



# Gifted, talented, but it's no easy ride

We need to be a lot cleverer about how we deal with bright children at school, writes

**Ainslie MacGibbon.**

**I**t would seem ludicrous to most Australians to make a top cricketer train with backyard cricketers. So why is it so contentious to group smart children with other smart children?

Despite the steady introduction of gifted and talented classes and the growth of selective schools, many feel that Australian culture stigmatises rather than values intellectual ability. Others view special classes or schools for the academically gifted as favouring the individual over the wellbeing of a community.

But ask any parent of a gifted child, or such children themselves, and it becomes clear that those who exhibit "giftedness" have special needs. In most states the Francoys Gagne model is used to determine whether a child is gifted or talented. This model regards gifted and talented as two separate stages. Gifted refers to the child's potential or ability, while talent describes their achievement.

Miraca Gross, the professor of gifted education at the University of NSW, says: "If as a nation we want to develop talent in all areas, we need to be serious about turning gifted children into talented children in all areas." Research indicates giftedness can wax and wane or disappear altogether if it is repressed or ignored.

So what determines if a child is gifted? Indicators have varying reliability, says Dr Kerry Hodge, from the Children and Families Research Centre at Macquarie University. Consistent indicators may include good thinking; ease or speed of learning; advanced verbal abilities (usually from infancy); exceptional memory; exceptional concentration; perseverance or

motivation; wide-ranging interests and knowledge; preference for older companions; keen observation; interest and skill in numbers; exceptional spatial ability, and early use of symbolic representation, such as sophisticated drawing.

Hodge describes possible indicators as walking, talking and reading early; high energy levels; precocious reading (early reading predicts school success but not necessarily giftedness); curiosity; imagination or creativity; temperament (perfectionism, increased sensitivity); sense of humour, and birth order (first-borns are over-represented in gifted samples).

Hodge also cites characteristics that can prevent giftedness from being detected. These include problematic behaviour (disruptive, stubborn, questioning of authority); introversion; uneven development; learning difficulties; physical or sensory disabilities; and concealing ability to gain peer acceptance.

When recognising giftedness, it is accepted that standard IQ testing should be used together with measures such as parent or teacher nomination, drawings and work samples, or interviews.

Gross, who is also the director of the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre at the university, says a child is considered gifted if they have an ability in the top 10 per cent for their age. But, like disabilities, there is a range. One in 10 are mildly gifted, one in 50 moderately gifted, and one in 1000 highly gifted.

By next year about 4.4 per cent of the secondary population will be in selective schools, according to the NSW Department of Education and Training. Yet it is estimated that about 10 per cent of public school students take part in gifted programs.

Most parents, when reading the indicators of giftedness create a mental checklist – and tick criteria off against their own child's abilities. This natural comparison has been seized on by companies that bombard expectant parents with toys designed to boost intellectual capacity. Parents are later targeted with coaching

and computer solutions to help their child gain selective school entry.

While most parents recognise this as marketing, many succumb to some aspect, shamed into doing "what's best for their child", eventually finding faith in their own judgment. Others overstep the line. An extreme example was a case before the Independent Commission Against Corruption, in which parents of a primary school student attempted to bribe a teacher to ensure "favourable consideration" in selective school exams.

There are two issues at work – one is the intense competition for places at the best schools. The other is the genuine belief by a parent that their child is gifted.

"All parents think their child is gifted" is a statement repeated frequently. Gross says this is a myth.

"I have been working in gifted education since 1983 and I very rarely meet a parent that says 'my child is bright' and the child isn't," she says. "Because of the stigma, many parents are reluctant to raise it, especially if they are from a disadvantaged background. Many parents think the school will find out, but if the school doesn't look objectively, the school will not find out."

Associate Professor Craig Campbell, from the University of Sydney, says the best government schools are considered to be those that collect together bright children. "This creates large numbers of potential inequities – better comprehensive schools are located in middle-class areas – putting even more pressure on families who can't afford to live there to get their children into selective schools," he says.

Campbell believes parents are being encouraged to view themselves as consumers in the free market that schools have become, placing pressure on schools.

One high school principal says gifted and talented programs have become an important marketing tool to procure new markets of parents.



back



Some feel that “gifted” is a doomed, unfair label that has only benefited an exploitative industry. Others believe a social injustice is occurring if “giftedness” is not recognised. Whatever the case, there is a subset of children, and their families, who require understanding and support. The best way to do this – whether by acceleration, ability grouping or differentiation within the classroom – is another area of controversy.

Gross says it is important for gifted children to have access to other gifted children. “If they are emotionally mature, doing some or all of the work with the grade above is beneficial – the research supports acceleration both academically and socially,” she says.

“Ability grouping does work well when coupled with a challenging curriculum.”

She says a bright child may be rejected year after year, feel isolated and end up lacking confidence.

To make the transition to a selective school or opportunity class, “a sensible parent will explain to a child that they may not be at the top of the class any more, but they will be challenged and have fun” Gross says.

But she warns “we have also got to stop thinking that gifted children come from middle-class and private or selective schools”.

Dr Karen Grubb recently completed the thesis *An Examination of the Experiences of Gifted Preschool and Primary Age Children* through RMIT University in Melbourne. She says a family’s understanding of their child’s giftedness and interactions with schools were the keys to success.

Grubb found school was often a negative experience for gifted children. The greatest success came when there was collaboration between the teacher, parents and the child – “but this individualistic approach would benefit any child”,

she says.

She found that gifted preschoolers often don’t get the attention they need, even though it is obvious there is a special need and that this is when the brain is very active.

“Parents often deny giftedness – or feel they are not entitled to help because they are scoffed at,” Grubb says. “The word is the problem. In the Australian context, the term ‘giftedness’ is often perceived as a form of privilege. We are not saying they are any better in terms of their worth though.”

Grubb says parents are more accurate at recognising giftedness when they are provided opportunities to openly discuss their child’s abilities, free from judgment.

She says her thesis found myths and misconceptions were the most harmful influence on the provision and development of services for gifted children.

