
Is Gifted Education a Necessary Ingredient in Creating a Level Playing Field for Indigenous Children in Education?¹

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The generally below average academic outcomes for Indigenous children in Australian schools is well documented. In recent years substantial monies have been provided to help reverse this trend, with little effect. What has this to do with gifted education? The fact is that academically gifted Indigenous children have been a major part of the overall academic underachievement of Indigenous children. Gifted Indigenous children have been grossly under-represented in programs for the gifted (Braggett, 1985; Chaffey, 2002; Taylor, 1998) while evidence is emerging that the gifted cohort are underachieving to a far greater degree than the rest of the Indigenous population. This trend is also reflected in a sample of Canadian Indigenous children (Chaffey, McCluskey, & Halliwell, 2005).

Indigenous children are under-represented in programs for the gifted for a number of reasons. Firstly, many of the brightest Indigenous children are grossly underachieving in the school setting (Chaffey, 2002; Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003) making it highly unlikely they would be identified through teacher-centred methods. Further, many of these gifted children are 'invisible' underachievers (Chaffey, 2002). This makes most identification methods unreliable for these children as they actually underachieve on normally reliable quantitative identification methods. Another factor relates to the issue of involuntary minority status (Ogbu, 1994). Involuntary minorities have been placed in long-term subordinate positions as a result of colonisation, conquest, or slavery (Ogbu, 1994). Involuntary minority status peoples often experience powerful cultural group affiliation versus academic performance pressures (forced-choice dilemma, Gross, 1989) and oppositional behaviours to education (Ford, 1996). For academically able Indigenous students the dilemma is clear: should the students 'act white' and risk alienation from their cultural peers or retain peer acceptance and shun academic excellence (Ogbu, 1994; Colangelo, 2002). For most Indigenous children the answer is simple as community is a most powerful force in their lives.

The solution to providing appropriate gifted education programs for Indigenous children lies in addressing the two key issues discussed above. Firstly, identification:

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any identification method must be able to move through the considerable talent masks most gifted Indigenous children, knowingly or unknowingly, employ. This method must assess learning potential rather than current achievement levels, as many of the children are academic underachievers (Chaffey, 2002; Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003). Secondly provision: most existing mainstream programs for the gifted are not suitable for Indigenous children as many gifted Indigenous children are academic underachievers with substantial academic skill gaps and socio-emotional inhibitors to academic engagement. The small achieving cohort of gifted Indigenous children is also highly susceptible to socio-emotional forces that would lessen their chances of successfully engaging in mainstream gifted programs (Chaffey, 2002). Any provision model that hopes to effectively cater for these children must first address the academic underachievement and overcome the raft of socio-emotional barriers that so often act as talent masks.

Then over time, as socio-emotional barriers fall, as academic self-efficacy grows, and as skill gaps diminish many of these children will be ready, socio-emotionally and cognitively, to successfully engage in mainstream gifted programs.

Now to the question 'Is gifted education a necessary ingredient in creating a level playing field for Indigenous children in education?' I would answer strongly 'yes!'

I hold this view due to the fact that, fundamentally, gifted education is based on what high ability children can do, an approach diametrically opposed to the largely deficit based approaches that too often have dominated Indigenous education. Gifted education focuses on high achievement and working to one's potential. Deficit models emphasise remedial approaches with little focus on children with high learning potential. Historically, Indigenous education has been dominated by deficit model approaches.

The establishment of suitable gifted education programs for Indigenous children could impact on the educational setting of Indigenous children in the following ways:

1. Enhanced teacher and school expectations

The impact of teacher expectations, especially on children from low SES and some cultural minority backgrounds, is well documented. A cohort of academically-engaged gifted Indigenous students should enhance overall teacher expectations of academic success for these students. Further, evidence is emerging from a number of programs that teacher expectation regarding Indigenous students is often generally enhanced as teachers view all Indigenous students through a different lens. This outcome will be enhanced if the gifted program contains a teacher professional development component that reveals factors that contribute to underachievement for these children and provides appropriate pedagogy to help reverse underachievement.

2. Role modelling for peers / siblings

The establishment of a cohort of academically achieving gifted Indigenous students will impact positively on other Indigenous students in a vicarious manner. The general absence of peer academic role models is part of a cycle of underachievement that can be broken by the emergence of a gifted cohort.

3. Indigenous community

The existence of a cohort of academically achieving gifted Indigenous students has the potential to help remove the shadow of generations of poor academic outcomes for most Indigenous communities. Involuntary minority status issues are the result of exclusion and can only be overcome by genuine inclusive outcomes. A genuine gifted education program does this in the education setting.

The emergence of an academically achieving gifted Indigenous cohort can positively influence most of the Indigenous students in schools. If the less academically able cohort dominates thoughts and provision, the malleable middle will move downwards and the children with high learning potential will largely disappear into the middle and become 'invisible' underachievers. That is what we too often currently see. If the children with high learning potential dominate thoughts and provision I suggest it is possible to reverse the current unacceptable situation.

Conclusion

Gifted education has the potential to contribute greatly to the emergence of equitable educational outcomes for all Indigenous students. However, I suggest it will be difficult to shift the current lamentable position if a gifted cohort does not emerge. The expectations of schools, teachers, Indigenous communities and the students themselves toward educational outcomes can be positively influenced. Without this the best of plans may be in vain.

A word of caution: The academic underachievement and 'invisible' underachiever status of many academically gifted Indigenous children means successful inclusion in traditional gifted education provision is unlikely. Suitable identification methods and provision must seek, first, to reverse underachievement from both the socio-emotional and cognitive perspectives.

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