

A CASE STUDY:

“A story which must be told, as I believe that it will create awareness which could benefit many other children.”

Early Identification of a Gifted and Talented Child: One child's journey from preschool to school

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ABSTRACT

Billy's gifted and talented nature did not shine out. Only training on the part of the researcher helped to identify him at preschool. At school he was not so lucky. None of his teachers had trained in the area of Gifted and Talented education, and thus overlooked his identifying characteristics. As acceleration was the only system available for young gifted and talented children at his school, it was imperative that he be identified in order for his educational and emotional needs to be met. Due to various circumstances, assessment was never carried out. This is a case study of an exemplary gifted and talented child's journey from preschool to school in a town in N.S.W. We can only hope that his is the only case.

recommends case studies, which have been found to have 92% reliability (Fatouros, 1986) in identifying gifted and talented children. Fortunately I was able to select a child at the preschool where I was teaching almost immediately:

Hayden was certainly gifted and talented: his language skills were astonishing; he remembered everything I had said three weeks ago, always answered any question before other children could formulate a response, or got his message across by the sheer volume of his insistent voice, wanted to know about everything, and had great suggestions for activities which I had not even heard about. I felt smug in the knowledge that I had a gifted and talented child picked out for my assignment..

IDENTIFICATION AT PRESCHOOL

But Billy was a different sort of child. If I hadn't been enrolled in a Gifted and Talented course, I would have missed him altogether! He was a bright-eyed, quiet but keen 4-year old little boy. He did not particularly stand out from the group – at least not until the day he dropped a mountain of handtowels, which he had collected in the bathroom, before my feet. “There you are!”, he smiled at me confidently meeting my eyes with the look of an equal. “What do you mean, there you are? Will you please put those handtowels right back where they came from! I bet you cannot remember whose locker to hang which towel into...”. I did go on a bit, amazed at the idea of Billy doing such a silly deed. His immediate next action was to find a spot on the floor and curl into a ball, where he fell asleep almost instantly. I looked at my assistant in alarm. “I don't

know what is going on for this child”, I exclaimed. My assistant had spent the previous year in the 3-year old room where Billy had attended the year before, and carefully explained that in that room one child was allowed to collect everyone's towels just before going-home time each day. That is when I realised that Billy had wanted to please me, to do a good deed – and I had admonished him for it. How very interesting that he fell asleep! Very sensitive child, obviously ... I explained what happened to his mother when she came to pick him up, and I apologised to him. The next time he came back, he looked me squarely in the eyes and said gravely: “I'm glad you said that you were sorry!”.

These were the events which caused me to take a punt on Billy instead of studying Hayden (and risk an F in my assignment). Fortunately, my case study proved me right. Later on, my findings were further verified by a speech therapy assessment which stated that Billy's language was that of a 7+ year old child. My case study conclusion suggested the following about Billy's future: “...it is recommended that Billy be placed in a class at school where he has access to vertical movement in areas where he shows superior ability, such as a K-1-2 composite class with a teacher who is in favour of such mobility” (Wellisch, 1994).

When we completed our assessments of all the children that year, we found that some of the other children would benefit by accelerated input. I was therefore able to form two small groups around Billy and Hayden. The groups were offered a differentiated curriculum for short periods of time during one of their two

When I was in my last year of studying for a B. Ed. (E.C.) degree I chose a Gifted and Talented elective. During the course I learnt that some of the characteristics of young gifted and talented children are HIGH SENSITIVITY, EXCELLENT MEMORY, ADVANCED LANGUAGE SKILLS, PARTICULAR ACCELERATED SKILLS, A DISLIKE FOR CONFORMITY, CREATIVITY, LEADERSHIP SKILLS, PERFECTIONISM dovetailed closely by the almost inevitable twin characteristic of LOW SELF ESTEEM, TASK COMMITMENT, that they ASK MANY QUESTIONS, ARE UPSET BY INJUSTICE, and are IMPATIENT WITH OTHERS LESS INFORMED. One of the tasks for the course was to conduct a case study. Clark (1992)

face-to-face sessions each day. The children left at the end of the year well stimulated, and eager for school.

THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

I was busy settling in the new group the following year when Billy's mother came to see me, a handkerchief close to her mouth, her eyes red and teary. I led her into the office, where she told me that Billy was unhappy and that the teacher he had was awful. He had been placed in a straight Kindergarten class, and the teacher was insensitive to his needs. I urged her to talk with the Principal, and to have him assessed by the School Counsellor. She left a little bit happier, and I lost touch with Billy shortly after this event.

Two years later I enrolled in a Master in Early Childhood course and one of the components I chose was Gifted and Talented Education. Coincidentally, a few weeks later I happened to meet the Principal of Billy's school at a function, and enquired about him. He said that Billy had been assessed and that his assessment had not shown him to be outstanding. I was disappointed, doubting my initial identification, but as I needed to carry out another case study for my course, I thought it would be interesting to follow up on Billy and get the whole story. I obtained the permission of the Principal and the parents, and here is the sad story that unfolded:

THE FIRST YEAR AT SCHOOL

Billy started to bedwet and have nightmares a few weeks into first term of his Kindergarten class. "Every time I looked at him he was crying", mum said. She tried to speak to the teacher, who was uncommunicative, "abrupt...rude, she didn't answer my questions" and who complained that Billy was "pathetic" and "always last with everything". It appeared, said mum, that "his attention span was too long". He worked longer and more thoroughly than the other children, often did not finish his work, and therefore "felt he'd failed". The teacher didn't say 'you've done a good job, do you want to finish it at home and show me?', mum said, but used comments such as "Oh, didn't you finish?".

Mum went on to relate her first visit to the classroom: "She was telling them to point their finger at the ceiling, sharpen it in their ear, and was calling it a pencil...it was to do with discipline. You know, the old fashioned style of discipline, where

all the children had to do the same thing, go rote...the night before (Billy, ed.) had done a dot-to-dot to a hundred and ten...for his own amusement, and this particular day...she had them set up with a dot-to-dot to twelve...and of course Billy went to it and got into trouble instantly, because SHE said that they were only allowed to go from one to two when SHE said and from three to four when SHE said!".

At the time mum had wanted him to stay on at the school, but dad did not agree in retrospect: "...we should have just pulled him out of that school then. Mum argued that he had stayed with his peer group, his brother, had learnt that not all people are pleasant, and that it was not his fault that the teacher did not like him.

After mum had come to see me at preschool in tears, she had in fact gone back to the school and arranged a meeting with the Principal and the

"He seemed under terrific pressure to do everything perfectly ... and yet, he would get upset if she tried to help him"

teacher. At the meeting testing was discussed and permission obtained from mum, with an eye to acceleration because mum - feeling backed up by my case study, of which she had a copy - had suggested that he may be bored with the pace at school. Throughout the meeting the teacher was completely uncooperative and her only comment to every suggestion to accommodate Billy was, according to mum, "He's not running my classroom!" It was therefore resolved that Billy would, in the short term, occasionally see the Principal for praise in order to counteract, in the words of the Principal, the "poor relationship between the child, the teacher, and mum". This praising was supposed to happen once per month, but had only taken place a couple of times, according to his teacher. Everyone involved noticed an improvement in Billy, however, because as mum said, "he felt like somebody liked him. And as he was no longer "tortured" by his teacher, none felt the

need for further follow up. I did, though, in order to complete my case study.

The Principal told me about his involvement and about the assessment: "I don't know what range he came out...He didn't really show out as being that much ahead of the other children at that stage ... (but, ed.) after having him assessed and probably having a bit more communication between the teacher and his mother, things settled down and Billy was quite happy at school. He seemed to take some of the pressure off himself". Unhappily, my research tells of another story: I found that Billy was, despite the Principal's recollections - even down to the outcome - never assessed by the school counsellor: No records of any assessment could be found, despite a search by two Counsellors, and the School Counsellor who worked at the school then does not recall seeing Billy, or making any recommendations. Had he been assessed and found to be of superior ability, the Principal told me, he would have been accelerated if his parents were in agreement with this course of action. Acceleration was the only method used during the early school years at this school with gifted and talented children, but the school was partial to Gifted and Talented education, which was demonstrated in years 5 and 6 where children were rotated between four teachers, and were taught in ability groups during part of the school day.

Although things did settle down after the above meeting, his parents told me that all through the Kindergarten year Billy went through a "naughty phase", was tearful and tantrummy, would either cry or yell, was a "wild boy", teamed up with an ADD child and "wouldn't listen". Mum: "I found that to compensate for the - the repression from school, that I'd have to allow a lot more flexibility than what was good for him". According to dad "... his whole attitude did not swing again until he started back the following, (ed.) year". Billy's parents think that he is now happy at school.

Billy's Kindergarten teacher had found it difficult to cope with Billy. "He seemed under terrific pressure to do everything perfectly"...and yet, he would get upset if she tried to help him, she said, explaining how making mistakes in her class was no problem: "I'm the only one in my room allowed to have a rubber and I just get it out and...but Billy was just always upset, and no matter what you said to try and make him feel better... We never ever

make a big thing about somebody making a bad mistake...". He never wanted to leave his work unfinished, but took great pains to get it just right. Her biggest problems with him were that he always wanted praise and that he "had that terrible thing...about wanting to be perfect...". Billy's teacher suspected pressure from home, but would not exclude that the pressure came from within the child. She described his behaviour as unhealthy.

She admitted, though, that he had done well, had come near the top in the year. He had good general knowledge, was always keen to find things out...Thinking back over his perfectionistic behaviour, she commented that she had never met anyone like Billy in her 40 odd years of teaching. When I asked her if she thought he may have been gifted and talented, she thought not. Her knowledge of gifted and talented was that they would be far ahead of others, say, able to read the newspaper in Kindergarten, not mix well socially, be creative, different to the ordinary child...and anyway, she doubted that anyone at 5 could be gifted and talented – certainly, SHE had not met such a child during her time as a teacher. Precociousness at such an early age would just be a sign of parents having spent a lot of time with their child, and this, in her experience, evens out as school progresses.

BILLY'S SECOND YEAR AT SCHOOL

The following year Billy was more fortunate in that he got into a composite class, which, the Principal assured me, was just the luck of the draw, as all the classes were basically parallel – with a teacher who was more flexible and understanding. This teacher did, however, find it difficult when Billy had to be told again and again to stop working and sit on the floor: "He was ABSORBED...there (was, ed.) always some sort of little battle"...or when he inevitably persisted in suggestions to change a story theme, or just had to add a little extra: "He'd want to be just a little bit different". She found this quite annoying at times. He needed individual treatment, and his interest in his work – although "a lovely quality" – did not always fit in when working within a class. On the positive side she related that once during a symmetry lesson he had discovered something even she hadn't seen. "I was just blown away by it!". She found him to be far from conforming, "very individual with his thoughts", an

independent worker, able to "tackle any task", enjoying "hard words" and "complex sentences", very strong in story writing – the best in the class, and in the top group in all other areas. She felt certain that his intellectual needs were well catered for, and had not felt the need to provide him with a special programme. Warmed by her description of him I asked if she thought that he was gifted and talented. But she, too, thought that "someone who is gifted and talented is someone that CAN read a newspaper or whatever...". Pushed further she said that she wasn't "qualified enough to answer that", but that he was very good at storywriting and pushing himself in reading, writing and related areas.

His teacher was puzzled by his attitude to school: "... He'll just (in a deliberately slow voice, ed.) walk out of the class, he's never happy or bright or gay, but never cross or anything, just straight down the line...you wouldn't know whether he is happy to be here or not, but I'm sure that he is...".

When asked what he liked about school, his immediate response was "pupil free days".

BILLY'S STORY

Billy described his initial experience of school as not being "welcome" or liked. His consequent attitude towards school seemed to be more permanent than the parental perception would have it: When asked what he liked about school, his immediate response was "pupil free days". Billy recalled his Kindergarten year – he liked the work, but disliked having to line up for everything all the time. And his teacher talked a lot. These events had bored Billy. In first class he liked his new teacher because she gave out stickers when he sat up straight. And he was having more fun. When asked to elaborate on "fun", it turned out that it entailed being allowed to sit next to a friend while they worked. He recalled preschool as a place where one could look after the preschool pets, whereas

school was a place where dogs came and "everybody teases them". His evaluation of the difference between preschool and school was as follows: preschool was real fun, and school was "boring – except for pupil free days".

CONCLUSION

I have presented here a follow-up case study of an exemplary child who had been identified at a preschool two years earlier as potentially gifted and talented. Billy's journey from preschool to school was, it seems, marred by an unwilling teacher who was uninformed with regard to gifted and talented characteristics; by a school Principal who failed to carry through the promised assessment and who now believed that he had, and that Billy had not done very well – a myth which could well follow Billy during the remainder of primary school and thus act as a deterrent against any future requests for assessment; and by a subsequent teacher who, however more sympathetic to his person, appeared to be as uninformed on the characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children as was his Kindergarten teacher. His parents, seeing him happier and bringing home good school reports, are pleased with his progress. Although it is difficult to forecast what will happen to Billy in the future, his teacher reports that his friendship patterns show a tendency to be drawn to "little scallywags", which could possibly result in Billy, too, becoming a child with behaviour problems during class. He has additionally developed a rather bothersome strong will, according to his parents. But the last, along with his admirable, hitherto unwavering commitment to task – which is "... crucial to learning and success" (Karnes, 1983, p.87) – may stand him in good stead on his future journey through an apparently unresponsive school environment.

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