Editorial: Giftedness Unfurled

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This special issue of APEX is the outcome of a collaborative effort between giftEDnz: The Professional Association for Gifted Education and the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children. It contains papers from the 2012 inaugural conference of giftEDnz, themed “Giftedness Unfurled: Fostering Best Practice in Aotearoa New Zealand”. The conference celebrated the many achievements of New Zealand professionals working with and for gifted and talented learners of all ages.

The opening article in this issue is the Te Manu Kōtuku Lecture presented by Associate Professor Jill Bevan-Brown, who was recognised for her contributions to gifted and talented education as the inaugural recipient of the Te Manu Kōtuku award. The award recognises Jill’s outstanding service to the education and development of the gifted and talented children and young people of Aotearoa New Zealand. In Māori oratory, the most telling compliment is to liken someone to Kōtuku. It symbolises everything rare and beautiful. The feathers of Kōtuku were highly prized by Māori and were used to adorn the heads of chiefs both in this life and after.

Jill’s lecture, Digging Deeper, Flying Higher, celebrates our country’s achievements over the last 15 years, but challenges teachers and other professionals to examine the progress made and to build upon those. The article argues a need to be vigilant, rather than complacent, in: initial teacher education; professional learning and development; school and early childhood provisions for gifted learners; parental, family, whānau and gifted learner involvement and; Māori and multicultural matters. Her final challenge leads nicely into the other articles in this issue:

The challenge is not only to develop our gifted children’s intellectual and creative abilities but also their sense of responsibility, their tolerance and caring for each other and the environment so that their inventions, policies and practices lead us away from the brink of earth’s destruction rather than hastening our journey towards it. We must start giving as much attention to children’s intrapersonal and interpersonal development as we do to their cognitive development.

Vicki Needham’s article shares the results of her research which investigates teacher attitudes, experiences and understandings of the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children. While teachers were positive about working with gifted and talented children, they were admittedly held back by their own understandings and hindered by a lack of knowledge and skills. As one of her research participants explained: “I am unsure about the terminology ... I see giftedness relating to a very small minority of people with extraordinary abilities in an area. I see talentedness as a second tier with more people included.”
The next article by Louise Tapper sheds some light on these uncertainties by reviewing some of the current debates around the concept of giftedness and talent and relates these trends to concepts described in the New Zealand-based literature of the last decade. As Louise explains,

*The lack of common conceptualisations of giftedness in New Zealand is questioned with a recommendation that teachers are helped to become more knowledgeable about current conceptualisations which in turn may provide them with a sounder framework for underpinning pedagogical decisions.*

The next article reports similar findings, suggesting the need for 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. Valerie Margrain and Sarah Farquhar, based on a survey of 125 early years educators, discovered a gap between what teachers should do and actually do in practice. For example, while over 97% of respondents believed teachers should “provide additional opportunities within the programme for gifted children to further develop and practice their special gifts/talents/abilities and strengths”, only around 70% actually practiced this.

What teachers believe and what teachers do is just one of many incongruencies in gifted and talented education; as the next article highlights, there are often differential patterns in access to provisions and differing teacher, parental, and student viewpoints of their value. Brenda Bicknell and Tracy Riley share the perspectives of fifteen 10-13 year old mathematically gifted and talented students when it comes to competing in problem solving, number crunching events. The students enjoyed the opportunity to compete against other talents and ‘prove’ themselves on various local, national and international stages.

This is not dissimilar to the experiences of elite athletes, as the next article by Kath Godber shows. In this article, a bird’s eye view of the life worlds and experiences of elite athletes in both their educational and sporting worlds. As Kath explains, these athletes often have their feet in both worlds, living “a dual existence.” The article explains the importance of each environment, but also social networks and relationships. One of Kath’s recommendations for practice can be applied across all areas of gifted and talented education in New Zealand: “greater consistency regarding identification procedures and resultant provision is needed to ensure ... appropriate educational support and the resources that match ... individual needs.”

The challenges we face in conceptualising, identifying and providing for the gifts and talents of our children and young people in New Zealand are many, as this issue of APEX demonstrates. But importantly, this issue shows us that once we begin to unfurl or open up the many possibilities for our gifted and talented learners, we progress. The koru shows a new unfurling silver fern frond, which symbolises new life, growth, strength and peace. As it unfurls we see perpetual movement, but we also see an inner coil that suggests a return to its point of origin. The koru reminds us how life both changes and stays the same. As we celebrate best practices in gifted and talented education in Aotearoa New Zealand, let us

not forget the children and young people who provide our point of origin and push us towards new growth.