

Parenting with eyes wide open: Young gifted children, early entry and social isolation

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Abstract

This case study outlines the challenges of eight Australian mothers with intellectually gifted preschoolers. The ideal ways of nurturing children's giftedness, the parents' role in early identification and the effect of maternal depression and possible association with twice exceptionality (gifted with a disorder) are discussed. The narratives of case study parents then describe how and whether the needs of their preschoolers were understood or met in early childhood services, and the advice they received about early entry. It was found that early entry met the needs of children whose parents chose this acceleration option and that the preschoolers who missed out because of intervention by their educators did not fare so well. Findings also indicated an urgent need for the inclusion of compulsory early childhood giftedness courses for Australian pre-service educators and an equally urgent need for professional development courses about giftedness for educators already working in early childhood services.

Keywords

Gifted preschoolers, parenting, early entry, twice exceptional, maternal, depression, early childhood educators, educator attitudes

Becoming a first-time parent cut-off from daily connections with others and confined to the home can be 'incredibly isolating' (Rodie, 2017). One remedy that could potentially fill the social needs of new mothers is the provision of mothers' groups organized by

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Australian health authorities ‘if you all click . . . but not so great if you don’t’ (Rodie, 2017: para 12). The isolation can be exacerbated by having an intellectually gifted toddler, as one mother found when her toddler’s advanced development left her shunned, ruling out any kind of ‘clicking’ at her group (Wellisch, 2017). This mother was one of eight participants in a recent case study that compared parenting experiences with the attitudes and practices of early childhood educators in relation to giftedness (Wellisch, 2019). One aim of the case study was to explore the early school entry experiences and decisions of the parents, another was to gain insight into other challenges and issues facing parents of intellectually gifted preschoolers who learn very quickly, have excellent language skills, glue-like memories and sometimes have a penchant for perfectionism.

The findings of these parenting challenges will be detailed in this article. First, an outline of ideal ways to nurture children’s giftedness and the role of parents will be discussed, including their role in the early identification and assessment of giftedness. This will be followed by information about the effect of maternal depression on the process of attachment (Bowlby, 1969) and its possible role in twice exceptionality (giftedness with a disorder). Then, the pros and cons of early entry will be examined. The article concludes with excerpts of the case study narratives about experiences with early childhood services, early entry choices and outcomes, and what effect a gifted child has had on parents’ own social interactions.

Nurturing giftedness

First-time parents may not be aware of a child’s advanced ability due to their lack of experience and because there is no other child at home for comparison. However, they may be alerted to the possibility that their child is unusually advanced by neighbours, friends, child care educators or healthcare nurses who see many other children of a similar age.

The role of parents in the development of their children’s giftedness is both fundamental and far-reaching. The intimate knowledge of the child and the warmth of the relationship, the importance of daily interactions and communications, as well as dedication to ensure that opportunities are available for the child, cannot be overstated. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1993), parental high expectation, provision of stimulation and unfaltering support appear to help elicit and promote giftedness. Although such support is a positive environmental factor, the development of an insecure attachment style in a child can have negative effects and will be discussed later.

Gagné (2013), an expert in giftedness, described the role of parenting a gifted child as follows:

Any interventions by the parents to create a specific family environment, either propitious to general knowledge learning, to musical activities, or to athletic ones, could impact the development of related natural abilities. The same applies to their active efforts to involve their children in such activities, like visits to museums or concerts, winter or summer family sports activities, or any other activities that could foster a child’s mental or physical natural gifts. (p. 15)

Parenting a gifted child can add to the challenge of parenting. One case study participant described parenting a young gifted child as ‘absolutely exciting and delightful and wonderful, but at other times . . . demanding and difficult and intense’ (interview, 16 March 2017). At some time, one of the parental challenges will involve the identification of giftedness.

Early identification

Early identification is important so that parents can learn about giftedness, support their preschoolers adequately, lay plans for their children’s schooling and learn to become assertive educational advocates. Such preparation will stand parents in good stead because Australian undergraduate school teachers generally do not receive training in giftedness (Fraser-Seeto et al., 2013). It is therefore left to parents of gifted preschoolers to advocate for their children and explain their needs to each new teacher. Over the years, parents learn to request individual education plans and strategies, such as enrichment, extensions and acceleration, where appropriate.

Cognitive assessment. Once parents are aware that their child is advanced and may be intellectually gifted, a cognitive assessment, also known as an IQ test, will provide confirmation. The psychologist’s report can then be used as evidence when parents request an appropriate level of education for their child.

The right age to assess giftedness. The optimum time for testing is much discussed among parents on social media platforms. Many psychologists are reluctant to assess children younger than 6 years, although gold-standard cognitive assessment tools are designed for much younger children, with the Wechsler tests commencing at 2.6 years (Wechsler, 2012). The notion to wait until the age of 6 appears to arise from the results of an old review of even older studies in which it was concluded that IQ scores at an earlier age are not as stable as when children are older (Hutchens et al., 1991). However, it is important to point out that the authors of the review did not separate out gifted child participants from its general participant population and did not take into account that young intellectually gifted children are mentally older than their chronological age, so their IQ may be more stable at a younger age than that of the average child. Additionally, stability of IQ scores in older children may have been overstated, as demonstrated by a more recent longitudinal study (Ramsden et al., 2011) of 33 pupils aged 12–16. The students were assessed in 2004, and again 3–4 years later. The results showed that the teens were split evenly between those whose scores increased and those whose scores decreased. The researchers concluded that an individual’s intellectual capacity relative to their peers can also weaken or strengthen during the teenage years. Waiting for an age when the child’s IQ is stable is therefore neither particularly practical nor helpful, especially when it is a requirement for the acceleration option of early entry to school, described later in this article.

In addition to the IQ stability issue, a child’s cognitive development can be negatively affected by adverse situations and experiences, complicating the gifted profile of children. Some of these unpredictable situations are described below.

Maternal depression and the process of attachment

The developing brain of a newborn child takes place within a complex interaction of simultaneous genetic and environmental influences and events that include the cellular and molecular levels (Stiles and Jernigan, 2010). Environmental factors that can affect an infant are, for example, maternal depression and the quality of child–mother attachment, which is contingent upon maternal responses to the infant (Bowlby, 1969). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defines a major depressive episode as the onset and presence of at least five symptoms over a 2-week period. These symptoms can include depressed mood; loss of interest or pleasure; feelings of worthlessness or guilt; and difficulty in thinking, concentrating or making decisions. The enforced social isolation of early motherhood can be an unexpected change for an otherwise gregarious and outgoing woman and may contribute to both perinatal and postnatal maternal depression (Bilszta et al., 2010).

In Australia, as in most parts of the world, more than 1 in 10 women suffer with both perinatal and postnatal depression (Milgrom, 2017) arising from a variety of issues, such as social disadvantage (Heckman, 2006), children’s behaviour problems (Essex et al., 2003; Gartstein and Sheeber, 2004) and relationship problems (Nagata et al., 2000).

Some learning disorders in children, associated with working memory deficits (Swanson and Siegel, 2001), may develop through missed ‘experience-dependent’ opportunities during critical periods of development when a depressed mother is less likely to interact as frequently or as enthusiastically with her baby as mothers who are not depressed (Perry and Szalavitz, 2006). Attachment security arises from a baby’s needs being responded to and met and may also be a key ‘experience expectant’ opportunity (Greenough et al., 1987). If the attachment is insecure or disrupted, perhaps through a protracted period of maternal depression, the outcome of this early traumatic event can be emotional maladjustment and unevenness of development. One study found that 74% of chronically depressed mothers had insecurely attached babies (McMahon et al., 2006).

Specific adverse outcomes of insecure attachment have included unhealthy perfectionism (Wellisch, 2008), while maternal depression has been associated with children’s attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, depression and behaviour problems, as cited in a study by Wellisch (2015).

Research suggests that 30% of abused children have severe learning problems (Streeck-Fischer and van der Kolk, 2000), and, although severe deprivation related to maternal depression is uncommon in the general population, milder adverse incidents as a result of maternal depression have the potential to affect the quality of care during the first year of life due to less contingent responsiveness of mothers (Wellisch et al., 2012). Specific learning disorders are found in children with average or higher abilities and are not fully understood, but include possible associations between cognitive deficits in a variety of areas (Büttner and Hasselhorn, 2011), such as in working memory. These issues may lead to underachievement (Leschied et al., 2005) and mask children’s giftedness.

Maternal depression and children's IQ

Depressed parenting behaviours at a time of rapid brain development may have consequences for children's IQ and behaviours, although research has demonstrated mixed outcomes. For example, one study of 65 Dutch middle class children found that there were more gifted children who were securely attached than in the general population (Van Ijzendoorn and Van Vliet-Visser, 1988). Another study of 5029 mothers found that only depression during the prenatal, and not the postnatal, period was associated with an average reduction in children's IQ of 3.19 IQ points (Evans et al., 2012), and a French study of 1039 mothers found that chronic depression predicts children's cognitive development at school entry age, particularly in boys (van der Waerden et al., 2017).

The brain matures from the bottom up, and the amygdala, a brain area associated with socializing, begins to mature around 6 months of age (Joseph, 1999). Brain organization caused by early emotional deprivation may be more difficult to change than later trauma, especially if intervention takes place after 6 months of age (Croft et al., 2007). Maternal depression during early development may well be a contributing factor in children identified as twice exceptional.

In summary, although there have been mixed outcomes, studies indicate that maternal depression can affect the IQ and development of young children. It is therefore important to ensure early diagnosis and treatment to improve the chances of good child adjustment.

Early entry to school

Intellectually gifted children learn more quickly than do typically developing children and therefore require a faster pace of educational provisions. Early entry, an option to enter school before the standard minimum age, provides gifted children with an early acceleration option. If this option is available, it should be considered, and an assessment is therefore needed when a child is around 4 years old. If the full scale score is at or above IQ 130, early entry is most likely to be the child's advantage. This is because he/she would be mentally at least 1 year ahead of his or her same chronologically aged peers, because social-emotional development is also likely to be advanced (Gross, 1999) and because there is no guarantee that a differentiated program will be provided during the early school years. Holding such a child back for another 12 months because of chronological age may well be a disadvantage both socially and intellectually.

One underlying reason for an early entry provision is to ensure that gifted children are intellectually engaged while they are with older children who are often a better match mentally, thus better able to meet gifted children's social needs (Diezmann et al., 2001). Additionally, children who are highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted often learn to read prior to school entry (Clark, 1992; Rogers and Silverman, 1997), and may – depending on their level of giftedness – have even greater difficulty fitting in socially with their chronologically same-aged peers.

Although class acceleration is well supported by research (Rogers, 2004), not all experts agree. Freeman (2008), who carried out a longitudinal study with 170 gifted children, found that all but 1 of her 17 participants who had been accelerated had increased problems with social interactions and some did not achieve as well as prior

Table 1. Overview of early entry age and other criteria within Australia.

States/territories	Early entry criteria
ACT	Must be 4 before 30 April to commence and must be assessed with 'very superior' rating across all assessments in cognitive function
New South Wales	Must be 4 or older at 31 January of the year of enrolment. Assessments may include anecdotal records, interviews, standardized tests of cognitive ability and behavioural checklists
Queensland	Can apply for early entry if turning at least 5 years and 5 months on 31 December in proposed year of attendance if Principal is satisfied that child has required attributes
South Australia	Can enrol at the start of the school year earliest if 4 at 1 May. Full-scale IQ scores of 145 (within the range of 138–148) and at the 99th percentile on a standardized assessment of cognitive (intellectual) development.
Tasmania	From 3 years 6 months at 1 January in the year of school commencement if in top 2% (>130) of the population
Victoria	Can apply for exemption to minimum age (5 years) if at least 4 years 6 months of age on or before 30 April in the year of school commencement, if ≥ 130 full-scale IQ on WPPSI, and assessed after the age of 4 years
Western Australia and Northern Territory	No provision for early entry

ACT: Australian Capital Territory; WPPSI: Wechsler Preschool & Primary Scale of Intelligence.

to acceleration. In contrast, Gross (2006) undertook a longitudinal study of 60 children with IQs at or above 160 and found that her participants who were not accelerated constantly felt the need to camouflage their abilities and try to blend in while those participants who were accelerated had higher degrees of life satisfaction. In individual cases, neither of these options will address all the gifted child's social needs, and achievement may not be at the same level as in a class with chronologically same-aged peers. However, class and subject acceleration is at least more likely to alleviate boredom at school, better able to address gifted children's intellectual needs and help prevent underachievement resulting from educational disengagement.

Early entry in Australia

Early entry provision is currently available in only some parts of Australia, and criteria vary between states and territories. Below is an outline of the early entry provisions at the time of writing (Table 1).

In the Australian state of New South Wales, the early entry provision was first included in gifted policies almost three decades ago (Department of School Education, 1991). It allows an early entrant to start school from the age of 4 years, while enrolment is normally from 4.5 and up to 6 years of age. Prior to early entry, school principals may want to be satisfied that a child is ready for school. A construct such as school readiness, however, may be fraught with problems for gifted preschoolers. For example, school

readiness is interpretable in many ways and does not necessarily involve intellectual readiness. In fact, early childhood educators, who are often consulted about a child's readiness, tend to believe that good social skills are the most important signs of school readiness, and they base their social skill assessments on previous experiences with neurotypical children (Grant, 2013; Wellisch, 2019). Gifted children's social needs and skills are, however, different from those of other preschoolers and can be misinterpreted by educators. These children often crave close and loyal friendships and prefer the company of older children and adults. Some do not play at all or play advanced games with rules that their same-aged peers refuse to play (Wellisch, 2019) or they may play differently, preferring solitary creative activities, such as writing (Wilson, 2015).

In the case of children who have higher levels of giftedness, their social and emotional maturity is almost at the level of their intellectual ability (Gross, 1999), so it is unlikely that their social engagement needs will be met by same-aged peers, who do not understand them (Wellisch, 2019; Wellisch et al., 2012). Children with higher levels of giftedness need to be in the company of children of the same mental age, and they can have emotional 'meltdowns' and struggle with self-regulation when placed in mismatched intellectual and social settings. It is these behaviours that are often misinterpreted as social and emotional immaturity, and these behaviours are cited by educators as evidence against early entry (Diezmann et al., 2001), or, in the case of schools, against whole-class acceleration.

Although acceleration can provide at least one solution to the intellectual needs of gifted preschoolers, parents are faced with a number of other issues that may affect their choice in relation to early entry. For example, there is the current trend favouring *late* entry, with 22% of children now aged 6 in their first year of school (Baker, 2018), and it is the frequent subject of debate, as one case study participant found:

It is a great discussion amongst Mothers' Groups . . . when you have a baby around, you know, February, March, April [the school year in Australia starts in late January] . . . should you or shouldn't you. And . . . on Facebook where you are constantly bombarded by things that people have "liked" which are around . . . Mamamia blog things on "I should not have sent my child to school" or "I should have sent my child to school" and things like that. (Interview, 9 December 2016)

An additional issue is that early entry can further increase the 18-month gap between the youngest and oldest school entrants (children must enroll in school in the year they turn 6 in New South Wales), widening the gap to 2 full years. Such an age gap can disadvantage gifted early entrants whose physical development more closely matches their chronological age (Diezmann et al., 2001). Young gifted children who are smaller and physically slower and less developed in comparison with their classmates may therefore be less successful in sport and be more vulnerable to bullying.

Early entry and educator attitudes

The late entry trend is supported by the majority of early childhood and other teachers who espouse the 'hold them back' view (Mergler, 2016; Serry et al., 2014; Wellisch,

2019). Early childhood teachers may be swayed by school teacher anecdotes about poor outcomes for neurotypical children whose parents enrolled them at the earliest opportunity to avoid paying high child care fees (Koshy and Robinson, 2006) as well as by recent research outcomes. This research has highlighted several problems in children who enter school early: immaturity of language, behaviour skill deficiencies (Norbury et al., 2016) and early inattention/hyperactivity that may have long-term effects (Dee and Sievertsen, 2015). These studies have not, however, separated out gifted early entrants from other children (Koshy and Robinson, 2006), possibly creating the impression that early entry is a disadvantage for *all* children.

As mentioned, early entry is a well-researched and supported acceleration strategy for intellectually gifted children (Diezmann et al., 2001; Rogers, 2004; Vialle et al., 2001), who, in contrast to neuro-typical peers, often have advanced and early language skills (Fraser and Passow, 1994), get on well with older children and adults, and have a 'healthy attention' (Koshy and Robinson, 2006, p. 115). Therefore, unless there are additional disorders or disabilities that could interfere with the success of early enrolment, early entry can be the best choice for gifted preschoolers with an IQ of 130 or more.

Most early childhood educators, however, may not be aware of the early entry option or about the benefits of early entry for gifted preschoolers (Diezmann et al., 2001). Fraser-Seeto et al. (2013), who investigated Australian university provisions for school teacher education courses about giftedness, found that, of the 14 universities offering teacher education courses within New South Wales, only two included compulsory content about giftedness in their preservice courses, and this would be similar for early childhood education coursework. Educators therefore lack adequate information about gifted children (Grant, 2013), with 81% of a sample of early childhood educators reporting that they had not received adequate information about gifted children during their studies (Wellisch, 2019). This is unfortunate because inexperienced parents look to early childhood educators for advice and may be influenced by them to hold their children back, to the children's detriment, in the belief that the children will develop in maturity and improve in social skills – social skills that may be perfectly adequate in the company of older children – before entering school the following year. This is precisely what happened to some of the present case study participants (Wellisch, 2019).

Case study

The case study of eight mothers was one part of a mixed-method research project, recently undertaken to compare their experiences with the attitudes and knowledge about giftedness and early entry of 184 early childhood educators in the Australian state of New South Wales (Wellisch, 2019).

Due to the targeted population required for the case study, parents were recruited from previous clients of the researcher, the researcher's consultancy website and the closed Facebook group *Parents of Gifted Children – Australia*. Participants had to meet the requirements of having a gifted child who did not have a disorder or disability and who was recommended for early entry by a psychologist and to reside in New South Wales or another state or territory where early entry was available. Although the invitation to

participate in the research did not come with a gendered criterion, only mothers applied to be interviewed.

Six interviews were conducted face-to-face, and two were conducted via Skype. Questions sought to ascertain their impressions of parenting a gifted child and how they chose to either send their child to school early or hold the child back from school. Interviews averaged 40 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Parents were sent a copy of the transcripts and were asked to either make amendments or approve the contents. A modified inductive analysis was then employed, with categories coded according to keywords or concepts.

The average age of mothers at the birth of their child was 34 years, ranging from 28 years to 40 years. Their educational backgrounds were higher than average: two mothers had master's degree, five had bachelor's degree (one with honours) and one mother was enrolled in nursing studies. The children of participants included six girls and two boys, with an average IQ of 140.5, ranging from 127 to 153. Table 2 provides additional information about the participants and their children.

Findings

Experiences with early entry

Parents who pursued the early entry option were faced with a maze of information or the lack of information that only the most tenacious and confident could solve. Sandra¹ who lived in New South Wales was successful at her third attempt:

I always expected her to go to a Catholic school, and so we spoke to them and they would not have a bar of it. Said, 'No, we don't take early entry, it's not something we do.' We [then] spoke to a public school who were [sic] so negative, I was, like, there's no way she's coming into this environment. (Interview, 20 December 2016).

On her third attempt, Sandra found a public school principal who immediately welcomed her gifted child into his school. Jane's child could read at the age of 3 and had an IQ of 153. Her birthday was 5–6 weeks too late for 4-year old early entry, so she had another terrible social-emotional year at preschool. At the end of that year, the preschool director accompanied Jane to the local school and together they successfully convinced the principal that Jane's daughter should skip the first year of school and accelerate into the next class up, the class she could have attended the year before. Louise [child's IQ = 135] took her bored preschooler from her early childhood service in the middle of the year, contacted the education department and was told, 'Sorry, we can't help you; you should have applied in the year before' (interview, 9 February 2017). She then found a gifted-friendly principal who advocated on their behalf, and the child was allowed to start in Term 3. Cassie [child's IQ = 146], who lives in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), found the education department's process unclear:

No one . . . wanted to provide any kind of support or advice . . . I don't think they actually want people to use the [early entry] measure. . . . And they have this long list about needing to be socially mature as well. Once I actually had a [IQ] report they were actually really

Table 2. Information about participants and children.

Parent ^a and location	Past client	Child's place in family	Year of child's IQ test	Child's age at IQ test	Test type	Chose early entry	Child's current school year	Child's current age (years)	Attending school type
Sandra New South Wales	Yes	Only child	2010	4.8	WPPSI-III	Yes	Year 6	12.11	Private
Jane New South Wales	Yes	Eldest of two	2008	3.9	WPPSI-III	No	Year 4	8.9	Public
Angela New South Wales	Yes	Second of two	2014	3.9	WPPSI-IV	No	Kindergarten class	5.11	Private
Steph New South Wales	Yes	Only child	2015	3.9	WPPSI-IV	Yes	Kindergarten class	5.4	Private
Alexa New South Wales	No	Second of three	2014	4.5	SB-5	No	Year 1	7.3	Public
Louise Victoria	No	Only child	2015	4.9	WPPSI-III	Yes	Year 2	6.0	Public
Michelle New South Wales	No	Only child	2015	3.5	SB-5	No	Kindergarten class	5.3	Public
Cassie ACT	No	Eldest of two	2016	3.11	SB-5	Yes	Kindergarten class	4.8	Public

^aReal names have not been used; SB: Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales.

helpful. . . I think they just read the numbers on the report and went 'tick'. . . I just wish that it was an easier process. I wish it was more understood. I don't understand how it can be so easy just to choose, as a parent, to hold a kid back for months before the cut-off and so hard to choose early entry. . . . Parents, they don't even know it exists, that it's an option and they don't know how to do it. (Interview, 26 March 2017)

Angela [child's IQ = 130], whose son was tested and recommended for early entry, said:

They did allow him to go and they did assess him but they weren't comfortable. They said that his level of giftedness. . . wasn't high enough for early entry, so he just went one day a week the year before to see if it would work, and then everyone decided that no, they would keep him [back] in the year he was supposed to be in. (Interview, 5 December 2016)

Alexa [child's IQ = 150], a mother of two gifted children and a primary school teacher, had not sent her young son early because he would then have been in the same class as her older gifted daughter, who had not been identified before school entry. Alexa said she wished schools would be aware of early entry as a valid option:

My experience with acceleration has been. . . oh, yeah, it may be there but we never do that, it's very, very, very, very rare. . . I've had to argue for acceleration as an educational intervention from that point of view just like for a special-needs kid and I think that early entry is an educational intervention, it's a valid one. I wish that school counsellors knew about it. . . There needs to be some training and some understanding out there because I think some kids need it, not all gifted kids, [but] my son was one of them. (Interview, 9 December 2016)

Michelle's daughter [IQ = 154] had been tested and recommended for early entry. She contacted the local school and 'the school had visited the day care and had a look at her and said, 'We will enroll her if you want us to but we're not sure', suggesting that day care should accelerate her child into the school readiness group to see how she would fit in. The day care refused to cooperate, arguing that the child was not ready, and Michelle held her back from school. Toward the end of the following year, the day care contacted Michelle because her child was having behaviour problems, and they thought she was bored (interview, 26 February 2017).

Early entry choices and outcomes. Four of the eight parents chose early entry on the recommendation of psychologists, and their children are thriving intellectually. Asked whether she had found any barriers after early entry, Sandra said, 'The only one has been a little bit in the sporting field in that. . . there's been stages where she's been competing like at swimming schools and stuff against the year older because they group them together' (interview 20 December 2016).

Two mothers' children did not enter early but were accelerated the following year. Jane's daughter, who was too young for the 4-year old entry, was accelerated from preschool directly into the second year of school. Asked if Jane had any regrets, she said, 'My main regret is not pulling her out of preschool' (interview, 22 December 2016).

Her daughter, who still finds the work too easy, was offered a further class acceleration, but Jane was concerned about how this would affect her daughter later and declined. Alexa held her son back because she was concerned he would outperform his older sister if he was to attend the same class. He had an unhappy first year at school. He was extremely bored and did not fit in socially. At the end of the year, his sister, who was later identified as gifted, was accelerated to year 3, and he was then accelerated into the second year of school.

The last two mothers were advised by school and early childhood services to hold their children back despite the recommendation by the children's psychologists for early entry. Michelle's daughter was held back on the grounds that she was not ready and had too much catching up to do, and Angela's son was deemed to be socially immature by the school.

Social and emotional issues and early entry. Both Michelle's and Angela's children exhibited behaviour problems soon after they entered school the following year. Michelle said that her daughter's school teacher believed that her daughter was at least 1 year ahead in maths. Despite this, the child was given the same work as the others in her class. Her daughter's behaviour was fine at school, but at home, it was another matter: 'We've had some doozies [meltdowns] lately. I try and block them out [laughs]' (interview, 26 February 2017).

The promise of being with the 'right' group of children held sway for Angela, who followed the school's advice to start her child a year later. She felt the right group was more important than early entry: 'It is a small school . . . This [current] year is a really nice group where there are some other peers that are good for him, I guess, whereas the year group that he was going into [sic] there wasn't a good fit for him socially.' Angela said that holding him back had increased his confidence and self-esteem, but although he was accelerated in some subjects, 'We are certainly seeing an awful lot of anger. . . . He has had some aggressive episodes at school which we have never had before, so obviously there is [sic] some forms of frustration' (interview, 5 December 2016).

Social-emotional immaturity or a bad social and contextual fit?

Several mothers quoted teachers and others saying that their children were too immature socially and emotionally. Rather than being immature, however, some of these children who started school early became more emotionally and socially balanced once their intellectual and social needs were met. Alexa recalled the following:

My oldest daughter . . . we started her at school late . . . She was 5, almost 6. We did that on the recommendation of the wider community I guess . . . and also she had separation anxiety and so . . . we didn't want to send her off 5 days per week when she was having trouble separating from us. Unfortunately, in the year we held her back that got a lot worse, and . . . it was just a disaster and she was just bored at preschool and I realized with hindsight that we should have sent her to school. Because once she hit school, it basically disappeared. . . . And at preschool, she would kick and scream and wouldn't leave my side. (Interview, 9 December 2016)

The participants' children who were intellectually challenged through acceleration were generally happier, and their social needs in the company of older children were often better matched. The exception was Steph's daughter [IQ = 129] who first experienced bullying at preschool, which arose again at school. Sandra's child had both older and younger friends. Louise's and Cassie's daughters both found friends at school. As Jane's daughter was more interested in reading and in friendships with adults, it wasn't until 'probably into her second year of school that she realized that it was possible that a kid could be as interesting as a book. . . . It took her a very, very long time to work out that a kid had something interesting to offer her' (interview, 22 December 2016).

Insights about meltdowns

Wellisch (2019) found that educators interpreted gifted children's meltdowns, an emotional outburst to a situation out of the child's control, as signs of social and emotional immaturity that required an extra year at preschool. The case study mothers, however, saw this differently. Cassie thought her child's meltdowns usually occurred due to things being unfair, or to lack of stimulation: 'Usually she gets less meltdowns with more stimulation, we've always known that. She was the baby you had to take outside every day. . . . If you didn't. . . go outside and see things and do things, yeah, things would be hard' (interview, 26 March 2017). Jane thought her child's meltdowns 'always correlate to being under-challenged at school' and often ceased when placed in an intellectually and socially appropriate setting (interview, 22 December 2016). In Sandra's case, the child cried each time Sandra left her at preschool. This behaviour completely disappeared when the child started school as an early entrant, and Sandra 'never had any of the tears or trauma we had with preschool' (interview 20 December 2016).

Meltdowns also occurred when a child felt unable to communicate with peers who did not understand a gifted child's preference for complex play; was under-stimulated; was a bad fit within an early childhood setting or attended school with same-aged peers. Jane's child would go through 'a whole day of frustration that she couldn't even name and then come home and collapse' (interview, 22 December 2016). Alexa related it to her son's boredom with the school work: 'He was well behaved at school but we copped it at home with meltdowns and the tantrums' (interview, 9 December 2016).

Gifted children's play. Cassie recalled her daughter's bad fit with chronologically same-aged peers:

She was seeking friendships early. . . . From about 18 months . . . she might have a game like playing house and she'd want them to take some particular action, like getting ready for a party. She'd tell them what to do, and they kind of look at her strangely and wander off. . . . She would get frustrated . . . spend a bit of time yanking kids around, to put them in the place that she wanted them to be . . . which came across as a bit bossy . . . and they'd walk away when she was talking about something that was really interesting to her, telling them about science or whatever it was. . . . [She would] gravitate to the older children- [but] their mothers wouldn't think of them as potential friends, [so] there was no way to make that relationship continue. So she didn't quite fit with the kids her age, and then

couldn't make friends with older children because she wasn't seen as their natural playmate. (Interview, 26 March 2017)

Jane found similar issues with her daughter's friendships with older children: 'Other parents don't have the concept that your 4-year-old might get along really well with their 7-year-old, so it's really hard to get older kids to be available to your younger kid. . . . The parents don't want to' (interview, 22 December 2016).

Social issues of mothers. A theme that emerged during the interviews of the case study participants was the social disruption that occurred from having gifted children, such as being shunned by other mothers and losing old childhood friends. This issue has been found previously by others (Jolly et al., 2013). Bayly (1999) stated that the social isolation of parents with gifted children is particularly significant when they do not have access to other families with children, who also show advanced development. Some participants did seek new friends in gifted organizations and soon learnt not to share their children's developmental milestones or achievements when communicating with parents of neurotypical children. Cassie recalled the first time she realized what it was like to be the mother of a child with advanced ability:

Sometimes it's . . . isolating, because she is not the same as the kids her age. . . . There was one particular moment I can think of when she stood up (at the age of 6 months), and she was standing in the middle of this group of other babies, free standing, all by herself. It was the first time she had done it. I was excited because this was amazing, because this was new. And I was like, 'Oh, look, she's standing!' And I looked around and all the other mums were just ignoring it. And I was sitting there going, OK. . . . It got better when I . . . let go of that mothers group and . . . made contact with ACT Gifted Parents Support Group when my daughter was about 2½ – 3 and so we did start up a playgroup. . . . It was really nice to be able to talk about what happened in our day and not have people look at you like you are weird, and nice to share milestones and hear very similar things coming back. (Interview, 26 March 2017)

Cassie was still concerned about her early entry daughter:

What other parents might think worries me and I haven't necessarily completely come out [about her daughter's age] to the parents in her class yet. I'm still a bit anxious about birthdays, frankly, and I'm sure that will pass. . . . It's a lovely group of mums. (Interview, 26 March 2017)

When asked what concerned her exactly, she said she worried that people would say things to her daughter that would make her feel she didn't belong.

Steph said she did not talk about her child's giftedness or achievements with other mothers. Alexa said could not share her children's achievements with family members either because it had caused jealousy in others within the family. When asked what it was like to have a gifted child, Alexa said:

Lonely is the first word that comes to mind because you can't talk to people about it openly. You can't share milestones because they were met such a long time ago that you are like wondering if other kids have problems. . . . I've lost friends. . . . One of my closest friends who I've known since I was 15 . . . [I told her,] 'We've been for this testing and this is what it has shown.' I got straight away, "Well, that's your journey you'll have to live with it." And . . . the friendship has really fractured and fallen about. And other people have just distanced themselves. So, [I found people] in a gifted community . . . we used to take [my son] down to the playgroup and that was his complete favorite activity for the week because he met two boys there . . . and they bonded over what Brazil and Uzbekistan's flags look like. (Interview, 9 December 2016)

Limitations of this case study

As there were only eight Australian mother participants, the findings of this study cannot be extrapolated to the gifted population at large. Additionally, as only mothers participated, it is not known whether father participants would have provided similar insights into parenting a gifted child or about their children's experiences outside the home. More studies are needed about gifted provision during the early years, particularly from other countries, for the purpose of comparison.

Discussion and conclusion

The narratives of the mothers in this case study indicate that it is difficult for parents to find information about giftedness. In early childhood services, where parents often seek advice, there was a lack of educator understanding and knowledge about their child's social, emotional and intellectual needs and about gifted play behaviours. Gifted children's intellectual needs went largely unmet, social skills were misread and underestimated, and their transitions to school were mismanaged. Grant (2013) similarly found in her case study that educators were unable to provide adequate support in the transition to school for her child participants. Grant thought this was due to the dearth of attention to giftedness in the early childhood literature and to a similar lack in tertiary coursework. Similar observations were made by Walsh et al. (2010). Because few Australian universities ensure compulsory units about giftedness within undergraduate coursework (Fraser-Seeto et al., 2013), educators have limited knowledge about giftedness. For participants of this case study, it had the direct consequence of disadvantaging their children within their early childhood services, and in some cases also negatively affected their school entry experiences.

The narratives of the current case study's participants also revealed the absence of information about the early entry option and application process, identified similarly by Diezmann et al. (2001) almost two decades earlier. Wellisch's (2019) findings also indicated that most educators were unable to provide early entry guidance to parents due to their own lack of information, while they quite actively advocated for holding children back from school. The idea of early entry may also create cognitive dissonance with the opposing trend of sending children to school later and possibly cloud educator

objectivity in discussions with parents about early entry, even in cases where they know about the acceleration option.

The early entry struggles of participants included finding their way through the maze of gifted identification and early entry criteria, having to convince early entry gatekeepers of their children's additional needs and, in two cases, succumbing to outside authority and holding their children back. The outcome for the two children who were held back, starting school a year later, was not favourable, because the intellectual needs of one child and the social needs of the other were not met. The four mothers who sent their children to school early reported that their children continued to be adequately provided for both intellectually and socially at the time of the research. As Cassie said, 'She's so happy. I think this is the happiest I've seen her' (interview, 26 March 2017).

One last outcome of this case study is that gifted children's advanced development can also have an ostracizing and isolating effect on the social lives of their mothers and may add to the risks of maternal depression. Mothers in this case study learnt to keep quiet about their child's advanced development, early achievements and milestones after experiencing unexpected uncomfortable silences and social rejection. They had to find alternative ways to connect and share with those who also had gifted children, for example, through social media.

In summary, the study indicates that Australian gifted preschoolers' needs are generally not well understood and go unmet in early childhood services, with some children actively prevented from having their needs met via early entry. The implications of this study are that there is an urgent need for the inclusion of compulsory early childhood giftedness courses for Australian pre-service educators; and an equally urgent need for compulsory professional development courses in giftedness for educators already working in early childhood services.

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Note

1. The names of all participants have been changed.

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