Identifying gifts and nurturing talents: Programs for gifted preschoolers

As advocates for high-quality early childhood education, we need to recognize the diverse abilities of children. Usually, when we discuss diverse abilities, we look at the needs of children with greater difficulties in attaining skills. However, creating a stimulating and supportive environment is important for all children, including those recognized as being gifted.

Many gifted children have heightened levels of awareness, and not catering for their needs can lead to social, emotional and physical problems. Terman (1931, p. 579) wrote that 'the higher the IQ, the more acute the problem'. Seventy-eight years later this sums up the situation well. How do we create an environment that nurtures and develops these children?

REALISING POTENTIAL

We know that neurologically our brains are always developing to meet the challenges we come across. For example, if a child is encouraged to use, or is exposed to, more than one language, this ability will continue to develop. If not, it will fade, or be much harder to use later on. The earlier we recognize our children's ability, the more our children will be able to do. Gallagher (2008, p. 211) comments, 'We have come to realize the extreme importance of the early years of birth through five to the full development of the individual's potential'.

While not all children are gifted, we need to be able to recognize and nurture their gifts and not be satisfied when they show that they have simply achieved what is expected at a specific age. We need to encourage and provide support for their future development and be as concerned for them as we are for children who are not developing to the benchmarks or standards we have set for them.

All children need to be nurtured, and we need to remember to keep nurturing the few who have gone well beyond our expectations, to help them to continue to develop into even more able human beings. We also need to remember that many gifted children are not gifted across all areas, and through careful observations we will notice those who shine in one domain as well as those who shine in many. As parents, teachers and caregivers we have this ability and need to develop it as best we can.

Let's examine two different programs that aimed to nurture the gifts of preschool-aged children. One was in Arnhem Land, on an island in the tropical north of Australia; the other was in Sydney at a University of New South Wales holiday program for gifted students.

THE ARNHEM LAND PROGRAM

The program included all available children in the community. The majority of the children spoke Yolngu Motha but a few had learned English as their first language. Both languages were used in the classroom. The room was large and very clean. There were many toys in different locations, grouped in different ways - boxes and pegs with exotic dress-up clothes, containers with cardboard, fabric, wood scraps, glitter, glue, paint, seeds, etc. - which allowed the children to create and explore in a safe environment. The program was remarkably child-centred because the teacher and assistants were aware of the levels of ability of each individual child in their care.

The teacher and one of the assistants were experienced; the other assistant had started at the beginning of the year. They began their days before the children arrived and ended them after the children had left, allowing time to discuss the children and their achievements. The teacher developed observation charts that all three used when developing programs and reporting to families on the children's individual learning progress.
THE SYDNEY PROGRAM

The program encouraged the participation of children from all socioeconomic backgrounds through the possibility of scholarship arrangements. The participating children were all identified as gifted by their families and, in many cases, by psychological assessment. Although the program was not identified as a 'boys only' program, the children were all boys. The theme for this particular group was 'space'. The program leader and two assistants each had more than 20 years of teaching experience. The leader was finishing her doctorate in Gifted Education and both assistants were completing postgraduate studies in giftedness. All spoke English as a first language, as did the majority of the children.

Information was sent out prior to the start of the holiday program asking the children to bring in a drawing and some writing on the first day to help the teachers to gain insight into the children's abilities. Different activities were displayed around the classroom every day and the boys were encouraged to try all of them. All had multiple levels of difficulty, as some of the children could read, write and count past 100. Some children had had years of exposure to groups of other children while some had spent limited time outside the family circle.

The leader and her assistants made observations and collected data from the children's work. Each day they discussed the children's abilities and how to encourage further development of the children's skills. Information regarding the children's work was given informally to their families during the week. A formal report was written at the end of the program.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Both programs made careful observations, encouraged individual development, and showed respect for the children and their families. The programs were seen as fun by the children, but also had specific learning opportunities that challenged them. The children were treated as individuals, with different ability levels, and the teachers encouraged them all to strive to achieve.

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References


Gagné (2003) defines a gifted child as one whose inherited abilities put him or her in the top 10 per cent of a given population in a given domain. A talented child is one who has developed abilities sufficiently to be classified as being in the top 10 per cent of a given population in a given domain within an age and stage range. When individual gifts are nurtured through exposure to good teaching, parenting, disposition, environment and a degree of luck they will develop into talents, and the top 10 per cent will be called talented writers, musicians, scientists, artists, mathematicians, etc.