

Early Childhood

Creating Contexts for Individualized Learning in Early Childhood Education

This position statement, initiated by the Early Childhood Division of NAGC, focuses on creating optimal environments for recognizing, developing, and nurturing the strengths and talents of young gifted children, age 3 through 8. Characteristics of these young gifted children can include (but are not limited to): the use of advanced vocabulary and/or the development of early reading skills, keen observation and curiosity, an unusual retention of information, periods of intense concentration, an early demonstration of talent in the arts, task commitment beyond same-age peers, and an ability to understand complex concepts, perceive relationships, and think abstractly (Clark, 2002; Smutny, 1998; Smutny & von Fremd, 2004). Although many individuals are influential in the lives of young children, this position statement targets those who care for and are responsible for teaching young gifted children, including parents, caregivers, teachers, administrators, and other members of the community.

Early childhood gifted education focuses on recognizing, developing, and nurturing the strengths and talents of all children age 3 through 8. Early childhood educators and family members have mutual goals to develop children's capacity and passion for learning to the fullest potential. In addition, research indicates that an interactive and responsive environment in early childhood supports both cognitive and affective growth and establishes a pattern of successful learning that can continue throughout children's lives (Clark, 2002; Smutny, 1998). As such, the creation of rich and engaging learning environments in schools, homes, and communities during early childhood can enhance educational opportunities for learners and help put children on the path to academic achievement.

In many children, a pattern of gifted behaviors and/or advanced performance can be seen as early as pre-school; however, classroom modifications for gifted students altering the pace, depth, or complexity of instruction are rarely implemented in pre-school and early-elementary classrooms (Robinson et al., 2002; Stainthorp & Hughes, 2004). Thus the early educational experiences of many young gifted children provide limited challenge and hinder their cognitive growth rather than exposing learners to an expansive, engaging learning environment. This problem may be intensified among traditionally underserved populations of young gifted students including culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse learners, as well as children from poverty because in many cases additional resources for providing enriched learning experiences in homes and communities are also limited (Robinson et al.; Scott & Delgado, 2005). Therefore, NAGC believes that providing engaging, responsive learning environments in which young learners' interests, strengths, and skills are identified, developed, and used to guide individualized learning experiences benefit all children, including young gifted children. Further, NAGC believes that providing a broad range of educational, health, and social services is especially critical for enabling young children from economically impoverished environments to develop and demonstrate high potential.

Young gifted learners are a heterogeneous group that is not easily defined or assessed. They present educators and families with unique challenges due to their rapid and often asynchronous development (Elkind, 1998). Varied and uneven physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth can make identification of young learners' strengths, skills, and interests, and the subsequent provision of individualized instruction, difficult for those without formal training in acceleration and differentiation of curriculum and instruction

(Gross, 1999; Smutny & von Fremd, 2004). In fact, research indicates that highly gifted young children frequently hide their advanced abilities or outstanding behaviors in educational settings to fit in socially with their peers (Gross). In addition, parents offer a unique perspective and are often among the first to recognize gifted behaviors in early childhood indicating that families must be included as active partners in the identification process and subsequent planning of learning environments (Barbour & Shaklee, 1998; Gross; Smutny, 1998). Ultimately, educators and families must work together to consistently develop and adapt environments that cultivate and respond to the learning needs of young gifted learners (Smutny & von Fremd).

Early childhood educators and family members play powerful and critical roles in establishing and supporting learning environments at home, in community settings, and in traditional school settings (Feinburg & Mindess, 1994; Smutny, 1998). These contexts vary and require the active participation of caring adults to recognize and nurture children's strengths, interests, and abilities. However, similar core elements must be in place across all contexts to establish an appropriate and responsive educational learning environment (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant, 1995; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; Katz & Chard, 2000; Feinburg & Mindess; Smutny). The attributes of these core elements include:

- recognition of students as individuals who enter school with a unique set of experiences, interests, strengths, and weaknesses that will influence their readiness to learn (Elkind, 1998; Feinburg & Mindess; Smutny & von Fremd, 2004)
- informal and formal observations about student strengths and readiness that inform the planning of learning opportunities (Smutny; Smutny & von Fremd)
- flexibility in the pace at which learning opportunities are provided (Some gifted learners benefit from acceleration to prevent needless repetition while others make gains with additional time to explore a topic in a more in-depth manner than same-age peers.) (Smutny & von Fremd)
- challenging and content-rich curriculum that promotes both critical and creative thinking across all academic disciplines including reading, math, science, and the arts (Robinson et al., 2002; Smutny & von Fremd)
- opportunities to build advanced literacy skills (Gross, 1999; Stainthorp & Hughes, 2004)
- ample and varied materials including but not limited to technology, print material, and manipulative resources (Barbour & Shaklee, 1998; Bredenkamp & Rosegrant; Clark, 2002)
- instructional strategies that foster an authentic construction of knowledge based on exploration, manipulative resources, and experiential inquiry (Barbour & Shaklee; Clark; Katz & Chard),
- early exposure to advanced concepts in age-appropriate ways (Clark; Smutny)
- learning opportunities that provide choice and the development of independent problem solving (Robinson et al.)
- the identification and use of individual student interests to encourage investigative behaviors (Barbour & Shaklee; Smutny & von Fremd)
- interaction and collaboration with diverse peer groups of children having like and different interests and abilities (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant; Elkind)
- experiences that range from concrete to abstract (Katz & Chard; Smutny & von Fremd)
- opportunities for social interaction with same-age peers as well as individuals with similar cognitive abilities and interests (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant; Clark)
- engagement in a variety of stimulating learning experiences (including hands-on opportunities, imaginative play, and problem-solving) (Barbour & Shaklee; Clark; Smutny), and
- caring and nurturing child-centered environments that support healthy risk-taking behaviors (Barbour & Shaklee; Clark; Elkind; Smutny).

To actualize these optimal learning environments, NAGC supports the development of information for parents, educators, and caregivers on the traits, behaviors, and unique learning needs of young gifted children. We also promote collaboration with early childhood educators to increase their capacity to identify and nurture the interests, talents, and abilities of young gifted learners and to create intellectually engaging learning environments to provide the highest quality education possible for all young children.

Annotated Bibliography

Barbour, N. E., & Shaklee, B. D. (1998). Gifted education meets Reggio Emilia: Visions for curriculum in gifted education for young children. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 42, 228-237.

This article explores the relationship between gifted education and early childhood education relating to curriculum development and implementation, evaluation procedures, and parent involvement.

Bredenkamp, S., & Rosegrant, T. (Eds.) (1995). *Reaching potentials: Transforming early childhood curriculum and assessment, Vol. 2*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Published by NAEYC, this book describes curriculum development for young children and connects goals and objectives to national curriculum standards.

Clark, B. (2002). *Growing up gifted* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

This book traces the development of giftedness from birth through adulthood with chapter four focusing on early childhood. Insights are offered about environmental factors, parenting, and educational experiences.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (1993). *The hundred languages of children. The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

This book explains the constructivist learning approach to educating young children exemplified in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The approach “fosters children’s intellectual development through a systematic focus on symbolic representation” (p. 3).

Elkind, D. (1998). *Reinventing childhood: Raising and educating children in a changing world*. Rosemont, NJ: Modern Learning Press.

Written by child psychologist, David Elkind, this book examines modern conceptions of early childhood, including a chapter describing definitions and identification of intelligence and giftedness in young children.

Feinburg, S., & Mindess, M. (1994). *Eliciting children's full potential: Designing and evaluating developmentally based programs for young children*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing.

The authors describe in detail how early childhood classrooms develop student’s potential by embracing the cognitive development model.

Gross, M. U. M. (1999). Small poppies: Highly gifted children in the early years. *Roeper Review*, 21, 207-214.

This article discusses issues in the identification of young highly gifted children and describes the developmental differences in this unique group of learners. Research-based suggestions for improving identification and service provision are also provided.

Katz, L., & Chard, S. C. (2000). *Engaging children's minds: The project approach* (2nd ed.). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Katz and Chard describe the Project-Approach to curriculum development and the principles and practice of the approach. The approach is based on philosophical underpinnings of Dewey and experiential learning.

Robinson, N. M., Lanzi, R. G., Weinberg, R. A., Ramey, S. L., & Ramey, C. T. (2002). Family factors associated with high academic competence in former Head Start children at third grade. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 46, 278-290.

This study examines the factors related to the academic achievement of the top 3% of third grade students participating in the National Head Start/Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Project.

Scott, M. S., & Delgado, C. F. (2005). Identifying cognitively gifted minority students in preschool. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 49, 199-209.

Scott and Delgado examine the efficacy of a pre-school screening instrument for identifying cognitively gifted minority students.

Smutny, J. F. (Ed.). (1998). *The young gifted child: Potential and promise: An anthology*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

This comprehensive volume presents and synthesizes the research of 41 experts in the fields of gifted education and early childhood education to address topics related to identification, special populations, parenting, socio-emotional needs, and education.

Smutny, J. F., & von Fremd, S. E. (2004). *Differentiating for the young child: Teaching strategies across the content areas (K-3)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

The book details a rationale, tools, and techniques for including differentiated instruction for young learners across the curriculum. Smutny and von Fremd also emphasize the vital relationship between effective assessment and successful differentiation.

Stainthorp, R., & Hughes, D. (2004). An illustrative case study of precocious reading ability. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 48, 107-120.

This longitudinal case study drawn from a larger study illustrates the educational experiences of bright, early readers and the factors that can impede or foster continued growth of literacy skills.

Approved November 2006



The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of parents, teachers, educators, other professionals, and community leaders who unite to address the unique needs of children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents as well as those children who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.

All position papers are approved by the NAGC Board of Directors and remain consistent with the organization's position that education in a democracy must respect the uniqueness of all individuals, the broad range of cultural diversity present in our society, and the similarities and differences in learning characteristics that can be found within any group of students. NAGC Position Papers can be found at www.nagc.org.