PERSPECTIVES

THE PROGRESSION OF LESS SUPPORT
Why gifted students drop out
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Who would believe that a gifted student with seemingly endless potential and the ability to choose any post-secondary educational trajectory would instead choose to drop out of school? Although surprising to most people, dropping out of school is becoming increasingly more common for our brightest students. Their decision is often impacted by earlier educational experiences. Lack of challenge and support during primary school years, for example, may begin a cycle of disillusionment with traditional schooling that culminates in leaving school early.

In the United States, researchers have estimated that a quarter of students who leave school before completing their degree program were once considered high potential (Renzulli & Park, 2000). This is an alarming statistic that should cause concern. There is a great risk of personal and societal cost when gifted students choose to leave school without a diploma. The unintended consequence of this decision may be less opportunity to maximize their potential and to make meaningful contributions to society. Conversely, for some gifted students, dropping out of school may actually be a form of self-preservation and a way to bypass an educational system unequipped to meet their learning needs.

Giftedness and Dropping Out

Internationally, the term "dropout" is inconsistently defined; however, often a "dropout" is synonymous with a student who did not earn a traditional high school diploma. Findings from our research suggest this term and definition do not fully encapsulate this complex phenomenon, especially for gifted students (Ritchotte & Graefe, 2017).

Further, a distinction needs to be made between gifted students and low-achieving students who drop out of school. Gifted students who drop out often still meet grade-level standards and are capable of exceeding those standards, while low-achieving student are more likely to fall below those standards. Failing grades do not typically drive gifted students to drop out of school. Rather, feeling unchallenged, unsupported and disconnected within the school system is much more likely to influence their decision (Ritchotte & Graefe, 2017; Kanevsky & Keighly, 2003; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012.

Alternate Path Overview

Research on why gifted students drop out of school is very limited. The primary purpose of our research on this topic was to acquire a rich understanding of how gifted individuals who dropped out of school interpreted this experience and the meaning they attributed to it.

We interviewed 14 gifted adults (50% female, 50% male) who dropped out of school. Eight of the participants were formally identified gifted in school. Six were nominated by gifted educators who believed them to be gifted. Most of the non-identified participants were over 50 years

old and did not recall formal gifted identification procedures at their schools. Half of these six (and half of the 14 overall) went on to earn a master's or doctoral degree after dropping out.

Important Takeaways

Finding from our interviews revealed that several different factors influenced these individuals' decision to drop out of school. For example, significant earlier experiences like issues at home and changing schools several times were very influential in this decision. One individual shared the following, "At that time I was in the foster placement… trying to survive, that was what was the most important. My foster family was emotionally and physically abusive." Two individuals had been to a total of 17 different schools before they dropped out. Instability outside of school made having adult support in school all the more critical.

Unfortunately, support was often not available to these individuals. One shared, "I kind of get upset at the educational system for not noticing who I was." Another said, "My mother was there to help. Without her, I really believe I wouldn't be alive." Most of these individuals became disillusioned with the educational system during their primary schooling. One poignantly drew a distinction between "schooling" and

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"learning." She said that she never lost her passion for learning, but she definitely lost her passion for traditional schooling at a young age. It is important to note that the need for acceptance from peers and teachers was just as important to these individuals as the need for challenging, personalized learning experiences. Many felt isolated and alone. They wanted to feel connected not only to learning, but to their school community as a whole.

As students, they all believed that adults at school, for the most part, did not try to understand or address their unique learning or social-emotional needs. This was referred to as "the progression of less and less support" as they advanced through the school system. Several noted that counselors, administrators, and teachers did not even try to convince them to stay in school. They were seen "as more of a liability than an asset" when they refused to conform to teachers' and administrators' expectations. With that said, many did mention a caring teacher that "got" them, inspired a lifelong love of learning, and made school more enjoyable in the short term.

The individuals in this study were not "dropouts." They were "non-traditional completers" who did find success in their lives through

alternate paths. Most earned a special credential documenting proficiency in secondary-level academic skills (i.e., the General Education Development Test) and went straight to college after dropping out. One individual recalled overhearing a conversation between his parents who were frustrated with the education he was receiving. His mother remarked, "What if we're not talking about a [high school] diploma?" Soon after, he left school, with his parents' support, and went straight to college. This individual, like others in our study, may be more appropriately called "self-selected accelerators." Traditional schooling was not meeting their needs, so they chose an alternate, more accelerated path to reach their future goals.

Maximizing Students' Potential

The individuals in our study defined success in different ways, but for the most part, it was either based on a meaningful sense of accomplishment in their personal lives or their professional lives or both. Regardless of the success they ultimately achieved, however, it was evident when listening to their stories that the academic and affective support most students need to achieve post-school success was absent or severely lacking during the most formative years of their schooling. It was also clear that the decision to leave school often began for these students well before entering high school, sometimes as early as primary school. In order to help students meaningfully engage at school, educators may try implementing some or all of the following tips:

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- Make a concerted effort to develop relationships with your gifted students. Know their stories, their strengths and passions, as well as their struggles and areas of need. Self-awareness activities can and should be embedded in the regular classroom for all students.
- Offer systemic supports that recognize and validate asynchronous cognitive development and social-emotional needs at all educational levels. Regular lunch-time discussion groups facilitated by a teacher or counselor and bibliotherapy groups before, during, or after school are inexpensive, feasible supports that can help students feel valued and connected to others at school.
- Specialized programming options must also be offered. These could take the form of acceleration (e.g., subject or grade based), alternative learning environments (e.g., online classes), early access to specialized program options (e.g., concurrent

high school and college enrollment, early Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses), and/or opportunities to complete traditional high school requirements through demonstrating competencies that do not require sitting through an entire class and completing every assignment.
- In addition, regular access to counselors and other individuals familiar with the characteristics and concerns of gifted students could go a long way toward creating a safe and nurturing environment in which gifted students' social-emotional needs could be addressed. These adults could be available not only as support personnel, but could also facilitate the development of student advocacy skills and help to provide career counseling so students can meaningfully connect what they are learning in school to the future they envision for themselves.

Concluding Thoughts

The individuals in our research study needed alternatives to regular academic programming and connections to compassionate adults to keep them engaged in the educational process. Beyond that, once they determined that leaving school was the best and sometimes only viable option, they needed caring, well-informed adults that could help them make a realistic plan for their future. Those who did not have this support stumbled before finding a path that would help them attain their goals. Alternate paths require intensive adult guidance and support. These non-traditional paths may not be appropriate for all gifted students, especially if schools are meeting their needs or are willing to take steps to ensure that their cognitive and affective needs are met. Nonetheless, whether gifted students choose to get a diploma or to try an alternate path, the adults in their lives must equip them with the skills necessary to attain their future goals, whichever path they choose. **JAR & AKG**

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