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The Education of Gifted Children in the Early Years: A First Survey of Views, Teaching Practices, Resourcing and Administration Issues

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a survey of views on the early education of gifted children in New Zealand and identifies where challenges for professional support, resourcing, and educational administration might lie. The 125 respondents represented a range of roles connected in some way with education and most (71%) also had first-hand experience of caring for or teaching a gifted child. Various views on how giftedness should be defined were expressed, indicating that no agreement on a definition existed. Notwithstanding this, it was considered important to identify if a child was gifted or not. Talking with parents about their child's abilities, along with formal and informal observation of the child were the preferred methods for identifying giftedness. The findings suggest further research and consultation on a definition or definitions of giftedness relevant to the early years of education and the developmental characteristics of the young child is needed. Incongruence between what respondents believed teachers should do and what they actually did in practice on a number of aspects of working with young gifted children was found. Respondents' suggestions of resources included: ideas for extension activities; identification and assessment tools; and recognition of parents as an important resource for information. Written, online and media resources and the provision of teacher professional development is clearly wanted and should help to raise understanding and knowledge about giftedness whilst also assisting teachers to more fully put beliefs into practice. In regards to an educational administration question of where responsibility for gifted education should sit within the Ministry of Education 74% of respondents thought it should be brought under the Special Education section, though concerns were expressed the adequacy of resourcing in Special Education. Opinion was more divided on a question of whether gifted children should be permitted to start primary school before their fifth birthday. This question generated the most feedback from respondents covering issues such as acceleration and appropriateness of the school setting for (any) children under-5 years.

Introduction

In the area of gifted education in the early years (0 – 8 years) there is little systematically collected information to guide and inform practices and policies in New Zealand. An online survey about the education of young gifted children under the age of 8 years was conducted in order to add to the existing knowledge base of specialised studies on early gifted issues, such as: transition to school by Gallagher (2005, 2006), precocious readers by Valerie Margrain (2005, 2010), and 'forgotten children' by Lynette Radue (2009).

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The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of this first national survey of gifted children in the early years of education. The reason for having an early years (birth to age 8) rather than an early childhood education (to age 5) focus was to include the periods of transition between the home, early childhood, and primary school settings. Also, while it is the NZ rite of passage for children to start primary school on their fifth birthday, internationally speaking an early years focus includes the learning of children up to the age of 8 years, regardless of the education setting.

There are few programmes and resources provided for teachers of young gifted children in New Zealand. There have been a small number of nationally funded projects, such as professional development for teachers in gifted education, but these have been aimed primarily at the school sector. Within the school system programmes for gifted students are in most cases targeted at the senior primary school or secondary students and generally not made available for the under 8 year-olds. The 'Oneday' and other out-of-school programmes also tend to cater for senior primary students. 'Small Poppies' is an educational extension programme for children under 6 years however it is only available in a small number of areas in New Zealand and is not a government recognised licensed early childhood education service.

Principles of curriculum differentiation and support for gifted learners (Porter, 1999; Harrison, 2005), theoretically align well with broader curriculum and conceptual views on early learning which view children as competent, capable learners (Malaguzzi, Ministry of Education, 1996). However, as a society there are many common misunderstandings about giftedness that influence practice, including wariness of elitism, concern around supposed negative effects of acceleration, and 'apologetic' responses (Moltzen, 2011). The purpose of the survey was to learn more about beliefs and practices of teaching young gifted children from those who are directly engaged with the early years sector

Methodology

Design

The survey was a 13-item online questionnaire. Questions asked participants about their role, experience, beliefs regarding giftedness and gifted practice, valued and observed identification practices, valued and observed provisions, resources, beliefs about links with special education, and beliefs about early entry to school. Some of the questions were single response, and others enabled respondents to select several options. The majority of questions provided opportunities for respondents to add comments, and many were provided. Low-risk ethics approval was provided by Massey University.

The Respondents

Responses were received from 125 people connected in some way with the provision of, or use of, education services. The survey was made available through ChildForum and giftEDnz networks between December 2010 and April 2011. ChildForum is a professional research-

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informed early childhood education information network. GiftEDnz is the professional organisation for gifted education in New Zealand..

Most respondents (71%) were caring for or teaching a gifted child or children, or had in the past. Others (29%), who tended to be in administrative, management or academic roles, had not had personal experience of engaging with young gifted learners.

Respondents could, and did, identify as belonging to several roles, therefore the total percentages for responses by role add up to more than 100%. Almost half of all respondents identified as being parents, a third in education management or leadership roles, and a fifth as teachers. Just under half (45%) said they were involved in tertiary teacher education or research.

Findings

The results presented here cover: views on definition and identification of giftedness in young children; responding to young gifted children; resources for teachers; connection between special and gifted education; and views on eligibility for early school entry. Preliminary results were published on the ChildForum website in June 2011 (Margrain & Farquhar, 2011), emailed to respondents who provided their email addresses and provided to giftEDnz to share with its membership.

Defining Giftedness

It seems there is no agreed-on definition of giftedness within the early years of education, at least not amongst the respondents to this survey. Giftedness may be defined by taking the top 5 – 10% of children in a group according to one-third of respondents. One-quarter of respondents considered that just the top 5% of children should be regarded as being gifted. Other respondents however disagreed with this approach to defining giftedness with just under one-quarter (21.5%) stating that they believed all children were gifted – in other words every child was special or had something special about him or her and should not be singled out as being gifted. A further 8% thought it possible for there to be no gifted children in any one early childhood or junior school class.

Many respondents (38%) offered various comments about asynchronicity, being twice exceptional, under-identification, performance, creativity, motivation, strengths and dispositions. A range of comments about issues connecting to concepts and definition have been summarised and are shown in Table 1. Child individuality, holistic views of the child and avoiding labelling were emphasised in some of the comments received.

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TABLE 1. Respondents' concepts and definitions of giftedness.

Concepts and Definitions	Respondent Quotes
Multi-category	Children can be gifted in different aspects/ways e.g. mathematically, linguistically, musically, socially, so it is hard to put a percentage on it.
Holistic	A multiple intelligences approach makes for more holistic view of giftedness therefore a holistic assessments is critical, both in EC [early childhood] and in primary education.
Comparative	Giftedness children are those who demonstrate abilities above those of their peer group. They could also be those who demonstrate the potential to achieve above their peers.
Intellectual	A child who has an intellectual grasp of ideas or concepts and who can put it into action or extend the theories beyond regurgitation of facts.
Egalitarian	I believe that given the right environment every child has the potential to be gifted.
Not Labelling	I am wary of labelling and aim to foster the strengths of all.
Qualitative	Gifted children are those who learn faster, see things in different ways from their age peers, exhibit curiosity and understanding which is 'more than' others, feel emotions intensely, don't fit easily – many of these characteristics in one child indicate giftedness to me.

Identifying Children as being Gifted and Methods to Identify Giftedness

The majority of respondents (82%) agreed that effort should be made to identify a child who is gifted. A further 12% thought that it was acceptable to do this 'sometimes'. Only 5% of respondents stated 'no' to identification of giftedness and 1% stated "only if required".

The 5% of respondents who replied 'no' to doing anything to identify a gifted child included those who in answer to a subsequent question stated they were averse to formal assessment but supportive of teachers observing and responding to children's diverse individual strengths and interests. It could be argued, therefore, that observing and responding in this way is "doing something" and thus it seems almost all respondents believed something should be done to know if a child was gifted or not.

The methods to identify giftedness preferred by the largest numbers of respondents were:

- talking with parents and other people involved in caring for the child (85%),
- formal observation and assessment (82%), and
- informal observation/watching/listening (79%).

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These figures may be confounded as a result of possible differing interpretations among respondents as to whether the Learning Story methodology commonly implemented in early childhood education centres is a formal or informal approach to assessment. In the survey question we had given Learning Stories as an example of a formal method of observation and assessment because of its deliberate and intentional use as pedagogical documentation. When reviewing respondents' comments we noticed however that one respondent wrote: "with informal I mean learning stories and narratives – a very, very valuable tool in ECE." This suggests possible confusion on what is and is not a formal observation and assessment method.

In any case, the responses indicate that observation (be it formal or informal or both) is seen as the single most important identification tool in early years education. However observation without understanding of characteristics of giftedness may mean that important behaviours, traits and indicators are either missed or misunderstood:

[Teachers] should be on the lookout and allow the child to reveal their traits of giftedness.

Observation is probably the best method at this age, but only if the observer is aware of what to observe, and the significance of what is observed. To do this the observer needs to have a knowledge base about gifted education, on which to draw.

One respondent noted that assessment is not divorced from programme delivery and some respondents added that effective teachers in early years education provide varied, open-ended tasks and opportunities for children to explore diverse areas of competence.

Not rigid testing per se but offering open tasks and opportunities for the giftedness to become apparent.

Providing opportunities for a wide range of experiences in which all children, including gifted, can practice and learn new or improved skills/understandings ... rich, responsive environments that serve to excite and stimulate children to have a go, to grow more.

More formal methods of identification of giftedness were rated as most helpful by only between one quarter to one third of respondents. These methods included IQ testing (28.3%), other norm-referenced tests (31.3%), primary school achievement tests (27.3%) and rating scales (26.3 %).

Responding to Learners

On a question about how teachers should respond to children who are gifted, the feedback indicates teachers are viewed as having responsibility for responding to gifted children as learners in a similar way to which they would with any child. A strength-based approach to teaching all children, whether gifted or not, was considered to be best as opposed to focusing on a child's areas of weakness, or limitation.

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Teachers should be providing opportunities for each child’s individual needs regardless of their ability. Isn’t that what they are paid to do?

A disconnection between what respondents believed teachers should do and what they have observed teachers do in practice was found when comparing responses. Table 2 provides a summary of responses.

The activities respondents valued more strongly than they actually observed happening were:

- providing opportunities to develop abilities,
- supporting gifted learners’ problems/weaknesses, and
- supporting families to find further opportunities for their child’s learning outside of the formal educational setting.

Other actions were observed as being practiced by teachers more than respondents believed they should be were:

- emphasising socialisation and play over skill development and knowledge,
- avoiding drawing attention to exceptionalism, and
- not differentiating between learners whether gifted or not.

TABLE 2. Percentage of respondents who recommended an action and the percentage who said this was also what happened in practice.

<i>Actions</i>	<i>Beliefs</i>	<i>Practice</i>
Provide additional opportunities within the programme for gifted children to further develop and practice their special gifts/talents/abilities and strengths	97.2	70.8
Staff/teachers should provide gifted children with help in areas in which they struggled or had problems/weaknesses	86.8	60.4
Encourage parents/families to seek opportunities outside of the early years setting	60.4	47.9
Communicate to parents/families that play and socialisation should take priority over advanced skills, knowledge or abilities	30.2	42.7
Avoid drawing attention to a child’s exceptional achievement in front of other children	24.5	42.7
Provide learning and teaching programmes that do not differentiate between children who are gifted and not gifted.	14.2	57.3

Some respondents commented that they had seen teachers ignore behaviour that showed exceptionalism; they would “put down” or disparage giftedness, fail to keep children stimulated, and “make arbitrary decisions about how far a child should progress”. A respondent also stated that she felt it was “rare to see teachers doing anything in particular” when working with young gifted children.

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I have observed teachers and other children overtly criticise and alienate gifted children.

I have also seen teachers ignore and label children with special abilities, talents and strengths rather than supporting them. Very sad!

Resources

A lack of, and a strong need, for more resources was evident in respondents' comments about resources, for example:

It is extremely difficult to gain information to support very young children, let alone resources and reassurance that you are assisting them to attain their fullest potential.

Respondents were asked to indicate what resources in particular would be most helpful for teachers and others who are working with young children to have. Table 3 illustrates that a range of resources were indicated as being most helpful to have by 60% or more of the respondents. The valued resources to support giftedness in the early years included teaching plans, assessment tools, case studies, learning stories, tips and fact sheets, a New Zealand research and practice book, resource suggestions and examples of children's achievement.

TABLE 3. Recommended resources by percentage response.

<i>Recommended resources</i>	<i>Percentage response</i>
Teaching plans and ideas for extension activities	81.7
Identification and assessment tools	78.8
Case studies that include responses from teachers	76
Learning stories of young gifted children	75
Tips, fact sheets and key information	74
New Zealand research and practice book	73.1
Suggestions of resources to purchase	62.5
Examples of achievement of young gifted children	60.6

Small numbers of respondents suggested other resources. A general need for more professional learning about gifted education and further study opportunities was a common theme across the responses received.

I think that all teachers need to be far more proactive about up-skilling their knowledge base ... it should be about making the teacher a better teacher rather than focussing on the "gifted" child as such. Teachers need to know how to cater for all children regardless of their ability.

When asked about the preferred format for resources, responses indicated that a range of written, online and media resources produced in different formats for different target groups (researchers and tertiary educators, teachers, and parents) was wanted. Around half

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the respondents asked for DVDs, brochures, hand-outs, laminated cards, and bookmarks. Around two thirds of the respondents wanted to see more articles on gifted education in early years academic journals, provided through online national networks and organisations (such as ChildForum and giftEDnz), articles in parenting magazines, and online through the TKI Ministry website for schools.

The need to ensure that parents are recognised as an important resource was mentioned, as well as reference to the New Zealand Ministry of Education parent-teacher handbook publication (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2009). This book and some online resources are among the only no-cost materials currently provided nationally to support the education of young gifted children.

Special and Gifted Education

At present the Ministry of Education's Group Special Education team provides support for children with developmental and learning difficulties in schools and early childhood services. Respondents were asked if they thought Group Special Education should include children who are gifted. Three quarters of respondents replied "yes" (74.5%), 16% replied "no", and 9% were unsure.

The reasons why respondents supported gifted education being included with special education were mostly to do with the fact that some gifted children also have special needs. Furthermore a view was expressed by many of these respondents that gifted children are at the end of the special needs spectrum and like children with high health or disability needs they too require extra support which often cannot be provided for adequately within mainstream education classes and early childhood education services alone. For example:

Gifted children have special learning, developmental, social and emotional needs which require extra support from adults.

These are special needs children too, with needs that cannot be met by mainstream education services.

Several participants mentioned that behavioural concerns may become evident if the extension needs of gifted children are not met, due to frustration and boredom. Others considered that gifted children inherently often had higher levels of challenging behaviour due to social and emotional sensitivity, perfectionism and other gifted traits. These issues supported the belief that psychologists and special education teachers working for the Ministry of Education had a responsibility to know about and support gifted learners. A belief underpinning much of the feedback was that early intervention provides a strategic investment for long-term wellbeing, for example:

The earlier we can provide support for gifted children, the easier their journey through 'the system' will be and the better their self-understanding will be, thus enhancing their psychological health.

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Support for an integrated approach of special and gifted education acknowledged that children can be both gifted and disabled, which is often referred to as being “twice exceptional.” A further reason supporting integrated service provision was the comment, “simply because there is nobody else offering this kind of support unless parents can pay for it”. While the majority of respondents acknowledged the role of the regular teacher as having primary teaching responsibility for gifted children, there was also a call for specialist teachers and advisors.

Those against gifted education coming under the Special Education administrative umbrella (16% of respondents) expressed concerns about how already stretched and under-resourced services would cope, and about the equity of provision.

I wonder if gifted children would go to the bottom of their already overloaded lists.

There are not enough services for the children GSE are supposed to support now without watering the service down to gifted children.

Age or Ability Eligibility for Starting School

Currently in New Zealand a child may not officially start school until their fifth birthday. Respondents were asked if they thought there should be flexibility for gifted children to enrol in primary school education before they were 5 years old. Opinion was divided about whether this should be permitted with 45% saying “yes”, 36% saying “no” and 19% indicating they were “not sure”. A large amount of additional comment was generated by this question with 70 of the 125 respondents adding comments.

Reviewing the additional comments, most respondents who were against permitting gifted children early school entry gave one or more of the following arguments:

1. *Children benefit from the importance of relationships with same-age peers.*

Physically they will still reach puberty at same age, so would be better with age peers, long term.

It is important that children are kept within their age cohort ... it is better for the child to be extended within their own age group rather than be accelerated.

2. *Emotional immaturity of children under five years of age to cope with the primary school environment.*

Children may be intellectually mature in adults’ eyes, but they have not emotionally matured.

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3. *School settings not appropriate to children under 5 years of age compared to early childhood education settings.*

Some kids are really ready for school before the age of 5 BUT unless the school is prepared to differentiate according to their need then there is not a lot of point in their attending school early because they will become disillusioned earlier!

Respondents in favour of early entry to school considered children should be able to access and attend whatever environment would benefit their learning best. It was considered that, for some children, school provided particular opportunities for academic and intellectual extension.

Access to appropriate programmes and interaction with older children was seen by some respondents as critical for the well-being of some children who are younger than five.

As the parent of a 4 year old who has been ready for school for over 6 months, it is difficult to have to hold them back for another 9 months before they are able to start school. If we wait too long we may start extinguishing the flame within that desires knowledge.

Children who are gifted may become bored, frustrated, and hostile if their needs are not met ... let them develop at their own pace, even if it is outside "the norm". If this can't be done within an ECE setting, then there should be the opportunity to attend school prior to a fifth birthday.

Some respondents suggested that it should not be an "either/or" choice between early childhood education and school, but instead innovative solutions should be developed such as dual enrolment, or specialised centres for 4-5 year old gifted children. Barriers to early school entry were not seen by all participants as insurmountable, and instead it was noted that the focus should be on opportunities for better supporting young gifted learners. For example, suggested strategies to provide emotional support alongside early entry to school were initial part-time attendance by the child, and parents attending with their child.

Discussion

Does our NZ education system support the development of confident and capable learners? If the results of this survey are anything to go by it would seem not in relation to children under 8 years who are gifted. This is an overlooked group of learners. It is probably not helped by a lack of a clear agreed-upon definition of giftedness in the early years. And, there are concerns about the adequacy of early education settings to provide for gifted young learners along with an obvious lack of resources, financial resourcing, and structural support.

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The survey presented here provides a first look at what is happening (or not as the case seems to be) in the education of gifted children in the early years. It was undertaken for the reason that published information providing an overview of views and needs in early years education has not been available to date as discovered by one of this paper's co-authors, Sarah Farquhar, when she represented early childhood education on a Ministerial advisory group for gifted (school) education in 2010/11.

The results of this survey would seem to generate more questions than were asked and this is a good thing because, according to the respondents, gifted education in the early years is evidently not well provided for in New Zealand and there is therefore a need for much more research, along with discussion, consultation and debate. Some distinct and immediate needs for support are identified in the results such as for teacher professional development, support to put beliefs about quality practice into action, more resources, and better structural support – but more research and careful thinking and planning is needed on how to meet these needs in ways that will make a real and positive difference to gifted young learners.

Given that what happens in the early years of development affects children's subsequent learning and achievement (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Siraj-Blatchford, I., 2004). It would seem that the results of surveys such as this one should be on the table of all education policy planning meetings and education reviews. In particular, consideration of children under-8 years of age should not be excluded from gifted education plans, provisions, and reviews. For example, the question on whether gifted young learners should be permitted to start school before their fifth birthday generated a large number of additional comments and highlights at the very least a necessity to consider difficulties and issues for the transition of the young gifted learner between early childhood education and primary education. The work of Peters (2010) and Gallagher (2005, 2006) informs consideration of the principles of transition, but we also need to ensure consistent inclusion of gifted children and their families in decision-making as primary stakeholders.

The predominant assessment approach in early childhood, of using Learning Stories, is one that builds on careful observation and has the potential of showcasing the exceptionality of young gifted students (Margrain, 2011). If greater recognition of traits and characteristics can be shared amongst those involved in education, these may be able to be noticed, recognised and responded to more effectively. This equally applies in the early years of school, and more could be done to document narratives of practices in diverse settings, using cross-grouping, acceleration, enrichment, mentoring or other responsive strategies. In the words of one respondent:

Gifted children need gifted teachers. We need case studies and stories of gifted children but also positive stories about gifted teachers and their responsiveness. There are many negative stories but we need to document and share the positives to encourage teachers as to what they CAN do in a climate where little professional development and learning, and funding is offered.

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After carrying out this survey new questions emerge from the findings about the construct of giftedness in the early years. Should approaches to giftedness for older children define the way in which giftedness is defined and support is provided in the early childhood education and junior school sectors? Surely developmental characteristics of the young child and social-cultural beliefs about the kind of childhood educational experiences that are valued for this age should drive practice? The fact that there is such little attention to and recognition of giftedness in the early years of education provides an almost blank canvas upon which New Zealand could develop a system that leads the way and really truly recognises talent and brings out the best in our top achievers starting from infancy.

Opportunity can be created from the finding that respondents considered there to be such little attention to and recognition of giftedness in the early years of education. It could be considered that an almost blank canvas exists upon which New Zealand could develop a system that leads the way and really truly recognises talent and brings out the best in our top achievers starting from infancy.

Conclusion

The survey findings pointed to several disconnections between actions respondents believed ought to be happening, and those that they had observed. These findings challenge our understanding of what quality teaching in early years education can aspire to (Farquhar 2003). The claim that education supports the development of confident, capable learners (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2007) cannot be justified if it is not applied to all learners. The survey findings show that there is little national support for gifted education in the early years and a lack of effective support for young children in early years education settings. There is therefore considerable scope for further research and for much policy and professional work in this area to be carried out.

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