



# the Heart of the Matter

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# GIFTED

**G**ifted is an uncomfortable term. It seems to imply that some children are born with more gifts than others, and therefore, are more important or more special. The Multiple Intelligence Theory used at Rainbow Mountain recognizes that all children have gifts in various areas. One child may have musical gifts, while being kinesthetically challenged, for example. A child who may not consider them self to be academically gifted, *per se*, shines because they are talented in some other area, such as interpersonal skills, and at Rainbow, she will feel special for who she is. Our school's mission is for *all* children to have the opportunity to discover and develop their personal gifts and talents.

This article is specifically about educating children who are *academically* gifted. A large proportion of our population at Rainbow Mountain is academically gifted. Rainbow Mountain understands the needs of gifted children and how to educate them in a humane, holistic manner that will equip them to manifest their vast potential.

If you don't consider your child to be academically gifted, you will still find this article informative, because the pedagogical techniques discussed benefit *all* children at Rainbow.

First, let's explore what the term *gifted* means. For decades, educational researchers have been debating how to define gifted. The Duke University identification program for the gifted accepts any child in 4th through 7th grade who scores in the 95th percentile or above in any academic area on a standardized test. Some public schools accept any child 90% or above in gifted programs. Interestingly, some of the most sophisticated research to date discovered that parents are usually accurate in their own assessment of their child. Therefore, if a parent feels their child should be in a gifted program, their child is likely to be successful in that program.

### **The Pit-falls of Conventional Gifted Education Programs:**

Gifted kids in the public school system are actually considered "at risk" as exceptional children. 10 to 20 percent of high school dropouts are gifted, and the suicide rate is shockingly high. Further complicating the matter, gifted kids are often "double identified," meaning they are identified as gifted AND with another diagnosis, such as ADHD, or they are within the autism spectrum. Clearly, gifted children need a different approach, so public schools either push children ahead a grade and/or they enlist them in pull-out programs that remove them from the rest of the student population for parts of the week. Both of these strategies have major pit-falls.

Promoting a child ahead a grade can be disastrous and the problems with this approach are too numerous to name in this article. On the *rare* occasion that the child is also advanced socially, emotionally, and physically, it can work beautifully.

Often parents assume that if their child is ahead a grade it will reflect positively on their academic resume in the future because people will be impressed with their advancement. The truth can be opposite: high schools and colleges are sometimes leery of kids who have been advanced a grade because of negative experiences they have had with these children being immature. Furthermore, gifted kids are usually somewhat competitive by nature, and they prefer being at the top of the class, their “rightful” place. By promoting them ahead a grade, a “99<sup>th</sup> Percentile” child now becomes a “90<sup>th</sup> Percentile” child, or worse yet, now scores only average compared to other children in his/her class. If your goal is for your child to earn as many merit scholarships as possible to private high schools and/or access to prestigious colleges who require a perfect high school record, you are far better off keeping her in the same class as her age peers. I speak from personal experience as a parent who just helped my daughter through college admissions. Colleges repeatedly stressed that they get plenty of applicants with perfect grades and high test scores. What they are looking for are students who stand out in other ways. The more mature they are, the better, as compared with their peers.

Pull-out programs have fewer risks than early grade promotion, especially if they are high quality and well-funded. Pull-out programs are usually the favorite part of the week for gifted children. They study fascinating content, go on field trips, and think deeply. The problem is that these programs further isolate gifted children from the rest of the population. Why not have the whole day structured like a special pull-out program?

### **Rainbow Mountain’s Unique Approach**

At Rainbow Mountain, we have an integrated approach to gifted education. Our program naturally serves gifted children because of four primary aspects:

- 1. Challenge is inherent in our curriculum.**
- 2. We have a large gifted student population, so gifted kids have like-minded peers.**
- 3. We focus on creating well-rounded children through holistic education**
- 4. Our academic philosophy is about building a broad foundation in the early grades before academic acceleration, which comes in the upper elementary grades.**

### **Challenge is Inherent in Rainbow’s Curriculum**

Gifted children thrive on challenge. The gifted child who is not challenged *by* the school is likely to be a challenge *to* the school. The gifted child needs to stay intrigued and busy. At Rainbow Mountain gifted children stay challenged and engaged through:

- Project learning
- Interdisciplinary studies
- Rich content
- Differentiated learning

#### **Project Learning:**

Much of our learning at Rainbow is project-oriented, where students work on open-ended projects, rather than closed, right/wrong information. An example of a “closed” assignment is one with all right/wrong answers. Gifted children are often bored with such assignments. They will finish them quickly, and commonly underperform. Closed assignments are either about specific rote skills or information recall, which is the lowest level of thinking. An “open” assignment has no limits. It is a complex process requiring high level critical thinking. Students are required to not only recall information and understand rote skills, but they also have to analyze and evaluate facts. They have to synthesize skills and integrate information from various subject areas in order to create a final product. The open ended projects gifted students enjoy the most incorporate student-directed

learning, where children have some choice in the direction of the project and/or the topic. In the upper grades, students do Personal Interest Projects (PIPs), where they research and present a topic that is wholly their choice. Gifted students can take project work and endlessly expand upon it while working at a level of complexity and challenge well beyond their grade level. The Author's Unit in second grade, is an obvious example of an open ended project. By the end of the unit each student will have written, illustrated, and published a book. There are no limits on the length or complexity of the book each child writes.

### Content Versus Rote Skills

**Content** is a topic. At Rainbow, content is not isolated facts – content is integrated through an interdisciplinary theme. Gifted kids (all kids!) love learning content at a young age. In fact, they are capable of learning very advanced content before they are even ready to read or write. For example, when Jessy Tickle's preschool delves into the Earth unit, they collect and study soil samples. Jessica Redford's summer preschool program studies the art of Van Gogh and Jackson Pollock. Rachel Hagen's first grade curriculum studies the water cycle ending at the oceans, where they go into great depths of the ocean, learning the zones and the types of life and adaptation in each zone. This is content most of us didn't learn until high school or college. By promoting a heavy content-based curriculum our students are challenged, without being "pushed." As a result, students of all ability levels are fascinated and develop a love of learning.

**Rote skills** are typically the building blocks of learning information and/or skills, and usually in a right/wrong format. Our brain favors and better remembers information that we can connect with. Rote learning, by definition, is learning that is not attached to content, making rote learning the hardest to retain. A certain amount of rote learning is unavoidable, and even the most creative teacher has a limit on how interesting he can make the learning of rote skills. Mnemonic rhymes, musical jingles, kinesthetic movements, and the like all make rote learning more memorable and fun, but it's still rote learning.

### Interdisciplinary Learning:

Theme-time is the largest learning block of the day. For example, a unit on Lewis and Clark wraps in history, geography, reading (historical fiction and/or nonfictional historical accounts), writing, and science (plant and animal identification and classification). All types of learners benefit from making connections across content. It's more challenging and interesting, and students retain information better because their brains make connections.

### Rich Content:

We engage heavily in content learning in the early years at Rainbow in favor of accelerated mastery of rote skills. Public schools and prep schools try introducing many rote skills ahead of the developmental curve (for regular learners), requiring long and endless amounts of repetition. We have found that by introducing each rote skill at the age when the "window of opportunity" is the greatest, kids master them quickly and efficiently, thereby opening up time for more rich content learning, critical thinking, project work, and holistic learning which develops many more aspects of the brain. This benefits both regular learners and gifted learners.

It's important to not equate challenge with acceleration. Kids are challenged by the richness of our curriculum without the anxiety, competitiveness, or tediousness of being accelerated in rote skills at a young age. Children who have been accelerated in academics at a young age, often confuse perfectionism for excellence, leading to anxiety and a loss in creative potential.

### Differentiated Learning:

At Rainbow, when we work on academic skills, gifted students are often given slightly different work than regular learners. The teacher will deliver the same basic lesson to the whole class, but a gifted student's actual work may be at a higher level. A gifted speller may receive different words to learn. For Math, children are placed in the grade level most appropriate for them, and about 30% of students work a grade or more ahead. Most children at Rainbow read above their grade level, and many are years ahead. Therefore, reading is highly individualized prior to fourth grade, with each student reading at their appropriate level. Our motto to "meet kids where they are" extends to both remedial learners and gifted learners.

## Developing Well-Rounded Individuals

At RMCS, our goal is for gifted students to become well-rounded individuals in all domains: mental, physical, emotional, social/moral, and spiritual.

We find that gifted learners, when educated with methods that cultivate a love of learning, naturally excel in academics. They don't need to be pushed. To the contrary, they often need to be nudged in the other domains. Vast amounts of peer-reviewed research and national studies have proven that IQ is actually a poor indicator of success in college or life. The extensive national SCANS study, conducted by the Department of Labor, determined the biggest factor in predicting success and employability are social and emotional skills. If one really thinks about it, this isn't surprising. People with above average social skills are typically successful people.

Unfortunately, many schools focus so exclusively on academics that gifted students run the risk of becoming narrowly focused, and fall behind their peers socially and/or emotionally. Even sadder, some gifted students remain "in their head" and never become successful at producing work that is tangible and useful. By focusing on creating well-rounded children, we find that gifted students become truly equipped for success, and also end up excelling academically more than if they had been pushed at an early age... but sometimes it's hard for parents to be patient.

## To develop well-rounded individuals, Rainbow Mountain helps each child to cultivate:

### Spirituality:

We savor children's natural connection to the earth and the spirit. We don't want them to lose their spiritual gifts early. The earlier a child develops academic skills and the left side of the brain, the more likely she is to lose connection with intuition and the right side of the brain. We teach children to trust their intuition and to be

### Learning is Play

Some of the most productive geniuses saw their work as play. Mozart and Einstein both come to mind. Note also that Mozart, a child prodigy who was pushed by his father to excel at an early age, was a troubled soul with immature social and emotional skills. In contrast, Einstein was not recognized as a genius when he was young, so no one pushed him. Besides being a mathematical genius, he became one of the most venerated wise old souls of recent times.

At Rainbow, we have high expectations for gifted children. We don't just want them to be smart, we want them to be world-changers, scientific geniuses who make life-giving discoveries, best-selling authors, famous artists, and so on. To fulfill their future potential, they need time to play as young children.

connected to what their heart tells them, not just their thinking, which is often rational, yet flawed. In addition, as children mature at Rainbow they learn simple meditation techniques and how to calm the brain – tools that can help a gifted child with an over active "monkey mind."

### Imagination and Creativity:

Children are naturally imaginative. We nurture their imagination so that gifted children excel. Being smart is one thing, but true genius lays in the ability to be creative and innovative. Focusing on

academic skills too much and too early stunts imagination because it creates narrower neural pathways in the brain. We want to be lighting up *all* areas of the brain. The arts (visual, music, and performance), which are so prevalent and integrated into our school's curriculum, nurture imagination, and uplift the spirit.

### Emotional and Social/Moral Maturity:

I find that students who have been at Rainbow for eight years are more emotionally mature than the typical American adult. Emotional maturity is the foundation for social development. See other *Heart of the Matters* for more information on how we develop the emotional and social domains. Service learning is one of the many ways that character and social responsibility are instilled at Rainbow. Perhaps most importantly for gifted children, is that everyone is socially accepted at Rainbow. They can really be themselves, which builds confidence.

**Physical Development:**

Recent research confirms that sitting for more than six or more hours a day creates lasting damage, and even vigorously exercising for 30 minutes a day cannot make up for the damage. Why would we make a 5 year old or an 8 year old sit for so long? Think about evolution. We were made to move. Children learn by touching, moving, making sounds, exploring. Movement develops multiple areas of the brain – making complex neurological connections. A healthy body equals a healthy brain. Besides offering physical education and after school sports to the older grades, movement is integrated into our program on a daily basis. Students spend a much shorter portion of the day sitting than at most schools, and part of that time, they are likely to be sitting on the floor rather than in chairs, which grounds them and engages the core body muscles.

**Executive Function (EF):**

Some are calling EF the new IQ, because it is a far better indicator of success in life. Executive Function includes time management, perseverance, organization, prioritizing, making wise choices, etc. We drive students hard in EF in the fourth through eighth grades, so that they enter high school prepared in every way possible.

**According to our graduates and high school teachers, Rainbow students are:**

- advanced in all domains in comparison to their peers
- reported to be more socially and emotionally mature
- display more confidence
- engage with adults more than other students
- affectionate and compassionate
- highly moral
- balanced
- excellent team members
- highly motivated and engaged in the learning process

I encourage you, dear reader, to watch the eighth grade graduation speeches on our website. The authenticity, morality, brilliance, and maturity expressed by the students is remarkable. [www.rmcs.org/2011/07/14/2011-8th-grade-graduation-speeches/](http://www.rmcs.org/2011/07/14/2011-8th-grade-graduation-speeches/)

**RMCS Builds a Broad Foundation in the Early Grades Before Academic Acceleration in the Upper Grades**

In the case of gifted kids, it is very tempting to work with them on advanced skills early, because, frankly, it is exciting for the adult(s) to witness the child's early accomplishment. Gifted kids love challenge, and they will apply themselves and achieve a high level of academic learning to please us and for the sheer challenge. They enjoy the stimulation. The problem, however, is multi-fold:

- They plateau and regular students often catch up by high school or college.
- Missed opportunity. While learning to accelerate in rote academics, they have missed learning in other areas – both academic and holistic.
- The love of learning becomes tarnished. Gifted students are often burned out at a young age and never experience their full potential.

**Kindergarten – Third Grade: The Foundation**

Up through the third grade, whether a child is gifted or not, it is important for children to simply enjoy learning. We want the neural pathways in the brain to associate learning with pleasure, not anxiety. School should be as an enjoyable place that opens up worlds. See “Learning is Play” side-bar.

Ultimately, the biggest mistake a parent of a gifted child can make is to think that by pushing their child to be more advanced academically before the age of nine, they will be more advanced later, thereby receiving a higher level of professional status, and thereby be happy. This long line of logic is so ingrained in our American culture, that we forget that our ultimate goal is the last part – for our child to be happy. A happy child is a functional child, free of anxiety, who will naturally excel. Children shouldn't be burdened with the responsibility of adults, or they run the risk of becoming neurotic. Childhood is your child's last chance to be a free spirit. It should be savored.

There is a theory that children who mature too quickly in the early years, “make up for it” later in life by holding themselves back in other ways. A healthy way to “make up for it” would be to take a gap year after high school — a year off to explore before going to college. Unfortunately, most methods of holding themselves back are not benign, such as having trouble taking on adult responsibilities (“launching”) or engaging in drug abuse.

**Fourth – Eighth Grade: Academic Acceleration**

Children experience huge spiritual and psychological changes at age nine, sometimes referred to as “the nine year change.” At nine and for the next few years, the child becomes more existential. He begins to understand mortality, for example. He individuates from his family, and he can look at himself as others may see him. Once this developmental milestone is met, the child is ready to accelerate and to take on the responsibility of being a “student.” (For example, the child should now be responsible for homework, not the parent.) Therefore, true academic rigor begins in the fourth grade at Rainbow.

### **The program at Rainbow shifts dramatically in the fourth grade.**

By this time, Rainbow students have developed a thirst for learning. At this juncture academic learning accelerates quickly, and the children soak it up like sponges. Because they haven't been overburdened with homework in the past, they are excited to have nightly homework assignments. They are given binders and expected to keep track of deadlines and to organize their work. They have to prove, through their portfolio, that they are meeting academic standards. The five paragraph essay is introduced, and by the end of fourth grade is expected to be written with a mastery level of creativity, organization, proper mechanics (grammar, spellings, etc), and neatness. Math is becoming more abstract, and students who are gifted mathematically are on track to complete Geometry and/or Algebra II by the end of eighth grade.

In seventh grade students are issued conventional grades on report cards for the first time. (Prior to this they were graded using rubrics, narrative feedback, and portfolio work.) The beautiful thing is that they are *begging* for grades at this point! Whereas, their peers in other schools, who have been receiving grades for years, have already classified themselves as an A student or a C student. In contrast, ALL Rainbow kids see themselves as capable of receiving all A's, and they are highly motivated to strive for excellent grades.

### **The Academic Results!**

Academically, by the time our students leave 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they have achieved at exceptionally high levels. Our test scores indicate that classes, on the average, advance about 20 percentile rankings between 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. So, for example, a class scoring in the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile (on the average) in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, will score in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade average percentile ranking is in the high 80's or 90's in reading, writing, and math, which is exceptional. Typically, by the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, the majority of our students score at the "post high school level" (college level) in multiple subjects on the SAT10 test.

We are the only middle school I know of in Asheville that offers both Geometry and Algebra II to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Our middle school students complete at least one high school style science lab. They have participated in science fairs since the first grade, and now complete long-term science projects. They have used technology to produce spread sheets, publish a newsletter, do extensive research, communicate, and give presentations. They present multi-faceted independent projects to their peers and write lengthy MLA cited research papers.

Rainbow students who have applied to prep high schools in recent years have been accepted and even offered merit scholarships. Those who enter public high school are accepted into the honors programs. As ninth graders they are expected to take Spanish II or III, a high level honors math class (some begin with Calculus), and honors classes in History, English, and Science. They are also artists, performers, and infuse creativity, imagination and innovation into their academic work, setting them apart from other students who are merely smart. ... and those are just the academic results.

### **Destined to Make a Difference**

In addition to the high level of academic and arts achievement of our students, it is ultimately their development in the other domains that we feel is the secret to their success in life. Their well-roundedness equips them to be leaders. Some of our most recent graduates are: a recording artist, club founders and leaders, student council leaders, service volunteers, a world peace delegate, lead editor of a national award-winning literary magazine, actors, directors, varsity athletes, a film maker, a Tedx performer, and much more.

Rainbow students of all abilities have developed habits of compassion, good communication, emotional well-being, physical health, and spiritual bliss. They are highly functional.

They are destined to make a difference. Our students both at home and at school have been given the best. Statistically, American middle class children are among the wealthiest 1% to 5% of people in the world. They are the fortunate ones. We don't burden them with guilt, but empower them to feel like they can make a difference. Teachers at Rainbow Mountain believe it is a moral obligation to develop exceptional students who will, as adults, lead us into a future that is socially just, environmentally sustainable, and spiritually fulfilling. Students' education at Rainbow has been imbued with meaning. They have been empowered to go forth and live a meaningful life.

### **Resources:**

- **Is EF the new IQ?** <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/06/03/is-ef-the-new-iq.html>
- **Education of the Gifted and Talented.** (2004) Davis and Rimm.
- **What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America, 2000.** <http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS/whatwork/>
- **The Application of Dabrowski's Theory to the Gifted.** Kevin J. O'Connor. <http://www.amazon.com/Social-Emotional-Development-Gifted-Children/dp/1882664779>
- **Is Sitting a Lethal Activity?** [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/magazine/mag-17sitting-t.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/magazine/mag-17sitting-t.html?_r=1)