

## GIFTEDNESS AND GIFTED UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Dr. (MRS) Funmilola Bosede Alokan\*

Dr(Mrs) Cecilia M. Olaniyi\*\*

### ABSTRACT

*Every nation wants to make sure that all students, including those with extraordinary talent in arts, sciences, business and other fields, have full opportunity to develop their excellent gifts. The society should concern itself with such students because of evidence that they will fill many leadership positions and roles in its future. They will make many of the new scientific discoveries and shape the future artistic productions. It is in the best interest of society as a whole to see to it that these gifted and talented students perform to the best of their potential.*

*Researchers found out that enough work is not done in that direction now. In every generation, many such children pass through school unidentified, their talents uncultivated. It is on this premise that this paper discusses giftedness and the Nigeria situation; components of intellectual competence; challenges associated with giftedness and identification of gifted children. The paper also discusses gifted underachievers; counselling and instructional interventions; and what parents can do to help their underachieving gifted children.*

**Key words:** Giftedness, educational institutions, intelligence, special abilities, under achievements.

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\* *Department Of Guidance And Counselling, Faculty Of Education, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria*

\*\* *Guidance and Counselling Unit, Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji Arakeji, Osun State, Nigeria.*

## Introduction

Every nation wants to make sure that all students, including those with extraordinary talent in the arts, science, business and other fields, have full opportunity to develop their gifts (excellence). This is done because it is recognized that their excelling in these fields means that society as a whole will flourish.

Gifted students are those who have already achieved more than average students and may be operating at two or three grade levels above their own. We should concern ourselves with such students because of evidence that they will fill many leadership positions and roles in our future society. They will make many of the new scientific discoveries and shape our future artistic productions. It is in the best interest of society as a whole to see to it that these gifted and talented students perform to the best of their potentials - and we have evidence that this is not happening now (Kirk, Gallagher, Anastasiow and Coleman, 2006).

## Definition

The term 'gifted' traditionally has been used to refer to people with intellectual gifts. In the United States, early definitions of giftedness were tied to performance on the Stanford-Binet Intelligence test, which Lewis Terman developed during and after World War I. Children who scored above an agreed-upon point - such as 130 or 140 - were called gifted. They represented from 1 to 3 percent of their age-group population (Terman and Oden, 1947).

Essentially, a high score on the Stanford-Binet or on other intelligence tests meant that children were intellectually developing more rapidly than their age-mates. What was unique was not so much 'what' they were doing as 'when' developmentally, they were doing it. A child playing chess is not a phenomenon, but a child playing chess seriously at age 5 is. Many children

write poetry, but not at age 6, when most are just learning to read. Early rapid development is one of the clear indicators of high intellectual ability, and that is what intelligence tests measure.

It was long thought that intelligence was distributed in society in conformity with the normal curve, with many students likely to have about average IQ scores of 100 and fewer expected to score extremely high. This "normal curve" distribution of scores was one of the reasons for assuming that intelligence was a biological property, since other characteristics such as height and weight showed similar normal curve distribution. But now there is evidence that intelligence scores do not form a normal distribution, certainly not at the extreme ends (Robinson, Zigler and Gallagher, 2000). Few children's IQ scores fall below 70 without some pathological cause, and there seem to be many 'more youngsters at the top end of the distribution (scoring over 140) than would be expected on the basis of a normal curve distribution (Silverman, 1997).

When this discovery is combined with investigations that suggest that entire population of countries are performing better on tests of ability than a generation before (Flynn, 1999), one must confront the notion that IQ scores are not fixed for an individual or a society but can be improved with education and experience. The number of highly intelligent students that can be produced is not limited, but we have as a prospect a gradually increasing supply of highly intelligent people - if we are wise enough to create the conditions for their development.

### **The Nigeria Situation**

In Nigeria, initial proposal on gifted education met with criticism of elitism and diversion of scarce educational resources to the benefit of children of the well educated. Some considered it a myth and suggested that all children exposed to well equipped schools and committed

teachers, will perform well and dispel this myth. Some saw it as exclusive educational apartheid in Nigeria (Ifede, 1986).

The Federal Government of Nigeria in a nation-wide broadcast in 1974 announced the provision of special education programme for gifted children and physically challenged children (Oyewole - Makele, Okunola and Kalu, 2009). When the National Policy on Education was released, it contained the introduction of Special Education Programme which caters for the handicapped and the exceptionally gifted children. National Policy on Education (1981) lays emphasis on the education of the gifted in the following words:

"There are also specially gifted children who are intellectually precocious and find themselves insufficiently challenged by the programme of normal school and who may take to stubbornness and apathy, in resistance to it. Government has already directed that all children including the gifted..... must be provided for under the educational system. The corollary of UPE, therefore is that special educational arrangements must be made for the 'handicapped' and the exceptionally 'gifted'. (p. 36)"

Government's major objective in respect of gifted children is also stated in the National Policy on Education (1981):

"To provide opportunity for exceptionally 'gifted' children to develop at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development. (p.36)".

To implement the policy statement, a committee which was set up by the Federal Government to work out a suitable programme for the education of the gifted recommended the

appointment of five Federal Government Colleges to serve as pilot institutions. As time went by, the Federal Government eventually instituted a gifted school in Suleja, in the suburb of the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja. The institution, named Suleja Academy (Now Federal Government Academy) was established in 1989 exclusively for the education of the gifted children at the secondary level of education. It is a national centre for nurturing gifted and talented children. The gifted education programme allows precious students with outstanding abilities and who are capable of high performance, to adapt to fast-tracked curriculum and complete the secondary school educational programme in less than the prescribed years, while attaining excellent result, Students in the Academy are on Federal Government scholarship covering tuition, boarding and feeding (Federal Government Academy, 2012).

### **Components of Intellectual Competence**

Perkins (1995) believes that competence reflects three major factors: the power of a person's neurological computer; the tactical repertoire or cognitive strategies that a person can bring to bear; and context-specific content and know-how. Students who are gifted appear to have advantages across the full range of information processing. They tend to grasp new ideas faster, they see more associations between ideas, and they have a rich storehouse of concepts and systems of ideas to apply to individual problems. They also have a superior ability to use cognitive strategies, which increases their ability to cope with difficult assignments. In most instances, their ability to reason - that is, to use existing information to generate new information - is at a level two to three years or more beyond that of their age mates.

It is the responsibility of the schools to help students develop both learning strategies and content mastery. The notion that the student who is gifted will automatically learn these

strategies or knowledge, however, is an idea that dies hard. The tactics or strategies that these students employ as they try to cope with difficult problems must be explicitly taught because they will rarely be spontaneously discovered. This collection of strategies is often referred to as the 'executive function' (Kirk, Gallagher, Anastasiow and Coleman (2006).)

The students will not naturally stumble on the process of multiplication (which, after all, is a strategy for processing information), principles of logical analysis, problem finding, and a number of other devices that are useful tools to the serious thinker. All these strategies must be taught. Occasionally, a student who is gifted will intuitively solve a problem in an innovative fashion, but unless the student explicitly recognizes the method, he or she will not likely have full use of the strategy. Schools should deliberately attempt to teach the use of thinking strategies in many different content areas and tasks, because the conceptual transfer of a thinking strategy from one content field to another is not as easy as many people think.

### **Many Gifts or Special Abilities**

Should giftedness be regarded as an overriding mental ability or as a series of special abilities? Howard Gardner is one of the latest of a group of psychologists to view giftedness as a series of special abilities. He has proposed a list of nine distinct and separate abilities that need specific educational attention (Gardner, 1998). All these abilities seem to be positively correlated with one another, and students who have outstanding talents in one area are usually good in the other areas as well.

In Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, Gardner (1998) identified the following areas:

- Linguistic: Mastery, sensitivity, desire to explore, and love of words, spoken and written language(s).

- Logical-Mathematical: Confront, logically analyse, assess and empirically investigate objects, abstractions, and problems; discern relations and underlying principles; carry out mathematical operations; handle long chains of reasoning.
- Musical: Skill in producing, composing, performing, listening, discerning, and sensitivity to the components of music and sound.
- Spatial: Accurately perceive, recognize, manipulate, modify and transform shape, form and pattern.
- Bodily-Kinesthetic: Orchestrate and control body motions and handle objects skillfully, to perform tasks or fashion products.
- Interpersonal: Be sensitive to, accurately assess, and understand others' actions, motivations, moods, feelings and other mental states and act productively on the basis of that knowledge.
- Intrapersonal: Be sensitive to, accurately assess, understand and regulate oneself and act productively on the basis of one's actions, motivations, moods, feelings, and other mental states.
- Naturalist: Expertise in recognition and classification of natural objects like flora and fauna; or artifacts like cars, coins or stamps.
- Existential: Capturing and pondering the fundamental questions of existence; an interest and concern with "ultimate" issues.

Being labelled as talented or being identified as gifted through high test scores does not guarantee an academic road of productivity or accomplishments following school. So what is the recipe for productivity on the part of a gifted student? Schneider (2000) reviewed an extensive literature on this topic and concluded that exceptional performance is usually based on an

extremely rich knowledge base, acquired through a very long lasting process of motivated learning.

In other words, high ability is not the predictor of student productivity, but only the base on which the student must build. Extended practice, dedication and high motivation to succeed are the basic characteristics necessary to complete the portrait of a productive person. This is where the school and educators can play a significant role in exciting the student about learning, providing resources and access to advanced knowledge that keep a student's high motivation alive.

Although researchers make a strong case for the importance of heredity in giftedness, environment, or the context of the child, is important as well. Extraordinary talent may be shaped by heredity, but it is nurtured and developed by the environment.

### **Challenges Associated with Giftedness**

Silverman (2002) discusses the special problem of 'asynchronization of development' of gifted students: that - for example - cognitively some may be 14 years old, physically and socially they may be only 8, and that this causes problems both for those students and for adults around them who are not aware of this atypical development.

Robinson (2002) points out that two implicit theories of intelligence are held by both adults and the students themselves. One has been entitled 'entity theory', meaning that intelligence is seen as a fixed trait and there is little we can do to change it. The second theory, an 'incremental theory', is that although people differ in native ability, intelligence is malleable and can be cultivated and increased through effort. Holding to either of these theories can result in differing emotional reactions to stress. Dweck (2000) points out that gifted students holding to



'entity theory' build the expectation that they will remain "smart" and should be able to handle new situations and stay at the top of the class with minimal effort. Faced with adults who remark on how bright they are, their concept of "born smart" is solidified. When such students are challenged by bright peers or difficult curricular, they often want to retreat from the uncomfortable situation, to seek low risk tasks that can reconfirm their high abilities. Those individuals holding to the 'incremental theory' seem to be in a better position to accept challenge and the need for effort and hard work to achieve success. The latter theory appears to be the one that comes closer to existing facts in schools for the gifted.

Another characteristic that seems to be a part of some gifted students' emotional and social life is that of 'perfectionism'. These are the combination of thoughts and behaviours of thought and behaviours associated with high standards or high expectations for one's own performance. Superior performance depends upon setting high standards for oneself and would seem an essential part of the high productivity expected of such students. But now the question is whether perfectionism shades over into neurotic performance, since from their earliest years, gifted children tend to be successful in almost everything they try - because they are being under challenged. If perfectionism becomes neurosis, students can become "failure avoidant". Perfectionistic students can have a depressive reaction if they receive a 95 on a paper instead of the usual 100. In such instances it is important for teachers and others to point out to the student that great accomplishments may be accompanied by failure in some part of the process.

For gifted girls, the message to be 'feminine', meaning to be passive, modest, dependent, nurturing, and unselfish, can conflict with their expectations of such factors as independence, risk taking, full development of their potential, assertiveness, and a certain degree of competitiveness. These conflicting messages can mean that some gifted girls elect to camouflage

their abilities in order to fit in better with society's expectations (Reis, 2003). While societal messages have changed somewhat since the women's movement in the 1960s (Roeper, 2003), these dilemmas remain critical for gifted girls.

Gifted boys face another type of dilemma. Those who are highly sensitive, aesthetically aware, insightful, emotive and intuitive run a high risk of appearing 'unmanly' and one needs only to contemplate the labels developed for boys who appear 'unmanly' to understand this difficulty in the life of a gifted boy (Kerr and Cohn, 2001). This means that gifted girls tend to take on more traits that are identified as male (independence, assertiveness risk taking and so on) and that gifted boys tend to show more 'feminine' traits (such as sensitivity, aesthetic awareness and emotiveness). This is a complex issue. Some gifted students find that the gender expectations of society conflict with the direction of their gifts and talents, so they face difficult choices about managing their identities as gifted individuals.

One common adjustment problem of many students who are gifted is dealing with the boredom that comes from sitting through classes in which something they already know is being taught. Imagine being faced with learning multiplication tables over and over, and one might begin to understand their dislike of a non-differentiated educational programme. In spite of their boredom, gifted students may avoid identifying themselves as being gifted, by using a coping style that denies interest in excellence and even by making fun of other gifted students (Coleman, 1989). It is interesting that at special schools for advanced students, the social norms is that it is OK to be interested in intellectual and academic goals (Kolloff, 1997). Under this social environment, students who are gifted find it comfortable to reveal their true selves and interests.

One should be reminded that individuals, within any category of exceptional children, are first and foremost 'individuals'. Each has his or her own pattern of strengths and areas of need.

### Identification of Gifted Children

Before one can provide children who are gifted with special services to match their special needs, one has to find them. Identification is not an easy task. In every generation, many such children pass through school unidentified, their talents uncultivated.

People generally expect that teachers can spot these children and do something for them. But studies have shown that teachers do not always recognize children who are gifted, even those with academic talent (Parke, 1989). The identification of these students requires an understanding of the requirements of the programme for which they are chosen. If one wants to choose a group of students for an advanced mathematics class, one's approach would be different from if one is looking for students with high aptitude for a creative-writing programme. Specific programme needs and requirements shape the identification process.

Any programme for identifying children who are gifted in a school system should include both subjective and objective methods of evaluation. Classroom behaviour, for example, can point out children's ability to organize and use materials and reveal their potentials for processing information, sometimes better than can a test. Products such as superior essays and term projects, that can be kept in a student's portfolio can serve as an indication of a special gift. A committee of teachers and other specialists can match the child's talents with the special services that are available.

Identifying children who are gifted should be the first step to a differentiated programme. It also can be used to determine eligibility for state financial aid that may provide a subsidy for local programme or to satisfy state or federal guidelines.

### **Gifted Underachievers**

Parents of gifted children are often surprised and dismayed when their children underachieve in school. Gifted children with learning disability are said to have dual exceptionalities and are sometimes called 'twice-exceptional children'. They are difficult to identify because they look like average learners. They are bright enough to compensate for their disability, so even though they are passing, they are working below their potentials, which means they are underachieving.

Amazingly, estimates of students with high ability who do not achieve well are as high as 50% (Hoffman, Wasson and Christianson, 1985; Rimm, 1987). This group represents a large population of talented students who are either underserved or neglected by gifted programmes. If these many talented children are being ignored, it is imperative that the issue be addressed.

At first glance, gifted underachievers seem to have more in common with low achievers than high achievers, namely, low performance in the classroom. The interesting difference that sets the gifted underachiever apart from his or her counterpart, the low achiever, is the ability to score high on standardized achievement tests, which typically assess knowledge that is needed to perform well in the classroom. This discrepancy between ability and achievement is the basic ingredient that a majority of educators use in defining gifted underachievement.

The key to helping an underachiever succeed is understanding the causes of underachievement; some of which are stated below:

1. Students excel to get the reward it brings - good grades and praise. Some children, however, are not motivated by these extrinsic or external rewards. They are intrinsically motivated; the desire to excel must come from within. For this reason, work that is not intellectually challenging is not likely to motivate an intrinsically motivated underachiever. Such gifted children may 'give up'; they may stop caring about learning or at least stop caring about doing work in school.
2. Gifted children are not immune to depression and its effects. They can become depressed by the same issues that can cause depression in all children, for example, divorce. Also family events like frequent changes in jobs and relocation, abuse or alcoholism will likely affect the child's ability to function and achieve.
3. Some parents become over - involved with their gifted child because they are attempting to vicariously relive their own childhood through their children. Often when parents have unmet achievement needs, they push them on to their children. Children whose parents overemphasize performance and achievement are in danger of feeling that their only worth is in what they produce and not in who they are. This often results in a child becoming passive-aggressive. The child can also start to withhold achievement and may become depressed.
4. Modelling is certainly one way that children learn about achieving. If adults talk about the boss in a very negative way, express attitudes like not needing to be on time to the office, or just model a dissatisfaction with work, the message the child gets is that work is not of value. It may be hard for children then to take school seriously.
5. The other kind of parent who can do harm even though well-intentioned is the rescuing parent. Parents who rescue their children from struggling through things in order to learn

how to resolve problems are denying the child the opportunity to learn emotional coping strategies and problem-solving skills; they are also robbing them of a chance to succeed.

6. Some students experience what Schecter (2010) refers to as the big fish- little fish syndrome. In elementary school, they may have been the brightest, but in high school, they may be one of many exceptional students. This readjustment in self-image and self-worth may be difficult for some gifted students to make without some assistance from adults.

### **Counselling and Instructional Interventions**

Butler-Por (1987) as well as Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) have described two categories of interventions aimed at reversing gifted underachievement: counselling and instructional interventions. Counselling interventions attempt to change any personal or family dynamics affecting gifted students' underachievement. Rather than attempting to force gifted students to be more successful, counselling interventions help them decide goals and help reverse any habits that are blocking the road to success.

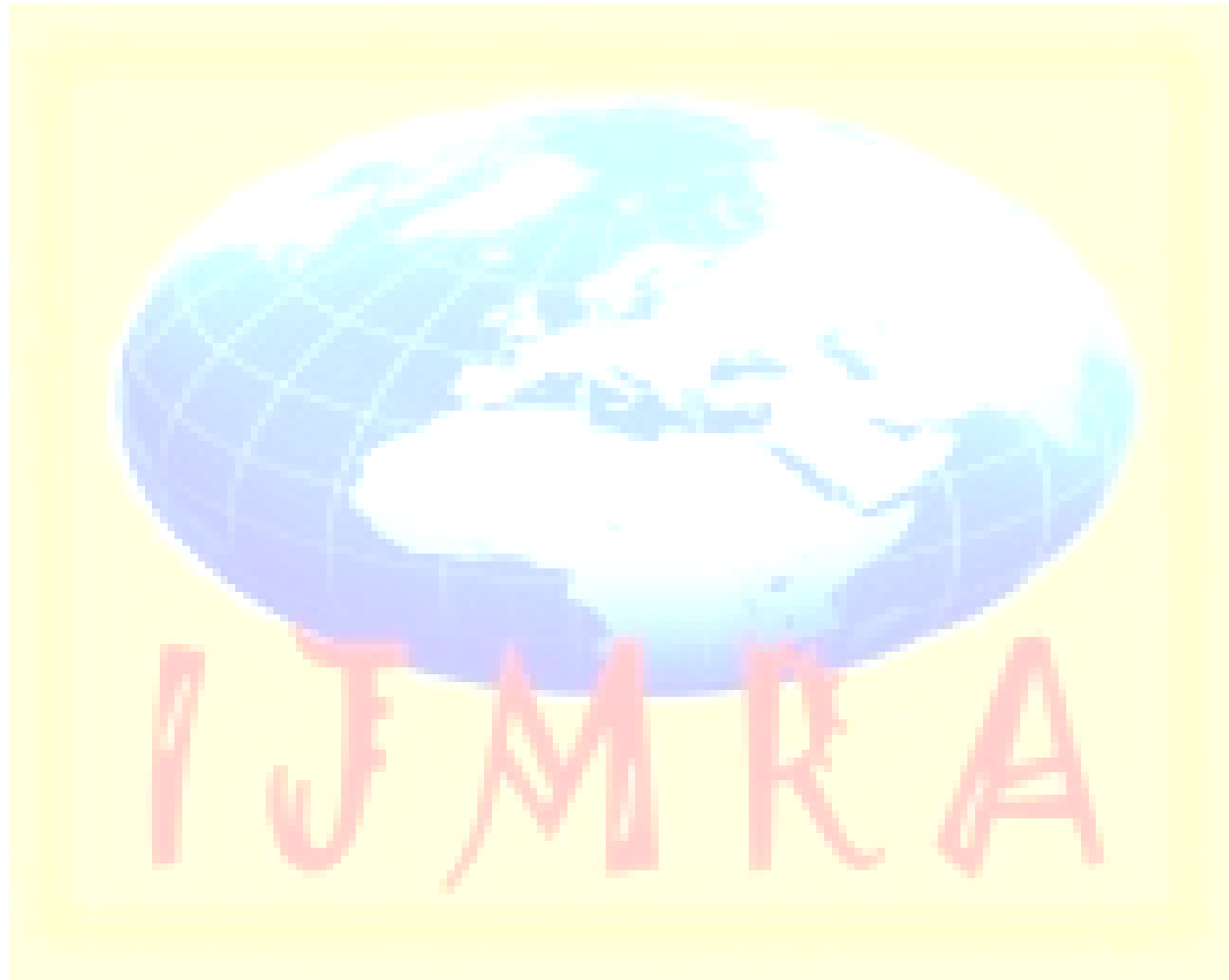
The second category of interventions, which is instructional intervention focuses on special classrooms designed to create a more favourable environment for gifted underachievers. Those classrooms have a small teacher-student ratio and use less conventional approaches to teaching. Students typically have more freedom and control of their own learning. Unfortunately, this strategy has not encountered much success in reversing gifted underachievement. Reasons for lack of success range from educational politics, to difficulty in getting school districts to implement them due to limited time, physical space and resources (Fehrenbach, 1993).

Successful intervention programmes do not let the child be in charge. After all underachieving children have shown their inability to work in their own best interest. However, through successful intervention over time, the child can be invited to be more active as problems and behaviour issues are resolved.

### **What Parents Can Do to Help their Underachieving Gifted Children**

- Children are more likely to be achievers if their parents join together to give the same clear, positive message about school effort and expectations.
- Children can learn appropriate behaviours more easily if they have effective models to imitate.
- If parents overreact to their child's successes and failures, the child is likely to feel either intense pressure to succeed or to despair and be discouraged in dealing with failure. Parents need to control their reactions and not overreact.
- Children feel more tension when they are worrying about their work than when they are doing their work. So it is important to get them involved in doing their work rather than worrying about doing their work.
- Children develop self-confidence and an internal sense of control if they are gradually given more power as they demonstrate increasing maturity and responsibility.
- Children will become achievers if they learn to function in competition. Competition is okay if it is not excessive. It is only excessive competition and pressure that are harmful.
- Children will continue to achieve if they usually see the relationship between the learning process and its outcomes. Children need to see that their effort will lead to something practical.

- What children really need is to be valued for who they are and not for what they produce. They need to be able to explore and be challenged to the limits of their abilities. They need to sample safely different potential identities without significant risk and they need to have appropriate expectations of themselves and others.





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