

香港資優教育學院
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education
Information Sheet

ARE GIFTED CHILDREN GOOD AT EVERYTHING

Many people perceive 'gifted' and/or talented to mean either the bright, happy motivated child or the child who is highly able across the board. Actually neither of these is accurate and a more flexible holistic view is required. Some gifted children are bright, happy and motivated, some are gifted in many areas of development but some develop coping strategies and hide their gifts and talents thus appearing to underachieve or not achieve at all. Many have areas of very high ability and areas where, although not necessarily below average, they are less able. Many find school difficult and can to lack motivation even though they are capable of more. The peaks and troughs in the profile of a child's abilities mean that often there are large discrepancies between the areas of high ability and the areas of lesser ability. These discrepancies can cause children great difficulties; it can take significantly more energy to perform consistently when in some areas a child has to work much harder to meet unrealistic expectations or even learning difficulties - twice (or multiple exceptionalities) or Learning Disabilities. Inconsistent performance is often interpreted by some teachers as a lack of genuine ability when in fact it can indicate a child who has the ability but also needs support in specific areas.

In a school's gifted education policy care must be taken to make sure that whatever the school's definition of 'gifted', it is inclusive and takes account of the following groups:

Twice Exceptional (sometimes Multiple Exceptionalities) or Learning Disabled

Giftedness does not exclude a child from having a learning difficulty or disability. It is possible for gifted children to have difficulties such as dyslexia, an autistic spectrum disorder, ADHD, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, or processing disorders. A learning disability or difficulty, more often than not, does not affect intellect.

There are three common problems when considering children who are twice exceptional.

- Their learning difficulty is identified but it masks their abilities
- Their abilities are recognised but mask their learning difficulties
- Neither are recognised and the child is considered average

In all three cases the problems for the child can be many.

If the sole focus of support is on the learning difficulty and no recognition is given for their abilities then an enormous frustration, boredom and low self-esteem can result. The child with unrecognised abilities may find it difficult to demonstrate them in a performance based assessment system, which is the norm in most schools.

If the focus is on ability with no recognition of any learning difficulties then the child may be working at a fever pitch to meet the very high expectations placed on them. They may feel stupid because they recognise that some things are very difficult and they may feel undue amounts of pressure and stress which can lead to poor physical, emotional or mental health.

Where neither ability nor difficulty is recognised the child may be working very hard just to stand still in terms of their progress. They may feel stupid in some areas because they can't demonstrate their

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thought processes and they may feel as if others think they are stupid because the work is beneath their true abilities. They may also feel bored and frustrated.

All three of the above scenarios may cause low self esteem, confidence, unhappiness and in some cases negative behaviours.

In all cases the child is unable to achieve at the level that should be possible for them. It should be noted that in a performance based assessment system it is THESE gifted children that are missed and/or overlooked because they do not perform at the level one would expect a gifted child to perform. In these children it is important to look out for the 'odd flash of brilliance', the quirky ideas, the divergent thinking and the abilities in non-literacy or numeracy-based areas. These children can't make up or fluke a 'flash of brilliance' but there can be many reasons for consistent under-performance. These children may also fit in to one or more of the following groups.

Behaviourally Challenging

Many gifted children demonstrate challenging behaviour because they are bored and frustrated. This does not mean that they are always the "badly behaved child" or deserve such a label within the classroom. Quite often parents notice that their behaviour is different at school compared with home. Therefore, the experience of one environment must be triggering this negative response. Ask why they are behaving negatively and look for what the triggers may be. Challenging behaviour can take on many different forms.

- A gifted child with an outgoing personality may be particularly vocal and constantly shout out or question the teacher, demanding attention and proving very difficult to manage in a classroom.
- Others are withdrawn and quiet, seldom sharing their ideas, possibly because they do not want to be seen as different or because they are frightened of failure.
- Others turn into the class clown and become disruptive and yet more turn their frustrations into aggressive and angry behaviour.
- A few have seemingly short attention spans and can be misdiagnosed with ADHD or a similar disorder.
- Some simply keep their head down and daydream, producing adequate but uninspired work.

For most of these children their challenging behaviour becomes the main focus of professionals working with them and can lead to their abilities being neglected and missed. This in turn causes further challenging behaviour and a vicious circle begins. The behaviour pattern needs to be dealt with quickly as children rarely change behavioural habits without a structured system of rewards, consequences and appropriate support – often called behaviour management. The correct diagnosis of the behaviour must be tackled at the same time; the wrong diagnosis will produce the wrong strategies. Children's abilities should be investigated, particularly if they are the 'flashes of brilliance' type of child or have other learning difficulties. If they are not offered challenging and interesting material through enrichment, extension work, effective differentiation or other means within the classroom and the whole school environment it is unlikely that the behaviour will improve.

With Chinese as an Additional Language (CAL)

Identifying minority ethnic pupils who are gifted and talented is especially difficult when they are at the early stages of speaking Cantonese or any other dialect. In many cases pupil's eagerness to

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learn and their self-sufficiency as learners quickly identifies their high level of ability even when their competence in Chinese is limited. Pupils with excellent literacy skills in their own language often thrive when given access to a bilingual dictionary. Similarly children who already speak (and write) two or more languages will often make fast progress in Chinese, even where their initial knowledge is minimal. A crucial first step is for teachers to reject a deficit based view of these children, as is the case with behaviourally challenging children or those who are twice exceptional. Teachers should adopt a positive, proficiency-orientated view that focuses on their strengths.

There are three key factors at play in the performance and achievement of gifted children with CAL: linguistic, socio-economic and cultural. When linguistic factors affect a child's ability to demonstrate their intelligences in the classroom then they may well under perform in many areas. If socio-economic factors are also at play then a child's performance may be affected by their previous experiences, possibly as a refugee or from an economically disadvantaged background. They may be unsure how to tackle many of the things that children from a Hong Kong background are familiar with; for instance, they may not have come across simple items such as toys or books before. If cultural factors are also present then children may not demonstrate their abilities because they are not aware that they are supposed to or have culturally learned behaviour that prevents them from participating in or having had experience of different activities

Coasting

Some gifted children have, probably from the first moment they begin school, realised that they need put in very little effort to achieve results that are acceptable or even good. Unfortunately this means that their true abilities are often masked or unrecognised and they can miss out on vital study skills. It is not uncommon for gifted children, when they reach a point in their education at which more is expected of them in terms of independent study and thought, are uncertain as to how they are supposed to tackle it. Others coast because it is easier to achieve less than it is to run the risk of failing or they coast because they are able to still achieve the required results to pass exams without making more effort. These children need support in understanding the importance of effort, strategies for failure and gradual increases in challenge.

Handwriting

Handwriting is still seen by some as an indicator of ability. Some consider poor handwriting to indicate low ability and/or lack of care and attention. In gifted children this is often not the case. For those whose thought processes are racing faster than other children, hand writing information is a slow and laborious task, making it inefficient as a means of communication. If a child is writing the first thought down and then has many more, how are they to remember what it was they were trying to write originally? Moreover, the nature of asynchronous development means that a young child may not have the motor skills to keep up with the flood of thoughts in his/her head.

Some gifted children often find that what they are being asked to write demands a minimum amount of actual thinking but can take a very long time in terms of physical effort. The whole lesson, and sometimes the whole day then becomes a handwriting exercise. The challenge of learning seems absent and school can seem unchallenging. Offering children alternative means of recording or presenting information and what they know in as many different situations as possible can help to free up their thinking and demonstrate their abilities much more successfully. Some gifted children need a scribe, use of a laptop, voice activated software and longer time in exams.

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Standing out

Many gifted children are very aware that they are different from their peers. Most want to fit in and so may make a conscious decision to 'dumb down' and limit their participation in lessons to a level that other children demonstrate. They may choose not to apply themselves to work, answer questions, read with fluency or share their ideas, for fear of being pointed out as the 'geek', 'nerd', 'boff' or worse. Others learn as they enter school that there are certain expectations for performance. They will discover that the children who spend time working out each word or counting laboriously will get more of the teacher's attention, praise and reward rather than those that just get on with their work independently. They will also see the level of work of the other children and assume that they should do likewise, even if they are capable of more.

All gifted and talented children may underachieve in different ways and for different reasons. Very few of them are 'good at everything'. Within every school's gifted education "whole school" policy there should be a comprehensive section on identification that is inclusive and wide ranging. Every GE policy should also have a definition for giftedness that is, again, inclusive and has flexibility of application. Once agreed upon it is also important that information about giftedness in particular areas is shared amongst all staff so that they can be watchful for other gifts and talents that may be masked, deliberately hidden or otherwise difficult to spot.

Reference

James T Webb (2004). *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnosis of Gifted Children and Adults*. Scottsdale: Great Potential Press

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