really strongly about my experiences in the gifted program during those years. For once, I wasn't swimming upstream in a boring, repetitive styled classroom. It was like so many of us could bloom by being free to really think without much of the prescribed boundaries."

"I could develop learning activities using Bloom's Taxonomy that were imaginative, challenging and released my curiosity!"

#### **7. Development of Leadership Skills –**

"The program stands out in my mind as a start to my creativity, strong 'people' skills, and the intrinsic belief that my ideas and work have value. I do believe that it helped encourage the leadership skills that I have carried throughout my life and my career."

"You showed me how to be alive and joyful and to dare great things. I am opinionated and love to laugh. As a teacher myself, I saw all the pitfalls and difficulties that being so different could bring. But with you as teacher and advocate and mentor, it never occurred to me that there was anything scary or hard about the thing at all. You made me love my uniqueness."

“These days, it seems everyone is always using the phrase ‘think outside the box.’ In fact, during my time spent in advertising in New York, we used it constantly. It was how we won projects; it was what we looked for in hiring; and frankly, it was how I’d gotten promoted. And there is no doubt in my mind that this ability or comfort in approaching situations uniquely was enhanced by so much of what I was able to experience in the gifted program’s testing ground.”

“Instead of reading, hearing or watching, I was doing! I believe to this day that my most meaningful experiences are those in which I am an active participant. From these, I realized that I had the potential to use my mind to create something of importance and value.”

These seven factors provide a checklist for teachers as they develop curricula and strategies to challenge and motivate students in gifted pull out and center programs, and in the regular classroom. They also offer guidelines for parents as they raise their children and communicate with teachers and administrators.

Over and over students tell us what Laura Lorenze emphasized in our interview on December 29, 2002 and in her written assessment of her gifted program experiences -- it is “about the process!” (Lorenze, 2003) Former students from the 1970s tell about the impact of exploring their interests, passions, thinking skills (especially those related to creativity), teamwork, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-concept, curiosity, and leadership skills. The voices of these former students put faces and hearts to the research. What do you teach that will impact your students for a lifetime?

If you would like to share gifted program experiences, please send them to [franny@learnerslink.com](mailto:franny@learnerslink.com). One story a week will be selected to be shared online at [www.learnerslink.com](http://www.learnerslink.com) each week.

With thanks to all of the students who have described their thoughts about their elementary gifted program experiences in this article. Special thanks to Melissa Kirsch Munnell for her interest in gifted programs and for contacting her elementary classmates to research this topic. Her data and presentation at Duquesne University in June of 2001 was exemplary and powerful. Thanks to her for motivating me to continue the search for what is significant learning. Melissa is a special education teacher in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Thank you also to Laura Lorenze, Dr. Jeffrey Wesolowski, and Dr. Lisa Jias for their interest over the years in “Learning that Lasts a Lifetime.”

Franny McAleer is an author of 20 books and 28 articles. She is an international consultant, teacher, Instructor at Duquesne University and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Her customized keynotes and workshops for teachers, parents, and students provide research based, classroom proven strategies that support the No Child Left Behind Act. Workshop topics which Franny presents include:

- 1) Learning That Lasts a Lifetime
- 2) Turn Up the Challenge for Gifted and High Ability Students
- 3) Differentiated Instruction ... One Size Does Not Fit All
- 4) Improve Reading Writing and Speaking Across the Curriculum Using Six Thinking Hats
- 5) Catch Them Thinking—Critically and Creatively
- 6) Be an Inventor

For information about these professional development sessions, visit Franny online at [www.learnerslink.com](http://www.learnerslink.com), write to [franny@learnerslink.com](mailto:franny@learnerslink.com), or call 724-941-4032, 724-413-6001 (cell). Master Trainer, Invent America! International Six Thinking Hats® Trainer.

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## **Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) and the Gifted Education Community**

**By Michael E. Walters**

**Center for the Study of the Humanities in the Schools**

"Among Emerson's major synonyms for soul, in so far as they refer to the individual, were life, energy, sensibility, creativity, love, sentiment, conscience, identity, intellect and genius." William H. Gillman, Foreword, p. 9, Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, New American Library, 1965.

Last year was Emerson's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, which was not celebrated by American society as it should have been. Besides being a seminal thinker in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, he also had an impact upon European philosophy. In a recent telephone discussion with Professor Maurice Friedman, translator and biographer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Austrian-Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, he mentioned how Buber was influenced by Emerson's writings as a college student. Buber defined education as "pointing the way." Emerson wrote in his journal on July 5, 1831: "The things taught in school and college are not in education but the means of education." (p. 46, Selected Writings). Emerson and Buber emphasized that all education must point toward learning-to-learn, and the role of inspiration and mentoring.

One of the elements of Emerson's work that needs to be rediscovered is his linguistic genius. He wrote philosophy and literary criticism in the style of poetic prose. His writing is characterized by precision and a clear style. His sentences contain a sharp wit and keen emotions: "In good writing every word means something." (p. 46, Selected Writings).

Emerson's concept of the role that "genius" has for culture is very relevant to the debate concerning gifted education as being elitist. The lead essay of Representative Men (1850) is about the uses of great men. By men he meant humanity. (The editor of his journal of Transcendentalism, The Dial, was the American feminist writer Margaret Fuller. He was constantly surrounded by and gave encouragement to gifted women.) According to Emerson, the importance of gifted people is that they serve as role models for collective human society. He believed that giftedness was an inspiration for the human condition. Thus, the gifted education community should bring Emerson to the forefront of American educational thought by teaching his ideas and encouraging students to read his books.

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