

Education Options for Gifted Children

Selecting an appropriate school for gifted children is a major challenge for most Indian parents. Gifted children need gifted education: curriculum, activities, grouping techniques, and assessment methods developed specifically for them. What should the parents look for in a school?

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Theme-based, trans-disciplinary learning:

A curriculum that is integrated across subjects around the framework of themes (e.g. "currency," "food"), rather than fragmented by artificial subject and chapter boundaries. Learning is activity-based and involves critical thinking, creativity, crafts, and physical exploration among others. The attention of the child is drawn to focus on similarities, differences, and structures rather than a non-directed laundry-list of keywords. More importantly, content knowledge is used to teach process skills (e.g. identifying and formulating problems, developing hypotheses, evaluating and synthesizing information, developing solutions to social problems). Thus mastery of content is secondary to the acquisition of basic skills of explorations that can be easily transferred to other areas of knowledge.

Projects: These are offered not as throwaway tack-ons, but as integral to the learning process. Children are encouraged to work on projects independently and

sometimes in small equal-ability groups (rather than groups of children who differ in ability), or with a mentor.

Children are grouped according to ability and not age: A single class may contain a highly gifted 7-year-old, a gifted 8-year-old, eleven 9-year-olds, and two 11-year-old slow learners. Alternately, children may be cluster-grouped – within an age-grouped class, the teacher may form a cluster or sub-class of the gifted children, offering them additional, advanced activities. Class sizes are usually small to allow teachers to meet individual children's cognitive needs.

Radical acceleration: In the absence of ability grouping, schools may offer radical accelerations, allowing children who have already mastered the content in most areas to skip (more than) one grade. If a child is advanced in just one or two areas, she's allowed to join an upper grade for those subjects, while continuing the rest of her classes with her age-mates.

Parents and teachers fear that acceleration will damage the child's socio-emotional development. A growing body of research suggests these fears are unfounded. Asynchrony is the exception, not the rule – most children who are advanced cognitively are also advanced socio-emotionally. Gifted children usually get along fine with older children. Acceleration, including early entrance to college, produces favourable socio-emotional and academic results for most gifted children. If a child has mastered the curriculum at his current grade-level, there's no reason for him/her to have to continue in the same grade. Boredom, more than any other factor is responsible for school aversion, peer problems, under-achievement, and frustration. Parents and teachers should seriously consider acceleration, one of the easiest and best ways to meet the needs of gifted children.

Which of these options are available in India, and where?

In India, the IB and the I-GCSE schools come closest to satisfying these conditions. I-GCSE schools offer theme-based learning, activity-based learning, small class sizes, and ability-grouping. More importantly the above mentioned curriculum allow for Individualised Educational Plans (IEP) most suited for the gifted children. ICSE and CBSE schools offer opportunities for project-based learning. Montessori schools offer activity-based learning and individually-paced work, but in India are generally restricted to the preschool years.

Be aware, however, that simply because these elements are offered doesn't make the school automatically appropriate for gifted children. At some of the best I-GCSE schools some teachers are restrictive and some bright children are bored. CBSE schools may have gone overboard with projects: projects can be numerous, irrelevant, and tend to be completed by parents rather than students.

At the same time, there are ICSE schools that go out of their way to offer activity-

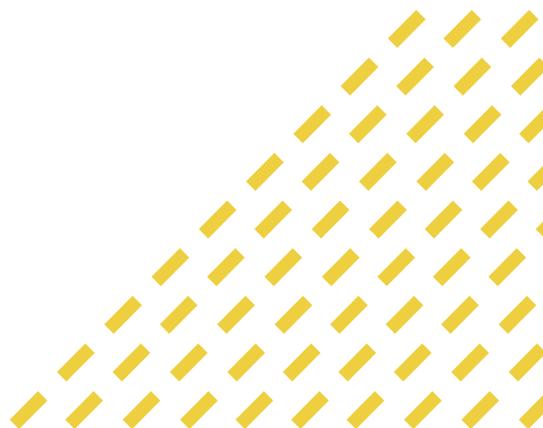
based learning, theme-based learning, and project-based assessment.

So how do you select a school for a gifted child? Before making a decision, ask to visit the school. Watch for the following:

1. Do the brighter children seem productively engaged? Or are they bored, running around, and interrupting other children's work?
2. Are there challenging activities for brighter children of all ages?
3. Are brighter children allowed to proceed through the curriculum faster? Or are they forced to sit through repetitions, recitations, and revisions?
4. Are brighter children pressured to work with or tutor other children? This practice is frequently employed when teachers have no advanced activities to offer them, and is not desirable – gifted children usually find peer tutoring boring.
5. When a child asks an unusual question, how do teachers respond?
6. Do teachers try to engage the brighter children in stimulating activities and conversation, or are they left to their own devices?

7. Do the brighter children seem to have a close, rewarding relationship with at least one teacher?

In 660 hours of classroom observations at 14 schools in and around Bangalore, we found that the teacher was crucial in meeting the needs of gifted children no matter what the school board or class size. We have seen unimaginative, restrictive teachers at I-GCSE schools; creative, patient teachers in crowded SSLC schools; and punitive, badly-trained teachers at CBSE schools. The point is that within the context of the school curriculum and philosophy, teachers are crucial. They are the ones who deliver the curriculum, who attempt or refuse to provide advanced content, who may develop a bond with the child or may alienate him/her from the formal education system. When you visit the school, ask teachers what they offer to gifted children; ask school management whether it offers radical acceleration or enrichment. Obtain details; obtain a commitment that the school will in fact meet your child's advanced cognitive needs.



The National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) is conducting a project on the Identification of Gifted Children.

For more information on the project and the NIAS Gifted Identification programme, access www.prodigy.net.in