

Gifted Children in the Early Years: Feedback on a Survey of the Education of Gifted Children Under 8 years of age

Reported by Valerie Margrain & Sarah Farquhar, June 2011

Background

An online survey was conducted about the education of young gifted children to gather information and sector views to help inform policy and practices for young gifted children and those who work with them.

The survey was made available through ChildForum and giftEDnz networks. Low-risk ethics approval was provided by Massey University (as the employer of Valerie Margrain).

The purpose of this paper is to provide initial feedback or a summary of the survey results for participants, and to give everyone with an interest in gifted education a preliminary indication of some of the key findings.

To download a PDF of this paper to print, or to read this paper online here is the link: <http://www.childforum.com/childcare-a-teaching/gifted-young-children/381-gifted-children-in-the-early-years-feedback-on-a-survey-of-the-education-of-gifted-children-under-8-years-of-age.html>

Response

The survey attracted feedback from 125 people connected in some way with the provision of, or use of, education services. Most respondents (71%) were caring for or teaching a gifted child or children, or had in the past. Others who tended to be in administrative, management or academic roles (29%) had not had personal experience of engaging with young gifted learners.

Please note when reading the data below that respondents could, and did, identify as belonging to several roles, therefore the total percentages for responses by role add up to more than 100%. Almost half of all respondents identified as being parents, a third in education management or leadership roles, and a fifth as teachers. Just under half (45%) said they were involved in tertiary teacher education or research.

Views on Defining Giftedness

Just over a fifth of respondents (22%) considered that in any class or early childhood programme the top 5% of children should be taken as being gifted. And, a third of all respondents considered that having a percentage weighting was appropriate and helpful.

A similar number (21.5%), however, indicated that they believed every child to be a gifted child and therefore a percentage weighting had no use. A further 8% thought it possible for there to be no gifted children in any one early childhood or junior school class.

The largest group of respondents, 38%, gave their own views on defining giftedness offering comments about asynchronicity, being twice exceptional, under-identification, performance, creativity, motivation, strengths and dispositions. The importance of individual consideration, holistic views of the child and avoiding labelling were noted.

Whether to Identify if a Child is Gifted

When asked if adults in education settings should do anything to find out if children may be gifted, the majority agreed that efforts should be made to identify if a child is gifted. 82% of respondents replied “yes” to identification of giftedness, 12% “sometimes”, 5% “no” and 1% stated “only if required”. The group of respondents who replied “no” to doing anything to identify a gifted child included those who were averse to formal assessment but supportive of teachers observing and responding to children’s diverse individual strengths and interests.

Preferred Methods to Identify Giftedness

The methods preferred by the largest numbers of respondents for identification of giftedness were talking with parents, narrative assessment and informal observation.

- 85% - talking with parents and other people involved in caring for their child
- 82% - learning stories and other formal observation and assessment within education programmes
- 79% - informal observation

Methods of IQ testing, other norm-referenced tests, primary school achievement tests and rating scales were less popular, being rated as suitable methods by between a quarter to a third of respondents.

Responding to Learners

On the question of how teachers should respond to children who are gifted the feedback indicates teachers are viewed as having responsibility for responding to gifted children as learners, and that a strength-based approach is valued.

Table 1 below highlights a number of differences between what respondents believed educators should do and what they have observed in practice. In terms of providing opportunities to develop abilities, support for learners’ problems/weaknesses and assistance to find support outside the education setting fewer respondents had observed this than those who believed this is what teachers should be doing .

Other actions were observed in practice more than respondents believed should be, in terms of focus on socialisation and play over development, avoiding drawing attention to exceptionality, and not differentiating between gifted and not gifted learners.

TABLE 1. Percentage of respondents rating actions desired of educators and whether observed of educators in practice

| <i>Actions</i> | <i>% of respondents Believe educators should do</i> | <i>% of respondents have observed educators do</i> |
|---|---|--|
| Provide additional opportunities within the programme for gifted children to further develop and practice their special gifts/talents/abilities and strengths | 97.2 | 70.8 |
| Staff/teachers should provide gifted children with help in areas in which they struggled or had problems/weaknesses | 86.8 | 60.4 |
| Encourage parents/families to seek opportunities outside of the early years setting | 60.4 | 47.9 |
| Communicate to parents/families that play and socialisation should take priority over advanced skills, knowledge or abilities | 30.2 | 42.7 |
| Avoid drawing attention to a child's exceptional achievement in front of other children | 24.5 | 42.7 |
| Provide a learning and teaching programme that does not differentiate between children who are gifted and not gifted. | 14.2 | 57.3 |

Resources

Respondents were asked to indicate which resources would be most helpful for teachers and others who are working with young children to have from a list of possible resources. All the resources listed were indicated as being most helpful to have by 60% or more of the respondents, and these were:

- teaching plans and ideas for extension activities – 81.7%
- identification and assessment tools – 78.8%
- case studies that include responses from teachers – 76%
- learning stories of young gifted children – 75%
- tips, fact sheets and key information – 74%
- New Zealand research and practice book – 73.1%
- suggestions of resources to purchase – 62.5%
- examples of achievement of young gifted children 60.6%

Other ideas for resources were asked for and 24 respondents suggested a range of other resources, with several calling for the provision of professional development for teachers and others working with learners in the early years. This is particularly significant because Ministry of Education professional development funding has been limited to the school sector.

The preferred format or type of resource was mixed, with no single method dominating, indicating that a range of approaches to dissemination would be useful. Around half the respondents valued a New Zealand book, DVDs, brochures, handouts, laminated cards, bookmarks etc. Around two third of the respondents valued articles in early years academic journals, online national networks and organisations (such as Childforum and giftEDnz), articles in parenting magazines, and online through the TKI Ministry website for schools.

Special and gifted education

The survey asked: “The Ministry of Education’s Group Special Education team provides support for children with developmental and learning difficulties in schools and early childhood services. Do you think Group Special Education should include children who are gifted?” Three quarters of respondents replied “yes” (74.5%), 16% replied “no”, and 9% were unsure.

Support for the inclusive provision of services focused on comments about the needs of gifted children, and difficulty for mainstream settings to be able to differentiate. “Gifted children have special learning, developmental, social and emotional needs which require extra support from adults.” Support for an integrated approach also acknowledged that children can be both gifted and disabled, and also that gifted children may have social, emotional or behaviour difficulties as a result of giftedness not being acknowledged. A further reason supporting integrated service provision was the comment, “simply because there is nobody else offering this kind of support unless parents can pay for it”.

Those against gifted education coming under the Special Education administrative umbrella worried how already stretched and under-resourced services would cope, and equity of provision. “I wonder if gifted children would go to the bottom of their already overloaded lists”.

Eligibility for starting school

Respondents were asked if they thought there should be flexibility for gifted children to be accelerated into a primary school class before their 5th birthday. Currently in NZ a child can not officially start school or move from early childhood to primary school education until their fifth birthday; and it is common practice for children to start school very soon after turning 5 (although the legal age requiring attendance is age 6).

Opinion was divided on this question. Interestingly, 45% said “yes”, 36% “no” and 19% were “not sure”.

Of the 125 respondents, 70 added detailed comments to this question and we look forward to analysing the comments and reporting the findings on a fuller paper.

Additional comments

At the end of the survey form respondents were asked for any further comments, ideas or suggestions about young gifted children, education for young gifted learners, attitudes, or access to resources and support.

We are grateful to the 53 people who provided additional comments. We look forward to analysing these and also giving greater attention to the many other comments given throughout the survey. We have done some preliminary cross-tabulations of the data to explore differences in sector groups for responses to various questions, and there is possibly some interesting divergence in views on definition and support.

Thank You

98.5% of respondents asked to receive a summary of results. We see this as an encouraging indication of interest in issues connected to advocacy and support for giftedness and gifted education in the early years.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the survey.

We look forward to sharing more details about the findings with you in articles and presentations.

Dr Sarah Farquhar (Childforum) and Dr Valerie Margrain (Massey University & giftEDnz Early Years special interest group).