

Feature Article: Thinking Along the Same Lines

by Tracy Riley

While the literature and advocates in gifted education espouse the importance of facilitating opportunities for like-mindedness, what does it mean to be like-minded? Our research team asked four gifted year 8 students (ages 12-13), their parents, and teachers this very question. Interestingly, all of the students described like-minded using a derivative of the word “think” and this was further supported by their parents and teachers. However, there were subtle differences between sharing common thinking processes (that were different from the norm) and having similar outcomes of thinking. For these gifted kids, it was more how they think, than what they think. As Rex¹ told us, “It is someone who thinks not exactly the same, but in a similar process.” Matt described thinking more as a trajectory, with like-minded peers being those who are “similar and think on the same kind of path as you.” Sally described “people... who have got more or less the same style or way of thinking.”



So how do gifted kids think? Our fourth student, James, would tell you that they all think “the same as me.” The teachers and parents described like-minded thinking as “quirky” and not fitting “the mainstream” – but this was not seen as disadvantageous. Quite the contrary. The “similar fashion” with which gifted students think, according to the parents in our study, enables them to accept and understand others, including those with different viewpoints as well as other gifted students with whom they can relate socially and intellectually. One of the teachers considered like-minded students as being on the “same level” and in the “same social group.” She explained that the gifted students’ like-mindedness enabled them to get along with each other, “they get on with each other, they understand what they are talking about, the topics that they talk about, in and out of class.” This teacher’s view highlights that like-mindedness is not just a reflection of thinking process, but also the result of thinking – or what is being thought.

Our team was a little surprised by these results, as we had conceptualized like-mindedness as being broader than thinking, to encompass feeling and learning. Curiosity about just what the notion of like-mindedness means revealed very little in the literature, though the potential effects of like-minded groupings are well documented. Levine and Cox (2005) discuss the idea of like-minded students being those who share perspectives and viewpoints. An alternative view relates more to group identity and connectedness whereby individuals deemed like-minded are those who “are socially well connected and share interests” (Mondani, Nagar, Shinnigrahi, Gupta, Dey, Goyal & Nanawati, 2014, p. 908). If thinking is the catalyst for like-mindedness, how do thinking processes and outcomes relate to the intellectual, social, and emotional connections we might anticipate in like-minded relationships?

Deidre Lovecky conducted a study over 20 years ago exploring some of the characteristic modes of thinking of exceptionally gifted young people, and these are worth exploring in relation to like-mindedness. The gifted students we interviewed described a desire for choice, challenge, and control in the ways in which they are grouped for learning. The students wanted to be able to choose their peer group, control their peer groupings, and have challenges in their group learning. Lovecky’s work explains their thinking, helping us to understand their needs in relation to peer groupings for learning and socializing.

- **The simple is complex.** Hesitancy or inability to respond to simple tasks or questions is the result of overthinking, using higher levels of analyses. In mixed-ability peer situations this thinking tendency may be perceived as non-compliant or even unintelligent. Amongst like-minded peers, complexity will likely be a welcome challenge to be debated and developed. Thinking productively – rather than reproductively – can be encouraged amongst like-minds.

- **A need for precision.** It is common nowadays to hear people referred to as 'on the spectrum' and this is often associated with gifted individuals' need for exact precision, fueled by an ability to see alternative meanings and qualify responses with one of my University professor's favorite lines, "it all depends." With like-minded peers, exploring the many possibilities that can be read into a situation can be challenging, even fun, but amongst different types of thinkers frustrations can arise.
- **The complex is simple.** Through associational and conceptual thinking, gifted students often make connections in ways that others simply don't. Temple Grandin has explained her mind as "a web browser" and this is an apt description of some gifted minds. They can see underlying patterns, breaking down and understanding abstract ideas in ways that demand learning challenges which when not met lead to boredom.
- **Inclination towards immersion.** Gifted students have a need to develop extensive, in-depth knowledge, and a capacity to integrate a breadth of ideas. For example, a young boy I taught in a weekend computer course was so fascinated by computers that despite not having one in his home or classroom, he taught himself BASIC programming language from his father's university textbook. However, they may also place limitations on their own learning, especially if they are not inspired or encouraged by peers who think similarly.
- **Ability to reason abstractly at an early age.** Being able to think metaphorically; reason logically, yet in the abstract; solve multiple problems in tandem; think paradoxically; and make logical connections leads to different ways of communicating, feeling, and experiencing the world around us.
- **Early grasp of the essential element of an issue.** Gifted children are often set apart by their depth of understanding implications, grasping cause and effect beyond their years. Being with other learners who 'get it', and can also hypothesize when thinking in opposites, forcing relationships or creating novel combinations, is a choice some gifted students will hunger for. Importantly, gifted like-minds can explore and debate moral and social issues with insight.
- **High capacity for empathy.** While some gifted students exhibit an exceptional ability for projective empathy, a lack of empathy demands choice and control in like-minded learning groupings. For the students in our study, they expressed little tolerance for learners of lesser abilities, especially in their group learning situations.
- **Exceptional memory.** Gifted students have not only better recollection; they have memories that are intense and enduring, characterized by multimodalities (e.g., sensory or associational). Physicians Brock and Fernet Eide at John Hopkins University described "brains on fire" and warned of drawbacks: sensory, emotional, and memory overload; hypersensitivities; mental fatigue; and 'analysis paralysis'.

Spending time with like-minded peers affords opportunities for engaging with those who think and learn in complementary ways, sharing values and interests, and challenging one another. It also provides a more acceptable context within which to ask questions (Adams-Byers, Squiller Whitsell, & Moon, 2004), receive constructive criticism (Chin & Harrington, 2009; Handel, Vialle, & Ziegler, 2013), set germane mastery and performance goals, and strive for and celebrate success. The advantages of spending time with like-minded others provides increased opportunities for connectedness; improved chances of being understood and accepted; better prospects of forming high quality friendships; more suitable occasions to practice socio-affective skills; and the comfort of "feeling normal" (Adams-Byers, Squiller Whitsell & Moon, 2004, p. 15). Gifted and talented students have the opportunity to learn how to learn, take risks and develop resiliency when learning with like-minded peers. Knowing how to think – not what to think – is what really matters.

1 Pseudonyms have been used for the research participants.

Acknowledgement