

**YOUNG GIFTED AND TALENTED CHILDREN: EARLY CHILDHOOD
TEACHER ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES ON THE NORTH COAST OF
N.S.W.**

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ABSTRACT

There is a dearth of Australian research on rural gifted and talented education in early childhood settings. This study, carried out on the North Coast of N.S.W., used a mixed methodology of surveys and semi-structured interviews to find out how the attitudes and practices of teachers who had attended in-service sessions on gifted and talented children differ from teachers with no such training. The results of the study indicate that consultancy services and a compulsory unit on gifted and talented children during preservice education are needed.

INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that gifted and talented education is relatively new to the early childhood sector in Australia (J. M. Hall, personal communication, September 1996). Few teachers who are not recent graduates would be aware of this topic, or of the characteristics and mode of identification of gifted and talented children. It is therefore logical to assume that many teachers may be unaware of the necessity and importance of special programs for these children. This would hold true particularly for rural teachers, where professional information is more difficult to access (Fleer & Waniganayake, 1994), and where early childhood teachers tend to stay in their jobs longer than their city counterparts (Clyde, 1989).

Gross (1994), in a brief summary of gifted and talented education in Australia, describes a society which holds a particularly extreme "egalitarian social ethos, coupled with the community perspective of gifted students as middle class achievers from the dominant culture" (p. 15). In contrast, educational strategies for children with special needs receive compulsory attention during preservice teacher education, with the result that teachers "are trained to respond swiftly to the needs of disadvantaged students" (p. 15). It is therefore hardly surprising that the attitudes and practices of teachers trained in this way are reflected in their classrooms.

Some traditions within early childhood education add to the lack of awareness of gifted and talented preschoolers. For example, early childhood educators have been zealous in their support of children's right to play, and in emphasising the importance of social skills, perhaps at the expense of enhancing gifts and talents in, for instance, academic skills (Spodek, 1986). In addition, early childhood teachers are encouraged to feel qualified in catering for all children through individual programming and developmentally appropriate practice, with the exception of children with special needs (Bredenkamp, 1987; National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC), 1993; Wangmann, 1995). Centres with these children can apply for grants, enabling

them to employ special needs workers, who carry out programs provided by government sponsored early intervention services.

An Australian adaptation of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Bredekamp, 1987) is the yardstick by which many early childhood services receive accreditation (NCAC, 1993). But DAP has been criticised for cultural bias, lack of teacher intervention, and insufficient preparation of children for later schooling (Carta, 1995; File, 1994; Jipson, 1991; Lubeck, 1994; New, 1994; Rodd, 1996; Spodek & Brown, 1993). As a result of this criticism, the basic tenets of DAP have recently been revised (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Unfortunately for gifted and talented children, the revision clarifies that the only exceptional children who need special programs and specialist staff are children with disabilities.

American literature on the subject of gifted and talented education for young children is plentiful (Fatouros, 1986; Karnes, 1983; Karnes, Schwedel & Linnemeyer, 1982; Kitano, 1982; Kitano 1990; Robinson, 1993). But a review of Australian literature on the education of gifted and talented children undertaken for this study reveals very little information regarding the practices of early childhood teachers (Hall, 1995; McBride, 1992), particularly in the rural region (Wellisch, 1997). As a result of the review, several key questions arose which provided a framework for this study. They were the following: What are rural early childhood teachers' attitudes to young gifted and talented children in early childhood centres? Do they recognise the needs of these children, and do they provide special programs? Do the attitudes of teachers who have taken a course in gifted and talented (GAT) education differ from teachers who have no training in this area, and do their programs for these children then also differ?

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

A pilot study of three preschool teachers conducted earlier by Wellisch (1997) concluded that there was a need for a larger study to examine the emergent themes. The enlargement of the pilot study required more data to be gathered from a wider range of respondents and, now that the themes had been established, a survey design was seen as appropriate to gather this data (de Vaus, 1995). The emergent themes from the pilot study were grouped into 5 Domains: Labelling Children as GAT, Programming for GAT Children, Beliefs About GAT Children, Efficacy/Responsibility for Dealing with GAT Children, and GAT Children as Socially Isolated. A sixth Domain was added in order to examine the general indication throughout the pilot study that teachers seemed to favour *disability* over *ability*. Questions were designed in accordance with the Domains. As well as the survey, an intensive interview was used to further explore themes of interest as well as to enhance validity (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993).

POPULATION AND SAMPLE SELECTION

Early childhood teachers on the North Coast of N.S.W. – a rural population accessible for the researcher (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993) - were targeted. In order to remain within the academic criterion of "teacher", eligible subjects had to hold a diploma or degree in early childhood or primary education, and be currently teaching in an early childhood centre. Surveys were sent to Directors working in North Coast community based preschools and child care centres, including council run centres. In order to focus on trained teachers, it was decided not to approach private centres, because according to a census quoted by Wangmann (1995), less than 25% of centres receiving Commonwealth funding employed trained teachers. Additionally, community based

centres who mostly employ trained teachers, are the largest single group of centres sharing common characteristics. For instance, they all receive State funding and are run by a community management (Rodd, 1996; Simons, 1986; Wangmann, 1995).

SAMPLE SIZE

Of the one hundred surveys sent out, 53% were returned. Despite targeting only preschools, seven surveys could not be used because the respondents lacked appropriate qualifications. As a result, a total of 46 surveys were used in the analysis. The survey form included a request for respondents to volunteer for an interview. Seventeen respondents, almost one third of all returned surveys, offered themselves for interviews. Only eight respondents were interviewed, however, as some respondents later declined, or could not make themselves available on the appointed day or hour. Of these, two had participated in an in-service on GAT education, corresponding closely with the 21.7% of survey respondents who had attended an in-service, and were therefore a representative sample of the survey respondents on this particular criterion. For the purpose of this study, GAT education, or training, could refer to any course of study in gifted and talented education at a university, or short in-service courses on the subject of gifted and talented children, occasionally provided in the North Coast region of N.S.W. by various organisations, including the Australian Early Childhood Association, Country Children's Services Association and the Lady Gowrie organisation.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE SURVEY

The survey was constructed in three parts. Part A contained demographic questions, asked about exposure to gifted education, and - contingent upon a positive response - provided space for self-reporting of change in philosophy and practice. Part B was made up of a total of 23 items (questions 8-30) which employed the statement format with a five point Likert rating scale anchored at both ends (strongly disagree, strongly agree) and the midpoint (agree) (de Vaus, 1995; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). This section sought to establish teacher beliefs about early childhood educational philosophies and practices, about the value of social education, the value of a broad education and the importance placed on teaching to deficit needs and gifted needs. Part B also included questions pertaining to beliefs and practises regarding young gifted and talented children.

Part C consisted of only open-ended questions. Bégin & Gagné (1994) found that having experience of gifted children or being gifted significantly influenced attitude scores, a finding shared by others (Tomlinson et al., 1994). The inclusion of this factor was one of Bégin & Gagné's (1994) recommendations for future studies. A question about knowing gifted and talented children was therefore included in this section of the survey. Other questions included teacher programming, and gifted and talented characteristics. Open-ended questions were kept to a minimum in order to ease the task of responding (de Vaus, 1995).

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

According to Fraenkel & Wallen (1993), validity "refers to the degree to which evidence supports any inferences a researcher makes based on the data he or she collected using a particular instrument" (p. 139). The use in this study of "multiple methods" (Denzin, 1978, p. 28) - quantitative and qualitative questions in the survey instrument as well as an intensive interview component - creates methodological triangulation, increasing internal validity.

Reliability, the consistency of scores provided by the instrument (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993), was strengthened by employing multiple item indicators (de Vaus, 1991) through the re-wording of questions in order to establish whether the subjects were consistent in their responses. Consistency, according to de Vaus (1995) may also have been further enhanced by the method of using posted questionnaires, rather than personal contact, although this researcher acknowledges that the lack of personal contact may also have the opposite effect.

DATA ANALYSIS

The returned surveys were analysed, and there was an exploratory phase of examining relationships amongst the Domains. One dependent variable, Domain 5, was a single question Domain. The remainder were arranged into five Domains, and Domains 1, 2, 3, and 4 were submitted to a reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency reliability score, with the lowest alpha being .63, while the highest was .80. Descriptive statistics were derived, and group comparisons and correlations were obtained using non-parametric tests, Mann-Whitney U test for comparing two groups, and Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance for the comparison of more than two groups. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to define correlations. Analysis of written qualitative responses were coded according to emergent themes (Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Preliminary analysis of the interviews was carried out with the supervisor in order to tease out responses within the Domains. Interviews were then transcribed, read and re-read. This was followed by cross-interview analysis consisting of coded data grouped by topics from the interview guide (Patton, 1990) together with a similar analysis of the qualitative section of each survey.

SURVEY RESULTS

Of the 46 respondents, 36 (78.3%) had not attended in-service on GAT, and 10 respondents (21.7) had some GAT training. All the respondents (100%) were female. Only 5 (10.9%) of respondents were aged between 20-30, 19 (41.9%) were aged 30-40, and 22 (47.8%) were aged over 40 years of age. The most common qualification was a diploma (69.6%), and the majority of respondents (91.3%) obtained their qualifications before 1992. Exactly half of the respondents had taught in the rural setting for more than 10 years, with 5 respondents (10.9%) over 20 years.

QUANTITATIVE SECTION

There were no significant statistical findings to indicate that teachers who are trained in gifted and talented education hold more positive views on GAT children, nor that they program more appropriately to these children's special needs. Findings in Domain 6 did indicate, however, that teachers respond with more confidence to identifying special needs children than to identifying gifted and talented children. An interesting and unexpected finding was that younger teachers (20-30) and teachers, who had reported less than 5 years of rural experience, responded significantly more negatively than older teachers (30-40 and 40+) to positive beliefs about GAT children (mean ranks of 11.50 and 14.80 respectively, compared to ranks in the mid-twenties for older, more experienced preschool teachers). That is, older and more experienced teachers working in preschools were generally more favourably disposed to gifted and talented children than younger teachers, including those younger teachers who worked in long day care centres.

The lack of significant findings could be attributed to a number of causes. First, the small sample of respondents would have contributed to the reduced chances of finding significant differences. Second, the small number of teachers who were exposed to GAT courses in the sample would also limit any significant findings. Third, if the two “trained” interviewees’ few hours of training is representative of the other eight “trained” teachers, the courses taken by teachers may have been too short to make a marked difference to attitude and teaching practice. Fourth, teachers may be reluctant to teach to different needs on either side of the norm. Studies on teacher attitudes to the integration of both gifted and talented and special needs children seem to bear this out (Tomlinson et. al, 1994; Wiley, 1993).

Additionally, social desirability may have played a role. That is, teachers may not have wanted to be seen as “uncaring” regardless of who differed from the norm, providing “socially acceptable” answers rather than revealing their real attitudes. This would not show up in any analysis (de Vaus, 1995). The notion that social desirability may have been involved was revealed by one interview participant, who, having expressed strong views on equity during the interview, made some equally strong opposing statements in favour of gifted and talented children once the tape recorder was turned off. She then requested that these last statements be kept off the record.

The inclusion of the qualitative questions, which required individual and specific hand-written responses on attitudes and practices with young gifted and talented children, as well as data from the interviews, appear to have had more contextual meaning to the specific teachers both surveyed and interviewed, and should go some way towards redressing the lack of significant findings in the quantitative survey data.

QUALITATIVE SECTION

Although the *quantitative* survey questions showed no significant difference between GAT “trained” (n=10) and “untrained” (n=36) teachers, interesting differences were found between the two groups in their responses to *qualitative* survey questions and in face-to-face interviews. The results of this study, however, must be interpreted in the context of the small sample size. The differences found between “trained” and “untrained” teachers seem to indicate that even a small amount of training makes a difference to early childhood teacher attitudes, and their ability is enhanced in the area of identification of young gifted and talented children, although programming remained largely unaffected. Generally, “untrained” early childhood teachers in this study seem to have been more aware of the characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children than “untrained” teachers in other studies (Diezmann & Watters, 1997; Hall, 1995; McBride, 1992). As a group, their heightened awareness of gifted and talented children may be attributed to a comprehensive knowledge of child development, a central component in early childhood education (Rodd, 1996). The negative characteristics of gifted and talented children, however, such as lack of social skills and behaviour problems were noted mainly by “untrained” teachers, indicating that training in gifted and talented education contributes to the conversion of negative impressions, a suggestion already made by Copenhaver & McIntyre (1992).

The lack of program provision seems to be partly due to a failure to identify GAT children. As one teacher commented, “I don’t think I really give a lot of effort to ‘gifted and talented’ – I haven’t identified the need this year”. Teachers also lacked information on program differentiation for gifted and talented children. One teacher admitted that she “could probably do

far more with a bit more training in this area". But a major obstacle to programming for gifted and talented children appears to have been caused by the reluctance of teachers to label children, largely due to a concern with equity, and extending beyond the gifted and talented child to all children generally (Wellisch, 1998). A final cause preventing specific programming for gifted and talented children appears to be based on teacher belief in the adequacy of developmentally appropriate practice. These beliefs seem to have prevented all but one "trained" teacher from forming small groups of gifted and talented children and providing some kind of special programming.

INTERVIEW RESULTS

Interviews, which were taped and later transcribed, were conducted in the preschools where the respondents worked. The outcome of the interview data clearly indicates that early childhood teachers on the North Coast of N.S.W. generally do not identify gifted and talented children. The predominant reason given is inadequate training. Another major reason is the lack of official recognition of a need for these children to be identified and catered for; no government funding for additional staff or resources; and no centres where a teacher or a parent can turn for help.

Most teachers without exposure to gifted and talented education were not concerned with the provision of a special program for gifted and talented children. Kim (no real names are used) in particular had an abhorrence to an interventionist approach, in stark contrast to recent recommendations for teachers to practice deliberate intervention (Diezmann & Watters, 1997). She had adopted the aboriginal belief that children were born with a spirit and that this "wild spirit" had to be allowed to come out. "I don't believe I have the right to push them in any direction. I have the right to nurture them, but not...exert influences on them that are intentional". And yet, she had no qualms in working with intention on deficit needs: "We...need to supply by way of encouragement, what they are not asking for but they need, so we can strengthen those areas that are lacking...". Many teachers interviewed, however, observed that DAP was inadequate for the young gifted and talented child, because the upper 8-year old ceiling of DAP was often outstripped by the development of gifted and talented children. Such a case in point was a gifted and talented 4-year old, whose passion was HSC chemistry. Some teachers also reported that the preschool routine and setting seemed to limit adequate educational opportunity and provision for these children, as did staff/child ratios and the lack of consultants.

Teachers interested in gifted and talented children spoke of a number of opportunities for gaining information, including courses and recently published books on the subject. Although some of the "untrained" teachers commented on the lack of information available on gifted and talented education, others were aware of the availability of such courses and chose not to attend. This finding, that teachers who do not have gifted and talented education as their special interest are unlikely to attend in-service on the subject, has been made before (Gross, 1994). The finding seems to indicate a need for the inclusion of a compulsory course in gifted and talented education in preservice training, a practice which has been found to have a positive effect on both teacher attitude, identification and programming elsewhere (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994).

Rather than teaching to strengths, both "trained" and "untrained" interviewees saw their role as detecting, and teaching to, deficit needs. In stark contrast to this method of educating children, the Reggio Emilia approach sees children as "rich, strong, and powerful. The emphasis is placed

on seeing the children as unique subjects with rights rather than simply needs" (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1994, p. 102). The revised DAP guidelines have now adopted this philosophy (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997), but the changes are yet to be included in our own Accreditation system (NCAC, 1993).

In summary, many teachers were aware of the existence of the young gifted and talented child, and some teachers were also aware of the need for special programming. Many felt unqualified, however, to cater to these needs. Many teachers were waiting for outside directives and guidance, an official nod of recognition or official funding, and help. Although teachers invariably claimed to cater for individual needs, more than half the interviewees admitted that they found it difficult to cater for the needs of gifted and talented children in the early childhood setting.

Attending short in-service courses was not found to be sufficient in imparting *enough* knowledge on how to identify characteristics, and did not result in the automatic provision of a differentiated program, although teachers did become more aware of individual abilities. This further indicates that short courses may help to raise awareness, but that longer courses are needed to skill teachers in differentiating their programs. Availability of in-service education on gifted and talented children, then, is not a sufficient strategy to redress the lack in the provision of special programs for such children.

Even when courses were available teachers tended, instead, to attend inservices that helped them to further cater to the children with disabilities. This area was seen as important because of government subsidies, policies of inclusion, and continuity of services in schools. The teachers in this study were also more likely to attend in-services courses catering to their personal/professional interests. This finding may be due to the rural factor, with the majority of respondents being in the 30+ category, trained before 1992, and seemingly preferring to pursue their special interest areas, rather than gain new information (Clyde, 1994).

Generally, teacher attitudes to gifted and talented education in the rural early childhood setting on the North Coast of N.S.W. are very much a reflection of present societal values. It is hoped that the contribution of this study will raise awareness and help redress the educational inequality presently affecting young rural gifted and talented children. The status quo for these children is best summed up by one teacher who recalled her pang of conscience after filling in her survey: "It made me think a bit about children whom I go 'wow, they are really smart'...do we just say that and then forget it, or what?".

FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study has revealed some information about teacher attitudes and practices with regard to gifted and talented preschoolers in a small region of rural N. S. W. It is important to establish the extent of provisions made in other areas of Australia. Further, as gifted and talented education is a relatively new area in this country, it would be advantageous to compare the teaching methods of those early childhood teachers who have already undertaken a unit of study on gifted and talented education at a university with teachers who have not.

We also have to keep in mind that young gifted and talented children are catered for by an increasing number of TAFE-trained early childhood workers. This study should therefore be duplicated with these workers in order to compare their attitudes and practices with the trained teachers in this study, and thereby create a more realistic picture of the true educational opportunities for young gifted and talented children.

The finding that older and more experienced teachers working in preschools seem to take more interest in gifted and talented children may indicate that teachers acquire more knowledge of children over time, and are more likely to be open to the challenge of such children than are teachers who are still at the survival stage, establishing their skills (Clyde, 1994). The preschool setting, traditionally a starting point to schooling, may also be more conducive to the demonstration and acknowledgment of talents, than would the less structured atmosphere of a long day care situation. Both these findings require further investigation.

In conclusion, although the sample was small and only included rural teachers on the North Coast of N.S.W., this study has made a number of contributions to the fields of Australian early childhood education and gifted education. First, the use of a mixed methodology will hopefully make this study more accessible to early childhood teachers, and inspire others to carry out similar research. Second, where previous studies have tended to concentrate on teachers of school aged children in the area of gifted education, this study has surveyed *early childhood* teachers. Third, the study has clearly shown that there is a need to review our preservice teacher education with regard to the present emphasis on deficit needs, and to include a compulsory subject on gifted and talented children.

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