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## Introduction

This practical handbook on early school admission for gifted infants was written in response to the demand by kindergarten teachers and school principals after early entry became legally possible. The team of workers in Gifted Education at Charles Sturt University has been bombarded with plaintive requests to explain how to recognise and identify children for whom early admission would be the best provision, and further explain what to do with them once they are accepted by a school.

*One Step Ahead* is an attempt to respond to that demand. The procedures described in this book have all been trialled and are a result of many years of 'hands on' experience. Our graduate students went to schools and tried out various ideas – especially those in Section 2 – and reported on their effectiveness. Some of them even contributed their own topics, eg. Ms Jody Goldney. Nevertheless, it is necessary to constantly remind ourselves that each child is different, that for several children to be gifted does not mean they are identical, and that commonsense is at least as important as psychological and pedagogical theory. For this reason the first section on admission ends with five case studies (up to the point of their admission to school – and the second section finishes by telling you what happened when the children actually went to school a 'step ahead': a year early).

The questionnaires in Part 1 are copyright free and can be used or adapted to suit the needs of your school. Note that the anecdotal evidence is vital to the interpretation of any questionnaire in which the respondent circles answers, as they do here. Please remember that however much you dislike the approach of a particular parent, the child is not responsible for the parent – and may well be gifted anyway.

The selection panel, advising the principal of the school whether to admit the child or not, generally lacks

one of the most relevant selection members: the preschool teacher who has experience with the child. Part 1 explains why we consider the thoughts and experiences of the preschool teacher – and what she or he can add to the panel's work.

The second section of the book has been designed as a guide to action. There has been talk of teachers' 'cook books', but cook book recipes only work if the ingredients are standardised and can be relied on to behave in exactly the same way every time the recipe is used. As this is far from the case with a teacher planning for the learning needs of a roomful of children, the best approach appears to be one which offers fairly detailed advice as 'advice' only – including ideas which have worked for many teachers and many children and many lessons, but not for them all, and not all at once.

Most of the detailed plans are for whole-class lessons as this is the type of organisation which the early entrant will probably find the most difficult; but also included are ideas for individual and small-group activities which could challenge gifted children.

The first years of schooling are years of great change for any child. For the child who starts school at a much younger age than most, there may be some extra difficulties but the good outcomes far outweigh these. The teacher who accepts a young gifted child may also find that she or he has some extra thinking, planning and organisation to do, but in this case the excitement and rewards of helping an early entrant should more than compensate for the extra effort involved.

At the end of the book there is a list of further reading in this area. You will remark that most of them have been published by Hawker Brownlow Education – as was this book. This is not in-house advertising, but simple acknowledgment of the fact that in Australia, Hawker Brownlow Education is the publishing company which enables us all to keep up with the latest in gifted education and research. Have fun reading.

# Chapter 1

## Why Early Entry At All?

Our schooling system is based on a paradox. There is an emphasis on catering to individual differences in children and catering for minorities: ethnic, physical and social. And that is as it should be, as far as possible. But the most obvious difference between individual children entering the school system – school readiness – has been overlooked in favour of administrative simplicity. Until 1991, the only criterion for admission of infants to school was their biological age, whether they were ready for school or not.

The new policy of the Department of Education in New South Wales, and its implementation guidelines published in 1991, at least partly changed the situation. Within limits, it is now possible for a child identified as needing schooling at an earlier age than five to enter the school system in NSW a year earlier. There is still no chance for children who might need to delay their entry into the school system to do so, but for cognitively precocious children a door has opened.

Nevertheless, the fact that the NSW Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the Hon. Virginia Chadwick, the Board of Studies in NSW and the NSW Department of School Education *all agree* that it is suitable for some children to start their schooling earlier than the norm, is not enough for teachers, parents or other citizens to assume that drastic changes have actually taken place within the education system.

Let us then have a closer look at why some children do need to start school earlier or later than others.

In the next chapter where we speak of selection for early entry, there is a definition of gifted children. At this stage it is more advisable to discuss the fact that despite similarities in age, each child is an individual; and if we disregard identical twins reared together, each child has his or her specific strengths and weaknesses, some of which are irrelevant in the school context, some of which are highly relevant indeed.

School plays a crucial role in preparing children for their future function as adult members of society. Its role is usually considered in terms of providing basic knowledge (academic) required by every citizen in our society for competent survival within our culture (literacy, numeracy), specific knowledge related to the child's future training for a particular job (introduction to languages for the future diplomat, historian and language teacher; introduction to geometry for the future architect or engineer; introduction to scientific thought, etc.) and the *chance to sample individual areas of human knowledge* to help with future career selection.

Then there is *sport and health development*, which is no less important, and the *socialising role* where the school helps parents give the child a framework of social rules and self-discipline within which we operate.

For any child to gain all the advantages which school offers, several things are necessary:

1. The child must be cognitively at the level of the information presented by the school – Piaget labelled the phenomenon "cognitive match". This means that the information provided must be presented in a form which fits within the child's existing cognitive constructs and the ways in which the child thinks. This will be discussed further in the chapter on identification, but it is enough to state here that without cognitive match the child simply cannot learn what the school has to offer.
2. The child must want to learn, or at least must not actively resist learning what the school has to offer.
3. The child must feel reasonably comfortable within the school environment, both physically and in relation to the teacher(s).
4. The school program must provide at least some degree of 'moderate novelty': that is, it must not only reiterate what the child already knows.
5. There must be no major cultural conflict between the school and the home environment which would create doubts about the value of school learning in the child.
6. The child must have an opportunity to feel like a valued member of the school community, accepted by her or his classmates.

## Chapter 2

### Problems with Selection of Children for Early Entry

Early entry poses a genuine problem: Who are the children for whom early entry will be of real benefit, how do we identify them and what do we do with them once they have been admitted? Two years after the possibility emerged, and two years of experience later, it may be possible to provide at least partial answers to the questions.

In *Pathways for Accelerated Learners*, Eddie Braggett (1992, p.45) considers that "early entry to school can be defended only if the intellectual needs of children are involved". This statement can be amplified when we clarify that the children concerned are those whose cognitive development is at the level of 'normal' school entrants, at least, and that we are speaking of gifted children.

"Gifted students are those with the potential to exhibit superior performance across a range of areas of endeavour," and

"Talented children are those with the potential to exhibit superior performance in one area of endeavour."

(NSW Department of School Education definition, 1991)

Some gifted children are also talented, but not all; some talented children are also gifted, but not all.

When we investigate these definitions further and attempt to translate them into the toddler and infant category, we encounter problems which do not appear at the later age range. Intelligence testing is not a good idea at this stage and the tests commonly used by educational psychologists are not very predictive for four year olds. Creativity, which is another identifying variable, is readily confused with Piaget's pre-operational stage symptoms at that age and there are obviously no teacher reports to refer to.

Nevertheless, it is possible to recognise that the gifted toddler will be the one who makes life hideous because she insists on having the text of the street advertisements read aloud to her and then insists on 'reading' them at the top of her voice every time you pass by them, and slowly teaches herself to read in this way, whatever your opinion on precocious readers is. It also means that the same child has an uncanny ability to work out where you hid the biscuits, finds any 'hole' in your argument for her to do something she does not want to do, and points it out to you with devastating clarity ("But mummy, you said...") and may well explain to grandma that there is no point being depressed about the shape of her figure if she insists on wearing clothes which are too tight or enjoys heaps of cream on her dessert.

We are speaking of a pain in the neck, we are speaking of a cognitively precocious child, a child who has greater reasoning ability than his or her age peers. The gifted, in general, are faster and more competent in any task which is based on reasoning – and they usually show it very early in their lives. They are hungry for cognitive stimulation, information and challenges, regardless of the specific area in which the challenge appears.

On the other hand, the talented toddler will be precocious or simply very competent in a specific, not necessarily cognitive, area. It is the child who sings true very early, who is the 'born leader' and selects the games everybody plays, not because the child bullies them into it, but because the child can 'sell' it to them. It is the toddler who can catch a ball while her elder sibling misses. It is not the child who, regardless of his own wishes, was trained like a seal in a zoo. But it is very hard to find out the truth when we meet the child for the first time.

The areas of talent are infinite, and only some talented children have exceptional abilities in the cognitive area as well. Those who do not should not usually be candidates for early admission into the school system, and are therefore not the subjects of this book which concentrates on those who are gifted (and possibly talented as well).

There are two populations which will play a crucial role in the decision about early admission:

1. The parent(s) of the child, who currently has to initiate