



Position Paper: Gifted children in the early years

Introduction

The early years in a child's life are increasingly seen to be the most influential period upon the learning and development of the individual over the course of their life span (Mustard, 2006; Ministry of Education, 1998; Sprenger, 2013). Early years is a term used in reference to young children up to the age of 8, and encapsulates education within early childhood and state schooling domains. Governmental expenditure into early childhood education promotes the needs of **Priority Learners** comprising **children with diverse learning needs** including children with **special abilities** as a distinct group (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2015a).

Gifted learners are **children with special needs** within *Te Whāriki: he whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996; hereafter known as *Te Whāriki*). However, the discourses around children with special needs are strongly associated with a disability focus (Dunn, 2000; Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009), which leads to giftedness being overlooked or considered outside the parameters of special needs. Publications produced by the Ministry of Education perpetuate these contesting perspectives.

The aims of Special education which are defined as “the provision of extra assistance, adapted programmes or learning environments, specialised equipment or materials to support young children and school students with accessing the curriculum in a range of settings” (Ministry of Education, 2015a) are aligned with the aims for gifted education. The [National Administration Guidelines](#) 1(c) iii (Ministry of Education, 2015b) promote the best interests for gifted and talented children. Yet procedures and practices, such as the special education

support services through [Early Intervention services](#) and [Resource Learning and Behaviour services](#) for school age children fail to either acknowledge or respond to the need for special education support services for gifted and talented learners. This failure to take action for our gifted and talented young children is in direct violation of their human rights.

Quality education through the provision of equitable opportunities for learning is an issue of human rights (Committee on the rights of the child & United Nations, 2006; The consultative group on early childhood care and development, 2013; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Children's Fund, & Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2006). The government of Aotearoa New Zealand is party to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) and therefore bound by the principles of this document including article 29.1a which states, "Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, *talents* and mental and physical *abilities* to their *fullest potential*" (United Nations, 1989, p. 9, author's emphasis). These priorities are acknowledged through the **National Education Goals** for early childhood education services and schools (Ministry of Education, 2015b). While not state mandated, early childhood educational policy within Aotearoa New Zealand designates early childhood education as a right for children, consequently if there are disparities in equity in early childhood education, the state is required to act to rectify this discrepancy (Quennerstedt, 2009).

Gifted children within the early years of education have special learning, social, emotional, and spiritual needs which arise as a result of their exceptional abilities. The early years in a child's life are the most influential period of learning and development. Ensuring the needs of the young gifted child are recognised and appropriately supported is crucial to the long term success of the individual (Clark, 2012).

This position paper supports the proposition that strategies must be put in place by the Ministry of Education to promote equitable and appropriate education practices for gifted children within the early years of education. Implementation of policies and regulatory guidelines must be undertaken to promote the rights of the gifted and talented child in their early years to develop their talents to their full potential.

Discussion

Akin to early childhood researchers who promote the early years as a crucial period of learning and development for individuals, within the domain of ‘gifted’ education, researchers and theorists assert the significance of the early childhood period in the life of a gifted person (Colombo, Shaddy, Blaga, Anderson, & Kannass, 2009; McGee & Hughes, 2011). There is no question that some children exhibit advanced behaviour in particular, or multiple learning areas (Bevan-Brown, 2005; Colombo, Shaddy, & Richman, 2000; Harrison, 2004). In some cases it has been argued that these children will know that they are different from their peers from as early as the age of two (Porter, 1999).

The concept of giftedness is contested by teachers and parents within the domain of the early years in Aotearoa New Zealand (Margrain & Farquhar, 2012; Moltzen, 2011; Tapper, 2012). This poses a challenge for teachers and parents who wish to promote a positive perspective of giftedness and access best pedagogical practice for gifted and talented children.

While the Ministry of Education (2012) supports giftedness as a phenomenon which is “is evidenced in all societal groups, regardless of culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, or disability (learning, physical, or behavioural)” (p. 22) and promotes the development of school and centre specific definitions. This rhetoric has not altered dominant negative concepts of giftedness, or perceptions which promote the view that ‘all children are gifted’. This is further exacerbated through the failure of undergraduate teaching programmes to emphasise gifted education. The resulting outcome is pedagogical practice which does not reflect research-based understandings of giftedness and gifted education in the early years.

Furthermore, educational practitioners who contend the actuality of ‘giftedness’ have a large impact upon the learning and development of gifted children (Elhoweris, 2008; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Lassig, 2009). Early childhood teachers within Aotearoa New Zealand hold a disparate range of views regarding ‘gifted’ education for children (Keen, 2005). These contesting perceptions become problematic when educators lack the understanding of gifted education yet the Ministry of Education advises parents who are interested or concerned about their child’s gifted ability to consult their early childhood teacher, as they “can also advise you about what to do next and provide contact details of those who can help if more support or information is needed” (Ministry of Education, 2015c).

There is a discrepancy of governmental provision for gifted education within the early childhood sector in comparison to the provisions for teachers in the school sector. While governmental investments into gifted education in the primary and secondary sectors are limited, support for early the childhood sector is scant. Primary and secondary educators school have access to a web resource designed for gifted students, their teachers and families; a repository that contains information and research (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Additionally, a revised edition of a the handbook for primary and secondary teachers entitled *Gifted and talented students: meeting their needs in New Zealand schools* (Ministry of Education, 2012) has been solicited by the Ministry of Education, outlining information on curriculum delivery for ‘gifted’ learners. Yet literature provided by the Ministry of Education devotes only a small section to giftedness in the early years (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008). More targeted support and research for giftedness in the early years needs to be addressed.

Action

The New Zealand Government and Ministry of Education is called upon to:

- formally recognise gifted and talented children in the early years
- include funding to support provisions for young gifted and talented children
- initiate funding and further support to undertake research in the early years sector in gifted education
- publish a handbook and other resources which are specific to the early years; to guide the effective implementation of evidence-based gifted education practices and provide relevant information for families with young gifted learners
- provide funding to secure access to Professional Development in gifted education for early years educators, to ensure a better understanding on how to support young gifted children is gained and that practice is evidence-based
- promote evidence-based practice in gifted education
- re-establish the Gifted and Talented Policy Advisory Group and include within this, representation for the early years.

Conclusion

The early years are a time of vital importance for the development of the gifted child. Yet, despite recognition of the importance of this phase of life, governmental support for young gifted children is non-existent. Contesting discursive images of the gifted learner as having

special needs or special abilities are confusing and give rise to significant problems in relation to provision of resources and support for gifted learners.

The equitable education of gifted learners is a human rights issue. Young gifted children are entitled to the opportunity which allows them to learn with the same strengths based focus as with other children. It is the responsibility of the government of Aotearoa New Zealand to provide this opportunity to gifted learners.

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