Personalising Learning in Secondary Schools: Gifted Education Leading the Way

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Abstract

This article outlines a programme for gifted and talented senior secondary students. The programme is comprised not of a single solution but as an eclectic collection of individual and personalised programmes. Each student’s programme is developed in consultation with the students, their parents, and teacher, as this article will describe. The authors’ proposition that the model for programme design and development is replicable in other settings and serves as a model of good practice in gifted and talented education. The ways in which the programme meets holistic needs of students, in partnership with their families, leads the way to greater personalisation of learning in secondary education.

Introduction

This article outlines a programme for gifted and talented students that has been developed and implemented over the last seven years in an urban New Zealand co-educational secondary school. This programme of personalised learning has been identified as a model of good practice in gifted education (Education Review Office, 2008), whilst a three year evaluative research project undertaken Riley and Moltzen (2010) highlighted the positive outcomes this programme was achieving.

The programme is known as TDI, Talent Development Initiative, and consists of parallel pathways of individualised and group learning which are culturally affirmative and inclusive of parents. The principles of student centred and holistic education embedded in educational policy and promoted in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007), Ka Hikitia (2006), the Pasifika Education Plan (2008), and ‘policies’ for gifted education (Ministry of Education, 2000; 2002) are reflected in this programme. The individual student is nurtured within the context of the group so that their potential, their gifts, is realised. A strong sense of self and of self efficacy as a gifted learner is developed and then utilised for the benefit of self and other.
According to West and Coates (2006, p.7), “Equity, excellence and efficiency are to be achieved in the future through personal responsiveness rather than generic provision – it is a movement away from the ‘one size fits all.’” Personalised learning means “… tailoring educational programmes to individual student needs, interests and aptitudes. It means designing programmes that put individual students at the centre, rather than making students fit the system” (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2008, p.114). “Personalised learning is the deliberate and systematic process of focusing all of the school’s resources to ensure that each learner is able, with support, to decide what they learn, how they learn, when they learn and who they learn with” (West & Coates, 2006, p.9). Personalised learning is the vehicle by which to transform learning and relationships, to create agency, identify and meet needs, and to transform gifts into talents (Gagne, 2003). Notions of learning, the learning process and the outcomes that can be achieved are valued by creating student and parent voice, and listening and acting upon it. The entrenched organisational frameworks of secondary schooling which have provided the frames of reference for learning and achievement are transformed when the individual student drives the process of learning.

The TDI model of personalised learning comprises three distinct components: individualised pathways of personalised learning; group pathways of learning for students, parents and staff; and the leadership role of the teacher in charge/facilitator. This programme currently consists of approximately forty students from the senior secondary school, Years 11-13, who have been identified as gifted and talented students and who, collectively, form a vertical class group. Although this programme is currently limited to a predetermined number of gifted and talented students, which is determined by the allocation of resources within the school, this programme is transferable and has the potential to become a school wide model catering for all students.

The development of identifiers, an identification process and a selection process has been an ongoing process that utilises local knowledge and national and international theory and practice, as the next section describes.

**Identifiers, the Identification Process and the Selection process**

We have developed identifiers that reflect western, Maori and Pasifika concepts of giftedness. Existing profiles, including the Purdue Scales (Feldhusen, Hoover, & Sayler, 1989) and the *Teacher Observation Scales for Identifying Children with Special Abilities* (McAlpine & Reid, 1996), are utilised in the identification of achieving, underachieving and twice exceptional gifted and talented students from a western perspective. Gifted Maori and Pasifika students can be identified through Maori and Pasifika perspectives and/or western perspectives.

A Maori parents’ group was formed and worked with the facilitator over a three year period to create Maori indicators of giftedness which were informed by the work of Mason Durie (2003) and Jill Bevan-Brown (2004). Our Pasifika parents group, created identifiers for gifted Pasifika. This group was led by teacher Manu Faaea – Semeatu, who
was supported by Dr Arini of Auckland University and the programme facilitator. Both these sets of indicators reflect culturally-specific qualities and abilities.

It is important to develop identification processes that are rigorous, transparent and defendable, especially when the programme begins to influence peer and school culture. “This [programme] has contributed to a culture where it’s OK to succeed, where the tall poppy is allowed to raise its head.” (Principal, interview, Riley & Moltzen, 2010, p.80). The success of this programme, for example, has generated increased competition for places, as is reflected in the number of nominations. In 2009, 25 nominations were received from the Year 10 cohort of three hundred, compared with 88 nominations in 2010 for the ten places on the programme. These nominations include self, peer, teacher and parent nominations, all of which must be exposed to the same processes of collation and analysis, as well as measures and levels of accountability.

The Purdue Parent Checklist (Feldhusen et al., 1989) is completed by their parents and the Purdue General Characteristics Checklist (Feldhusen et al., 1989) is completed by the individual teachers who have nominated students. Students who have self nominated are asked to complete a profile that we have created which asks them to identify and describe their gifts and talents and why they believe they should be included on the programme. Maori and Pasifika students and their parents complete this generic process and are also invited into the school as a group to complete the Maori or Pasifika identification profile. Each of these identification checklists produces quantitative data through likert-type responses, but additional qualitative comments are also sought to substantiate the responses or provide additional information. All of this raw data is weighted and ranked in order to generate the first natural groupings.

All teachers of the students in the highest ranked group are then asked to complete a more comprehensive profile of these students, the Teacher Observation Scales for Identifying Children with Special Abilities (McAlpine & Reid, 1996). If a student has initially been identified and nominated as a gifted underachiever, the Purdue checklist of behaviours of underachieving gifted learners (Feldhusen et al., 1989) is also completed by the teacher who nominated the student, and their parents. Information on twice exceptional students is collected through the special needs coordinator. All of this subsequent data is then added to the original data and the final rankings are generated.

**Individualised Pathways of Personalised Learning**

The TDI model shown in Figure 1 represents a process that includes: needs analysis, goal setting, the creation and implementation of learning opportunities, and the ongoing process of evaluation and re-setting of goals. This section of the article discusses these individualised pathways.

**Needs assessment and analysis**

Each student selected for the programme, their parents and the teacher/facilitator meet to identify needs, strengths, passions and areas of concern or weakness through a process of facilitated questioning that begins with the student and includes uninterrupted talk time for each of the participants. The focus of this interview is to identify strengths and
passions, intrinsic or extrinsic motivators, values and expectations and areas of concern in relation to all domains and in all aspects of life. In this way, needs, and subsequent learning to meet these needs, are not limited to the school curriculum or the school day, but to life in general.

“...now I’m doing sport, doing cultural stuff, doing a radio show, doing environmental community stuff and doing more than just academics. It’s just shaping me more and allowing me to do more than just academics. So now I have direction.”

(Student interview, Riley & Moltzen, 2010, p.72)

Figure 1. TKI Model

Goal Setting and Creation of Personalised Learning Plans

Created by Vivienne Russell
Short and long term goals are developed by the student, their parents and teacher, in relation to identified needs in all domains (shown in Figure 1 above). The teacher creates a plan of learning that utilises the school and local community, learning institutions and facilities, as well as key people with defined roles. This plan is presented to the student and parents and is then finalised by them for implementation. Each student’s learning plan is continually revisited and adjusted through a process of ongoing evaluation.

**Evaluation**

The process of evaluation for the students, parents and the teacher in charge is multi-faceted with processes that include written reflection, interviews and discussion. Students develop the intrapersonal skills of reflection, critical thinking and affirmative action through a process of evaluation which also places them in a central role in identifying and meeting their needs. In this way students are empowered to become increasingly responsible for their own learning and to have more control over it. Students and parents also evaluate the teacher’s role in meeting their needs within the individual and group programmes for students and parents, as well as the programme as a whole.

**Group Pathways**

The group programme runs parallel to the individualised programmes and includes objectives and opportunities for learning for each year level group and for the group as a whole as Figure 2 illustrates.

**Building Communities of Learning by Building Positive Relationships**

*Opportunities, rights and responsibilities.*

*You give, you receive, you belong.*

*You succeed.*

![Diagram](image)

Figure 2. Building Communities
This framework reflects the programme’s focus on relationships and building communities of learning around like-minds. These relationships form the basis of teaching and learning and of community and citizenship.

The Year 11 students who enter the group are the primary responsibility of the Year 12 students. Individual students are ‘buddied up’ and a formal programme of tutoring and support is undertaken, with clear expectations of responsibilities, roles and outcomes. Informal mentoring occurs as these relationships develop. The Year 12 students are also expected to lead the class group and take responsibility for class events. The Year 13 students are expected to lead the school with the active support of the class group and in turn, to lead the class group by example. In this way the principles of citizenship and leadership are developed based upon the foundations of positive personal relationships within a positive group culture. Students have also determined which values - from multicultural perspectives - are actively developed to become the shared values underpinning the culture of the group.

“We inspire each other. In a way it is slightly competitive but in a very healthy way. We support each other and celebrate each others successes. On the other hand you look at what others have achieved and we raise our own expectations. And there is no shame in achieving but in another way there is no shame in failing from time to time.” (Student, interview, Riley & Moltzen, 2010, p.67)

Parents gather as a group on a regular basis and form relationships that develop over the three years or more that they are involved in the programme. These evenings are organised around identified needs with the sharing of information, focus group discussions of issues and the specialist knowledge from invited presenters, providing a variety of formats for learning and support. This group, like the student group, is characterised by mutually supportive relationships and is empowered to be proactive when advocating for the rights and needs of their children and supporting them in their endeavours.

“I’ve always maintained that successful learning is much more than simply jumping through hoops. These children in particular will follow passions not prescriptions.” (Parent, interview, Riley & Moltzen, 2010, p.69)

Regular evenings are also held for parents and students, primarily to celebrate events and achievements. These bring everyone together in a whanau/family environment which further strengthens group cohesion and a culture of excellence, whilst also formally valuing effort.

Professional learning for teachers follows similar pathways to those for the students and parents. There are both individual and group programmes reflecting identified needs in relation to their roles as teachers, the development of their strengths and passions in this role, developing strategies to address their areas of weakness, whilst also supporting their general well being. Specialist group and whole staff programmes of learning reflect
school wide goals, interventions and initiatives for gifted students with student and parent voice forming an integral component in this process. In this way the social capital of students and parents is being utilised as agency through leadership of learning within a distributed leadership model (Mitra, 2008).

In their book *Distributing Leadership for Personalised Learning*, Ritchie and Deakin (2007) outline how personalised learning for students and for staff produces individuals who are able to “…take responsibility for their own learning journey and to do so in a way that respects other people’s learning and contributes to a sustainable world” (p.103). Staff, who have been supported in the development of their expertise in gifted education through professional learning, are expected to share this expertise in ways which are of benefit to others, just as the students are expected to lead their peers and the school community as a result of the support they have been given. For example, staff attending national or international conferences are expected to present workshops, sharing their developing expertise.

**The Role of the Teacher Responsible for Gifted Education**

This role is central to the introduction, implementation, development, success and sustainability of the programme. Proactive leadership in developing student and parent voice and translating this into affirmative action requires ongoing communication for positive change in a number of areas of the school.

Advocacy permeates all aspects of this role to ensure that practice is inclusive, processes are transparent and that outcomes are achieved. This means that policies, resources and programmes reflect and meet the needs of our gifted learners. Leading and managing a process of change in a positive manner is also a fundamental component of the role and requires “creating enough coherence on the edge of chaos to still be creative.” (West & Coates, 2006, p.134). And finally, within a programme of personalised learning, the leader’s ability to form positive relationships and build this capability in others is central to its success. Excellent intrapersonal and interpersonal are fundamental to leading this process.

**Leading the Way**

Holistic education and personalised learning nurtures human beings by recognising all human domains and supporting the endeavours within these that manifest as gifts and talents. The TDI programme of personalised learning for gifted students in the senior secondary school has been deemed a success and a model of good practice for all (Riley & Moltzen, 2010). Riley and Moltzen (2010) demonstrated positive impacts of this programme for students, parents and caregivers, and teachers. Gifted and talented students demonstrated “increased recognition and validation of gifts and talents; empowerment through participation in the development of a holistic educational programme based upon individual cognitive, social, emotional, creative, and cultural needs; increased engagement with like-minded peers; development of stronger relationships with peers, role models, mentors, and teachers; enhanced understanding of

Self as gifted and talented; and increased motivation and challenge” (pp. 80-81). Stronger home-school/teacher-parent relationships developed, as did opportunities for parent-to-parent support. Parents felt better empowered to advocate for their children’s needs not only from having a deeper understanding of abilities and qualities possessed by their children, but also through advocacy skills development. Finally, for the teachers, Riley and Moltzen (2010, p. 81) identified the following impacts:

- Greater skill in identifying gifted and talented students, including those who are underachieving or come from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Development of school-based tools for identification of gifted students, including refinement of appropriate measures for Māori, Pasifika, and Asian students.
- Greater acceptance of gifted and talented students.
- Development of a school culture more accepting of success of all types, including academic success.

The impacts of this programme reflect the goals of personalised learning for all learners, not just gifted and talented students. Like much good practice within the educational arena it is transferable to other learning areas and, in this instance, to leading positive school wide change in organisation, practice and outcomes for all learners. As one student explained to Riley and Moltzen’s research team (2010, p. 78), “This way of learning should be how schools are organised for all students”. The researchers conclude that these students believed that many features of their programme could be implemented into all classrooms and impact positively on all students.

Acknowledgements

This Talent Development Initiative was initially funded by the Ministry of Education (2006 to 2009).

References


