

# GIFTED IS AS GIFTED DOES

## Understanding gifted learners!

*"Gifted is as gifted does ..."*

We've all heard that phrase, spoken tolerantly or perhaps with some exasperation!

It sums up the feelings many teachers and parents have as they struggle to cope with the idiosyncrasies of the gifted child - the fascination with some esoteric topic or idea, the questions that come zooming in from out of absolutely nowhere, the apparent total oblivion to time and other considerations when something captures their attention, the infuriating failure to complete work or show interest in what we've spent hours preparing or alternatively the refusal to let something go that's not quite 300% perfect, the intense passion for right and justice that can put a little person beyond being reasoned with - and that eternal issue, *why* won't she do her homework when she knows it will only take five minutes?

At one extreme gifted learners seem to live in a place that's got virtually no connection with the routines and requirements of the normal school programme, while at the other, they are so busy striving to be a perfect match with those requirements that we either never see their true abilities or we are continuously frustrated at the gap between what we know they can do and what they actually produce. There are an amazing number of highly individual stopping places in between those two extremes.

No wonder we're tempted to shrug our shoulders and ruefully conclude, "Gifted is as gifted does!"

And yet that same phrase is the key to working successfully with gifted learners. That's something that's highly relevant for teachers right now. From 2005, schools throughout New Zealand will face a demand to comply with an alteration to the NAGs that, for the very first time in our educational history, recognises gifted children as children with special learning needs and requires that those needs be met.

In one sense this is a very exciting development. Gifted children have for decades been arguably the most disadvantaged group of children in our education system, with virtually no resources allocated to them and little support available for either their teachers or their families. Not so long ago one international survey rated New Zealand as least adequate of all the OECD countries in providing for its gifted children - not exactly a record to be proud of. Now, at last, there's a chance to change all this.

But how will teachers achieve this? Given all the other things we're asked to do, where can we find the time? And how will we suddenly know *what* to do to cater for these complex, unpredictable, different children?

## **Guidelines?**

Our natural impulse is to look for some set of guidelines that we can follow with some assurance that this will provide the answers - Bloom's Taxonomy, perhaps, or de Bono's Six Hats, or Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, or someone's inspirational book of creative lesson ideas.

It's a sensible impulse. We do need some guidelines, and each of these, in different ways, can contribute to our ability to generate much more meaningful learning opportunities for the gifted child.

But while you can drive a car without understanding how the engine works and bake a cake without knowing a thing about the chemical reactions involved in mixing and heating those ingredients, human beings are just not like that. You can't apply a formula to a person and think that it will automatically be effective - *especially* when the people you are dealing with are as diverse as gifted children!

In other words, even the best guideline ultimately depends on how well we understand, not just the guideline, but the children it is being applied to - on how much we truly know about how these particular children think and learn, what their instinctive responses are, what motivates them to work - and what closes them down.

And that's where a phrase like "gifted is as gifted does" takes on new meaning.

Not only does it signal to us that here we have a group of children who behave differently from how other children behave, it provides us with a starting point for gaining insight into that behaviour. It's telling us in no uncertain terms that gifted children are driven by quite different considerations from those that channel other children's learning. It's pointing with all the emphasis of a hunting dog to the exact place where we can find what we need to know about gifted children - from the children themselves, from observing exactly what it is they do, and from considering carefully what this can tell us about how they approach and respond to learning experiences and the implications this has for how we teach them.

## **For example?**

A very good and very important example is the fact that gifted children are *conceptual* thinkers. They are very strongly interested in finding out the how and why of things, in understanding the *reasons* behind what they experience or are told.

They are driven by a need to make sense of the world: when their attention is caught, they are incapable of accepting that something is so simply because someone has said it is so: they want to know *why* and *how*.

It's this which ultimately gives gifted individuals the capacity to see beyond what you and I may see and in adulthood to lead us towards new discoveries, new developments and new perceptions.

But it's also this which generates all those sidetracking "what if" questions in the classroom, which takes them off at times on a completely unexpected tangent to explore some possibility that has occurred to no-one else or which

no-one else may think of the slightest importance, or which sees them at times so absorbed they are completely unaware of what else is happening around them - or of what else they might be supposed to be doing!

We can view behaviours like these as a nuisance, or we can draw on them to help structure productive learning opportunities that genuinely challenge and satisfy the gifted learner.

For instance, one teacher thought that since a group of gifted children were keen readers, they'd be excited to learn about the history of books, so she began with Caxton and the printing press and asked the children to research the history of this invention - and then found that it didn't strike the sparks she had expected.

Why? Because it limited children to finding out a series of facts and gave little opportunity for *conceptualising* just what was involved and what it really meant.

A different approach, capitalising on the natural responses of gifted children, is to engage them first in becoming aware of how reading is now so deeply embedded in so many aspects of our everyday lives. We think of reading in relation to books, but we also read whenever we look at a clock, check a bus sign or laugh at a slogan on someone's t-shirt. Once started, children search with enthusiasm to add to this list - it can cover a wall. (The prize for the most unusual went to a boy who "read" a slogan on the sole of a shoe from a muddy footprint).

And then, we take the children back to a world where most people did not know how to read and start to ask how different would life be? How would you discover a new recipe, tell the time, find your way in an unfamiliar place, send a message to a relative living in another place, etc. etc. etc? What else would be affected? How would schools work? (Would there be schools?) Would people think for themselves more or less than they do today? How would knowledge grow? Who *did* read? How did they learn? Would the world be a more or a less frightening place? Who controlled knowledge then? Who controls knowledge now? Advantages and disadvantages of each?

And when children have begun to explore and debate questions like these, *then* we look at Caxton and can see, not just the facts, but also the significance of his work. Incidentally, this approach also generates many opportunities for the kinds of hands-on activities and direct engagement that gifted learners enjoy.

Once we have begun in this kind of way to understand the learning behaviour of gifted children and to use this understanding to guide the construction of our learning programmes, we can then employ tools like Bloom's Taxonomy far more effectively and purposefully, with far more satisfying outcomes for children and indeed for ourselves.

<p>Paper by Rosemary Cathcart. Originally published in <i>Education Today</i>, Issue 5, 2004.</p>
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