

THE CONCEPTUAL CURRICULUM

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One of the most interesting challenges involved in developing a genuinely effective programme for gifted learners lies in finding an answer to the question, "What shall we teach them?"

Given that we were consciously seeking in the One Day School to take a child-centred approach, the most natural response to this question might therefore seem to be to teach to the child's own interests. For gifted learners, when "interests" become "passions", the self-sustaining drive to explore the topic thus generated is immensely powerful, firing a learning energy which can take children to truly astonishing, levels of knowledge, understanding and performance.

Finding a way to tap into this energy has to be an aim for any gifted programme. But leaving aside for the moment the at times awe-inspiring problem of how to select between the sometimes mutually exclusive interests of 15 passionate gifted children in a One Day School class, the most serious difficulty inherent in this approach is that it can result in a curriculum unacceptably narrow in scope and is at risk of becoming that "potpourri of activities that are disjointed and haphazardly selected" against which Clark has so cogently warned us (Clark, Barbara. *Growing Up Gifted*. 3rd Ed. Merrill, 1988). We must ensure that there is some coherent structure to what children learn, some overarching educationally and ethically valid philosophy driving the selection of material so that children do encounter all the ideas and concepts and experiences relevant to their needs and essential to their full development.

The National Curriculum Framework does very admirably allow and indeed encourage teachers to permit same-age children to work at different levels according to their abilities. This is a very important provision. But it does not guarantee that there will be any *differentiation* of a curriculum to suit the needs of the gifted learner: it may involve no more than simple acceleration. By itself, this is not enough. In planning a curriculum for the gifted we must take into account what research has to tell us about *how* gifted children think and *how* they learn. Finally, there is another issue for the One Day School and for all programmes involving children on a part-time basis: since we cannot in any event cover the whole curriculum in this time frame, on what basis do we select those topics we do put forward for the children to study? Even if we use the National Curriculum framework as our starting point, how do we choose?

In short we're back there again: WHAT do we teach?

When the One Day School first opened, the temptation was to move immediately to establish some sort of curriculum guideline to help answer this question. But I think that any attempt to create a specific curriculum at that very early stage would have been premature, capturing our assumptions before they had been tested against children's responses. So we held back, waiting instead to observe and evaluate children's

responses to a range of learning experiences, and comparing our observations with research findings in this field. From this process has emerged the notion of a "conceptual curriculum".

WHAT IS THE CONCEPTUAL CURRICULUM?

In one sense it is first and foremost an APPROACH to curriculum, focussing on the observation that, whatever their specific area or areas of ability, gifted learners are characteristically more able to grasp underlying principles and abstract ideas: indeed they seem to have an intense drive to do so. They are inherently conceptual thinkers, seeking to find meaning and purpose in what they study, to perceive relationships and patterns, to discover cause and effect. Thus they are likely to find intolerably unsatisfying learning which involves primarily the acquisition of skills without relation to a clear purpose, an emphasis on facts in preference to issues, a valuing of derived over original thought or the encouragement of passive acceptance rather than active engagement.

We have frequently found these kinds of responses in children entering the One Day School programme. The standard curriculum appears to be experienced by these children as operating on a strictly lock-step basis with little emphasis on considering underlying concepts or issues. It is there in theory, but as far as these children are concerned, often does not seem to be there in practice.

Thus, for example, many of the children coming into One Day School express an intense interest in "science" but have little or no idea of what science is and often tell us they "don't have science at school". Similarly many come in profoundly fed up with doing basic skills in maths, thinking that that is what maths IS, and that maths is boring.

Our concern is to turn this around and to help gifted children discover meaning and relevance in learning by guiding them towards and allowing them to explore the conceptual understandings which underpin the various topics they study.

We had started this process at the beginning of the One Day School programme when the one decision we did make on curriculum was to treat every selected topic thematically. We felt that a thematic approach related best to the learning styles of gifted children. Such an approach allowed the children the space and time needed to work in depth on a topic. It helped provide for children bringing different passions and different areas of ability to the programme. Very importantly, it allowed us to demonstrate the links between different realms of knowledge and performance and in the process encouraged the development of respect for different perspectives and opinions and supported children in developing cooperative partnership skills. While this type of learning did not neglect the acquisition of skills or content - if anything this was enhanced - we felt that in its depth and range it was far more appropriate and effective for the gifted child.

Coincidentally and very helpfully, an article by Tracy Riley on this very

subject appeared in *Tall Poppies* (Vol. 21, No.2, 1996) just one month after One Day School opened, in which she presented an extremely strong case for the use of conceptual themes to meet the needs of gifted children. Riley described such themes as a "natural outgrowth" of the principles of curriculum differentiation for the gifted.

Working with conceptual themes thus seems to provide an effective and satisfying approach to working with gifted students. Eventually, however, one comes inevitably back to the question, WHICH themes? Riley provided a list of almost 50, all indisputably relevant and valuable and all capable of being revisited an infinite number of times in relation to an infinite number of topics. But are they equally important? Or is there some hierarchy of understandings?

In his last great series of papers, (*Towards The Aesthetic Road*) 1975-84), George Parkyn pointed out that our education system has concentrated almost exclusively on the supposedly measurable and quantifiable scientific-rational way of knowing. He saw clearly the dangers of this and in particular of technology developed without reference to the dimensions of feelings and ethics. As early as 1975, he was writing, "Our very survival depends upon a new concern with the quality of human life in its relationship to the finite world we inhabit." (p.6).

Numerous other writers in many fields have since recognised the importance of these ideas. During the '90's, the concept of developing a "global awareness" of the world and its inhabitants has increasingly been seen as highly significant in gifted education. The question was, could we now evolve a curriculum guideline drawing on these ideas which would be real and meaningful for children as young as six? Towards the end of 1999, I asked teachers at the One Day School to consider a draft of a "conceptual curriculum". (See end of article).

Very deliberately this opens with a reference to the "renaissance child". The Renaissance Man was a cultured person, someone expected to be both well informed and interested in all spheres of knowledge, including both the sciences and the arts. With the growth of knowledge, and the speed of invention and discovery during the past century, we have become a race of specialists, often neither aware of nor interested in others' specialties or of the impact of one on the other. The concept of global awareness reminds us that this cannot continue and that we must re-assert the interdependence of our various spheres of knowledge. The Renaissance Man (and Renaissance Woman) must re-emerge in a new and deeper sense.

Thus the particular themes included at this stage range across the major spheres of knowledge and allow for the use of the specific conceptual themes referred to by Riley. They reflect also some of the specific issues of understanding we have encountered in working with gifted children, for example in relation to maths and science.

The process begins with the selection of the topics or themes that are to

be considered. The selected topic or theme then has to be examined by the teacher during the lesson planning stage for its *purpose*: why are we teaching this? What is its significance for children's learning? What issues does it raise? What are the concepts that are necessary to achieve depth of understanding in relation to this topic or theme? How does it link with other topics or themes that have been studied? And so on.

Process is also modified first by the elimination of unnecessary practice: skills and some concepts are developed through use and application rather than practice by rote. Children actively engage in experimentation, observation, enquiry and demonstration; there is more use of discussion and debate, both to provide challenge and to encourage reflection. Original research, as opposed to reference research, is encouraged. Children move freely in and out of individual work and collaborative work. Children make choices and take decisions at significant points in the learning process.

Encouragement of original rather than reproductive work together with whatever we can achieve for real outcomes means modification of product too. Wall displays at One Day School do not consist of fifteen beautifully cloned reproductions of the same item, but of perhaps six or seven highly individual pieces, possibly in completely different media, with others having gone home because the child producer felt they were too precious to be left behind or because sharing with those at home had priority, and with some not going up because the child producer had decided the work did not meet his or her criteria well enough or because the producer recognised the work was not yet complete. This process is part of "real outcomes" too.

Finally the successful use of such an approach is very dependant on the creation of a learning environment characterised by acceptance, respect, open-endedness, flexibility, risk-taking, excitement and reflection. We call this an "invitational" environment to signal that it should proactively encourage children to respond in these kinds of ways.

The notion of a conceptual curriculum for gifted students at primary level is one that seems to us to hold promise for interesting further development not only for One Day School but for classroom work with gifted learners too.

THE CONCEPTUAL CURRICULUM: A FIRST DRAFT

- **The gifted child: the renaissance child?**
- **An understanding of the concept of science:**
 - The role science plays in our lives;
 - The scientific process;
 - Lives of scientists as role models;
 - The morality of science; scientific responsibility.
- **Perceptions about maths;**

- The "realness" of maths - its role in our lives;
 - Maths as a way of thinking;
 - Discovering that maths is enjoyable;
 - Lives of mathematicians.
- **The geography of the world:**
 - Knowing where places are;
 - How do we come to know about the world?
 - Exploration, the history of maps and map-making, map-reading and map-making skills;
 - Understanding how geography impacts on life;
 - Conservation, human use of the earth's resources;
 - The lives of geographers and explorers.
- **How does change happen in the world?**
 - Why isn't everything the same as it was a hundred or a thousand years ago?
 - Looking at real changes in society: analysing causes and processes, evaluating consequences, developing an understanding of how change happens;
 - Looking at the impact of the individual - real situations;
 - Achieving an awareness and an acceptance that each human being CAN make a difference;
 - Integrating this with their vision of their own future life roles.
- **How human beings survive in the world:**
 - The history of human beings;
 - Early humans;
 - A knowledge of what civilisation is;
 - A knowledge of previous civilisations
 - How previous civilisations are linked to ours;
 - The lives of historians, archaeologists, etc.
- **How human beings live together:**
 - The concept of community;
 - The concept of a city;
 - The concept of a nation and the concept of a state;
 - The global village;
 - When people live together, what has to be organised? Who makes the decisions? How?
 - Political systems;
 - Education, welfare, health, trade, economics.
- **How do humans share ideas? Feelings?**
 - The role of language;
 - The history of language;
 - The structure and use of language - skills in using this tool;
 - Non-verbal language: the role of the arts;
 - The lives of artists, writers, journalists.

- **How can we make sure changes are good?**
 - What is "good"? Philosophy for children;
 - Achieving a concept of personal responsibility;
 - Developing empathy for others (people and other life forms);
 - Exploring concepts of leadership.