

The Impact of Grouping Gifted Primary School Students on Self-Concept, Motivation and Achievement From Parents' Perspectives

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A degree of controversy and debate exists about the best educational experiences to fulfil the potential of gifted students. Special class placement can give good educational experiences and opportunities for gifted students. However, Marsh and Parker (1984) described the big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE) where equally able students have lower academic self-concepts in high-ability schools than in low-ability schools. Self-concept is an important factor in determining academic achievement. The place of motivation in academic achievement is well documented (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Blumenfeld, 1992; Dweck, 1986) and determined by mastery or performance-goal orientation (Dweck, 1986). The motivation will ultimately have a bearing on both achievement and self-concept. The purpose of this research was to determine the interrelationship of self-concept, motivation and achievement in gifted primary school children in a variety of groupings from a parent's perspective.

This study was a qualitative study of each parent's response to their child's experience in the gifted and talented class by asking them for their perceptions of the effect of special class placement on their child using an open-ended structured interview. Common threads and experiences were tabulated in a case-ordered matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Providing good educational experiences for students who are gifted is an important issue in developing and nurturing their skills. These young people hold promise and hope for the future of our nation and need to be catered for educationally to allow them to develop to their potential. As with all children, the gifted have a right to an

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equitable share of educational resources, such as access to information and materials, availability of good teachers, physical structures and good classroom practice.

There has been recognition in educational research that gifted children do need specific types of learning and teaching programs (Gross, 2001; New South Wales Department of Education, 1991; Renzulli, 1977; Silverman, 1992). That recognition led to an increase in the number of special classes for gifted children in New South Wales (NSW) in 1990s, following the issue of a policy advising ways of catering for gifted children (NSW Department of School Education, 1991).

There is a degree of controversy about how best to group gifted students. Should they be:

- all grouped together in a class
- randomly allocated to different classes
- in a class which is streamed for ability?

The effects of grouping on the academic self-concept, motivational orientation and the achievement of gifted children are unclear; therefore it is necessary to conduct research in this area of education. Research into the value of special class placement for achievement and positive academic self-concept has important implications for both policy decisions and the development of individual children's potential.

In the United States, research showed that for some individuals their placement in a homogeneous group of gifted students has positive outcomes on motivation, learning and self-concept (Feldhusen, 1991). However, there is research that questioned grouping children of similar academic ability because the big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE) operated (Marsh & Parker, 1984). This is where equally able students have lower academic self-concepts when they compare themselves with more able students they have been grouped together with and higher academic self-concepts when they compare themselves with less able students. This is significant when grouping gifted students into a homogeneous class, because the effects of that grouping may be that aspects of self-concept will be diminished. Marsh's (1997) and Marsh and Parker's (1984) research has shown that academic self-concept will depend on a student's own academic ability and how this compares with the ability levels of the other students in the same class.

This investigation addressed what effect selective gifted classes, called opportunity classes, have on children, on their self-concept, on their motivational goal-orientation and on their learning. Placement of primary school children into special classes involves parents making decisions about what may be the best educational setting for their gifted child. To understand and evaluate what informs parents in their decision-making it is important to ask parents how and why they make choices for the education of their young gifted children. Parents, as prime educators of their children, have a wealth of knowledge about their child, including an understanding of what interests and motivates their child. This understanding is usually based on observation, informal conversation, everyday living and some intuition. Parents can be excellent advocates for their children. Often information from parents is best obtained not by rigid questionnaire, but by open-ended interview where parents are able to talk freely and with elaboration about their child (Bogden & Biklen, 1992).

The wealth of knowledge that each parent has of their child allows them to articulate why they make choices about special class placement for their gifted child within a framework of their knowing how their child learns and what motivates that learning.

Parents and educators value children having a belief in themselves and their abilities. A positive self-concept as an outcome of education is valued across all educational settings. Janos, Fung and Robinson (1985) identified that the vast majority of academically gifted children show a positive self-concept compared to children not identified as gifted. However, gifted children participating in special programs have also been observed to show a diminished self-concept in comparison with other gifted children (Fulst, 1980; Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995). For gifted children to be motivated to use their ability and to keep their self-concept high is an important goal for special class placement or any other placement.

This study was of each parent's response to their child's experience in the gifted class by asking them for their perceptions of the special class placement on their child using an open-ended structured interview. Thus the purpose of the study was to qualitatively obtain parents' perceptions of special class placement for their child given their knowledge of how their child learns, what motivates their learning and the parents' wishes to best meet the needs of their gifted child. Parents were asked to share their insights into the effect of this placement on their child's performance and general wellbeing. In addition, discussion considered how the original special class placement affected subsequent class placement and transition to, and achievement at, high school. Common threads and experiences were tabulated in a case-ordered matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Method

Participants

A parent of each student who had been accepted to a specialist gifted class (opportunity class) was interviewed. For the child to be accepted to the specialist class he/she had undertaken an individual intelligence test (K-Bit; Kaufman & Kaufman, 1990), an interview with the school counsellor, and had submitted a sample of work. Thus the children were selected on merit, based on the IQ score and parent and teacher recommendations, as well as a sample of school work. All children selected gained an IQ score of 120+.

Procedure

This study was conducted after the children had left the gifted class and moved to a high school setting. Interviewing of parents occurred 12 months after the gifted students had left the opportunity class. Only 21 parents of the 25 students in the opportunity class were available for this study. The other four participants had either moved from their original address or were otherwise unable to be contacted. Each parent that was approached was willing to participate in this study. The parents of the students participated in individual interviews and were posed open-ended questions.

TABLE 1

Parents' Perceptions of Direct Outcomes of OPPORTUNITY Class Placement for High Success Students

High-success group		Direct outcomes	
ID	Gender	Positive	Negative
1	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • could perform at ability level • excellent opportunity for music performance • led to selective school position • learned thinking skills • became a lateral thinker • competitive atmosphere i increased performance • 'tail poppy' syndrome not evident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not at the top level in all subjects • travelled a long distance each day
2	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learned to perform at ability level • took responsibility for his learning • enjoyed bouncing ideas with others • learned to be more self-directed • became a lateral thinker • good social interactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sometimes assumed the role of class clown
3	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enjoyed being with bright kids • took learning in her stride • happy to go to school • developed good study habits 	
4	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good opportunities • excellent challenges • gained leadership skills • developed stronger work ethic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social friction with some children in the class • problems with friends
5	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enjoyed the work • challenged by other achievers • liked the competition • happy to go to school • learned to take things in his stride 	
6	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good to be part of the class • she learned good work habits • developed more confidence in herself • developed a good, outgoing personality 	
7	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good teaching • brought out skills needed for future study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anyone could get in the class • not many friends

Results

The open-ended responses of the participants were tabulated onto a case-ordered meta-matrix to obtain an overall picture of the responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Discussion

This aim of the study was to obtain information on the parents' perceptions of the opportunity class placement for their child. Academic outcomes, as well as broader social and emotional outcomes, were all labelled as outcomes.

The group of students were divided into three groups: high-, moderate- and low-success groups.

High-Success Group

Results of interviews indicated that seven students (33%) were perceived by their parents to have had high success in the opportunity class. Table 1 presents direct positive and negative outcomes for the high success group.

In their parents' opinion, these children are enjoying success and performing well in their high school situation. For this group, there were very few reported direct negative outcomes of the opportunity class experience. Two of these seven children gained entrance from the opportunity class to a selective high school.

Moderate-Success Group

Parents reported on the opportunity class being a moderate success for nine students (45%). Of these students, seven are reported to be doing very well in their high school. One of this group also gained entrance to a selective high school from the opportunity class and is reported to be doing exceptionally well academically. Table 2 presents direct positive and negative outcomes of the opportunity class placement for this moderate success group.

In this moderate success group parents were able to identify some positives but also a number of negatives. Competition and pressure were negative aspects reported negatively by a number of parents in this group. This was in contrast to the high-success group, where the competition was viewed as a positive factor. In the moderate-success group, many parents spoke of the positive unexpected outcome of better settling into and handling of high school because of the opportunity class experience. The more student-centred style of learning also gave some students good skills to take to high school, even though parents spoke of many negative aspects of inclusion in the opportunity class.

Low-Success Group

Parents described low success in the opportunity class for five students (25%) of the sample. Of this low-success group, two students are now performing very well in a mixed ability local high school. The other three students are performing in the average range but parents report that this is below their capability. Table 3 presents direct positive and negative outcomes of the opportunity class placement for this low-success group.

Most of the parents who reported low success for their children in the opportunity class group stated that the style of teaching and management of the class did not suit their child. Problems of motivation and teaching/learning style reportedly contributed to the low success of their child in the opportunity class.

TABLE 2

Parents' Perceptions of Direct Outcomes of OPPORTUNITY Class Placement for Moderate Success Students

Moderate-success group

ID	Gender	Direct outcomes	
		Positive	Negative
8	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> learned to strive ahead of other capable students learned to achieve at high level problems faced in opportunity class allowed her to face year 7 with confidence developed a maturity in outlook gave her opportunity for selective high school offered 'window of opportunity' for the future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> problems in establishing 'pecking' order with all the bright children teacher initially unaware of her needs social problems with friends
9	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> picked up his performance of high class standard found he could work quite easily was spurred on by highly competitive situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> set apart from peers in opportunity class by original peers and staff
10	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> endured the new situation gave her confidence coped well in later high school experience 	
11	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> developed good English and Music skills performing successfully in high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> removed from friends being in opportunity class produced some uncertainties
12	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> good academic experience achieved well helped later adjustment to high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> had to cope with the pressure
13	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> thrived against the other bright kids enjoyed the project work persevered through the first even though it was difficult became school vice-captain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> found competitive atmosphere difficult strict teacher left local school where other siblings attended first 6 months were miserable some separation of opportunity class from the rest of the school
14	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> happy to be chosen for the class socially, helped her to mix with a lot of different children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no real value confirmed she wasn't gifted upheaval from her home school

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TABLE 2 (cont.)

Parents' Perceptions of Direct Outcomes of OPPORTUNITY Class Placement for Moderate Success Students

Moderate-success group

ID	Gender	Direct outcomes	
		Positive	Negative
15	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coped with the work • enjoyed the experience • high standard set and he met the standard • more attention given which allowed him to work at his own pace • felt special because of his selection for opportunity class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pressure • competition • set expectation for selective high school entrance and then disappointed to have missed out • has performed average in an average school
16	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • other bright children helped to push him along • confirmed that he was bright 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • didn't really apply himself • lacked concentration • socially immature and opportunity class did not help that

Summary

Many of the positive outcomes of special class placement could be generalised to include the opportunity for children to work at their own ability level and to enjoy the stimulus of ideas from other thinking students. Also many of the children in this opportunity class reportedly took responsibility for their own learning, which was seen as a positive outcome. Parents reported that the foundations were laid for good study skills and for lateral thinking. Positive social interactions were also a pleasing outcome.

The negative outcomes seemed to relate to an overly competitive atmosphere that was a negative pressure for some children. It appeared also that those children who had low success in the opportunity class lost some motivation to work hard and some parents speculated that their achievement may have been higher in their former mixed ability group.

Choice of Opportunity Class

Eleven of the 21 parents (52%) reported that they would choose an opportunity class again for their child. These parents all reported the opportunity class to be a high success (7 parents or 64% of this group) or moderate success (4 parents or 36% of this group) for their child.

Five parents (24%) were definite that they would not choose the opportunity class, given the decision to make again. Four parents (19%) were either uncertain or had conditions that they would investigate before they made the decision again. One parent (5%) did not wish to speculate on this question. Two parents reported on the importance of the class teacher for the opportunity class and that in retrospect they would investigate who the teacher was and that teacher's teaching style before they made their decision.

TABLE 3

Parents' Perceptions of Direct Outcomes of OPPORTUNITY Class Placement for Low Success Students

Low-success group		Direct outcomes	
ID	Gender	Positive	Negative
17	M		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concentrated on language and writing skills and Mathematics was his best area • writing being messy was a big problem • very unhappy • suicidal • took him away from his friends • teacher and peers did not value the knowledge he had
18	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confirmed he was bright but not gifted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • results were poor • did not try as hard as before • many problems in this class
19	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good for his self image • knows he is bright • more interested in social things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • missed a lot of basics in opportunity class • poor teaching • poor teaching style • was lazy and looked for short cuts
20	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good memory skills • boost to self confidence initially • was school captain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there were only 4 Year 6 students and they did much of their work alone and they felt marginalised • poor teacher • terrible report • no awards • Year 5 were seen as the smarter children and treated differently – more elite
21	F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • research work was good experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • perfectionist • couldn't keep up with assignments • became upset that she took so long to complete work • whole family affected by high work load • work load too high • became depressed

▶ 100

The fact of moving schools was of relevance for some parents. In the group of 21 children, eight children went into the class from within that school where the opportunity class was created and 13 children came from neighbouring state primary schools. Three parents reported that changing the child's school was a problem to their child and that they would not have made that decision in retrospect.

Three of the five children in the low-success class seemed to be more gifted in mathematics than language and parents had the perception that this area was not valued as highly. One parent reported that 'the class concentrated on language and writing skills and this was not his strong area'. A parent of another child referred to her son having 'skills and knowledge in areas of economics and politics and these are not valued in school'.

Comments from a number of parents related the social difficulties encountered by their children when they moved from their primary school to the opportunity class: 'She was moved from a lot of her friends and so socially it was not a good experience'. Some mentioned the teacher referring to the opportunity class at assemblies as 'the best class' and that this was very difficult socially for the gifted children in the playground.

Placement in High School

Parents spoke about the transition to high school in very positive terms generally for those children who attended the local high school and for those who went on to selective schools. 'He does very well in high school when he works' was a common thread from parents. One parent suggested: 'It is a matter of time for him to decide he wants to do better. It is a decision and not a question of ability'. About a local high school class another parent reported: 'She doesn't have to work very hard to be in the top classes'. One particular parent who talked about the opportunity class putting a lot of pressure on her child was able to share, 'My daughter is in the top classes in the local high school and is happy to work at her own pace to remain there'. This theme of pressure on their child in the opportunity class resonates through a number of parent's comments: 'She is enjoying not having the pressure in high school that was on her in the opportunity class and she is achieving very well'.

Various parents believed that the opportunity class experience prepared their children for high school. One parent commented that 'the opportunity class was a good experience socially and it prepared her for high school'. Another mother, speaking of her son in a private nonselective high school, reported: 'My son does what he has to but without any effort'. A parent whose son went into a selective high school reported: 'He's just coasting through without much effort but doing well'. A mother who was very pleased with the opportunity class experience for her child reported, 'My daughter is at a selective high school and both years now she has received a certificate for an outstanding report ... she is in the right place ... and I don't know if she would have got there without the opportunity class experience'.

Overall the transition to high school from the opportunity class was positive whatever the high school setting was. Of the high-success group, all students were reported to have made the transition to high school successfully. From the moderate success group, 55% of students were reported to have made a successful transition to high school while 80% of students in the low-success group have made a good transition into high school. None of the students from the low-success group gained entry to a selective high school.

Parents in the study reported competition in the opportunity class as both a positive and a negative factor. Students who were reported as having high success in the opportunity class enjoyed and thrived on the competitive atmosphere. Comments such as 'thrived against the other bright kids' and 'being in a class of smart kids

really helped to push him along'. Students who had moderate or low success in the opportunity class found the competition to be a negative force. Comments included 'S ... found the competitive atmosphere difficult' and 'the pressure and competition were no good for C ...'. One parent referred to the high work load and competitive atmosphere contributing to her child's depression. A competitive atmosphere in a classroom can be modified by the teacher praising the students' efforts. Mueller and Dweck (2002) in their research found that praising gifted children's intelligence did not boost performance or self-esteem. They found that when effort was praised this encouraged students to sustain their motivation and performance.

Parents also reported that one of the outcomes of successful opportunity class placement was developing life-long learners and empowering students to work to their potential. However, the present study has shown that selective gifted classes are not a panacea for all children. When a gifted student is placed in a class where they are unhappy, and feel isolated and that their gifts are unvalued, this does not allow the student to reach their potential. Parents had an awareness of this factor and some reported that they would not choose to send their child to an opportunity class given another opportunity. One parent reports, 'We learned from K's experience and when our other daughter was selected for the opportunity class and was not sure whether she wanted to go or not we decided not to send her'. Although the literature reports positive social outcomes of placement in a gifted class (Feldhusen, 1991; Gamoran, 1990; Gross 1993), the present research did not find these social benefits. We measured social benefits by general self-concept, which is an overall measure of wellbeing, and placement in a selective gifted class did not reveal higher general self-concept for the group.

■ Conclusion

In catering for the educational needs of gifted children, many factors need to be explored. These range from the level of intellectual precocity to whether the gifted child is happy and achieving in their educational setting. This research sought to answer some questions about the value of grouping gifted children together in selective gifted classes such as opportunity classes, the impact of this grouping on the parents' perceptions of their self-concept and motivation, as well as whether motivation can be enhanced by grouping gifted children together.

However, it is important to recognise that parenting is more important than teaching in dealing with social and emotional problems. Not that teaching is unimportant — it is simply that parenting is more important, as teaching can seldom counteract inappropriate parenting. Supportive family environments are essential for social and emotional development. In primary school, the partnership of parents and teachers for the emotional and social development of the child is crucial for the child's continued motivation to learn (Webb, 1993). Aspects of social and emotional development need to be studied to gain a clearer understanding of these motivation results.

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