

Supporting the development of cognitive and emotional well being in gifted and talented children

Background Context

Acknowledging that identifying and providing for gifted and talented children is always complex, and, that no-where is this more challenging than with children in the Foundation Stage, this project sets out to find effective ways to identifying and recording the competencies of young gifted and talented children as they engage in self-initiated activities on a day to day basis. Information gained from this will then be used to determine what types of stimulating and challenging curriculum interventions are needed to keep the children focused and involved in their learning to ensure that any gifts or talents they might have are fostered at an early age. In particular, participating teachers and other members of staff will be encouraged to assess levels of 'well being' and 'involvement' in their pupils. (The former being a state recognised through feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment and pleasure and the latter a quality characterised by the ability to concentrate and persist which leads to increased motivation and fascination, coupled with intense mental energy and satisfaction). The precocious gifts and talents of particular children will provide a starting point for observations aimed at assessing what they know and can do, as well as noting any instances of 'intriguing' behaviour. What is learnt from the project will eventually be shared with other Early Years professionals within Kent LEA to ensure that all children – not just the majority – are catered for appropriately in Foundation Stage classes.

Aims

- To develop expertise, tools and strategies to help teachers identify young gifted and talented children.
- To develop a framework of interventions to create the best conditions for the development of gifted and talented children.

Dimensions of Study

The project aimed to identify, motivate and challenge gifted and talented children in the Foundation Stage of reception classes initially in five schools in East Kent and, ultimately to share findings throughout the LEA. The project was continued the following year in four schools in Mid Kent.

Influences on the Project

- Drawing on the work of Professor Ferre Laevers (1997) from Leuven University, Belgium. In particular his scales of 'well being' and 'involvement'.
- D. Eyre & L. McClure (eds.) (2001) 'Curriculum Provision for the Gifted and Talented in the Primary School'. NACE/David Fulton.
- S. Leyden (2002), 'Supporting the Child of Exceptional ability at Home and at School'. Routledge

Research in Action

Getting started

Professional development relating to levels of 'well being' and involvement' as indicators of quality provision was offered to Foundation Stage teachers from five schools. Videotapes were used to train these teachers to observe and moderate judgements about well being and involvement of a number of children. Next they were asked to screen their whole classes by using the Leuven Scales and to report back after having asked themselves the following questions:

- Who does not benefit from our provision?
- Who does not receive enough stimulation and care?
- Who may not be developing in all areas?

This led to a number of children being recognised as under-achieving or intriguing in the classroom situation. Ways to collect in-depth data about them were discussed and it was decided to put together case studies of potential gifted and talented children from each class.

A Synopsis of Case Study of L

He presented as having:

- Low levels of well being on the Leuven scale.
- Low levels of involvement on the Leuven scale although this varies across activities as he could concentrate for long periods on activities he liked e.g. he enjoyed listening to stories and concentrated well during these.
- Challenging behaviour – more interested in self than others.
- He could speak expressively on a range of subjects.
- He was inquisitive – especially in relation to insects – and was quick to notice changes to his environment.
- He blocked out his paintings although these and his drawings were detailed.
- He showed originality when making models.
- He became unhappy if he was given insufficient time to finish an activity.

Changes made as a consequence

The classroom environment was enriched to provide interest tables and interactive displays. Clear routines were established and boundaries for behaviour set. He was given support to express his emotions and talk about his feelings. He was allowed time to engage in the activities he was interested in and to speak to an audience about these, or to tell them stories, e.g. after he had said "I've got a friend who is an eagle... Can I tell you the story?" In addition to this, the story was 'scribed' for him by his teacher enabling him to concentrate on the compositional aspect of story telling which was his strength.

Success Indicators

- His levels of involvement were increased and he was more curious about his environment.
- His sense of well-being grew – he enjoyed the success he achieved in speaking in front of an audience.
- His ability to compose stories far exceeded that of his peers.
- He has greater interest in a wider range of class activities.
- He set himself challenges and followed up ideas from teacher directed work during child initiated sessions.
- His behaviour improved and he began to make friends.

Lessons learnt and findings

- The Leuven scales of ‘well-being’ and ‘involvement’ gave teachers a valuable, additional assessment tool to use to identify gifted and talented children as part of classroom observation and helped in the identification of children who may otherwise have been overlooked.
- The enhanced observational skills that the teachers acquired were useful when collecting evidence for Foundation Stage profiles.
- Wide ranging interventions relating to children’s specific gifts and talents enriched the curriculum and were successful in challenging and motivating them, resulting in improved levels of well-being and involvement.
- Parents were useful partners in the process of identification of gifted and talented pupils as they often had valuable insights into their child’s interests and preferred learning styles.

Further Research

Some issues remain for future consideration. How to:

- Find ways to preserve children’s sense of ownership over classroom activities whilst ensuring adults challenge and probe their understanding as deeply as possible.
- Offer flexibility within a carefully planned curriculum.
- Ensure that all Early Years staff are trained in observational skills so that young gifted and talented pupils are fully recognised and helped to fulfil their potential.

Findings from this project have been shared throughout the LEA and at national conferences in order to ensure that as many adults as possible are capable of unlocking children’s gifts and talents through detailed observations. Using the indicators of well being and involvement it is possible to find out what fascinates children, look in depth at what they can do which, in turn, reveals how the conditions for learning can be adjusted by the adult to provide the appropriate next steps.

Project participants

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