



The Autonomous Learner Model: The Whole Gifted Child

By Dr. George Betts

I can still remember my first day of teaching at the middle school level. The students seemed very excited about the class. After the bell rang all but one student, who was dealing with a personal problem, walked out of class. The conversation and subsequent meeting with this student set me on a journey to discover all that I could about the social and emotional characteristics of students. A master of arts in counseling and a doctoral degree in psychology with a concentration in counseling guidance followed and it was soon after that I developed the *Autonomous Learner Model*^a where the focus was on the “whole gifted child.”

As I complete my 50th year as an educator, and reflect on the concepts and ideas that seek to strengthen the social and emotional development of our children, I believe there are six essential qualities that gifted educators can instill in their students that are necessary if we are to focus on the “whole gifted child.”

1. **Unconditional Positive Regard:** The ability to accept people as they are, not as you want them to be.
2. **Development of Self:** A strong Self is necessary for successful involvement with others, as well as the confidence that you are positive as a person.
3. **Emotional, Social, Cognitive, and Physical Development:** If one of these domains is missing, there will be a deficit model instead of a positive approach to life and learning.
4. **Passion Learning:** Learning what others want you to learn is important, but being able to pursue what you love is called “Passion Learning,” the highest level of learning, because then you become totally immersed in this pursuit. Time stands still, you miss meals, you feel sleep-deprived and you generate great new ideas and products.

5. **Working Together:** Major skills include communication, consultation, and collaboration.
6. **Seek to Better the World:** Our future is now in the hands of our children. They can visualize a better world, and they need our support as they develop new solutions for our world's problems.

Clearly, research on and interest in the affective needs of students has increased in recent years, and there are many more organizations and educators who see the “whole” child, although no one else has attended to gifted children specifically. During my presidency for NAGC, I have developed the “Whole Gifted Child Task Force” under the leadership of Dr. Angela Housand and 17 other practitioners, university professors, and researchers.

Our goal is to discover, synthesize, and disseminate the knowledge and research on the whole gifted child—his or her needs, development, and the importance of providing alternatives for his or her ongoing growth in the school, home, and community. To that end the following questions will be addressed by the task force: *Who is the gifted child? What are the comprehensive needs (Cognitive, Social, Emotional, and Physical) of the gifted child? What must parents, educators, and communities do to support the gifted child? What are the outcomes for the gifted child who receives the set of comprehensive supports?*

The fields of counseling and psychology have taught the basics that are fundamental for the growth of the whole child. In gifted education we are experts on gifted students' cognitive needs and have developed research and application that is extremely valuable, but a more concrete understanding of what practices are needed is at the forefront of our task force. The task force shared initial work^b at the NAGC 63rd Annual Convention in Florida, and it will release more results in the months to follow.

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^a*The purpose of the ALM model is to shift the power to learn away from the teacher as a "dispenser of knowledge" and give that power to the students.*

^b*Find out more about the NAGC ALM task force here:
http://www.nagc.org/sites/default/files/Misc_PDFs/The%20Whole%20Gifted%20Child%20Presidential%20Session.pdf*