

A pilot study: Teacher views on the concept of giftedness in the early childhood setting

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Much has been written about acceleration (Feldhusen, Hannon & Black, 1995), teaching strategies (Kitano, 1982; 1989), and underachievement (Clark, 1992) of gifted and talented primary and secondary school children. Studies such as those of Gross (1986) indicate that educational programming for the gifted is largely dictated by teacher perception and expectation. Other research shows that the learning needs of young gifted children often remain unmet (Gross, 1995). This study explores early childhood teachers' perceptions of young gifted and talented children and their programming needs through open interviews with three rural teachers. The findings indicate that the gifted children in their care, aside from perhaps the exceptionally or profoundly gifted (Harrison, 1995, p.22), still remain unidentified; and that the teachers see their roles primarily as facilitators, reserving the use of a more interventionist approach mainly for children with deficit needs. The outcome of the study points to the need for further research and a possible re-examination of preservice and in-service teacher education in the area of young gifted and talented children.

Introduction

Fifteen years ago some American educators argued that the most able of our young children may also be the most 'neglected, unidentified, and underprogrammed children in their age group', but suggested that there was an 'emerging interest in young gifted and talented children' (Karnes, Shwedel & Linnemeyer, 1982, p.197). What was true of America then is probably true of Australia today (Gross, 1995).

Early nurturing of gifts and talents provide young gifted and talented children with 'better...chances for optimal development' (Karnes, 1983, p.1). Without such attention, underachievement—a state often associated with behaviour problems and a poor attitude to learning—could ensue (Clark 1992, p.419; Karnes, 1983, p.10). Early identification, on the other hand, can ensure:

- the design of a differentiated curriculum—a program which responds 'to the characteristic

needs of gifted children' allowing for a faster pace and 'more complex investigation' (Clark, 1992, p.286); and

- that teachers work to support the parents of the child (Clark, 1992; Karnes, 1983, p.3).

The ability to identify the gifted and talented child as early as possible is therefore of paramount importance. Without proper programming these children may become underachievers, and their talents may be wasted or misdirected.

Purpose of the study

The aim of this study has been to explore the knowledge base and beliefs of a small number of rural early childhood teachers without training in gifted education, and to narrate their views through the use of open interviews. Participants were asked:

- whether they believe in the notion of gifted and talented children;

- whether such children are found in the preschool setting;
- if they have known such children in their preschool setting;
- how they interpreted these children's behaviour, actions and expressions;
- how they made sense of what they have perceived;
- how their personal experiences contributed to their beliefs; and
- what decisions they have made about the sorts of programming young gifted and talented children need.

Identifying gifted and talented children

Because young children will eventually go to school, this study will use the term 'gifted and talented' as defined in the NSW Department of School Education (1991) policy:

Gifted students are those with the potential to exhibit superior performance across a range of areas of endeavour and Talented students are those with the potential to exhibit superior performance in one area of endeavour.

There are many modes of identification (Alvino, McDonnell & Richert, 1981; Clark, 1992; Wallace & Acklaw, 1982), and in schools children tend to be nominated by their teachers. But are teachers generally aware of the characteristics of gifted and talented children, and do they know how to program for such children? One study found that correct teacher identification decreases as children get younger, with only 4.3 per cent recognised at kindergarten level (Fatouros, 1986, p.24).

This failure to correctly identify young gifted and talented children may be due to teacher attitude. Gross (1986) claims that teacher attitudes and perceptions seem to influence teaching strategies with regard to gifted and talented children. It could also be argued that other recent studies on teacher perceptions, reflections and consequent actions (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Goodfellow, 1994; Halliwell, 1994; McLean, 1991) are also likely to apply to gifted and talented children, which would support Gross' (1986) findings. And whilst teachers sometimes retain some biases and preconceived ideas even after training (Hall, 1995), those primary teachers

who are trained in gifted and talented education are more likely to be sensitive to these children's needs (Hall, 1995; McBride, 1992).

Very little professional literature or research exists on Australian gifted and talented preschool children (Fatouros, 1986) or early childhood teacher attitudes towards these children (McBride, 1992). Moreover, there appears to be none at all on teacher attitudes in isolated and rural areas. Early childhood teachers in rural areas generally remain in the same job longer than their peers in the cities (Cross & Lewis, 1994, p.9). Although some distance education has been available for some time, many rural teachers in NSW have often had to invest considerable personal time and effort in order to access inservice and further education. This problem has now largely been overcome thanks to wider availability of distance education opportunities in the area of early childhood. The subject of gifted and talented education of young children, however, was unavailable in most early childhood courses until a few years ago, and those early childhood teachers who are trained in this area and work in the country would therefore be few.

In summary, early teacher identification of gifted and talented children is important in the realisation of the child's potential. Teacher attitude towards gifted and talented children is also important because it has a direct impact on programming. This pilot study identifies some common themes in the attitudes of a small sample of early childhood teachers, and points to a need for further studies and possible changes needed in teacher preservice education.

The participants

Three mid-north coast early childhood teachers/directors were drawn from the immediate local area of rural NSW, chosen for their vicinity—within an hour's travelling time—to the researcher. All three teachers had worked in the rural area for many years and two of these three teachers had worked in their present centres for more than 10 years. None of these teachers had received preservice or postgraduate education in the area of young gifted and talented children, although Cathryn (no real names have been used) had had some inservicing on children in Opportunity Classes (OC) at a primary school

some years prior to her 13 years as a preschool director.

The procedure

Three teachers were interviewed for approximately half an hour each. The area of research was not revealed during the recruitment telephone call, in order to avoid preconceived notions or building up a set of expectations of what I may have wanted to hear. Participants were simply asked for an interview for a study towards a Masters degree. They all agreed to being interviewed without hesitation.

When I presented Anne with the consent form which clearly spelled out the subject matter and method, she said that it had occurred to her after my call that she should have asked me what I was going to interview her about. Barbara commented at the end of the interview that if she had known what the interview was about, she would have read up on the subject. These comments served to validate the recruitment procedure: the lack of preparation on the part of the teachers helped to authenticate their responses.

Data collection and analysis

A loosely structured interview with recursive questioning (Stainback & Stainback, 1988) was used, so that teachers could reflect upon their convictions regarding gifted and talented children in a deeper way than if standard questions had been used (Fontana & Frey, 1994, pp.365–368; Stainback & Stainback, p.56). This method did indeed seem to elicit the teachers' inner beliefs. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a journal was kept (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993, pp.401–402).

Coding

Nine themes were uncovered through the method of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.74) (see Table 1 for two of these themes), and eight of these were considered major themes (see Discussion). Statements on views which all three teachers seemed to share were sent to the participants along with the transcript of their interview and their own teacher profiles. The participants were asked to comment on these documents.

Auditing

Preliminary findings were discussed with the mentor and with other peers during on-campus

sessions. Proceeds from these discussions were taken into consideration in the final write-up of the study.

Validity and reliability

Only one interview with each participant was undertaken, in order to prevent possible change in beliefs over a number of interviews. The field notes, audio-tapes and checking back with participants on the summaries of the transcripts served to enhance the validity and reliability of the study.

Findings

Anne was convinced that gifted and talented children existed. She had taught at the same preschool for 10 years, and so had the opportunity to later meet with, and hear reports about, children she had taught. She spoke of possibly overlooking at least one gifted and talented child, who later did very well at school. Although Anne was only aware of the more overtly gifted and talented child, she was keen to cater for all children's intelligences. Science, for instance, was an area of interest and expertise for Anne, and she enjoyed stimulating children's interests through simple experiments.

Barbara had taught preschool children in the rural area for many years, and had been in her present position for four years. She was not at all convinced that gifted and talented children existed, and believed that being a high achiever was not the way to live life. She thought such children were mostly pushed by parental expectations, often competitive—perhaps compulsively so—and as for particular interests, her view was that there was little use in attending preschool if the child was going to do just the one thing all the time.

She stated on a number of occasions that everyone should be well rounded, able to do everything, and seemed to believe that coming first all the time could cause loneliness. She had an idea of high achievers being 'different' socially, and likely to have social problems. She had always herself come at the top of the class, but had been an all-rounder and socially popular. Her parents had supported her in her achievements.

She admitted that she did not actively encourage high achievement in her own children. Her belief was that you couldn't continue to be first, that

sooner or later, as you went from the little pond to increasingly bigger ponds, you would find others who were more capable than yourself. This belief seemed to come out of her own life experiences, as she had initially excelled at a smaller school, but had not done quite as well when she entered high school, where there were more pupils.

Cathryn, who had taught at her present preschool for 13 years, did not believe that one could tell if a child was gifted and talented until they were 10, 11 or 12 years old: 'I think most children are gifted and talented in some way'. Cathryn had met a few children whom she considered 'highly intelligent', but that was mainly due to parental interests and the amount of time spent with the child. She, too, believed that gifted and talented children had problems with social skills. She based this belief on one child she had taught, who was now 16, was doing his HSC, and whom she considered to be a genius.

Cathryn had a lot of trouble with the actual meaning of the term 'gifted and talented', trying to work it out several times through the name of the concept, much like an unprepared student at an exam, finally deciding that a gift was what is termed by the Department of School Education (1991) as 'talent', and vice versa. Cathryn also thought that if a child had a particular interest, it

showed that the child was 'very bright', but it was only later on when 'they've got all their other skills as well' that you could judge where a child was at. She was actually concerned about children with special interests: '...my main concern was that he had this tunnel vision with dinosaurs... But apparently he is alright now...' Cathryn wondered whether early self expression in one field could be a substitute for lack of verbal expression, and she theorised that perhaps children would not 'worry about' the 'gift', once their vocabulary increased.

Discussion

Although the sample was small, some interesting themes emerged quite strongly during the interviews. A brief discussion of the major themes is presented below:

Theme 1: No uniform concept of giftedness

This study supports McBride's (1992) finding that teachers who are untrained in the characteristics of gifted and talented children hold no clear uniform concept of giftedness. Teachers in this study suggested a wide variety of characteristics, ranging from knowing the alphabet to advanced language skills.

Theme 2: Reluctance or inability to recognise the existence of the young gifted and talented child

Only one teacher, Anne, believed that such children could be identified at preschool and reported instances of catering to some needs, although she felt uncertain in other areas, and did not have the skills needed to design a differentiated program. Even Anne, however, seemed to only notice the highly or exceptionally gifted child. The types of statements such as Cathryn's—that most children are gifted are 'extreme pronouncements' made without 'objective evaluations of...pupils' (Isaacs, 1987, p.23).

Theme 3: Consultant would be a helpful support.

All three teachers agreed on this point.

Theme 4: Gifted and talented children are socially isolated.

The teachers all held beliefs about gifted and talented children being socially isolated or even anti-social (see Theme 8). Barbara's belief was based on one film she had seen on TV (see

Table 1

Social Isolation Theme

Anne	<i>Need for more social skills social skills aren't the same as the other children</i>
Barbara	<i>I saw a program on television: she came across as a very sad and lonely person</i>
Cathryn	<i>Normally...they isolate themselves a bit</i>

Pushy Parent Theme

Anne	<i>One mother was very...had a lot of input...was insistent that her child should read</i>
Barbara	<i>I think that's a danger sometimes that parents think that their child is particularly brilliant...</i>
Cathryn	<i>I think there was too much pressure from home...</i>

Table 1). All three teachers described children with gifted and talented characteristics whom they had noticed but failed to identify due to the child getting on well socially. Hall (1995) points out that such preconceived beliefs cause teachers to overlook the gifted child (p.9).

Theme 5: Gifted and talented children are pushed by ambitious parents.

All three teachers held strong beliefs about these children being sometimes unfairly pushed by ambitious parents. When Barbara was asked to elaborate on the kind of danger a child could encounter if their parents thought they were brilliant (see Table 1), she admitted after some thought that there would probably be no danger to the child. Such teacher views would hardly be helpful to the parent of a gifted and talented child, although Cathryn and Anne did report communicating with some of the parents of able children about their abilities and interests.

Theme 6: All young children need a broad education.

Believing, as did the other two teachers, in a broad education, Barbara commented that: 'it might be all very well to be excellent at the piano, but I feel that you need other skills...'

Theme 7: Developmentally appropriate practice is adequate for gifted and talented children

The teachers all believed that preschools inherently, by their very nature, catered adequately for gifted and talented children as activities were open ended, in the best tradition of developmentally appropriate practice. As Barbara put it, 'the way that our programs are structured, specific outcomes aren't expected, so really they are working at their own level...'

Theme 8: Outstanding ability as indicator of other developmental lags.

All three teachers expressed that all children were different and that they should be programmed for individually, a concept they had obviously all learnt well in their preservice coursework. Yet only Anne and Barbara mentioned programming for individual children, and only in connection with special needs children. Although individual programs were not used as such for more able children, Anne and Cathryn both described

making an effort to extend some children through regular activities.

The teachers also perceived an outstanding ability as an indicator of developmental lags in other areas which then needed attention, rather than recognising the talent. Cathryn's belief that one skill was only an indicator of immaturity and that it was only when children 'got all their other skills' that you could see how bright they were, is in stark contrast to Gardner's (1983) theory that competence in one domain does not automatically imply the same in another.

Conclusion

The small sample of rural early childhood educators who participated in this study showed inconsistent knowledge of the characteristics of gifted and talented children, other than perhaps the more extreme characteristics of some exceptionally or profoundly gifted children (Harrison, 1995). They lacked information on programming for these children, held conflicting views on the necessity for such programming, and it seems that their sometimes negative views of parental expectation coupled with their own lack of expertise may have limited parent-teacher communication, information and advice. Their knowledge-base therefore compares unfavourably with contemporary theories and findings on gifted and talented young children. Despite their rural background, the views and practises of these teachers are similar to views found in other studies (Hall, 1995; McBride, 1992). The key to the similarity seems to be lack of information rather than geographical location.

Further research is needed to explore the themes uncovered in this study. In particular, future studies might focus on the implications of the current emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice and deficit needs programming for gifted and talented young children:

- Is developmentally appropriate practice appropriate, or applied appropriately in the case of the gifted and talented child; or do teachers commonly fail to scout for talent; or fail to provide an appropriate program in the case of gifted and talented children?
- Furthermore, if continuous individual programming—despite much lip-service—is seen as only legitimate in the case of special

needs children, then identification of, and programming for, gifted and talented young children needs to be actively and urgently addressed.

- Finally, we may have to review preservice and in-service teacher education with regard to the gifted and talented preschool child, if further research confirms Anne's perception about her colleagues: 'I think that people presume that these children will make their way regardless, that they already have their skills, they're going to be clever, anyway, let's help the ones that are not going to be'.

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