

Tracy L. Cross

Nerds and Geeks: Society's Evolving Stereotypes of Our Students With Gifts and Talents

Over the past 25 years, my colleagues and I have conducted research into the experiences of our students with gifts and talents, particularly those in school. We have written many papers and even a couple of books describing these students' lives and how they live them. An obvious part of their experience can be reflected in the stereotypes used in society to describe these children. The two most common ones are *nerd* and *geek*. When we first started interviewing gifted students about these terms in 1982, we found that both terms had very negative ramifications in the gifted students' perceptions. For example, nerds were generally considered as socially inadequate, shy or overbearing, smart, and perhaps *too* smart as we learned later in our studies. Nerds were also perceived as being very focused on academic endeavors, physically weak, uninteresting, unnecessary to society, and ultimately undesirable. Generally speaking, all these things might be categorized under the heading of feeling abhorrent, which was the way most of these students described their experience of being gifted.

Although the term *nerd* had many negative connotations, the term *geek* was even more potent. Some students I met years ago in programs that I have championed or been director of had in a way reconciled themselves to being thought of as nerdy, but they really did not want to be thought of as a *geek*. *Geek* was a term that at that time had great power to stigmatize. The experience of being a *geek* was as one who others are embarrassed to be around. This element of guilt by association is an important component of the stigma theory of Irving Goffman (1963). *Geeks* were thought to be extremely inadequate socially—more so than the *nerds*—and also too focused in academic or technical endeavors.

Since the early 1980s many popular films, books, and television shows have been produced with an intellectually capable student as the main character. Some examples are *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), and "Family Matters," a sitcom showcasing Steve Urkel as "America's favorite nerd." All of these examples portrayed gifted students in a broader light than did the strict stereotypes that were just described. Even though these characters did have some negative aspects to their lives that were tied to society's stereotypes, they were seen as people, as individuals, and that was a huge step forward.

As the years passed, the current generation of children has grown up immersed in an increasingly rich technological society. This continues today with many homes having computers of one form or another. In general, children are receiving a significant amount of exposure to media of different kinds, and thus also have gained experience in using many diverse technologies (e.g., video games, cell phones, PDAs). Because of this exposure, this generation of children who are now in their teens has become so technologically savvy that being passionate about technology is becoming more commonplace, an emerging norm of sorts. This passion for technology has not only improved children's learning experiences, but also has had a dramatic effect on the term *geek*.

The term *geek* is now used increasingly as an adjective, rather than merely a strict stereotype. For example, "tech *geek*" is a common phrase used to describe someone whose passion for technology has made him or her a computer expert. This more positive spin on the word *geek* has occurred for two reasons. First, many people in our society are passionate about computers, so being viewed as an expert (*geek*)

is socially rewarding. Second, because many others strive to become more technologically savvy, the expert or geek is seen as a helper, and in many cases the term geek even attaches an avant-garde quality to this individual. In addition to the individual striving to become more technologically advanced, the evolution of cyber cafés and other multimedia advances in our culture (especially in the bigger cities), have contributed to the evolving stereotype of a geek.

So, where does this leave us in the year 2005? What does this mean, and what does this suggest for gifted kids? Well, in listening carefully, interviewing, and observing gifted children, I have learned that the term nerd has become rather neutral. It has almost become like a color in certain ways it is used. It is as though a person can be nerdy but also have many other qualities that are not included under that stereotype from 25 years ago. I believe that people like Bill Gates and other figures who present themselves in ways that would historically have placed them in the category of a nerd or a geek are no longer viewed as such because of the extent to which our society holds these people in such reverence. This societal perception has also had a large impact on the way our cultural stereotypes for nerds and geeks have evolved.

Obviously, as a psychologist who studies gifted children, I am pleased that these terms are losing their negative power. I think there will be many benefits as the terms get increasingly fleshed out and used more neutrally. Recently, I overheard young gifted children using the term nerd in the following way: "I am going to be nerdy today and stay at home and work on my homework." This statement implies that being a nerd is actually a choice, not a state of being. This

semantic distinction between choosing a behavior and manifesting negatively perceived traits is important to stigma theory because behavior is changeable, while attributing negatives to another's appearance is merely an attribution that is socially influenced. As evidence of this evolution in the stereotype, the term geek is also often used in very specific ways such as being a tech geek, or a geek for art, news, or weather. What is interesting and worth noting about these changes is their similarity to another analogy: the swan emerging from an ugly duckling. Being thought of as a nerd as a child (an ugly duckling) does not have the negative connotation that it once did. The knowledge of what great things can come from such early interests (the swan) has motivated a change in perceptions of the "nerdy" child. Therefore, the accoutrements to being academically oriented or working hard in school, in time, could cease to be as problematic for children in our schools as before.

Our schools have been described as anti-intellectual environments by many people in the field of gifted education including Howley, Howley, and Pendarvis (1995) and Coleman and Cross (2001). However, the evolution in these two stereotypes suggests that there is a growing awareness of the importance of competence in our society. This realization represents our society's movement from a manufacturing base to an information age. Our children are seeing this, and the change has primarily focused on the recognition that people like Bill Gates (once considered to be a geek) make very significant contributions to our society, and other intellectually gifted individuals are handsomely rewarded for their accomplishments. Thus, the children who would have been typically identified early by their peers as a

nerd or geek, and experienced the stigma of giftedness (Coleman & Cross, 1988) and limited social acceptance (Cross, Coleman, & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991), are now less likely to experience being an outcast. This is due to the growing awareness that being a nerd or geek could actually have a positive outcome. I am encouraged to think that these students' experiences in life will improve in a parallel fashion as the use of these two terms and stereotypes have evolved. Perhaps one day these gifted students will be able to live without the negative social consequences associated with being a student with gifts and talents.

I have often said that one of the great outcomes of our Western society's integration of computers has been to remind us that children are far more capable than adults often give them credit for being. As adults, many of us who are computer immigrants rely on our children—or children in general—to be our advisers because they have a higher degree of facility and expertise than we do, or will ever have. This transference of skills from child to adult is yet another mechanism that is assisting in the evolution of these stereotypes and also has the potential to improve the lives of gifted students. Perhaps things will improve enough that one day I will have inscribed on my gravestone "He aspired to be a geek." [GCT](#)

References

- Coleman, L. J., & Cross, T. L. (2001). *Being gifted in school: An introduction to development, guidance, and teaching*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press
- Coleman, L. J., & Cross, T. L. (1988). Is being gifted a social *continued on page 65*

continued from page 27

- handicap? *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 11, 41–56.
- Cross, T. L., Coleman, L. J., & Terhaar-Yonkers, M. (1991) The social cognition of gifted students in schools: Managing the stigma of giftedness, *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 15, 44–55.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Howley, C., Howley, A., & Pendarvis, E. (1995). *Out of our minds: Anti-intellectualism and talent development in American schooling*. New York: Teachers College Press.

continued from page 30

- Ford, D. Y., & Harris, J. J., III. (1999). *Multicultural gifted education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Foster, M. (1994). Effective Black teachers: A literature review. In E. R. Hollins, J. E. King, & W. C. Hayman (Eds.), *Teaching diverse populations: Formulating a knowledge base* (pp. 225–241). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hall, E. T. (1981). *Beyond culture* (2nd ed.). Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Hofstede, G., & Hofstede, G. J. (1991). *Cultures and organiza-*

tions: Software of the mind. London: McGraw-Hill.

- Irvine, J. J. (2002). *In search of wholeness: African American teachers and their culturally specific classroom practices*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Storti, C. (1998). *The art of crossing cultures* (2nd ed.). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Storti, C. (1999). *Figuring foreigners out: A practical guide*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Shade, B. J., Kelly, C., & Oberg, M. (1997). *Creating culturally responsive classrooms*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Meeting the Educational Needs of Young Gifted Readers in the Regular Classroom

continued from page 47

- gramming. In N. Colangelo, & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (2nd ed., pp. 75–88). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Rogers, K. (1998). Using current research to make “good” decisions about grouping. *NASSP Bulletin*, 82, 38–46.
- Rohrkemper, M., & Como, L. (1988). Success and failure on classroom tasks: Adaptive learning and classroom teaching. *The Elementary School Journal*, 88, 297–326.
- Schnur, J. O., & Lowrey, M. A. (1986). Some characteristics of young gifted readers. *Early Child Development & Care*, 26, 191–198.
- Starko, A. J., & Schack, G. D. (1989). Perceived need, teacher efficacy, and teaching strategies for the gifted and talented. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 33, 118–122.
- Swanson, D. (1997). *Welcome to the world of owls*. New York: Walrus

Books.

- Tolan, S. S. (1985, November/December). Stuck in another dimension: The exceptionally gifted child in school. *G/C/T* 41(4), 22–26.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). *The Differentiated Classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C., Kaplan, S., Renzulli, J., Purcell, J., Leppien, J., & Burns, D. (2002). *The parallel curriculum: A design to develop high potential and challenge high-ability learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Van Tassel-Baska, J., & Brown, E. F. (2001). An analysis of gifted education curriculum models. In F. A. Karnes, & S. M. Bean (Eds.), *Methods and materials for teaching the gifted*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Vosslander, A. (2002). Gifted readers:

Who are they and how can they be served in the classroom? *Gifted Child Today*, 25(2), 14–21.

- Wang, M. C., & Palincsar, A. S. (1989) Teaching students to assume an active role in their learning. In M. C. Reynolds (Ed.), *Knowledge base for the beginning teacher*, (pp. 71–84). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Westberg Peters, L. (2003). *Earthshake: Poems from the ground up*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Wildsmith, B. (2000). *The owl and the woodpecker*. England: Oxford University Press.
- Winebrenner, S., & Devlin, B. (2001). *Cluster grouping of gifted students: How to provide fulltime services on a part-time budget: Update 2001*. Arlington, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED451663)
- Yolen, J. (1987). *Owl moon*. New York: Philomel Books.