

## Position Paper: Gifted children in the early years

### Introduction

The exceptional abilities and qualities of gifted learners are “evidenced in all societal groups, regardless of culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, or disability (learning, physical, or behavioural)” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 22) and are often apparent from a very young age (Bevan-Brown, 2005; Colombo, Shaddy, & Richman, 2000; Harrison, 2004). Characteristics of giftedness may be exhibited through advanced behaviours in the early years or the demonstration of potential to perform at an advanced level. In addition, characteristics may be evident in one or two learning areas, or may be across multiple areas. In some instances gifted characteristics may co-exist with other exceptionalities such as learning disabilities, neurological, psychological or physical impairments. Often gifted learners are acutely aware of their difference from age-peers, with Porter (1999) arguing that this can be from as early as the age of two.

Special learning, social, emotional, and spiritual needs arise as a result of these exceptional abilities and qualities. As the early years in a child’s life are known to have a significant influence upon the learning and development of the individual over the course of their life span (Mustard, 2006; Ministry of Education, 1998; Sprenger, 2013), it is crucial that the needs of the young gifted child are recognised and appropriately supported, in an effort to promote the long term success of the individual (Clark, 2012).

‘Early years’ is a term used in reference to young children up to the age of 8, encapsulating education within early childhood and primary schooling. Gifted learners in the early years 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, discourse around children with special needs is strongly associated with a disability focus (Dunn, 2000; Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009), which often leads to giftedness being overlooked or considered outside the parameters of special needs. The Ministry of Education places emphasis on meeting the needs of **Priority Learners**; those **children who have diverse learning needs**. Yet children with **special abilities** are not recognised as priority learners, and fail to be supported through appropriate levels of

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funding and services (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2015a).

Further, the aims of Special Education 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). The [National Administration Guidelines](#) 1(c) iii (Ministry of Education, 2015b) acknowledge gifted and talented learners as having special educational needs, yet provisions, such as Ministry of Education support services (e.g., early childhood education [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 young gifted and talented learners.

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). Failure to take action for our gifted and talented young children is in direct violation of this. 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**” (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).

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 to support gifted and talented children within the early years. Implementation of policies and regulatory guidelines must be undertaken to promote the rights of gifted and talented children in their early years so that they may be supported to develop their talents.

## Discussion

As noted previously, early childhood researchers promote the early years as a critical period of learning and development for individuals. In line with this, 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). However, there are specific challenges which need to be addressed in the New Zealand educational context in order to meet the special learning needs of gifted and talented children in the early years.

There needs to be clear acknowledgement of giftedness and talent in young children. Early childhood teachers within Aotearoa New Zealand hold a disparate range of views regarding gifted education for children (Keen, 2005), with some educational practitioners contending the actuality of giftedness. Failure to acknowledge characteristics of giftedness which have been proven through research, and the way in which a gifted child experiences the world, is to deny children's self-perception and agentic decisions. This has the very real potential to impact negatively upon these children's learning, development and sense of identity (Elhoweris, 2008; Grant, 2013; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Lassig, 2009).

Furthermore, there needs to be clarity around conceptions of giftedness. Conceptions of giftedness vary among teachers and parents within the domain of the early years in Aotearoa New Zealand (Margrain & Farquhar, 2012; Moltzen, 2011; Tapper, 2012). Increased support is necessary to eliminate unhelpful rhetoric, including negative concepts of giftedness, and perceptions which promote the view that 'all children are gifted'. These views pose a barrier for teachers and parents who wish to encourage the development of understanding and positive perceptions around giftedness and talent, and seek to promote access to best pedagogical practice for supporting these learners.

While the Ministry of Education (2012) promotes the development of school and centre specific definitions and the use of this as a basis for developing provisions, these processes are primarily promoted in publications aimed at primary and secondary schools, failing to inform practice at an early childhood level. 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

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the early years. When the message from the Ministry of Education to parents and families who are interested or concerned about their child's gifted ability is to consult their early childhood teacher, as they can "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), the problems associated with some early years educators' lack of understanding around gifted education are further accentuated.

More Government investment in terms of provision and support for gifted education within the early years is sought. Resources which acknowledge and address aspects of early years education are generally cross-sector publications, and have a limited focus on this particular group of learners. An example of a cross-sector resource is a recently added subsection of Gifted and Talented Online which features resources and research in early years education, but which is embedded in the 'Teachers and Schools' section (Ministry of Education, 2014). Further resources which are targeted specifically to gifted education in the early years are required in order to guide the effective implementation of evidence-based gifted education practices and provide relevant information for families with young gifted learners.

More targeted support and research for giftedness in the early years' needs to be addressed, in order to gain evidence of best practice for those who are tasked with educating young gifted and talented children in the particular socio-cultural milieu of schools and centres in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Action

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

- formally recognise gifted and talented children in the early years
- promote evidence-based practice in gifted education in the early years
- publish a handbook and other resources which are specific to the early years
- 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
- initiate funding and further support to undertake research in the early years sector in gifted education

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- 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, government support for young gifted children is almost non-existent. Lack of clarity around conceptions of giftedness, and mixed perceptions concerning the gifted learner as having special needs or special abilities, give rise to significant problems in relation to provision of resources and support for gifted learners. Moreover, 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 other children. It is the responsibility of the government of Aotearoa New Zealand to ensure this opportunity is provided to young gifted learners.

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*Poipoia a tatou tamariki ihumanea*  
*Nurture our gifted children*

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