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Mentoring Young Minds: Responding the Needs of Gifted Children

Jyoti Sharma[1], Ketaki Bapat[2]

[1]Dr. Jyoti Sharma, Associate Professor, Cluster Innovation Centre, University of Delhi

[2]Dr. Ketaki Bapat, Scientist 'E', Office of Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India

Abstract: ***Though there are many talents identification schemes are running at school level in India, yet it has been realized that the term 'talent' needs to be conceptualized more broadly and comprehensively. It is equally important to make clear distinction between Gifted and Talented. Taking note of the issue, Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India initiated an exploratory project to develop indigenous methods to identify gifted children, particularly in Mathematics and Science. The present paper highlights the indigenous methods of identifying gifted children and how their learning needs are met through need based mentoring program.***

Keywords: Gifted; Mentoring

1. Introduction

Giftedness is inherent, unexplored and raw potential which if identified at right age has potential forhigh accomplishment. Footprints of academic giftedness can be traced through the spectrum of behaviors in a stimulating learning environment. Talented Children are those whose abilities have already been translated into achievements and Gifted Children are those whose high levels of innate abilities are not yet demonstrated by high performance(FrancoysGagne of Quabec,1995).

Within the cohort of gifted children, there are huge variations in their learning preferences, choices of subject domain and in their way of thinking. Gifted Education scholars have always asserted the need of specialized services for gifted children to maximize their potentials. (Van Tassel Baska, 1990; Silverman, 1993; Colango, 1997; Reis and Renzulli, 2004) These special needs must be supported with same strength and nurtured properly for the optimization of human resources. There is reasonable support in the field of academia to recognize and acknowledge the unique needs of gifted children.

Challenges in identify traits of giftedness

Large human resource, if identified at right age and nurtured properly can take the country to next level. At the same time, wide spread of cultural, social, linguistic, economical and geographical diversity makes it impossible to adopt any standard criteria to define and identify giftedness (Maitra,2006).The inherent diversity in cultural and social lives of Indian population can be a rich resource to understand developmental profiles of potentially young minds that possess raw intelligence, natural curiosity, surroundings. The development context available to the child must be an important criterion to identify promising young minds.The challenge to identify traits of giftedness lies in selecting/creating meaningful contexts for the target population. As the target population moves along the axis of diversity, it becomes important to select locally driven contexts which can promote diverse responses, ranging from most spontaneous and original response to highly intense and thoughtful response.

National Schemes INSPIRE, KVPY and NTSE

At present, three national level schemes, namely, INSPIRE, KVPY and NTSE, are running to attract students who are academically bright. The three schemes benefit a small number of students every year to pursue their interest in basic science research. Though each scheme has unique mandate and specific provisions but together these are not enough to capture the essence and spark of 'giftedness'.

2. Research Project

Taking note of the issue, Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India initiated an exploratory project to develop indigenous methods to identify gifted children, particularly in Mathematics and Science. It is in this context, to complement the existing schemes of talent identification, the current project rationalizes the need to establish pre-systems of potential identification At initial stage, the project aimed to identify children with advanced potentials in the field of Mathematics and Science for the age group 3-15 years.Three independent researchers, NIAS (National Institute of Advanced Studies- Bangalore), University of Delhi and Agatsya International Foundation – Bangalore headed the project at different locations and opted for independent methodology for identification.

3. Identification

Apart from the assessment of teachers, fellow students, parents and community and others, children from rural background were screened on the basis of other skills/abilities such as analytical skills, interdisciplinary thinking, inquisitiveness and case profiles of the selected learners wereprepared. Three stage screening process based on teachers nomination rating scale psychometric tests along with case profile was developed by NIAS and mentoring to the limited extent was attempted. The research team in Delhi developed a multi-layered and comprehensive model of

identification, named as Developmental Identification and Mentoring Process (DIMP).

DIMP Model and Stages of Identification

DIMP identification process has many unique features. First of all, it is a process of inclusion instead of rejection and all major partners of child's formal learning environment become part of the identification process. It helps to get an unbiased assessment about learning behaviors of a child. Child himself/herself is also become part of the identification process.Once identified as a potential group of students, they are further assessed for their advanced thinking skills in a specially designed mathematics/science context and are open ended.Students think analytically/creatively to answer suchunfamiliar and challenging problems. They are given freedom to answer a problem in as many ways as possible and are encouraged to think out of box, later asked to reflect upon their thought process.

Support through existing systems

KendriyaVidhayalyaSangadhan; Directorate of Education-Delhi State Government; Department of Education-Municipal Corporation of Delhi and many public schools whole heartedly participated in the field trail of the identification process.The well-defined process of identification has been tried out on a sample of more than 20,000 students in various schools of Delhi.Accepting the cause of gifted children, teaching faculty at Cluster Innovation Centre, University of Delhi extended their whole hearted support and readily took over the role of mentors.The support of parents was also overwhelming who took out time to bring their children for mentoring sessions on weekends.

Mentoring

DIMP considered nurturing /mentoring as an integral phase of identification as the interaction between mentor and mentee helps to bring out many hidden traits of their personality which could otherwise remained unnoticed and unexplored. Observations of learning patterns of students and their responses to challenging situations are the tools to understand gifted students. Mentoring was carried out without disturbing the schedule of schools. The adapted approach could successfully mentored students from different social background. The students' responses about the mentoring mentions were encouraging as they mentioned in the feedback responses that mentoring sessions has helped them in concept clarity, providing new thought processes and refining the liking of the particular area. In a way, it is an ongoing effort to maximize the potentials of students and raising the bar for all. The process becomes more and more child centered as one move from one stage to the next stage where one to one mentoring may be beneficial.

Analysis and Outcome

Developmental Identification and Mentoring Process (DIMP) re-emphasizes the fact that giftedness is developmental. Gifted potentials can be transformed into talent, achievement and accomplishments only if it is acknowledged, identified at right age and nurtured with unconditional support.

4. Conclusion

The exploratory project could successfully develop indigenous methods for identifying the gifted children in the age group of 3-15 yrs. DIMP a multi-layered, learner centered identification process can be adopted in diverse learning conditions and can be customized to suit the learning conditions of target group.Project outcomes strongly advocate that once identified,gifted students should be constantly guided, monitored and allowed to grow at their own pace to reach to their maximum potentials.The learning experience of the project should be utilized in developing comprehensive systems of identification and nurturance of highly potentials young minds. More importantly with the support of the existing systems the developed methods couldbe replicated in different states. Existing schemes of talent identification can be made more efficient by broadening the definition of 'talent'. Perhaps bringing out national level policy on gifted education along with synergizing existing systems would be beneficial in shaping the human resources. Setting up gifted education centres at various levels, networking with higher education institutes through National knowledge Network /ICT for the role of mentoring could be explored.

5. Acknowledgment

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