

Let bright sparks fly

As we look to the next generation for our doctors, lawyers and scientists, we'll most likely be depending on the more intellectually able children. It is vital therefore that we nurture the gifted and talented and ensure that their needs are catered for, as Lyn Allcock explains

All children are special and all children deserve the very best we can give them, but there are certain groups of children that require specific input in order to reach their potential.

Those students that have difficulties with learning or behaviour and those whom the Government consider to be at high risk of exclusion are catered for by current legislation. There is, however, another group of children for whom provision is only just being considered and for whom, some might argue, additional provision is unnecessary – intellectually able children.

Why support these children?

Let us look first of all at the group we are discussing. Mensa considers 'gifted' children to be in the top 2% of the population in terms

of their non-verbal IQ. Schools are encouraged to identify the top 5% of their intake.

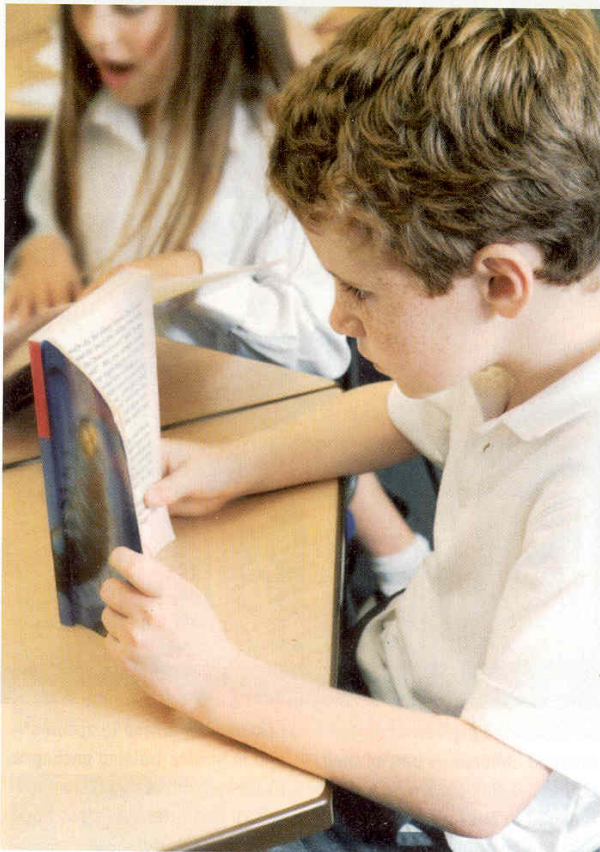
Under current provision any student whose ability falls into the bottom 5% is certainly targeted for additional provision, input from external agencies, additional adult help, smaller classes or even a special school. Currently none of these things would be considered essential for those whose ability falls into the top 5%.

Let me put it this way: if little Joe Average was sent to the local special school because it was the closest in his area, or a child whose ability fell into the bottom 5% was expected to attend mainstream school without additional provision, there would be uproar. However, the gap in intellect between Joe Average and the student whose ability falls into the bottom 5% is the same as the gap between our 'gifted' child and Joe Average. We put our brightest students into mainstream classes without a thought as to how this might affect their development or self-esteem. Gifted children have special needs.

Identifying bright children

In a formal sense, identification is made by testing a child's non-verbal IQ. Standard IQ tests administered individually by psychologists or tests administered to groups of students in schools such as CATs (Cognitive Ability Tests), are all tools by which one may formally identify giftedness. However, parents and teachers often suspect a child is bright well before formal identification. There are many aspects to a child's character that might indicate high ability.

What is your 'typical' bright child? Well, I guess there isn't one. However, there are a number of factors that bright children do seem to have in common. They set themselves very high standards, often impossibly high. They are not good at accepting failure and would rather not do something than get it wrong. They tend to like games and enjoy changing or complicating rules to make things more interesting. They don't enjoy writing by hand and would rather talk than put things on paper. Let's face it; writing is so slow when your brain is full of ideas! They enjoy the company of adults more than they do other children. They have amazing memories and can often recall events from early childhood forgotten by others. They may appear mature for their age but are often behind with practical skills such as dressing, tying shoelaces, riding a bike. They ask a lot of unusual questions that one might not expect



learning. On the other hand, providing a bright child with endless pages of the same type of work is also not acceptable as a solution and is more likely to be a recipe for disaster. Teachers themselves worry that their own subject knowledge may not be sufficient to cater for the needs of these children.

Many reputable companies are now providing enrichment or extension activities to help classroom teachers cope with the demands of their brightest students. E-learning allows students to progress at their own pace, and open-ended tasking in lessons enables each student to put as much or as little into the task as they are able. Liaison with class teachers higher up the school or even in higher educational institutions may provide opportunities for extended learning, with either the work coming to the child or the child having an individualised timetable that allows part-time access to higher education.

Teachers need to change their mind-set to see themselves not as founts of knowledge but as facilitators of learning. Once a child is literate and numerate, the greatest gift a teacher can bestow upon them is study skills.

There is, of course, a percentage of bright children who for reasons of socio-economic background, poor educational experiences, medical problems or poor motivation may not have been identified as bright and are vastly underachieving compared to their level of ability. The work to be undertaken here by the educational establishment is doubly hard.

Socially, there is a great deal of work to be done in ensuring that bright children do not become isolated or marginalised. There is a vast difference between preferring one's own company and having nobody to socialise with. There is nothing wrong with being a quiet or solitary person and

there are plenty of occupations in adult life that require the ability to work alone rather than in a team; not everyone is a social animal. However, we do need to ensure that such a decision is based on choice and not enforced from the outside. This is where identifying the brightest students and giving them the opportunity

to mix with others of a similar intellectual level can pay dividends. Vertically grouped activities that include older and younger students working together have proved to be extremely beneficial in improving self-esteem, motivation and behaviour in younger students where those things have become an issue.

Older students who are experiencing success provide role models and inspiration for others.

There are also emotional issues to be addressed. A child's intellect and understanding may progress at an accelerated rate compared to those of their peers, but their physical and emotional development do not. This is another reason we should be cautious about accelerating children. A child of four may watch the news or documentaries, understand the information given and even the concepts of deforestation, world poverty or war, but the emotional mechanisms to cope with that knowledge are not yet in place. The resulting internal conflict can cause all sorts of problems. Much of the work I do with bright children is enabling them to come to terms with their own level of ability and the conflicts and difficulties this may cause.

Parental concerns

Parents, too, may need support and advice upon finding out they have a 'bright spark' in the family. If they suspect their son or daughter is particularly able, they are often nervous about approaching other parents or professionals for fear of ridicule or appearing 'pushy'. Experience

from children. They may either stay apart from others, preferring their own company and becoming involved in their own pursuits, or be a popular socialite, taking charge of those around them and becoming leader of the gang. They may appear to have poor concentration, flitting from one thing to another, but then demonstrate a good knowledge of a subject when questioned or show an innate ability to multi-task. They may not be the hard-working, well-motivated, well-behaved children that many teachers mistakenly identify as the brightest. Your brightest student is just as likely to be the attention-seeking, argumentative class clown.

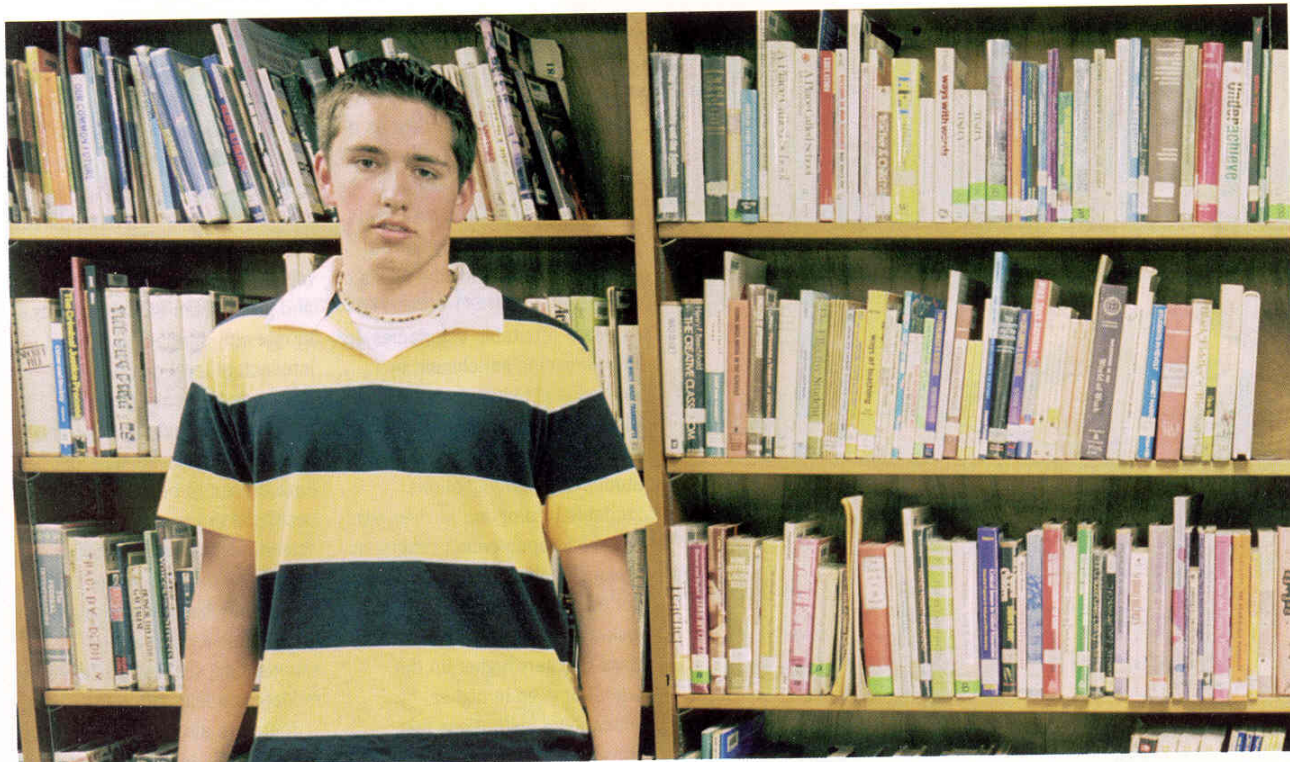
Providing support

Once we have identified such children, the next task is to provide appropriate support within the school environment. This, as with other children who

have special needs, has to be multi-faceted.

We need to cater for their intellectual needs. Generally, bright children learn more quickly than their peers, require less reinforcement of a topic and are able to study things at a greater depth. How we cater for the academic needs of these children is a matter of heated debate.

Intellectually able children may well enter school already two or three years ahead of their peers. Research suggests that the gap does not in fact stay constant but tends to widen as the child gets older and becomes more able to take control of their learning. It is for this reason I am not entirely comfortable with the idea of accelerating a child as a solution to meeting their academic needs. At what point does one stop? Is university a suitable environment for a child of 12? There is certainly far more to university life than intellectual stimulation and



shows that in fact, when parents suspect their child is particularly bright they are rarely wrong and pushy parents are few and far between.

Parents can help their child's intellectual development by being supportive and following their interests. The Internet and the library are probably a parent's best friends when it comes to keeping bright children stimulated and entertained. It is extremely important to talk and listen to your child, and particularly to discuss with them why things happen, not just how. As with teachers, parents should not be afraid to say, 'I don't know,' particularly if it's followed up with, 'but we can go and find out'.

One trap teachers and parents fall into is expecting intellectually able children to excel at everything. As adults we have our particular interests and if we don't like something we either don't do it or don't necessarily put our best effort into it. We don't allow our children the same luxury. While poor effort or underachievement is not

acceptable, it is okay to have preferences.

Parents can help their child's social and emotional development simply by talking things through with them. Helping them learn that it's okay to get things wrong, showing them how to lose gracefully and explaining how and why other children behave as they do can be of as much benefit as aiding their intellectual development.

Who can help?

There are many agencies and organisations that can be of help to parents and professionals alike, and recent government initiatives, such as the foundation of the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, have started to bring the education of gifted children to public attention.

All of these things are most welcome. Mensa, the National Association for Gifted Children and CHI, (the support group for Children of High Intelligence), all work to support children, their families and educators.

School inspections now focus

on provision for gifted and talented children as part of their remit, and schools are now required to have a gifted and talented co-ordinator. The difficulty here is that while there is undoubtedly a level of interest and enthusiasm, knowledge and experience are lacking in this area. Gifted and talented co-ordinators need special training so they can meet the very specific needs of these children and raise whole-school awareness of the issues involved. They also need advice as to what is appropriate provision for these children. My experiences and conversations at the Education Show last March (at the National Exhibition Centre, near Birmingham) convinced me that not only is the teachers' need very real but they are also keen to find high-quality training and advice on the subject of educating bright children.

The National Academy has a teacher training strand to its provision, and Mensa – as an organisation with long-standing experience of dealing with the country's most able people – is

now offering advice to schools and in-service training packages, as well as 'off-the-shelf' summer school and extension class packs for schools to purchase.

Personally, I don't like the term 'gifted'. It exudes élitism and implies something lacking in others. Bright children are not superior to other children and are not nicer people because they are bright. They are, however, a distinct group for whom additional provision and support is required if they are not to become disaffected and disillusioned with school. High-quality and appropriate provision is essential for a group of students who potentially will go on to be our nation's doctors, lawyers, inventors and entrepreneurs. *Special*

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