

News

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"Brains on Fire": How Gifted Brains Think

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In Stuyvesant High School, there is at least one student whose IQ is over 120. Many people assume they know what they're like: face stuck in a book, constantly on the calculator, and all alone in the corner of the library.

But what is behind that mopy hair and thick-lensed glasses? Who is the real person hidden underneath the genius, impatience, and loneliness? These questions and many similar ones were brought to attention in Dr. Brock and Fernette Eide's presentation, "Brains on Fire."

"Brain on Fire" focused on the term "genius" and its applications to school and life. Due to Stuyvesant's large amount of gifted students, many parents came to the Stuyvesant Auditorium despite the heavy rain and arduous trip o Manhattan. Amid the squeaking of boots on tile, and wet coats rustling together, Dr. Brock and Fernette Eide stood on the stage smiling and waiting. Once the audience settles down, Dr. Brock Eide took the mike and while grinning said, "Sorry about the rain folks; it's all our fault you see. We're from Seattle, and the rain seemed to follow us here to New York." The audience laughed good-naturedly and Eide waited for everyone to stop.

With this uplifting introduction, Eide gradually began his transition to his lecture on how brains think and learn. The Eides structured their research as a three-part presentation. The first consisted of a historical overview of IQ and geniuses. The middle section dealt with the many ways in which the word "gifted" can be used. The final one discussed the five characteristics of gifted thinking, along with an in depth-analysis of each characteristic. These characteristics ranged from enhanced speed of recognition and recall to enhanced memory efficiency and capacity and enhanced sensitivity patterns.

There are a number of challenges in terms of what the best method to teach gifted individuals is and what the most advantageous learning styles are for them, given the way their brains function. It is important to stimulate learning without exacerbating those characteristics that can hinder that process.

The hypersensitivity that characterizes gifted children makes learning at school easier than for other children, but it can also lead to increased distractibility as a response to stimuli in the environment. For many gifted students, however, this distractibility is accompanied by increased vigilance and persistence and does not hinder learning. In this case it is not a problem, but rather a different style of processing information and can, in fact, be considered a strength. When this distractibility, though, begins to affect learning it might require intervention.

In addition, gifted students, because of their excellent memory, can learn with less review and repetition. They are also highly capable of absorbing a lot of information from the general environment. The combination of hypersensitivity and enhanced memory makes it easy for them to assimilate all that information. As a result, there is the tendency to think that the education of gifted children should concentrate on providing them with large quantities of facts rather than teaching them how to process, analyze, link, organize and use the knowledge they already have in more sophisticated ways.

The greatest challenge facing gifted students, in fact, is how to organize and process information effectively and efforts should, therefore, be focused more on teaching them how to accomplish that goal. The Eides propose that to this end, gifted thinkers are encouraged to "understand the nature of thinking and knowledge", to assess the "quality and reliability" of the information they are exposed to and understand how information can be used in practical as well as abstract ways.

The Eides have just published a book titled *The Mislabeled Child* dedicated to understanding the individual learning differences of children with learning and behavioral problems.