

Helping teachers identify the gifted in their class

The process is not always as straightforward as it might seem, writes Kate Distin

Gifted children have characteristics that can be very challenging for both their parents and their teachers, and their abilities can be masked in a tangle of complex contradictions. Gifted children have natural talents, either in a specific subject or more globally, but they may also struggle with non-academic subjects such as art or sport, or have a learning difficulty like dyslexia. Their gifts may not lie in traditional school subjects, but rather in areas like spatial awareness, invention or empathy, and despite their intellectual advancement they may struggle socially or be emotionally immature.

If we see gifted children as the top 5% then by definition they are in a minority and this can lead to feelings of isolation - being different from everyone else - which they might try to minimise by hiding their abilities. These children tend to have good memories and can concentrate for long periods on subjects of interest, but they may be unwilling to put any effort into subjects that they regard as irrelevant. They often fear failure, and if they have never had to struggle to keep up in a subject then they may lack perseverance and concentration. As a result, they may struggle in areas where short cuts are not possible, for example, playing a musical instrument.

Gifted children enjoy abstract ideas, logical arguments, problem solving and debate. They may also make intuitive leaps, missing out the intermediate stages in an argument, and may find it hard to accept that they must show their workings for examination purposes. Gifted children work best when allowed to go at their own pace and enjoy being shown improved ways of going about things, neither of which will always be possible when the rest of the class also needs their teacher's attention. Where most children might need a second or third explanation before they grasp a novel concept, gifted children will typically master new information very quickly. But their mental agility, obsessive curiosity and intellectual zest can also make life very challenging for their teachers as well as for their parents.

They are sometimes very creative and highly imaginative, with a quirky sense of humour, strong feelings and opinions. They are often reluctant to accept what they read or are told, tending instead to criticise or question everything. Whilst in the long run all this might be of enormous social benefit, in a class of twenty or thirty children it can present an ongoing challenge to their teachers.

Many gifted children are perfectionists who set themselves unrealistically high standards. As a result, they often lack confidence in their own abilities and can be almost crippled by self-doubt. They may genuinely have no idea of how different their own abilities are from the norm.

This might also be true of their parents. Some schools decide not to inform parents that their children are on the gifted and talented register, partly from a reluctance to use labels, and partly because they fear that some parents can put unhelpful amounts of pressure on their children.

Consequently, some parents can reach the end of their children's primary education with no real idea about how their abilities compare with the national and school averages. They might know that she is amongst those pupils who are given extension work but not whether that's because they are working at an exceptional level, or simply because, in common with half the class at many prep schools, they are able pupils.

For schools themselves, there are some interesting contradictions involved in this approach. When pupils require regular learning support or are working at an exceptionally low level in a particular subject, parents will probably be informed. When pupils are chosen to be in a football team, to play in a concert or to have their art displayed on the walls, this is unlikely to be regarded as 'labelling'. When a child easily outruns all the rest on sports day, and also has a vastly better maths SATs result than the others, does it really make sense to keep just one of these pieces of information from his parents? We should also be honest about the fact that the children themselves are very aware of who is more or less able in each subject area.

There are, of course, ways and means of talking about a child's exceptional abilities. Labels such as gifted and highly able might be more helpful when applied to a child-in-a-particular-subject than to the children themselves. This could make all the difference to how the information is received by their own parents as well as by others; as could the phrasing 'amongst the most able in this subject', which implies that these children have been identified to date, but not that no other child can or will ever qualify. Describing children as highly academic can also be useful, since that puts them on a par with others who are very sporty or artistic, rather than marking her out in some way.

In these ways a child's intellectual gifts can be discussed as part of the everyday dialogue that goes on, particularly in prep schools, between teachers and parents. If parents should question why their child is not on the gifted and talented register then this could be seen as a useful opportunity to extend that dialogue: is the child under-performing or do parents need to adjust their expectations?

The truth is that some parents do and others do not put unhelpful pressure on their children. Those who are naturally pushy will continue to be so, with or without the information that their child is or is not gifted. And parents who are not naturally pushy will not be thrust into the other camp by learning that their child is gifted. In reality, schools cannot affect these sorts of parental attitudes: being open about gifted children is not the cause of pushy parenting, any more than being secretive about gifted children can make the problem of pushy parents go away.

The author is editor and co-author of "Gifted Children: A Guide for Parents and Professionals" (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006). www.giftedchildren.co.uk