

Little geniuses need care too

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Academically and mentally challenged children are not the only ones that need much more support than is being provided in India. And while small moves are being made to nurture the differently abled, another group of kids continues to suffer silently.

Yes, most of us don't even think that gifted children need special attention too. But the few people who are working in the field in India say that gifted children form yet another group that the society continues to treat unfairly.

"People think that gifted kids would do well anyway," says **Dr Devasena Desai, in-charge of the nurturing programme at the Pune chapter of Mensa, the largest, oldest and most well-known high-IQ society in the world.** Dr Desai, however, emphasises that close to nothing is being done for the children who carry the greatest potential. We, in fact, do more harm to them if we just let them be. "They are more touchy and withdrawn, because their high ability hampers their interaction with other kids," she says. "You have to give them challenging activities as well as help them in social and emotional development."

That, unfortunately, is a thought almost non-existent in India. So our gifted kids risk ending up as under-achievers or distracted workers. The education system has no special place for them. Few schools make special provisions for their mental stimulation and parents don't know whom to approach for guidance.

Not even a fraction of the money and attention given to providing special education for the mentally challenged children is given to these geniuses. "The need is doubled for these kids," says M. Srinivasan, founder-chairman of GEAR (Gifted Education and Research) Foundation, which runs a school in Bangalore. "But as they say, the crying baby gets the milk. While parents and social workers are very active to get facilities for the disabled, people look down upon me for promoting gifted education."

Efforts, however, are being made by individuals like him to make a difference at their own level. The Institute for Gifted Children, set up in Delhi by Dr Shakuntla S. Jaiman to develop a teaching methodology at her CSKM Public School, identifies gifted students from class 4 onwards. "The few schools that identify gifted children tend to group them in one section. That isolates them from the mainstream. But we develop them to become mentors to other children," she says.

The scenario is made more complex because there are conflicting theories of judging giftedness, although most agree that gifted people are the top 1% of the population. Besides IQ testing, which has attracted wide criticism, new concepts like Multiple Intelligences and attitude, emotional and social quotients have

emerged. This has left people to follow their own methods to identify and nurture children, and to train teachers.

For instance, Srinivasan, who holds a masters degree from the National Research Centre on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut, USA, applies the Multiple Intelligences concept in his school. "We don't ask, 'How smart are you?'," he says. "We ask, 'How are you smart?'" Jaiman, who has done her PhD. in the subject from IIT, Delhi, uses a wide range of psychological tests.

Srinivasan, in fact, discounts the IQ score beyond 120, saying it works more for mathematicians or scientists and not for the creative lot. Desai, however, says they need an IQ of at least 140. "There is a thin line between being talented and gifted," she says. "While a talented person may be good at one or two-three things, a gifted person has a cognitive ability that's far superior to the normal population."

Mensa, for that matter, has its own standard international qualifying test that a person from any cultural background can take. And Mensa, Pune, has, over the past five years, identified over 60 tribal students from Maharashtra as 'Mensan'. The organisation will help in their social, emotional and mental development through 18 modules over the next 18 months. Well, it's high time the gifted got some gifts too.