The Big-Picture Gifted Child: Making Connections

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Gifted children experience the world in unique ways. Understanding their natural aptitudes and considering how they learn can cater to the strengths of gifted children and accommodate their preferences. Part of a teacher's responsibility is to activate their unique learning style (Malvik, 2020.)

The big-picture gifted child

Even in the early years, a preference for big-picture learning may be observed in gifted toddlers. One example are the children who are slow to reach developmental milestones, because they do things when 'they master the whole'. Those with delayed speech may be practising words mentally for quite some time, before suddenly surprising everyone by starting to talk, using whole sentences. They may have already built up a large vocabulary and then be capable of holding a substantive conversation with adults. Another example is where they may muddle along with training wheels on their trike for a long time, but all at once, master the art of cycling. These children develop at their own pace, not necessarily fitting in with the accepted norms (Lammers van Toorenbury, 2020).

At school, big-picture learners adopt a conceptual, holistic style of learning: understanding concepts as a whole, before plotting in smaller pieces of information. As a result, details can be missed, or even considered inconsequential. These children can easily follow complex directions, talk in compound sentences, and invent original ideas and solutions (Porter, 2009). They learn intuitively: some of their thinking happens at a preconscious level. They learn instantly: a dislike of routine work and repetition creates boredom. They learn with a purpose: they want to know where this learning will be useful. These children want 'to connect the dots'.

Making connections

Making connections, by synthesizing ideas and concepts, is a forte of big-picture gifted children.

Their thinking often takes unexpected pathways. Making connections leads to 'if-then' reasoning – asking ideological questions even at a young age. They may develop a quirky sense of humour arising from their unusual imagination and their ability to match things together. Their drawings may appear unusual; but when asked, they give extensive stories to explain the connections. Their spatial awareness may be so developed that they visualise local maps in their head, so they are not easily lost.

Dr Louise Porter (2009) also suggests that big-picture gifted children may have difficulty learning to read phonetically and/or be poor spellers (p.3). Sounding out letters may appear boring, but recognizing words can be exciting, especially when they relate to their areas of interest. These children read contextually, where words fit into the whole and gain meaning from their placement in the sentence and paragraph. Comprehension depends upon word recognition and how words relate to each other.

Because big-picture gifted children learn instantly and understand concepts holistically, they may develop imposter syndrome when faced with challenges. If their initial attempts to perform tasks are

not met with instant success, they may give up, thinking that they are incapable of doing that work. Without an understanding of how they learn, they may conclude that they have become less skilled. Building resilience and teaching perseverance will build their self-esteem and help overcome the fear of being an imposter.

Most curricula are based on a sequential approach: but big-picture gifted children find it difficult to learn by this method. Because their learning style does not match the typical teaching style, they may be assessed as having learning difficulties, or be accused of laziness, or even have their giftedness questioned. Gifted children are not broken. They need support to develop resilience. They need scaffolding to find the next step when they become stuck. They need accommodation for their strengths and permission to work backwards. They need a flexible curriculum that caters for their learning style.

Teaching approaches with the big-picture gifted child

The big-picture child sees the world from a higher perspective than other children and perhaps the teacher. Providing learning that is more project-based allows all children in the class to follow their interests whilst addressing curriculum requirements. Making connections between concepts and not being hung up on the details allows the big-picture child to make progress in their work, see success and develop a process that maintains interest. Although this sounds good, the gifted brain can become overwhelmed by the big picture. It's important for the teacher to facilitate authentic conversations to help the child break down the big concept into manageable chunks or parts. This is the whole–part approach (Duncan, Goodwin, Haas and Wilson, 2021).

Although the gifted child may develop ideas and concepts that are more advanced or have a slightly different approach to other children, there are similarities to their peers when using a project learning approach in the classroom. The fact that everyone is working on a project stimulated by a problem-based question related to their interests, means that the gifted child feels as though they fit into the classroom culture.

The gifted child creates their own trajectory for learning, just as every other child does who is engaged in their own project. Assessment goals and the journey of learning becomes transparent, as curriculum outcomes are achieved and can be outstripped. The development of self-assessment goals allows the big-picture child to find their own way to reach their goal using the whole-part structure.

Along the way, it is important to celebrate the milestones that are accomplished when working toward predetermined goals – these are the 'parts' that have been identified that, when drawn together, make up the 'whole' concept. This boosts self-esteem and provides opportunities for the gifted child to reflect and pause, rather than rush ahead in their project. It also allows the child to review, recalculate and reinvent some of the steps that they may have taken. This encourages them to see that there is more than one way to approach a project. An awareness that develops those different approaches can reach the same goal. In turn, they can be more empathetic, accommodating and accepting of methods used by other children who may not be gifted.

Encouraging the use of technology for research or creating special effects enhances the development of the final product. Multimodal experimentation and implementation to address the curriculum requirements extends the learning throughout the project. The use of technology allows the gifted child to share ideas publicly and energise the learning of others. Adding in other forms of demonstration, such as art, writing, construction can contribute to the overall expression of learning through the completion of a project that has a real-life application that is of particular interest to the big-picture gifted child.

In this way, the gifted child is coached to look at the components of their big-picture concept, review them and draw them together to achieve their overall goal. This builds self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, self-confidence, social and emotional resilience through sharing concepts and goals with others.

References:

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