Social construction of giftedness: What might that mean for early childhood teachers’ practice?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe early childhood teachers’ perspectives on giftedness based on data collected during research for a doctoral thesis. The perspectives of early childhood teachers in particular can reflect how the New Zealand government and society value gifted and twice-exceptional children. The data collected suggest that, from the perspectives of the early childhood teachers in this study, the New Zealand Government and teachers are not explicitly aware of the special learning needs of gifted and twice-exceptional children. The implications of this finding include the need for early childhood teachers to have greater awareness of individual giftedness and the strategies to respond to individual needs.

Introduction

The term giftedness has been increasingly heard in recent years in many education circles in Aotearoa New Zealand. In addition to pedagogical aims, the driving forces behind this development are often described in terms of the need to meet individuals’ needs, or to promote inclusive practice (Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Purdue & Surtees, 2012; Knowles, 2006).

Although the growth of gifted education research and the increasing number of government publications about gifted education have raised awareness in this general area, attention has not been explicitly paid specifically to gifted education in early childhood contexts. The principle of inclusive practice underpins New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki, but because the document was published in 1996, it predates both of New Zealand’s gifted education policies (published in 2002 and 2012). Not surprisingly then, “giftedness” is not mentioned anywhere in Te Whāriki, nor are there any guidelines or methods for working with gifted children and their families. Indeed, the whole area of giftedness and gifted education is missing from the curriculum document that currently guides our early childhood education settings.

Without a clear direction from the Government, early childhood teachers are free to respond to the needs and interests of gifted children in their own way, and this has implications for the delivery of appropriate education to these children because teachers’ understandings of giftedness are often based on their personal and teaching experience of gifted children. Porter (2011) pointed out that, compared with the school sector, gifted children in early childhood contexts have often been overlooked. In addition, some teachers may hold traditional misconceptions of giftedness; for example, that gifted children will succeed regardless. As a result, many teachers may be limited in the support they are willing or able to give to gifted children. A teacher’s response to having a gifted child in their centre will...
depend on that teacher’s knowledge, skills and experiences of teaching or interacting with gifted children, as well as the philosophy of the early childhood contexts in which they teach.

This article draws on part of the findings from an ongoing doctoral study. In addition to sharing the understandings of giftedness in the context of early childhood education, the study examines the experience and views of a wide range of early childhood teachers. The article illustrates how the survey participants think about giftedness and how their perspectives influence their teaching practices.

Aim and research questions

The research questions pertinent to this article are:
- What are early childhood teachers’ views of giftedness?
- How do their views of giftedness influence their teaching practices?

What literature says

Many different definitions of giftedness have been presented by researchers and in the literature but there is no agreed definition to completely explain the dynamic concept of giftedness (Harrison, 2004; Moltzen, 2011; Sternberg, Jarvin & Grigorenko, 2011). New Zealand’s Ministry of Education (2008) has acknowledged this, saying terms used to describe children who are gifted include “gifted, talented, special abilities, exceptionally able and highly creative” (p. 12). The same government publication also stated that gifted children can be found in different cultures and in different groups: “Giftedness can be found among people from all cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic groups and among people who have physical, sensory, and learning disabilities” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 12).

However, Gagné emphasised the individual differences within giftedness: “Every gifted child is different and they are not necessarily talented or display talent in the same way as others” (personal communication, 18 April 2014). Gagné (2009) developed a Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) to describe the concept of gifted and talented. He explained that a gifted child has at least one ability domain in the top 10% of ability of a similar-age cohort. Moreover, he proposed that while giftedness is an outstanding natural ability, children who are gifted only have potential to achieve successfully in different areas. Furthermore, the DMGT model does not mean that children who are gifted are also necessarily talented. According to Gagné (2009), giftedness and talent are interrelated but also different. Gifted children need to be encouraged and nurtured, and the process of developing talent requires support from both the people and learning environment around them (Gagné, 2009).

Giftedness is traditionally identified by Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests — children who score highly in IQ tests are categorised as gifted. Due to this statistical procedure for assessing IQ, identified giftedness tends to relate to academic areas such as science, maths and literacy. However, research has shown that giftedness can be found into many different domains
(Gardner, 1983, Moltzen, 2011, Renzulli, 2012 and Silverman, 2002). Teachers can use an IQ test report to inform them about the strengths – and weaknesses – of each child, and hence help them to seek for different strategies to cater for children who are gifted or twice-exceptional. While there is no doubt that IQ testing is a valuable tool for getting a better understanding of the cognitive abilities of children in the school sector, such formalised assessment is at odds with the notion of play-based learning which is inherent in the early childhood sector. So although the New Zealand early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki advocates supporting children to develop learning dispositions that encourage learning (Ministry of Education, 1996), measuring IQ does not commonly happen in the early childhood context unless the child has been referred for specific reasons; for example, by a specialist or on the request of the parents. Instead, early childhood teachers look for behavioural characteristics that can indicate early giftedness, and these observations, combined with conversations with whanau, are often used to identify the gifted child giftedness (Radue, 2009; Wong & Radue, 2014).

As mentioned above, society does not explicitly address the needs of gifted children in early childhood contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand, despite Te Whāriki stating that the curriculum is inclusively designed for every child and that one of the curriculum’s goals is to provide “equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of gender, ability, age, ethnicity, or background” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 64) The word ability is often viewed as being about the nature of ability, and consequently inability refers to children with different sorts of disabilities. This link to disability may be because children who are struggling in education are often associated with the medical and psychological professions (Todd, McIlroy, & Bunting, 2009). Porter (2011) said there is strong research evidence that early intervention for children with disabilities supports their learning. However, children who have advanced abilities have always been forgotten – despite New Zealand’s gifted education policy, Gifted and talented students: Meeting their needs in New Zealand schools (Ministry of Education, 2012) stating that “gifted and talented education is an integral part of all aspects of education in Aotearoa New Zealand” (p. 12). Teachers have different philosophies and beliefs, and these are associated with different teaching practices. Consequently, a teacher’s personal understanding and philosophy about giftedness will influence the learning experiences they provide for the children in their care. Thus, responsibility for catering for gifted children is influenced by what early childhood teachers think and understand about giftedness (Cohen, 2011; Gibbs, 2006; Rubie-Davies, 2008).

**Methodology and methods**

This article describes a qualitative study that online surveyed early childhood practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand. A survey was chosen as the method to collect data because the study sought dialogue with the participants. Biklen and Bogdan (2007) explained that a survey methodology allows participants to give more detailed answers to questions, and hence researchers gain a better understanding of the participants’ perspectives on the topic being studied.
A national online survey of early childhood teachers was conducted between April and June 2013. The survey (using the website SurveyMonkey) was distributed to all the early childhood education contexts recorded in the Ministry of Education database, and invitations were sent to these contexts to participate in the survey. The Ministry of Education database lists 2470 early childhood contexts across sixteen regions. These contexts can be mainly categorised into three areas: education and care (full day cares, private and public childcare centres that offer full-day education and care (private and public childcare centres, preschools and community-based centres); sessional kindergartens (both private and public); and others (hospital-based childcare services, casual education and te kōhanga reo). Those who actually participated in the survey were, therefore, a self-selected anonymous sample from all early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. The survey aimed to solicit early childhood teachers’ understandings and exploration of giftedness and gifted education, and to find out how the teachers’ personal constructs influence the way they work with gifted children in practice. The survey consisted of 15 questions, 12 of which were open ended. One hundred and thirty-seven responses were received to the online survey, and analysis of these showed how the teachers’ understandings and exploration influence their practice with gifted children. The findings from the survey have implications both for future research and for practice. The genders and cultural background of respondents were not relevant to their participation in the survey, but all the respondents were working in an early childhood contexts licensed by the Ministry of Education at the time of the survey. Early childhood teachers who work in home-based settings were not invited to participate in the survey, and there were two reasons for this decision: firstly, home-based carers / teachers are not required to hold the same level of qualifications as those working in more formal early childhood settings, and secondly, the home-based qualification is not relevant to the research that I am conducting.

Ethical issues

All ethical requirements set by the University of Canterbury were met, and the ethical application for this survey was approved in 2012. Accordingly, the aspects of participation in the study – informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity – were taken into account at every stage of the study. The informed consent also included an understanding that the results from the research would be presented nationally and internationally, at conferences and in academic journals.

Findings and discussion

With a sample of 137 responses, it can be assumed that the participants were working in different socio-economic settings. (The survey did not specifically ask them for the decile rating of their early childhood setting because the focus of the research is on the contribution from the participants themselves; the research does not set out to compare childhood settings across different decile ratings or different regions.) The findings are presented thematically: the early childhood teachers’ common understanding of giftedness, the way the participants and their early childhood context provide for gifted children, and how they prefer...
to be supported in terms of working with these children. Data presented in this paper is representative of all the informants to the national online survey.

**Gifted and talented are...**

There were 129 responses in this theme drawn up from analysis of the data. Most of those who participated in this section understood gifted to mean that a child has an advanced skill or ability in one or more areas. Many of the respondents mentioned that the attributes of gifted and talented are related to cognitive domains, whereas only a few connected the terms to physical, social or artistic skills or abilities. IQ is an important part of the terms gifted and talented – children in these categories have high IQs, even though there are different measurements of specific aptitude happening instead of IQ, Brody & Stanley (2005) said not all gifted children have advanced natural abilities in all areas. For instance, a child may be gifted in music but at the same time be only average in other learning areas; they could even be gifted in one or more areas while also experiencing a learning and/or disability (i.e. be twice exceptional). However, there are still many teachers who compare giftedness with high general ability.

Some respondents also expressed the belief that the extent of a child’s giftedness can be gauged by comparing their skills and abilities with those of children of a similar age. Analysis of the responses revealed that the respondents tended to focus on the concept of giftedness rather than talent. A few respondents linked giftedness to potential. As mentioned earlier in the Literature section, Gagné’s (2009) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) noted that while the two concepts are interrelated, they are not interchangeable. Responses from the survey, however, indicate that many people do not see much difference between the two terms gifted and talented – few respondents were able to explicitly state the differences between gifted and talented, and respondents generally mixed the explanation of the two terms together. Feldhusen (2005) stated that teachers’ understanding of the interrelationships between gifted and talented can affect and guide their teaching practice. He argued that “the field of gifted education [needs] to move beyond perfunctory and meaningless use of the term ‘gifted and talented’ to a true delineation of talents as specific abilities that emerge out of general giftedness” (p. 67). The DMGT model defines the differences between gifted and talented like this: giftedness is about having natural abilities – a gifted child shows potential to have great achievement – whereas talent relates to skills and performance. A talented child demonstrates outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities in at least one field of human activity when compared with their age peers (Gagné, 2010).

A few of the survey respondents discussed the terms gifted and talented from a cultural perspective, saying that in some cultures there is the belief that every child is gifted. Conversely, though, none of the respondents explicitly noted that views of giftedness can be different in different cultures. The survey data shows that cultural perspectives do not play a role in most of the respondents’ views of giftedness. Baldwin (2002) said teachers’ understanding of the needs of gifted children from different cultural backgrounds affects the learning opportunities provided for giftedness in respect of different cultures, societal
attitudes and language. Early childhood teachers, therefore, need to attempt to understand individual giftedness.

Some respondents claimed that all children are gifted and talented, whereas one respondent indicated that they do not believe that giftedness and talent can be found in early childhood settings. It is interesting to see such completely opposite beliefs about giftedness. Yet, while their different perspectives about giftedness may drive totally different practices, it should be acknowledged that their different perspectives might also result in similar practices because both perspectives were about every child being treated the same. Almost every respondent agreed with the concepts of giftedness and talented, and believes that gifted and/or talented children can be found in early childhood settings. These beliefs go against the traditional view of giftedness, namely that gifted children can only be found in primary school. Moreover, the survey data has demonstrated that almost all of the respondents acknowledge the terms gifted and talented, even though gifted education in early childhood contexts has not been explicitly addressed in government documents.

More than three-quarters of the respondents said that they have worked with gifted children, while fewer than one in five said they have not; the small remaining percentage did not know whether they have or not. With many of the practitioners giving a definitive ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, it can be inferred that these practitioners acknowledge the term giftedness – some have just not had experience with these children in their teaching journey. And although the validity of the data can be questioned if the teachers are not able to identify giftedness appropriately, the fact still remains that the teachers’ understanding of giftedness would influence their teaching practice and hence the learning opportunities provided for gifted children.

Twice-exceptionality

Twice-exceptional is a term used to describe children who are gifted and disabled (Clark, 2013; Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014 and Silverman, 2002, 2013), and these disabilities can include physical, sensory and learning disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2008) and/or social and emotional disabilities. The second section of the online survey asked the early childhood practitioners about their understanding of twice-exceptionality. One hundred and twenty-five respondents made comments in this section, with many saying they had not worked with twice-exceptional children.

However, a number of early childhood practitioners said they had worked with twice-exceptional children. Most of their responses focused on the weaknesses of being twice-exceptional, rather than the giftedness, and specifically within just two areas – language and social skills. Some respondents pointed out children who are twice-exceptional can be high functioning in some areas, particularly thinking and visual; however, these children often struggle with behavioural problems. Several respondents gave examples about the weaknesses of being twice-exceptional such as lack of language skills, delayed speech and limited communication skills. A few respondents cited processing issues; namely, that twice-exceptional children can ask questions beyond their age level but are often not able to
respond to the other children. One practitioner explained that children who are twice-exceptional are good at maths and have spatial awareness, but they also have some developmental difficulties. Some respondents said their weaknesses were related to learning difficulties such as Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism, while others described symptoms of these learning disabilities; for example, children who are twice-exceptional may be very good at puzzles and using computers, but they can also be much focused on what they are doing, very occupied in their own way, to the exclusion of others. Two respondents talked about physical skills and movements. Many of the respondents had observed twice-exceptional children and used their observations to illustrate the advanced abilities and also weaknesses of such children. Only two of the respondents referred to support being provided from a therapist and the Ministry of Education.

Some respondents believe that the concept of twice-exceptional is about children who have high skills but who are also poorly skilled in social areas compared with their peers. Typical responses in this category were: “children who are exceptional at maths or literacy, but who were very challenged in social skills”, and “very high skilled in some curriculum areas but rather low skilled in social areas”. These respondents had based their comments mostly on their experiences but also on assessment practices. The twice-exceptional children whom the respondents worked with were usually good at language, maths and reading. One described a child whom s/he had worked with as having high emotional intelligence but being shy and unable to speak. Another respondent said that from her experience, twice-exceptional children have abilities far beyond the normal ranges of their peers but they are often very demanding of adults’ attention. It was interesting to see that for eight respondents, the learning disabilities that twice-exceptional children display are limited social skills – these respondents did not mention anything about a specific disability such as the children exhibiting ADHD or being deaf. Despite twice-exceptionality having two facts, the discussion by the survey respondents was more about the challenges or weaknesses of twice-exceptional child/ren rather than about their exceptional abilities. The responses in this category were all related to the common social challenges that gifted children face, such as having weaker social skills and being isolated from other children. The data showed the term twice-exceptionality has been misunderstood. Many teachers see a gifted child’s special learning needs and social needs as an example of twice-exceptionality or see these as learning disabilities because of the way a gifted child’s social needs can impact on their learning and the way they interact with other children. Kay (2000) claimed that teaching practices do not always take into account the tendency for gifted children to think in more complex ways than their chronological peers do. Brody and Mills (1997) described three criteria that were relevant in identifying twice-exceptional children: “(a) evidence of an outstanding talent or ability, (b) evidence of a discrepancy between expected and actual achievement, and (c) evidence of a processing deficit” (p. 285). The concern is that this misunderstanding about twice-exceptionality could influence the way gifted children are treated by their teachers.

What do their practices look like?

This study aimed to investigate how the survey participants’ views of giftedness influence their teaching practices. There were 119 responses in this section, with the respondents
explaining how they provide for gifted children in different ways. The teachers’ responses to gifted children were influenced by how they, the teachers, understood and explored giftedness. Most of the survey participants said that the philosophy that underpinned their context’s practice was one of focusing on the individual child and their needs and interests. Many of the teachers supported this one-on-one approach. It is reassuring to hear teachers like to support children equally; indeed, all children should have the same right to receive learning opportunities. Riley (2001) said “one size doesn’t fit all”, meaning that one teaching approach cannot meet all children’s needs. Learning opportunities need to be provided according to individual. However, seventeen practitioners stated that the learning experiences they offer to gifted or twice-exceptional children are the same as those offered to the other children; for example, “They [the learning experiences] don’t [differ]; we support all children.” Some noted that they prefer every child to be treated the same: “They don’t. All children are treated equally.” A few commented that they would not mark out children as gifted or twice-exceptional; for example, “No difference. I believe it is the teacher who spotted such children to single them out and walk them through her own planned curriculum.”

One element heavily emphasised by the respondents is that family involvement and partnership with parents are crucial for understanding giftedness. Many practitioners tend to involve families and whānau in their programme. Some respondents focused specifically on parents’ and whānau involvement in the curriculum; for example, “We are an iwi based whānau centre. Whānau are involved in our curriculum.” It is widely understood in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand that working closely with families and whānau is important for supporting children’s learning and development, and this belief is strongly woven throughout New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum. Indeed one of the main principles of Te Whāriki is about families, with the document clearly stating that “the wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.14). Thus, many early childhood teachers tend to involve families and whānau in their centre’s programme. Because of the strong commitment of having families and whānau be part of the centre’s practice, creating and maintaining positive relationships with families and whānau are equally important. Another principle in Te Whāriki is that learning is influenced by relationships. Working with families and whānau has become a teaching strategy for supporting children’s learning and development (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009). As some of respondents stated, “[A]s with all children, teachers work to build relationships with them and their whānau so they can best provide an environment which supports their interests and encourages their development in new areas.” Many respondents said that the teachers at their centre work together with the children and their families because this strategy supports each child’s learning and development. A few respondents said staff and whānau communicate with each other, with one teacher noting s/he was not sure that s/he would like specific resources for support in this area.
Conclusion

This article has explored early childhood practitioners’ understanding of giftedness. The purpose of this article was not to judge if the survey respondents had a correct understanding of the concept, but to explore their varied perceptions of this complex topic. The respondents’ understandings represent different attitudes towards teaching those who are gifted, and their practice reflects their understanding and beliefs about giftedness. Within this topic one can identify broad areas relating to beliefs about giftedness, such as high IQ, advanced abilities, and the need for help with social skills. Although some teachers often talk about how they have to provide for children with special learning needs, gifted children are seldom mentioned in this context. This is because many teachers do not understand that gifted children also have special learning needs. One thing that this research is attempting to highlight is that giftedness can have many facets and hence gifted children will present with many different needs – an idea that few of the survey respondents appeared to understand. If early childhood teachers are to address the diverse needs of gifted children, then they will need to provide a variety of different learning experiences every day. Such a commitment will require teachers to be willing to take up the challenge of understanding and responding to the characteristics of giftedness, as only then will the diverse learning needs of individual gifted children be met.

Implications for practice

The data from the national online survey makes a great contribution to our knowledge about what early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand understand about giftedness and how their beliefs might be influencing their teaching practices. Understanding who children are and acknowledging individual differences, rather than just adding a set of expectations on gifted children, would enhance the relationships between teachers and gifted children and their whānau. The Government needs to review the provision of gifted education, especially in supporting gifted education in early childhood contexts. The Government should ensure that the early childhood sector is adequately resourced so that teachers can effectively work with gifted children. However, to realise the findings of this study, professional development for teacher educators is needed as well – teacher educators need to be more aware of characteristics of giftedness, particularly in early childhood contexts. Professional development on working with parents of gifted children would be also helpful. Data in this study showed that a number of early childhood practitioners believe developing a working partnership with parents would enhance their understanding of the needs of gifted children. Such a partnership would also highlight to the teachers the needs of the parents, who are attempting to nurture the potential of their gifted children. However, there is also the risk that such a partnership could throw up potential tensions –parents may end up faced with different challenges such as teachers’ misconception of giftedness.

The Government also needs to support initial teacher education (ITE) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Kane et al. (2005) stated few ITE courses include components about gifted education. In particular, research has noted a lack of practical teaching and learning opportunities for teachers participating in ITE (Riley & Rawlinson, 2008). This article indicates
what has been missing from ITE in terms of supporting gifted children in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Government should support institutes offering programmes leading to teacher registration, but it also needs to monitor the quality of these programmes. Providers should equip teachers to be responsive to a range of children needs, including those of gifted and twice-exceptional learners.

**Implications for research**

Even though research into gifted education in Aotearoa New Zealand increased between 2000 and 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2012), the data from the national online survey indicates that research is still need that explicitly addresses gifted education in the early childhood sector. As the revised gifted education policy (Ministry of Education, 2012,) stated: “Approaches to providing for gifted and talented learners are based upon relevant research and theory” (p. 10). Early childhood education needs to be strengthened by gifted education research in Aotearoa New Zealand, so that teachers in early childhood contexts have more guidance and support to face the challenges of meeting the diverse needs of the gifted children in their practice.
References


