

Gifted Child Personality Types and Effective School Lesson Plans

Deborah L. Ruf, PhD ©2008, 2011

Personality typing has been utilized for years in various personal and career counseling situations because it helps people to understand their own motivations and needs compared to those of others with whom they live and work. An excellent paper by Piirto (1998) summarizes personality type studies of gifted children and teachers. She points out that various authors have discovered and interpreted school behavior differences that are correlated with personality type preferences (e.g., Jones and Sherman (1979); Murphy, 1992; Myers and McCaulley, 1985; Myers and Myers, 1980), as well as studies of teacher types and interests (Betskouski and Hoffman, 1981; Piirto, 1998). For example, we know that the majority classroom teacher type preference is ESFJ (Betskouski and Hoffman (1981), while that of talented students is ENFP with a higher than the population average being introverted among this group (Piirto, 1998).

Here briefly is an informal summary of what each letter means:

Table 1

Preference	Characteristics	Additional Characteristics
E-Extroversion	Energized by being with people, interacting with others.	Does not mean talkative; an E can be quiet, even shy.
I-Introversion	Gains energy by being alone; down time generally means “alone time.”	Introverts can be talkative and good in groups, but they need “alone time” to recharge.
S-Sensing	Gather information through their five senses; detail-oriented; don't like theories as much as facts.	Like lists, clear directions, time tables. Often very literal, miss nuance, have difficulty generalizing.
N-Intuition	Use intuition and hunches; analytical and theoretical; see the ‘big picture’ and not as interested in the details.	Like to create their own plan after they understand a situation; bored by routine; comfortable with some uncertainty.
F-Feeling	Feelings matter, are important; like win-win solutions; generous with praise and affirmations.	Sometimes make less than ideal choices in order to please everyone; often hurt when not appreciated; can be quite sensitive to others.
T-Thinking	Practical, direct, expedient. Logic rather than emotion.	Other people's feelings may be an afterthought; may seem insensitive.
J-Judging	Orderly, organized, predictable.	Feel best when work is done, things are as they should be.
P-Perceiving	Flexible, open-ended, somewhat spontaneous.	Fairly independent, make decisions based on mood, timing, what feels right to them.

Sak (2004) notes that although gifted adolescents demonstrate all personality types as measured by the MBTI, they tend to prefer certain types more than general high school students do. Researchers (Delbridge-Parker & Robinson, 1989; Gallagher, 1990; Hoehn & Bireley, 1988) reported that about 50% or more of the gifted population is introverted compared to the general population, whose preference for introversion is 25%.

The Meanings of the Letters

Basically, the sixteen type preferences revolve around four dichotomous factors of E/I (extroverted/introverted), S/N (sensing/intuition), F/T (feeling/thinking), and J/P (judging/perceiving). Examinees take a written assessment where they respond to items about which of two scenarios they would prefer. The *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® is for adults and the *Murphy-Meisgeier Type Indicator for Children*® is for school-aged youngsters. The results are presented on a continuum for each dichotomy where it is possible to have a strong to slight preference for one quality or another.

Rationale for the Study

As a private consultant and specialist in high intelligence, with a primary interest in gifted children, I read in my early studies of gifted children that altruism and empathy were more prevalent and more developed in highly intelligent children. Many researchers wrote that some children, especially intellectually gifted children and adolescents, manifest sensitivity and concern for others quite early in their lives as compared to non-gifted peers.

Dabrowski suggests that a propensity for advanced moral development comes from a base of particular response patterns within the highly intelligent (1964). A significant aspect of my personal experience, i.e., rearing three highly gifted sons who did not show high degrees of empathy or sympathy toward global issues, led me to consider the possibility that some gifted children and adults are more predisposed to overt “caring” behaviors than others who are equally intelligent. Perhaps high intellectual level is important, but other personal characteristics are necessary for a caring, altruistic, or empathic approach to the needs of others.

Additional experiences have contributed to my interest in the topic of personality types among the gifted. During my initial studies of high intelligence, I learned that many people in the field assumed that high intelligence and altruism go hand in hand, that it is part of the moral sensitivity that the gifted share (Dabrowski, 1964; Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1942; Lind, 2000; Lovecky, 1997; Piechowski, 2006; Renzulli, 2002; Silverman, 1993; Terman, 1925; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982). O’Leary (2005) summarizes this viewpoint as follows:

Silverman (1993) suggests “the cognitive complexity and certain personality traits of the gifted create unique experiences and awareness that separate them from others. A central feature of the gifted experience is their moral sensitivity, which is essential to the welfare of the entire society.”

O’Leary concludes, “Moral reasoning as an indicator of giftedness and the advanced moral reasoning noted by researchers in the field of gifted education (Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1942; Kohlberg, 1984; Silverman, 1993a; Southern, 1993) suggest that those students who demonstrate advanced levels need a curriculum and counseling which also address this area of development.

Gifted programs and those working with gifted students must be aware of the affective traits and needs associated with these children and be aware of the necessity for counseling' (2005, p. 52).

I became concerned that some parents and teachers might actually conclude that advanced moral reasoning as described in some of the gifted literature was an essential concurrent factor within those people who were identified as gifted. The most commonly mentioned personality type found among the gifted was INFP. My own subject pool was self-selected by parents, and I began to suspect that there is probably something about the INFP gifted students that leads parents to take their children to specialists like me. We also know that just as certain personality type preferences are drawn to specific careers, different summer and academic programs for the gifted simply attract some types more than others and would lead to over-concentrations of these types in some studies.

Beginning in the year 2000, I started to administer *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® to all parent clients and *Murphy-Meisgeier Type Indicator for Children*® to all children six and older. I continued my practice of having parents complete my own form called *Developmental Milestones*, a form which included their description of early milestones, reasons they were seeking my help, how others were reacting to their child, and their goals for their child.

Results and Interpretation

Patterns slowly emerged and by the year 2007 I had data from more than 300 families with gifted children. My public speaking started to include what I was learning from personality typing, which then led to a different pattern of people seeking my help. By 2004, the overwhelming majority of children brought to me for evaluation were P-perceiving: 92%. P-Perceiving children are less likely to finish their work or stay on task when they find the work to be tedious or uninteresting than are J-Judging students. To me, this suggested that within the student population, there were many gifted children whose personalities allowed them to cooperate in school even when it contributed to their own underachievement. This meant that parents and teachers were pleased with their behavior and cooperation and such children were seldom brought to specialists for help or guidance or further evaluation because they were "doing fine" in school. After I started speaking and writing about how P-perceiving behavior in gifted children was worrisome to many parents and teachers, and that there are probably many cooperative but under-identified gifted students out there not having their needs met, more smart children who are cooperative in school started finding their ways to my doorstep for evaluation. Now I see a slightly higher percentage of J-Judgers than I used to see.

Many parents wonder if their children's type preference can change over time. It is generally believed that the S/N types are inborn and highly resistant to change (Piiro, 1998), but the other three dichotomies can change with effort, experience, or current conditions. This would be especially true in children, which is why some people think there is no point in assessing children for type. I find that knowing a child's current type preference makes it easier to help the child make changes or helps teachers and parents know what approaches are likely to be most effective with children. If their preferences change later, fine; but knowing their current values and viewpoints helps us interpret and deal with current issues now.

Table 2 School Behaviors Related to MBTI® Types

Personality Type	Common School Issues	Parental and Educator Viewpoint
Extrovert	Wants to work with and do what others are doing. Resists individualized plans, subject acceleration (where friends are left behind), or working beyond what classmates are doing. Fewer Es than Is spend lots of time reading, prefer to discuss, pick each other's brains.	Often defies gifted stereotype of being a loner so seen as "not trying" rather than extroverted gifted. If ongoing ability grouping is not provided, this child resists going to pull-out program, won't follow through on an IEP, gets restless doing independent study or online learning.
Introvert	Dislikes group work, has more difficult time making friends in mixed ability class than an extrovert because prefers one or two good friends or a soul mate or would rather read a good book.	Concerned if child doesn't have a lot of friends or is a loner; parents and teachers often manipulate the situation to get student more involved with classmates, learn to get along with "peers," although this usually means "age mates."
Sensor	Needs clear instructions and goals. May seem obtuse because the lack of intuition makes this student have difficulty with reading comprehension or knowing what he's being asked to do. Generally willing to memorize, more comfortable when he knows what to expect, better at math calculation than math reasoning.	This gifted child is often overlooked or under-estimated because they don't make mental connections as fluidly as Intuitives. A gifted Sensor generally impresses with a wide store of details and facts, very concrete, excellent memory. Their inability to see the big picture means they are less likely to enjoy theorizing about existential issues, and this makes them seem less intelligent to gifted Intuitives.
Intuitive	They have difficulty showing their work because their minds move so nonlinearly that they don't think they did any work. They usually don't follow steps to solve problems. They don't like to memorize because they feel more comfortable when they fully understand how to do something. If it makes sense to them, they can always re-create the method or strategy. They get impatient with directions and steps because they want to hear the point or overall goal first or they won't be able to "get into it" intellectually.	This child is stubborn and careless because she won't show her work and won't memorize her math facts. Most parents and teachers think that the child must memorize the basics before moving on to more complex material, which isn't true, so they often interpret the lack of memorization as lack of ability. Not following protocol, e.g., not showing work, not going through the outlined steps on a project or paper, get this gifted child in trouble, too. When school is too easy, this child's mind wanders. Far more Intuitives than Sensors are labeled as ADD.
Feeler	Many Feelers care deeply that their parents and teachers are pleased with them. Some, especially girls, comply so successfully with school expectations that they become perfectionistic underachievers who won't risk showing any academic	It depends on whether or not the child complies or resists. Often seen as too emotional, many are also seen as stubborn or noncompliant when they stick to their own inner-felt values about the worthiness of the work they are asked to do. It may violate the values of a Feeler to such a

	struggling for fear of losing everyone’s admiration and approval. Some Feelers, especially boys, see the ‘stupidity’ of the work and assignments in their classes and are truly angry, wounded, hurt when forced to comply.	degree that the adults would do best to allow an alternative proof of learning. Appropriate grouping and instruction take care of much of this issue, too.
Thinker	If they like the teacher and like the class, they will do better even when the work is below their abilities. If they are forced to comply with ridiculous requirements, they will lose respect for the adults who force it.	They may seem cavalier and arrogant because their youth and lack of experience puts them in the position of stating the obvious: “This work is stupid.” They are unlikely to suffer fools gladly.
Judger	These gifted students tend to get their work done and take pride in being first or best regardless of the inappropriateness of the assignments. They take advantage of its being easy. Because they do what they are supposed to do, they are rarely seen as needing more than they are getting in school.	These gifted students make their parents and teachers proud and happy. If and when these students become depressed due to a lack of true soul mate friendships, no one understands that lack of ability grouping is probably at the root of it.
Perceiver	Flexible and open-ended, these children run into trouble with late and uncompleted assignments. They don’t see the need to finish something when they already know how to do it.	They seem stubborn, undependable, and unfocused. Their lack of follow-through and compliance in school is seen as a sure sign that they are doomed, will never find a job, and are wasting their abilities. This kind of child is frequently an outright embarrassment to his or her parents, too, because they see the behavior as a bad reflection on their parenting.

Table 2 shows some ways the different preferences contribute to fairly predictable attitudes and behaviors of gifted students, and the reactions of adults in their lives. All of this is especially true for those who are in same-aged, mixed ability classrooms where their academic and intellectual peer relationship needs are not being met.

Parent personality type has a great deal to do with gifted child adjustment regardless of the child’s type preference. For example, a laid-back, idealistic INFP who has a similarly typed parent is much less likely to end up feeling like a failure than the child whose parent is an SJ type. Sensors are generally rule-and-procedure followers. They can’t easily relate to someone who chooses not to do something because it isn’t “right” for him. A Sensor parent is uncomfortable with a child who ignores what is normal and accepted behavior, and for such a parent, school performance is the first measure of self worth. FP children seem to wear their hearts on their sleeves, and a parent whose type ends in TJ might see the FP child as weak, stubborn or irrational. If you tell the parents of an uncooperative, unhappy, underperforming, disorganized gifted child that their child has “executive function” disorder, as an example, they find it much easier to deal with a labeled learning disability than with a child who simply doesn’t do what she

is supposed to do. In reality, it is almost always the school setting that brings out the worst in gifted children, and changing the setting can clear up the “bad” behaviors.

Why, then, do many gifted specialists see so many more P-Perceivers and especially FPs? These are the most likely gifted children to find regular school—classrooms that group students by age rather than readiness to learn or intellectual ability—boring, painful, and a waste of time. I ask parents if they’ve ever used this statement with their child: “In the amount of time you’ve argued with me about this, you could have finished it.” Such a child is almost always a Feeler-Perceiver. A Thinker-Perceiver is more likely to do a shoddy job but at least get it done. FPs, though, need their parents and teachers to understand them, so they need to have the argument. Thinkers simply dismiss the adults who made the foolish requirements and don’t care as much if the adults know why or understand them.

Parents only have so many options available to them when the majority of schools group children by age ~~not ability~~ in mixed ability classrooms. When parents know how classrooms are set up and how their own children are likely to react to those circumstances and requirements, they can effectively intervene and give the correct support to their children. If parents know ahead of time how their own children will react to different options and adjustments, an IEP (Individual Education Plan), subject level acceleration, or online learning, for example, then they can select options that might work with their child.

When we know parent and child personality types, the benefits go in both directions. For the child, it is possible to help the less flexible parent types to understand their child better and to help them change the child’s environment instead of trying to get the child to conform and comply with an inappropriate school situation. Any parent who suffered during the school years wants to see his or her children do better. For these parents, understanding how the schools are set up and how their type affected their own experience can be a very real relief. And most importantly, when the use of personality typing helps parents and educators to understand better that the behavior of many gifted children in school is a response of their personality type within the specific educational environment, more structural and programming changes to support these children may become available.

References

- Betskouski, M., & Hoffman, L. (1981). A summary of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator research application in education. *Research in Psychological Type*, 3, 3-41.
- Dabrowski, K. (1964). *Positive disintegration*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Delbridge-Parker, L., & Robinson, D. C. (1989). Type and academically gifted adolescents. *Journal of Psychological Type*, 17, 66-72.
- Gallagher, S. A. (1990). Personality patterns of the gifted. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 3(1), 1, 11-13.
- Gross, M. (1993). *Exceptionally Gifted Children*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Hoehn, L., & Bireley, M. K. (1988). Mental processing preferences of gifted children. *Illinois Council for the Gifted Journal*, 7, 28-31.

- Hollingworth, L. (1942). *Children above 180 IQ: Stanford-Binet: Origin and development*. New York: World Book Company.
- Jones, J.H., & Sherman, R.G. (1979). Clinical uses of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. *Research in Psychological Type*, 2, 32-45.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The psychology of moral development*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lind, S. (2000, Fall). Overexciteability and the highly gifted child. *California Association for the Gifted*, 31, No. 4.
- Lovecky, D. V. (1997). Identity development in gifted children: Moral sensitivity. *Roeper Review*, 20, 90-94.
- Myers, I.B., & McCaulley, M.H. (1985). *Manual: A guide to the development and use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Myers, I.B., with Myers, P. (1980). *Gifts differing*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Murphy, E. (1992). *The developing child*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- O'Leary, K. (2005). *Development of personal strengths and moral reasoning in gifted adolescents*. Unpublished dissertation: University of New South Wales.
- Piechowski, M. M. (2006). "Mellow out," they say. *If only I could: Intensities and sensitivities of the young and the bright*. Madison, WI: Yunasa Books.
- Piirto, J. (1998). *The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and talented adolescents: Feeling boys and thinking girls: Talented adolescents and their teachers*. Paper presented at the CAPT conference, Orlando, FL.
- Piirto, J. (1998). *Understanding those who create*. Scottsdale, AZ: Gifted Psychology Press.
- Renzulli, J. S. (2002). Expanding the conception of giftedness to include co-cognitive traits and to promote social capital. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84, 33-58.
- Silverman, L. (1993). The gifted individual: The phenomenology of giftedness. In L. K. Silverman (Ed.), *Counseling the gifted and talented*. Denver: Love Publishing Company.
- Terman, L. M. (1925). Mental and physical traits of a thousand gifted children. *Genetic studies of genius* (Vol. I). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sak, U. (2004). A synthesis of research on psychological types of gifted adolescents. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*.
- Webb, J. T., Meckstroth, E. A., & Tolan, S. S. (1982, 1994). *Guiding the gifted child: A practical resource for parents and teachers*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.