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Where are they? Gifted disadvantaged children in India

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Abstract
India is a pluralistic, multicultural, and multilingual society. Cultural differences within India make it impossible to adopt a common approach to the identification of potentially gifted children. We need a program that is locally driven and culturally appropriate to be able to make a real difference in the future life of young potentially able children, so that our neglected best can become culturally excellent achievers. The Ministry of Human Resource Development has taken the wake-up call to bring all marginalized children into an educational 'safety net'. Preparing a suitable model for 'identification' and 'nurturance' of potentially gifted children across diverse sociocultural profiles of society is also an area of concern for today's government.

Keywords
Disadvantage, cultural difference, potential giftedness

The present paper provides a comprehensive tri-layered model to identify potentially gifted children from the school system and out of the school setting. To accommodate a greater number of disadvantaged children from an out-of-school setting, another model with sequential basis was further developed.

Giftedness is a universal phenomenon, but it can be understood only when it is contextualized. India is a country with diverse social profiles. There are multiple discriminatory variables such as ethnicity, religion, cast, diverse mother tongue, and wide economic disparity. There are millions of children in India who do not go to school. A substantial number of children cannot go to school because no neighborhood schools

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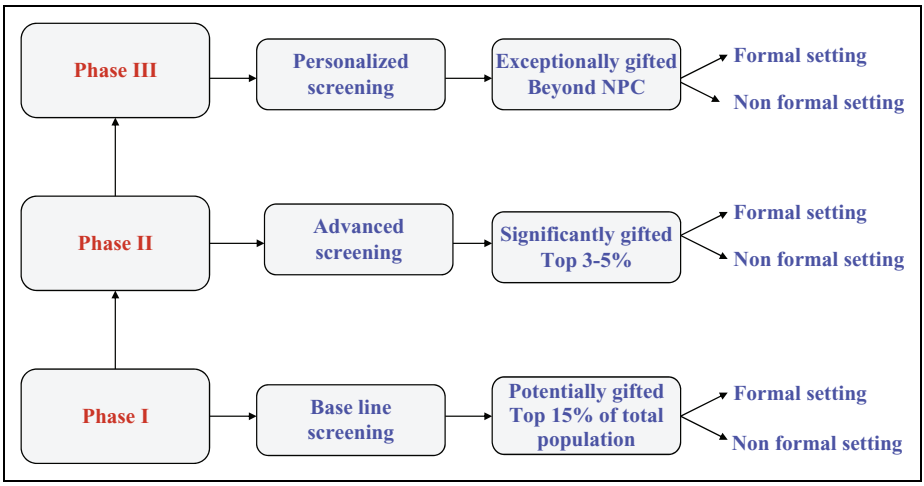

Figure 1. Tri-layered identification model.

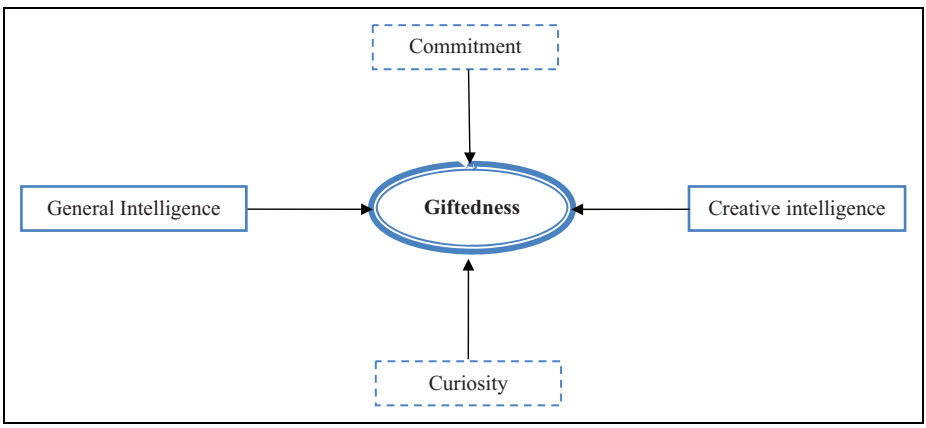

Figure 2. Generic traits of giftedness.

are available to them. In a very large number of cases, education is not the family's first priority; survival is the top priority. Children work as laborers/domestic helpers and contribute to the family's struggle to meet their basic needs (Maitra, 2006).

Within this complex scenario, our potential and valuable human resources are neglected, which India cannot afford to do. To overcome this circle of poverty, ignorance and exploitation, we need an adequate theory and strategies for educating a large number of disadvantaged children.

In this present scenario, *Education for All* is the topmost priority of the Government of India. The Ministry of Human Resource Development is making sincere efforts to bring all children aged 6–14 years into the 'safety net of education'. The Right to Education Act has been enacted by the Indian Parliament. On 1 April 2010, India joined the league

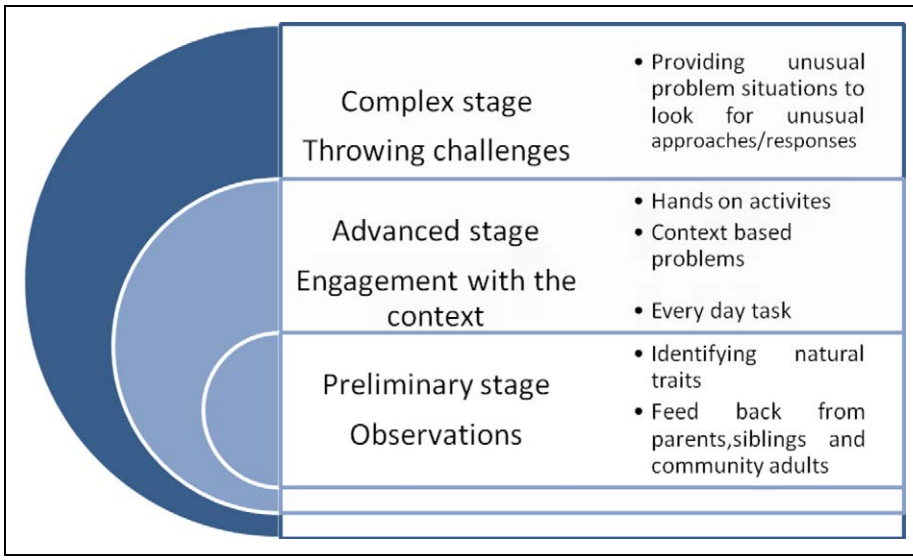

Figure 3. Sequential identification model for out-of-school gifted children.

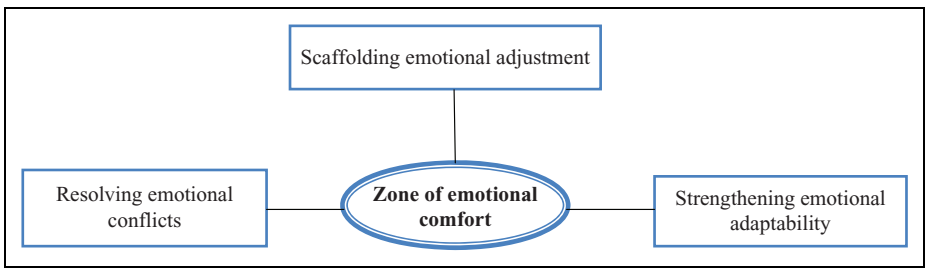

Figure 4. Emotional adjustment and expansion.

of 135 countries in the world to make education a 'fundamental right' of every child ('Education for All', Global Monitoring Report 2010, UNESCO). While addressing the nation to mark the implementation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), which makes elementary education an entitlement for every child in the age group of 6–14 years, the Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh, stated, 'We are committed to ensuring that all children, irrespective of gender and social category, have access to education, an education that enables them to acquire the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes necessary to become an active citizen of India' (*The Hindu*, 2 April 2010). This will go a long way to reach the unreached and to enshrine equality in our constitution.

At this historic phase, there is a clear recognition of diversity among individuals who have the potential to achieve excellence. It has now been truly accepted that such children exist in every part of Indian society, be it in cities, villages, or the distant

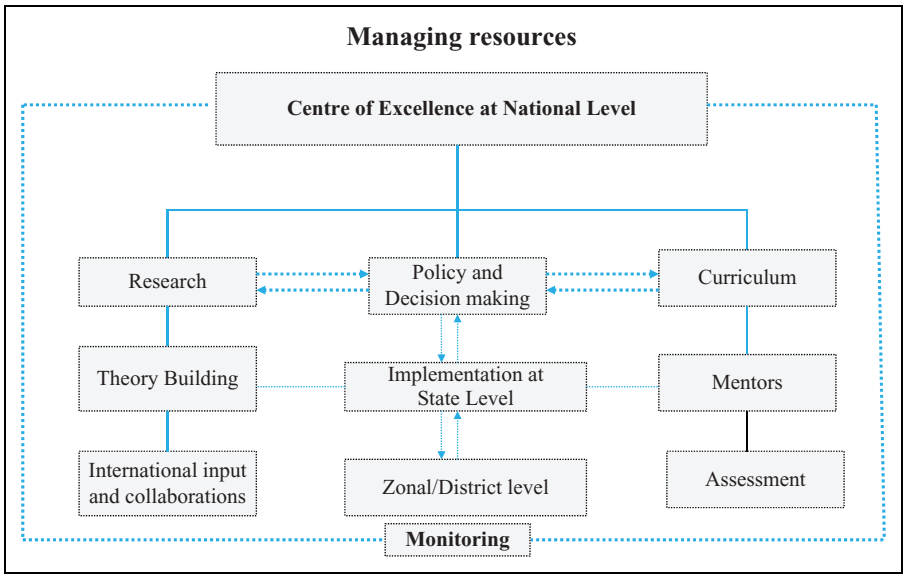

Figure 5. Resource planning and management.

hills of our habitat. The government has taken the initiative to strategize various ways of identifying potentially gifted children within the school system and out-of-school set-ups.

An international round table on 'Identification and Mentoring of Gifted Children in India' was organized jointly by the Indian National Science Academy and the Indo-US Science and Technology Forum, at which experts from USA and India working in this area were invited to share their knowledge and experience. The objective was to prepare a road map of workable procedures to identify and mentor gifted children in India.

It was the first initiative at which organizations in India, working independently in their own areas, came together on a common platform to share their practices, concerns, and limitations. After much deliberation, sharing and debate, an extensive tri-layered identification model was presented to identify potentially gifted children in an Indian context.

The proposed model aims to:

- develop a talent pool of potentially gifted children from school and out-of-school settings;
- identify significantly gifted children who are remarkably gifted in one or more areas;
- identify significantly gifted children from out-of-school settings;
- identify sparks of genius of exceptionally gifted children; and
- prepare a host of programs suited to diversified learning needs of the above groups.

The baseline screening during the first phase is the first level of the identification process of preparing a talent pool of potentially gifted children who have high intellect

and disposition, similar to Renzulli's three-ring conception of giftedness (Renzulli, 2005).

At the second phase, the focus is on students who are precocious in one or more domains of human endeavor. These children demonstrate greater insight and appetite in a specific domain.

In the third phase, an attempt will be made through personalized screening to identify prodigies who are passionate about their domain of excellence and who show extraordinary rigor and understanding to accommodate subject knowledge much beyond their age peer.

The model aims at establishing national strategies to identify gifted children from school systems and out-of-school settings. The strategy of the model is to develop a two-strand approach. The first strand is a mechanism to identify children within the school system. The second strand involves a greater effort to identify those invisible, isolated gifted children who are distanced from the education system.

Locating gifted children within the school system

The term 'gifted' is commonly used in academic discourse for children who have potential to achieve excellence in at least one academic area/discipline.

General intelligence and creative intellect are considered fundamental to any definition of giftedness, whereas curiosity and motivation are strengthening domains. To optimize the rare gifts, these children need to have a challenging and enriched environment.

As school-children are accustomed to regular assessments, we can broadly identify a reasonable pool of potentially gifted children using formal and non-formal methods of identification. The identified pool of children can be provided with appropriate opportunities and mentoring in their respective potential field.

Identifying gifted children from out-of-school settings

There are millions of children in India who do not have access to formal education for various reasons. A significant number of gifted children who are victims of a system that perpetuates socioeconomic disparity are forced to slip into a state of ignorance, neglect, and limitations. The identification of these children requires localized context and focused identification procedures that are rooted in their cultural lives. The proposed model is a three-step model based on systematic observations & interaction and analysis of collated profiles.

The model is an outcome of the project on 'Non-formal curriculum for out-of-school advanced learners' (Maitra and Sharma, 2009). The theoretical framework has already been developed and is ready for application in the field.

It aims to identify cognitive–behavioral traits of potentially gifted children who possess high natural intelligence and strong motivation and interest to understand their natural environment, which has an unlimited source of knowledge for them. Without access to schools, these children are very close to their natural environment and everyday work culture. These children cannot be identified through test-taking or traditional school knowledge, but they clearly demonstrate sparks of gifted behavior in

non-traditional, culture-specific situations.This model is context based and the child is exposed to process-oriented identification procedures. Observations of and feedback from community groups are key variables for preliminary screening. (It is sequential as we move in a heirarchical order from basic to complex everyday situations. The model outlines the identification guidelines based on a tri-layered identification model for out-of-school children.) It works as:

The preliminary stage. The first stage looks for general natural traits of a gifted child, which are easy to identify without much deliberation. These basic traits are 'general intelligence', 'sharpness', 'quickness to respond', 'eagerness', 'curiosity', 'divergent responses', 'wittiness', etc. (Natural Trait Model, Maitra and Sharma, 2009). At the same time, feedback from parents, siblings, and adults in the community is equally significant as they are the people who share everyday space with the child and are very close observers of his or her day-to-day style of functioning.

The advanced stage. After the preliminary stage, identification can move to a more advanced level, where the child can be observed for his or her ability to do regular tasks differently and more intelligently. It also looks for his or her determination and love for new ideas.

The complex stage. The third level is the most intense, where the child is exposed to new and unusual problem situations. The observation parameters include his or her ability to relate the new problem situation to his or her previous experiences, his or her ability to make new connections and search out new relations, his or her comfort level with new problems, and, finally, his or her determination to respond to the challenge given.

Thus, the proposed model aims at looking for basic natural traits of a potentially gifted child who is not exposed to a formal means of learning and assessment, but has the motivation, willingness, and ability to expand his or her existing zone of giftedness. Such children are potential sources of raw intelligence, fresh ideas, and concentration, which can be transformed into achievement and recognition.

The identified group of potentially able children should be placed in a short intervention program to familiarize them with the mainstream.

Box 1: Strategic management of short intervention program

Objectives

To prepare identified group to learn and adapt functional knowledge of formal school system appropriate to their intellectual age.

Focus points:

- Based on specific learning needs of the child
- Individualistic
- Multidisciplinary content integration
- Age appropriate
- Flexible time frame
- Psychologically balanced
- Scope for extension
- Culturally rich

Managing the program

The short intervention programme (SIP) is a specialized program based on each individual child's strength, learning style, and academic needs. It aims to accommodate the child's behavioral as well as social profile to prepare him or her for more enriched experiences.

It is to be managed at four levels by a group/team of teachers/resource persons:

- Planning stage
- Transaction stage
- Assessment stage
- Monitoring stage

The short intervention program should be a bridge program, keeping in mind the learning profile of each child. The program should have the scope for advancement and extension depending upon the pace of each learner.

Apart from formal content acquisition, out-of-school children need adequate emotional safety to adjust to a strong cultural shift. There should be a zone of emotional comfort for them, where they can work freely without fear of rejection. Mentors have to play a significant role to provide them with a zone of emotional comfort where constant scaffolding is needed for adjustment, acceptance, and expansion. The term scaffolding was used by Vygotsky (1998) to help students learn effective means of knowledge construction and expand their cognitive horizon Alsop (2007). Later, Alsop used the idea of scaffolding to nurture emotions conducive to learning. Based on this learner-centered approach, mentors can always provide emotional strength to a gifted child who is constantly struggling with peer rejection, as well as self-criticism. It will enable them to reach the zone of emotional comfort where they can handle their emotional conflicts more constructively and independently. After reaching this plateau, they can work more freely with greater self-acceptance.

It is equally important to enable them to be in their own culture, so provision should be made to bring their culture into the formal system. The school curriculum should be a rich mix of their cultural surroundings, cultural variations, and sparks of diversions.

They should be allowed to work in their preferred style, and at the same time be exposed to multiple contexts in the process of capacity building. The programs for these children need sophistication and advancement in education services to widen their horizons.

Major considerations include:

- setting up a centre of excellence;
- initiating resources;
- preparing and managing the curriculum;
- introducing technology;
- building up networking; and
- mobilizing the community.

I conclude this paper by restating the main points. Cultural differences within India make it impossible to adopt a common approach to the identification of potentially gifted children. We need a program that is culturally appropriate to make real differences in the future life of our young, able pupils so that our neglected best can be transformed into culturally excellent achievers. The Ministry of Human Resource Development has to take centre-stage to put in place any development program. However, parallel community support at a grassroots level is the lifeline for such efforts to be successful.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that she does not have any conflict of interest.

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Author Biography

Jyoti Sharma is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College, University of Delhi where she obtained her Ph.D. and M.A. in mathematics, and M.Ed., M.Phil and Ph.D. in Education. She has a keen interest in mathematically gifted children and has developed a model depicting cognitive, and non-cognitive traits of mathematically gifted children. As a teacher educator, she is involved in action research based on innovative classroom practices for diverse ability learners, and preparing innovative teaching material to facilitate mathematics learning.