

Where are the gifted under fives?

Inclusion and support programs for gifted children



In 2001, the Government conducted a Senate inquiry into gifted education but, unfortunately, its recommendations and subsequent implementation strategies passed the early childhood field unnoticed. I believe we may have missed the action on gifted children because of six commonly-held myths:

① 'All children can be well catered for by the developmental program or emergent curriculum currently offered in early childhood settings.'

Fact: Gifted children have particular special needs and strengths that require an individual education plan—ideally created cooperatively by their teacher and their parents—which is regularly evaluated.

② 'Young gifted children (if they exist at all) are bound to have deficit needs. For instance, they generally have poor eye-hand coordination and social skills, and, as we are not gifted experts, these are the areas that should be programmed for in the early childhood setting.'

Fact: Gifted children often develop unevenly and are plagued by insecurities as a result of their 'different-ness'. Programming for strengths is a strategy that will enhance self-esteem and help gifted children overcome reluctance to confront weaknesses. The difficulties they sometimes encounter with their peers are usually due to their advanced mental age, rather than with a social skills problem: gifted youngsters often feel more comfortable with older children or adults.

③ 'Gifted children are already ahead of other children and therefore do not require particular programming. We need instead to focus on children who have deficit needs or are disabled.'

Fact: Gifted children have a number of special needs including chronic low self-esteem, perfectionism and boredom. Giftedness has its window of opportunity and, if it is not attended to, it atrophies like an unused muscle. Besides, why must it be a

choice between programming for the gifted or for the disabled?

④ 'Children, whether gifted or not, need to play and to have a normal childhood. There is plenty of time for scholastic activities later on.'

Fact: Early childhood educators have had numerous conversations about the 'image of the child', but no-one has yet questioned the image of the playing child and what 'play' may mean in this context. In the case of gifted children, 'play' could well mean composing music (think of Mozart who did just this at age five). Our role is not to tell children to wait until we think they are ready, but to be responsive to their actual needs whenever they occur.

⑤ 'Parents who claim their children are gifted have been spending too much time hot-housing them with scholastic activities, that's why these children seem to be ahead of others. Experience indicates that once they have been attending a centre for a while, you can no longer tell these children from the others.'

Fact: Research has consistently shown that parents who nominate their children as gifted are mostly correct in their assertions. There is also ample evidence from twin studies that intelligence has a genetic component, and research shows that gifted parents tend to spend more time with their children, demonstrating that both genetics and environment help to kindle gifted

children. Additionally, gifted children soon learn the 'norms' in a particular setting and are excellent at 'hiding their light' in a setting where their different-ness is not appreciated—that's why they seem to fit in after a while.

⑥ 'We have never had a gifted child at our preschool or childcare centre.'

Fact: If 10 per cent of the population are intellectually disabled, then the 10 per cent on the other side of the normal distribution must be gifted. Giftedness is generally categorised in a similar way to disabilities: e.g. mild, moderate, etc. (see box). So it is likely that there are at least four or five gifted children at a 50-place service.

A seventh myth is that the concept of gifted education is elitist.

The summary of the 2001 Senate inquiry acknowledged that:

- gifted children are found in all socioeconomic and ethnic groups; and we fail underprivileged children's special needs the most, because they are least likely to have other supports
- early childhood staff should, therefore, be trained to identify gifted:
 - children from low socioeconomic backgrounds
 - children with a disability
 - rural children
 - children of Indigenous descent.

Level of giftedness	IQ	Prevalence
Mildly gifted	IQ 115–129	>1:40
Moderately gifted	IQ 130–144*	1:40–1:1000
Highly gifted	IQ 145–159	1:1000–1:10 000
Exceptionally gifted	IQ 160–179	1:10,000–1:1 million
Profoundly gifted	180+	<1:1 million

(Feldhusen, 1993, cited in Gross 2000)
 *Intellectual giftedness is classified as 130+ by most school systems.

- we have neglected gifted children's special needs; therefore many suffer underachievement, boredom, frustration and psychological distress
- the special needs of gifted children should be seen in the same light as intellectual disability special needs and physical disability special needs
- the Commonwealth should sponsor national curriculum materials (including online materials) to help teachers differentiate the curriculum for gifted children
- suitable acceleration of gifted children should be encouraged (e.g. early entry into the school system for gifted preschoolers).

Current perceptions

The issue of early entry mentioned above applies especially to early childhood services where gifted children's parents should be able to find support and information (Wellisch, 2005). This is why it is clear that the Senate inquiry was a wake-up call, not just for schools, but for the early childhood

sector too. Unfortunately, rather than being at the forefront, our field has regressed. Take the current Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) handbook (NCAC, 2005), for example, which makes no mention of gifted children at all—whereas they were included in the 1993 version (albeit in the introductory section).

Recommendations

Young gifted children should be provided with a program that meets their needs. The Government's commitment to gifted education should be extended to fund courses for early childhood educators, early childhood support services and be embedded in the QIAS. And what should services do in the meantime? If you feel inadequately trained to assess and program for gifted children; are unaware of the early entry option and don't know whether you have a gifted child attending your service; then you can—and should—visit the websites below and make a start on providing more adequately for the special needs of young gifted children in your care.

Mimi Wellisch

References and further reading

The Government's *Gifted and Talented Policy* is available online www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/curriculum/schools/gats/PD20040051.shtml as is the *Gifted Education Professional Development Package* www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/gats/

Commonwealth Government (2001). *Report of the Senate Select Committee on The Education of Gifted and Talented Children*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government Publishing Service.

Gross, M.U.M. (2000). Issues in the cognitive development of exceptionally and profoundly gifted individuals. In K.A. Heller, F.J. Monks, R.J. Sternberg & R.F. Subotnik (Eds.), *International handbook of research and development of giftedness and talent* (Second edn., pp. 179-192). New York: Pergamon.

National Childcare Accreditation Council (2005). *Quality improvement and accreditation system handbook third edition*. Sydney: Author.

Wellisch, M. (2005). School readiness: When should we consider early entry? *Every Child*, 11(3), 26-27.

Well-known psychologist and educator Louise Porter has updated and revised her book, *Young gifted children: Meeting their needs*, which is a comprehensive but easy to use resource for early childhood professionals.

This, and other quality assured titles, are available from

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au or freecall 1800 356 900.



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