



DOING RIGHT BY THE VERY BRIGHT

These are the notes from a presentation given to Deputy and Assistant Headteachers at an Essex Primary Headteachers Association conference by Jason Buckley, Director of Studies at GIFT, a leading organization in providing residential and day extension courses for the exceptionally able.

The meme used and abused to illustrate different notions of equality originates with Business Professor Craig Froehle, and the photo of Karan Sheikh, tallest boy in the world, is from www.mirror.co.uk The "best thing/worst thing" comments about the school experiences of children with higher learning potential/gifted children/the most able were contributed to a facebook group operated by Potential Plus, the leading UK charity that supports families containing HLP children.

Please free feel to circulate these notes, although you might like to wait until the video version of the original slideshow is available.

If you would like more information about the workshops for children and young people we offer, or the training and support we can give to schools and individuals, please visit: www.giftcourses.co.uk or email enquiries@giftcourses.co.uk

Some other useful links:

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS www.potentialplusuk.org

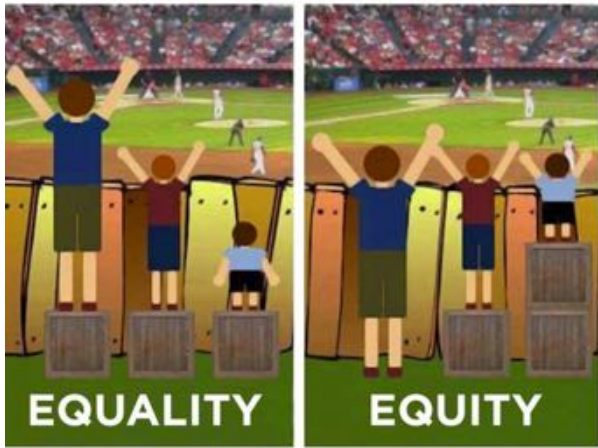
IDENTIFICATION www.bertiekingore.com/high-gt-create.htm

PERFECTIONISM www.independentschoolparent.com/lifestyle/goodbye-little-miss-perfect

ANOTHER PROVIDER OF MASTERCLASSES FOR PRIMARY CHILDREN: www.tomorrowsachievers.co.uk

DOING RIGHT BY THE VERY BRIGHT EQUALITY OF STRUGGLE

We only have limited resources, and it can seem fairer to put more into the education of the weakest learners, not the strongest. But all learners should get Equality of Struggle. It's why they go to school.



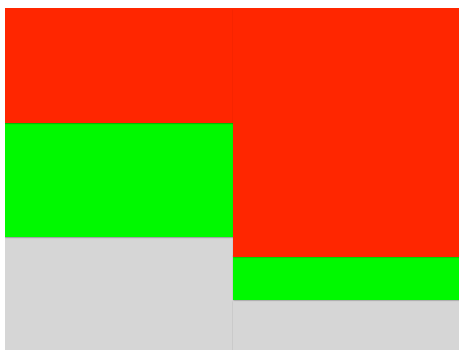
What I can't yet do at all

What I can do with help

What I can do without help

What you go to school for

"...best thing: giving him 1:1 extension work, challenging him enough that he sometimes struggles a little."



Some children's struggle zones don't overlap at all with their peers, especially in maths and literacy. Much of their school time is spent doing work that wastes their time. Differentiation around the edges is not enough for these very different children.



So, three important attitudes in delivering Equality of Struggle...

First, do no harm

"Worst: we were told our 7 year old couldn't move onto free reading because "he's not allowed to overtake the year above"

Reading schemes are for learning to read, not the other way round.

Avoid patronising "fun" things such as "rainbow writing".

Don't get them to "focus on their weaknesses" when they have done the main work. Both of these feel like a punishment.

Don't criticise them for going beyond the task, or fail to notice excellence because it doesn't meet criteria or is messy.

Most difficult first

"Worst: Making my son do all the standard class work first before anything that would challenge him...leaving not enough time to complete it/learn from it."

Avoid wasting their time with repetitive, low level work.

Let a child do the most difficult bit first if they can, then progress to something more difficult – or making it more difficult for themselves – e.g. "Come up with a question you are not sure you can answer", or one of their GO TO PROJECTS.

Teach the child, not the age

"Worst: "well I can't possibly do that, what will the teacher do with her next year?!"

"Best: acknowledging his precocity whilst still letting him be a five year old boy. A good example: a project on Julia Donaldson's Stick Man. The others were tracing letters with stick man decorations, he wrote instructions to make a Stick Man out of straws and took them to Y5 for them to make to see if his instructions were easy to follow. But alongside this, he still had all the opportunities to do reception-like things - scavenger hunts outside and building mud pies and doing messy painting." (Teaching the child AND the age!)

The Awesome Teacher

“Best thing: in reception the awesome teacher frequently said 'I did this with Seth because I thought he'd enjoy it'; she let him do different work and choose his own books, and encouraged him to go into different areas of the school and talk to children of different ages; acknowledging his precocity whilst still letting him be a five year old boy.

A good example: the class were doing a project on Julia Donaldson's Stick Man. Whilst the other children were tracing letters with stick man decorations, doing pictures and odd words to form stories, counting sticks, and all the other five-year-old suitable things, Seth was encouraged to do more difficult things on the same topic, for example writing instructions to make a Stick Man out of straws and then taking them to Y5 for them to make to see if his instructions were easy to follow.

But alongside this, he still had all the opportunities to do reception-like things - like going on scavenger hunts outside and building mud pies and doing messy painting. That's the main reason we didn't want to accelerate him this early, because he was able to have the best of both worlds.”

DOING RIGHT BY THE VERY BRIGHT GO TO PROJECTS

OFSTED may in theory say that you should never run out of more challenging things that are specific to the topic in hand. The reality is that that is an impossible and inefficient demand: you would end

up preparing a lot of resources that didn't get used. Some topics are easier to extend than others, and attending to the needs of the most able was not a priority in setting the curriculum.

Also, imagine you've finished a pile of marking, and someone says, "Great! You're doing really well. Have some more marking. This is really difficult stuff – I can hardly read the writing. Enjoy!" More on the same doesn't feel like a reward unless it is exciting, and you can't think of an exciting extension to every task. The approaches in this section provide maximum productive engagement for minimum teacher input. In each case, once the main work is done, the child can spend time on a "Go To Project".

Book pushing

There are perhaps no days of our childhood we lived so fully as those we spent with a favorite book.

–Marcel Proust

The most able children are often voracious readers – but in their hunger for intellectual stimulation, they tend to fill up on junk – a dozen books in the same naff fantasy series. They often read these at such speed that they don't really take them in.

Push them on to more challenging fiction for the next age group up, or the one after that. Good non-fiction is harder to find but equally important. A book at the edge of their ability is in the "green zone", because they wouldn't be reading it without your motivation and guidance.

"Worst: we were told our 7 year old couldn't move onto free reading because "he's not allowed to overtake the year above"

Reading schemes are for learning to read, not the other way round!

Big challenges in few words

It is time-consuming to create detailed extension work for every topic. It's also a rare child who is motivated on every occasion to complete work to a high standard in order to get more work, however able they may be.

So if you can build up a pool of activities that have a reputation of being quirky, playful, enjoyable as well as challenging, students can be more motivated to complete their work and move on. You might consider having a book, perhaps called "Something Completely Different" which contains the responses to these challenges. Make the marking responses in this book about the ideas in it, and don't feel obliged to put "next steps". This is about noticing work and encouraging it, not grading it. Some examples:

Write a "Choose Your Own Adventure" book, set in a historical period.

Keys 2, 5 and 6 on a calculator don't work. Can you find these answers using the other keys...

You have just become the new Prime Minister. Write your first speech to the nation with your aims for your term in office.

Magnum Opus

The most able children are often capable of sustained and repeated attention to a single project of interest beyond that of their peers. Kieran Egan's "Learning in Depth" attempts to extend this to all children... worth a google.

Find an outlet for existing interests, or provide a project that has "legs" and will lend itself to deep study and extended presentation in writing or another form. Organisational challenges, especially when they are real and part of school life, are also effective.

Best thing: "They show a genuine interest in the special interests and projects that are expressed and help them use these interests to interact with other students or engage with less attractive areas for development."

Best thing: "Providing an opportunity for my HLP to be responsible for some class initiatives and ideas. I think many HLPs like being able to channel their creativity and thoughts into something they can see develop and change. Providing an outlet for this is wonderful and it is even better if an adult at school takes regular time to guide and support these ideas."

DOING RIGHT BY THE VERY BRIGHT YOU CAN'T DO IT ALL

If you teach for 30 years, focussing on a class of 30 children each year, that's 900 children.

That means you might have direct responsibility for 30 children in the brightest 3%. That's one class-full over a whole career. It takes a whole career to have as much experience of these children as you do of average children after a couple of years. 10 of them might be in the brightest 1%.

You might get to teach one "1 in a 1000" child. Or none. These children are as different again from a child at the lower end of the top 1% as those children are from a child who is just "more able". One of your colleagues has probably taught a "1 in 10000" child. These children are brilliant and bewildering even for their parents.

What I'm emphasising is that there is no way you can have all the experience you need to give these children the very best experience, any more than you would for children at the equivalent point in the bell-curve of ability at the lower end, who might not be in mainstream schools at all. So don't be afraid to ask for help.

G&T Passports

Worst thing: "Not sharing information from one class into the next so the parent has to have exactly the same awkward conversations about needing to stretch them every single year."

Worst thing: "Every year we have to fight for him like it's a new problem. So we lose the first term to that each year."

Children with SEN tend to have a smoother handover from one teacher to the next because the documentation is better, and a SENCO is more often involved.

The most able children experience a lot of tedious repetition as new teachers underestimate them or look for evidence of things they have already proved before.

Some questions you might include in your G&T passport are on the next page. Please add your own, experiment and let me know what works best.

Enlist colleagues

Best thing: Head of KS2 at the start of this term: "We're quite not sure what we're going to do with him next year, so we're trying to make some links to find what other schools do in this situation." Love that they're already thinking ahead.

For younger children, collaborating with teachers of older classes is helpful. When they get older, find secondary teachers. People will sometimes say, "I can't start sending them to older classes now, what will they do in Year 6?" Let them worry about that in Year 6: by then they will be all the more capable of independent study. Do not retard their progress for the convenience of the institution. It's just not fair.

If you can't find secondary teachers who will help when they are going beyond Year 6, please contact us: our capacity for pro bono advice is limited but we will do what we can.

I've also set up a facebook group, "Doing Right By the Very Bright", which is for teachers and parents.

Openness with parents

Best thing: "A teacher who got my child and told me the good things and admitted the things he had trouble with. This was so reassuring and I believed him. When teachers say 'everything is fine' and it's not, you don't believe anything they say."

Parents just want to be heard and to collaborate. They don't expect an expert or to take all your time.

Don't be defensive or deflect queries with, "they need to work on their weaknesses", "they didn't get 100%", or "all our children are gifted". The latter is either true but trivial if it means "everyone is good at something", or important but false if it claims that the most able do not need special support.

Being an exceptionally able child might seem like getting a lucky ticket, and with support these children can thrive at school and have very richly fulfilling lives. But their emotional and social well-being is intimately tied up with their academic well-being. Thanks on their behalf for reading this.