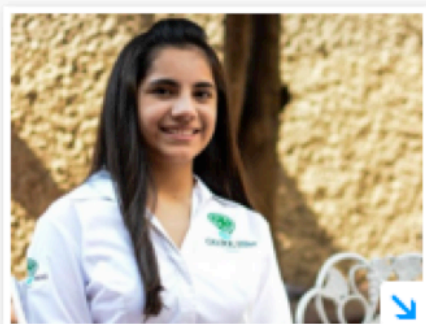


Mexico's 13-year-old psychologist is amazing

Jan-Albert Hootsen , GlobalPost

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(Photo: Jan-Albert Hootsen/GlobalPost)

MEXICO CITY — When asked how it feels to be one of Mexico's most powerful women at her age, [Dafne Almazan](#) giggles. "I'm kind of proud of it," she says. "It's a great honor."

Last month, Dafne became the world's youngest psychologist as she graduated from Mexico's Monterrey Institute of Technology ([ITESM](#)). At just 13 years old, she's the country's most famous child prodigy. And it shows: When she's not studying, she plays the piano, teaches Mandarin to other gifted children and she just returned from a trip to Denmark where she presented her simulated satellite project.

"It's not actually that hard, to be honest," she says. "It's not like getting up really early every day and staying up really late. I just try to organize my time as best as I can so I can do all the things I like."

Becoming a psychologist is a remarkable achievement for such a young person, even if she is a genius. It's why Forbes named her one of the 50 most powerful Mexican women this summer. According to the magazine, Dafne's "power" springs mostly from her capacity to inspire others.

"I'm happy with the attention," she says in an interview with [GlobalPost](#), with a somewhat bashful smile. "This way I can show everyone that it's worth it doing your best. And I can do something about the prejudice that gifted children spend their time locked up in a library. We don't have to give up our youth just because we're gifted, you know."

Her success made Dafne the poster child for the super-gifted in Mexico. Her inspiring role may indeed be sorely needed. Most child prodigies in Mexico aren't nearly as lucky as she is.

A recent study estimates there are 1 million underage geniuses in this country of 120 million, but only 4% of them reach adulthood with the ability to actually put their gifts to use.

Here are some of the reasons. The vast majority of geniuses are wrongly diagnosed as having a mental disorder. They receive none of the special attention they need in a woefully inadequate Mexican education system. And they suffer bullying at school, depression and demotivation for developing their talents.

Said study, the first and so far only one of its kind published in Mexico, was carried out in 2013 by the Talent Attention Center (CEDAT in its Spanish initials), a private institution in [Mexico City](#) studying the child prodigy phenomenon and offering after-school courses.

Established in a mansion-like building in the capital city's posh Del Valle neighborhood, CEDAT provides approximately 250 super-gifted children with classes like robotics, astronomy and physics, while also helping parents deal with their genius kids.

CEDAT is the biggest institution of its kind Latin America. It's a family business of sorts: It was started by Asdrubal Almazan, a doctor and Dafne's father. His youngest daughter is the third in a generation of prodigies; her older brother Andrew, 20, and sister Delanie, 17, are also highly gifted.

"Establishing CEDAT began out of personal necessity, when I found out Andrew had genius-level intellect," Almazan says. "When he was 9 years old, he was having trouble at school. He was smarter than the other kids, would often correct his teachers and suffered from boredom and bullying."

Andrew himself now leads the psychology department at CEDAT. He entered university at age 12, back then the youngest in Mexican history (until his youngest sister overtook him). He graduated in psychology and education and is now developing an educational model for highly gifted students at the ITESM university in Mexico City.

"I'm trying to prevent other children from having to go through the same experiences as I did," Andrew says over [Skype](#). He was attending a conference at Harvard when the interview took place. "Mexicans are very poorly informed about what genius-level intellect in a child means. Prodigies are often wrongly diagnosed with ADHD, and parents have no idea how to deal with them. Many are rejected by their classmates and their teachers."

Mexico's education system ranks an abysmal last among member states of the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD). And, according to CEDAT's study, it has virtually no resources to identify and guide super-gifted pupils adequately.

And that's not just a problem for the kids themselves, but for the entire country. Mexico's economy has been underperforming for years, with half the population living in poverty. Innovation lags behind; according to the OECD, patents and other science and innovation outcomes are all very low.

"There have been plenty of studies that point out that a more intelligent economy is a more prosperous economy," Andrew explains. "And a country that 'loses' its prodigies is a country that loses economically."

Mexico's federal government seems in no hurry to adjust that problem. While embroiled in a seemingly endless struggle with radical unions over teacher evaluations, the [Education Department](#) in August cut funding to several major public universities by almost \$70 million. Never mind any additional government support for institutions like CEDAT, which lacks the resources to expand.

Dafne, however, retains her youthful enthusiasm. Despite being a graduated psychologist, she won't be treating any patients in the near future; she just decided to pursue a master's degree in education, which will likely make her one of the few people in the world to gain an MA while still a minor. "I know it's hard to reach and guide all gifted children in Mexico, but I'm optimistic that we'll eventually be able to do so," she says. "I always wanted to go to college, and I managed to achieve it too."