

WHAT THE WORLD DOES FOR THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

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Abstract

Around the world, different approaches to the education of the gifted and talented inevitably make a difference to which children are given opportunities to develop excellence in any area. Cultural viewpoints divide roughly into two and can be conflicting. In one, the gifted are seen as only a tiny fixed proportion of the population, selected by achievement. In the other, the gifted are widespread and seen in terms of high-level potential and hard work. Provision for the gifted, though, is not often based on research evidence. This presentation of models and ideas of educational provision from around the world increases the possibility of their being picked up adapted and employed elsewhere.

Who are the gifted and talented?

Internationally, there is a wide range of definitions of gifts and talents, almost all of which refer to children's precocity, usually in terms of high marks in school. Definitions not only depend on what is culturally approved, but also on what capacity there is to help the children. Most analyses of who is chosen as gifted and talented from different cultures show considerable biases when looked at in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds.

Local cultures clearly affect identification and provision (Freeman, 2005). The criteria depend on the aim, whether high marks in school, innovation, solving paper-and-pencil puzzles for an IQ club such as Mensa, competitive athletics or gaining entry to a gifted summer programme. Scholarly children will be different from athletes, and the creatively gifted are often more difficult to identify and accommodate.

Teachers also have their subjective images of what a gifted child should be like, so that teachers' and parents' choices can be different from objective test measurement. Teachers' own attitudes towards identifying the gifted vary greatly; some refuse to do it at all, while others overestimate a youngster who is good at, say, maths for their all-round abilities.

Even within one country, such as the USA, percentages of the child population identified as gifted by teachers vary between 5% and 10% across the states (OERI, 1993). But teachers are reliable, in that they will continue to pick the same kind of children. Parental choice is beset by cultural stereotypes (Laungani, 2007), often meaning that two boys are chosen for every girl: a strangely stable gender proportion all over the world

The two dominant approaches to gifts and talents come from the constant political struggle between élitism and egalitarianism – in effect, between the relative cultural importance given to genetics and environment (Freeman, 1998).

The genetic view - selects relatively few children for what Freeman calls “diagnose and treat”. Children’s abilities are measured and compared with others of the same chronological age, typically on an IQ test, especially in the USA. Children above a chosen (and variable) cut-off point are offered a gifted programme which may be simply more school-type teaching. The vast majority of children must fail to reach the cut-off point and are rejected as incapable of high-level achievement, which could be wasteful of a nation’s resources

The environmental view – aims to educate all children to a very high standard, especially in the far north of Europe and the Far East. This view assumes a high level of teacher expertise and commitment, and hard work by the children. Self-selection for extra teaching, found in New Zealand and China, fits into this category. It is illustrated in a recent book by Chua (2010), a Chinese mother who writes, “Chinese parents demand perfect grades because they believe that their child can get them. If their child does not get them, the Chinese parent assumes it’s because the child didn’t work hard enough.”

Some examples of different approaches to educating the gifted and talented

- Israel has a government Division for Gifted Education, which measures and provides gifted education for Jewish and Arab children
- Saudi Arabia has 22 Summer Programmes for 960 gifted children.
- The Pinnacle Project in Washington selects highly gifted youngsters to interact for a residential week with Nobel prize winners
- The Incan Foundation in Turkey takes very poor children from all over the country for boarding high-level education
- The free Africa Kamas Leadership Academy in Malawi models its curriculum on English private education
- The Embracer High School in Brazil takes only very poor children and offers them an engineering speciality.
- The language schools of Russia teach all subjects to selected bright students in a foreign language
- India has more than 500 (and growing) Jawaharlal Navodaya Vidyalaya (JNV) schools for bright boys and girls from poor rural districts
- New Zealand has Day-a-Week schools and resources centres around the country
- The Children’s Palaces across China provide non-selective, out-of-school education for youngsters who are prepared to put in the effort to stay the course

The Tower Education Group Survey

International approaches to choosing and providing for children as gifted were investigated via an international survey by the Tower Education Group (UK) (Freeman, Raffan & Warwick, 2010), on which this paper has drawn.

World-wide evidence was gathered by an internet questionnaire and personal interviews, bringing in nearly a thousand replies. Respondents came from the whole range of stakeholders involved in educating the gifted e.g. academics (28 percent), school-based practitioners (27 percent), administrators (15 percent), policy makers (10 percent), gifted education charities or interest groups (10 percent), consultants, parents and others (10

percent). The majority, (65 percent) were from Western Europe, America and Australasia, 10 percent were from Eastern Europe, seven percent each from The Middle East and South America, and 4 percent from the Far East and 2 percent from Africa. Hence, there was some bias towards the mostly Western outlook of selecting just a few for special treatment rather than the more Eastern approach of seeing all children as having potential.

Nearly 40 percent of special education for the gifted operates within a country's official education system, whether at national, regional or local level. Provision can be school-based, out-of-school, educational psychologists or by consultants and teacher training programmes. 12 percent of programmes were specific curricular or pedagogical approaches, and 7 percent were affiliated with or originated from universities. Some reported national or regional programmes with a variety of education on offer.

The majority of programmes were government-funded (60 percent), with just over 20 percent being privately financed. 10 percent of programmes received 'partnership' funding from both governmental and non government sources, and a further five percent described themselves as non-governmental organisations.

An outstanding finding was that teacher judgement was the common denominator in all methods of identification – at 80 percent - whether as the sole or a combined procedure.

Normed tests, whether nationally normed or not, such as for general intelligence (55 percent), were also used frequently, alone or in combination. Some inventive respondents devised their own assessment procedures, often using multiple sources of evidence. Most respondents used a combination of identification methods. In fact, two-thirds used four or more, while more than half used six or more.

Perhaps because of the dominant teacher input, marks in school (63 percent) were the prime criterion of giftedness. Thus, the children were often chosen as gifted because of their already high achievements rather than unrealised potential - so much more difficult to assess. Bypassing potential must result in the loss of gifted underachievers of all kinds, including the disadvantaged and those with learning difficulties. It can also mean that the highly achieving school-pupil, who is set to learn more of the same thing, can have considerable problems in producing original insightful ideas (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995).

The survey asked respondents to identify up to five success criteria for their programmes. Responses indicate a clear imperative to raise student achievement, with 60% seeking a demonstrable improvement in formal tests as evidence of success. Of all the criteria for judging the success of provision for the gifted, the lowest attention was paid to research evidence and evaluation (13 percent). Again and again, educators turned to school-type achievement as the measure of success (60 percent). Nevertheless, most respondents described how they aimed to encourage learners to think beyond the traditional bounds of the curriculum in a wide variety of ways, such as differentiated activities, real-life problem solving, challenging open-ended tasks, higher order skills, good quality questioning, and interest-led enquiries.

Around the world, by far the most usual place for the education of the gifted is the mainstream classroom (30 percent). Most gifted pupils (77 percent) were not removed from home for their gifted education. But there is also the finding that one in five of the

programmes are residential (21 percent), which might indicate a high proportion of dedicated gifted educators as responders, and specific provision as in American summer camps.

Acceleration and enrichment

The Tower survey showed that the old argument of acceleration vs. enrichment is simplistic and dated. It is important to recognise that acceleration and enrichment/extension are not mutually exclusive but typically overlap. Although there is often a tension between the two, with one or the other predominant, there are benefits in using a variety of overlapping strategies. Very few responses indicated a commitment to one at the expense of the other, and all were built on local context.

Acceleration

Nearly 40 per cent (39.4%) of the gifted were accelerated in school. This is a high figure – even allowing for American bias – but it most probably reflects a generous interpretation of the term to include a variety of subject-based acceleration techniques as well as more traditional grade-skipping approaches. 59% reported a more advanced curriculum and 42% reported a faster pace.

The Belin-Blank Center, Iowa is one of the most prominent advocates for acceleration in the field. It believes that acceleration is one of the best options for highly gifted students, but in spite of 50+ years of research, it is underused. Accelerative approaches allow learners to proceed at a pace that maximizes their ability to learn; homogenous grouping and above-level curriculum allow them the opportunity to discuss and manipulate content that sparks continued learning. They believe that acceleration should be an option available to all gifted learners; their advice to colleagues stresses very clearly their commitment to under-represented populations and to twice-exceptional learners.

Enrichment

At 89 percent of gifted education, enrichment is by far the most universal method of provision for gifted learners. Responders wrote that it enables the learner to experience greater breadth in learning, going beyond the standard curriculum. Some 65 percent of practitioners regard differentiation as key to success, reflecting the challenge of managing classroom learning for the more able. Classroom balance between pace, breadth and depth can be a critical issue in challenging and supporting the more able.

Social-emotional effects on the development of gifts and talents

Labelling a child as gifted often reflects local stereotypes and consequent expectations, whether of difficult behaviour or advanced maturity. These can become self-fulfilling because children often try to oblige, often setting up a poor emotional base on which to build a happy life. But labelling can also have positive effects on self-esteem. Research evidence shows the gifted to be at least as well balanced as any others (Neihart, Reiss, Robinson & Moon, 2002; Richards, Encel & Shute 2003; Freeman, 2006; Freeman, 2010).

Around the world, widely varying check-lists of ‘characteristics’ of gifted and talented children are presented to teachers. Many of these are concerned with children’s behaviour, and expected emotional problems. Fortunately, intuitive, inspiring teachers can spot and nurture talent which such lists miss. Teachers are not always keen to identify young children, though, because of concerns about premature labelling issues. Yet educational help in early childhood is likely to have a much stronger effect than later, especially for the disadvantaged (Freeman, 2003).

Evidence for the effectiveness of gifted education

Unfortunately, using scientific evidence as a basis for any educational policy or action is not customary in any part of the world. Nor is research evidence usually explicit about the context of where it was done or how it might be transferred elsewhere. But theories and models are put into practice with greater or less success in different parts of the world.

There has never, to the writer's knowledge, been a direct comparison made of specific programmes for the gifted, either cross-culturally or even within one country (Freeman, 1998). Research on gifted education is problematic in quality. Typically, it is concerned with small samples of children who are never compared with matched others. Although generalisations from apparently successful educational schemes are common, it is hard to know whether they might be transposed elsewhere. In England, American-style (CTY) out-of-school education for the gifted did not work. It closed immediately when the very generous financial support stopped (2002 – 2007). And there is virtually nothing to show for it. (National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, Teacher Training Resource Bank, <http://www.ttrb.ac.uk/viewarticle2.aspx?contentId=15183>, retrieved 17 May 2010.)

Yet, in whatever manner the gifted are selected, the outcome is most likely to be positive. It is not surprising that bright, keen children will learn more with extra educational help than those who have not had that opportunity and experience. So if children appear to do well from a gifted programme, we do not yet know whether it is due to the extra attention, to only parts of the scheme, or whether the effects will last.

We do know, though, that research on the effects of practice, notably of more than 10,000 hours, will produce expertise (Ericsson, 1996). But whether that practised expertise is the same as talent in terms of inspiration, creativity and world acclaim is questionable. Could any child really be a Mozart?

Hong Kong Education Bureau aims to reach 100% of the region's learners in a genuinely inclusive way with a wide remit for accommodating learner diversity. Resolutely not tied to any one approach, it has utilised an adapt-and-adopt approach as appropriate to the context of the child in order to ensure fully personalised teaching and learning approaches. The Bureau use wide consultative structures and strategies with open and responsive communication to engage with the full range of stakeholder from the government to academics and to the child and their parents. The primary strategy is to use of pilot programmes to trial approaches and strategies which if successful are then incorporated into online modules for further trialling to create transferability.

Constraints on effective provision

Sometimes, as much as teachers and administrators would have liked to make explicit provision for the gifted, they were constrained by matters outside their control, most of which are familiar around the world. Notably, the fact that limited teacher capacity (28%) is seen to be as significant as funding indicates how vital both the role and training of teachers are to any sustainable development of provision. Many of these issues are also seen to be inter-related, notably the poor attitudes to gifted education from both parents and senior leaders which may have a detrimental effect on the priority given to it within schools.

Yet policy and practice appear to be changing to reflect wider educational priorities in an effort to integrate successfully. There was broad acceptance that gifted education has a much

wider and more significant role in society than for a narrowly identified grouping.

New Zealand's policy of the Office of the Minister of Education recognises that the valuing and nurturing of specific gifts and talents is culturally relative. "Giftedness and talent can mean different things to different communities and cultures in New Zealand, and there is a range of appropriate approaches towards meeting the needs of all such students".

Supplementary learning opportunities

There are extra opportunities for the gifted through home schooling, summer schools or a specialist boarding school such as for sport. It could be a few hours a week within an institute of higher education or a day experience in industry, etc. Learners often took higher-level courses in addition to schoolwork, to broaden knowledge and aspirations. Mentors, too, come into this category.

A significant proportion of programmes provided supplementary opportunities involving working with experts (58%). Summer schools are offered by almost half the respondents (47%). Whilst this might be seen as surprising, given the comparatively high cost of such models, it should be noted that 24% of respondents to the survey had national roles, implying that such provision is often made available across a wide geographical area but will only cater for a small minority of those eligible. Many countries are moving away from high cost individual or small group provision, to a more mainstream mode of delivery where schools are expected to do more themselves. This trend can only be expected to continue as limited funding continues to be a major constraint on providers.

There is a wide variety of out-of-school courses in Spain, such as Centro Huerta del Rey in Valladolid and the branch of the American Center for Talented Youth (CTY Spain) at the University of Navarra and Madrid, in addition to other university and local authority provision.

Online (46%) and blended learning emerged as main practice of over a third of people in the field. This is driven in part by the growing sophistication of the online offering and increasing reach as more communities secure internet access. Where the infrastructure exists, online and distance models are reaching rural and remote communities. Practitioners seem to be seeking opportunities to offer a wider range of provision to students and to build more support for classroom achievement. However, a significant caveat needs to be added here. Virtual learning opportunities tend to be strongly linked to economic factors. Creating resources, providing viable, local platforms and delivering access requires significant investment.

Estonia has the Gifted and Talented Development Centre (GTDC) at the University of Tartu where the main aim is to give opportunities and possibilities for the development of pupils who have a deeper interest in science. The GDTC offers both the facilities to enrich pupils' knowledge beyond usual school curriculum for those for whom the standard curriculum is insufficient. Pupils can be identified by teachers or can approach the programme directly – there is no admission test or formal measure. Over 10,000 learners participate each year. The GDTC organizes national Olympiads in mathematics, physics, chemistry, informatics, biology and geography, and other areas.

Conclusions from the analysis of the survey results

- 1.** Building up the capacity for gifted learners within education systems is vital for meeting their needs. This can be more efficiently offered by taking a broad approach through initial training and professional development, in order to equip all classroom teachers with the skills for differentiation. Notable courses for teachers are the international European Council for the Highly Able (ECHA) Diploma, and the British National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE). Specialists can also be extremely helpful as advisers and mentors to classroom teachers. Effective professional development can often be integrated with provision for learners.
- 2.** Representation means that the identified gifted population should broadly reflect the whole school population. Unless providers are explicitly focussed on improving standards only for high achievers, it is essential to take a multi-faceted approach to discovering hidden potential. Open access approaches are still unusual outside the cultures which developed them, but there is a case for including them within a portfolio approach.
- 3.** Whole school improvement is enhanced by a focus on gifted education. There is often too much emphasis on improvement from the bottom-up, tackling the needs of the lowest achievers. By starting from the curricular and pastoral needs of their most able learners, schools can create a much more positive environment in which diversity and innovation are valued. This is rewarding for the whole school community, teachers as much as pupils and parents.
- 4.** Classroom teaching can be provided through acceleration, enrichment and differentiation – determined by the needs of the learners. Acceleration and enrichment are not mutually exclusive and a rich approach to provision will incorporate elements of both as appropriate.
- 5.** Diversity means that one size will not fit all. Although it may be tempting to assume that gifted learners are similar, these students are as diverse as the general pupil population. It follows that providers must tailor their provision to suit the very different needs of the individual learners.
- 6.** Educational effects of disadvantage must be recognised. There is a growing international focus on inclusion. Recognising high-level potential in disadvantaged learners brings gifted education into mainstream educational practice.
- 7.** Local educational priorities need to be the focus for providers if they are to secure commitment and support for gifted education. Schools have a wide range of seemingly conflicting priorities and gifted education has to convince that it can effectively benefit many alternative strands of school endeavour.
- 8.** Parental engagement is critical to effective provision. Parents respond well to opportunities to become directly involved as partners in their children's learning. All involved find mutual benefits.
- 9.** Online learning is needed to develop learning and support for students and their educators. Social networking techniques have enormous untapped potential in this

field which is only now beginning to be exploited. Online programmes can support improved collaboration, communication as well as strengthening learning and professional development.

10. Limited funding strengthens the case for providers to pool resources and expertise. Competition has only moderate value. There is a strong case for securing more public-private funding agreements.
11. Evaluation is imperative. Providers must carefully and continuously monitor outcomes of the learning they offer, so that issues can be spotted quickly and problems rectified. Evaluation is important evidence to support the case for expansion or replication of a service elsewhere. Many providers are aware of the importance of evaluation, but too few are translating that into practice.
12. Research needs to be robust and supportive, and expressed in terms that are meaningful and relevant to practitioners. Too much emphasis is currently given to the development of elaborate theoretical models. The gifted education community urgently needs to resolve this problem for the sake of its own reputation.

Political and social attitudes are often more influential than resources in provision for the educational needs of the gifted. Overall, enrichment and open access to high-level resources are becoming more favoured than extra education in one area of study, except for such talents as music, dance and sport. The most obvious change in international outlook is away from specific gifted education for the chosen few, towards a more democratic approach involving collaboration between everyone involved.

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