

THE MYSTERY CONDITION

DETECTION AND INTERVENTION

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There is a group of children in New Zealand who have a condition which severely impacts on their learning but which is very difficult to diagnose. It is so difficult, in fact, that some researchers believe that over 50% of children with this condition are never diagnosed and never receive appropriate help. Misdiagnosis is not uncommon, with children being given other labels and inappropriate and sometimes harmful treatments. Furthermore, researchers say, a number of children are said to have this condition, when in reality they do not, again sometimes with harmful outcomes.

This condition is giftedness.

In almost any other situation - if, say, these statistics applied to children with hearing problems - we would surely be expressing considerable professional concern.

But giftedness? Given all the other traumatic problems that children can face, does it really matter if some very bright children who are surely going to succeed anyway are not immediately picked up by their schools?

It matters to Mark, who at just seven years old attempted suicide because of his unhappiness at school, and very nearly succeeded.

It matters to five-year-old Linda, reading Roald Dahl independently at home but forced to learn as a beginner reader at school: she has started bedwetting again, has nightmares, begs her mother desperately every day not to have to go to school.

It matters to Peter, taunted by other children because of his “weird ideas”: he now hides in corners at playtime, never asks or answers questions in class and is perceived by his current teacher as an inadequate little boy of barely average ability.

It matters to Todd, misdiagnosed as ADHD and fed on Ritalin for months.

And it matters to Jennifer, happy and successful at school, liked by her teachers for her positive attitude and beautifully presented, accurate work, popular with other children, totally unaware that she is working three to four years below her true ability level.

These are actual situations. They are typical of hundreds we have encountered in our work at the George Parkyn National Centre for Gifted Education.

DETECTING THE GIFTED

Why aren't these children being found?

The reasons are many and varied. For example, media stereotypes mislead many people, community attitudes towards the gifted make many parents reluctant to “label” their children, the very diversity of the children themselves further complicates matters: Todd bouncing off walls, Peter physically and mentally cowering in corners and Jennifer brilliantly conforming, are unlikely to be seen as having the same core issue.



WHAT ABOUT TESTING?

But a major reason is quite simply lack of knowledge amongst teachers themselves. Most teachers had little or no pre-service training in identifying and teaching gifted children; the opportunity for subsequent professional development in this field has been limited in New Zealand. Welcome as the Ministry of Education's current initiatives are, it will be a very long time before all teachers have the specific understandings and skills required to cater effectively for the gifted child.

The kinds of testing most frequently used in the classroom are not necessarily particularly effective in finding gifted children. They are virtually always tests of performance or achievement rather than of ability; gifted children do not always perform well in the test situation. Again, there are many reasons for this. Highly creative thinkers may do poorly on "one right answer" tests. Gifted children who have found that the cost of being recognised is too high may deliberately aim for a low or average score. And so on.

Even where children score highly, what does this actually mean? If Luke is on the 99th percentile in his PATs, does this mean he could work one or two or even four or more years ahead of where he is at now? We don't know: these tests don't discriminate sufficiently at the upper end to tell us this, and off-level testing is rarely used.

A full-scale psychological assessment using a range of assessment tools and carried out by a psychologist sensitive to the special issues for gifted children can be extremely helpful. But such testing is not within Group Special Education's brief and the cost, if done privately, is prohibitive for many parents and there is no guarantee that the information will be properly understood. One teacher said very recently to one of our parents when offered an assessment report, "I'm not going to look at that. I prefer to make up my own mind." Unfortunately, her response is not unique. However, we are still up against the reality that relatively few children will be assessed in this way. We need other options.



HOW ELSE CAN GIFTED CHILDREN BE IDENTIFIED?

The key factor is the child's behaviour. This is where we can almost always find clues to help us in recognising the gifted child.

There are two aspects to this.

Firstly, the learning behaviour of gifted children shows some characteristics which are markedly different from those of less able children. Within their specific areas of ability, gifted children grasp concepts more quickly, see relationships more readily, are more curious and exploratory, tend to be more persistent, are generally able to concentrate for much longer and are more inclined to speculate about possibilities. They have a strong drive to find meaning and purpose in what they do. They may have a heightened sensitivity to emotional experience and to social and other issues. They are likely to be fairly intolerant of repetitive work and may lose interest quickly once they have achieved understanding: they want to move on. But when their interest is caught, they resist interruption, their ideas and responses are complex and their work often extremely detailed. But what interests them is not necessarily what the teacher planned.

There are, of course, many individual differences. Some gifted children, for instance, are extreme perfectionists, while others appear to be completely unconcerned about the appearance of their work or its impact on others. But even given these differences, recognisable patterns occur.

The [Teacher Observation Scales](#) provide a very useful tool for detecting gifted characteristics. Based on the Hartman-Renzulli Scales, the [Teacher Observation Scales](#) were modified and normed for New Zealand by McAlpine and Reid and can be obtained inexpensively from the [NZCER](#).

Secondly, the situation response of the gifted child can be extremely illuminating.

For many gifted children, the situation in which they find themselves is one of endless frustration. They may repeatedly be asked to learn again material they already know and to practise skills they



have already mastered. They are surprisingly often denied access to resources and leaning activities appropriate to their ability level, but beyond their chronological level. They may see other children being praised for work of lesser quality while their own efforts seem to be taken for granted and their questions and ideas are often discouraged. Even where teachers are more aware of their needs, gifted children can still find themselves being held back by the slower learning rates of others, and they may find it difficult to understand why other children can't see the concepts and issues which are so clear to them and why other children sometimes seem to find them unlikeable or strange.

Children cannot escape from school or from their school situation. Somehow they have to find a way to cope. It is through these coping strategies that they may come to your attention:

- Frustration can lead to anger, disruptive behaviour, work avoidance or even work refusal, intolerance of others and even verbal or physical aggression.
- It can cause a child to lose interest in learning, to drift into daydreaming and apparent inattentiveness, to produce sloppy, disinterested work of poor quality.
- For some gifted children, it can increase a tendency to anxiety, encouraging perfectionism, fear of risk-taking and conformity to perceived expectations or "dumbing down".
- Trying to cope with the reactions of peers can also lead to "dumbing down" in order to fit in, to withdrawal and sometimes serious depression, or to clowning and silliness and other attention-getting behaviour in an attempt to win peer acceptance.
- We would certainly not suggest that every disruptive or withdrawn child or every daydreamer is gifted. But reports of such behaviour should at least trigger this question and ensure that it is checked out.

LEARNING DISABILITIES

This merits a special mention. "Mixed ability" children-gifted children with a learning disability-have a dual disadvantage, as each condition tends to mask the other and both may remain undiagnosed. Some researchers consider that learning disabilities are more common amongst the gifted than in the rest of the population, particularly amongst the creatively gifted.



WHAT IS THE AIM?

We also need to be aware of other factors which can disguise giftedness, such as gender, culture, physical disability and the family's socio-economic status.

INTERVENTION

Supposing you do conclude that a child is gifted but underachieving and/ or behaving in ways that you see as unproductive, what do you do?

The first and most important question to ask is: "What is the goal of intervention?"

One four-year-old boy had to be taken home from kindergarten in a state of great distress after his attempts to explain to the other children the dangers of the hole in the ozone layer and the need for everyone to take anti-pollution measures were completely ignored. He was utterly bewildered by their failure to see how important this was and upset and frightened by the possible consequences. The other children simply thought him odd and didn't want to play with him. This real situation illustrates the dilemma facing us when we consider intervention. This little boy exhibited a remarkable grasp of facts and concepts and an even more remarkable commitment to achieving social change. His response, however, was inappropriate for the group of people he was trying to reach. Consequently, not only was he left distressed, so were his teacher and then his mother, trying to cope with a near-hysterical child. The long-term outcome may be that he is even less likely to be accepted and listened to by his peers, and this may persist throughout his school years.

Is the goal of intervention therefore to teach him how to conform and behave in ways that will ensure his acceptance by others, including both other children and teachers? This does appear to be the goal of most interventions. But if so, what will happen to his unique talents?



Or is the goal of intervention to support him in being true to his talents and abilities? If so, how do we reconcile his need to go so far beyond his peers with the entirely different expectations and responses of other children and of teachers?

Thus we need to ask:

- What needs to stay as it is?
- What needs to change?

For the child, what will need to stay the same are the gifted qualities and behaviours which enable him or her to learn, respond and achieve at the gifted level. What may need to change are behaviours which are not inherently gifted behaviours but rather, behaviours which represent an inappropriate response to or an inappropriate attempt to cope with an unsatisfactory learning or social situation.

Our first task, therefore, is to differentiate very carefully between these two types of behaviour. Only then can we begin to determine a useful course of action to assist the child. But it is equally important to recognise that there may also need to be change in:

- the classroom environment and culture
- the understanding and attitudes brought to the situation by the teacher
- the learning programme offered to the child.

The ideal learning environment for the child is that described by Barth as a “community of learners”. This goes beyond the concept of a responsive environment to construct a relationship between everyone engaged in the classroom or school which recognises everyone’s potential as both a learner and a giver of learning, creating a dynamic and supportive environment for all concerned.

Teachers’ attitudes, as always, are critical. They shape the environment and both explicitly and implicitly set expectations and determine relationships. Teachers without prior training in gifted education may need help in understanding the responses they see in both identified and



unidentified gifted children and in knowing how to deal with their needs. Parents too, may need help, both in understanding and supporting their child and in achieving effective communication with the school: advocating for your gifted child is a task which can sometimes raise more barriers than it lowers.

The programme offered to the child needs also to be carefully assessed. Is it at an appropriate level? Is it appropriately differentiated? Does it provide sufficient challenge? Are needed skills being taught? Does the child have any degree of ownership? Is there flexibility and opportunity for choice? Does it provide for interaction with gifted peers? Is it holistic, taking into account the child's personal and social development as well as his or her learning needs? What support does the teacher need in delivering these aims?

What happens in the classroom is of major significance, because this is where the child will always spend most of his or her time. But options which may be needed to make differentiation completely successful include the use of cross-grouping, withdrawal groups, IEPs, One Day School or similar programmes, mentoring and online services.

In short, there is no one simple answer either to identifying or assisting the gifted child: it is a complex, challenging and interesting task.

Giftedness should not be a mystery condition. It is part of the normal range of human ability and performance. While we fail to recognise this, we fail the children who through no choice of their own have daily to cope with the needs this condition generates. There is a need to demystify giftedness and to bring about equity of opportunity for the gifted child in our midst.

CONCLUSION



FURTHER READING

This article is a very brief introduction to a very complex topic. Further reading which may help you:

- Adderholdt-Elliott, M. (1987), *Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being Good*, Hawker-Brownlow
- Barth, R. (1991), *Improving Schools from Within*, Jossey Bass
- Cathcart, R. (1994), *They're Not Bringing My Brain Out*, REACH Publications
- Heacox, D. (1992), *Up from Underachievement*, Hawker-Brownlow
- Ministry of Education (2000), *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting their Needs in New Zealand Schools*
- McAlpine, D. & R. Moltzen (1996), *Gifted and Talented: New Zealand Perspectives*, ERDC
- Silverman, LK. (2000), *Counselling the Gifted and Talented*, Love

