

Chapter 1: Introduction and definitions of giftedness in the early years

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Introduction

This book is about young children who are gifted—a group of unique individuals who, during active play and learning in early years environments, may struggle to have their giftedness noticed, recognised and responded to. There is no doubt that young children who are gifted exhibit an ease and speed of learning (Gagné, 2004) that is not often recognised as giftedness by early years teachers. This book has been written in the hope that it will support readers to become more confident in recognising the characteristics of giftedness, more competent in identifying children who are gifted in early years contexts, and more aware of the phenomenon of giftedness. Part of that professional growth will be a deeper understanding of the interests, successes, fears, frustrations and aspirations held by these children, their parents and family/whānau. But ultimately this book will be a resource that provokes reflection and responsiveness, and enhances learning for the youngest of learners, so that giftedness can be understood, discovered, developed and celebrated.

Terms

For the purposes of this publication the authors have chosen to use the phrase ‘early years’. This definition encompasses the age span from birth to 8 years. By the end of this developmental phase children have already formed a conception of themselves as thinkers and language users and have made decisions about their abilities and their worth. It is a crucial time for all teachers in early years settings to be responsive to the advanced abilities of young children, and to support, accelerate and enrich their learning as they make the transition to primary school. Early identification and a supportive transition process are vital elements for teachers to engage with, because these children may be misunderstood in a teaching and learning context and left lacking the stimulation they deserve.

In New Zealand, the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ are often used to express the same concept (Ministry of Education, 2012), with gifted and talented education often being referred to as GATE. In this book the term ‘gifted’ is used to name a specific and unique group of learners who exhibit giftedness (which is defined later in this chapter) and who have the potential to excel in one or more areas of learning. The authors acknowledge that young children with advanced abilities may not yet have had the opportunity to develop their unique skills or advanced knowledge into a specific talent. However, in order to fulfil their potential and to have their passions, interests and strengths recognised and responded to, they must have a well-designed and supportive environment, which includes a differentiated curriculum. Relationships between teachers, children and their families/whānau are key (Ministry of Education, 1996) in order to engage in stimulating and enriching dialogue so that young children can gain authentic and meaningful understanding from within the context of their own social and cultural lives (Vygotsky, 1978).

Setting the scene

Gifted learners are found within every group in society, yet within the early years context there has been a reluctance to ‘label by capacity’, which creates further misunderstanding and delays in support (Porter, 2005). There is a long history of egalitarianism in Aotearoa New Zealand (Moltzen, 2011a), which this book hopes to challenge,

from the viewpoint that we all come into this world differentiated. We are not all ‘the same’. Teachers will most certainly have one, two or maybe more children in their setting each year who could benefit from changes in their curriculum and opportunities that best respond to their interests, specialised knowledge of certain topics and dispositional learning strengths. What’s more, such curriculum changes enacted by teachers can benefit all children. Giftedness is a dynamic concept, and we all need to generate dynamic ideas about responsiveness. This will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

Specific learning interests and strengths that are advanced and unexpected at an early age (Murphy & Margrain, 2007) may not be catered for in educational contexts due to a lack of information and experience among early years teachers. Young children who are gifted have been shown, both nationally and internationally, to be under-identified (Clark, 2013), and a lack of identification leads to an absence of quality response, stimulation and enhancement of learning potential. Gifted children do not realise and reach their potential on their own (Moltzen, 2011b). These children need stimulating and enriched teaching and guiding, and access to an equitable education should not be a matter of chance.

In New Zealand the early years sector has a unique opportunity to identify giftedness in these children early and co-construct learning with children, utilising the principles of the curriculum documents (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2007) as holistic, responsive and inclusive guides. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) emphasises that “teachers should provide for children who require resources alternative or additional to those usually provided within an early childhood education setting” (p. 11).

It is also important for early years teachers to build effective relationships with one another, across both sectors, and we consider transition further in Chapter 9. Information needs to pass with the child as they transition to the primary school setting, where the National Education Guidelines (NEGs) and National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) require schools to assist all learners through appropriate teaching and learning strategies to reach their potential, including those identified as gifted and talented (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Defining giftedness

Although many theories of giftedness have been developed, there is no universally accepted definition (Ministry of Education, 2012). Broadly speaking, there have been three general approaches to defining giftedness (McAlpine, 2004):

- a conservative approach, which suggests a single criterion for giftedness (e.g., intelligence)
- a liberal approach, which uses a more broad-ranging and inclusive definition
- a multi-categorial approach, in terms of outstanding performance or potential in one or more areas (e.g., music, visual arts, leadership and other domains).

Two common views on the definition of giftedness currently favoured in New Zealand are those of Gagné (2009) and Renzulli and Reis (1986) (see Appendix A). Gagné is one of the few theorists to make a definitive distinction between the terms ‘gifts’ and ‘talents’, which he later renamed ‘natural abilities’ and ‘competencies’ respectively. His view allows for the acknowledgement of *potential* as well as performance, which is important because the concept of potential is crucial in the early years. As we have noted, this is the critical time when young children form lifelong conceptions of themselves.

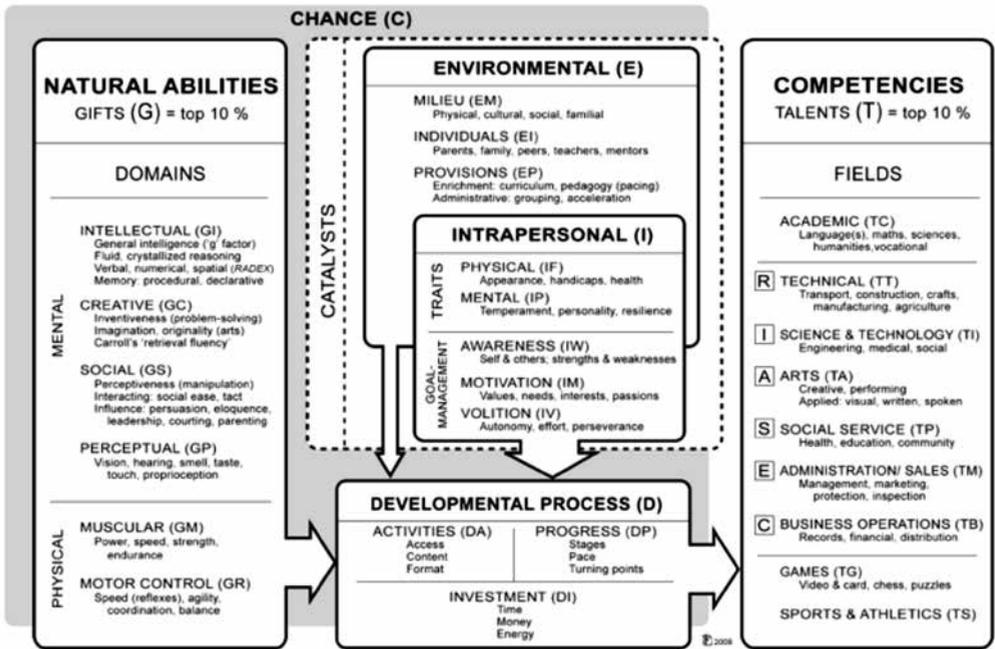


Figure 1.1. Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT)

Source: Gagné, 2014; downloaded, with permission from Gagné, from his website: <http://www.gagnefrancoys.wix.com/dmgt-mddt>

Children's gifts or natural abilities are more likely to be seen in the early years, whereas talents and competencies are age and training related. Margrain (2011) reminds us that it is in the application of specific natural abilities that young children who are gifted can be acknowledged, in areas such as memory, inventiveness, leadership, proprioception, endurance and agility. Gagné (2009) argues that talent or competency is demonstrated or more evident as time goes by, and this view promotes the early years as an optimal foundation time for gifted children. His model is encapsulated in Figure 1.1, which shows how the development of competencies is influenced by many factors—including natural ability, environment, intra-personal traits and developmental processes—but also acknowledges the role of chance. An overview of the DMGT, along with additional materials, is available at Gagné's website: <http://www.gagnefrancoys.wix.com/dmgt-mddt>

Renzulli and Reis (1986) argue that teachers should focus on traits demonstrated through observable behaviours rather than trying to define giftedness in the abstract sense. They discuss three areas of performance:

- *above average abilities* (e.g., recall, early language) or *specific abilities* (e.g., advanced drawing skills)
- *task commitment*, which comprises sustained motivation and attention in the development of ideas and products (e.g., the young child who stays at the carpentry table for long periods of time to complete a project)
- *creativity*, which involves problem solving, originality of thought, fluency, flexibility, and elaboration of ideas (e.g., the 18-month-old child who stacks chairs to see out a window).

Renzulli and Reis's (1986) model, the Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness, is illustrated in Figure 1.2. This conception presents the idea that giftedness is at the nexus of the three aforementioned essential elements: above-average ability, task commitment and creativity. As a result of these three elements interconnecting, giftedness is brought to bear on general performance areas (e.g., music, leadership or mathematics) and specific performance areas (e.g., film-making, electronics, whaikōrero/speech-making or sculpture).

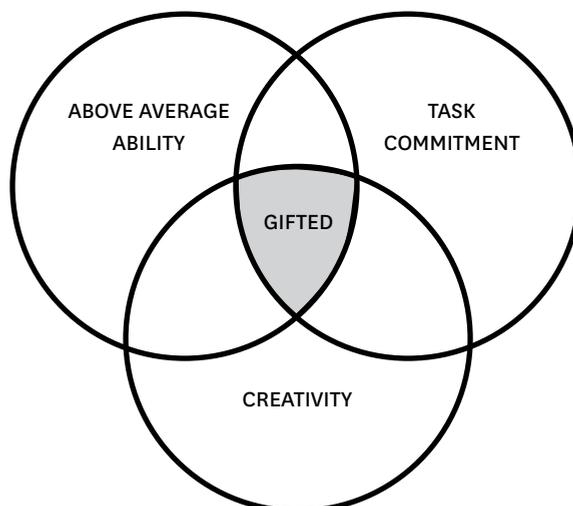


Figure 1.2. Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness
Source: reproduced, with permission, from Renzulli and Reis, 1986

The models of giftedness from Gagné (Figure 1.1) and Renzulli and Reis (Figure 1.2) offer early years teachers an opportunity to consider the important role they have in supporting the development of potential in the early years (Margrain, 2011), although Renzulli and Reis's (1986) work may be more applicable in the early primary school environment.

Harrison (1999) defines giftedness in the early years in terms of a child

who performs or has the ability to perform at a level significantly beyond his or her chronologically aged peers and whose unique abilities and characteristics require special provisions and social and emotional support from the family, community and educational context. (p. 20)

Her work will be further discussed within this book, and the definition is particularly useful for the early childhood education sector.

An additional consideration for the Aotearoa New Zealand context is a Māori perspective of giftedness. Bevan-Brown's (1993) research suggests that how we define giftedness in early childhood in New Zealand needs to be broadened to encompass both the commitments we have made to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (the *Treaty of Waitangi*) and the multicultural society in which we now live. Aspects of Māori culture and customs that are valued by Māori can be incorporated into our national concept of giftedness, and teachers need to receive professional development in order to recognise giftedness from a Māori perspective. Māori concepts of giftedness should be viewed holistically, reflecting the customs, beliefs, values and attitudes of Māori people (Ministry of Education, 2000). Bevan-Brown's work will also be further considered in later chapters.

Aotearoa New Zealand policy makers and researchers have shared their criteria of how giftedness is defined via the Working Party on Gifted Education (2001); Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind and Kearney (2004); and the Ministry of Education's Gifted and Talented Advisory Group. These criteria, further promoted in *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools* (Ministry of Education, 2012), remind us that a definition needs to:

- be multi-categorical
- reflect bicultural approaches

- recognise multicultural values, beliefs, customs and attitudes
- acknowledge that gifted children demonstrate exceptionality in relation to their same-age peers
- reflect the context and values of the community
- acknowledge that giftedness is evidenced in all societal groups
- recognise that a child may be gifted in one or more areas
- recognise that human development will differ for all individuals
- recognise that gifts may emerge in circumstances that are unique to that child.

The same Working Party also included the place of the early years in gifted education by identifying core principles to support the well-being of the very young. Some of these core principles, acknowledged by the Minister of Education (2002), were as follows.

- Gifted and talented learners are found in every group within society.
- The early years environment is a powerful catalyst for the demonstration and development of talent.
- Māori perspectives and values must be embodied in all aspects of the definition of, identification of and provision for gifted and talented learners.
- Early years settings should provide opportunities for parents, caregivers and whānau to be involved in the decision making that affects the learning of individual students.
- Early years settings should aim to meet the specific social and emotional needs of gifted and talented learners.
- Programmes for gifted and talented children should be based on sound practice, take account of the research and literature in this field, and be regularly evaluated.

These guidelines and core principles allow educational settings to set their own definition of giftedness, to develop procedures and practices in context, and to support their gifted learners. However, it is not enough for teachers to abdicate this responsibility to their workplace environment. Teachers need to have rigorous discussion and debate to ensure their own philosophy allows for the acceptance of this diverse group, as well as room to grow their understanding.

The historical perspective of gifted education (both nationally and internationally) has been that defining giftedness is not an easy task. Contemporary research (Ministry of Education, 2012) provides evidence that giftedness is valued according to the communities, cultures, religions and societies in which gifted individuals emerge. In other words, giftedness would be viewed quite differently by a remote farming community in New Zealand in comparison to a multicultural suburb of a regional township, or a community of university graduates in Wellington. A final decision on a single definition of giftedness will probably never happen: the sentence ‘Gifted is ...’ will never be definitive. Nor should it be.

Current trends over the last two decades emphasise a move away from defining giftedness in terms of only one factor, such as IQ. Nutall, Romero and Kalesnik (1992) argue that the concept of giftedness should expand beyond the traditional emphasis of general academic prowess. In recognising this, these researchers propose that young children who are gifted show sustained evidence of advanced capability relative to their peers. This could be in general academic skills and/or in more specific domains such as music, art or leadership, to the extent that they need differentiated educational programmes. A wide-ranging and diverse ‘menu’ of abilities and qualities that reflect the diversity of the multicultural nature of our country is now recognised as contributing to the concept of giftedness.

In the early years we cannot afford to underestimate the importance of the responsive learning environment, because it gives teachers the opportunity to recognise the potential—as well as the performance—of these children, and it helps to bring the advanced abilities of early years children with giftedness to the fore. Riley (2015) argues that it is vital to step back and assess the effectiveness of any learning environment for gifted and talented learners. She maintains that these learners already enter their places of learning with individual strengths, abilities, passions and needs, and she challenges educators to respond supportively to these individual factors.

A teacher’s responsibility

Few would disagree that a child’s educational environment plays a key role in influencing their development. The environment influences the

progression from potential to performance, from ability to achievement. Every teacher in New Zealand has a legal and moral right to develop the potential of all children, regardless of their abilities. Acknowledging the learning requirements of young children who are gifted is one of the many roles and responsibilities of a teacher.

Young children who are gifted enjoy development that is dynamic and personalised, and our teachers are in a prime position to observe the manifestation of clusters of traits that may indicate outstanding potential or development. It is critical in these formative learning years that positive dispositions are nurtured, and that secure, safe and stimulating environments allow for all levels of learning. These early years provide the foundation for learning and child–teacher relationships. Personalising the curriculum for gifted learners can change the dynamics of the relationship, because the child’s attitude and enthusiasm for learning are lifted, thereby strengthening the classroom community (Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 2001).

An underestimation of giftedness increases the risk that the child may not receive best-fit learning experiences (Hodge & Kemp, 2006). The regular curriculum, unadapted, is unlikely to effectively stimulate and enrich the gifted child, and so timely identification is essential in order to understand the curriculum modifications needed. Early years teachers not only have the opportunity but also the privilege of being alongside a child’s learning journey. They also have the responsibility to partner with the child in the most favourable way to ensure rich conversations and interactions. New Zealand early years researchers (Dean, 2011; Gallagher, 2008; Margrain & Farquhar, 2012; Murphy, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Murphy & Margrain, 2007; Radue, 2009) have suggested that in New Zealand, young children who are gifted are an overlooked group of learners, and they challenge teachers to notice, recognise and respond in order to provide a differentiated curriculum.

Conclusion

Defining giftedness is a complex issue because there are many perspectives to consider. This fact should not, however, cause a barrier to identification and provision. It is too easy for teachers to put ‘gifted’ into the too-hard basket, which means another generation of gifted learners fail to have a stimulating environment. So while rigorous discussion

should be engaged in, early years teachers need to focus on exhibited characteristics and early identification rather than on definition. It is the responsibility of all early years teachers to engage with giftedness. The various chapters in this book will support this idea.

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