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Preface

The importance of early education cannot be overestimated. A love of learning and a sense of excitement, purpose and creativity formed in the early years can go on to have lasting impact on the lives of young people. Opportunities offered in the early years can develop into lifelong passions, giving our world a diversity and richness that can only enhance and augment the lives of all. As someone working with young children you are in an ideal situation to offer these opportunities. It is a very privileged position to be in and one we need to take seriously if we are to help young children develop in a way that celebrates and cultivates their full range of abilities and aptitudes.

If you're reading this book then it is likely that you have in your care a child who is demonstrating abilities beyond what might be expected for their age. These children, sometimes referred to as 'tall poppies', will be doing things in your early years setting that often leave you standing in amazement – such as the three-year-old child who goes into the story corner and reads a book for themselves. There is no doubt that young children are often capable of more than we think. National initiatives in the UK (Early Intervention, Scotland; Foundation Stage, England and Wales) have helped to raise expectations among educators. Perhaps less well documented are the group of children who often receive the label 'gifted and talented'. It is the educational experiences of these children that this book will explore.

International (UN, 1989, 1994) and national (DfES, 1998, 2001; SEED, 2003; SOEID, 1994) initiatives have seen an ever-increasing move towards inclusive education. There is much debate as to what this term means and there are a plethora of books on the market that consider just this issue. For the purposes of this book, 'inclusive education' is taken to mean children learning together: learning from each other, from the adults around them and from their communities and families. The focus of this book will be to explore how we can meet the needs of the so-called 'tall poppies' mentioned above within an inclusive education framework.

The first chapter of this book sets out to explore how we might include gifted and talented individuals in our settings. It considers the labels we use to describe gifted and talented children and looks at how the adults' beliefs about intelligence will impact on what they do, say and look for in the early years setting. It challenges educators to think about the nature of intelligence and to think about inclusion in a new way.

Chapter 2 investigates the tricky area of identification. It suggests practical ways of identifying young gifted and talented learners – interview questions, observation sheets and tracking sheets are suggested as ways of building up an 'holistic picture' of a child and their abilities. It considers how culture, history and educational experiences influence responses to gifted education and highlights the common issues countries across the globe grapple with when providing for gifted and talented children.

Chapter 3 considers four curriculum areas – physical movement/motor development, music, language and mathematics – and offers some suggestions as to what may be advanced responses to common early years activities and resources in these areas.

The next four chapters, Chapters 4–7, consider each individual curricular area and contain ideas for challenging activities. The activity sheets can be used as they appear or can be adapted and developed to suit individual settings. These chapters may be ‘dipped in and out of’ as a particular need in a particular curricular area arises.

The final chapter pulls together the thoughts and ideas from throughout the book and links these to common practice found in early years settings. It highlights the need to challenge our gifted and talented children and to ensure that we offer challenging learning opportunities for all.

You will see six icons appearing throughout the book:



This icon indicates that there are some key points that early educators should bear in mind when working with young gifted and talented learners.



This icon suggests some points for staff to reflect on when there are things that practitioners and settings need to think about when providing for gifted and talented children.



This icon shows where there are useful activities for practitioners to try.



This icon means you can photocopy these pages.



These icons indicate some further sources of information and offer some suggestions to get you started.



This icon appears at the end of chapters to provide an overview of the key points.

1

Including the gifted and talented in the early years

Some key points about the education of gifted and talented learners will be made in this chapter.

- **Adopting an inclusive approach to learning is helpful to young gifted and talented learners.**
- **Current learning theory and changes in the way we think about learning, ability and intelligence offer an opportunity to ensure all abilities are being challenged and celebrated.**
- **Labels for gifted and talented learners, while useful, can also be a hindrance. We need to focus on what the labels mean and try to come to some shared understandings about the terms used.**
- **Intelligence is difficult to define. It is our beliefs about intelligence that will influence our view of children in the early years setting and impact on individuals' self-beliefs or mindsets.**



Who are the gifted and talented in your early years setting?

I wonder what picture you have in your mind of a child who is gifted and talented? Often we conjure up images of a round-faced kid with freckles and glasses. He/she always answers questions correctly and is often to be found on his/her own, usually doing science experiments. He/she is sometimes known as 'the little professor'. Or perhaps it is the virtuoso violin player who happens to be four years old. He/she spends hours practising almost to the exclusion of everything else; he/she is quietly spoken and is good at mathematics as well. This kind of stereotyping, while common, is not helpful, particularly if we're considering the education of young gifted and talented children within an inclusive education framework. For many, these narrow views of who the gifted and talented are will go on to shape and influence what they do with young children in their care.



- What does it mean to be gifted and talented in your setting?
- How might your views on gifted and talented children influence practice in your setting?
- What kinds of things do children do in your setting that make you say 'wow!'?

The early years setting should be an exciting place to be for all children. It is also the ideal place to discuss the education of gifted and talented children. Through the provision of appropriate activities and interaction with adults, the setting should offer young children the opportunity to:

- discover what they are interested in
- discover what they can do
- develop relationships with others (adults and children)
- learn to work alongside others (adults and children)
- take risks.

Early years settings, by their very nature, are often considered to be inclusive in the care and education of young children. The structure and practice within early years settings would seem to allow for the adoption of an inclusive approach to learning. For one thing, a play-centred curriculum allows for a child-centred approach: children drive the learning process. This is not to say that there is no structure and that goals are not set, it's just that learning and development are seen as important and complementary, and the emphasis is not simply on targets and results. The child focus of staff and the flexible structure within early years allow for the development of inclusive practices.

Inclusion in the early years setting

Inclusion is an international concept stemming from the International Declaration on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Inclusion can be looked at from two perspectives:

- 1 the current reality for particular groups of individuals for whom exclusion has been and continues to be the norm; and
- 2 an alternative concept of inclusion which encompasses all members of society rather than just a few.

In education the inclusion debate is often narrowed into a discussion about children who present with difficulties and where to educate them – in mainstream school or special schools? The world of gifted education has not been immune to this debate. Many programmes, centres and summer schools offer gifted individuals special pull-out programmes and opportunities. Blogs and websites discuss the relative merits of 'schools for the gifted'. Traditionally in the UK education systems

we have excluded 'children that don't fit' – those with physical impairment, behaviour difficulties, learning difficulties and yes ... even the gifted and talented. When we see a child doing something that is unusual in some way we often seek to identify what it is that is different and then we go about finding a label to explain this difference. We may even try to 'fix' the difference, just so they're 'normal'. While young children may react non-judgmentally to those who are different they are nonetheless developing an awareness of difference which may result in prejudices emerging and so it is important that educators think about encouraging awareness of, and positive attitudes to, diversity and difference within the setting. A shared view of inclusion does not exist at present, however, I would suggest that inclusion is about all individuals in society and as such assumes a 'whole' in which everyone has an equivalent part.

Feeling included

Feeling included, and of course the opposite, excluded, are feelings we will all have had from time to time. Consider the following example told to my colleague:

John found it really awkward taking Josie to playgroup. He was the only father in the area who had made the decision to stay at home and look after his children. He was never part of the incidental chat the women took part in and always felt out of things on the nursery trips. Equally he felt he had less and less in common with male friends. He had commented that if only there were less stereotypical images of who looks after children things might be better.



- Can you think of a time when you felt excluded?
- How did it make you feel?
- What was the impact of these feelings on your behaviour?
- What was the impact of these feelings on your self-esteem and self-worth?
- What would have helped you to feel more included?

Gifted and talented children will sometimes feel excluded from the games their peers play. Sometimes staff interpret this as the gifted child having poor interpersonal skills and being immature. However this is not as simple as it might first appear. Let's look at this from the gifted child's perspective.

A group of children are playing in the house corner. The children have taken on traditional roles and are engaged in a make-believe game. The 'baby' in the 'family' is ill and is in bed. The gifted child approaches and the following happens:

Gifted child: *Can I play?*

Mum: *OK.*

Gifted child: *Can I be the doctor? I think I know what's wrong with the baby.*

Mum: *No.*

Gifted child: *But I think I can make her better.*

Mum: *She's got a cold.*

Gifted child: *No she hasn't, I think she's got malaria. You get that when a female mosquito bites you. What are the symptoms? Has she been in the tropics?*

Mum: *She's got a cold.*

Gifted child: *I know how you make malaria better. She needs to come to hospital and she'll need to get chloroquine, mefloquine, or quinine. Can I be the doctor?*

Mum: *No. She's got a cold. She's not got your fancy illness. You can be the dog.*

The gifted child walks away muttering under their breath saying *I know how to make her better.*

There are several things happening here but on a basic level the gifted child has been excluded from the game. There may be several reasons for this but we will look at two related issues:

- 1 The game is already established and the existing group do not want another person to join.
- 2 The gifted child wants to develop the plot using their knowledge of real-life issues which the rest have no experience of or interest in.

The first reason relates to group dynamics and this may or may not have anything to do with the child being gifted per se. The 'mother' designates a role for the gifted child that 'fits' with the existing story. Joining in on that basis means play can continue. The second reason, while it relates not only to gifted children, does throw up some particularly interesting issues for gifted children. Gifted children will often have in-depth knowledge about a subject or subjects. They can be good at connecting that knowledge to different situations. They can also make up complex plots and story lines in their heads. Their age peers may just not understand what they are talking about and so they set about excluding them from the game, thus re-affirming existing group dynamics. In the scenario above the gifted child walks away but another outcome could be that the gifted child sets their complex plot aside and, in this case, would get down on all fours and start to bark. Gifted children can choose to be excluded from play and maintain the complex plot in their head or they can give up their complex plot in order to conform to the story and join the group. While on one level they may feel more included by 'joining in', as educators, we should be concerned if this happens on a regular basis. Children might stop sharing those complex plots; they may even begin to stop the elaborate thought processes – why bother if no one is interested? If this happens how will we know that they were and are capable of this higher level thinking? This is one example related to play but this may repeat itself in a variety of situations within the setting. Educators need to use such opportunities to increase young children's willingness to be inclusive of those who are different to themselves.



- How are difference and diversity celebrated in your setting?
- How do educators encourage children to be accepting of difference within the setting?
- In what ways do educators ensure that all children are valued within the setting?
- In what ways does the setting ensure that young gifted children are included appropriately in activities?

A danger when early years settings start to identify gifted and talented learners is that they lose what makes the early years setting experience unique and child-centred, and instead start to adopt the formal approaches offered in schools. While this may be appropriate for some, it will not be appropriate for all. That young gifted and talented learners need to be challenged is not debatable; how we do this perhaps requires further discussion. For the purposes of this book, inclusive education is taken to mean children learning together: learning from each other, from adults around them and from their communities and families. In this way, it is argued, gifted and talented learners can be:

- challenged appropriately
- seen as valuable members of the learning community
- have their gifts and talents recognised and celebrated within an inclusive setting.

So what do we know about learning that will help us to do this?

Learning in the early years setting

Much has been written about learning and how we learn. Advances in science and medicine, for example, mean we now know much more than we did in the past about how our brain functions and the impact that this has on learning. However, this knowledge has not always changed what we do as educators.

The point of looking at theory is that it offers vital insights into the day-to-day practice of learners, educators and settings, but often theory is overlooked in the busy day-to-day organising and planning of a setting and so is disregarded. A well-known theorist and academic wrote:

An eminent professor who has researched and lectured on education for years is persuaded by one of his students to go out to schools and see good practice. On the way back in the car the professor is very quiet and the student asks him what he made of his day. 'Well,' replied the professor, 'I was just wondering if it would all work in theory'. (Ainscow, 1998: 7)

This anecdote highlights the false and unnecessary division between theory and practice. Theory without practice is useless, practice without theory is dangerous.

A number of theories have developed about learning, intelligence and ability. Any theory reflects a 'moment' in time. Theories come and go and collapse in on themselves when society changes. We learn new things that suggest the theory needs to change, adapt or be modified. This can give the impression that we are going round in circles. There is also a tendency to throw out everything we've been doing in the past, because it is somehow viewed as bad and outdated, in the naive belief that all the so-called new ideas will somehow be better and provide the answers.

The activities in this book emerge from a particular paradigm or worldview. A paradigm is described by Lewis (1998) as an interconnecting set of assumptions, values and methodologies that are accepted as self-evident. Lots of theories and approaches can be part of the same paradigm because they share the same world view. Thus the main theories reflected in this book belong to the social constructivist approach to learning and teaching and are part of what Poplin (1988) calls the new paradigm. New ways of looking at gifted and talented education and at early years education are being explored (Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Ziegler, 2005) and also call for a paradigm shift. The common theme across these new paradigms is that we need to change our thinking in relation to learning and think not about how we identify more people within the system but think about how we transform the system. This book is therefore concerned with how we can best create learning opportunities for young children that will allow their abilities to emerge and be nurtured.

As part of this new paradigm a social constructivist approach tells us there are some key things we know about learning that are important and will maximise learning for all learners:



- Learning is a social activity.
- Children learn best from collaborative activities – but we need to carefully craft the experiences.
- Experiences gained outside of the early years setting should be linked to the learning taking place in the early years setting.
- Learning in early years settings should be contextualised and not divorced from real-world experiences.

Taking these points into account, there are a number of core principles that underpin good learning experiences for all children. Bearing in mind this includes those who are gifted and talented, some principles might be:

- All children have a right to an education that is appropriately challenging and takes account of individual needs.
- Each person has a unique profile across a wide range of abilities that should be recognised, enhanced and valued equally.
- Recognition of an individual's ability profile is only possible in partnership with parents and other significant individuals in that person's life.