

Young children who are very able: What facilitates optimal engagement and learning in their education?

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The Australian context: nursery level

For all children

- Fragmented provision, multiple providers
- Recent national government interest and funding
 - Early Years Learning Framework
 - 15 hours preschool education for all
 - More university places for teacher training

For able/gifted children

- Almost invisible

The Australian context: early school years

For all children

- Policy and practice differs in each state
- Age of entry from 4.5 to 6 years
- Curriculum largely academic

For able/gifted children

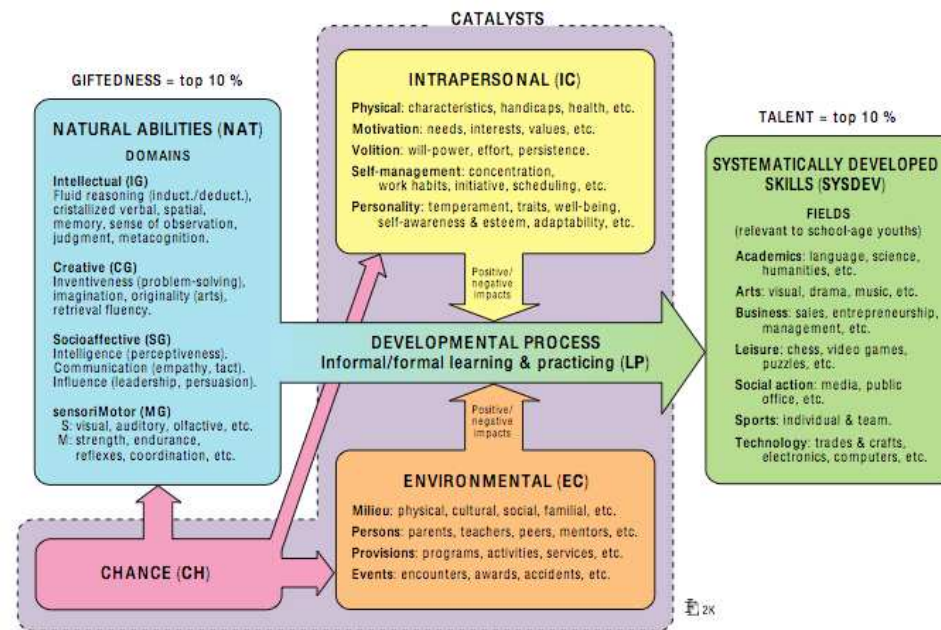
- State policies but little accountability
- Minimal if any pre-service and in-service education of teachers regarding high ability
- Some selective programs in upper primary

What do we mean by giftedness/high ability?

“A gifted child is one who performs or has the potential to perform at a level significantly beyond his or her age peers and whose unique abilities and characteristics require special provisions and social and emotional support from the family, community and educational context.”

(Cathie Harrison, 2003, p. 8)

Francois Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent



Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT.EN.2K)

Research evidence: The teacher's perspective regarding very able young children

- Less in favour of early identification and provision than parents were (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2002)
- Reluctant to label (Wellisch, 1997) or set child apart (Valpied, 2005)
- Viewed children's futures according to gender stereotypes (Lee, 2000)
- Uncertain about encouragement vs pushing (Hall, 2001)

Research evidence: The perspective of parents of very able young children

- Generally credible in identifying advanced development (Lewis & Louis, 1991; Pletan et al., 1995; Silverman, 2003)
- Need assistance to deal with school's response to their able children and to themselves (Alsop, 1997)
- Worry their children will be “dumbed down” (Whitton, 2005) or will disengage (Dockett & Perry, 2007)
- Wonder whether their requests are reasonable (Robinson & Koshy, 2006)

Research evidence: The very able young child's perspective

- Have expectations of school as places to learn new things (Harrison, 2005; Whitton, 2005)
- Disillusioned if new learning is not offered (Harrison) or if work is too easy (Valpied, 2005)

Introducing Kerry's study

The research question:

What were the perceptions of young very able children and their teachers and parents about the early years of school?

Research procedures

Children participating

- 14 children identified as possibly very able at age 3 or 4 - 6 boys, 8 girls
- 9 entered school at usual age (5)
- 2 entered school a year early (4)
- 3 skipped first year of school

Tested and interviewed at end of each year

Research procedures

Parents participating

- Well educated, middle class

Questionnaire at the end of each school year

Research procedures

Teachers participating

- 26 of 33 invited, all female
- Teaching experience 5 - 20+ years
- Taught K (9), Yr 1 (9), Yr 2 (6), Yr 3 (2)
- Minimal pre-service or in-service education about very able children

Questionnaire at the end of each school year; teachers knew child would be tested and interviewed

Timeline

<i>Cohort</i>	<i>Data collected</i>			
Enrichment Program	Nursery	1st school year	2nd school year	3rd school year
University nursery		Nursery	1st school year	2nd school year
University nursery			Nursery	1st school year

What did the parents say about engagement?

To what extent do you think that your child works to his/her ability in class?

1	2	3	4	5
never	not often	sometimes	often	always
0%	9%	50%	34.5%	6.5%

Mean rating 3.3 (similar each year)

What did the parents say about teacher recognition of abilities?

To what extent do you think that your child's teacher recognises your child's abilities?

1	2	3	4	5
Greatly u'estimates	U'estimates a little	Accurately recognises	O'estimates a little	Greatly o'estimates
3%	6%	51%	3%	36%
			0%	0%

Mean rating 2.2 (similar each year)

What did the parents want from teachers?

- To be taken seriously when asking for more challenge for their child
- To have curriculum modifications when their child *was* acknowledged as very able

What were the teachers asked?

How much do you consider this child to be above average in ability?

- a little above average?
- far above average
- not above average?

Does this child have strengths?

If yes, what are they?

How accurate were the teachers?

1st school year: 4/10 children underestimated
(and 4 not rated)

2nd school year: 4/10 children underestimated

3rd school year: 1/5 underestimated
(and 4 not rated)

“Underestimated” = not rated as far above average but had at least one test score in the gifted range.

This occurred 43% of the time.

Which work is easy or difficult for you?

Children reported easy work (in reading, writing, mathematics) twice as often as they reported difficult work.

Over the three years, 6 children said they never had difficult work. For 2 of these, this happened for two years.

Do you think your teacher knows it is easy or difficult for you?

- 79% thought the teacher did know (or probably) when their work was easy
- 75% thought the teacher did know (or probably) when their work was difficult

Most thought the teacher was tuned into their ease or difficulty of work, but teacher rate of underestimation suggests they might not have known about the easy work (or didn't think it mattered).

Would you rather do easy or difficult work?

- More preferred difficult work (especially in 2nd year) or a combination or “at my level”
- *Why?* Intellectual reasons: challenge, progress, having something that took a long time to do
- 36% preferred easy work
- *Why?* Social or emotional reasons: wanted to avoid embarrassing mistakes, to finish fast, to chat while working

What makes your teacher pleased or cross?

In the early years children thought their behaviour was what the teacher cared about most.

As they grew older, they thought the quality of their work was as important to the teacher as their behaviour.

They were readily learning classroom “systems” and complying with expectations for learning (that may have been too low).

Are there times when you don't want to do what
your teacher asks?

“Yes” increased as age increased

But... “You have to do it anyway.”

These children mostly accepted the authority of
the teacher and just got on with their work,
even when dissatisfied with the content or
level of challenge.

Watch out for the late bloomer : Mitchell's case

- *Nursery and 1st school year:*

Academically average, behavioural signs of high ability

- *2nd school year:*

“A little above average” but reading, spelling in gifted range and maths almost

Poor attitude to school and teachers

- *3rd year (new school):*

“Far above average” and extended academically

Improved motivation and behaviour

Recommendations for optimal engagement

- Find out what children already know and can do before teaching “new” skills and content
- Invite parents to tell about their child’s strengths and their responses to tasks
- Invite children to tell how they feel about levels of work given
- Encourage intellectual risk-taking and tolerance of errors to avoid chronic underachievement

Introducing Anne's study

When we were very young:
Experiences of young very able children
transitioning to a formal learning environment

Background

Reasons for study

Type of study

- qualitative case study
- studied 7 highly able children
- 1 child at preschool
- all 7 beginning school

Research question

What influences a very able child's learning experiences when transitioning to formal educational environments?

Findings - two areas

1. Characteristic behaviours of very able children influencing engagement
2. Influences of the teachers on these characteristics

Children's voices

Michael : I'm not a child: I don't play with toys.

Justin: Don't they (the school) know I learnt that last year?

Characteristic behaviours in a formal setting

Social-emotional

A sense of connection

- To the teacher
- To the other children

Characteristic behaviours in a formal setting

Cognitive

The importance of new learning

- response to formal provision
- response to informal provision

A sense of identity

Conclusion drawn -

When there was appropriate social, emotional and intellectual provision it enabled these young children to establish of a sense of identity as a student in the new formal environment.

Important teacher influences on the children's behaviours

- Some early assessment
- Compartmentalised awareness of children
- Schools did not regard information about earlier learning experiences as important unless they indicated deficits
- Formal learning provision was limited by expectations set early in the year

Conclusions about teacher influences on the children's behaviours

There was lack of awareness or knowledge about characteristics which

- made continuity of learning schemas difficult for children
- meant positive aspects were often happenstance
- resulted in vulnerability for children

Recommendations for optimal engagement

- Teachers need to know the characteristics of very able children
- Be aware of the child's learning schema to ensure continuity
- Take a holistic view of engagement with learning

Discussion/questions

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