

Book Review

Micro-Schools: Creating Personalized Learning on a Budget

Book by Jade Rivera

Reviewed by Linda C. Neumann

The tenth addition to the *Perspectives In Gifted Homeschooling Series* is Jade Rivera's book *Micro-Schools: Creating Personalized Learning on a Budget*. The publisher is **Gifted Homeschoolers Forum (GHF)**, a non-profit organization that focuses on gifted and twice-exceptional kids and their families, offering resources, classes, and a network for communication and support.

Like others in this series, this nearly 80-page soft-cover book offers a well-written overview of its topic: micro-schools – what they are, why they're needed, and how to establish one. In the book's introduction, the author acquaints readers with the term *micro-school* in this way: “[It] is not like homeschooling. It is not a co-op. Nor is it like traditional public school or private school. It is education on the cutting edge.” Later in the book, she states that a micro-school is “just a school that children may attend part-time or full-time”; but, in her opinion, it's a school that should provide “an appropriate academic and social-emotional challenge.” Equally essential, Rivera says, is “individualizing almost every expectation and request made of the learner,” a goal that she describes as “extremely challenging, but not impossible.”

In the first chapter, Rivera explains how she became involved in micro-schooling. A student who excelled in some areas and struggled in others, she found success at Evergreen State College, a public liberal arts college in Olympia, Washington. The school is known as a non-traditional college in which, as

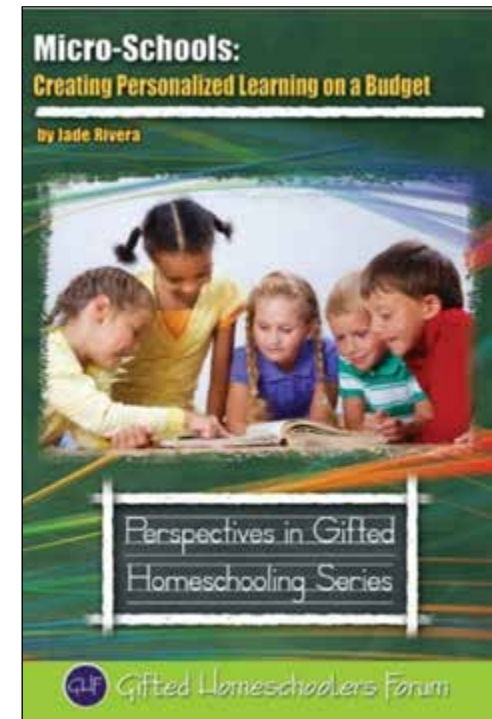
Wikipedia states, students enroll in interdisciplinary academic programs instead of classes.

After an unsatisfying stint as a chemist, Rivera found her niche in the field of education, teaching chemistry in a small progressive school for gifted students. Her success there, she states in the book, came from “just teaching the way I wished I had been taught, a lot like the way I was taught at Evergreen.” Her approach to teaching was to develop a curriculum that was “completely project-based, with full choice given to the students.” The result, according to the author, was that the students loved it and she felt that she had discovered her life's work.

In time, Rivera founded her own school: One Room Micro-school for Gifted and Twice-Exceptional Students. Over the next two years, Rivera says, she learned “a lot about educating, administering, and working with families.” What she also learned was that “the programs are not about the lessons, but about the community and giving children the chance to learn on their own terms.”

In the following six chapters of the book, the author lays out the rationale for starting a micro-school, the challenges, and the steps to accomplish it. The rationale revolves around the characteristics of gifted learners – their intensities, their capacity for learning quickly and deeply, their creativity, and their need for independence. The challenges come down to what Rivera describes as the “push and pull between everyone's needs.” By “everyone's needs,” she means the following:

- Students' temperaments
- Students' individual academic needs



- Parental expectations
 - Teaching preferences.
- All, according to the author, must be balanced.
- In the remaining four chapters, Rivera covers the steps for creating a micro-school:
- Recruiting families
 - Choosing a lead educator
 - Logistics, environment, and schedules
 - Parents and fostering community.



A Conversation with Jade Rivera

Finding the Right Learning Environment

By Linda C. Neumann

Author, educator, and coach Jade Rivera has made neurodivergent learners the focus of her work for much of the last decade. When asked to describe this population, she explains that they are individuals who, due to common variations in the human genome (such as giftedness, autism, and dyslexia, for example) process the world around them differently than do most others.

“I love the term *neurodivergent*,” she says, “because it quickly conveys exactly what I’m talking about with regard to giftedness or twice-exceptionality. It breaks down the myths surrounding these children, and it gets to the heart of what we’re really talking



new venture as a way to use her own personal and professional experiences as well as her compassion to

about — kids who are having a holistically different experience from what many people consider normal.”

Rivera began a career in alternative education following what she describes as a “brief, successful, yet unfulfilling career as a chemist.” She saw this

help young neurodivergent learners understand who they are and how they learn. She works with both parents and professionals to help them better understand and meet the needs of the neurodivergent learners they raise, teach, and care for.

What Makes a Good Learning Environment for Neurodivergent Learners

What does the “right” learning environment look like for kids who experience both learning and the world around them differently? According to Rivera, “connection, acceptance, and sustained support are the true needs of a learning environment.” She believes that advanced academics, iPads, and maker-spaces are great; but, she says, “They only go so far if we don’t take the time to connect socially and emotionally and allow children’s abilities to unfold naturally, at their own sped-up or slowed-down pace.”

Rivera explains that, in her experience, setting high expectations for these learners is also essential. “I let my students know that they are capable of great and fulfilling feats,” she states. “I tell them that it’s our job as facilitator and student to work together to determine how they learn as well as what they want to learn so that they can live a life that is meaningful to them.”

When asked why traditional schools are often a poor fit for gifted and 2e learners, Rivera replies, “I think it’s important to note that traditional school has become increasingly difficult for neurodivergent children in the last 15 years, since No Child Left Behind went into effect. I might have had a more appropriate

than they have. And they certainly are not trained to empathize with the intensity and sensitivity that go hand in hand with that precociousness.

Readers will also have a good start in figuring out what it takes to build the kind of learning environment in which these students can thrive.

For information on books available from GHF Press, visit: <http://giftedhomeschoolers.org/ghf-press>. To learn more about Jade Rivera’s thoughts on what constitutes a good learning environment, see “Finding the Right Learning Environment: A Conversation with Jade Rivera,” starting on this page. 📖

Micro-schools, concluded

The book ends with sample enrollment contracts and resources

Readers of this book will come away with an understanding of the role that micro-schools can play in meeting the needs of students viewed as “outliers” in many more traditional schools. Of these students, Rivera says:

My students gravitate toward subject matter beyond their years and show an aptitude for understanding and integrating knowledge in those subjects with a depth that can make a typical teacher feel uneasy. Sadly, most teachers are not taught how to relate to a child with a greater knowledge base about a subject

Finding the Right Learning Environment, continued


and innovative education as a 2e child in the 1980's than most kids are getting now in 2016. Teachers have been systematically stripped of their abilities to be flexible and use their best judgment. They are forced to focus so much on achievement that they can't afford to spend time on connection; and, as I stated before, flexibility and connection are vital to a 2e child's wellness in the classroom. Add to this the fact that teachers are

rarely trained to educate gifted and twice-exceptional children, and you've got a recipe for misery."

The Impact of an Inappropriate Learning Environment on Neurodivergent Children

In her work, Rivera sees the impact that being in the wrong learning environment can have on neuro-

divergent learners. "They are hit with the combo of depression and anxiety, which may show up as volatility and anger in the classroom, or possibly as withdrawal and lack of engagement," she explains. These students may find themselves incorrectly identified as having ADHD or an emotional behavior disorder; and they may be inappropriately remediated or



Designing an Innovative Learning Environment

As part of her work, Jade Rivera designs innovative learning environments. Here are some thoughts she shared with 2e Newsletter on what an innovative learning environment should be.


"Many people equate innovation with technology, but innovation is so much more than that! When I think of innovation, I think of iteration — making a commitment to repeatedly coming back to the classroom's academic, social, and physical design to make it better for everyone who uses the space. The basis for these changes should be feedback and observation, and the process for making changes should be one of testing out new ideas, observing and assessing their efficacy, and then coming back to design some more. It's an endless process but an effective one. With a certain mindset, it's joyful. Today, in its latest form this process is referred to as Design Thinking. To learn more about it, check out Stanford Design School's website: <http://dschool.stanford.edu/dgift>.

"To this end, every micro-school that I've led has held a strong commitment to reflection and iteration. I'm constantly absorbing all I can about educational theory and neurodivergent children so I can create the most effective learning environment possible. I'm proud to pass on this knowledge to others, like Edison Academy SLO [San Luis Obispo] in southern California. This private micro-school for twice-exceptional students is committed to providing a personalized learning environment for twice-exceptional students by focusing on their strengths. They create an individualized learning plan for each student in tandem with the child and caregivers based on each student's readiness, talents and interests. This is an example of a school that understands what twice-exceptional learners need.

"Edison Academy SLO is the first up-and-running micro-school born from my Build Your Micro-School Summer Institute. I created the institute for people who read my book, but wanted more. The Build Your Micro-School Summer Institute is a three-month

course packed with guidance and information on creating your own innovative learning environment. Each week I host live calls and open office hours. I work with those enrolled to set goals and create lists of outlined action steps. By the end of our time together, enrollees have everything they need to create a thoughtfully planned micro-school ready to meet the learning needs of their community.

"People in education talk a lot about inspiring children to become learners and preparing them for lifelong learning. In my mind, there's no better way to accomplish these goals than to build them directly into the design of the learning environment. I love to teach people how to do exactly that."

For information on Jade Rivera's Build Your Micro-School Summer Institute, visit: <http://buildyourmicroschool.com>. 

Finding the Right Learning Environment, concluded

medicated. They are at risk, she says, for being bullied, kicked out of school, or even treated for oppositional defiance disorder.

“Unsurprisingly,” Rivera observes, “the result is often a child with a poor self-image, one who might feel alienated and who has no real friends.” These are also children more likely to express thoughts like, “I wish I was never born” or “I want to die,” a situation that Rivera describes as both deeply sad and totally unnecessary.


Switching to a more appropriate learning environment, however, is not an instant cure-all. According to

Rivera, “Transitioning a child from an inappropriate environment to an appropriate one can be challenging. If the new learning environment is project-based or progressive, it might take students a while to adjust to the new expectations put upon them.”

Furthermore, Rivera notes, a child may have developed unhealthy coping mechanisms that will take time and perhaps counseling to redirect. This healing process, in her opinion, must be the top priority.

Rivera has seen that kids pulled from the traditional classroom and placed in a progressive school can become miserable in a wholly different way. “All of the

sudden,” she says, “they’re asked to direct and think for themselves after having very little experience doing that! It’s critical to scaffold these children into these new environments in order to set them up for success.”

According to Rivera, neurodivergent learners who make the change to an appropriate learning environment will “find themselves challenged and encouraged at their level and according to their learning style. Overall, they will have their needs to be seen and heard met. But this is not to say that it will be all roses and sunshine. There will be hard days, but there will be fewer hard days.” 

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