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abilities, they demonstrate special cognitive and emotional needs that are not met in Indian classroom are geared to the average learner.

National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru, leads the National Programme on Identification and Mentoring of gifted and talented children (0-18 years), popularly known as the NIAS – Education for the Gifted and Talented (NIAS-EGT). Initiated in 2011, the programme is headed by Dr Anitha Kurup. The aim is to provide equitable educational opportunities for gifted children and develop talent through a systematic sustainable mentoring programme.

The NIAS-EGT team has developed India-based protocols through evidence-based research to identify children in mathematics, science, humanities, social sciences, arts and sports for urban, rural and tribal children. Further, the team has also developed a multi-stage, multi-level model of mentoring that will c

gifted children from diverse populations.

Support for the very young (till grade 5) is provided through parents' workshops and counselling sessions which include guidance for school selection and curriculum choice, as part of the NIAS- EGT general programme. Gifted children in grades 6 to 12 can join the Advanced Learning Center (ALC) programme is in collaboration with schools.

Dr Kurup's research and policy advocacy, along with other similar groups working on education for the gifted, resulted in the inclusion of education for the gifted and talented in the National Education Policy, 2020. Dr Kurup has served as an expert in education and gender at state and national levels.

We bring you an interesting and insightful interview with Dr Kurup.

Q. When is a child called gifted? Do IQ and EQ play a part?

A. Research indicates that gifted children can be identified as early as when they are less than a month old. At NIAS-EGT, we consider a child gifted when he or she shows exceptional ability in one or more domain. The domain could either be a structured set of activities like maths, science or language, or an unstructured performance in music, dance or sports. When a child's remarkable abilities place him or her in the top 2 per cent of that age group, the child is considered gifted.

Gifted children show advanced learning ability and a deep motivation in the area of their interest. A child is typically not gifted in all domains. But if it is a domain of their interest, gifted children can focus on the task for very long periods of time till the task is completed.

Early researchers, mostly psychologists, depended on IQ measures to assess for giftedness. But based on research, NIAS is of the strong view that a gifted child's dimensions cannot be captured only by IQ. There are cultural and social factors at play. When you talk of emotional quotient (EQ), there is a range. Some gifted children show high EQ and levels of maturity but in some children, emotional development is not in tune with their age.

Q. How can a gifted child be identified in the Indian context?

A. Psychometric tests used to identify gifted children work in developed countries but not so well in India and other developing countries. One, developed countries have the means (funds) and manpower to conduct these tests. Two, they believe that giftedness has only psychological dimensions, which I argue against.

In India, we have a large, diverse population which speaks different languages and comes from different social backgrounds. NIAS-EGT decided to develop India-based protocols to identify gifted children. A large number of gifted children can be captured in the formal education system. By detailed observation of the behaviour of children in classrooms, we developed the Teachers Nomination Behavioural Rating Scale 2011-12. The teachers are trained before they use this scale. We also prepare a detailed profile/portfolio of the child that gives us data on the abilities of the child that distinguishes him or her from other children. We use the scale and the data in combination to identify gifted children.

Q. What are the needs of gifted children that are not met in regular classrooms?

A. Our regular classrooms are geared towards average children. Also, we struggle with large classrooms. There are two groups of children on either end of the continuum – those with learning difficulties and those who are advanced learners. Teachers are sympathetic towards slow learners and help them keep up but advanced learners do not get attention as teachers believe they will manage.

I strongly argue that these children cannot manage on their own. They too have special needs and these needs have to be addressed. Advanced learners need an integrated and complementary programme to help them learn while they are part of the formal education system. I do not believe in 'magnet schools' where advanced learners are isolated. That will make it very difficult for them to get integrated in society later. Not all gifted children are academically gifted. Some may be creatively gifted. Creatively gifted children get very bored, underperform and become disruptive if they are put in a special class for academically gifted children.

Q. Do gifted children learn differently?

A. Yes, they learn very differently. Some learn differently but know how to present their work in a form acceptable to teachers. Others may solve problems skipping a few steps (having worked them out mentally). This may not be acceptable to teachers. Gifted children have a different way in which they organise information and process it. It could have something to do with how their brain is wired.

There is very little research on understanding the cognition of gifted children. I have two research assistants trained in neuropsychology and we are trying to study this aspect – how the cognition of gifted children differs from that of other children. And, how they learn differently. I am against children being subjected to MBT so we are working on behaviour-based research.

Q. What are the problems gifted children face?

A. Gifted children have very high levels of anxiety. They set high standards for themselves and struggle cannot match up. One of the training components of our programme is to help them deal with failure. I tell them that failure is not a statement of their abilities but a signal that they should set new goals that work for them.

Gifted children also find it very difficult to interact with peers. Some manage by partially hiding their gift so that they get accepted in the group. Some cannot connect with their age group. They get ridiculed for the questions they ask in class. Lack of peer support is one of the biggest challenges gifted children face.

Q. What is the role of a teacher in the education of a gifted child?

A. Teachers in Indian schools are overburdened and have to play several roles. So, what I always tell the teachers I meet is that I expect very little from them when it comes to gifted children. Teachers should be trained to identify gifted children. And, teachers should not snub these children thinking that they are a burden. As soon as a teacher feels that he or she does not have the capacity to teach a gifted child and answer the questions the child is asking, the child should be put in touch with teachers of higher grades who have domain knowledge.

Q. How can gifted children in India best be mentored?

A. We have connected our gifted children to bright undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc). We organise short residential workshops for 30-40 gifted children at the IISc campus in the summer and winter school breaks. We give them exposure to contemporary areas of work. They get very excited about subjects like neuroscience, AI and machine learning. We bring experts to address the students at the workshops. The children also work on the problems we give them among themselves. For rural children, I think long residential workshops are needed. We also conduct classes during the weekends through ALCs in schools.

In our 'School Partnership Advanced Learning Centre Project', we have also adopted a hybrid mode. In pilot, we had 15 Army schools. We selected 30 children and 2 facilitators from each school. Two of the children were selected for the weekly training in the online mode. The teacher's training, orientation programme and foundation course were conducted online. The facilitators, with the help of the two children, conducted sessions in their respective schools for the rest of the 30 children. Every six months, we conducted workshops for facilitators to review their progress and plan for the next six months.

We have received a research grant and plan to expand this programme to Navodaya schools, Kendriya Vidyalayas and schools for the urban poor. This way we will be able to understand the challenges we face in different learning environments. The next step would be to scale up the programme.

Q. How can gifted children from the underprivileged segment be helped?

A. NIAS-EGT has partnered with schools that work for underprivileged children. We work with Parikram Bengaluru and Sevalaya in Tamil Nadu. There are intrinsic challenges working with these schools, whether in urban or rural areas. The gifted children may not get parental support. They may not have the social network that children from more affluent segments have. However, I have found that gifted children from underprivileged segments are very motivated to learn. They want to make a difference.

We even reach children who are not in the formal schooling system. Any teacher or parent can nominate a child on our 'Prodigy' website. We have children who are home-schooled and some who have dropped out of school. We help them to take exams of the National Open School so that they are mentored. If these children are very good, we admit them in our online programmes.

Q. How do you measure the impact of the ALC programme?

A. We look at 16 factors including creativity, communication, digital skills, collaboration, critical thinking, environmental stewardship, global citizenship, interdisciplinary knowledge and skills in the social domain. We also assess a child's ability for self-control and motivation. We take test scores every six months. Along with quantitative methods, there is qualitative data which the team collects through observation. We also monitor the academic achievement of the children. The impact of the programme can be gauged over 5 to 7 years a year.

As a result of our programme, children learn to manage their time very differently. Also, children who go through our programme from grade 6 to grade 12 are very clear about what they want to do later in life. The programme helps them figure out what excites them and where their interest lies. It also exposes them to domain experts and gives them an understanding of what the workspace offers them.

Q. How can parents best help their gifted child?

A. Given the Indian context since we don't have gifted education programmes in formal schools that have really taken off, the role of parents is crucial. Most often it is the mother who understands her child's gifts.

supports the child.

At times, parents could become overambitious. I interact with parents out of office hours and tell them they put pressure on their children, it could become counterproductive since it will interfere with their performance. I bring in psychologists, educationists and domain experts to counsel parents. Career options are so many in today's world. It is very important that gifted children, like other children, are allowed to follow their passion and excel in the field of their choice. I tell parents: "Do not live your dreams through your children".

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