

## OAGC Review Article

### Abstract:

In this article the author discusses the challenges of advocating for gifted students from a deep place of passion, specifically if that passion blinds us to the humanity of our colleagues. The author shares two stories from her practice that illustrate how this passion can become a weakness, and how, through painful realizations of how this blind passion impacted others she worked with, she comes to understand that being a colleague is not aggressive or railroading, but working alongside others and meeting them where they are. The vulnerability inherent in the teaching profession, and the alienation in teaching the gifted make it vital that we use our strengths to communicate respectfully with our colleagues.

### Biography

Jennifer Groman has been in gifted education for 23 years, with special interests in creativity theory, transpersonal psychology, and teacher growth. She directs the Talent Development program at Ashland University, where her office does not smell like gym socks.

### Title: Being a Colleague

Working in education is challenging enough, but working in gifted education can be very alienating. Through my research on teacher growth and identity, I began to realize that while the culture of education - the Institution - is a large part of why teachers burn out, one of the main components of identity loss in teachers relates to how we treat one another: teacher to teacher. I studied three teachers in depth, all of whom were at one time or still in gifted education. I asked them to share their challenging experiences. Alongside them I also searched my stories of loss of identity and growth. I gained many insights, but the one I want to write about here is a lesson I learned about being a colleague. I have two stories from my practice to illustrate. I call this first one "Tigress Caged."

*I was ten years into the profession and I just wanted to be a good teacher. I worked hard at it, with long hours of planning and paperwork organizing my new little rural gifted program around changing requirements and local committees while working nights on my master's degree. I was dedicated to my students. Those of us who are considered "specials" teachers were not equal to regular ed, special ed, and Title I teachers. That was understood the day I entered my classroom, tucked behind the gymnasium in a padded-walled (how fitting) equipment storage room. This was my school's new room for the gifted and talented. It smelled like old gym socks.*

*Jack's mother came to me one day with agitated tears in her eye: her son was not eating, was stressed and disengaged in the second grade class that she felt was not challenging him. I sighed. I had worked with that teacher before. She was a gentle soul, but felt no need to differentiate for her gifted students. "He needs to work more slowly, take time with his work,"*

*she would say. Meanwhile he waited for others to finish, while his quickly scrawled but perfectly answered math papers piled up on her desk.*

*I went into tigress mode. I spoke to the principal about allowing Jack to change teachers midyear and to place him with a teacher who would make the accommodations he needed. The principal, a weak and insecure retiree who had been hired quickly to fill in as interim leader, put me off. I was tireless, working on ways to challenge Jordan, relieve his stress, and keep his mother from removing him for private school.*

*One day after school four elementary teachers paid me a visit. They had never entered my room before. I remember thinking how surprised I was that they even knew where my classroom was! (Probably followed the smell.) They filed in and told me they needed to talk to me. We all sat down and I waited, unnerved. As the conversation started, they each in turn told me how unprofessional I was for choosing to put the needs of this one student before the reputation of a tenured teacher. They reminded me that I was an inexperienced teacher, new to gifted education, and this was a veteran teacher with dozens of years of good service. I was unprofessional, disloyal, and unprincipled. I felt surrounded and attacked from every angle. How could I dare to question her ability to work with this student when she had taught hundreds of happy little second graders over her two decade career? I sat in stunned silence, holding back angry tears until they finally released me and left my room.*

*Then I fell apart.*

For me, this was an existential crisis. I faced a complete shift in how I viewed myself as a champion for my students. I wore my advocacy for students like a suffragette banner across my chest and after I stopped sobbing, I began to realize that perhaps that was not the best way to truly work alongside colleagues to make things better for gifted.

My strength, passion, and drive became my weakness. I came in like a mad, defensive freight train, anticipating challenge at every turn and ready for it in fighting stance. Ten years later I left teaching, exhausted and in deep mourning, to work in arts administration. (Side note: One thing I learned – if there is anything that is *less stable and less funded* than gifted education, it is the arts.) I call this story “Strengths, Weaknesses: My Return to Teaching.”

*Upon my return to the profession I accepted a job at the state level, slowly returning to life. I'd been working three years with a team of terrific educators creating a series of online instructional modules to teach groups of school staff and parents how to accommodate for gifted students. We had done some great work and I was beginning to see my way ahead to teaching again.*

*At one training workshop, I wanted to connect with the gifted teachers and coordinators who were there. It wasn't too many years before that I attended these kinds of meetings, listening to some nerdy no-load tell me how to teach. They were now looking at me with that same tired look. “Really? I spent two hours preparing sub plans for this?”*

*I was trying to talk to this group about how, when working with adults and colleagues, our greatest strength can sometimes be our biggest weakness. I had made this speech a dozen*

*times before. The PowerPoint slide glared and they just stared glassy-eyed at me. I knew exactly what they were thinking. Suddenly something opened up in me. I sighed and leaned slowly on a nearby table. I said softly, "I know something about this. I come across as all Miss Enthusiasm and Passion, but there is a weakness to that, and I learned it the hard way."*

*I began to tell them the story of my dealings with Jack's teacher. I had long since apologized to her for not initially going to her with my concerns about his accommodations, but it had lately been on my mind. I told them that my enthusiasm and passion for teaching and protecting my students gave me an inflated sense of power and self-righteousness that seemed to give me permission to totally run over a respected colleague.*

*"I was young and 'enthusiastically' gifted," I reasoned aloud, laughing at my own pun. My audience – suddenly attentive – was listening in silence. "And youth has its way of blinding us, doesn't it? It was a very painful realization at the time, but it taught me a lot about being human with others. It also taught me a lot about my own strengths and weaknesses."*

*My workshop partner was staring transfixed from the back of the room. I had strayed from our usual formula. I asked teachers to pair and share about their own perceived strengths and how they could be weaknesses, and their own perceived weaknesses and how they could be strengths. During the sharing out period a number of participants talked frankly about their personal and teaching lives. One teacher shyly said, "I tend to be very quiet and I have always viewed that as a weakness. How could it be considered a strength?" Another woman raised her hand and said, "Teachers are more comfortable working with someone who works with them, rather than trying to tell them what to do. Maybe being quiet would be an asset to them." Click. Connection. For them – and for me.*

*After the workshop my partner and I sat together reading the evaluations. He glanced over at me and smiled. "That went well," he said.*

What are your strengths? How do they become weaknesses? And what are your perceived weaknesses? Can they be considered as or channeled into strengths?

Teaching is a profession where we are vulnerable every day. But walking around in the shoes of our colleagues and leading from alongside rather than from high above gives us perspective that is part of our strength. That is being a colleague.