

Getting Inside Kids' Heads: How to Design Lessons that Foster Positive Social Action

Deborah L. Ruf, PhD ©2008

I was a classroom teacher before I became either a parent or a high intelligence specialist. I had my own set views of how a “good student” should perform and behave in school. I am a highly theoretical, matter-of-fact person by nature who generally considered idealistic people to be a bit on the foolish side. When younger, I was far more likely to make personal changes when they made sense to me rather than because it might make other people feel good. It didn't naturally occur to me that I could or should vary my approach to reach more of my students; but I now know that learning needs, viewpoints and styles vary hugely within a typical classroom. Also, as an older, more experienced educator, I realize the importance of fostering positive social viewpoints and actions in our youth. The main task is to figure out how to reach students—students who bring their sets of values, viewpoints, and styles—to help them understand that what they are learning can benefit themselves and others. For that to be possible, though, what we teach them has to “fit” their own perceptions, interests, and needs.

***Sensitivity and Caring Behaviors among Gifted Students***

Dabrowski suggests that a propensity for advanced moral development comes from a base of particular response patterns within the highly intelligent (1964). A significant aspect of my personal experience, i.e., rearing three highly gifted sons who did not show high degrees of empathy or sympathy toward global issues, led me to consider the possibility that some gifted children and adults are more predisposed to overt “caring” behaviors than others who are equally intelligent. Perhaps high intellectual level is important, but other personal characteristics are necessary for a caring, altruistic, or empathic approach to the needs of others.

Additional experiences contributed to my interest in the topic of personality types among the gifted. During my initial studies of high intelligence, I learned that many people in the field assumed that high intelligence and altruism go hand in hand, that it is part of the moral sensitivity that the gifted share (Dabrowski, 1964; Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1942; Lind, 2000; Lovecky, 1997; Piechowski, 2006; Renzulli, 2002; Silverman, 1993; Terman, 1925; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982). O’Leary (2005) summarizes Silverman’s viewpoint as follows:

Silverman (1993) suggests “the cognitive complexity and certain personality traits of the gifted create unique experiences and awareness that separate them from others. A central feature of the gifted experience is their moral sensitivity, which is essential to the welfare of the entire society.”

***Personality Types: The Meanings of the Letters***

Sixteen type preferences revolve around four dichotomous factors of E/I (extroverted/introverted), S/N (sensing/intuition), F/T (feeling/thinking), and J/P (judging/perceiving). Examinees take a written assessment where they respond to items about which of two scenarios they would prefer. The *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® is for adults and

the *Murphy-Meisgeier Type Indicator for Children®* is for school-aged youngsters. There is a continuum for each dichotomy with a strong to slight preference for one quality or another.

Table 1

Preference	Characteristics	Additional Characteristics
E-Extroversion	Energized by being with people, interacting with others.	Does not mean talkative; an E can be quiet, even shy.
I-Introversion	Gains energy by being alone; down time generally means “alone time.”	Introverts can be talkative and good in groups, but they need “alone time” to recharge.
S-Sensing	Gather information through their five senses; detail-oriented; don’t like theories as much as facts.	Like lists, clear directions, time tables. Often very literal, miss nuance, have difficulty generalizing.
N-Intuition	Use intuition and hunches; analytical and theoretical; see the “big picture” and not as interested in the details.	Like to create their own plan after they understand a situation; bored by routine; comfortable with some uncertainty.
F-Feeling	Feelings matter, are important; like win-win solutions; generous with praise and affirmations.	Sometimes make less than ideal choices in order to please everyone; often hurt when not appreciated; can be quite sensitive to others.
T-Thinking	Practical, direct, expedient. Logic rather than emotion.	Other people’s feelings may be an afterthought; may seem insensitive.
J-Judging	Orderly, organized, predictable.	Feel best when work is done, things are as they should be.
P-Perceiving	Flexible, open-ended, somewhat spontaneous.	Fairly independent, make decisions based on mood, timing, what feels right to them.

***Personality Types and School***

Because so much of the gifted literature talked about this sensitive, caring nature of the gifted, I thought that some parents and teachers might conclude that advanced moral reasoning was an essential concurrent factor within those people who were identified as gifted. The most commonly mentioned personality type found among the gifted was INFP. My own subject pool was self-selected by parents, and I suspected that there is probably something about the INFP gifted students that leads parents to take their children to specialists like me. Just as certain personality types are drawn to specific careers, different summer and academic programs for the gifted simply attract some types more than others and would lead to over-concentrations of these types in some studies.

In the year 2000, I started to administer *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®* to all parent clients and *Murphy-Meisgeier Type Indicator for Children®* to all children six and older. I continued my practice of having parents complete my own form called *Developmental*

*Milestones*, a form which included their description of early milestones, reasons they were seeking my help, how others were reacting to their child, and their goals for their child.

Personality typing has been utilized for years in personal and career counseling situations because it helps people to understand their own motivations and needs compared to those of others with whom they live and work. An excellent paper by Piirto (1998) summarizes personality type studies of gifted children and teachers. She points out that various authors have discovered and interpreted school behavior differences that are correlated with personality type preferences (e.g., Jones and Sherman (1979); Murphy, 1992; Myers and McCaulley, 1985; Myers and Myers, 1980), as well as studies of teacher types and interests (Betskouski and Hoffman, 1981; Piirto, 1998). For example, we know that the majority classroom teacher type preference is ESFJ (Betskouski and Hoffman (1981), while that of talented students is ENFP (Piirto, 1998).

Sak (2004) notes that although gifted adolescents demonstrate all personality types as measured by the MBTI, they tend to prefer certain types more than general high school students do. Researchers (Delbridge-Parker & Robinson, 1989; Gallagher, 1990; Hoehn & Bireley, 1988) reported that about 50% or more of the gifted population is introverted compared to the general population, whose preference for introversion is 25%.

In my own work, patterns emerged and by 2007 I had data from over 350 families with gifted children. The overwhelming majority of children brought to me for evaluation were P-perceiving: 92%. P-perceiving children are less likely to finish their work or stay on task when they find the work to be tedious or uninteresting than are J-Judging students. This certainly causes alarm and concern in both parents and teachers. Girls are more likely to conform, be flexible, and do what they are told to do in school, too, so even when they are highly gifted and P-perceivers, they get into less trouble in school and are brought to specialists less often.

Parent personality type has a great deal to do with gifted child adjustment regardless of the child's type preference. For example, a laid-back, idealistic INFP who has a similarly typed parent is much less likely to end up feeling like a failure than the child whose parent is an SJ type. Sensors are generally rule-and-procedure followers. They can't easily relate to someone who chooses not to do something because it isn't "right" for him. A Sensor parent is uncomfortable with a child who ignores what is normal and accepted behavior, and for such a parent, school performance is the first measure of self worth. FP children seem to wear their hearts on their sleeves, and a parent whose type ends in TJ might see the FP child as weak, stubborn or irrational. If you tell the parents of an uncooperative, unhappy, underperforming, disorganized gifted child that their child has "executive function" disorder, as an example, they find it much easier to deal with a labeled learning disability than with a child who simply doesn't do what he is supposed to do. In reality, it is almost always the school setting that brings out the worst in gifted children, and changing the setting can clear up the "bad" behaviors.

Why, then, do gifted specialists see so many more P-Perceivers and especially FPs? These are the most likely gifted children to find regular school—classrooms that group students by age rather than readiness to learn or intellectual ability—boring, painful, and a waste of time. I ask parents if they've ever used this statement with their child: "In the amount of time you've argued with me about this, you could have finished it." Such a child is almost always a Feeler-

Perceiver. A Thinker-Perceiver is more likely to do a shoddy job but at least get it done. FPs, though, need their parents and teachers to understand them, so they need to have the argument. Thinkers simply dismiss the adults who made the foolish requirements and don't care as much if the adults know why or understand them.

**Table 2**

<b>Characteristics of Thinkers</b>	<b>Characteristics of Feelers</b>
Logical	Decides with heart
Objective	Dislikes conflict
Decides with head	Passionate
Wants truth	Driven by emotion
Rational	Gentle
Impersonal	Easily hurt
Critical	Empathetic
Thick-skinned	Caring of others
Firm with people	Warm
Driven by thought	

Thinking people are objective and make decisions based on facts. They are ruled by their head instead of their heart. Thinking people judge situations and others based on logic.

Feeling people are subjective and make decisions based on principles and values. They are ruled by their heart instead of their head. Feeling people judge situations and others based on feelings and extenuating circumstances.

***Lessons That Foster Positive Social Action***

As you look at Tables 1 and 2, notice what appeals to each kind of learner. More boys are Thinkers and more girls are Feelers, but among the gifted, there are many Thinker girls and Feeler boys. F-Feelers are more likely to join in with any plan to help others than are T-Thinkers. The Thinkers will want to know if the proposed plan makes sense and is likely to be effective, while the Feelers assume that if everyone pitches in and works together, any plan will work. They become easily dismayed when not everyone sees this, their reality.

Differentiation of assignments and of products (proof of learning) is the primary way to reach both kinds of student. The teacher must keep in mind that most tasks and products will attract more girls than boys, so it is vitally important to find meaningful tasks that engage the boys, too. Let's work on an example.

The overriding topic is Rain Forests. The teacher introduces the topic with books, video, and assorted levels of supporting reading materials and pictures. The teacher lists things relevant to the study of rain forests, e.g., why they are called rain forests, where they are, what they are like, who owns or manages them, how they are used, who lives in them, what kinds of animals live in them, and so on. The teacher then asks the students to generate more questions and lists them for all to review. The next step is the most crucial to meeting the needs of the various kinds of students in the room. The teacher asks the class to consider what each of them would like to know more about and spend time looking into that and developing a way to share his or her findings with the entire class. The teacher must establish a time line of decisions or products, provide an ongoing supply of materials, links, experts, and individual help and direction, and then start to collect what the students are finding so as to turn it into a cohesive framework.

The growing structure of the framework allows the students and teacher to see a growing list of issues related to rain forests. In other words, the teacher does not initially introduce the topics of how rain forests are vanishing, why they are vanishing, how this is affecting global climate change, etc. This way, even the T-thinkers become aware and curious about the topics. Whereas an F-feeler might first respond with alarm and statements like, “This is wrong!” T-thinkers are likely to take a more practical approach and ask “How can we fix this? Whose responsibility is it?”

The teacher keeps track of what each student has decided to investigate so as to guide students to classmates who might work with them, share ideas, materials, or labor. Much of the work is done during class time, so it will be noisy and students will be moving around, leaving for the media center, art room, and so on. Parents can be included, as well. Teacher should continue to monitor progress, keep records, and work with individual and small groups of students during class time. Virtually no lecturing should take place unless someone has invited a guest speaker.

How do we know when we are done? How do we know what the students have learned? Acceptable products include a number of possibilities including films, reports, artwork or construction of models, speeches, scripted debates, and proposals to recognized groups that work with any of these issues. All of the products will be shared with the entire class over the span of another week or so thus ensuring that all of the students learn from each other as well as through all of their own preferred learning modes.

### ***Summary and Conclusions***

In order to reach all kinds of learners and guide them toward positive social action and caring about the greater world, it is important that teachers understand how different their students usually are from one another. A flexible approach to teaching almost any subject allows for the utilization of students’ different strengths, interests, and viewpoints. More girls than boys show overt interest in social action; and F-feelers show stronger tendencies toward actual positive social action than T-thinkers. But exposing boys and T-thinkers to the needs and issues of the world increases the chances that they, too, will become the problem-solvers of the future. Such approaches to learning create lively, interesting classrooms and school days, too.

### References

- Betskouski, M., & Hoffman, L. (1981). A summary of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator research application in education. *Research in Psychological Type*, 3, 3-41.
- Dabrowski, K. (1964). *Positive disintegration*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Delbridge-Parker, L., & Robinson, D. C. (1989). Type and academically gifted adolescents. *Journal of Psychological Type*, 17, 66-72.
- Gallagher, S. A. (1990). Personality patterns of the gifted. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 3(1), 1, 11-13.
- Gross, M. (1993). *Exceptionally Gifted Children*. New York: Routledge Press.

- Hoehn, L., & Bireley, M. K. (1988). Mental processing preferences of gifted children. *Illinois Council for the Gifted Journal*, 7, 28-31.
- Hollingworth, L. (1942). *Children above 180 IQ: Stanford-Binet: Origin and development*. New York: World Book Company.
- Jones, J.H., & Sherman, R.G. (1979). Clinical uses of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. *Research in Psychological Type*, 2, 32-45.
- Lind, S. (2000, Fall). Overexciteability and the highly gifted child. *California Association for the Gifted*, 31, No. 4.
- Lovecky, D. V. (1997). Identity development in gifted children: Moral sensitivity. *Roeper Review*, 20, 90-94.
- Myers, I.B., & McCaulley, M.H. (1985). *Manual: A guide to the development and use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Myers, I.B., with Myers, P. (1980). *Gifts differing*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Murphy, E. (1992). *The developing child*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- O'Leary, K. (2005). *Development of personal strengths and moral reasoning in gifted adolescents*. Unpublished dissertation: University of New South Wales.
- Piechowski, M. M. (2006). "Mellow out," they say. *If only I could: Intensities and sensitivities of the young and the bright*. Madison, WI: Yunasa Books.
- Piirto, J. (1998). *The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and talented adolescents: Feeling boys and thinking girls: Talented adolescents and their teachers*. Paper presented at the CAPT conference, Orlando, FL.
- Piirto, J. (1998). *Understanding those who create*. Scottsdale, AZ: Gifted Psychology Press.
- Renzulli, J. S. (2002). Expanding the conception of giftedness to include co-cognitive traits and to promote social capital. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84, 33-58.
- Silverman, L. (1993). The gifted individual: The phenomenology of giftedness. In L. K. Silverman (Ed.), *Counseling the gifted and talented*. Denver: Love Publishing Company.
- Terman, L. M. (1925). Mental and physical traits of a thousand gifted children. *Genetic studies of genius* (Vol. I). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sak, U. (2004). A synthesis of research on psychological types of gifted adolescents. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*.
- Webb, J. T., Meckstroth, E. A., & Tolan, S. S. (1982, 1994). *Guiding the gifted child: A practical resource for parents and teachers*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.