

Experiences of Gifted Adults Reentering the Educational System: a Qualitative Exploration

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Summary

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Background

Gifted learners, as researched in childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood, have several distinct learner characteristics. These characteristics lead to positive or negative experiences in school, depending on several internal and external factors. Educational research on gifted learning usually does not focus on adults.

Aim

The goal of this research is to understand the learning experiences of gifted adults reentering the educational system. The main question of this research is formulated as follows: What positive and/or negative experiences with adult education do gifted adults report after reentering the educational system, how do they interpret these experiences, and what solutions do they propose for possible problems?

Participants, procedure, design

The sample consisted of 10 gifted men and 12 gifted women aging from 29 to 61. They were contacted through calls for participation placed in the digital newsletter of Mensa and local electronic Mensa-mailing lists. A cross-sectional qualitative survey was conducted by interviewing the participants in-depth with the use of the online video call software Skype.

Measures

For the interviews, a brief topic list was constructed to facilitate an open interview on positive and negative experiences in education. This allowed for the participants to talk about the themes that were relevant to them, as opposed to themes found in the literature on gifted learning beforehand, leaving room for new insights.

Results

Participants liked gaining new knowledge and being immersed in new conceptual frameworks. Participants reported negative experiences where subject matter was not presented in a way that

matched the participant's learning style. Self-reported solutions to this mismatch focused on making teachers and students aware of different learning styles and how to deal with them.

Because of their high internal quality standard, the participants were very appreciative of teachers who placed the subject matter in a wider perspective and who had an open mind for discussion. Negative experiences were reported when teachers did not possess these characteristics. When talking about solutions, participants mainly reported conforming to the teacher.

Participants preferred assessment procedures that test deep learning, due to their high quality standard. Negative experiences were mostly reported where assessment consisted of multiple-choice exams. Participants suggest that multiple-choice exams should not be the standard.

Participants reported positive experiences with classmates who possessed relevant work experience. They reported negative experiences where classmates were not as motivated as them to obtain a good result in cooperative learning. Solutions included: conforming oneself to the standards of classmates and purposely selecting group members to work with on projects.

Conclusion

The experiences of gifted adult learners may be understood by looking at these four external aspects of learning: subject matter, teachers, assessment procedures, and classmates, in combination with these three internal aspects of learning: self-reported preferred learning style, self-determination, and internal quality standard. It is recommended to consider individual differences when designing instruction. Summative assessment should focus on deep learning, and the work experience of adult students should be utilized. Flexibility is recommended when cooperative learning is concerned.