GIFTED and TALENTED EDUCATION UNIT

# G&T in the Early Years

***A periodic bulletin for teachers, from the Gifted & Talented Education Unit at the DfES***

## Gifted and Talented Education and the Early Years: a Conversation with Christine Pascal



Christine Pascal was interviewed in August 2005 on the subject of Gifted and Talented Education in the Early Years. During the interview, a number of areas were discussed and the account below provides an agreed accurate record of the conversation. While this is not 'guidance' it will be of great interest to both the teachers of young children and other educators. This 'conversation' is the first in a number of bulletins by the Gifted and Talented Education Unit (GTEU) at the DfES. This paper contains some fascinating insights about young children and current government plans to improve their early experiences. The 'conversation' looks broadly at a wide range of themes, some of which will be amplified in later publications.

### *An Introduction to Christine Pascal*

Christine currently holds the Chair of Early Childhood Education at the University of Worcester, where she is Director of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood, located at the St Thomas Early Excellence Centre in Birmingham. She is Co-Director of the Effective Early Learning (EEL) Project and The Accounting Early for Life Long Learning (AcE) Project and was National Evaluator of the Government's Early Excellence Centre Programme. She is a Specialist Adviser to the House of Commons Select Committee and is currently a member of the DfES Early Education Advisory Group. She is a Vice Chair of the British Association of Early Childhood Education (Early Education). She also co-founded the European Early Childhood Education Research Association and works extensively across the UK and Europe in her early childhood research and development work. She is Vice Chair of Birmingham Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. She has written widely on the subject of quality early childhood education.

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### *Context and Overview*

Education in the Early Years is going through a radical period of change. This is partly a result of strong government commitment to eradicate child poverty and seek excellence early. Although the changes were in progress before the publication of the Green Paper *'Every Child Matters'*, this has certainly added momentum. The Report underlined the need for and set in motion 'joined up' provision for young children from birth, with education, health and the social services working together (and pooling budgets). A second agenda has been to streamline the various EY initiatives (including Sure Start local programmes and the Early

Excellence Centres) and raises the quality of the offer. By March 2008 there will be 2500 Sure Start Children's Centres with a longer term vision of a Children's Centre for every community by 2010. Children's Centres will be developed from existing Sure Start local programmes, Early Excellence Centres, voluntary and private provision. Children's Centres will offer a range of services to families with babies and children under 5 years old – including integrated early learning and care; health services; family support and advice on employment and training. The development of Children's Centres has been influenced by recent research which shows that disadvantaged children benefit significantly from good quality pre-school experience. There is a requirement for a qualified teacher on the staff of each centre and an expectation that all staff working with children will have at least a level 3 qualification. This is based on the EPPE research, which showed that children in settings with staff who have higher qualifications make more progress. There has been considerable debate about the appropriate mix of skills required for a teaching team in these new centres, which offer both care and learning. Workforce re-modelling is a major agenda in EY over the next few years. Included in this debate, is the possibility of having an EY Professional in the team, rather than having the traditional role of a teacher. There is some resistance to this, but support for the notion of changing roles and the need to raise qualifications and establish a proper career structure. There has been a debate about the age span that constitutes the early years. Currently there are two phases: birth to 3 years and 3-5 years. Some people have called for this to be extended to embrace 6 year olds to aid the continuity to KS1. In addition a Common Assessment Framework will be established. It is very important that provision for the gifted and talented is included in this Framework, otherwise there will not be judgments on quality. The inspection by Ofsted of EY provision (around 5 key outcomes) is likely to both improve and harmonise provision.

## *Views on Gifts and Talents in the Early Years*

It is useful to view all children as competent, rather than incompetent: separating children out is implying some are not. Hence all children have strengths to build on, if possible in an environment where this can be led by the child, as well as the teacher. The Early Years stage is a time where gifts and talents can be transient and difficult to track. The normative range at this age is vast. There are peaks, troughs, stutters and false starts, as the nature of the high ability evolves. There are precocious children or individuals who master skills early or in a special way ('advanced development'). The need for young children to have a strong view of self and have positive relationships with their peers can be problematic if labelling of gifts and talents is too rigid at this age. Practitioners can confuse these elements. For instance, a child may have balance, run well or have exceptional coordination but may not be highly talented. The only unusual thing here is that they have acquired skills early. The clue to gifts and talents in these years may be more to do with *creativity* and the use of



skills to *do something unusual* or *unexpected.* Such a child would have the capacity to do what few children can do at any age. An example of this was a child who was designated as having special educational needs, but who had a particular gift with words and phrases in simple poetry, and is now one of the top advertising people in the country. What we as educators do at this age can have a deeper and more long lasting impact than subsequent years, in that the malleability and architecture of the brain has greatest capacity in this age group. Hence turning off young children, is just as easy as 'turning on'. The natural drive of these young children is towards very broad experiences, rather than tunnelled pathways. Below are critical factors in considering gifted and talented provision in the Early Years.

## *Some Critical Factors in Early Years Provision*

- *It is important to focus on creativity.*
- *Gifted and talented children do unusual things.*
- *The stakes are high in social and academic development at this stage, when the brain's connections are at their most malleable.*
- *It is just as easy to turn children off learning as on.*
- *The natural drive is for broad, rather than tunnelled experiences.*
- *If the capacity to relate to peers and adults at this age is curtailed, there are long-term implications.*
- *Long-term social and emotional literacy is all important.*
- *Early Years is on the 'sharp end' of personalization and 'the system should bend to the individual'.*
- *There is a danger of too much individualization - sometimes children need to be part of a group, in a collaborative, equitable way.*

*"Early Years is at the sharp end of personalisation."*

## *Known Research on Gifted and Talented Education*

The actual term 'gifted and talented' is little used in the Early Years. Sarah Blakemore has contributed some useful research on brain development that is highly relevant in grounding educational practices on a sound basis in psychology and neuroscience. This is referenced in the House of Commons last inquiry into Early Years.

Colwyn Trevarthan has carried out some useful research on communicative musicality and on the benefits or effects for pre-school education.

Robert Sternberg's 'Triarchic Theory' and Joseph Renzulli's 'Three-ring Conception' of intelligence are good reference points. They both view creativity as central to gifts and talents, with other contributing factors including context, social interaction, task commitment and raw ability. The DfES Foundation Stage website http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/foundation_stage/ has some informative case studies and research information.



## *Identification*

*"Gifted and talented children need to be observed in different contexts, as they will not perform reliably."*

Any work on identification should be hand in glove with parents (especially the very young). At this stage, the parents frequently know their children best. Gifted and talented children need to be observed in different contexts, as they will not perform reliably. Most tests fail to catch ability at this age, especially in normal situations.

There should be a sensitive awareness of cultural differences - while there are claims that assessments are transferable, they are frequently viewed as mono-cultural. Any identification involving testing should not be paper based. Reading and non-verbal tests are important. Generally assessment should be ongoing, rather than carried out at fixed points. In any identification process, it is essential to look at *unexpected responses* from the child. Looking for *persistence, creativity* and *precision* that is on the edge of the child's 'zone of development' is a good indicator.

## *Child Development and G&T*

Gifted and talented education is not about advanced development. The children could be at a normative or at any stage of development - the fact that in Piagetian terms a child has 'moved on a stage' is not closely linked with their ultimate level of giftedness.

Young children do not really have a notion of subjects and therefore it is useful to identify broad 'areas of learning'. A 'gifted thinker' may not fit to a traditional subject.



*" … the fact that in Piagetian terms a child has 'moved on a stage' is not always closely linked to their ultimate level of giftedness."*



**Broad Areas of Learning: 0 - 3 years**

- *Healthy*
- *Communication*
- *Exploratory*
- *Creative*

**Broad Areas of Learning: 3 - 5/6 years**

- *Communication*
- *Creative*
- *Physical*
- *Literacy*
- *Mathematical*
- *Personal, Social and Emotional*
- *Knowledge, Understanding of World*



### *Observation through Projects*

There is a tendency to underestimate young children, as we do not know as much as we should do about their competencies. In many cases we do not know what to look for or cater fully for what we discover. There is now research underway that will help this through a process that will display competencies in all domains from birth. Child development checklists are all right up to a point but they do not pick up the unique creativity that is a hallmark of gifted and talented children.

### *Patterns of Behaviour*

This is displayed through higher levels of engagement and involvement, physical response and often, deep passion in the learning. However, patterns in underachieving gifted and talented children are often very different. Typical responses are seen as *strange* rather than *special* and this sometimes results in 'shutting down' the brain and pushing the gifts underground. Alternatively there may be disruptive behaviours through boredom or frustration.

## What Seems to Particularly Stimulate Gifted and Talented Children

The setting up of enriched environments is critical, though it is all too easy to make an environment over-stimulating. A room looking more like a garish fairground may seem enriching but is probably going to be the opposite. Highly colourful carpets, display boards, artefacts and equipment may be beneficial in theory but not practice. Similarly, most gifted and talented children prefer to investigate in depth rather than flit from one superficial task to another.

A critical factor in all this is the role of teachers - are they aware of the dangers of over-stimulation? They have to make delicate decisions about when to step back and allow exploration and when to intervene.

Resources should ideally lend themselves to various types and levels of use. This is very important, particularly when set in a classroom where the learning is more integrated than fragmented.

*"The level of openness in the resource and environment should be such that the child is able to explore boundaries, allowing uniqueness to emerge. It is in this zone that many gifts and talents emerge."*

At this age the children will return, often obsessively, to the same resources which become the backdrop for much role play and may be essential building blocks in developing the learning. The amount of pressure from the teaching team can profoundly influence the effectiveness of the experiences.

The level of openness in the resource and environment should be such that the child is able to explore boundaries, allowing uniqueness to emerge. It is in this zone that many gifts and talents emerge. This should be celebrated, particularly the unpredictable and unique. However, young children do need boundaries, but there also needs to be flexibility, so that crossing boundaries is neither a threat nor causes loss of confidence.

## Warning Flags: what not to do

- *Not too tight a structure*
- *Experiences not too narrowly constructed*
- *No filling out templates for 'learning'*
- *Expectations should not be too preconceived*
- *Objectives should not be too tight*
- *Experiences for gifted and talented should be developmentally appropriate*

## Assessment for Learning

Identification should be more process than product-based. This is particularly the case when looking at creativity, which has an essential link to the gifted and talented child. Creativity is unlikely to emerge unless captured through the process of an activity or experience.

For the very youngest child, assessment should take place in a variety of different 'normal' contexts.

Assessment should be generally observation-based and include the child.

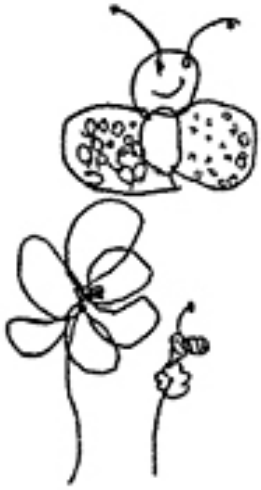
It is in listening to the articulation of the child that gifts and talents emerge.



## Planning and Differentiation

It should not be forgotten that the gifted and talented child needs some activities to be 'non-differentiated' to allow them to just join in with the rest of the class. Clearly differentiation is an element of teaching that can be applied to all children. However, given the particular characteristics of the gifted and talented there are certain elements of, for example, interaction, focus and resources that seem to be particularly important. There are high teacher skill requirements for differentiation, as it is structured but fluid, planned for yet open-ended. Once planned, the teacher's role in implementing is critical. For example, the use of reflective questioning can help the child to move forward and gain ownership. It is far easier to do this badly than well. Planning must have some indicative structure but yet an open-ended quality that allows some free reign.

It is of the utmost importance that the teaching of basic techniques should not be neglected. This means that sometimes there just has to be some straight teaching.



## Active Learning Strategies



Giving the child the *capacity* to be active is key. This starts by freeing up the child from total teacher control.

The teacher should become more a partner: active and equal. This encourages ownership of the learning and the fostering of a disposition to learn. That does not mean the teacher should not intervene at all or assert control, but that often stepping back or being more reflective can be much more effective in the long haul.

*"The skill of the adult is to know when to structure and scaffold and when not to."*

Also, while it is particularly useful to have plans, resources and fertile environments where the child can initiate the learning, there are many times when the teacher will do that. For example, the use of an effective starting point (eg an event or tactile experience) can engage and be the launching pad for a host of extended personalised pathways. There is a need on the part of the teacher to plan starting points with multiple options and to make judgements about interventions as activities unfold. Getting more of an ethos of a 'studio' or 'workshop' can be effective, where the child has open access to materials. The skill of the adult is to know when to structure and scaffold and when not to.

With active learning typically comes some exciting experiences, realisations and learning to share. A supportive climate where all can take pride in quality work and where the gifted and talented, even at this early age, can share with an 'open heart' rather than feeling ashamed of being special.

The teaching group as a whole should be encouraged to see gifts and talents as a cause for celebration, rather than something strange. This speaks to a positive, rather then negative climate. Hence there should be a sense of 'playful boastfulness' in performance.

## *Activity Development: Key Attributes*

- *Not always the teacher in control*
- *The teacher following the child 'adding bits in'*
- *Diversity of resources*
- *Observing children using resources uniquely*
- *Sometimes the use of resources will be odd (eg paint in sand tray)*
- *The teacher is a resource*

## *Key Teacher Skills*

- *Good at working with families and parents*
- *Intellectually curious, open to the world*
- *Good at nurturing emotional literacy*
- *Tuned into emotions*
- *Confident, little self-doubt*
- *Attitudes as much as skills - view each child as competent*
- *Acute observer - recognises key signals*
- *Able to see creative possibilities*
- *High skills in reflective questioning, follow on questions and dialogue*
- *Inspiring /aspiring*



*"The role of the teacher at the early years stage is in many ways more demanding and multifaceted than at any other phase."*

## *Transitions*

All transitions are hard but rapid changes for young children are particularly difficult and often have the effect of disrupting the development of gifts and talents. This can be partly relieved by creating as much continuity as possible (for example the use of vertical/family grouping). The transitions from home to school and from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1 are difficult. There have been in the past and currently are plans to create more continuity of experience and approach within the Early Years.

The changes following *Every Child Matters* should help with transitions, particularly in emotional literacy and the offering of joined-up support. It is very important to remember that gifted and talented children need as much support as any other. It is possible that the effects of *Every Child Matters* will be to ease the fragmentation that is often a cause of disrupted development for the gifted and talented child.

## *Classroom Management*

A key issue for the teacher is how to treat gifted and talented children in relation to the rest of the group. It is important not to lose sight of the rest of the group in personalising the learning.

A flexible layout, offering a possible backdrop for a variety of activities - an 'enabling layout' - is important to management of the classroom.

The teacher's role at the Early Years stage is in many ways more demanding and multifaceted than at any other phase. This is due mainly to the breadth of maturity, developmental stage and teaching role. There is critical responsibility on the teacher to provide a strong foundation for the rest of schooling and, ultimately, work. The ability to move from parent, to resource, to leader is complex.

With gifted and talented children, the differentiation of activity, the delicate points of intervention require sound judgement. The art of asking (and following up) more reflective questions, allowing the child to 'fly', requires advanced teacher skills.

## *Time, Space and Grouping*

An approach that is open, flexible, responsive and dynamic is a good starting point. The capacity to change these, balanced with some need for stability, is important. While establishing this balance, it is also critical to have consistent boundaries and constraints.



## *Different Approaches in Early Years*

The best approaches create a harmony between social/emotional and cognitive. There is a range of approaches which support a balanced pedagogy. Examples would be Reggio Amelia, High/Scope, Experiential Education, Te Whariki and also the Foundation Stage and Birth to Three Matters Frameworks. These approaches are not driven by a Skinneristic directive style or by curriculum but use a social-constructivist model of learning. The very best models see experiences in an experiential and integrated way. The role of the teacher is as a *scaffolder and facilitator.* He/she makes the complex judgement of where to insert 'structural bits'. The child will have some choices of self-management and organisation, and reflection on learning.

## *Acceleration and Enrichment*

Enrichment and acceleration is not just for older children. Enrichment can involve other adults who can offer specialist support - how they integrate into the teaching team is critical. The difficulty with acceleration is when this is 'done' to children. If they own it and drive it then it can be positive. There should be opportunities for acceleration (in context and where children can relate to it). Acceleration should not be at the expense of the social and emotional support.

## *Academic and Emotional Symmetry*

These should be hand in hand. There should not just be *symmetry* but also *synergy.* The deployment of staff is now very flexible and dynamic (less so in primary schools). With this in mind, someone has to have a sense of the whole experience, the symmetry and the child's place in that. The effect of this support should be like 'lighting a fire, allowing the children to fly and soar'.

## *Out-of-Hours/Extended Schools*

Children do need some time out - space from school - there is too much programming. However, schools will increasingly be open all the time. If handled well, this side of the learning offers a chance to understand more of the whole child. This time also offers a chance to extend the opportunities for enrichment, connected to the day. On many occasions, it will be out-of-hours where the gifts and talents can emerge and be nurtured in development. This is partly due to the fact that this time has traditionally been seen as more flexible, with choices for the child about what they do and when they do it. Hence, at best, out-of-hours programmes offer a great resource for personalised learning. It is important that this choice is retained in the search for seamless provision. As with daytime provision, it is all-important that there is not a mono-cultural bias. It is also important to remember that SEN children can also be gifted and talented!

*"The best approaches create a harmony between social/ emotional and cognitive"*

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