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RECOGNISING THE GIFTED CHILD

*Barry Wright

Amongst all populations there is a normal distribution of physical and mental characteristics. It follows then that in the Aboriginal population there will be the same proportion of children who vary from the intellectual norm as in any other surveyed group. For educators one such cohort which is often ignored is that which we might like to call the intellectually gifted or, individually, the gifted child.

Gifted children are born with an intellectual ability superior to that of the average. Their intellectual gift can be nurtured or suppressed by the teachers who have them in their care, but most especially by the encouragement or lack thereof given by parents or guardians. If their gifts are not recognised and encouraged these children will not develop to their full potential, and their gifts are often lost, both to the individual and the community.

For teachers, health workers and parents the following are signs of the gifted child and may be used to identify them. If a child exhibits a range of the following it may be time to discuss the matter with the counsellor and/or social worker to see if further testing is warranted and a developmental program indicated. It is important to remember that all gifted children do not exhibit all these signs nor do they all mature at the same age or physical stage.

There are two areas which will show in the child's behaviour and maturation which provide the observer with clues to the child's probable gifts. These are intellectual abilities and physical abilities.

INTELLECTUAL

Gifted children, in relation to other children, exhibit some or sometimes all of the following:

* *Dr Barry Wright, Senior Lecturer, School of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences, Nepean CAE, Kingswood, NSW 2750*

1. Possession of superior reasoning ability. They speak and think at a level expected from an older child. Their vocabulary is more extensive than other children their age and their sentence construction and conversation more complex. They can think more logically and recognise relationships that children the same age cannot. Their abstract reasoning is more developed.
2. They can perform more difficult mental tasks. They can concentrate on problems for longer periods without apparent boredom.
3. They learn more quickly and acquire new knowledge and concepts more easily than other children their age.
4. They are always curious. They are forever asking questions of teachers, parents, older siblings, friends and age mates. They are always asking and wanting to know - Why? How? If? How does it work? What happened to those characters in the story after it ended? When was the Dreamtime? Who was Bunjil? etc.
5. They identify problems readily.
6. Their range of interests is very wide. They seem to be interested in everything and anything, but they also follow up these interests. They pursue their interests in many subjects. They remember it all.
7. In the classroom they are early and proficient readers. They excel in language and numbers, love science and literature - being voracious readers, often have their heads buried in a book. They are often highly creative in art, pottery, craft, music and dance.
8. They complete school work, research and hobbies without adult supervision or encouragement.
9. They show originality and initiative.
10. They are often impatient with routine drill, with repetitive tasks. If these bore them they may misbehave.
11. They are alert, notice things and respond to stimulus quickly.



Interpretation by Billy Reid of an illustration in *A Guide for Teachers of Aboriginal Children in Victorian Primary Schools*: Aboriginal Education Services, Education Department, Victoria. With permission.

12. Like all children their talents and interests vary, some gifted children are good at some subjects, whilst not performing highly in others. Only the very rarest child is able to excel in everything.
13. They are often more interested in intellectual subjects than practical ones.
14. They have an interest in their origins and destiny. They will want to discuss death, though just like other children they may not accept its reality. They will want to discuss their Aboriginality, Aboriginal history and religion, the times of Creation and of Ancestral Heroes. They will want to know how and why Aboriginal people are different, what happens after death, what were our forefathers like and how did they live. Such questions show that they are searching for answers about themselves and their place in the world.

PHYSICAL

Gifted children are often slightly heavier and taller than children of similar age. They tend to be stronger and healthier, well nourished and relatively free from nervous disorders.

Quite often gifted children lack stimulus from the normal school syllabus. They then "switch off". When this happens they may withdraw from games with other children and from class activities, acting out their thoughts and fantasies in solitary play.

If you have a gifted child in your class or are the parent of a gifted child, these few rules may help in management and development.

1. Seek guidance from qualified advisors.
2. Be tolerant of new ideas.
3. Help children name and classify things.
4. Don't restrict by over-supervision. Give help only when the child asks or needs it.
5. Respect individual differences. Be glad that individuals differ.

6. Reward creative behaviour. Exhibit pleasure at the child's achievements. Encourage the child's sense of wonder and discovery.
7. Work with other adults, family, teachers and elders to encourage the child to develop and achieve.
8. If there are several gifted children, encourage them to work together. Stimulate children to speak with elders, to learn about traditions, history, laws and language.
9. Don't repress the child. If appropriate, promote to a higher class.
10. Discuss the child's development with other educators and the child's family.
11. Although the child is different, and gifted, it is important not to let the child think he or she is superior to or better than other people. Don't encourage boasting or exhibitionist behaviour as this will often lead to alienation and fights.

The education of a gifted child is often a long and trying task. It is important, and as you see the child blossom under your care it brings a great deal of pride and satisfaction in a task well done.

Aboriginal people need leaders, academics and scientists to ensure their future. Many gifted children grow up to enter such professions. Don't squander their gifts.

