

A Critical Review of Gifted and Talented Students in Malaysian Educational Programs

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This paper provides a critical review of gifted and talented students in Malaysia by exploring the concept of creativity in the current teaching practices. Based on Gagné's (2004) definition, 'giftedness' is understood as outstanding potential and 'talent' as outstanding performance. This in turn means that these students have a unique learning needs and show exceptional levels of creativity. Due to their uniqueness, these students need to be challenged and engaged by a creative curriculum as well as creative pedagogical approaches that have the potential to change their lives and transcend their giftedness to another level to produce knowledge that potentially benefits the society (Abu Baker, 2016). According to Kim, Kaufman, Bear and Sriraman (2013, p.1), "Most gifted education programs have the promotion of creativity as one of their goals, and many include creativity in their screening process". To this end, the paper explores the various strategies implemented to meet the specific learning needs of gifted and talented students in Malaysia. It also considers the current research gaps in relation to gifted and talented education and creativity by examining the PERMATApintar (TM) Programme at National University of Malaysia (UKM). This program is based on Gagne (2010) Development Model of Gifted and Talented (DMGT) in which the domain of giftedness (natural abilities) is categorised as Intellectual, Creative, Social, Perceptual, Muscular and Motor Control. Finally, the paper considers the possible implications on creativity in gifted and talented education in Malaysia.

عنوان البحث: مراجعة نقدية لبرامج رعاية الطلبة الموهوبين والمتميزين في ماليزيا

المخلص

هدفت الدراسة الحالية الى تقديم مراجعة نقدية لبرامج التعليم في ماليزيا والتي تتعلق بالطلبة الموهوبين والمتفوقين من خلال التعرف على مفهوم الابداع في الممارسات التعليمية، وطبقا لتعريف جانبي (2004) تشير الموهبة الى الامكانيات الخارجية، ويفهم التفوق على انه الاداء المتميز. وان الطلاب الموهوبين والمتفوقين لديهم احتياجات تعليمية فريدة من نوعها، ونظرا لطابعهم الفريد يظهر الطلاب مستويات استثنائية من الابداع، ويحتاجون الى تحديات ومناهج تربوية مثيرة للابداع التي لها

القدرة على تغيير حياتهم وتجاوز الموهبة لمستوى اخر لانتاج المعرفة التي يحتمل ان تعود بالفائدة على المجتمع (Abu Baker, 2016) ووفقا لكل من كيم، كوفمان، بير (2013) ان من اهم اهداف برامج تعليم الموهوبين ان تكون لديها القدرة على تشجيع الابداع، وتشمل هذه البرامج عملية الفرز الخاصة بهم، وتحقيقا لهذه الغاية، حاول البحث الحالي الكشف عن الاستراتيجيات التي يتم تنفيذها لتلبية احتياجات تعليم الطلاب الموهوبين والمتفوقين في ماليزيا. كذلك اخذت الورقة الحالية بنظر الاعتبار الفجوات الموجودة بالابحاث التي تتناول تعليم الموهوبين والمتفوقين، وذلك من خلال الكشف عن البرنامج المعد من قبل الجامعة الماليزية الوطنية (PERMATApintar (TM) Programme) لرعاية الموهوبين والمتفوقين في ماليزيا. والذي يستند الى النموذج المقترح لجانيه (2010) نموذج تنمية الموهوبين والمتفوقين (DMGT) الذي يصنف مجال الموهبة (القدرات الطبيعية)، الفكرية، الابداعية، الاجتماعية، الادراكية، والتحكم العضلي والحركي. واخيرا، ورقة البحث الحالي اخذت بنظر الاعتبار التطبيقات الممكنة في الابداع لتعليم الموهوبين والمتفوقين في ماليزيا.

Introduction

Recent indications are that for every hundred thousand, at least, one talented child existed (Clark 2005; Claxton 2003). In this sense , with a population of relatively four and a half million children attending the school in the age ranged between nine to fifteen years (Noriah et al. 2009), Malaysia was, indeed, a country of a considerable number of talented and gifted students that definitely required sufficient, specialized and professional considerations. However, evidence showed that such a policy of talented and gifted education for those students was not adequately introduced in the educational system of Malaysia. There were, nevertheless, some programs that took place for identifying talented students to help them to skip educational grades and, therefore, complete their elementary learning earlier (in comparison with normal children). Yet, these programs (that were first introduced in the early sixties of the twentieth century and whose development had been inadequate in the sense that they lacked any planning to support students cope with their accelerated education) came to an end ten years later. Also, the employment of counseling services in the Malaysian educational system started relatively during the same period (early sixties), focusing on vocational guidance.

The country put forward a plan to introduce and develop an appropriate educational system that permits equal access and excellence that had been the dream of many. This access emphasized that every student had the opportunity to the highest educational quality or standard,

while excellence referred the requirements of children to have the adequate opportunity that enable them to develop their learning potential further. As they face unique changes, specialized learning opportunities that could provide various learning needs and curves was something vital to be designed.

Talented, gifted and superior individuals' existence is something definite. The field of study that identifies them was continuously debated. Goodhew stated that “Identifying potentially gifted and talented (G & T) students has never been an exact science”, and that it couldn't be captured by a single number that measures only one domain of giftedness (Goodhew, 2009, p. 8).

However, many of studies (Brown et al., 2005; Putallaz, Baldwin, & Selph, 2005; Rigby, 2005) observed that there were many strategies and policies that could be possibly adopted for identification of gifted and talented individuals. In their research , Brown et al. (2005) said that the techniques and strategies for identifying talented and gifted students must include the following aspects : expression criteria for individuals, continuous assessment, various criteria for considering and identifying contextual factors. Davis, Rimn, and Siegle, (2011) agree that any identification strategy for gifted and talented students must necessarily adopt a multi-levels approach and not to be concerned with mere academic ability.

Curriculum for the gifted must differ not only in degree, but in kind. It is important to avoid simply “more of the same.” It should be in place of rather than in addition to required classroom work. Students should not be penalized for being identified as gifted by being given extra work. Teachers should be sensitive to student interests and talents in planning both cognitive and affective activities. To assure that curriculum opportunities are appropriate to the abilities, accomplishments, interests, and cognitive and affective needs of gifted students, modifications should be made in content, process and/or product (Kimbrell, & Rose, 2009, p.26).

Evaluation of student growth must be based on appropriate and specific criteria and should include self-appraisal and criterion-referenced and/or standardized instruments. It must be kept in mind that programs for the gifted deal with a unique population. Gifted students' progress cannot be fully assessed by standardized tests, which have been normed on a heterogeneous group because these tests will not present a true picture of student growth in gifted students. In fact, if a student has scored at the top of the scale on a test, the phenomenon of “regression

toward the mean” may result in a lower score on the retest. In choosing methods to measure student progress, care should be taken to ensure that the methods chosen: 1) are in agreement with program objectives; 2) involve the student in self-evaluation; 3) consider process as well as product; and 4) are appropriate and valid assessments of the population being tested.

English Language was viewed as the country’s second most important language , after Bahasa Malaysia as the country’s mother tongue. The significance of English as a worldwide lingua franca had , indeed , been a major condition in the learning and employment of language in Malaysia, especially as a means to gain information in technology , sciences in addition to academic purposes. Specialists were aware of the crucial need to be fluent and well- competent in English in order to obtain the wealth of information available and achieve a considerable level of success in various topics and fields of study. In addition to that importance, English was also employed in various specializations and was , indeed , an influential and compulsory factor in the academic setting of Malaysia. Fluency in English was highly emphasized in all fields of study, and students realized that being competent in English greatly affected their acceptance opportunities at universities (whether foreign or local) as well as giving an appropriate rank in the workplace (Vinodini 2003). However, Saadiyah and Kaladevi(2009) recently observed that the concept of declining condition of the English language among students in Malaysia has , indeed , become a rather worrisome phenomenon for all. This was evident in Malaysians’ everyday speech , which was clearly characterized by errors (both in grammar and phonology) or in certain occasions too loaded with irrelevant “suffixes” and words from other different languages as observed by Muniandy et al.(2010) . One of the predictable reasons that most of Malaysian learners of English as a second language were incompetent users of English was because they did not learn this language appropriately or effectively (Sahandri and Saifudin 2009).

The purpose of the study

The purpose of careful and comprehensive identification procedures is to find and serve as many students as possible who need special programs to develop their exceptional abilities. It is important to identify students with potential for outstanding achievement. The emphasis in

identification should be on student need for qualitatively differentiated educational services beyond what is provided through the classroom curriculum (Kimbrell, & Rose, 2009, p.17).

One main purpose of this study would to hopefully inspire and spark more debate and research into the services that are currently available or can be made available to the gifted and gifted education. This is particularly important in context as there is still a lot of room for improvement considering the of Education's goal to research, re-strategize and implement new programs for gifted students.

Method

It is worth mentioning that a descriptive critical review of the program of gifted and talented students in Malaysia was adopted in this study.

PERMATApintar (TM) Programme

The Program was developed by the Malaysian government to highlight and , consequently ,fulfill the requirements and needs of talented and gifted students. This strategy or program was first proposed by the Malaysian Prime Minister's wife, who had paid due efforts and interests in supporting the students in developing their unique abilities and potentials. Thus ,she was , indeed , one of the highly effective persons who participated in the success of this Program ever since it was put forward . Based on her consent or approval , the National University of Malaysia (UKM) was provided the right to develop, perform and supervise the employment of this strategy which officially started on the third of April 2009. Datin Seri Rosmah (the prime minister's wife) was a member of the PERMATA institution and , also , a supporter of PERMATApintar (TM) Program (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Nowadays , this program is considered as the only unit of Excellence in the country responsible for identifying talented and gifted individuals from all over the country. It gave students the adequate opportunities to develop their talents and potentials. It was imperative to carry out these tasks considering talented children as the country's precious national heritage. Lack of identifying those children could result in Malaysia losing some of its invaluable force, powers either because they neglected school dropout, or they have travelled to other countries that offer considerable attention to their talents (Ministry of Education, 2013).

The program was currently concerned with four main concepts : 1) ASASIpintar, a one year pre-university programme 2) Talent Search and Management, 3) School Holiday Camp (PPCS),and 4) PERMATApintar(TM) Educational Programme,. In this program, students were trained to improve their academic ability and to take various educational experiments and exposures in order to produce rather well balanced individuals who achieve excellent academic knowledge and are able to employ the knowledge, particularly know-how aspects and other various experiences in order to contribute to the development and prosperity of their country (Ministry of Education, 2013).

The school's objectives can be summarized in promoting a comprehensive and specialized education for the talented and gifted students paying equal importance to intellectual, physical, spiritual , emotional, and social development. As far as the high school is concerned , three academic tracks were offered i.e. National Track which was based on National Curriculum and O- Level Track which was based on British philosophy of Education ;Accelerated Track that was based on the National Curriculum; Scholastic Aptitude and Scholastic Assessment Tests (SAT) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL);. Students must also be given two courses in Mathematics and practice two foreign languages.

The program paid considerable attention to academic achievement and the learning environment was comprehensively altered based on the National Education Philosophy (NEP) which emphasized the development of balance in all emotional, physical, intellectual , spiritual, and social aspects. The program focused on philosophy of student development and principles of living a rather balanced peace in the abovementioned aspects. The programme , that emphasized comprehensive and differentiated learning approach , lasted for two years in which all students were learning according to their appropriate educational level. It was based on student-centred learning and using various strategies and techniques of learning including : research projects with experts , collaborative methods and cooperative learning, student exchange and problem-based learning (PBL) ,and mobility programmes. The gifted students were given tests on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) to help them in innovative , creative, and critical thinking in their learning career.

Discussion

The study showed PERMATApintar program identification is beginning to be recognised as a key issue in provision for able children. The programme used multiple criteria and that teachers do not become too reliant on one method. It is worth putting time and effort in at the beginning to develop identification procedures, and once identification procedures have taken place, they must be recognised and nurtured if they are to be effective. Also, the study showed there was a great deal of uncertainty on how best to achieve differentiation which meets the needs of gifted pupils, especially with the differences amongst educators in the Malaysia and those in the UK.

Although national initiatives such as EiC and the National Academy are beginning to coordinate appropriate differentiation methods, it is thought that these initiatives need to place more emphasis on teaching within the classroom rather than enrichment activities. In order for practitioners to provide appropriate consistent pedagogy, more empirical research needs to be carried out to discover the practicalities of able pupils' needs. For this to be a success, views from teachers and pupils should be considered.

The literature highlights that it is important that the curriculum is enriched in order to allow a pupil to explore a subject in greater depth. It is also vital that gifted pupils take part in enrichment opportunities out-of school hours to work and interact with likeminded peers. Within the UK, up until recently, the gifted and talented strand of EiC has focused on one-off enrichment activities, and it is now time to develop an enriched curriculum within the classroom.

Recommendations

In this study, the recommendations arrived at can be summarized in the following:

- 1- Be flexible, in compact with the curriculum and provide enrichment activities, also, implement a multi-level and multi-dimensional curriculum. In addition, make the curriculum student-centered. Allow students to pursue independent projects based on their own individual interests.

- 2- Encourage gifted students to participate in extracurricular activities that involve academic skills.
- 3- Address the counseling needs of each student to support emotional growth, as needed.
- 4- Remember that gifted children may not excel in all areas.
- 5- Do not assign extra work to gifted children who finish assignments early.
- 6- Consider the nature of any discrete training that educators may need to develop effective practice, as well as the most effective way for this training to be delivered.
- 7- More research needs to be carried out on the different methods of differentiation and different applications within different subjects.
- 8- Furthermore, there is a need to reassess the gifted education system at the systemic and governmental level. Programs such as school acceleration and ability grouping should be stressed and implemented accordingly. Gifted education programs can encompass a diverse range of dimensions but a general, basic shortlist should include characteristics such as thinking skills, intellectual curiosity, creative expression, traditional academic skills, social perceptiveness and muscle coordination/dexterity. Guidelines like these or from established organizations like NAGC (2015) would help serve as a baseline for educators and law makers in Malaysia to reexamine, design and execute excellent gifted education programs.

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