

FEATURE ARTICLES

THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATOR: A KEY CONTRIBUTOR TO EFFECTIVE PRACTICE FOR HIGHLY ABLE YOUNG CHILDREN

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Abstract

There is little agreement within the literature as to what constitutes high ability. In an early years context this lack of agreement contributes to the difficulty in identifying and providing for young children with high ability. One aspect that may affect this search and subsequent provision is the early years educators' understandings of high ability and the correlation between this understanding and practice. This paper seeks to explore the symbiotic relationship between understandings of high ability and their impact on early years practice and identification. Forty-five participants working in early years settings and with no prior formal engagement with the concept of high ability completed a questionnaire. The results of the open-ended questions are presented here. Findings show that educators' understandings of high ability are crucial to the identification of highly able children and to the creation of appropriately challenging learning opportunities for children.

Introduction

There is little consensus as to what constitutes high ability (HA) (Coleman, 2004; Cramond, 2004; Gagné, 2004; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005) although there is general acceptance that in education it refers to children who are working or are capable of working in advance of their chronological peers in one or more curricular areas (SNAP, 2009). There are studies considering the needs of older children (Bailey et al., 2008) and retrospective studies considering HA during childhood (Albert, 1980; Bloom, 1985) on which early years educators can draw when considering how to meet the needs of highly able young learners. However, there is a

paucity of research relating specifically to the education of highly able young learners (Koshy & Robinson, 2006).

Evidence is emerging (Bégin & Gagné, 1994a, 1994b; Gross, 1997, 1999) that relates the impact of beliefs about intelligence and practice. In the 1980s research (Orenstein, 1984; Davis & Rimm, 1985; Whitlock & Dacette, 1989) suggested a correlation between training relating to gifted education, and the implementation of effective gifted programmes. More recently Geake and Gross (2008) sought to elicit the implicit negative attitudes of teachers to highly able children suggesting that these views impacted on provision. Eyre and Geake (2002, p. 38) argue that teachers who 'hold stereotypical hostile views of gifted students are unlikely to enrol voluntarily in CPD [continuing professional development] programs'. In a study of 133 Korean elementary teachers, Kim and Gentry (2008) postulate that specific in-service training in gifted education results in an increased knowledge of and interest in gifted education. These studies relate to the formal schooling context with no reference to the pre-school perspective.

In Scotland, little is known about the impact of early years educators' beliefs about HA on learning. In addition, many key staff in early years establishments possess a range of qualifications and some, no qualification at all (Adams, 2008). Staff will have personal experiences that will shape their beliefs about ability. These beliefs impact on their professional lives and will be tempered or not by engaging in professional learning. When placed alongside the available research relating to formal schooling, it would seem reasonable to assume that nursery staff beliefs and attitudes would have an impact on provision for highly able young learners.

The intent of this research was twofold:

- to consider how early years staff viewed HA in the early childhood setting
- to explore how and if their understanding affected the planning of learning opportunities.

Beliefs, attitudes, policy and practice

Rollinson (2005) postulates that attitudes will typically reside at an intuitive level until the person is confronted with a situation that challenges those attitudes. Attitudes and beliefs are, however, rooted in a number of sources and as such are notoriously difficult to measure directly but can instead be accessed through inferences (Reid, 2006). HA is a concept, concepts represent beliefs or sets of beliefs that support us as we attribute substance, order and rationality to an issue in our culture and society (Manion et al., 2000).

Hertzog argues that 'there is a strong relationship between teachers' values and beliefs and how teachers define their role' (Hertzog, 2001). Choh Ssu Yee and Quay May Lin (2001) found that 'school teachers' beliefs are very important because beliefs can influence their treatment of pupils and affect teaching behaviours'. While these two studies are not directly about early years educators they suggest there is a strong correlation between the adult and their beliefs and practice. Gibson (1984) suggests 'structures of feeling' are created through individual suppositions that are grounded in personal or group experiences of situations. He argues that this leads to adults making 'judgments, explicit or implicit, on what is worthwhile and what is not' (p. 62).

Beliefs about who the highly able are would be one such structure of feeling. This prevailing structure of feeling will influence those in the setting and where a conflicting view is held, it will be likely to be subsumed into the dominant discourse. However, structures of feeling are not casual rejoinders but configurations of commonly shared ways of seeing both ourselves and our world.

One way of allowing staff to begin to articulate and reflect on their beliefs is through continuing professional development (CPD). Friedland (2007, p. 126) portrays professionalism as a 'ball of knotted string'. She suggests that as the knots are untied so the ball of string will disentangle, allowing issues to be dealt with more clearly. She suggests the 'knots' may include issues relating to gender, ethics, salary structures, the role of women in society, leadership. The contentious nature of HA would be another 'knot' worthy of unravelling. In a UK-wide study of early years practitioners, Nutbrown and Clough (2006) discovered that 'professional development

opportunities for pre-school educators was an issue which generated much comment and surprisingly few felt appropriately equipped to work with children with learning difficulties' (p. 64). While their study focused on children with learning difficulties it is reasonable to assume that similar findings would emerge for staff working with highly able children given the contested nature of HA and because it is viewed as an additional support need in Scotland in the same way as a learning difficulty. In the UK, those who deliver CPD leading to formal qualifications in the early years have the delicate task of balancing the intertwining aspects of care and education components.

The situation is further exacerbated by Government expectations of the standard of learning that will be achieved in the early years. Policy contexts can shape and influence staff attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Internationally, curriculum and programme developments have sought to create curriculum which 'satisfactorily meets the development needs of all young children' (Nutbrown and Clough, 2006, p. 14). Te Whariki (MoE, 1995) and Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi, 1996) are examples of international developments, which have influenced curricula beyond the borders of their country of origin. In Scotland a seamless 3–18 years curriculum is currently being implemented. There seems a commitment to the holistic development of children throughout these curricula; however little, if any, explicit reference is made to young learners with HA. If the particular needs of this group are not overtly considered or understood it may result in their needs being met in an ad hoc manner at the discretion and discernment of the setting.

Methodology

The sample comprised 45 early years educators working within settings in West Dunbartonshire Education Authority. All participants were women. They had volunteered or were encouraged to attend half-day sessions. The Authority was developing provision for highly able pupils and while school staff had had opportunities to attend events looking specifically at this cohort of pupils, no work had been carried out with early years staff. In order to establish baseline data prior to the course commencing, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire.

Settings represented reflected the wide range of child care available to parents in Scotland and included Early Education and Childcare Centres (EECC), private daycare nurseries in partnership with the Education Authority, mobile crèche, 3–5 Nurseries and a nursery catering for children with additional support needs (ASN). The teachers represented in the cohort worked across primary schools and early years settings and one was a member of the authority's early intervention team.

Staff held various and sometimes multiple qualifications. The most common combinations were Professional Development Award (PDA) combined with Nursery Nurse Examination Board (NNEB), Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Scottish Nursery Nurses Examination Board (SNNEB).

Participants were asked to place themselves in an age range from 18–55+. Of the 41 who responded most were in the 40–55 years age bracket. The highest response category for experience was 11–15 years' experience in early years settings. Four open-ended questions were posed, the results of which are the focus for this paper.

A questionnaire explored provision for and identification of young able learners. The first section included a set of statements using a 5-point Likert scale. In the second section, participants answered a set of open-ended questions related to current practices in their setting and finally participants completed demographic questions that would put their replies in context. As such, it was an exploratory account of their beliefs and practices. These questions were designed to offer participants the opportunity to contribute perspectives on the issues. Manion et al. (2000) suggest such questions customarily make available valuable information that may not be captured in the rating scale. While comparing responses can be problematic and they are not acquiescent to aggregation, they provide valuable insight into issues that are most relevant to the participants (Greer, 1991; Manion et al., 2000).

Although the methodological shortcomings (Hughes, 2003; Reid, 2006) were recognised, a questionnaire was selected as the best tool as it is a valuable method of collecting a wide range of information from a number of individuals. The sample size, however, is small and therefore results should be used cautiously.

Results

1. What do you understand by the term 'young children with HA'?

One respondent declined to answer. Forty-four gave some description of what they understood by the term. Answers included:

- performing consistently above chronological peers (16)
- having 'advanced knowledge' in area/s of the curriculum (6)
- advanced skills, strengths and abilities in area/s (7)
- one who requires challenge (6)
- curiosity, questioning, interested in learning, wanting and needing to learn (6)
- problem solving (2)
- children who already know what you are teaching (1)

2. In what ways does your setting seek to identify and support particular abilities in children?

A range of responses relating to identification were offered, including:

- observation to identify (23)
- all children treated as individuals so no particular approach adopted (7)
- assessment procedures (2)
- screening process (1)
- ability to complete any activity related to the curriculum guidelines (1)

They supported children by:

- utilising children's areas of interest as a starting point (13)
- using observation to plan activities (8)
- working in small groups, ability groups, one-to-one support (6)
- using different methodologies/resources, e.g. talking and thinking floor books (4)
- implementing the Education Authority's staged intervention process and support from Network Support staff (4)
- contacting external agencies (2)

3. In what ways does your setting use the information you receive from parents in the planning process?

Two respondents did not complete this section. One was not involved with parents in her role and another stated she was not involved in planning. From the remaining forty-three

respondents there was agreement that information gathered from parents was used to inform planning.

Information from parents was used in the following ways:

- to directly inform the planning of activities (23)
- parents are directly and actively involved in contributing to the planning (10)
- the use of *All About Me* booklets, learning journey folders, newsletters, parents' evenings and a parents' wall (9)
- parents work with staff to identify targets for the staged intervention programme and individualised education programme (1)

Three responses (quoted below) suggested that settings were either reluctant to take at face value the information parents offered or that the information given was inaccurate or unrealistic:

Staff take account of information shared, such as child's interests, likes/dislikes, etc ... But will observe the child to determine their skills and ability.

It's used to discover children's likes but quite often you find the child is either not as skilled as their parents say or skilled in one area but with huge gaps in their learning (usually socially and emotionally).

It tries to meet expectations of the parents whilst sometimes setting more realistic/achievable goals.

4. Give some examples of ways that young children who are highly able are challenged within your setting.

Three respondents gave no response and one indicated that her role involved visiting a number of settings and that she had 'no examples' and had 'not seen any in establishments' she was in. Another did not give an example but stated 'they are given the opportunity to further develop their skills with a range of suitable activities'. Of the remaining participants twenty-seven respondents offered challenge through:

- different programmes of work/tasks (10)
- providing more challenging activities (9)
- giving highly able pupils responsibility (9)
- one-to-one sessions (8)
- taking the lead from the child, involving them in the planning process (7)
- providing more challenging resources (7)

- problem solving/open-ended questioning (3)
- adapting existing programmes of work (3)
- using ICT (3)
- writing, reading and numeracy development (2)
- encouraging children to attempt things they can't do (1)
- highly able young child working with older children (1)

One respondent mentioned behaviour challenges with which a particular child presented. This would appear to be a misinterpretation of the question.

Discussion

1. What do you understand by the term 'young children with HA'?

The concept of HA was accepted uncritically. As such this is a limitation of the study as it is possible that staff attending were predisposed to accepting the concept. In addition, later groups who completed the questionnaire had heard about previous sessions and may have been influenced by staff discussions of the concept demonstrating the power of CPD opportunities and also perhaps peer influence. Accepting these limitations, the staff members in this study reflected the generally accepted notion that a highly able pupil would be one who is *performing consistently above chronological peers*. While this consensus may be viewed as positive, it still requires exploration in terms of how staff will gauge what performance looks like. Questions also remain as to the level of advanced conceptual understanding in the quantitative domain that would be required if a child identified as highly able.

The staff were aware that HA might manifest itself in one or multiple curricular areas. This multiplicity is reflected in the literature relating to the complex nature of intelligence (Coleman, 2004; Cramond, 2004; Gagné, 2004; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005). Acknowledgement of the multifaceted nature of HA may suggest staff were open to identifying a broad range of behaviours when observing children.

Staff identified learning traits that might indicate HA. Such traits are reflected in the literature (Archambault et al., 1993; Feldhusen, 1994; Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2003; Koshy and Robinson, 2006). However the traits recognised,

such as curiosity, questioning and interest in learning, are not exclusive to highly able young children (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). If all children display some of these characteristics at various points in time in the setting, we have to be clear how we identify and challenge children appropriately thus offering continuous and appropriate learning experiences for all that build on prior learning and knowledge.

2. In what ways does your setting seek to identify and support particular abilities in children?

The most commonly reported method of identification was observation. Observation is dependent on the observer having a clear understanding of what it is they are looking for. The contested nature of ability (Coleman, 2004; Cramond, 2004; Gagné, 2004; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005), alongside the varied responses to previous questions about ability, highlights the problematic nature of observation being the most common form of identification. In addition, if children have to demonstrate the characteristics of HA in order for them to be recognised, those who have potential to demonstrate HA with appropriate support may be overlooked depending on the construction of the observation schedule.

The questionnaire did not formally explore the format of the observation. Informal discussions suggested that observations were carried out during activities with only the occasional use of formal observation schedules. These were often connected to end-of-session assessments and rarely, if ever, focused on the search for HA. This lack of focus may lead to HA not being 'seen' by the observer or the observer may think it doesn't exist within the cohort being observed. Similarly, observation of this nature do not take into account other influences that may impinge on the child's cognitive ability. Issues such as sleep deprivation (Eunjoo et al., 2009), the home learning environment (Sammons et al., 2004) and community support (Rogoff, 2003) all suggest that cognitive ability is a multifarious mix of experiences, environment and ability. A child's lived experiences may impact on his or her capacity to demonstrate ability. Thus addressing composite and contingent issues relating to HA through observation requires the practitioner to have a deep understanding of the complex process of observation alongside clear understandings of what it means to be highly able. Given the lack of consensus as to what

constitutes HA, observation, while crucial, may be unreliable and exclusionary where it is the dominant or only strategy employed in the identification process.

Eight of the 16 respondents indicated that the observations made were then used to plan appropriate activities. Such use of observations is important in the construction of activities to ensure continuity in learning. However, if the observations are potentially incomplete or inconsistent, then it is possible that the activities that are subsequently offered will only be offered to those who have demonstrated abilities.

The role of assessment in identification was less clear. Assessment was mentioned only twice as contributing to the identification process. The EPPE Report (Sylva et al., 2004, p. 11) confirmed the 'importance of formative assessment to meet children's particular needs, particularly formative feedback during activities'. Given current initiatives (LTS, n.d.), it might have been reasonable to expect this aspect to feature more strongly in the responses.

The organisation of children into smaller groups, groups by ability and individual support were seen to facilitate appropriate support. In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) promotes active learning and co-operative learning in mixed ability groups (SG, 2008). Considering the needs of older children, Smith (2006) argues that they may benefit socially learning in mixed ability/co-operative settings. She highlights the importance of highly able learners interacting and working with peers of the same age. However, in common with Porter (2005), Bailey et al., (2008) and Sutherland (2006), she also outlines the importance of pupils being intellectually stimulated within these groups and possibly working alongside an intellectual peer.

Nutbrown and Clough (2006, p. 9) suggest that effective early education includes 'developmentally appropriate practice, observation-based pedagogy and assessment; close parental involvement, equality of access to a differentiated curriculum; and a multi-professional, cross agency approach to provision'. Responses from this study reflected each of these elements. Emerging findings from studies (Lenz Tagucchi, 2010a) which challenge the accepted discourse of universal learning goals and values call into question the pre-determined paths of learning that can be the result of and form the basis of the above interactions. Developmentally

appropriate practice may seek to use centralised standards to evaluate learning progress. Lenz Tagucchi suggests this is problematic due to the inter-connectedness of materials that are both human and non-human resulting in what she calls 'intra-active pedagogy' (Lenz Tagucchi, 2010b). While utilising the child's area of interest as a starting point for challenge (13 respondents) may be viewed as being child-centred and developmentally appropriate, Lenz Tagucchi (2010a) argues that this will be dependent on the practitioners' assumptions about knowledge, learning and becoming a learner and their understanding of this interactive process.

3. In what ways does your setting use the information you receive from parents in the planning process?

It is well documented in the gifted and talented field that parents are concerned about sharing with settings information regarding their child's ability (Gross, 1993) and equally, parental participation in the learning process is acknowledged as crucial within early years (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Parents fear they will be classed as pushy parents (Gross, 1993) and one response suggested that the setting perceived parents held unrealistic expectations for their child stating that 'it tries to meet expectations of the parents whilst sometimes setting more realistic/achievable goals'.

The tensions between the educator as expert and the knowledge of parents is evident in the response 'staff will take account of information shared, such as child's interests likes/dislikes, etc ... But will observe the child to determine their skills and ability'. While staff can complement and supplement the information offered by parents, this statement suggests that staff hold the expertise in determining skills and abilities. This brings us back to the question of universal learning goals and values. Staff may only look for and acknowledge skills and abilities that fall within a predetermined path of learning. Many early years settings focus on the traditional skills and abilities deemed necessary for school but such a narrow focus may mean children with abilities and skills outside this framework go unnoticed and unchallenged (Carr, 2004; Sutherland, 2008).

Results from this study would suggest that early years settings in this authority are striving to involve parents in the learning process in line with Government advice (LTS, n.d.). While

many positive steps had been taken, there was no indication as to whether particular consideration was given to HA and given parents' reticence in sharing information there was no way to know if their involvement ensured that abilities were being highlighted and subsequently catered for.

Opportunities for contribution were offered to parents. However all the methods assume a degree of literacy and confidence on the part of the parent. They also require parents to avail themselves of the opportunities. If parents are part of a marginalised group, have issues around literacy or poor memories of their own schooling, they may not avail themselves of these opportunities.

4. Give some examples of ways that young children who are highly able are challenged within your setting.

Five respondents did not provide any concrete examples. This is concerning since all participants indicated during the course of the face-to-face sessions that they could think of children who required extra challenge.

The remaining 40 participants articulated the kinds of activities they considered relevant, with 27 offering challenge through catering specifically for highly able children. Individualisation of the curriculum was the most commonly mentioned approach. This individualisation was offered through particular activities or resources being introduced although no detail was offered as to what these consisted of. Nine respondents cited providing opportunities for young children to assume responsible roles.

Leadership skills are highlighted as a particular attribute of gifted children (Marland, 1972). Terman (1925) concluded that 'gifted' rather than 'regular' pupils were more likely to play a leading role in school. With respect to leadership, Foster and Silverman (1988) give emphasis to the fact that schools should recognise the development of leadership and provide leadership education as part of their regular curriculum, especially for 'gifted' pupils so that they can build a sense of collegiality toward others from the outset. It was not clear from the responses if this development of leadership through responsibility was systematically cultivated with a view to enhancing leadership skills or if it was seen as a way of keeping highly able children occupied

and therefore less likely to resort to challenging behaviour.

Winstanley (2004) contests the 'ingredients of challenge' are not widely understood, thus the statement 'providing challenging activities' would need to be elaborated if full understanding of the term is to be achieved.

Two respondents indicated that writing, reading and numeracy development were undertaken. This low response is interesting since advanced understanding and mastery in these areas are often equated with being highly able.

Interestingly, one respondent talked about the behaviour challenges of a particular child. Her response would appear to be a misinterpretation of the question but gives rise to questions about staff perceptions of children with high ability.

Conclusion

Increasingly, there is recognition that children of HA in the early years require consideration and support (Jackson, 2003; Koshy and Robinson, 2006). In a Scottish context, this need is reflected in legislation where children who are highly able are specifically mentioned (SG, 2009).

Data from the open-ended questions suggested that while there was agreement with the accepted view that highly able children will be working ahead of their peers, there was still a range of understandings with disparate phrases and terminology in use. Some used generic phrases such as 'a child who is clever, a child who is bright' or 'a child who is intelligent'. Such phrases do not illuminate the participants' understanding of the term since words such as 'clever', 'bright' and 'intelligent' can have various meanings and interpretations. A lack of shared understandings between educators and parents allows for the potential for highly able children to remain unnoticed and unchallenged. Inconsistency in planning and divergence of views and beliefs may result in varied responses to curriculum planning. Offering opportunities to reflect and consider perceptions of key educational aspects such as ability and intelligence through high quality CPD opportunities may help to address this issue and ensure the statutory rights of highly able children are met.

This study suggests that while there are areas for development, there is much to celebrate and build on within these early years settings. Most participants regarded parental involvement as important and integral to planning and accepted

that HA exists, suggesting there is fertile ground on which to build. Minds, in this study, seemed open to considering these complex issues.

While there are clearly limitations to this study, such as the sample size, it has nevertheless highlighted a number of areas worthy of further research and discussion such as adult beliefs, curriculum development and parental involvement. Throughout the study, the educator was crucial to the identification of children with HA and to the creation of appropriately challenging learning opportunities. Pascal and Bertram (1997, p. 135) suggest that 'not only does the adults' style of engagement directly affect the children's levels of involvement, but the children's involvement affects the adult's style of engagement'. This symbiotic relationship must be explored if highly able children, and indeed all children, are to receive an appropriately challenging curriculum.

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