Making Great Kids Greater: Easing the Burden of Being Gifted

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. DOROTHY SISK CONDUCTED BY DR. JANICE NOVELLO

This interview is the third in a new series initiated by the members of the Bulletin’s 2008-2010 Editorial Board. The goal of the series is to feature interviews conducted with Delta Kappa Gamma members or other educational leaders on a topic related to the theme of the issue.

Gifted Education
The National Association for Gifted Children (2009) defines gifted children as “students who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities,” while the Elementary and Secondary Education Act defines gifted children as “students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities” (U.S Department of Education, 2002). Although no federal agency or organization collects statistics on the number of gifted students in the United States, the National Association for Gifted Students (NAGC) estimates that there are more than 3 million school aged academically gifted children which translates to approximately 6% of the population. No single program has been implemented to serve the special needs of these children, and each state and in some cases each school district designs and implements a program for its own students.

Dr. Janice Novello holds a Ph.D. in Educational Administration and Gifted Education Programming. She has served as a teacher of the Gifted in four states and is currently on the Editorial Board for the National Association for Gifted Children’s publication Teaching for High Potential. She has presented workshops and lectures around the world on both Creativity and Gifted Education, and will be presenting Conversation in the Gifted Classroom at the NAGC Conference in the Fall of 2009. Dr. Novello is a faculty member of the University of Phoenix and is currently serving as a member of The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin Editorial Board (2008-2012).
Services may be provided in a number of ways, including, but not limited to:
• Part time class with like ability students, regular schedule the remainder of the time.
• Accommodations in the regular classroom
• Full time class with students of like ability
• Acceleration of content
• Grade advancement

Dr. Sisk’s Background in Gifted Education
Dorothy Sisk is currently the Program Director for the Texas Governor’s Program for Gifted Children. She holds the Lamar University’s Conn Chair for Gifted Education in the College of Education and Human Development, a position she has held since 1989. In 2009, she was honored as the Distinguished Faculty Lecturer. She served in Washington, D.C. as Director of the Office of Gifted and Talented Education and was previously a professor of Special Education and Gifted Education at the University of South Florida.

She has authored a number of books about gifted children and has lectured all over the world on their behalf. In August, 2009, she lectured at the World Council for the Gifted and Talented in Vancouver, Canada on the unique perceptions of gifted kids and the discrepancies between their mental age and their chronological age, which could lead to feelings of inadequacy.

A Career Devoted to Children Who Are Gifted

Dr. Sisk, what led to your involvement in Gifted Education?
I became interested in gifted education in my very first year of teaching third grade in Garden Grove, California, in which I taught a cluster group of gifted students, above average students and average students. Across the hall, my colleague had a class of above average students, average students, and students below average. She was an accomplished musician and would give impromptu concerts for all of us before or after school, and there was a constant flow of students back-and-forth from our classrooms, as we shared our talents. My students were studying famous authors and were eager to share their findings with our companion class. This experience taught me that “gifted strategies” are enabling strategies for all kids. The pace and product may be very different, but the active, responsive classroom works for all abilities. I was very fortunate to be selected as part of a team of ten teachers who participated in a special project in the district that replicated the Cleveland Major Work Class. At the same time, I was taking classes with Dr. Juliana Gensley who was one of the original Terman study youngsters who were identified at age nine as gifted and followed throughout their life. Juliana became a life-long mentor and colleague and urged me to seek a doctorate. I enrolled at UCLA and again was able to study with giants in the field of gifted education, including Dr. Ruth Martinson who crafted what became known as the Marland Report for gifted education, and the Dean of the College of Education, Dr. May Seagoe. Upon graduation, I joined the University of South Florida and was able to work with Dr. Marvin Gold in establishing a MA program in gifted education and founding the Florida Association for Gifted Education. Our program eventually became an outstanding Ph.D. program in Special Education with emphasis on gifted. I took a leave of absence from the University of South Florida to go to Washington, DC to direct the Office of Gifted and Talented for five years, and then returned to USF until 1989. Since 1989, I have been at Lamar University where I hold an endowed chair in gifted education.

What Information Concerning Gifted Children Do You See as Important for Educators to Understand?
Gifted students want to live a life of immutable values, and they need to develop moral courage to step away from actions and behaviors of others that are outside of their ideals. Recently in a three-week residential program for gifted adolescents (the Texas Governor’s School), the students shared that they have pulled away from friends who are using alcohol and drugs; consequently, they have lost many of their friends from early childhood. Being able to define themselves with their values is part of developing their individuality, and this can be a painful process. One of the students in the Texas Governor’s School created a film clip called Individuality in which he portrayed the loss of one’s identity as a result of
going along with the group. He shared his film with the group, and they all agreed that at some point or another they all had been on that same path choosing which is the best path to follow. At the same time that gifted students need to learn to be individuals and to become more aware of their gifts, it is equally important that they develop a sense of being other-centered in order to meet one of their essential needs—that of making a difference. When gifted kids are asked ‘what is their quest?’ most will answer “to make a difference.” Many gifted programs are adding service projects to their program offerings, and these service projects are great vehicles for developing and maintaining the sensitivity and empathy for others of gifted students. An example is the Challah for Hunger Project developed by students in California to assist the people of Darfur. These students bake the traditional bread of the Seder and sell it to their friends. Their project was so successful that there are other similar projects sprouting up at other campuses to reach out to others who need help and assistance.

Last, of great importance in the lives of gifted students is the development of their creative consciousness. Using one’s creative consciousness allows the individual to solve problems in a creative way, but most important it helps one to live in a creative way. In today’s world, we are bombarded with scenes of violence, social injustice, sexual abuse, alcoholism, environmental exploitation, and countless other problems in the evening news, in movies, and in video games; therefore, there is a danger that people, including gifted students, may come to accept violence as a way of life. One way to help gifted students overcome this bombardment is to help them develop a sense of peace and tranquility by engaging in nature walks, bird watching, and just being “one with nature.” These types of quiet moments can help gifted kids achieve a balance in their life, and a recognition of the importance of quiet time. Many gifted programs are asking their students to journal and this reflective activity can help encourage “pondering” and thinking about one’s actions and reactions. Gifted kids are our hope for the future. Developing that giftedness is the challenge of education, to enable them to help shape society to its true fulfillment.

In your latest book, Making Great Kids Greater, Easing the Burden of Being Gifted, you address the issue of Asynchrony. Would you please elaborate on that for us?

Asynchrony means being “out of sync.” Gifted kids are more advanced than kids of their chronological age, which represents one type of asynchrony they experience. In addition, there can be discrepancies between their mental age and their emotional and social development. A gifted kid with the mental maturity of a 14-year old and the physical maturity of an 8-year old faces enormous emotional and social challenges. Along with their asynchrony, the gifted have a unique perception of themselves and their world in comparison to their age mates. The gifted are sensitive, perfectionist, and intense, and moral issues affect gifted students more deeply and at an earlier age than their peers. Gifted students may appear to be great kids and well adjusted, receiving good grades in school, but they still may suffer from feelings of inadequacy because their successes fall short of their ideals.

Would you please briefly discuss the Theory of Overexcitabilities and its relationship to Gifted Children?

Gifted kids are intense and the theory of Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski helps to clarify and build an understanding of their intensities. Dabrowski called the intensities “overexcitabilities” and he said that they can be considered positive energy. He said this energy can enable the gifted to live lives with immutable values and to develop moral courage to become their best selves. The overexcitabilities are: 1) psychomotor, 2) sensual, 3) intellectual, 4) imaginational, and 5) emotional. Dabrowski theorized that intellectual, imaginational and emotional intensity are necessary parts of giftedness.

Gifted kids need to develop social skills, but there should be a distinction made between socialization and social development. Many times in the literature these terms are used interchangeably. Socialization is a Level II function in Dabrowski’s theory of emotional development in which the individual goes along with the group; whereas, social development represents what Dabrowski calls a multi-level function in which the individual seeks autonomy, responsibility, and
authenticity, which would be the goal for gifted students.

Some Educators have heard the term “Perfectionism.” Would you please share some information concerning this important quality noted in some Gifted Children?

Perfectionism is a characteristic of many gifted kids and again there is a difference between debilitating perfectionism, and the positive side of perfectionism in which the individual seeks excellence. Parents and teachers need to be mindful of the gifted students’ high standards that they set for themselves, and work with them to achieve time management skills and ways to plan for follow through on long range plans and projects.

Dr. Sisk, I know that you are a strong supporter of Delta Kappa Gamma. Would you please share how you became involved in a leadership role in this Society?

The University of South Florida was using the concept of a professional development school long before it became popular and I worked with Gorrie Elementary School where I met Mrs. Jessie McKenzie. She was a creative visionary principal and her students were involved in project based learning and creative problem solving using E. Paul Torrance’s ideas. Jessie was president of Delta Kappa Gamma at that time and asked me to present a session on the importance of Recognizing and Developing Giftedness in Students. They were such an appreciative audience that I joined the group. I became their program chair, their secretary and eventually president of the Chapter.

Dr. Easton offers a thesis for individuals seeking educational solutions: “One part of the premise of this book is that engaged students are learning students. Another part of this book’s premise is that schools can do something about engagement” (preface, p. xix). This thesis has broad appeal for the needs of today’s complex society.

Educator’s Award Honorable Mention


Selected by the 2009 Educator’s Award Committee for honorable mention is Dolphin Mysteries: Unlocking the Secrets of Communication by Drs. Kathleen Dudzinski and Toni Frohoff. In writing about the wonders of this species the authors have emphasized the necessity of eradicating ocean pollution. “Within each of us there is also an internal dance between two selves: one self is the dedicated, objective researcher who documents every nuance of dolphin posture, behavior, interaction, vocalization, and more with exacting precision; the other is the little kid who is simply enamored by dolphins and wants to cavort with them until the sun sets” (p. 35). Thus is the balance found in this enthralling book.

The research is well-documented. The pages of photos pull the reader to marvel and review the many well-labeled diagrams. Systematic and readable, this offers the dynamics of the communication, behavior, and social patterns of the species in an understandable format for the general public. Additionally, the necessity for environmental concerns is presented in a tangible manner. Dudzinski and Frohoff have peaked interest in aspects of human interaction with the environment and the other species with which we share our world.

Selections by the Educator’s Award Committee came from nearly twenty submissions. Three other titles are recognized as books of interest: The Gender Gap in College: Maximizing the Developmental Potential of Women and Men by Linda Sax; Journeys of Heartache and Grace: Conversations and Life Lessons from Young People with Serious Illnesses by Melody Chatelle; Where the Pavement Ends by Marie Wadden.

References

