



Peer-reviewed paper

## **The well-being of gifted young children: Perceptions, pedagogy, and governance**

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This article considers the effects that the beliefs and understandings of giftedness, held by teachers and by those in wider society, have on the well-being of gifted young children within ECE services in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand. Young gifted children in ECE services make up a heterogeneous population of individuals with many diverse abilities. Societal and culturally constructed perceptions of giftedness held by teachers and significant adults can affect the self-concept of gifted individuals from an early age. Gifted children, like all children in the early years, learn in an interdependent environment and their social/emotional well-being is reliant on the attitudes and understanding of those around them. Feelings of well-being can be promoted through the trust that the gifted child and his or her *whānau* (family) have in their relationships with educators who have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the characteristics and the complexity of learning for gifted and talented children. This understanding is hindered by discrepancies in provision of information for teachers of young gifted children. Knowledge about the characteristics of giftedness can support gifted children's learning through the dispositional learning framework. The well-being of gifted young children in the early years would be enhanced if all teachers and related professionals were trained in gifted education at the pre-service level. Further support at the governmental level for gifted education in the early years is needed for early childhood teachers.

### ***Introduction***

The early years in a child's life are formational, and experiences within this period of development have long lasting impacts upon the individual's later life (Mustard, 2006). Gifted children within the early years of education demonstrate diverse interests and abilities. Like any group of children, attention needs to be given to the promotion of their well-being during this crucial phase in their learning and development, as these seminal years are influential in the life of a gifted individual (Colombo, Shaddy, Blaga, Anderson, & Kannass, 2009; Harrison, 2003; Koshy & Robinson, 2006; McGee & Hughes, 2011; Murphy, 2005; Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2004; Walsh, Hodge, Bowes, & Kemp, 2010). Early experiences impact upon the immediate well-being of the gifted child and resonate across the life span with potential positive or negative effects (Gagné, 2004).



This article uses the terms 'gifted' and 'gifted and talented' interchangeably to describe this particular group of young children. This is in line with the practices of the New Zealand Ministry of Education (NZMOE) which allows the use of both terms in their seminal publications for educators (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2012; New Zealand Ministry of Education, Bevan-Brown, & Taylor, 2008) and on their website for educators, parents and students ([www.gifted.tki.org.nz](http://www.gifted.tki.org.nz)).

*Te Whāriki* (NZMOE, 1996) emphasises that the "well-being of children is interdependent" (p. 42). In addition, *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996) positions dispositional learning as occurring within environments "characterised by well-being and trust" (p. 45). Learning is influenced by the child's experiences of responsive, reciprocal relationships with others in his or her life (Smith, 2013). Young children who participate in early childhood services interact with multiple individuals who affect the social, spiritual, physical, cognitive and emotional well-being of the child. These fundamental relationships impact upon the child's current emotive state and influence lasting behavioural, social and emotional responses to others in the wider world.

The connection between worlds – the early childhood environment and the other domains a child occupies in his or her life – can serve to enhance or hinder the emotional well-being of children in the early childhood setting. The ability of the early childhood setting to develop a *wrap around* form of family support (Smith, 2006) can be crucial for parents of gifted children. Trusting relationships between *whānau* and teachers, which value the perceptions and opinions of the family regarding their child, promote an educational setting in which children can thrive.

In light of the points above, the following discussion will address the importance of a positive consideration of giftedness and talent within the early years' educational setting, for the promotion of well-being for the young gifted child. Contemplation will be given to colloquial and societal perceptions of giftedness, with particular focus upon views within early childhood. Attention will be paid to how teachers' attitudes and understandings of giftedness can positively or negatively impact upon the well-being of gifted children. This will be followed up with how teachers who demonstrate an understanding of the characteristics of giftedness, and can reconceptualise these characteristics into learning dispositions from the Teaching and Learning stories framework (Carr, May, & Podmore, 2000), can serve to contest dominant negative images of giftedness. Finally, an analysis and critique of governmental policies regarding giftedness and gifted education within the early childhood domain will be addressed.

### ***Societal and cultural perceptions of giftedness: The construction of the gifted child within society***

Within *Aotearoa*/New Zealand, there is a history of dismissal and rejection of the concept of giftedness. In the 1900s, many thought that children of exceptional ability were forced into *brilliance*. For example, a newspaper article of the time argued that giftedness was a manufactured phenomenon, produced by intense parental instruction, a *hot-housing* of the child into exceptionality ("Over-Taught Children", 1908). Normal and abnormal spaces (Foucault, 2003) for both the



child and parents are constructed through these images; parents are considered to be inappropriately seeking glory through their child, and children are unnatural products of this vanity. Furthermore, this hot-housing was argued to result in arrested emotional and social development. There was a long-standing prevailing belief that gifted children were emotionally unstable and socially distant from their peers (Moltzen, 2011). Some of these historical images prevail within *Aotearoa/New Zealand* and continue to affect strategies to support the emotional well-being of the gifted child. The view that there is a dichotomy between emotional stability and exceptional ability constructs deficit images of the gifted child; to be exceptional in one area is to be lacking in another (Edwards, 2013; Porter, 2011; Sherriff, 2011).

Historically, giftedness was synonymous with academic ability (Moltzen, 2011). Cognitive gifted ability within the United Kingdom has been found to be framed more negatively than gifted abilities in other domains, such as music or sport (O'Connor, 2012). This can be equally considered to be relevant in *Aotearoa/New Zealand*, where exceptionality in sporting and musical domains are widely publicised (consider television coverage of sporting events, and shows such as *X Factor* and *NZ Idol*). Yet cognitive giftedness is represented through images of serious, bookish, brilliant but socially distant, mentally unstable, or emotionally disturbed individuals (consider recent popular representations within film and television: *A Beautiful Mind*; *The Imitation Game*; *Good Will Hunting*; *The Big Bang Theory*; *Bones*). Through their representation in popular media, these normalised images perpetuate dominant negative stereotypes of the cognitively gifted individual as emotionally unstable and socially inept, despite empirical evidence to the contrary (Jones, 2013). These images affect perceptions of the potential social and emotional development of the gifted young child, and promote a prevailing discourse of a child who is extraordinary, but flawed and requiring intervention to fit within society. While many gifted children do have special emotional intensities (Peterson, 2009) the normalisation of the necessity to change the gifted individual to fit within societal norms is inappropriate.

Knudson (2006), in his book outlining the history of gifted education in *Aotearoa/New Zealand* schools, points to “the fierce egalitarianism of New Zealand society” (p. 209). He maintains that this belief that no one person should have an advantage over another has impacted on attitudes towards gifted children throughout colonial times and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that it continues to be a deterrent to provisions in the present. Children learn from an early age that *being smart* in the socio-cultural milieu of *Aotearoa/New Zealand* schools and ECE services is negatively stigmatised (Margrain, 2005; Tapper, 2014).

Societal and colloquial perceptions of giftedness affect perceptions of the emotional well-being of the gifted child, constructing dominant views of the gifted child. The dominant negative images of the cognitively gifted individual promoted in popular culture, and based around stereotypes, needs to be mediated with a more astute understanding of gifted individuals' social and emotional competence. The heterogeneity of young gifted children should be recognised and understood within early childhood settings. *Te Whāriki* (NZMOE, 1996) promotes the image of young children as “capable people and competent learners” (p. 30), an image which, in fact, applies to many gifted children.



More recently, concepts of giftedness within *Aotearoa*/New Zealand reflect sensitivity to a wider range of gifted abilities. In reviewing literature surrounding the concept of giftedness within *Aotearoa*/New Zealand, Tapper (2012) concludes that there is:

...clear support for a multi-categorical understanding of giftedness consummate with a domain specific view, the recognition of a developmentalist approach that identifies potential as well as performance, and the understanding that giftedness is apparent across all societal groups and is in relation to what is valued by a particular culture, reflecting a socio-cultural position. (p. 7)

For example, in Māori concepts of giftedness abilities, such as service, pride in their Māori identity and high moral values, reflect the interdependence between the gifted Māori child and their *whānau*, *hapu* (sub-tribe) and *iwi* (tribe) (Bevan-Brown, 2009). The redefinition of the domains of giftedness and consideration of culturally mediated forms of giftedness can reduce the permutation of dominant negative stereotypes of giftedness. Within our increasingly global community, the push to streamline standardised conceptualisations of giftedness must be resisted in order to retain heterogeneous perspectives that are unique to the bicultural identity of *Aotearoa*/New Zealand.

Societal and colloquial understandings about giftedness are further problematised within contemporary discourses of *special needs* and *special abilities*, which are incorporated into the priority learner group, *children with diverse learning needs*, recognised by the NZMOE (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2015). It is asserted that the term *special needs* is relative to children with disabilities, whereas children with *special abilities* relates to gifted learners (Macartney & Morton, 2009). However, the definition of children with *special needs* by the NZMOE as “a physical disability, a sensory impairment, a learning or communication delay, a social, emotional or behavioural difficulty, or a combination of these” (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2012) serves to exclude the consideration of gifted children within the review of inclusionary practice recently conducted by the Education Review Office (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2012). Gifted children are positioned both inside and outside of the *special education* umbrella, problematising their inclusion within policies concerning special needs.

### ***Attitudes of teachers regarding giftedness and gifted children: The impacts of perceptions on children’s emotional development***

The well-being of the gifted child is emphasised through the relationships she or he experiences. Within the context of the early childhood setting, confidence and independence are fostered through relationships that engender trust (NZMOE, 1996). As stated earlier, the well-being of the child is interdependent. The attitudes, perceptions and practices of the teachers within the learning environment impact upon the gifted child’s emerging self-perception.

To develop a sense of their own identity and a strong sense of self-worth, children must experience relationships of trust with their teachers in the early childhood setting (NZMOE, 1996). This trusting relationship needs to be built



upon a foundation of mutual respect; children must see that their experiences are valued in order to emotionally invest and consequently build confidence in the early childhood setting.

Moltzen (2011) maintains that an understanding of the nature of giftedness and talent should be a focus for all educators working with gifted children in our schools and centres. Australian researchers found that initial teacher education programmes which specifically educated student teachers on positive concepts of giftedness led to improvement in teacher understandings and perceptions of gifted learners (Hudson, Hudson, Lewis, & Watters, 2010; Plunkett & Kronborg, 2011). Teachers who are trained in gifted education are more aware of the social emotional development of gifted children, enabling them to respond by creating a learning environment responsive to their well-being (Riley, Sampson, White, Wardman, & Walker, 2015).

Currently in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand, early childhood initial teacher education programmes do not provide teachers with sufficient opportunities to develop an understanding of concepts of giftedness that are supported by empirical evidence. Most initial teacher education providers include a generic course on inclusionary issues for children with special needs (see, for example, AUT University, 2015; Manukau Institute of Technology, 2015; University of Auckland, 2015; University of Canterbury, 2015; University of Otago, 2015). However, as outlined earlier, this is problematised by the discursive use of the term *special needs* within the *Aotearoa*/New Zealand context, which may or may not include giftedness.

The lack of specialised gifted education courses within initial teacher education programmes arguably contributes to the disparate range of views regarding gifted education for children held by early childhood teachers within *Aotearoa*/New Zealand (Keen, 2005; Margrain & Farquhar, 2011). Within a recent review of effective prioritisation of children's learning, 29% of ECE services were found to be non or minimally responsive to children's strengths or abilities (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2013).

Lack of knowledge and negative perceptions of giftedness from the significant adults in their lives can have an adverse effect upon the well-being of gifted children (Elhoweris, 2008; Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Lassig, 2009). Adults' perceptions of the gifted child, which are informed by societal and colloquial perceptions of giftedness, can serve to enhance or undermine the relationship of trust with the gifted child. Young gifted children's developing sense of pride and confidence is interdependent with adults' perceptions of the child and their construction of the image of the gifted child. The normalisation of the necessity to change the gifted individual to fit within society can be re-envisioned through the promotion of children as "capable people and competent learners." Teacher practices with gifted children can enhance their emergent sense of well-being through increasing opportunities for the child to exert their agentic decisions.

In turn, teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards giftedness are modelled for the child's peers within the early childhood setting. The tone of the teachers' interactions with the gifted child can set the standard for the behaviours of the child's peers (Plunkett & Kronborg, 2011). Young gifted children develop an early sense that they do not *fit* with other children, with some gifted children as young as two recognising they are different to other children (Margrain, 2005;



Porter, 1999). It is argued that, within *Aotearoa*/New Zealand, a *tall-poppy syndrome* affects the images and response to identification as gifted, in which “standing tall can sometimes elicit very negative responses” (Moltzen, 2004, p.140).

The attitudes of teachers regarding giftedness affect the gifted child at both the micro and macro levels of interaction and interrelation, impacting not only upon the gifted child, but their *whānau* and the wider learning community (Adams & Pierce, 2004; Speirs Neumeister, Adams, Pierce, Cassady, & Dixon, 2007). For example, the giftedness of a Māori child affects the whole family; successes are shared, but so are failures (Macfarlane, Webber, Cookson-Cox, & McRae, 2012). Research into the best attributes for teachers of gifted children assert that a compassionate and positive perception of the child’s giftedness can enhance gifted children’s development of trust in their teachers and thus promote feelings of well-being (David, 2011).

Margrain, Lee, and Farquhar (2013) support professional development for all early childhood teachers in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand around promoting an understanding of how to identify and support young gifted learners. They concluded that “it is neither valid nor equitable to rely on ad hoc experience to provide understanding of gifted education” (p. 11). Without this understanding from their teachers, gifted children in the early years will be negatively affected.

### ***Understanding the characteristics of gifted children: Using learning dispositions to construct an image of the ‘confident and competent’ gifted child***

While giftedness can be expressed in diverse ways and a hegemonic view of the behaviour of gifted children should not be considered (Gur, 2011), common characteristics of giftedness identified through empirical research can aid identification and understanding of the actions of a gifted child (Allan, 2001; Elhoweris, 2008; Silverman, 2014). Knowledge of the characteristics and learning dispositions that are exhibited by many gifted children can enable teachers to contest negative dominant images of giftedness, and develop an appreciation of the intensities that can often be experienced by the gifted child.

Many young gifted children demonstrate characteristics such as: a need for little sleep; frustration with others who do not understand them or cannot keep up; heightened sensitivity to the emotional responses of others; distress when unable to achieve their *vision*; a high sense of fairness; non-conformist behaviours; and a sense that they do not *fit* with other children (Breen, 2008; Silverman, 2013). As young gifted children can be keenly aware of how they fit within their environment, teachers’ actions in response to the expression of these characteristics impact upon the gifted child’s well-being. For example, young children often argue over resources but, for the gifted child, the sense of injustice they feel when their toy is taken from them can have a lasting impact. Through an understanding of the characteristics of gifted children, the emotional well-being of the gifted child can be supported by teachers’ considered pedagogical actions. A sense of trust that their emotive responses will not only be heard but validated, can enable gifted children to learn the skills to develop pro-social behaviours and negotiate age-peer relationships within the early childhood setting.



As discussed earlier, images of the gifted child as having arrested social development and being negatively disjointed from age peers remain prevalent within society. Understanding of the characteristics of gifted children can enable educators to take action to reconceptualise the images of the social competence of young gifted children. Some gifted children can be perceived as socially inept when in actuality they are highly socially competent when matched with like-minded individuals (Riley et al., 2015). Alternate images of socially competent gifted children are constructed when these children find peers related to their ability or interest. However, this can prove to be challenging, especially when young gifted children are limited to a small group of chronological aged peers in early childhood settings (Farrent & Grant, 2005). Using peer relationships as an indicator of children's social competence and well-being should be mediated with the understanding that like-minded peers are not necessarily chronological aged peers (Öneren Şendil & Erden, 2013).

In promoting a view of children as “confident and competent learners” (NZMOE, 1996, p. 9), characteristics of giftedness can be reconceptualised as learning dispositions through the Learning and Teaching Stories Framework (Carr et al., 2000). In this way, the characteristics that are demonstrated by the gifted child as observable behaviours can be reconsidered as learning dispositions, which can be fostered and encouraged to promote learning. Characteristics that are demonstrated as negative behaviours can be repositioned into positive learning dispositions and deficit perceptions of gifted children transformed into perceptions of capability. For example, gifted children who may be considered to be quickly frustrated because they become annoyed with others and themselves when they are unable to achieve their goals can be viewed as *meticulous*, and *visionary*; gifted children who are considered overemotional, demonstrating heightened sensitivity and distress at the emotional responses of others, can be viewed as *compassionate*; gifted children who incessantly argue about fairness could be seen to demonstrate *ethical sensibility/responsibility*, and gifted children who demonstrate non-conformist behaviours, as *critical thinkers* who *challenge* the power relationships in their surroundings.

Utilising learning dispositions has also been recognised to support the identification of gifted characteristics (Margrain, 2010). When reconceived within a positive dispositional framework, reframing characteristics of giftedness into dispositions of learning enables opportunities to promote a constructive perception of the gifted young child and the development of their well-being. Rather than negative attributes that need to be altered in order for the gifted child to fit within society, enhancement of these learning dispositions can be targeted if they are reconceptualised as commendable personal qualities that will aid the young gifted child throughout his or her life.

### ***The governance of gifted education: Direction and advocacy***

The NZMOE promote a view of giftedness as a phenomenon “found in every classroom, and across all cultures and socio-economic groups” (New Zealand Ministry of Education et al., 2008, p. 7). Gifted learners are viewed to be “those with exceptional abilities relative to most other people” (New Zealand Ministry of Education et al., 2008, p. 15). On a global level, 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, “[p]arties 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). 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).

Further, the Graduating Teacher Standards of *Aotearoa*/New Zealand mandate that teachers must “recognise and value diversity . . . promote a learning culture that engages diverse learners effectively . . . (and) demonstrate a commitment to and strategies for promoting and nurturing the . . . emotional safety of learners” (Education Council New Zealand, 2015). The recommendations of the Early Childhood Taskforce within *An agenda for amazing children: Final report of the ECE Taskforce* (Early Childhood Education Taskforce, 2011) call for “the introduction of the requirement that early childhood education initial teacher education providers ensure their programmes include sufficient study of special education to promote early identification of needs and appropriate teaching practices for children with a special education need” (p. 99). Additionally, *He Pou Tātaki - How ERO reviews early childhood services* (New Zealand Government, 2013) asserts “the focus [for every ECE service] will be on inclusive practice to enable each child’s participation and engagement in the programme, and their further development of competence as a learner” (p. 9). Yet despite such directives from nationally mandated documents, the NZMOE fails to take action to ensure all initial teachers in the early years have access to courses that include specific content on giftedness within initial teacher education programmes.

Irrespective of the lack of teacher training in the area of gifted education, current practice by the NZMOE enables and empowers all early childhood teachers as the primary source of information and guidance for parents seeking advice regarding their gifted young child. This is highlighted through their recommendations on the NZMOE web page for parents of gifted children, which states:

If your child is attending an early childhood service or Kōhanga Reo, talk to their educators. They will be interested in knowing all about your child’s interests and abilities so that they can support them well. 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. (NZMOE, 2015, para. 8)

However, research has demonstrated that some teachers may still question the existence of giftedness, or attest to all children being gifted (Keen, 2005; Margrain & Farquhar, 2011). These views could be seen to be reinforced by influential leaders in early childhood education who have promoted the perception that *every child is a gifted child* (Ramage, 1997). Such perceptions, that all children or no children are gifted, are not only empirically unsubstantiated but they also do not align with NZMOE policy directives. As argued earlier, specific courses on giftedness within initial teacher education programmes are needed in order to promote positive perceptions of gifted learners and to assist



teachers in the early years to support the well-being of these young children (Hudson et al., 2010; Plunkett & Kronborg, 2011).

Within early childhood education, governmental guidance regarding giftedness in young children is minimal. Teachers and parents share a combined sector publication, but this book does not designate specific strategies for teachers working with young gifted children (NZMOE, Bevan-Brow & Taylor, 2008). Website support is also limited, with a sub-section devoted to early childhood education within the gifted education section of the Te Kete Ipurangi website (see <http://gifted.tki.org.nz/Early-Childhood-Education-ECE>). While these above examples point to a start having been made in providing some support for early childhood educators who work with gifted children in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand, advocates maintain that much more in the way of specific governmental policy and direction is needed ("The trouble with being gifted", 2015).

More extensive legislative direction and policy guidance is needed to provide equity in educational provision for gifted children in early childhood education. Support from the Ministry for courses in gifted education within initial teacher education programmes for early childhood would be a positive direction in policy development. If early childhood teachers do not have an understanding of the particular needs of gifted children in schools and centres, the well-being of these young learners cannot be assured.

## **Conclusion**

To develop a sense of well-being, children must experience relationships of trust with their teachers in the early childhood setting (NZMOE, 1996). Gifted young children learn from an early age that it can be perilous expressing their talent to others, as their ability can be negatively stigmatised, but trusting relationships with understanding teachers can enable gifted children to develop confidence to learn. An understanding of the characteristics of giftedness and learning dispositions of young gifted children can promote understanding and, conversely, a lack of understanding can negatively impact upon the well-being of the gifted child.

Significant action needs to be undertaken at a governmental and Ministry level in order to further promote what Margrain and Farquhar (2011) call "a strategic investment for long-term well-being" (p. 8) for young gifted children in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand. The disparities in educational provision for gifted young children need to be addressed. All teachers of children in the early years need to have a clear understanding of the characteristics of gifted children and an appreciation of the intensities that can often be experienced by the gifted child.

The early years are highly influential in the life of a gifted individual. By promoting the well-being of gifted children through supportive, responsive, reciprocal relationships with knowledgeable teachers in the setting of the early childhood centre, young gifted children of *Aotearoa*/New Zealand will grow as capable people and competent learners.



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