

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

GIFTED CHILDREN AND THEIR EDUCATION

In Hong Kong, the Education Bureau (EDB) identifies gifted learners as those who have exceptional achievement or potential in one or more of the following:

- a high level of measured intelligence;
- specific academic aptitude in a subject area;
- creative thinking;
- superior talent in visual and performing arts;
- natural leadership of peers - high ability to move others to achieve common goals; and
- psychomotor ability - outstanding performance or ingenuity in athletics, mechanical skills or other areas requiring gross or fine motor coordination.

Some schools (and indeed some parents) prefer to use the term “more able” or “high ability” children because they see these terms as being less elitist and therefore a little more inclusive in a politically correct world but the term “gifted” is now part of the official language and one which is used throughout this section.

Most people would agree that gifted children fall within the upper 5-10% of the ability spectrum. However, it is possible that within the top 2% there are individuals whose rapid development can dissociate them from their peers, socially, academically and intellectually. The challenge of the gifted child is that of creating learning opportunities appropriate to their ability and age while at the same time keeping them emotionally and socially within their peer structure. For this to be done successfully parents and teachers need to work in partnership.

Identification

The first issue that most parents face is the question about whether their child is gifted and there are no easy answers. In recent years, our growing knowledge of the brain's complexity and increasing understanding of how learning takes place has led to less reliance being placed on measures that put groups of children in order, high to low categories. Describing human ability by a single measurement such as a quotient (as in IQ) or a score is now seen as simplistic. At least eighty working definitions of giftedness and high ability have been developed during the past century, each created with its own defined purpose. These include selecting adults for particular high-level tasks, selecting students to attend enrichment programmes, diagnosing reasons for particular pupil behaviours and assessing progress. Hence, for the identification of highly able children there is no one all-embracing definition of what giftedness is, and there is a range of strategies and diagnostic tests that can be used and that vary across the age range.

After having been sorely tested by the insatiable curiosity of their young child, parents are often the first to recognise that their child might be bright for their age. There are many checklists of gifted characteristics. In general they contain several common elements –

The child:

- has a wide vocabulary and talked early
- asks lots of questions and learns more quickly than others
- has a very retentive memory

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- is extremely curious and can concentrate for long periods on subjects of interest
- has a wide general knowledge and interest in the world
- enjoys problem-solving, often missing out the intermediate stages in an argument and making original connections
- has an unusual and vivid imagination
- could read from an early age
- shows strong feelings and opinions and has an odd sense of humour
- sets high standards and is a perfectionist
- loses interest when asked to do more of the same.

No one child will show all these sorts of behaviours, but very bright children will fit a significant number of them.

Early Years

For a child in the pre-school phase, parents are the best placed people to observe whether their offspring are developing skills and talents significantly in advance of their years and peers. Early talking, unusual levels of concentration, and the ability to make creative connections to good ideas are good indicators. Parents may encounter problems at toddler group, playgroup or pre-school nursery because staff do not recognise that the child can easily do the things the other children are enjoying doing and so is quickly bored and becomes a problem! This should best be managed by discussion between parents and staff as to how flexible the activities can be to include extension tasks for the most able.

School Years

Once at school some aspects change but others do not. The child is now of an age when an educational assessment can give added professional insight. But as giftedness or high ability does not legally fall in the category of special educational needs (SEN), there are no additional resources available for a child assessed as highly able. If issues have developed, if the child does not want to go to school, is bored at school, is unhappy or has become withdrawn, then parents need to work in partnership with the school, the class teacher and the Head to expose the issues in a non-confrontational way. The appropriateness and purpose of an assessment might be made if behaviour and learning difficulties have developed. If parents are willing to have a private assessment undertaken, then this is best done with the full knowledge of the school and an understanding of what will happen in the school as a result of the findings.

If, after discussions with the school, parents feel that they need to know more about how they can manage their child, but the school is not willing to proceed, they can still undertake a private assessment. This will provide the parents with additional information about their child's intellectual ability and potential. Parents can then make an informed decision on the way forward, accepting that this may be limited by the school's position.

Identifying older children as having unrecognized abilities, gifts and talents is always a sad occurrence, for it represents a waste of earlier opportunities. If the abilities are not recognized and encouraged early, there is a risk that the child will become withdrawn, or will merge into the crowd, or will develop a disruptive pattern of behaviour, all of which would detract attention from their ability

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and may go undetected for many years. It is often when schools undertake a formal assessment on the basis of poor behaviour the truth is revealed – the child is a high-ability low performer!

Provision in Schools

Once identified, the gifted child needs challenging learning experiences. The roles of parents and of schools are of equal importance in building this provision. Through parents the child gets access to evening, weekend and holiday time activities, and so can be involved with a wide range of ages and expertise that is not found within the school system. This helps to ground the child's emotional and social development.

Schools should have a written policy on how they manage their gifted children and it should be openly available on request. It should include how children are identified and what measures are put in place to stretch and challenge them at every stage of their school career. The policy should have the full support of the staff, the governors, and parents and be widely available to all. In fact, each of these constituencies should ideally have been involved in the policy making.

How these learning experiences are managed within school will depend on the child's age as well as the type of school and the resources available. Teachers in primary schools are used to managing groups of children of widely different abilities, and they are often well placed to plan individual extension or enrichment activities. Where the curriculum allows it, the child can work with other staff or older classes on agreed activities, always remembering that what can happen easily one year may be difficult the next. For some parents the easy solution would appear to be to accelerate the child one or two years. The evidence suggests that, when carefully managed, acceleration can work but this is not always the panacea. For example, older children can be hostile to a younger child joining their peer group, there may be issues of social immaturity, and there can be major issues to be faced at the transition from the Primary to Secondary phase.

The structure of the secondary school gives additional scope for differentiating the curriculum and locating pupils in ability sets, but the gifted child still needs to have extension activities built into each and every lesson. The strategies available to a school depend on its unique circumstances, but much good practice has been built up over recent years.

Besides a 'Gifted Education' policy, schools should have a professional, perhaps the Primary School Master/Mistress or the Curriculum Team Leader, with responsibilities for involving all staff in best practice ideas. Also, school inspectors expect there will be evidence that shows that the policy is working and every school should be able to demonstrate that the needs of gifted children are being considered in school self evaluation and the School Improvement Plan.

Useful Websites

Hoagies: the all-things-gifted resource
<http://www.hoagiesgifted.org>

Education Bureau, HKSAR
<http://www.edb.gov.hk>

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Support Measures for the Exceptionally Gifted Students
<http://gifted.hkedcity.net>

Center for Child Development, Hong Kong Baptist University
<http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ccd/index.htm>

Programme for Gifted and Talented, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
<http://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/pgt>

Education Development Program, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
http://www.edp.ust.hk/index_e.html

Recent Books for Parents and Schools

Bates, Janet and Munday, Sarah Able. *Gifted and Talented*. Continuum 2005

Distin Kate (Ed). *Gifted Children: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Jessica Kingsley 2006

Gray-Fow, Bette. *Discovering and Developing Talent in Schools: An Inclusive Approach*. NACE/David Fulton 2005

Gross, Miraca U M. *Exceptionally Gifted Children 2nd. Edition*. Routledge Falmer 2004

Hart, Susan et al. *Learning Without Limits*. Open University Press 2004

Porter, Louise. *Gifted Young Children: A Guide for Teachers and Parents, 2nd Ed*. Open University Press 2005

Sutherland, Margaret. *Gifted and Talented in the Early Years*. Paul Chapman 2005

Winstanley, C. *Too Clever by Half: A Fair Deal for Gifted Children*. Trentham Books 2004