

Identifying gifted children

This is in response to a recent article by Anitha Kurup dealing with identifying gifted children¹.

While every nation wants to maximize its talent output, this particular programme as envisaged in the paper raises few questions in my mind, which I think should be debated among not only the readership of this journal but all stakeholders.

Many of us have been associated with different talent search programmes like national science talent examination, KVPY, etc., which all start from the age 16 onwards. Preparation for IIT entrance test starts at the age of 14, for UPSC exams at 20 and so on. My experience tells me that in all these streams after a stringent selection procedure we do get a talent pool, who are mostly successful in their endeavours, whether they choose to stay in the country or not. However, I have never encountered a programme for the age group 0–15 to identify child prodigy! Well-rounded comprehensive programmes of teaching, training, sports and extracurricular activities are essential for the development of positive aptitude/attitude in children. How can one spot an artist, poet or a scientist at that young age? In my opinion let them be open to all ideas, spoil them with choices and then later let them decide for themselves what they want to be. Any psychological evaluation of children will be destined to fail and will be discriminatory with dangerous ramifications. And then what about late bloomers? How many talented IIT graduates kept up with our space programme at the school level? Don't we have talented youngsters who don't have the IIT stamp? The essential component of nurturing kids is to reassure them continuously and equally that they are important and loved with all their attributes. One should remember all children are born equal but exhibit their talents differently. It is the environment that largely pushes them to do things of

different dimensions. Please do not discriminate among and compartmentalize them. Identification of talent should not be reduced to a checklist programme.

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1. Kurup, A., *Curr. Sci.*, 2021, **120**(3), 472–478.
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Response

If all children are born equal, how does one explain the differences in abilities between siblings, twins or for that matter between children of siblings who grow in similar backgrounds – schools and homes. Though genetic influences are strong during early induction, brain development is inextricably linked with the environment, which plays a vital role in nurturing the gifted. Recent research in the education of the gifted and talented has pointed to the need for early identification and intervention^{1–3}. The period between birth and 3 years is significant for neuronal elaboration in the brain. Sensory experiences and associated learning shape and reshape neuronal circuits and preserve their loss during this synapse refinement stage of neural development⁴.

The purpose of identification of the gifted children is to provide them challenging opportunities in the areas of their interest and not to discriminate and compartmentalize students. Most of the gifted children in our pool shift areas of interests over time. Based on the changed interests, the programmes provide opportunities to match their changed interests.

The focus of mentoring is not to lead the gifted children to early specialization, rather it is to develop among children the ability to be independent learners and develop learning skills that will help them match their passion with the abilities.

India has several talent search programmes like the National Talent Search and the KVPY exams that are held nationally for children aged 14–16 years. These exams assume that through a single test/interview, one is able to spot talent. What constitutes 'Merit' has come under serious criticism. For a diverse country like India, the definition of merit is not reflective of the abilities of India's diverse population. Test taking itself is an ability defined by opportunity and honed through practise. This is by and large accessed by the upper middle class and elite who have the necessary resources. Unfortunately, children who come from rural and tribal areas of India lack these resources (cultural capital and social network) inherently placing them at a disadvantage. Hence, these children from resource poor home backgrounds are unlikely to be identified for their talent.

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 2. Pfeiffer, S. I. and Petscher, Y., *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 2008, **52**, 19–29; doi:10.1177/0016986207311055.
 3. Smutny, J. F., *Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom*, 2000; <http://www.casenex.com/casenex/ericReadings/TeachingYoungGiftedChildren.pdf>
 4. Nash, J. M., *Fertile Minds*, 1997; <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,985854,00.html>
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