

Gifted children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder(ADHD): What are some of the implications for teachers?

This article describes a small scale research project conducted in 2007/2008 that moved beyond the current literature's focus on emotional characteristics and misdiagnosis of Giftedness as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to address some educational and social experiences of six children who have been identified as being Gifted (deliberately capitalised to show Giftedness is as significant as ADHD which has to be capitalised) with ADHD. This research involved both interviewing the six Gifted children with ADHD, their parents and a staff member of the George Parkyn Centre (now the Gifted Education Centre) who had worked with many Gifted children with ADHD.

The main aim of this research was to identify the learning experiences and preferred teaching strategies of children who had been identified as Gifted with ADHD. This article provides a brief overview of the study as it addresses the key findings and considers the implications for teaching practice and suggests some possible directions for future research.

Key findings and implications of the project

Although there is a body of literature on both Giftedness and ADHD, there has been little research to date on the preferred educational strategies of children who are both Gifted and have ADHD. This study therefore provided important insights into the learning experiences of this twice-exceptional group of children. The research questions were investigated by conducting semi-structured interviews with six Gifted children with ADHD, their parents and a staff member at the Gifted Education Centre (a One Day School). The stories told by these children and their families indicated that even though they could be considered fortunate, in that their Giftedness had been recognised, their educational experiences were mixed. The children and their parents reported that the children's positive experiences were for the most part at external educational centres such as One Day Schools with often more negative educational experiences in their 'normal' classrooms. Experiences at normal school seemed to be characterised by what appeared, for various reasons, to lead the children to avoid

challenging tasks. However, while the children seemed content in most cases not to challenge themselves, there were instances where behavioural issues arose that were possibly due to boredom or lack of motivation, rather than (or in addition to) factors associated with their ADHD. The parents expressed concern that this lack of challenge could lead to patterns of underachievement, and reluctance to persist when learning did become difficult. Although, these patterns seemed to be overcome when effective educational strategies were utilised (e.g., many of the children referred to how they were able to stop their incessant moving, a characteristic of ADHD, when reading a book relating to a topic of interest).

This study provided insights into the children's experiences in a range of contexts, and through this identified other effective strategies for these twice exceptional children. These included, assisting Gifted children with ADHD to become learning goal oriented (e.g., by utilising a reward system that provided immediate visual feedback) and acknowledging their interests (e.g., topics or preferred teaching strategies, such as presenting information visually). Other preferred strategies included, tasks having a meaningful purpose (which sometimes meant the purpose of a task merely had to be explained if not explicit), allowing movement, and the use of computers.

In addition, having a friendship with a 'true peer' (someone who is also Gifted and understands what it is like to be different) seemed to assist these children to overcome social difficulties and enabled them to enjoy working with others (which could be considered an integral part of the New Zealand classroom learning environment). It is important these educational strategies are utilised otherwise these children could continue to underachieve as their Giftedness (in some settings) seemed to be masked by their disability (ADHD). Although when these effective educational strategies were used some of these children were able to overcome difficulties associated with their disability (e.g., the previously mentioned wanting to move).

However, this does not mean this study is suggesting that a 'normal' classroom teacher could address each child's preferred effective strategies during all learning times. In contrast, this study has emphasised that the best way to address the learning of Gifted children with ADHD may be to acknowledge learning preferences through

individualisation, perhaps with children as self managers (to an extent that is appropriate for the individual). This is because self management could allow children to adapt learning to relate to their interests, making them stimulated and intrinsically motivated to learn. Self management could also allow children to utilise their perceived self efficacy. For example, they could decide whether they wanted to work alone or in a group (in relation to whether they could do the task well alone or if they could benefit from support from other children).¹

It seems acknowledgment of the previously mentioned educational strategies (e.g., a reward system that acknowledges visual information, allowing movement, purposeful work, or explaining the purpose of a task, allowing the use of a computer and acknowledging interests) could mean these Gifted children with ADHD may exhibit their strengths as they should be stimulated to learn and exhibit their potential (e.g., strengths) thus teachers should have more accurate expectations. This is significant because a teacher's expectations of a Gifted child should be appropriately high. However, this study indicated that some 'normal' classroom teachers may have had low expectations that negatively impacted on these children's behaviour and academic abilities as they appeared to be underachieving. In contrast at One Day School or other external learning centres (e.g., Kip McGrath) it seemed their Giftedness was recognised, and these children seemed to excel.

Some may suggest this indicates 'normal' teachers could benefit from professional practice on how to teach Gifted children, including those with difficulties such as ADHD. Nevertheless, this study indicated effective educational strategies for these children could also apply to the 'average' child. Therefore it is not only a teacher of the Gifted (e.g., a One Day School teacher) but 'normal' effective classroom teachers that should be utilising these strategies. This is not an inappropriate expectation because as Moltzen (2005) suggested the 'normal' classroom is where most Gifted children can be found and it is requirement by law (due to NAG 1-III, Ministry of

¹ 'Normal' classroom teachers should be able to assist the Gifted children with ADHD to become self managers (e.g., those who develop their own goals and manage their own tasks) with the encouragement and guidance of the New Zealand curriculum as managing self is one of five key competencies. The Ministry of Education (2007a) indicated the key competencies are more complex than skills and successful learners understand when and how to use the competencies.

Education, 2007b) that Gifted children are identified and provided with appropriate education.

Conclusions

This study has not suggested new educational strategies but has indicated that effective educational strategies for some Gifted children with ADHD (e.g., acknowledging interest) could be those that are also effective for the 'average' child. Although the underlying message of individualizing learning may be a newer concept recognized by the Ministry of Education (2006) as personalised learning.

The educational strategies identified in this study were found through reading but the depth was gained from talking to the Gifted children with ADHD and their parents. So although the specific findings within this research may not be applicable to all Gifted children with ADHD, what this study emphasises is that teachers should be researchers who ask questions and seek answers by talking to children and their parents.

Gifted children with ADHD are a group of Gifted children that are on the fringe who have been under-researched, yet it is understandably very important to these children and their families that their educational abilities are accommodated by using effective educational strategies so they can be assisted to meet their potential.

Identifying effective educational strategies was particularly important because the children's educational experiences in the 'normal' classroom were not very positive. This may suggest in order for a teacher to identify effective educational strategies for a Gifted child with ADHD they would have to acknowledge that although the child had behavioural difficulties they could also have potential beyond that being exhibited in their classroom.

Directions for future research

Future research should be undertaken to address effective educational strategies for Gifted children with ADHD, as to date this study seemed to be only the third undertaken internationally and the first in New Zealand. This future research could be action research that utilises the educational strategies suggested in this study.

However, the educational strategies the children in this study found effective may not be effective for other Gifted children with ADHD and what this study indicated was that Gifted children with ADHD should have individualised learning.

Therefore, action research could establish and carry out Individual Education Plans (IEPs) with children who are Gifted with ADHD. At the beginning of the year the researcher could carry out meetings with members within each child's team and develop IEPs for the child for a period of time (perhaps a term). Individual education teams could include the child their, parents, 'normal' classroom teacher, One Day School teacher (or preferred extra-curricular teacher) and any other people the child could benefit from having involved in establishing an IEP (e.g., members of the team could be different for each individual child). The team could then establish children's preferred educational strategies that could become components of their IEP.

This action research could truly establish whether an educational strategy, recommended for the Gifted by the Ministry of Education (2000), that is perhaps not often utilised, could assist these Gifted children with ADHD to meet their potential.

Furthermore, this study indicated truly individualised learning could involve the child (to an agreed extent) self managing their education. This is because a teacher may not be able to carry out each individual child's preferred effective educational strategies in all learning situations.

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