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Out-of-School Education for the Gifted and Talented around the World

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Cultural influences affect all out-of-school provision for the gifted and talented. Excellence can either come from special provision – or from none at all. In Scandinavian countries, for example, special provision is not politically acceptable, yet children's achievements there are often superior to those of the countries which do have special provision for the gifted. New Zealand and Israeli educational administrations provide generously. Germany has inspiring competitions. Brazilian help goes to helping severely deprived gifted children. The huge American Talent Searches select youngsters, via teacher recommendations and tests, for intensive summer-schools. There is a major cultural dichotomy between the largely Eastern perception of 'most children have gifted potential' and the largely Western one of 'few children have gifted potential'. These perceptions make a difference to children's opportunities and expectations. For example, it may be assumed either that children's interests allied with opportunities will enable them to excel, or that it is necessary to diagnose and treat the recognised gifted separately. Though the outcomes from the different approaches can be roughly compared in world terms, e.g. scientific advances, economic success, it is impossible to conduct a controlled experiment on each type of provision within different cultures. Even with one country, there are no scientific comparisons between gifted programmes. The most noticeable trend around the world is to offer voluntary access to very high-level opportunities, so that no keen youngster is turned away without a chance

to try it. In fact, virtually all world-class high-achievers have selected themselves to work in the area of their interest. Recognition of cultural attitudes is essential for any country making special provision for the gifted and talented. The complete UK government report, on which this paper draws, is provided free on www.joanfreeman.com

SUMMARY

No educational provision for the gifted and talented works in a cultural vacuum, and this is as true for out-of-school activities as for what happens in school itself. There is evidence that excellence in children's achievements can come from widely differing special provision or from no special provision at all. Cultural influences affect attitudes as to who might be gifted and talented and what might be done for them. Whatever the size and influence of special centres anywhere, there is always overlap between in-school and out-of-school activities. For all styles of provision, cooperation between the two is a vital aspect of success. The major cultural dichotomy in this field is between the perception, usually found in the Far East that 'most children have gifted potential' and the largely Western view that 'few children have gifted potential'.

It is safe to say that children who are selected for aptitude and ability, and who are keen to learn, will get more from special enrichment than those who of equal potential who have not had that experience. But this does not necessarily show the provision as the best possible method for enhancing gifts and talents. In fact, I do not know of a single scientific investigation, either cross-culturally or within one country, which compares any aspect of an out-of-school programme with another. As a result it is hard to say what type of provision would be most appropriate and effective in any given situation. Outcomes are also dependent on the enthusiasm, organisation and money put into any scheme - as well as the way youngsters are chosen for it.

Some of the largest and most influential out-of-school American institutions were founded on the psychological understanding of human abilities that was current in the 1920s. These early influences of seeking an IQ cut-off point (or

equivalent) to identify the gifted still affect their practice. In addition, the big American Talent Searches so often select youngsters for summer-schools not only by their high-level achievements, but also by their parent's ability to pay the sometimes high fees.

Opinions about the identification of the brightest children and consequential educational practice underlie all provision for their education, whether in or outside school hours. Because of cross-cultural differences, it would not seem wise to copy any action directly from one culture to another without recognising these influences and possibly modifying the model. The growing trend around the world is to offer high-level opportunities to as many youngsters as possible, so that no keen learner is turned away without even a chance of sampling them.

AN INTERNATIONAL LOOK

Taking an international overview on out-of-school education of the gifted and talented offers perspectives which can sometimes cut right cross cultural assumptions. This is important because it can highlight views we all hold without always being aware of where they have come from, or from what cultural basis they have emerged. These cultural differences affect attitudes as to who might be gifted and what might be done for them, whether as school-children or later in their lives. Although cultural outlooks can be quite opposing, sometimes even contradictory, they do provide useful templates for different styles of education. Yet whatever the size and influence of schemes and educational centres, there is always overlap between in-school and out-of-school activities. And for all styles of scheme, the provider's cooperation with school is a vital aspect of its success. This is as true for what is based in the classroom and spreads outwards, as to what is started outside and finds its way into school. Families too are part of any successful partnership of this kind. Unfortunately, the use of scientific evidence as a basis for any out-of-school educational action is less than likely. In spite of considerable searching of the literature and questioning of practitioners, I have not yet found a single scientific comparison, either cross-culturally or within one country. Nor have there been comparisons between one aspect of an out-of-school programme

and any other. As a result, it is hard to say what type of provision would be the most appropriate and effective in any given situation. Comparisons have been made between the varied approaches in terms of international competitions and comparisons, or of national scientific advances and economic success. Yet it is not possible to conduct a controlled experiment as to the relative value of each type of provision within the setting of any one culture. Therefore, it would not seem wise to copy any action directly from one culture to another without recognising inevitable differences in background and outlook. Outcomes, of course, are also dependent on the enthusiasm, organisation and money put into the schemes. It is not surprising that carefully selected, bright, keen children will learn more from special enrichment than those who have not experienced it. It would be strange if they did not. Hence, direct comparison between the achievements of youngsters who have attended a particular scheme and those who have not, does not necessarily tell us that it provided the best possible method for enhancing gifts and talents. Additionally, because there are unavoidable errors and biases in all selection, the way in which youngsters are chosen has an effect on the outcome. The growing trend around the world is to offer as many youngsters as possible access to very high-level opportunities, so that no keen learner is turned away without even a chance of sampling the provision. An example is the American Renaissance Quest Camps which are designed for the whole family, rather than specifically for the gifted and talented, but still provide the educational means and support to take interests to any height. The changes in outlook on out-of-school education for the gifted and talented gaining ground around the world are summarised here.

Trends in International Out-of-school Education for the Gifted and Talented

Policy changes

Haphazard provision	➔	Defined framework
For the benefit of the gifted	➔	For the benefit of the system as a whole
School-type extras	➔	Flexible approach

Provision changes

Supplementing school	➔	Complementing school
Less selection	➔	More child-led access
Underused facilities	➔	Creative use of facilities
Inadequate facilities	➔	Use of local/national resources
Unstructured holiday time	➔	Structured enrichment

Contrasts in geographical areas

Cultural ideas of who the gifted are directs all provision for their education. Though it is difficult to point to a precise correlation between countries' cultural attitudes towards giftedness and the overall attainment of its young people, in the OECD (1999) comparative study, the countries with the highest performing young people have notably comprehensive approaches to schooling. The USA, which has by far the most developed activity in the gifted domain, was a weak performer. Britain's performance was high. Much appears to depend on the overall standard of basic education, which is of course related to the standard of living and thus opportunities for individual development. It is possible to distinguish two dominant views on gifts and talents which affect provision for its development, although they overlap and both kinds can be found in many countries.

The Western view

Since the turn of the 20th century, it has been accepted the Western World that human abilities fall along a measurable spectrum, this being largely genetically determined. This allows measured abilities to be presentable in either a straight line or a bell curve, as we know so well in the description of IQ differences. Accordingly, all one needs to do to identify the gifted is to work out how best to measure abilities, choose a high cut-off point, and select those who score above it. Most Western concern with gifts and talents today continues to measure in that way. It is also the dominant idea affecting special educational provision in the country which produces the most prolific and strongly influential research, the USA.

The Eastern view

In most of the Far East, environmental influences are seen as dominant, such that not only the child's but the teacher's behavior is a vital aspect of the child's future. Almost every baby is seen as being born with good potential, and for each, the main difference in progression in their rate of development hard work.

STYLES OF PROVISION

The major styles of out-of-school provision for the gifted and talented are considered below under five headings - 1. The Talent Search 2. Self selection by provision 3. Hard work 4. Competitions 5. Voluntary provision

1. The Talent Search

Talent Searches select highly-achieving children by tests which result in a measure allowing a high cut-off point to be used to designate the gifted and talented. Talent Searches are predominately American, but are also conducted in Germany, Australia, Israel, Spain and the UK. The model assumes some children to be innately superior in ability to others, this ability being measurable so that an appropriate educational provision can be provided for its actualisation. The benefits are that children who make it onto the courses and summer-schools are provided with high-level, varied and stimulating education, and acceptance can lead to improved life-chances. Teachers are usually well paid to give up their holidays for the summer-schools and say they very much enjoy the excitement of high level teaching.

However, though some allowance is made for unrecognised potential, many Searches fail to net proportionate numbers of different groups in the population. For example, technical courses in the United States are sometimes entirely filled by boys of East Asian background. Youngsters, who are possibly of equal potential, may fail the tests or prefer not enter the testing arena. Just-missed applicants could possibly have achieved as well - given access to the richness of provision of those who were accepted. The Talent Searches and summer-schools depend on a great deal of money, provided not only by generous private donors, but by parents. However, in Canada and Holland, Talent Searches have been started but eventually failed because of lack of financial support. No immediate and visible surge of national excellence has been measured from the very many thousands of American youngsters who have passed through these programs since the 1930s. As there has never been any comparison between what they provide, it is impossible to know which aspects of the education of any Talent Search are

the best or most appropriate for that society. Outcomes are further confused because of the predominance of keen well-to-do children on the courses and the excellence of their provision.

2. Self-selection by provision

A prime example of self-selection by provision is provided by the Chinese Children's Palaces, widespread and popular local centres where children can gain enrichment and higher-level learning. This model relies on the children's motivation for success (Freeman, 1998). A Palace can simply be a large house with rooms crammed with activities or a great purpose-built edifice, serving thousands of children at weekends. The Palace concept is that children's' interests, allied with opportunities will enable them to excel. Children's palaces in China are a thriving and integral part of the education scene, providing out-of-school activities across the arts, sciences and technology and beyond (Coles, 2002). They provide drop in sessions, clubs, classes and summer camps, with strong emphasis on high quality of the teachers and facilities. No child is tested for entry and no child is turned away. Those who want to take their chosen subject further must make a contract to come for a specified number of lessons. If they do not attend them all (without good reason) they cannot continue. Some come for many years and reach breath-taking standards in their chosen field. Normal teachers are paid extra for this work, which they say they greatly enjoy. For example, the Beijing Children's Palace was set up in 1954, and has had 100,000 students every year in recent years. The evidence of its effectiveness, though, is difficult to quantify, although China's successes in international competitions, both intellectual and sporting, are outstanding.

3. Hard work

In many countries of the Asia Pacific Rim, primary-age children are regarded as similar in potential so that differences in their achievement are due both to their hard work as well as the teacher's competence. The potential long-term rewards for the diligence these small children shoulder are in their choice of secondary

school, providing access to university, followed by a good career - and a good pension. It is possible that this style of learning is even enhancing the IQs of Japanese children, which is in accord with their improved academic scores (Flynn, 1991).

In almost all international comparisons of children's achievements, those of East Asian elementary and secondary school pupils have been outstanding, even among the top performers. In the TIMMS (1999) study, "the top four of the 41 participating countries in mathematics, and three of the top four countries in science were from East Asia" (Stevenson et al, 2000 p. 167). Yet East Asian children show no special precocity in mathematics during their preschool years; their rise to success starts at school. Nor is this excellence limited to a few star performers as in the West: the overall achievement standards are excellent - and rising.

4. Competitions

Competitions provide the single outstanding type of universal out-of-school activities for the gifted, though they are not always recognised as such. They are relatively easy and inexpensive to administer and organise, and can be made accessible to large numbers, but at the same time differentiated to suit any level of ability. Although at first glance competitions appear to be passive, in only tapping what is already there, in fact they can be active in eliciting, stimulating and challenging talents in many fields. Because they can activate and strengthen the feeling for the subject matter, they improve knowledge and skills. Struggling with the tasks of the competition enhances the abilities to work autonomously, while researching, experimenting, problem solving and persevering.

5. Voluntary Provision

Parents are generally the first adults in a child's life to become aware of the child's talent. Bright children may benefit from supplementary voluntary parent-directed activities. Though for many parents this task is rather intimidating. When they seek professional help and advice from paediatricians,

teachers, school psychologists or educational counselors, they are sometimes confronted with ignorance and prejudice about gifted and talented children with imputations that they are 'pushy' parents. The parents of highly able children in most countries of the world have felt obliged to establish self-help groups in the form of association.

ESSENTIAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS STUDY

It is clear from the evidence that excellence does not emerge without appropriate help (Freeman, 1998; 2001). To reach an exceptionally high standard in any area, potentially gifted and talented youngsters need the means to learn, which includes material to work with, focused challenging tuition and encouragement. This can be in school, out-of-school or using a combination of different sorts of educational provision. Every school is able to experiment and learn from with the models presented here. The three vital aspects to be considered for any provision are - 1. Selection 2. Provision 3. Following-on

1. Selection

Broad conception: Programmes for gifted and talented individuals need to be developed around a broad conception of giftedness. Those developed around narrower conceptions, such as IQ or teacher recommendations or even the model of seven Multiple Intelligences, serve more limited populations.

Multiple criteria: Screening needs to include the use of multiple criteria and to reflect the population being targeted for services. Standardised tests should only be a starting point in the screening process.

Vocations: Aiming to achieve appropriate vocational guidance and provision should be approached creatively. Sometimes unconsciously, the early development of a vocational identity can be based on strong cultural gender and social-class roles, and so can inhibit the range of later development and career choice (Freeman, 2003a).

2. Provision

Standards: The standard of teaching, in terms of knowledge instruction, intellectual demand and innovative teaching must be challengingly high. When school-type lessons are disappointing and uninspiring to gifted and talented children, as for all children who are taught below their potential, they are mind-numbing. The aim should be world-class teaching.

Flexibility: From the start, flexibility must be inbuilt. Administration is never the best reason for an educational decision, though understandably it often takes precedence. Taking gifts to their highest level demands open-ended thinking and the possibility of changes of direction. That is where the roots of creative insights lie.

Individuality: The young people who attend courses in high-level challenging education are special, in that implicitly, they have a higher potential than other children. Dominance of didactic teaching, the passing on of knowledge, is less suitable for them, although some straight knowledge acquisition is essential. Instead, a counseling and guiding style of teaching encourages ideas, as well as taking the Vygotskian approach of using the individual's own potential (Zone of Proximal Development) rather than present performance.

Accessibility: It is not easy to help undiscovered potentially gifted and talented youngsters to access learning and ideas at a stimulating and high level. One possibility is to disband the selection process entirely and allow self-selection by pupils for high-level provision, Freeman's Sports Approach, for example. In this, just as in school sport, children select themselves for higher level teaching and extra practice (Freeman, 2003b)

3. Following-on

Networks: No programme should come to an abrupt halt for the student at its official end. Continuing connections are vital to encourage on-going interaction of ideas and the supporting social contacts made during

courses, live-in or otherwise.

Evaluation: At the time of setting up any course, it should be organised for research to attest to its effectiveness. At very least, this would include a before and after assessment, and for preference the use of comparison groups to provide some evidence of how valuable the course was to the participants. Longer-term research, the longer the better, should be a part of the initial economic provision.

A worthwhile goal

In the provision of out-of-school education for the gifted and talented the establishment of a network of models and centres of excellence around the world would be very valuable. Indeed, the current outlook of many countries is already set for cooperation, though progress is slow. The major competitions, such as the Mathematics Olympiads, are international, and some private institutions are starting associated set-ups, but there is still a very long way to go. There are many initiatives around the world which combine approaches and styles; additionally, new ideas emerge constantly as individuals experiment with different forms of education for the potentially gifted and talented.

<p>This paper has been extracted from the author's report for the UK government Department for Education and Skills. The complete report is free on WWW.JOANFREEMAN.COM</p>
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