



The Gifted Child's Right to Education

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India's commitment to provide free and compulsory elementary education was demonstrated after the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act 2009) was enacted. Today, every child is entitled to quality education at the elementary school level. With the growing recognition that no two individuals are the same, the formal schooling system in India has to gear towards meeting the needs of children who come from diverse backgrounds. By the RTE Act, 2009, the schooling system in India is compelled to embrace inclusive education as a philosophy and approach and demonstrate the same through practice. Inclusive education encompasses gender, scheduled castes and tribes, religious minority, physical and learning disability, and the gifted and talented.

Including all children up to 14 years in the formal education system in India is an uphill task. In the crisis of serious resource crunch, it may appear hard to argue for resources for a gifted education programme. Conceding equal educational opportunities for all is important. Advocates of gifted education argue that these provisions are not adequate to meet the needs of the gifted children. Therefore it is imperative that the state not absolve its responsibility of catering to the needs of the gifted children as this will hurt the gifted children of the poor the most.

Individual differences exist and can be an outcome of a complex set of factors like intelligence, creativity, ability, environment, genetic, nutrition, social and cultural among others which have serious educational implications. All children are equal in their right to receive appropriate education, however, what constitutes an appropriate education is not the same for all children born in a calendar year. For an effective teacher, she/he will

have to move beyond the one-size fit curriculum and address the individual differences to ensure learning for every child. In other words, it is the gifted and talented students who are the most ill-served when curriculum and instruction are not differentiated.

Haub and Sharma referred to India as a "collection of many countries held together by a common destiny and successful democracy" (2006, p. 3). There are 193 million school-aged children between 6 and 14 years (Mehta, 2007). Assuming normal probability, gifted children would comprise approximately 3% of the population, translating to about 6 million. The numbers alone pose a huge challenge for developing a comprehensive national program. Additionally, seventy percent of the population of India resides in villages. By and large this population has a lower educational status, higher poverty and less access to modern amenities (Haub & Sharma, 2006). The differential access to resources and knowledge of issues of different groups prevent the development of alliances that could help in proactively changing the context of education for the gifted in the country.

India has made some sporadic efforts in the past to promote high ability students in Science and Maths. In 1986, India sought to improve the overall quality of education, particularly for rural Indian and other minority populations, by introducing the Navodaya Vidyalaya Scheme (Wright, 2008). In addition, annual national-level tests such as the National Talent Search, olympiads in mathematics and science, the Kishore Vigyanik Prothsahan Yojna scholarship and other talent search programs have been introduced. These tests measure acquired knowledge and skills. Often the gifted and talented children are left out from such selection process as

they may not “.... fall into nice, neat stereotype(s) of good test takers and lesson learners” (Renzulli, 2005; p.80).

Gifted children are those who demonstrate higher ability or potential for higher ability as compared to others of their age-group. This ability more importantly reflects a need: gifted children need advanced material to satisfy their advanced academic development.

The concept of giftedness is still debated among researchers in the field of gifted education. While there is no universal definition of giftedness, there are several definitions proposed by Francoys Gagne, Joseph Sternberg, and Howard Gardner. One of the most popular models of giftedness is Renzulli’s Three-Ring Model, which includes:

- a) **Well-above average ability:** Ability (intelligence) needs to be above average, but, need not be exceptional. Ability is conceptualised in terms of standard deviations in IQ scores.
- b) **Creativity:** is the ability to associate unlike ideas, think analytically and divergently and propose unusual solutions that are appropriate. Creativity is crucial to achievement in any field: achievement means beyond memorization to using the acquired knowledge to develop a new product or idea.
- c) **Task commitment:** is the ability to work hard to acquire knowledge and skills in a particular domain of interest. Renzulli mentions perseverance, resilience, passion with the topic, vision, and sensitivity to human concerns as some behavioral and psychological correlates of task commitment.

While there is no one definition of giftedness, researchers agree on common characteristics of gifted children:

1. rapid learner
2. interest in novel, complex and challenging problems
3. high language ability and advanced vocabulary; an avid reader
4. high energy: may be restless; may be bored by routine tasks

5. curiosity: asks unusual questions (‘why’ and ‘what if’) and performs independent explorations
6. metacognitive skills/associative thinking: identifies connections between ideas from different areas; e.g. when learning a concept in class, associates it with a phenomenon she/he has observed in real life
7. creativity: generates new formulae to solve math, offer unusual responses to a question
8. persistence and motivation to excel in area of interest (marks/competition, may not motivate gifted children)
9. ability to grasp advanced concepts
10. hypothetical thinking, philosophical, and ethical concerns

A gifted child may show only some of these characteristics. The National Association For Gifted Children (NAGC, U.S.) recognises giftedness in broad areas: academic, general or specific intellectual ability, creativity, leadership, visual/performing arts or music, and psychomotor abilities.

Unfortunately, the curriculum and practice of the typical Indian classroom is geared towards the average learner through lecture-based teaching and written exam-based assessment encouraging memorization. Within such a system, the possibility of recognizing gifted children is limited. Very often, teachers mistake the high achievers in tests as gifted.

Research in the field of giftedness reveals that there is a large proportion of children who may be gifted cope poorly with a structured classroom, dislike writing, perform poorly in exams, ask unusual questions, or propose unusual ways to solve problems thereby disturbing the regular classroom. Teachers often recognize these children as trouble makers. Even in cases when a gifted child is recognized (not as a gifted child, but one who is a fast learner), the teacher generally leaves that child to his/her own devices or asks him/her to help a weaker student.

Contrary to the belief that gifted children can ‘manage on their own’, research suggests that like all children, gifted children need appropriate

stimulation, challenge and support to fulfill their potential. Unless the school curriculum meets gifted children's advanced educational needs, they may display the following problems:

- a. **Behavioral problems in class:** boredom, restlessness, disciplinary issues, frequently skipping school.
- b. **Poor socio-emotional adjustment:** gifted children may feel left out, hide their abilities to fit in with their peers, get bullied, or may wonder 'what's wrong with me?' and stay aloof.
- c. **Poor work habits:** unless gifted children are adequately challenged in school from a young age, they may develop poor work habits. For many gifted children, secondary school or college is the first time they face a challenging curriculum or peers of equal ability. When this happens, they may conclude that they were wrong about their intelligence ('I thought I was smart, but I can't cope with this curriculum so, I will never be able to do this, so there's no point trying'), and may never fulfill their potential.

These problems are not inherent to gifted children; rather, they arise when a child has advanced cognitive needs which the regular classroom does not satisfy.

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Conclusion

In the absence of a national programme of gifted education, India loses an opportunity to tap the talent of these young minds that can contribute to the growth and development of the nation. The country has recognized this and has initiated a national programme in 2010 to develop tools for identification of the gifted children in Science and Mathematics (3-15 years). The programme was initiated by the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to Government of India: NIAS anchors the programme with two other collaborators- Delhi University and Agastya Foundation. Multiple tools using quantitative and qualitative methods are developed and have been validated. While the research groups work on further validation of the identification methods, efforts are made for mentoring the gifted children.

The task is enormous and more groups need to join this national effort. There are local efforts promoted by Jagdish Bose National Talent Search, Kolkata; Jyana Probhodini in Pune; research in gifted education led by Prof. Krishna Maitra of Delhi University among many others. However there is a need to expand to create more groups in other parts of the country such that there is a national movement of gifted education.