

Social and Emotional Issues of Gifted Young Children

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Introduction

Of all definitions on gifted children, Cathie Harrison's is the one that touches me most: "A gifted child is one who performs or has the ability to perform at a level significantly beyond his or her chronologically aged peers, and whose unique abilities and characteristics require special provisions, and social and emotional support from the family, community and educational context" (2005, p. 87).

It is one of the very few definitions that include the social and emotional needs of gifted children, making it more comprehensive. Giftedness is found in all areas, not just academic, and it can be visible in the process as well as the product of an exceptional skill. It reveals itself also in the behaviour of the gifted child (Cathcart, 2005). There are the obvious behaviours like the way he/she talks or reads or creates a piece of art or solves a difficult puzzle problem which can be easily recognised as superior, but there are also aspects that are less obvious, yet those need to be understood as well. They are the social and emotional needs or difficulties the gifted child might have. An exceptional ability is often based on exceptional perception which has a strong effect on how a gifted child will experience the environment and everyone, everything in it. Daniels and Meckstroth (2009) speak of intensified experiencing and magnified emotions here, which might cause the gifted child to react different from age peers, more unusual. The child might be intense, more sensitive than his/her age peers or more withdrawn and quiet (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009).

Who has not encountered a situation like the following, where a child creates a city with detailed infrastructure in the sandpit, or is in the middle of imaginary play about a special animal using a simple rope, and along comes another child, snatching the rope or digging a hole in the middle of the "city"? The child's reactions can go from withdrawal, quietly grieving and crying behind the bush of the play area for a long time to outrage and violent aggression, caused by feelings and emotions so strong and seemingly inexplicable that the child is not able to console himself/herself, ask for help or simply communicate the "heartbreak" in any way to others nearby. As teachers we often do not expect a child's reaction to be so dramatic, so extremely intense, especially if the reason for it appears minor. The more we understand emotional development and emotional intensities of gifted young children in general, the better we are able to cater for and support them.

What makes gifted young children so different from their peers?

The difference is not just the product of their exceptional ability but the social behaviour and the intensity of the experience in the moment. Gifted young children may appear as hyperactive, disruptive, noisy, dramatic, hugely excited but also quiet, shy, extremely tearful, deeply saddened at times, depending on their temperament, their environment and emotional state they are in (Probst & Piechowski, 2011).

As a kindergarten teacher I have worked with some gifted children who showed remarkable abilities. These included acting out imaginary fights and adventures with no props; reading books before starting school; drawing highly detailed paintings; creating musical instruments; building detailed structures with blocks, wood or whatever is available. Some of these children have exhibited huge imagination in making up stories around their play, yet I have noticed that the stronger their exceptional ability the bigger the rift can be between them and their age-peers, and even adults. While it is easy to accept and celebrate special abilities which lead to great achievements, it appears much harder to tolerate and accept the other, more difficult issues that come with it; the intense emotions which can make it so difficult to fit in, to socialise and have friends (Piechowski, 2006). Being picked on by peers and reprimanded by adults, for example for not being able to sit still in class or at mat times, can lead to children thinking of themselves as naughty, less worthy, or even stupid (Piechowski, 2006). It seems the very thing that makes the child so perceptive and creative, makes the child also very intense and vulnerable at the same time.

Acknowledgement, understanding and acceptance for who they are, can make a huge difference in gifted children's lives. It will support these children, helping them grow in confidence and enabling them to cope with whatever the future might hold for them. Giftedness and the feeling of being different are for life (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009).

What are the emotional issues which have such an impact on the social life of gifted young children? What are possible ways to help them? What can we teachers do?

Gifted children are easily stimulated by their interests and might react more intensely to an activity or item related to their interest. This stimulation can fuel inner excitement so strongly that these children can find it difficult to adhere to social boundaries; with that the child might appear annoying, nagging, stubborn or bossy, or may be seen simply as 'out of control' (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980), a Polish psychiatrist and educational psychologist studied gifted individuals and human emotions, especially in relation to giftedness. He found intensified experiences, emotions, feelings, perceptions and imaginations in the Gifted (adults and children alike), which gave them the ability to grow to their fullest potential, given the opportunity. However, with inner growth

there often is also constant questioning of values and beliefs, which can cause inner conflict and pain (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009).

Dabrowski developed the concepts of developmental potential and multilevelness, referring to individual giftedness and the level of development. He coined the term "overexcitability", which describes the inherent inclination to react intensely to individually different stimuli and can amplify emotional growth (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). Overexcitabilities and levels of development are essential aspects of highly gifted individuals. These aspects are equally as important as the cognitive abilities of gifted individuals, such as the feeling of rightness to an academic solution (Piechowski, personal communication, March 25, 2010). The following explanations focus on overexcitabilities in pre-school aged children in an attempt to provide more insight and give some ideas to early childhood practitioners in practical situations, keeping in mind that there is no recipe that fits all gifted children. Knowledge and awareness of giftedness and overexcitabilities will make an enormous difference in teaching practice.

Dabrowski grouped overexcitabilities into five areas: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal and emotional (Piechowski, 2006).

1. Psychomotor Intensity

Psychomotor intensity characterises an oversupply of energy. It can be seen in psychomotor expression of emotional tension (Piechowski, 2006).

Many gifted children appear very busy and restless, having a need to move fingers, feet and arms while thinking. They might have problems sitting still on the mat, maybe even need something in their hands in order to concentrate. Further expressions and signs are compulsive chatting and talking, acting out, nail biting and finger picking; and probably many more (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009).

It is of great help to allow preschoolers to have something in their hands while sitting on the mat – a bean bag (as long as it doesn't become a projectile) or a small soft toy; or have the child sent on an errand like getting a book from the shelf. Simply having the child involved in some way that makes him/her move will help. The same can be said for the classroom. There is no harm in having a small, soft ball or deflated balloon, filled with rice, in the pocket to allow the child to fiddle with it while thinking and concentrating (without disturbing others).

Sometimes it can be helpful to change the structure of the mat time, shorten the duration time or divide the large group of children in two or three smaller ones, depending on the number of teachers who then each can take a group.

It is beneficial to children with psychomotor intensities to plan for movement opportunities in the classroom, especially following activities which require sitting still for a longer time like reading, writing, exams, and so forth (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009).

2. Sensual Intensity

Sensual intensity encompasses heightened sensory and sensual expression of emotional tension (Piechowski, 2006).

Children might experience intense seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting.

Positive and negative reactions can be extreme and seem out of place for anyone who does not experience in the same way as these children do. During my teaching experience I have seen children covering their ears in pain while the other children enjoyed a Christmas concert with singing and guitar music or the visit of a bagpipe musician, yet another child was not coping during a school visit on a special school dress up day because the whole event, as organised as it was, appeared still too noisy for him and he covered his ears, crumpling to the ground. Some children experience difficulties with food when the texture or the taste is unpleasant to them, yet others are oversensitive to light or smell. I have also seen young children, being absorbed in music and wanting to listen to a specific piece of music all over again. Whilst many children (and adults) can have those likes and dislikes, they might not experience them in the same way gifted individuals do and they certainly won't react as extreme. Intense reactions might be prolonged crying, anxiety, hiding, screaming, scratching, vomiting in any of the above situations, describing dislikes. However being absorbed in something that strikes a child as beautiful could be addictive and taking this away, can have the same reactions. The dislike of clothing labels, scratchy fabrics like wool and elastics on sleeves and socks is very common, causing further emotional outbreaks (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009). The stronger and intense the experience, positive or negative, the more extreme can be the reactions.

Giving these children strong support in developing self-help skills and strategies to cope in situations where their senses simply take over, causing them excessive emotional stress, is of utmost importance. Solving the problem for them is not enough, because they will find themselves repeatedly in situations that could overwhelm their senses, and there is not always a "helping hand" available. It might prove helpful to find a solution together with the child, involving the parents as well. We can talk with children about things they like and don't like, constructing a place where children can recognise and express their feelings about what feels beautiful, stimulating or not.

In early childhood settings we can attempt to create aesthetically pleasing environments for all senses, comforting and inviting for all attending children, which should include quiet spaces and cushioned corners to cater for those moments with sensual overload. The feel of

smooth rocks and pebbles, the sparkling sunlight captured in colourful glass beads, the smell of fresh grass or roses, the taste of open fire roasted marshmallows on a stick – all these are wonderful sensory experiences, instilling a sense of happiness in some, a paradise of immeasurable wonders in others.

3. Intellectual Intensity

Intellectual intensity consists of a superior activity of the mind with a passion for problem solving, keen observation, avid reading, high concentration, hunger for knowledge (taking in facts like a sponge) and voracious curiosity (Piechowski, 2006).

Often we can find a strong streak of perfectionism in gifted children, which can promote excellence and outstanding intellectual achievements, but can also lead to anxiety, fear of failure, avoidance, feeling their work is not good enough, and spiralling down the path of never-ending frustration. The acceptance and acknowledgement of those feelings will support the children and provide the groundwork for the development of coping strategies with them (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009). Concentration span and high perfectionism can prevent the completion of a product in time allocated. Unfinished projects are disappointing for any child. To avoid this educators can plan for extra time, discuss with the child possibilities to complete their work and provide storage, so further work can be done later or another day, or allow completion at home, if possible. To have a task or a project completed is satisfying and very empowering for any child, especially a child with perfectionism. The support teachers can give in finishing projects is critical and will have long-lasting positive effect.

Discussions with children around mistakes, which are necessary for learning, are invaluable. All adults have made mistakes before and had to experience failure before they mastered the one or the other skill. Talking, modelling and demonstrating that we all learn from mistakes can support gifted children to cope with failure and might even save them to some extent from suffering with poor self-esteem (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009). This is accomplished more easily with pre-school children as very young ones might require more hands-on strategies that are flexible enough to suit individual needs.

Intellectual peers are quite often not age peers. Finding ways of enriching and accommodating gifted children by having them meet with like-minded peers of different ages is very beneficial (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009). This could be book clubs, chess clubs, Explorer camps (NZAGC), mind adventure days (One Day School), extracurricular school programmes like holiday programmes (film school, etc.), holidays programmes in general, junior memberships at zoos and wildlife parks, sport and adventure clubs or just family members. Small Poppies, a programme for gifted preschoolers is established in several areas in New Zealand.

4. Imaginational Intensity

Imaginational intensity is seen in spontaneous imagery as an expression of emotional tension (Piechowski, 2006).

Highly creative children have also a vast imagination and the ability to immerse themselves in imaginary adventures, play and worlds, to create a range of imaginary friends, pets and animals. They don't seem to get bored and can amuse themselves easily on their own. Many children know the difference between reality and imagination, and may even involve others into their imaginary play. If in doubt, careful asking about "the story" will shed light on this and might clarify if some scaffolding is needed in supporting children to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009). However, not all imaginary events are positive and taken lightly. An example is the imaginary play of a group of five year olds who had invented a mining company and then 'fired' the chief executive officer, who in turn was heartbroken for several days. It took his family nearly a week to find the reason for his withdrawal and silent crying. Educational professionals need to be aware of those pitfalls to be able to recognise when and how to get involved with support and advice.

It is wonderful when children share their imaginary adventures with others; it is a great opportunity for learning stories and anecdotal in children's portfolio (in early childhood settings), documenting children's creative potential from a young age.

Imagination can be used for all kinds of problem solving and challenges in a range of areas, so why not use imaginary play to tackle a problem?

5. Emotional Intensity

Emotional intensity consists of strongly intensified feelings and emotions, which can be positive and negative. Gifted individuals can be very much aware of other people's feelings and emotions and may identify with their feelings. This form of overexcitability is the most extensive one, because of its complexity (Piechowski, 2006; Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009).

For gifted children it's like a rollercoaster, because emotions run high and low, deeply in extremes. Deep-felt sadness can turn into anguish and despair. Compassion can be felt strongly for others, for the misery of the homeless, for the victims of natural catastrophes or for nearly extinct species of animals. Relationships are important and felt deeply, but not necessarily with age peers. Children as well as adults have strong emotional attachments to specific persons, things, rituals and traditions, even environments, making change often emotionally heartfelt and intense. Loss and grievance can be traumatic.

Rejection can be a pitfall. A child who feels like this will not understand how the friend he played with yesterday is no longer a friend today, a situation that happens quite frequently in early childhood settings as children begin to establish for themselves what friendship

actually means. To comfort the grieving child by pointing out that there are many other children who can be friends is not enough. An adult in the teaching environment could be the friend for a while and gradually include other children who could then become playmates and even friends, that way making it inclusive. This process could take more time than expected but it is necessary and definitely valuable for future “heartbreak”. The role of the adult in this can be seen as that of a friend and a safety net.

Somatic expressions of emotions include blushing, sweating, feeling a “knot” in the stomach or heart racing. Children might not always be able to explain what they are feeling (Piechowski, 2006). They just “feel it”. It is important that these feelings are acknowledged by an adult and that this person listens. Through active listening the adult might be able to recognise these emotions and support the child in finding a way through the inner turmoil, helping him/her to find a way out. Children will eventually develop their unique ways to express what it is that makes them feel like as they do. With caring support and patience gifted young children will find over time coping strategies for themselves (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009).

Active listening is also important when it comes to behaviour issues. Anger has the potential to turn into temper tantrums or rage. It is important to acknowledge the anger feeling and its management. Children need to learn how to deal with the intense feelings of anger. Daniels and Meckstroth describe it as a “delicate balance” between acknowledging the feeling and handling its expression (2009). We do children a disservice by letting children act out their negative feelings in ways that are socially inappropriate; even worse when those feeling of outrage and fury are let loose and lead to harm. How should children be able to survive in a society where social skills are necessary and where the lack of such skills will close doors (Fertig, 2009)?

A better way is to calm the child, acknowledge what it feels (not the reaction) and work with the child by discussing calmly how the situation could have been handled more positively, working out strategies for similar future situations and, if possible, modelling these through dramatic play. A gifted child is still a child, and having to cope with immense emotions and intense feelings, which might not be recognised for what they are, makes it even harder. Talking about feelings, explaining a whole range of feelings like jealousy, sadness, loneliness and frustration will help the child to identify them and s/he can work with an adult to find appropriate ways to cope with them. It is of great assistance to use props like puppets and books or invent dramatic play around feelings to support the educator in this. Making it a general theme at mat times will address everyone, making it inclusive and less accusative. The child might also learn about how others feel, which fosters the development of empathy and may lead to a better understanding of social skills in general (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009).

Be prepared though, it can be a long process. However, it is worthwhile and invaluable for the gifted child who grows into a gifted adult and a capable member of our society.

Overexcitabilities, behaviour and temperament – the need to see the child in context

The intense expression of overexcitabilities, some or all of them, can easily lead to the assumption that a child might suffer from a condition such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or be on the autism spectrum. While there are indeed gifted children with disorders, dealing with behaviour out of context is harmful in any way (Probst, 2008).

Probst (2008) gives us here the example of a restless child at mat time, who expressed psychomotor overexcitabilities by moving rather than sitting, and then being praised when eventually sitting still, giving the child the message that something is wrong with him/her.

Temperament is yet another important aspect. Whilst the temperamental expression of characteristics can differ, depending on environment, they also affect overexcitabilities in gifted individuals (Probst & Piechowski, 2011). Many gifted children are introverts, needing time to themselves in order to recharge energy, especially after group activities. It may not be in their nature to have a large number of friends, they may be happy with just a few and those few will be very dear to them. It should be acceptable for a child to play solitary for a while. Don't make the child socialise, rather give him/her some space and the opportunity to come back (Probst, 2008; Fertig, 2009). Introvert gifted children need time to warm up on arrival at kindergarten; often tend to look for a quiet space where they can start an activity on their own, needing time to themselves. From own experience, close relationships between children, teaching staff and families support these children during transition times like these, and the children are more likely to form enough trust to voice what they need and if they require help in entering play of others. Often play in smaller groups of two or three is preferred. Gradually all children in an educational setting will come to know and regard each other as friends, regardless of temperament.

Introverted gifted children appear shy and very quiet, but can get very vocal and excited about areas or items of their interest and passion. They also tend to "bottle" up intense feelings when they feel pushed or bothered too much, which may lead to powerful outbursts to the surprise of everyone around them. While social assurance from others is definitely of support, there is a fine line between pressuring and encouraging; trusting relationships are the key for educators in knowing when to help and how much support is needed (Probst, 2008; Fertig, 2009; Probst & Piechowski, 2011). Extroverts, on the other hand, crave attention and need to be engaged in order to recharge – completely opposite from introverts. Extrovert children need more stimulation and extra channelling to

accommodate their bursts of energy, maybe extra activities and learning experiences (Probst, 2008).

Overexcitabilities, temperament, advanced and complex interests as well as the need for advanced social interactions with peers (not necessarily age peers) in gifted young children can definitely challenge adults who live, care for or work with them in early childhood settings and school (Harrison, 2005). We all know that the more intense these excitabilities the lesser acceptance the child will get from adults and age peers around him/her. Out of context the child may be seen as annoying, difficult, maybe unmanageable, aggressive, hyperactive or as drama queen. We must not forget, that whatever it was that triggered the display of unusual behaviour might be much more deeply experienced by the child; any upset is likely to be felt much more intense by the child than anyone else (Piechowski, 2006).

This makes it so important to endeavour and go through great lengths to get to know the gifted children and their families we are working with, see those children holistically in context – and accept children's overexcitabilities as their specific innate qualities of experiencing the world around them (Probst & Piechowski, 2011). Piechowski states quite clearly that it would be very hard to find a gifted individual who shows little of any of the five overexcitabilities, simply because they are the fundamental aspects of all creative, intellectual and social outstanding achievements (2006; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009).

Conclusion

Gifted individuals of all ages notice at some stage in their lives that they are different from others, and that they need to find their own strategies to cope with many difficult situations in life, because of the depth of their emotions and the uniqueness in perceiving the world around them. Gifted young children need the support and acceptance from adults (parents, family, and caregivers) who care for them and from those who work with them (teachers). They need to know that it is okay to move around or play with a squishy small toy, if it helps them think (*psychomotor*), that it is safe to ask for help when emotions are just too hard to bear (*emotional*), that sometimes we can't be perfect every time (*intellectual*), that it is acceptable to be lost in the taste and texture of an apple or be repelled by it (*sensory*), that it is fine to play imaginary adventures with "your spaceship in a different solar system" at the back of the kindergarten all by yourself. Sometimes you might invite others in or simply leave your play and join the others (*imaginary*).

The previous explanations are intended to give an insight into the emotional intensities of gifted young children. These experiences quite often come with problems, because of the lack of social acceptance by people around these children, especially when reactions and behaviour appear so abnormal.

Gifted young children need acceptance and acknowledgement of who they are and how they feel by their families, peers and those who work with them in early childhood settings. With greater awareness and recognition of emotional intensities (overexcitabilities) in early childhood settings gifted young children have a better chance to be understood and supported for the things life throws at them. It is not just about the nurture of the gift alone as exceptionality and emotional life are so closely connected, they simply do not exist without the other. If educational practitioners know about this small allowances and individual adjustments to the programme of early childhood settings can be made more readily case by case. Trusting relationships with gifted children and their parents, active listening and an openness to alternative ideas will make it easier to work together on strategies that support and nurture abilities and intensities. This approach not only fosters gifted children's abilities and inherent nature, it will prepare them for life.

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