

## The Rage-to-Learn Gifted Child: Meeting Their Needs

**Dr Kathryn Murray and Gloria van Donge, Australia.**

Gifted children, with a rage to learn, have an internal motivation that propels and compels them to explore, to investigate, to learn. Rather than being forced into the rigidity of a system, these children need their own learning line.

### **The rage-to-learn gifted child**

Alertness in babyhood and attention to their environment may be early indicators to parents of this type of gifted child. As toddlers, their conversation skills and counting ability begin early. Their questions are endless, endless: every answer only generates more questions. They are quick to recognize things like traffic signs, advertising logos, car brands. Their curiosity and insatiable hunger for learning seems unstoppable (Lammers van Toorenbury).

In the introduction to his book, *Bright*, Alan Thompson (2016) says, *"It's not possible to graph your child's passion for counting absolutely everything including nutritional information on food packaging, or their motivation to learn to read the newspaper at the age of two."* (p28).

These children crave new ideas, new challenges and new experiences. They love complexity and are willing to take a risk. They immerse themselves in an area of interest, showing intense focus and concentration. They have an amazing capacity for facts and figures, processing information quickly and efficiently. They are independent and show high self-efficacy, passionately pursuing their own goals. At home, they invent and develop all kinds of activities. Their focus is more on the process than the product.

A local three-year old surrounded himself with sticks, cardboard, wood glue, lawnmower parts and other odds and ends. When asked what he was doing, he scoffed, *"I'm making the making!"* (Downie, 2014, p24).

In the classroom, the rage-to-learn gifted child may present a challenge because their learning is motivated by their own interests: they do not learn in order to pass a test. They are driven by task involvement with a goal of mastering skills, rather than being powered by performance goals measuring their ability to succeed. These children like to work autonomously and when learning is disappointing, they lose their sense of purpose and disengage in the classroom. When the work is too easy, they lack persistence and fail to develop study skills. They may develop signs of anxiety, like health concerns and not wanting to attend school.

## **Meeting their needs**

If the needs of rage-to-learn gifted children are not honoured, then behavioural challenges may emerge. Those who see themselves as intellectual peers of their teachers often reject authority and become argumentative. Their endless questioning converts into tireless negotiations when given adult directives. Being told what to do or think may insult these children and lead to outrage. As non-conformists, they may develop a critical mindset, intolerant of others and their own shortcomings (Betts & Neihart, 2017).

Being out-of-sync with their peers, the gifted child may be subjected to bullying. A study conducted in eleven states of America discovered that 67% of all gifted students were bullied by 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The vast majority were silent about this (Peterson, 2006). Depression, unexpressed rage and school absenteeism may alert teachers to this situation. Some gifted children deal with the emotional impact by becoming bullies themselves.

## **The teacher**

In a classroom of 25 or more children, it can be difficult for the teacher to notice and identify a rage-to-learn gifted child. Often, the outward behaviours are noticed and responded to in ways that may not always be conducive to the gifted child feeling 'seen' and 'heard' by other children or the teacher. The competing expectations placed on the teacher by school administration, parents, and the needs of all children in the class can be very overwhelming and stressful. Including children with special needs or gifted children into the mix can be problematic. It is easy to see why the gifted child's behaviour and engagement with learning can be compromised.

Unless teachers have received training in identifying and facilitating the learning of gifted children, there may be a disconnect in the classroom. Generally, teachers do their best to teach to individuals and accommodate their needs for learning. Considerations of all developmental domains – social, emotional, physical, cognitive and language are part of the teacher's focus for all children in the classroom. Curriculum requirements, participation in school committees, sporting teams and the like all add to a teacher's daily responsibilities. A classroom is a busy place with many competing priorities.

## **Classroom considerations**

Another layer for the teacher to address is that gifted children are renowned for hiding their giftedness in an effort to fit in with peers and form friendships. Setting up a classroom culture that honours individual learning approaches in a safe emotional space is essential for all children, but especially the gifted child.

A classroom designed with a range of smaller learning spaces provides the feeling of 'psychological safety' (Kirby, 2021). Smaller spaces are less threatening. They allow for greater focus on tasks, encourage intimate conversations with 2 or 3 others, and minimise potential self-regulation issues. Well-planned and designed spaces allow children of all abilities to enter into the learning at their own level. A gifted child could well be exploring ways of using 'loose parts' alongside a child with a disability. In this instance, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory suggests that the more experienced or skilled child can guide the other in a peer tutoring approach (O'Donnell, 2012). This method supports the development of self-regulation and impulse control by managing social and emotional development.

Having an 'assets-based learning' approach focuses on valuing existing knowledge and strengths which supports strong self-esteem and identity development (New York University, 2020). When children feel comfortable and accepted, instances of disruptive behaviour or bullying disappear. Diversity in thought, culture, and traits are seen as assets to the learning. Strengths of teachers and children are valued with the focus being on what they bring to the classroom rather than their differences and deficits.

Encouraging self-determined, assets-based projects that respond to the requirements of the curriculum provides the gifted child with autonomy and considers their interests. In turn, thinking and imagination is extended to their individual level. Having open conversations where the gifted child feels safe to be vulnerable and authentic can promote engagement with the learning and provide psychological security.

Changing the language in the classroom from 'teacher' to 'coach' or 'facilitator' helps to change the mindset and subconsciously builds more equity between the children. Being a coach in the classroom can be aligned with being a sporting coach. The role changes from leading and telling to providing advice, giving opportunities to practice skills and then allowing the individual to do his or her part in the team.

If this approach is used in a classroom designed with many smaller spaces, children can ask for individual advice, practice their skills and then share with the larger team. Then, learning is fulfilling for each child – no matter what their level of ability. The range of gifted children extends to more than the rage-to-learn child. Giftedness comes in many shapes and sizes. Each child should be looked at individually where 'one size fits all' is not a part of the classroom pedagogical approach.

## References

- Betts, G. and Neihart, M. (2017). Profiles of the Gifted, Talented, Creative Learners. <https://uncw.edu/ed/aig/documents/2017/profiles%20of%20the%20gifted%20talented%20and%20creative.pdf/>
- Downie, R. (2014). Making the Making. Kids on the Coast. Education, May-June, pp24-30.
- Kirby, A. (2021). How do we build psychological safety - in the context of neurodiversity? <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-do-we-build-psychological-safety-context-prof-amanda-kirby/>
- Lammers van Toorenbury, W. (n.d.). Hoogbegaafdheid, Signalen en Handvatten. <https://hig.nl/meer-over/>
- New York University, Steinhardt. (2020). Thought leadership. An Asset-Based Approach to Education: What It Is and Why It Matters. <https://teachereducation.steinhardt.nyu.edu/an-asset-based-approach-to-education-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/>
- O'Donnell, A. M. (2012). Educational Psychology. Milton, Queensland: John Wiley and Sons Australia.
- Peterson, J.S., & Ray, K.E. (2006). Bullying and the gifted: Victims, perpetrators, prevalence, and effects. Gifted Child Quarterly, 50 (2), pp148-168. <https://journals.sagepub.com/>
- Thompson, A. D. (2016). Bright: Seeing superstars, listening to their worlds, and moving out of the way. Life Architect.