



An Interview with Wenda Sheard: Gifted in Paris

By Michael F. Shaughnessy

First Published in *The SENG Update* Newsletter, April 2010
http://www.sengifted.org/articles_multicultural/shaughnessy_interview_wenda_sheard.shtml

SENG's Editor in Chief, Dr. Michael Shaughnessy, interviews Wenda Sheard on her recent talk in Paris to the group Gifted in France. Wenda Sheard is an attorney, teacher, and mother of three gifted children. After practicing law for nearly twenty years, she earned a Ph.D. in political science with an emphasis on education policy. For two years, Dr. Sheard lived in Hangzhou, China and taught international students. Dr. Sheard is a founder of the Athens (Ohio) Association for Gifted Children, a recipient of an Ohio Association for Gifted Children award, a presenter at state and national gifted conferences, and a writer of articles about gifted children. She has helped teach the highly gifted portions of on-line gifted education courses and has presented at teacher in-service days. She has also worked, presented, and published in the political science field, and served in numerous volunteer and professional capacities in the legal field. A former president of SENG, she currently lives near London, England, and teaches at an international school.



Question by M.S.: I understand that you recently spoke in one of the most beautiful cities in the world - Paris, France. Tell our readers about it.

Answer by W.S.: The speaking engagement in Paris went well. About thirty people attended. Almost all were parents of gifted children. Slightly more than half of the people in the audience were expatriates from the USA, England, and other countries. The others were from France. One woman who is part of a new school for gifted children in Paris attended. Several teachers were in the audience.

Question: What kinds of things did you talk about at your presentation?

Answer: My presentation was a mixture of information about the social and emotional characteristics of gifted children and some qualitative research I did a few years ago comparing the characteristics of third culture kids with those of gifted children. That research was published in *Roeper Review*: "Lessons From our Kissing Cousins: Third Culture Kids and Gifted Children," by Wenda

Sheard, January 2008, Volume 30, Issue 1, pages 31-38.

Question: What do you mean by "third culture kids"?

Answer: The term "third culture kids" applies to people who have spent time living away from their home country during childhood. Although adults living in other cultures observe the cultural differences around them, children living in other cultures absorb parts of those cultures and create, internally, a "third culture" that is a blend of the child's home and host country cultures. I found it fascinating that my Paris audience included many adults who themselves were third culture kids. After my talk, one audience member asked me to conduct research on the children of grown-up third culture kids, and another told me that he believes that the public schools of all countries cause third culture kids difficulties because the public schools of all countries teach that their own country is best.

Question: What are some of the emotional issues involved?

Answer: I explained how both gifted children and third culture kids suffer feelings of alienation, resort to hiding aspects of themselves, and experience

a progress towards maturity that differs from the path society expects. Children who are both gifted and third culture can experience a "double whammy" when they return to their home countries and try to fit into the academic and social scenes in their local schools.

Next, I summarized from my research the lessons that third culture kids have learned from living abroad. I asked the parents in the audience to apply those same lessons to helping to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of their gifted third culture children. Because third culture kids learn that familiarity leads to toleration and understanding in the global arena, I asked the parents in the audience to familiarize themselves with the unique academic, social, and emotional needs of gifted children in order that the parents can help themselves and others understand gifted children.

Because third culture children have learned to be flexible in their thinking, and have learned the necessity of understanding other people's actions, cultures, and beliefs, I urged the parents in the audience to be flexible in their thinking about schools and education, and to understand the actions, cultures, and beliefs inherent in most schools.

Question: Who are some of the people who have influenced you, and that you discussed at your presentation in Paris?

Answer: When teaching the parents about the characteristics of gifted children, I drew from work available on the SENG website by Deidre Lovecky, P. Susan Jackson, Sharon Lind, James Webb, and others. I especially love Deidre Lovecky's five characteristics of gifted children and adults, available from www.sengifted.org. Whenever I speak about SENG issues, I always mention work by James Webb and others on misdiagnoses, and I mention P. Susan Jackson's article "Bright Star, Dark Sky," which speaks of the phenomenon of gifted children hiding dangerously severe depression from parents and others. I also pepper presentations with stories about my own experiences raising three gifted children.

Question: What information about schools and education did you share with the parents?

Answer: When I urged the parents in Paris to be flexible in their thinking about schools and education in general, I used my teacher hat to attempt to dispel a series of myths about education, including myths about curricula, grade levels, socialization, report cards, and college admissions. Parents are often surprised to hear a teacher explain that a typical sixth grade classroom might include children with reading comprehension levels from fourth grade up past high school. Parents are also often surprised to learn that most private colleges in the United States will accept students without standard high school diplomas. The parents I met in Paris were no exception, although they did inform me that all universities in France do require a high school diploma. In answer to that concern, I urged the parents to check out the North Atlantic Regional School (www.narhs.org), which was founded by gifted-friendly folks and has a good record of helping students around the United States and elsewhere earn a high school diploma long-distance and gain admittance to colleges of their choice.

Question: Any last comments or concluding statement?

Answer: I am grateful to the members of Gifted in France for inviting me to speak. From them, I learned that parents of gifted children everywhere face similar academic, social, and emotional issues. I also learned that the research I did a few years ago for the *Roeper Review* article is very true: there are similarities between third culture kids and gifted children. Both groups seek acceptance and understanding. Gifted children and their parents can benefit greatly by lessons learned by third culture kids--that people fear the alien and accommodate the comfortable. The more we help gifted children and adults, as well as the professionals who work with them, feel comfortable about giftedness, the better. The SENG mission rings true beyond the United States of America.