

Giftedness Does Not Discriminate

By Terry Bradley

I applaud Celi Trepanier's latest blog, [Gifted Children: Culturally, Ethnically, Racially and Socially Diverse](#). She states that "too many students from families of a lower socioeconomic status, as well as students from culturally, ethnically and racially diverse groups are often disregarded for gifted identification likely because of beliefs in unfortunate myths and a prevalence of incorrect information about what giftedness is and what giftedness can look like in the classroom."

Trepanier talks about two disturbing myths associated with gifted children from diverse backgrounds. <http://crushingtallpoppies.com/2017/06/26/gifted-children-culturally-ethnically-racially-and-socially-diverse/>

I'd like to address these two myths as they relate to a former student of mine, Juliet, who grew up in the slums of Uganda.

Juliet: *"My mom died of AIDS when I was 5. I lived on the streets, eating garbage, and sleeping in the warm trash heaps at night. I was left to stand on my own two feet to figure out the world."*

Myth #1: Gifted students come only from specific races, and from middle- and upper-class families.

Truth: Gifted students come from all walks of life.

Juliet: *"I wanted nothing more than to go to school. One day, I followed a child to school, and because I wasn't a student I had to stay on the other side of the gate. I was amazed to be this close to something I wanted so badly. I wanted someone to teach me how to hold my pencil, tell me that I had potential and that they saw something in me."*

Through luck and kindness, an American woman ended up sponsoring Juliet's education. Then in 2012, that same woman ended up adopting her and bringing her to Colorado when Juliet was fourteen. But the characteristics that defined Juliet's intelligence were already in place long before she became a part of the American school system.

Myth #2: Giftedness – it is made, not inborn.

Truth: Giftedness is inborn, not made.

Juliet: *“On the third day of my first year of school, the principal asked each one of us what we wanted to be. I told him, “I want to be a lawyer” because I wanted to stand up for those who couldn’t fight their own battles; I wanted to give a voice to those who didn’t have one.”*

“At age 11 I was finally able to read and write. I was an outstanding student scoring in the top of my classes. I didn’t want to learn English until I had to. I was very stubborn. I had to learn English in 2010 so I could talk with my parents. English was my fifth language. In 2012 I was allowed to emigrate to the U.S.”

I was fortunate to meet Juliet her freshman year in high school, a year after she arrived in the United States. The difference in cultures, the weather and the education system posed a challenge for her. But her desire to be successful was incredibly strong.

She graduated a semester early from high school with a 3.8 GPA, and spent a few months in France immersing herself in the French language and culture. She interned at a law firm this summer and still has the desire to be the “someone” that helps other less-fortunate students succeed. She is currently attending college in Colorado.

I understand, more than ever, why it’s critical to view multiple pieces of evidence that might contribute to GT identification, particularly with students in underrepresented populations. Juliet’s intensive work ethic, her ability to learn new material and languages so rapidly, the high expectations she had for her performance, and her determination to be resilient, successful, and make a difference were all credible markers of her intelligence.

It’s important to note that standardized testing was not an area of strength for Juliet, as intelligent as she is. Our school systems should never rely *solely* on standardized assessments as proof of giftedness. Similarly, standardized testing cannot be a factor that *refutes* GT identification, if there are other criteria that soundly demonstrate the presence of GT characteristics. This is especially true for students in underrepresented populations, who may not have had the benefits of

preparation, training, and cultural immersion that allow them to successfully perform on these assessments.

Many of us in the GT field agree that “Giftedness is something you are, not something you do.” Juliet’s raw intelligence and natural curiosity and determination were apparent from our first meeting. She was admittedly very stubborn and said she didn’t like to follow rules. I inwardly smiled when she insisted that she was going to tell her science teacher that she was going to redo a test that she did not do well on. She didn’t just *wish* she could redo it, she *insisted* that she be given another chance. She was given another chance.

Juliet: I want to help other kids navigate the world through education; teach girls that there is more than just getting married, doing chores, and staying home. I want them to have the power of education and decide their futures; to know you can be a woman and still be powerful because knowledge is power.”

Juliet valued friends in high school that respected the fact that she did not ever want to miss class. Education was seen as a privilege that you do not squander.

Ending comment from Juliet: I know that I do not fully understand what giftedness means but here is what I do know: we students of color sometimes have trouble showing our gifts because kids like me have moved from other countries and are merging into this education system. Sometimes we do need help and a lot of it. My teacher in Africa used to say that you can’t drown when you scream help because everybody will jump in to help you. I find this to be a true statement because most of the time kids are afraid to admit they want help. We are afraid that others will think of us as stupid or not good enough so we just end up not even asking and we drown but not because we aren't good at something or smart, but because we are in the culture where you get shamed for even asking for help. I feel like sometimes teachers should reach out to students like us, because all we need sometimes is a person to believe in us and stand with us.