



EDUCATING
the **MORE ABLE**
STUDENT

What works and why

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London EC1Y 1SP

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2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
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Cover designer: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY



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First published 2015

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2014948708

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-0794-2

ISBN 978-1-4739-0795-9 (pbk)

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The Global Picture: History and Oversight

Key points

- Education of the most able suffers from being tagged as 'elitist'.
- It is held back by a belief that ability will always win or show through.
- Asian and Eastern European cultures accept more readily the existence of children more academically able than the norm.
- Schemes for the most able are sometimes in shorter supply in the undeveloped world because they are seen as a luxury.
- Schemes for the most able are vulnerable because politics dictates their survival and their funding.
- The cause of able and gifted children can be badly served by its academic arm.

Able, gifted and talented schemes and initiatives globally date primarily from post-1945, though there are examples of schemes clearly aimed at the most able that date from much earlier. The creation of grammar schools in England and the further development of *Lycées* in France and *Gymnasiums* in Germany after the Second World War are among the most extreme examples of complete educational systems being designed around high academic achievers. There is considerable difference across the world in the proportion of children deemed to be in the top cohort of ability. UK grammar schools and the Australian SHIP scheme are, or were, geared to the top 30% of ability, whilst Singapore has a scheme for the top 1% and the Hungarian Genius scheme rather joyously (albeit just a little improbably) implies that all children can be members.

A number of countries across the world operate outstanding schemes for the education of able children. Despite this, there is a strong sense that able, gifted and talented education is sometimes low down on a country's

priority list, and in some countries (most notably the UK) it is an endangered species. There are a variety of reasons for this.

Why has able, gifted and talented education become an 'endangered species'?

First, education for the most able suffers from the tag of elitist, in an age when 'elite' can be a swear word. A common theme in conversations with teachers undertaken as part of this book was that resources expended on the most able were inevitably resources taken away from the broader spectrum of ability. One example of an academic statement of this concept is:

Increasingly, the focus is moving away from the categorization of some pupils as 'gifted' (with all others implicitly therefore in the 'not gifted' category) and towards an individual focus on individual differences in developmental trajectories, recognizing that pathways to high-level achievement are enormously diverse, domain specific and incremental in nature. (Matthews, in Shavinina, 2009: 1365–6)

What one teacher described as 'fundamental egalitarianism' is a feature largely of western educational culture. One extract sums up the nervousness felt by many commentators about special provision for able students:

What is the justification for the support of special programs for the gifted and talented? Given the low teacher salaries and high classroom sizes that plague most school systems, why should resources be expended on a select few? Such diversion of taxpayer money seems particularly objectionable in any society that adheres to egalitarian principles. Why not use the cash to help the less gifted and the less talented reach higher standards of achievement? Why shouldn't a democratic country design its educational system to make its citizens more intellectually homogenous? Why not create a nation where everybody is truly equal? (Simonton, in Shavinina, 2009: 905)

For some commentators, the undeniable value of equality of opportunity has morphed into the rather more questionable belief that all children should *only* be offered the same opportunity. Such dismissal of able, gifted and talented programmes is also made easier by the sense that to lavish such resources on able children is to bless them twice over, and that able children either need no help to achieve their potential or much less help than their weaker peers. There is also a regrettable tendency in academic circles to treat giftedness as an illness and a source of major

problems. One session at a recent Biennial World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children produced a list of undesirable symptoms shown by the gifted so lengthy that it appeared such children needed treatment rather than teaching, to be sent to hospital rather than school (see below). Yet the truth is that gifted children can make life difficult for themselves, not wishing to stand out from the crowd and using their ability to measure their work and achievement so they float just above the trip wires in the system that are meant to detect underachievement. The following is clear statement of the need for special provision:

Most classroom teachers have experienced the frustration of realizing that the work they are assigning is too easy for some of the bright students in their classrooms. Many teachers have also felt pangs of guilt as they watched these same bright students complete assignment after assignment of previously mastered review work that is not really necessary for them to complete. In many instances teachers are just too busy trying to help students who are not working up to grade level and who do not understand the work to be able to find enough time to substitute appropriate and challenging assignments for students who do understand the material and need no further review. (Renzulli et al., 1982: 188–94)

Eastern European and Asian culture seems far more ready to accept both the existence of an academic elite and the need for it to be taught as a special needs category. Yet, even in Far Eastern and Asian countries, and in China, many were newly ambivalent about their existing able, gifted and talented programmes because of the belief that hot-housing had undoubtedly given students an excellent command of basic principles and core knowledge, but at the cost of driving out creativity and imagination.

Second, for understandable reasons, countries in the two-thirds world often do not have gifted and talented (G&T) education programmes as a priority, understandably when one's concern is that large elements of the populace are not receiving even basic education. In a survey conducted by the CfBT Education Trust, where a very large number of questionnaires were sent out, 65% of respondents were from western cultures. Rather surprisingly, given their level of activity in promoting G&T schemes, Eastern Europe and the Baltic states only accounted for 10% of responses. The Middle East and South America each produced 7% of responses, the Far East 4% and Africa 2%. Too much should not be read into these figures, not least of all because a survey conducted in English will not always be accessible to some teachers in some countries, but it does convey the sense in which G&T education is a luxury for some countries with little money to spare, rather than a staple (Freeman et al., 2010).

Third, educational funding is usually provided by politicians. Where the government is firmly behind the principle of able, gifted and talented education, as in Singapore, it thrives and flourishes. In a number of western countries, one is left with the impression that there are relatively few votes in high-ability programmes. As discussed above, politicians can always comfort themselves as they withdraw provision from such programmes with the notion that the most able can use their intelligence and their ability to look after themselves, something which much research shows to be untrue.

This is essentially the political argument against the Gifted and Talented agenda. Resources are limited and should be focused on 'real kids' with real problems, who cannot cope without explicit support. All identified G&T kids tend to look a little like Harry Potter or Hermione Granger, come from middle-class supportive families and would basically succeed no matter what the school did because their parents would put all the back-up strategies into place to ensure that in the eventuality of nuclear fallout, they will still be doing pretty well: private tutoring, taking them out to see culturally interesting exhibitions and artefacts, more private tutoring and sometimes even talking to them face to face. Seemingly, no wonder they can't fail.

Except, of course, they do fail: all too frequently. Even these 'heavily supported' students often go off the rails, or misunderstand the demands being made of them or the degree of difficulty of the exam, or assume that because they might be top of their class they will automatically get the top grades they need. These students are just the tip of the iceberg. The straightforward reality is that the very children who need some of the greatest support because they are smart but disadvantaged are precisely the learners who are underachieving on an industrial scale. They are the students who don't get to go to the cultural events, don't get to hear the 'right words' spoken at home, don't have parents helicoptering in when they start to slip and slide. In short, they are the very children we need to support the most in school, or their talent will be squandered, their aspirations abandoned. A great deal of worldwide research suggests that these are the children who are not getting the support and not achieving anything like their potential, yet still governments tend to equate disadvantage with low performance.

A cynic might argue that renewed attention to the gifted and talented from government tends to follow on from a crisis. The starkest example was the money invested in G&T education in the USA in the mid- to late 1950s following the country's perceived defeat in the space race when the Soviet Russians were the first country to put a satellite, Sputnik, into orbit. Similarly, at least some of the USA's present commitment to G&T

programmes is explained by the shortage of home-grown STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) specialists. In STEM occupations, 38% of doctoral employees are foreign born, whilst only 30% of college students major in STEM subjects. Comparative figures are 59% for China and 66% for Japan.

Fourth, G&T education is arguably badly served by some of its university and research arms. Partly, this is because there are very few champions of gifted and talented education in schools, and so the burden of leadership falls on academics and researchers. Winning political battles, making a cause great by taking it out to a wider public, and charismatic contributions to the media are not the first features one might associate with some university academics. Those academics have also not helped by taking up and defending fixed positions, and on occasion fighting each other more than fighting for the cause of able, gifted and talented education.

Gifted education seems to be a fragmented, porous and contested field ... dogmatism in the field takes the form of insular or competing camps, each promoting a particular perspective and either ignoring or denigrating the others. The result has been an unsettled field. (Ambrose et al., 2012)

A further complication is that many of those who write on G&T education have never actually taught school children:

The field of gifted education ... [consists of] ... those of us who write, conduct research, educate teachers – the chattering class of the field – and the much larger segment of the field engaged in the day-to-day practice of gifted education – teachers, administrators and policy makers – those who actually make this form of education happen. (Borland, in Ambrose et al., 2012: 13)

Much research pays scant attention to the reality of a teacher's life or the reality of a pupil's experience in school. Able, gifted and talented education has many critics and enemies, and is also divided within and sometimes against itself. It is not a recipe for a cogent and forceful justification of the need for more able programmes. We, the authors of this book, write simply as teachers with over 70 years of teaching combined behind us, with one overwhelming concern, namely to identify some of the classroom practices and techniques that draw the best out of our more able children and allow them to realize their full potential.

Global experts in gifted and talented education

There are, despite these reservations, a number of highly respected global experts in the field of gifted and talented children, some of them seminal,

founding figures, and others those who have picked up or carried on the torch. A list might include the following:

Edward de Bono (born 1933) pioneered the teaching of Thinking Skills as a subject in its own right. Though not only concerned with the most able, he has been a significant influence on many of those who are and on the development of such as the Australian SHIP scheme.

Howard Earl Gardner (born 1943) is an American who was one of the pioneers of the theory of multiple intelligences in the 1980s. He identified between seven and 14 'intelligences' in a theory that has never been quite proven, but which has received much support and prompted much further thought. In his first draft proposal of seven intelligences (in *Frames of Mind*, 1983), two were typically valued in schools, the next three were usually associated with the arts and the final two were what Gardner defined as 'personal intelligences'. Though contentious, his influence has been benign in that it challenged simplistic definitions of intelligence.

Robert M. Gagné (1916–2002) wrote some of his major work in the late 1990s (see, for example, 1999), as a leader in the group that sees ability not as a static phenomenon but as something that can be developed and evolved – the 'Gagné Assumption' and 'Nine Events of Instruction'. He disputed the notion that ability can be measured simply by IQ tests and challenged, among others, the work of Piaget. One useful by-product of this type of thinking is that by discouraging classification of children simply by where they are at, and encouraging looking at where they might grow to be, a significant number of disadvantaged children at least are put into a potential pool in which they might swim as gifted and talented.

Joseph Renzulli (born 1936) has already been referred to. An American who has been influencing opinion for many years, his approach to children and to schools is holistic. He does not deny the importance of above-average intelligence in giftedness, but links it with major personality features, seeing these as the catalyst that enables giftedness to be realized. He believes in flexible, organic systems that grow out of the individual and local soul, and his whole-school programmes refreshingly demand that the pupil links in with (and is excited by) real-world problems with a clear practical application. To this element of pragmatism is added a fierce interest in creativity.

Charles Spearman (1863–1945) was an Englishman and an early pioneer, publishing in the early 1900s. An army officer for 15 years, he enrolled to study psychology at Leipzig in 1897, as Leipzig was willing to let him in without the formal qualifications required in England. He was as well known in his own time for his work in statistics, though he became Professor of Psychology at University College, London, in 1928. His theory of a general intelligence (the 'G factor') that can be subdivided into mathematical and verbal intelligence, with children deemed gifted if their measured IQ (Intelligence Quotient) is above a certain level, has been massively influential and probably still provides the definition of the most able for a majority of laymen.

Robert Sternberg (born 1949) is a contemporary American who has written about a form of multiple intelligence. He is also a critic of intelligence tests.

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His theory of 'Successful Intelligence' claims that a successful person needs three different skill sets, crudely defined as analytic, creative and practical. Though highly individual, his work fits into a wider picture whereby some modern research does not deny the importance of intelligence in giftedness, but sees it almost as an inert compound made active by any one or all of environment, upbringing or personality.

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) was a Russian who viewed the child as being a very active participant in the development of giftedness and saw the crucial role of the teacher in unlocking it. His obsession with potential is a very helpful contribution to a tangled debate. Of particular importance to the modern debate is his concept of the 'Zone of Proximal Development' – Vygotsky's term for the range of tasks that a child can complete. It has two limits – the lower the one the child can achieve independently, and the upper what can be achieved with the help of a suitable teacher.

Questions for further thought

Why is so little attention given to these experts?

It is telling that few, if any, of the above have any real presence in the popular consciousness, and none are from the UK. It is testimony to the fact that the academic establishment concerned with G&T children has been in many cases more concerned with talking to itself than with talking to children, teachers or parents. It is also both noteworthy and regrettable that the average age of leaders in this field is so high. There are few young researchers and teachers setting the world alight with new and challenging research into the able, gifted and talented, and hence even less pressure on governments and societies in general to cater for this vital group. Too little attention has been given to the core issues of how able and gifted education justifies its existence, and far too few experts have addressed the strong charges of elitism that are all too easily levelled at the field. Highly talented but disadvantaged learners are still neglected in much of the research as are significant minorities. Teachers are not represented in the lists of experts and their experiences are devalued by many researchers. Researchers therefore have little cause to seek out these teacher experts, who are rarely reported on or referenced in the national educational media.

What are teachers doing with the models promoted by experts?

What is also becoming abundantly clear is that school providers are becoming more sophisticated in choosing and applying various models from the experts in gifted education which are appropriate to their circumstances. We believe that there is real power in the adaptive and adoptive nature of the uptake of ideas and approaches by schools. This is well illustrated by the finding that over 110 separate research authorities were cited by respondents in the CfBT worldwide survey mentioned above. Possibly because of the limited material available to

practitioners of what works in a local context, there is an increasing tendency to combine approaches, selecting elements in new ways. It is a 'mix and match' approach often based on anecdotal evidence of successful programmes but it also suggests the growth of a more democratic approach that is empowering and to be welcomed. It is hoped that this book might also help teachers to locate and explore more of the approaches that can be used.

What works where and why?

The pages that follow discuss the various techniques used to nurture and teach the gifted and talented, and give details of practice in a number of countries around the world. The conclusion from a project such as this must be that there is no magic bullet. No one technique works with the gifted and talented massively more than any other. No country has a monopoly of virtue in terms of what it does and how it does it. Where countries do have a proven record of success, it is often because what they do and how they do it springs naturally out of the local or national culture, and does not necessarily transplant. Schemes for educating G&T children have many good parts, but so far no one has added the parts together to make a greater whole. One feature that showed as very common in our research was the increasing use of devolution, and a wholly or partially independent sector in education worldwide. Charter schools in the USA, city academies and free schools in the UK and the increasing number of independent schools in Singapore are typical of a trend towards local management of schools. These changes have an impact on the whole education system of a country, and not just on the way it educates its most able children, but they do in many cases have a knock-on effect on, or at least implications for, the education of the most able. Many of these effects are discussed below.