

Giftedness: In The King's Hospital School's experience.....

Centre for Talented Youth

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen

My name is John Rafter and I am the Headmaster at The King's Hospital Boarding & Day school here in Dublin. I am delighted to have been invited to speak to you all today, by Colm O'Reilly, Director of CTYI. As a long time educator teaching Maths and Science but also coaching sports & overseeing extra-curricular, I am very passionate about providing a stimulating environment for students that is not just meeting their academic needs, but is also focussed on their physical and emotional wellbeing.

How we identify giftedness in a student.

In The King's Hospital school all of our mixed ability students are required to sit the CAT4 Cognitive Ability Tests, either as part of our Entrance Scholarship Examinations or when they arrive into First Year. Some of our students may not have had their abilities identified in primary school so it is very helpful for the parents to receive the detailed results of the CAT 4 Test.

It is also of great benefit to our teachers. Once students are identified with having exceptional academic ability, our Special Education Needs Co-ordinator informs staff and emphasises the need to provide them with more stimulating and challenging classroom activities.

It is important to note here that the CAT 4 and Scholarship Exam in History, Geography & Irish is also a good indicator for us if a child is twice exceptional and may be experiencing some learning difficulties or have asynchronous development. This enables our Special Education Needs Department to customise a learning plan for that student and provide those supports from day one. We are always humbled by the determination of our twice-exceptional students who successfully progress on their learning journey with the help of the compensation strategies that they are taught early on. Just this year, two of our twice exceptional students achieved over 600 points in their Leaving Certificate and received Entrance Scholarships for Trinity College.

For the purpose of the CTYI Talent Search we define students who achieve at or above the 95th percentile in Cognitive Ability test as 'academically gifted'. This year for example out of our mixed ability intake of 108, we had 11 students who achieved at or above the 95th percentile in Verbal subtests, 13 students who achieved at or above the 95th percentile in Quantitative subtests and 4 students who reached this standard in both areas. We then notify parents that their child has been invited to participate in the CTYI Ireland's Talent Search assessment and that students will receive extra tuition in Maths and English in order to prepare for the tests. In addition, some of our students who have been assessed independently by an educational psychologist and are deemed to be 'gifted' are also eligible to sit the CTYI assessment.

Students who then attain the qualifying grade in the SCAT are celebrated at a school assembly and encouraged to attend the summer programmes and enrol for the CTYI online courses.

So how do we provide for our exceptional ability students?

A few years ago a librarian from the UK addressed the School Library Association in Dublin suggesting many classroom based activities to enhance the experience of gifted students in class. However in her experience students did not want to be differentiated as being 'gifted' and would rather be challenged in class rather than taking a separate programme in school. Timetabling a separate programme can be an additional disruption to their class routine given that some may already miss quite a bit of class time due to their sports and other extra-curricular commitments. As a result, in consultation with a number of colleagues in the teaching community there was general agreement that running a separate Gifted Programme in schools could, in practice, be counterproductive.

In The King's Hospital school we provide a broad range of extra-curricular activities and there is much on offer to keep our 'gifted' students involved and motivated. The activities are all-inclusive so the student does not feel singled out but naturally a gifted student will be drawn to certain activities. Through our student council, students also have the opportunity to propose new activities that they feel their peers will enjoy and engage with.

Some of the activities on offer are; Mathematics and Science Olympiads, presenting at Sci-Fest, Debating in English, Irish, Spanish, French and German, Model UN & EU, Student Council, Speech & Drama performances, musicianship in a range of instruments and the opportunity of participation in a wide variety of sports including rugby, hockey, basketball, rowing, badminton, athletics, tennis, cricket & polo cross.

On top of this any competition for Second level students that we receive notification about is circulated to the relevant subject departments and supported by teaching staff and /or the librarian. We run competitions in-house as well as promoting National and International ones and feel that there is plenty of stimulation available for all our students. I also feel that many teachers are very aware of students in their classroom who require that extra challenge and stimulation. As a school, we are very accommodating to students who wish to follow programmes in Transition Year such as the one run here in DCU on Fridays. Also our Career Guidance Department are constantly on the lookout for seminars and courses that are tailor-made to meet the specific interests and needs of our high-achievers.

Our school library is a hub of activity for students and our full time librarian is dedicated to providing stimulating activities for our gifted students, during breaks and after school. Some of the activities currently taking place are Maths, Scrabble, Chess & Philosophy Clubs, Creative writing, & Spelling Bee. Starting from First Year in English for example, we have additional reading initiatives where the 'best' reading class, as measured through the Accelerated Reader Programme, get to shadow book awards such as the Children's Book Awards in Spring. In 2nd and 4th Years they shadow the Great Reads Award from September. This involves presenting to their class as well as reading, voting for the books and even making videos and book trailers.

Another initiative from our librarian, Joan Kelly, is getting first year students involved with producing a Newsletter. This requires a number of skills to be utilised by the students, writing abstracts from articles featured in journals such as New Scientist and History Ireland, conducting surveys, collating and presenting results, reviewing films, computer games and books for example.

Although this initiative was originally intended for our gifted students we found that other interested students in the class were feeling excluded and this upset our gifted students. The Newsletter is now a very successful venture for any first year student with an interest in journalism.

When preparing for this talk I spoke to some of our current gifted students to ask of their experiences. The students were quite emphatic that although they are delighted to have their academic successes celebrated by the student body and staff it is because we equally celebrate all our sporting and performing arts achievements. Teenagers do not like to be seen as 'different' from other students. Most 'gifted' students want to integrate into the school community in every way possible and to be an integrated part of their peer group. By providing all these additional opportunities and encouraging participation in sports and the arts the students feel more accepted by their peers. This helps them to develop friendships with students they might not otherwise have connected with and gives them a more positive outcome from secondary school. The students also felt that, as the teachers were aware of their abilities from the start, they were encouraged to challenge themselves and feel positive about their abilities.

In conclusion I would like to say that as an educationalist I am very encouraged by the introduction of the new junior cycle which aims to place the student at the centre of the learning process. It promotes new ways of teaching and learning with the objective to recognise a broader range of skills as part of the assessment process.

The eight principles being underpinned by the Junior Cycle framework:

Learning to Learn, Choice and Flexibility, Quality, Creativity and Innovation, Engagement and Participation, Continuity and Development, Inclusive Education and Wellbeing, all serve to make the learning experience for 'gifted' students more meaningful and engaging.

Also the introduction of 'Wellbeing' as a new area of learning included in the new Junior Cycle framework is a step in the right direction. 'Gifted' students can become somewhat isolated and even bullied at times by their peers because of their abilities. Hopefully better awareness of the importance of Wellbeing by their teachers and fellow students will help us all to be in a better position to meet their emotional and psychological needs. There is overwhelming evidence that students learn more effectively if they are happy so it is our responsibility as educators to do our best to create an educational environment where all students can thrive.

In KH we encourage students to be self-starters and independent thinkers, while at the same time gaining social adeptness and empathy in a mixed ability environment. Our ultimate goal is to send our students out into the world armed and empowered with resilience and confidence.

Thank you very much for listening today and if you are interested in finding out more about The King's Hospital please do not hesitate to get in touch with us. I am also happy to answer a few questions if Colm thinks we have time.

John D. Rafter 25/11/2017