

Improving Strategies for Educating Gifted Children in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper discussed strategies for educating children with intellectual superiority in Nigeria. Man has always recognized that the progress and advancement of a society depends on the genius, creativity and contribution of a few of its members. This paper probed into the meaning of the phrase “gifted children.” The paper looked at the Nigerian National Policy on the education of gifted children; strategies for educating the gifted which amongst others include compacting and differentiating the curriculum and providing enrichment activities; allowing students to pursue independent projects based on their own individual interests; interactive teaching; team teaching, collaboration, and consultation with other teachers; extracurricular activity and competitive outing; addressing the counseling needs of each student to support emotional growth as needed; and the need for the teacher to establish and maintain a warm, accepting classroom. The paper found the inadequate blueprint on the education of the gifted in Nigeria and the lukewarm attitude of the society to the idea of giftedness as key challenges. The paper concluded that the education of the gifted should be given adequate attention in view of their well acknowledged capabilities when developed and the strategies put forward in this paper are the surest ways of doing this.

Keywords: Improving, Strategies, Educating, Gifted, Children, Nigeria.

Introduction

Education means equipping the individual to be a functional member of his community. Mu'azu (2006) described education as the consciously planned and systematically applied formal training, carried on through the various social agencies especially the school. Special education is meant to make provisions for the special needs of special children so that their education potentials can be realized. It is a matter of necessity to provide sound and qualitative education for the citizenry in any society, be they normal, handicapped, gifted and talented (Omede, 2005).

Over the years, education of exceptional persons has suffered a lot of neglect basically because the society does not recognize that they have the capacity to withstand the rigour of formal education. In contrast to this challenge of mainstream special needs education, the problems associated with giftedness are mostly external in nature and are caused by the lack of acceptance and understanding of giftedness in the society (Salaudeen, 2010). The gifted child's general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative and productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability were greatly undermined in various communities. The education of gifted children began in Nigeria in 1985 when the Suleja Academy School for the Gifted was established. The establishment sparked off a chain of events culminating in conducting census of the gifted and talented children in Nigeria. This exercise gave room to form an educational institute to accommodate the gifted individual and at the same time train teachers to specialize in the area of gifted education to enable them provide educational services that will meet the needs of the gifted youngsters.

The teachers of the gifted children are charged with the responsibility of using various strategies in enhancing the educational accomplishments of gifted children in the context of the Nigerians system of education. This could be done in special or inclusive school settings using conventional teaching methods such as preparation and delivery of lesson notes and assigning home works to the students. However, with the perennial under achievement of gifted children, it becomes necessary for teachers of these unique set of children not just to go an extra mile to improve on conventional strategies and adopt unique and improved strategies in teaching them but to appraise the various simulations and role playing activities which the gifted can observe in an attempt to have a better understanding of his or her concerns, psychosocial behaviour and feelings. For the purpose of gifted education, emphasis must be on practical as much as theory. The thrust of this paper shall be to propose certain improvements to existing teaching strategies or even provide entirely new strategies which have been effectively utilized in other concrete.

Who are the Gifted Children?

Man has always recognized that the progress and advancement of a society depends on the genius, creativity and contribution of a few of its members. According to Okwudire & Ugbong (2009), there is no one single definition accepted totally to be the best, because there is no typical gifted child. According to the authors what is regarded as gifted depends on societal values and the child's particular talents. The writers see the gifted as those individuals who, by way of having certain learning characteristics such as superior memory, observational

powers, curiosity, creativity, and the ability to learn school-related subject matters rapidly and accurately with a minimum of drill and repetition, have rights to an education that is differentiated according to those characteristics.

In view of the above Winzen (2003) perceives giftedness in two perspectives, that is, as a potential and as the actual product of the outstanding work. Winzen noted that when giftedness-as-potential is used, usually this indicates a cut-off point on intelligent test of IQ as between 120 and 140. If giftedness-as-product is used, there is less importance attached to IQ but puts on trial the attributes of the person and their potential value to society.

Due to their superior intelligence, gifted children may know much of what the teacher is about to teach and they can learn new material in much less time than their peers. They show very clear signs of superior ability and intelligence, learn very rapidly and display knowledge of many things at a surprisingly high level of competence for their age and expected experience (Obani, 2004). This is why Okyere & Adams (2003) say the gifted child in school should be catered for early in their school lives so that as adults, they will be able to be creative in their chosen fields. These children require different educational programmes beyond those normally provided by the regular school programmes in order to realize their contribution to selves and society.

According to Fakolade & Archibong (2006) Giftedness should not be defined by separate categories, every aspect of personality and development influences and interacts with every other aspect. To them, giftedness should be examined as a construct that impacts on personality. Okyere & Adams (2003) use the phrase "outstanding talent" to describe the gifted. These children exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative and or artistic areas, possessing unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields (Okwudire & Ugbong, 2009).

The National Policy on Education

Special education is a formal special education training given to people (children and adult) with special needs. This group of people may be classified into three categories:

1. The disabled
2. The disadvantaged
3. The gifted and talented (FRN, 2004).

The National Policy on Education (2004) further explains that the gifted and talented are people (children and adults) who have/possess very high intelligent quotient and are naturally endowed with special traits (in arts, creativity, music, leadership, intellectual precocity, etc.) And therefore find themselves insufficiently challenged by the regular school/college/university programmes.

The aims and objective of special education are to:

- a. Give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children, their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities notwithstanding;
- b. Provide adequate education for all people with special needs in order that they may fully contribute their own quota to the development of the nation;
- c. Provide opportunities for exceptionally gifted and talented children to develop their talents, natural endowments/traits at their own pace in the interest of the nation's economic and technological development; and
- d. Design a diversified and appropriate curriculum for all the beneficiaries.

Looking at the above provisions it is clear that gifted children need to be provided with opportunity to develop at their own pace. What is rather not too clear is how the government intends to actualize this goal. The FRN (2004) did not elaborate on the salient strategies for educating the gifted children and in fact falls short on giving any clue in that regard. To this end, this paper shall dwell on the exposition of the various strategies, complementary or alternatives, for educating the gifted.

Strategies for Educating the Gifted Child

It is estimated that students who are gifted and highly talented encompass 5 to 15% of the school age population according to Adelodun (2010), the National Planning Committee on Education for the Gifted and Talented Children stated that the target population anticipated for a take-off of the programme in 1987 was 5% of total primary school population. Although this population may be negligible; their contribution to national growth and development is inestimable. It is on the basis of their contribution that strategies for their education should be improved. The following strategies are hereby put forward:

- 1. Compacting and Differentiating the Curriculum and Providing Enrichment Activities:** Compacting means condensing a semester or year's worth of learning in a shorter time period (Winebrenner, 2001). Differentiation means providing gifted children with different tasks and activities than their age peers-tasks that lead to real learning for them. There are five elements of differentiation: content, process, product, environment, and assessment (Winebrenner, 2001).

In teaching the gifted, it is necessary to provide environment that is stimulating, and address cognitive, physical, emotional, and social needs of gifted children in the curriculum. Callahan (1997) noted that the teachers must let the students move quickly through the required curriculum content and onto more advanced material. In other words, there should be allowance for academic rigor. In doing this, it is desirable to differentiate the curriculum in order to address differences in the rate, depth, and pace of learning. This will enable all students in the class to learn about a specific area by creating projects at their own ability level. If gifted children are not challenged by curriculum early in their school lives, they will equate smart and easy, and challenge and hard work may be threatening to their self-esteem. They will become perfectionists and avoid challenges, or they will search for easy-way-out solutions, such as avoiding handing in assignments, procrastination, and disorganization for fear conscientious work may reveal they are not as smart as they are assumed to be (Winebrenner, 2001).

The teacher needs learn to take advantage of real-life experiences that can be translated into problem-solving academics for all students and this should be given priority in their curriculum. Ultimately, it is important to engage gifted students in the curriculum decision-making process, giving them an opportunity to learn how to take responsibility for their own learning.

2. Allowing Students to Pursue Independent Projects Based on their own Individual Interests:

Independent projects can be assigned on the basis of ability level. The teacher must encourage creativity and original thinking among gifted students by allowing them to explore ways of connecting unrelated issues in creative ways. Gifted students should be guided in creating their own goals and set goals that are specific, measurable, aggressive, realistic, and within a reasonable time frame. For instance, the teacher may allow gifted children to create and publish a class newspaper to distribute. This consists of assisting students in understanding their special capabilities and the training necessary for them to reach their full potentials. The teacher however should be mindful not to place expectations that are too high or too low. To help children learn the value of attaining knowledge in their lives, learning should be encouraged for its own sake, rather than emphasizing the end result or accomplishments (Taylor, 2003). Thus, the need to teach research skills for accessing information; higher level thinking skills for processing it; creative thinking and problem-solving skills for flexibility in approach and generation of information; and communication skills for sharing it become imperative.

3. Interactive Teaching: Having students work together, teach one another, and actively participate in their own and tier classmates' education is a very useful and productive strategy. This does not *ipso facto* advocate gifted children being peer tutors in the classroom; rather the gifted student should be challenged as well. Winebrenner (2001) rightly posits that the yearning for learning is stifled for children who sit in classrooms surrounded by lessons they could easily teach the rest of the class. Instead, these gifted children become defensive, angry, passive, bored, and resentful. The emphasis should be on working together in the classroom. One way of doing this is to cluster gifted children together at a table within the regular classroom and utilize advanced materials, as well as other suggested resources and modification, to meet their exceptional needs (Heward, 2009). Allowing open forums and debates in the classroom about controversial issues will go a long way to broaden their horizon. Equally important is the need to provide plenty of opportunities for gifted children and average children to engage in social activities. Some gifted children may need help in developing social skills.

4. Team Teaching, Collaboration, and Consultation with other Teachers: A teacher of gifted children requires specialized training to ensure the ability to meet their needs. Occasionally, he may need to use the knowledge, skills, and support of other educators or professionals in the schools in educating these children. For instance if a child attends resource room, the teacher must communicate with the specialist for suggestions on how to enrich daily class work. The teacher should organize resources in order to free himself to work with individual children and give the children greater control of the learning situation. Supplementary books and learning tools, community resources, and the use of community members with specific skills as mentors can be helpful.

5. Extracurricular Activity and Competitive Outings: Gifted children should be made to participate in extracurricular activities that involve academic skills. They should be provided opportunities to interact with other gifted children across grade levels and schools through competitions or collaborative projects. Examples include mathematics and debate teams. Because gifted children are often natural leaders, it is important to invite them to use their talents and abilities to the benefit of others rather than in disruptive manners. For example, encourage the gifted student to run for office in student council, or another extracurricular activity in which he/she is involved (National Association for Gifted Students, 2012).

Gifted students tend to be competitive in nature. Therefore, participating in regional and national competitions such as spelling bees, science fairs, and essay competitions will be fun challenges.

6. Addressing the Counselling Needs of each Student to Support Emotional Growth as Needed: Winner (1996) in highlighting the realities of giftedness observed that some gifted students have issues regarding

anger, boredom, bullying, delinquency, isolation, depression, peer relations, perfectionism, dropping out of school, stress, frustration, and underachievement. About 20 – 25% of gifted students have emotional difficulties (Teachers First, 2012). Gifted children are similar in many ways to the average child in the classroom. As such, it is essential not to place unrealistic expectations and pressures on them. They may be ahead of other students in some areas and behind in some areas. Hence, awareness of the strengths and weakness of gifted children in class is key to effective teaching. Failure to do this, especially to note their weaknesses, is unfair and frustrating to them.

Often times, parental input about the education of their gifted children will have to be sought. The issue, more often than not, is the failure of parents of gifted children to identify the exceptional nature of their wards. At other times, parents may realize their child's giftedness, but remain cloudless on how to maximize the child's ability. In these instances, counseling parents of gifted children is as important as counseling the gifted themselves.

7. The Need for the Teacher to Establish and Maintain a Warm and Accepting Classroom: The classroom community should be groomed to embrace diversity and honour differences. The teacher should provide an environment in which the child can demonstrate his or her potential or aptitude to learn and perform. Teachers should strive to establish a non-competitive, individualized, and open classroom, which allows all students to advance at their own rate of learning.

At the same time, the teacher should try to find fact the joy and uniqueness in each child. Children may exhibit their gifts on non-typical levels, rather than in general intellectual aptitude of specific academic abilities. He must keep in mind that every child has different needs.

Challenges of Educating Gifted Children in Nigeria

Gifted education has experienced series of setbacks in many countries of the world. In Nigerian, initial proposals on gifted education met with criticisms of elitism and diversion of scarce educational resources to the benefit of children of the well-educated (Fakolade & Archibong, 2006). 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 scheme to cater for a sort of educational apartheid in Nigeria (Ifede, 1986). Many teachers and parents believe that there is no need to do anything special for gifted children. After all, they reason, most gifted students get good grades. They do just fine without extra help or attention. Debunking this notion, Winebrenner (2001) using a scale of poor, average and gifted learners argued that the level, pacing, amount and type of learning activities that benefit the average learners are as inappropriate for them (gifted children) as they are for students who are working significantly below grade-level expectations. In this case, if the school cannot be accused of elitism for assisting the underachievers', logically, it cannot for catering of the need of the gifted.

Another challenge of the education of gifted children in Nigerian lies in the inadequacies of the Blue Print on Education of the Gifted and Talented Person. First, the National Planning Committee on Education of the Gifted and Talented Children 1986 and later amended in 1999 perceived giftedness mainly in terms of high intellectual performance (Adelodun, 2010). While enumerating the characteristics of gifted children, the National Planning Committee said giftedness usually manifests itself in exceptional academic ability. To equate giftedness with high intellectual performance is to present the committee as being myopic in their way of viewing giftedness. According to Nwazuoke (1995), if this is taken, children whose giftedness may be expressed in talent fields other than academic have been screened off.

As regards the issue of resources, the National Planning Committee stated in the blueprint that the successful implementation of the education of gifted children in Nigerian, given its envisaged great magnitude and high quality, demands the availability of well-trained professional crops of teachers to develop, administer and evaluate the scheme. The committee went further to state that such professionals would be needed to teach in schools where the gifted education programmes are being run at local, state and federal levels while those in the Ministries of Education will be responsible for administration, training, curriculum development, staff development, evaluation and other relevant field assignments. In this regard, the National Planning Committee failed to realize that to just advocate for the availability of a well-trained professional personnel is not enough. The committee ought to have gone a little bit further to state the minimum qualifications expected of people to be referred to as well-trained professional crops of teachers (Adelodun, 2010). This will enable a clearer understanding of the category of people referred to as "well-trained."

Another inadequacy observed in the blueprint and a challenge to the education of the gifted is the recommendations made by the committee that the curricular for the gifted programme be similar to those provided in the 6-3-3-4 system of education. One would have expected the committee to advocate for the use of a unique curriculum for the gifted and talented persons. This becomes very necessary because there is a need for the self-actualization of these intellectual giants and there is also a need for their potentials to be fully tapped through a carefully adapted unique curriculum. In a recent article in one of the major newspapers, a writer alluded to a Prof. Ayodele Awojobi who was allowed to complete a 4 – years engineering course in 3 years at

the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria due to his exceptional intellectual ability (Aliyu, 2012).

On the issue of scholarship scheme for gifted children, the committee, in the blueprint, recommended that the local government should provide free education to the top 5% (gifted) children in a state and that the federal government should provide an appropriate education to the top 5% (gifted) children on a country-wide basis. Similar to the above is the issue of finance and control. The blueprint recommended that the financial responsibilities of the gifted programme be shared by the three tiers of government. The blueprint did not think, of private partnership. As rightly observed by Adelodun (2010), considering the fact that the financial implications of running a gifted education programme are far reaching, one would have expected the committee to recommend that both the public and private sectors should join hands with the three tiers of government in its funding.

Under implementation of the programme, the committee recommended the calibre of teachers that could stretch the gifted children to the highest cognitive level possible and who would encourage them to be explorative and experimental. According to the committee, teachers with very long teaching experience may not be tolerant enough of the sometimes erratic learning behaviours of the gifted, while inexperienced teacher may not be able to handle the very flexible, individualized curricular and management techniques that operate in a class for the gifted. The committee therefore recommended that knowledgeable teachers with 5 to 10 years teaching experience be selected and given short intensive courses to start off the programme. One wonders why the committee should prefer teachers with must 5 to 10 years teaching experience to those teachers with very long teaching experiences since it is often said that experience is the best teacher. Furthermore, it is not clear the parameter the committee would use to measure how “knowledgeable” a teacher is when a recommendation was made that only knowledgeable ones are selected.

Conclusion

Gifted children occupy an important position in our country’s quest for economic and technological development. To this extent, a thought of underachieving gifted children is a thought of an underachieving nation as this target class have been shown to be the propellers innovations and technological breakthroughs such as scientific inventions in medicine, engineering and the arts. In the light of this, it is important that our educational system should be positioned to maximize the potentials of gifted children. A veritable means of doing this is through the contrivance of effective strategies for teaching gifted children. Once these strategies are identified and properly applied, the fortunes of gifted children and that of the nation are bound to rise.

Recommendations

In order to surmount the challenges identified in this paper, the following recommendations have been put forward:

There is need for the government to sensitize the populace about the need to give adequate attention to the education of its gifted and talented citizens as innovations within a nation’s economy depend largely on this class of persons. Accordingly, the notion of gifted education as an elitist scheme should be erased.

The myopic construction of giftedness strictly as high intellectual performance in the Blue Print on Education of the Gifted and Talented Parsons should be altered to accommodate children whose giftedness may be expressed in talent fields other than academic.

The Ministries of Education at all tiers of government in discharging the responsibilities of administration, training, curriculum development, staff development should clearly define the minimum qualifications expected of people to be referred to as well-training professional crops of teachers.

Gifted and talented children should not be enslaved to the general 6-3-3-4 or 9-3-4 (UBE Scheme) system of education currently practiced in Nigerian. Where necessary, a unique curriculum well suited to their self-actualization should be adopted.

In order to boost funding for gifted education and make available scholarships for more gifted and talented children, efforts should be made by the government to partner with the private sector to generate more revenue.

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