

Tapping the Potentials of the Gifted in Inclusive Education: Implications to School Improvement in Hong Kong



Alan P. Y Chow

The Department of Educational Policy and Administration
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Phoebe C. W. Chow

Kei Tsun Primary School
The Hong Kong Council of the Church
in China

Helen S. Y. Ku-Yu

Department of Applied Social Sciences
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

The philosophy of ‘education for all’ has laid down the foundation of inclusive education since the last decade. The development of schools with an ‘inclusive’ orientation is the most effective means of improving the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. Hong Kong, keeping in pace with other school systems in the world, is also moving towards the same direction of inclusive education recently. However, it is easy to find indigenous examples of many unmotivated underachieving gifted children who can hardly develop their exceptional or specific potentials to their full, and whose academic performance consistently falls short of expectations in schools. This paper describes several cases of the underachieving gifted, some displaying behavioural problems, some having low self-esteem and being disregarded in schools. Strategies of nurturing the gifted used by individual schools are critically examined and discussed. To conclude, implications to how school can better improve especially in the areas of policy, curriculum planning, and teaching and learning strategies as well as home-school relationship are drawn.

In general, gifted children are regarded as a cluster of youngsters who enjoy superior intellectual abilities with better interpersonal and intrapersonal relations, outstanding academic achievements and improved coping skills (Butler-Por, 1993; Freeman, 1979; Montgomery, 1996; Whitmore, 1980). However, researches also inform us that some able children especially those who suffer from chronic underachievement in their school careers are characterized to be poor in problem solving, vulnerable in social

relations and low in self-esteem (Butler-Por, 1987; Webb, 1993; Whitmore, 1980). For the group of underfunctioning able students, they have brilliant capability but low academic performance which may or may not present a compelling reason for teachers to take an active role in helping them.

This paper briefly outlines a research study, illustrating an example of how gifted underachieving children are being nurtured in the current education system of Hong Kong. What characteristics they have demonstrated and what strategies the schools have been using at both classroom and school levels are also discussed. As a conclusion, implications to school improvement, in terms of policy, curriculum planning, teaching and learning, and home-school cooperation are drawn.

The Methodology

A case study research approach with multiple sources of evidence, looking into five unmotivated underachieving gifted students, studying in three individual mainstream elementary schools, was adopted in the research. The use of multiple sources of evidence allowed us to address the issue of potential problems of construct validity and triangulation in doing so could essentially provide multiple measures of the phenomenon (Yin, 1994). All case students were observed and studied for a year. Apart from the students, other interviews, including the parents, the teachers and their heads, were conducted. All interviews were taped and transcribed. Documents were collected to corroborate with the interview data to assure internal validity and reliability.

Discussion

The Characteristics of the Underachieving Gifted

Adopted Whitmore's (1980) characteristics of able underachievers, a comparison of the five case students can be referred to Table 1 as listed below:

Table 1: A Brief Analysis of the Characteristics of the Five Underachieved Case Students

Case Students Characteristics	School A		School B		School C
	Chan	Lee	Cheung	Wong	Ho
(1) significant discrepancy between quality of oral and written work	√	√	√	√	√
(2) poor daily school work	√	√	√	√	√
(3) dislike of drill and memorization	√	√	√	√	√
(4) superior ability to understand concepts	√	√	√	√	√
(5) persistent dissatisfaction with accomplishments	√	√	√	√	√
(6) dedication to self-selected assignments at home	√	√	√	√	√
(7) avoidance of trying new activities	√				√
(8) low self-esteem	√		√	√	√
(9) aggressive behavior	√				
(10) has a wide range of interests	√	√	√	√	√
(11) resistance to comply with teachers' instructions	√	√	√	√	√
(12) short attention span in classroom learning	√	√	√	√	√
(13) setting unrealistic goals	√	√	√	√	√
(14) difficulty in peer relations	√	√	√		√
(15) poor attitude toward school	√	√	√		
(16) has an external locus of control	√		√	√	√

On the whole, the able underachievers in our sample shared some common characteristics in the checklist as described by Montgomery (1996), like any ordinary gifted children from countries elsewhere. Their strengths included:

- superior ability to understand concepts;
- great dedication to self-selected assignments at home; and
- a wide range of interests.

However, they were weak in areas like:

- a significant discrepancy or a large gap between quality of oral and written work;
- failure to complete or having poor daily school work;
- dislike of drill and memorization;
- persistent dissatisfaction with accomplishments;

- resistance to comply with teachers' instructions;
- short attention span in classroom learning; and
- setting unrealistic goals.

In sum, students observed were in need of great enhancement in acquiring study skills and higher-order thinking skills, establishing healthy self-concepts, repairing or further building up good social relations and making persistent self-reflection on their own behaviour and thoughts.

The Possible Reasons for the Development of Underachievement

Drawn from multiple sources of inquiry, the possible reasons for the development of underachievement might include:

- the underachieving gifted individuals did not gain genuine respect from teachers and they were continuously neglected when comparing with those high achievers in class;
- there had been no differentiated provisions for fulfilling their needs in learning;
- they were studying in a high competitive social climate and both teachers and parents were much more concerned with students' high academic results rather than their learning attitude and their socioemotional needs in their school life;
- both teachers and parents were likely to use extrinsic rewards to motivate students but it seemed that what the gifted children wanted was more intrinsic in nature;
- the school curriculum as well as the whole academic policy were too inflexible and rigid to make room for developing differentiated integrative programmes in both formal and informal curricula;
- Heads and teachers used to pay concern to the overall development of the entire school and pay less attention to the problems of the underachieving gifted;
- there was the predominance of failure syndrome and criticism in the learning culture and those who were underachieving would find themselves more vulnerable;
- the whole teaching and learning process was dominated by adult/teacher control and the unrewarding and unchallenging curriculum further increased the differentiation of the high and low achievers in the school system.

The Teachers' Perceptions and Attitude Towards Gifted Education

In the interviews, the informants seemed to reflect that:

- teachers still held the belief that gifted students could self-manage their study and enhance themselves in an independent and effective fashion and IQ test was regarded as the most and only reliable tool to identify between the gifted and the ungifted;
- teachers were proud to have gifted students with superior cognitive learning capability in their class but they showed worries about their ability to teach them;
- teachers placed high emphasis on classroom management issues and regarded the problems from underachieved individuals as normal classroom behaviours;
- teachers appreciated efforts rather than talents of individual students in their teaching;
- teachers expected that individual students could totally comply to their guidance and framed models;
- teachers traditionally viewed parents as their helpers rather than partners in nurturing the students and paid less seriously on parents' concerns;
- teachers generally viewed reversing the underachievement of the gifted as a kind of remedial service and that was the duty of those assigned colleague(s) with training in special education;
- teachers used to adopt a deficit approach of nurturing the students, rather than investing time and energy in studying how to tap the full potentials of the gifted;
- teachers were reluctant to organize extra learning activities for individual low achieving gifted learners;
- teachers adopted didactic teacher-centred instruction strategies, and pull-out gifted programmes were not common.

The Strategies of Nurturing the Gifted Used by Individual Schools

It was seemingly that teachers of the case schools had deeply entrenched gifted education in the area of special education rather than in the umbrella of quality education for all students. They had very limited knowledge about gifted education and in particular in the endeavour of identifying the gifted individuals. They were also handicapped in handling those unmotivated underachieving gifted students, especially those who were disruptive in class. In their perception, students had outstanding

performance in one or more than one intelligence measures were not at all gifted, not meeting the standards they required. At present, the case schools did not have any overall policy or structured guidelines to educate the able underachievers. Below is a summary of strategies that they were using.

Table 2: A Summary of the Strategies Used in Handling Gifted Underachievers at the Case Schools

School	School A	School B	School C
Gifted provisions			
School policy	no	limited	no
Curriculum planning	no	only some pull-out programmes	no
Teaching and learning strategies	no	Varied among individual teachers, greatly dependent on textbooks	no
Home-school cooperation	limited	moderate	limited

The findings revealed that

- the schools did not have a clear overall policy in gifted education ;
- they seemed not ready to place gifted education as part of their educational goals and incorporate this emphasis into their existing curriculum and school systems;
- the current provisions related to gifted education were rather ad hoc in nature and only initiated by individual vision-driven teachers;
- the personal interest and the devotedness of individual teachers demonstrated in the study varied among schools;
- not all teachers had the capacity to help the gifted individuals;
- the chief stakeholders in the schools were unaware of and inadequate in developing differentiated integrative programmes to cater for the needs of every gifted individual;
- parental nomination was seemingly not highly recognized in the case schools and the present home-school cooperation appeared to be limited.

Implications

It seemed apparently obvious that there had been no systemic policy or adequate intervention in nurturing the gifted students at the case schools. The assumption of ‘education for all’, that no child’s needs are overlooked because of the needs of others, and all children, regardless of ability should have a right to an appropriate education (Eyre, 1997), was not well undertaken. For a reflection, it is crucial for the school personnel to create the necessary conditions to support their school improvement change and to strengthen the whole school capacity to provide quality of all its pupils by building upon existing practices (Hopkins, 2001, 2002). Implications to policy,

curriculum planning, teaching and learning, and home-school relationship discussed below are worth noting:

Policy

As addressed by the government, the mission of education in Hong Kong is to ensure that the education needs of all students are met so that their potential, no matter where they lie in the ability spectrum, can be maximally developed (Education Department, 2000). Therefore, the ethos of tapping the potentials of all students should be made clear to individual school personnel prior to laying down any related policies. At the outset, achieving consensus among colleagues is extremely crucial because “Policy cannot mandate what matters” (McLaughlin, 1990:12). The whole school policy as well as a well-structured development plan, striving to develop all students, including the gifted, the average and the underachievers, should be developed and shared.

Staff work within this policy framework should plan, do and reflect collaboratively in areas like the definitions, the systems for identification and recognition as well as the approach to classroom teaching and learning. At school level, the essence of improving is that schools should accept the reality of a centralized policy context, that can exploit the creativity and synergies existing within the system and build the organizational conditions that support continuous improvement (Hopkins, 2001). At classroom level, teachers are to identify and select students for extension work and enrichment activities in schools. These enrichment and extension activities should be seen as one way of catering for individual learning differences at the upper end of the ability range (ED, 2000). Furthermore, in consideration of the unawareness of the school personnel, government should initiate immediate measures and resources to help them understand the background and philosophy of gifted education, each them how to identify and develop the abilities of children and to work effectively towards reducing academic underachievement in inclusive schools. For a long-term preventive measure, the elements of gifted education should be included in the curriculum of the pre-service teacher training so that novice teachers can be better equipped before graduation.

Curriculum Planning

Even in schools where a policy for all students exists, either regarding the gifted education as an integral or a separate part of the whole curriculum planning, the respect of tapping the potentials of the gifted should be part of the curriculum

planning. For a better education delivery, an effective nomination system of early identifying the more able students is useful to match teachers' work to the pupils' needs. The curriculum therefore should be flexibly planned with extension and enrichment of the core learning contents and an additional pullout programme outside the formal curriculum should be developed. Within the curriculum, the three core elements of high order thinking skills, creativity and personal-social competence should be immersed for all students as the basis for nurturing talents and giftedness among our youngsters (ED, 2000). Hence, a review of strengthening and enhancement of existing curriculum and school activities meeting the needs of all levels of students in every school is recommendable. As continuous improvement, apart from setting up a team of teachers with capacity built overseeing the quality of the specific programme, a constant review of the policy design and its curriculum planning exercise is essential to sustain the momentum, too.

Teaching and Learning Strategies

The conventional definition of 'effective student learning' is commonly equated with a range of test scores or examination results. But to David Hopkins, powerful learning is more than just results and scores. The challenge is to "find ways of raising levels of attainment while at the same time helping students become more powerful learners, by expanding and making articulate their repertoire of learning strategies" (Hopkins, 2001:71). Students in our study appeared to have long been suffering from low self-esteem, poor daily school work and academic results. They even dislike schooling. As a consequence, a strategy for educational change, that focuses on student achievement by modifying classroom practice and adapting the management arrangements within the school to support teaching and learning, is essential. For those exceptionally gifted, unstructured tasks are not motivating or appealing to them. As an implication, teachers should base on the students' learning styles and further develop their own teaching strategies more sensitively and creatively to create challenge in their interactions with the students. Supported by Whitmore (1980), effective learning can take place where emphasis should place on:

- (1) A classroom climate without threat of failure, encouraging freedom of expression;
- (2) Child centred approach;
- (3) Good teacher-pupil relationships; and
- (4) Support of peer group.

However, teaching independently is not as effective as teaching in team. Helping the

gifted underachieving students in reversing their underachievement needs collective effort of genuine collaboration and support among the teaching community.

Home-School Relationship

With reference to the five case students in the study, they were all identified by accidents. Both teachers and parents did not have any prior knowledge about gifted underachievers and they were not aware of the students' potentials. To help the underachieved gifted restore their confidence in learning, Butler-Por, (1993) suggests that the first thing to do is to let them know that they are accepted and respected. It is essential to let teachers know clearly their roles as well as the nature of underachievement and the specific problems of the underachieving gifted. Besides, it is also important to recognize the contribution of parents whose knowledge can better inform curriculum planning and actual teaching delivery. Supportive family environments, as suggested by Webb (1993), can add value to help accelerate the positive development of the gifted underachievers even if they do self-learning independently at home. Moreover, the establishment of a parent-teacher association in most schools of Hong Kong can be a good pre-requisite for successful collaboration between home and school. It is important for schools to make use of this invaluable resource as a collaborative network linking the efforts of both the parents and teachers and which can ultimately enhance the learning outcomes of all students on their school improvement journey.

Conclusion

The case mentioned above is only reflecting the fact that teachers of Hong Kong are still primitive about gifted education provisions in schools. They only regard those students who have high IQ scores of over 130 with assessed evidence and who have highest grades and consistently perform distinctively well in class as gifted children. Those who are the majority, having average academic performance with low profile in learning, or even those who are identified as underachievers are always neglected, even if they might be able underachieving students with great potentials to be tapped. However, its success still depends on a more developed, a more generic approach of an overall policy of inclusive education, in which schools must adapt to meet the needs of children, whereas in integration children must be adapted to meet the needs of schools (Montgomery, 2000). Hence, the developed policy should be agreed by all, led by a vision-driven head, with adequate resources and conditions provided and supported by teachers, parents and all other stakeholders concerned.

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