Meeting Affective Needs Of The Gifted Child

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The Question

Are we meeting the affective needs of the gifted students in our curriculum?

The Context

Joyce Van Tassel-Baska advocates that school curricula should not only develop the cognitive potential of the gifted child, it should meet her affective needs too. According to her, there are nine affective characteristics that are crucial in the development of any gifted child: sense of justice, altruism and idealism, sense of humour, emotional intensity, early concern about death, perfectionism, high levels of energy, strong attachment and commitment and aesthetic sensitivity.

This paper will examine the possible affective needs that arise from these characteristics and evaluate to what extent the current NYGH curriculum has addressed these needs. This paper will also propose possible curriculum interventions that would help to meet most of the needs of the child’s giftedness, arising from Van Tassel-Baska’s curriculum recommendations, but customized to the Singaporean context.

The Details

A two-prong approach - questionnaire survey and focused group discussion – was used. A class of 22 gifted students completed a questionnaire survey on their affective learning needs. These students were identified to be in the gifted programme since primary four and continued their gifted education programme in NYGH. After the survey results were analysed, a sample size of 10 from the same group of students were invited for a focused group discussion to provide more in-depth understanding of their affective needs.

The Bottom Line

Gifted students’ intellectual development surpasses their peers and they also have intense emotions and sensitivities which grow out of “overexcitability where they have a strong will to change self and help others” (Piechowski, 1997 p. 372.). Therefore, it is imperative that our curriculum help these gifted students discover who they are and maximise their potential. The school community will have to provide appropriate support for these students and hence their unique affective needs should be identified and met (Scherer, 2006; Van Tassel-Baska, 1998).

The following section presents findings to discuss whether the affective needs of the gifted students have been met in our curriculum:

1. Sense of Justice
   - The students feel that the idea of justice has been covered in their Language Arts classes, which helped them understand the importance of justice and punishment in society. Through class discussions, they have also understood that justice has its complexities. For example, people can be judged differently due to perspectives.
2. Altruism and Idealism

- Through their Integrated Humanities lessons, the students realised how other countries are facing various social problems such as poverty, health and hunger issues. While the curriculum has broadened their perspectives of examining these issues, they found it hard to empathise with the people from these countries because the examples that have been raised seemed isolated from their context.
- Nevertheless, they feel that our school’s Community Involvement Programme (CIP) has provided opportunities for them to develop this characteristic. Besides, some of them have also helped the wider community in their own ways. For example, some students donated clothing to the victims of the Hainan earthquake through the Red Cross Society in Singapore.
- Many of them cited a lack of time as hindrance for them to initiate such projects in school.

3. Sense of Humour

- The students generally appreciated humour used in a variety of ways in subjects such as Language Arts and Integrated Humanities, especially through the use of political cartoons and satires. The students were able to appreciate the humour found in these cartoons and satires, which can be used for “self-deprecation and self-defense” (Van Tassel Baska, 1998 p.184).
- However, they were so focused on their assessments that they felt they did not have much time and opportunity to fully appreciate humour used during lessons.

4. Emotional Intensity

- The students considered themselves more emotionally intense than their peers. Therefore, they felt more secure in a classroom setting where all the students were also gifted learners.
- Nevertheless, they were also aware that because they were ‘different’ from their peers, they found it harder to socialize with them.
- Hence, they feel our curriculum has not sufficiently helped students address this need and provide them the support needed to develop greater social skills in them.

5. Early Concern About Death

- Death seems like a taboo subject to discuss in class but the students felt that there is necessity to discuss death for them to appreciate life better.
- Generally, the students feel that there was a lack of discussion on this topic though some of them have questions about death and life after death. Some of them relied on their religion and faith to provide answers to the questions that they have.

6. Perfectionism

- All the students were aware that they have been perfectionists in their own ways. Their perfectionism has manifested negatively in class where they refused to raise questions for fear of making mistakes.
• The teachers’ high expectations of these gifted students have perpetuated this problem in the sense that the students feel that they must be high achievers in all aspects in order to meet these expectations.
• The students reflected that it is important that teachers understand that each of them is talented and gifted in her own way and the teachers should focus on their strengths and develop them rather than expect them to excel in all areas.

7. High Levels of Energy
  • The survey results show that all students felt that they have been stretched sufficiently in their learning.
  • However, there seems to be a lack of differentiation in assessment which could have stifled their creativity and cognitive ability.

8. Strong Attachments and Commitments
  • In the survey, most of the students stated that that their teachers have been inspiring and cared for them as an individual. They also felt that the teachers could identify their individual strengths and weaknesses.

9. Aesthetic Sensitivity
  • Generally, the students feel a lack of aestheticism in the curriculum and thought that this aspect is not important as it is not assessed.
  • They feel that not all students will appreciate art and music and therefore it is not important for this aspect to be infused into the curriculum.
  • However, they believed it could be infused into elective modules for them to develop their interest this area.

The Recommendation

NYGH has met most of the affective needs of the gifted students. For example, in the affective characteristics of Justice, Altruism and Idealism, Sense of Humour and Strong Attachment and Commitment, the school has already addressed them in the curriculum.

As for Emotional Intensity, in 2008, NYGH introduced the integrated SBGE classes where gifted students were mixed top PSLE scorers. The gifted students from those classes benefited academically and affectively from interacting with their non-gifted peers. (NB. The students surveyed and interviewed for this paper were not in the integrated classes.)

For the rest of the affective characteristics, here are some recommendations for teachers to consider:

• **Early Concern about Death**: A suggestion is to have the topic of life and death addressed during lessons. For example, the curriculum could include genealogy and units exploring life-span. Through these topics, the students can learn to respect and celebrate life. They will also learn to approach and treat the morbidity of the subject with maturity.

• **Perfectionism**: One way to address this need is for teachers to focus on excellence and not perfectionism by helping students understand statistical
probability and giving them the opportunity to fail in safe risk-taking activities. Another suggestion would be to use moral dilemmas. They will help students develop their moral reasoning as concluded by Kohlberg (Eggen & Kauchak, 2004). It gives them an idea how reality is at times so that they can be more comfortable with risks and be more accepting of setbacks. Students may sometimes have the idea that adults are perfect due to the high expectations the teachers always have of them. They may also think they get punished whenever they make mistakes as this is how the school works.

- **High Levels of Energy**: A suggestion would be to provide creative and psychomotor outlets for students during lessons or in assessment.

- **Aesthetic Sensitivity**: Works of art provide students with intellectual and emotional stimulation. Teachers must not use the arts as a means to an end. They must help the students develop sensitivity and appreciation for the fine arts. A suggestion would be to expose students to the fine arts from various periods of Singaporean history and have them appreciate the multilayered analyses required to interpret these works.

References


