

A banner for Gifted Awareness Week, 13-19 June 2016. On the left is a photograph of several hands of different ages and skin tones stacked together in a supportive gesture. To the right of the photo, the text reads "Gifted Awareness Week, 13-19 June 2016" in black, followed by "BELONGING" in large orange letters, and "accepted, included, connected" in smaller orange letters below it. At the bottom of the banner are three logos: NZAGC (New Zealand Association for Gifted Children) with a red poppy icon and the website www.giftedchildren.org.nz; giftednz (The Professional Association for Gifted Education) with the Māori phrase "Pūwhiri a taitau tamariki ihimānana" and the tagline "Nurture our gifted children"; and the New Zealand Centre for Gifted Education with the tagline "Empowering Extraordinary Minds" and a colorful bar chart icon.

Gifted Education: where does it belong?

Gifted and talented learners have unique sets of abilities, qualities and needs, and as such require special educational accommodations and support. As this is recognised through the National Administration Guidelines (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015), governmental documentation, and resources specific to supporting these learners (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2012a; Ministry of Education, n.d.d), it would appear that gifted and talented education has a place to belong within the broader context of education. However, further exploration evidences significant and detrimental inconsistencies in both policy and practice.

Positioning and power relations (Sumsion & Wong, 2011), as expressed through policy, general documentation and resourcing, impact on the ability of those working to support **all** learners. Looking more specifically at gifted and talented learners as a group, it is how this category is reflected through political communication that is of significance, as this is of direct and considerable consequence to learners. Schein (as cited by Sumsion and Wong, 2011, p. 34) expresses that, "... even where individuals' own sense of belonging 'may be fluid and multiple', externally imposed categories are likely to have already established some limits to their belonging". With belonging recognised as a fundamental human need (Poston, 2009) and a requirement for wellbeing, which in turn underpins learning (Education Review Office, 2016; Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2007), this highlights the need to deconstruct any barriers which have been created through political discourse.

The Ministry of Education recognises that a focus on wellbeing "is not only an ethical and moral obligation for teachers, leaders and trustees but also a legal responsibility" (2016, p. 4), therefore, belonging is also an ethical, moral and legal responsibility, and one which is influenced by political rhetoric, policy and resourcing. In order to meet these obligations, recognition, appropriate resourcing, support for and dissemination of research in this specialist area are a necessity. Having a clear sense of where and how gifted and talented education belongs within special education, and within the wider education domain, will

give direction to educators as they strive to “raise the achievement of all students” (Parata, n.d., p. 6).

This position paper supports the proposition that gifted and talented education must have consistent inclusion and representation within and across all Special Education policies, information sources, resources and practices, and that explicit links be made with other areas of education, including but not limited to, specific learning areas, transitioning, and the education of Māori and Pasifika learners, other learners who fall within the category of having special education needs, and learners within different sectors including early childhood.

Discussion

Recognition

It is first necessary to acknowledge the current forms of recognition for gifted and talented education at a national level. For instance, an updated reference guide for education entitled “*Gifted and Talented Learners: Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools*” was commissioned by the Ministry and published in 2012. This is a valuable guide for educators to refer to and is included within the resources on Gifted and Talented Online. With Gifted and Talented Online as a ‘community’ specific to gifted education on the Ministry of Education’s Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI) (Ministry of Education, n.d.c), there is some representation of the diverse needs of gifted learners. This website, which is soon to be updated, is presently home to information, resources and an active moderated mailing list, accessed predominantly by the schooling sector. This is a valuable reference point for educators as a preliminary source of information. As the Ministry of Education has upgraded sections of the TKI site, there have been opportunities for links to be made to gifted and talented education in each focus area. This has occurred through several brief case studies in the ‘Inclusion’ and ‘Mathematics’ sections.

In terms of professional learning and development, targeted and specifically funded PLD in gifted education has been available since 2000 with the establishment of advisory services. These were in place through to 2009. Since 2012 there has been a pocket of funding for contracts where services were made available by three organisations to a very small number of schools across the country. In addition, regional meetings for gifted and talented education Communities of Practice were organised and run through these contracts. With the change of structure for accessing professional learning and development, these contracts have not been renewed and these services will no longer be in place after 2016. Further to this, ‘gifted and talented’ was included as an endorsement in the post graduate course for specialist teachers, which was commissioned by the Ministry, primarily for training Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLb). However the continuation of this is an uncertainty.

Each and every one of these initiatives is valuable and shows recognition of the special needs of this group of learners. These are however, just the beginning of what is needed to recognise and show respect towards, and value in, the needs of this group of learners.

The gifted and talented 'community' on TKI is not shown as fitting under the umbrella of Special Education, as the National Administration Guidelines state, but rather, under the umbrella of Learner Groups, along-side Alternative Education and learners who speak English as a second language (ESOL). Furthermore, when it comes to professional learning and development, gifted and talented education is situated under Curriculum. There is simply no consistency in where gifted education is seen to belong, and oftentimes this group of learners is seemingly neglected in totality, as demonstrated below:

- The recently launched Education New Zealand website includes no obvious reference to gifted and talented learners within the Special Education section at all (Ministry of Education, n.d.e);
- Updated TKI pages such as Special Education online, Autism online, IEP online fail to include any clear connections to gifted education;
- No obvious links are made within the learning areas/subjects communities pages, with the exceptions of Mathematics Online, Pasifika and Arts.
- A lack of inclusion of gifted education for Māori-medium education or those offering professional support such as RTLB online.

It is necessary to pose the question of how strengths-based practice (Alliston, 2007; Ministry of Education, n.d.b; Resiliency Initiatives, 2011) might be occurring if gifted and talented education is not visible, and as a result is side-lined as an unimportant consideration in education.

Resources

As stated earlier, gifted and talented learners sit within Special Education under the National Administration Guidelines (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015). Therefore as with all other groups of learners under this umbrella, it is expected that funding should follow suit. However, this is not the case. Special Education provisions within early childhood education focus on "developmental delay, disability, behaviour and/or communication difficulties" (Ministry of Education, 2016), while within the primary and secondary school sectors the focus is on "learning and/or behaviour difficulties, including support for high needs students for students with disabilities" (Ministry of Education, n.d.a). Given the espoused practice of a strengths-based approach, and the need for all children and young people to feel a sense of belonging and engagement within education, it is unclear as to why and how gifted and talented learners are consistently left out from the Special Education resourcing and supports. In reference to allocated Special Education funding, the Ministry of Education advise schools to ask the question; 'Does this gifted

student have learning or behaviour **difficulties?**' If the answer is 'yes,' then using some of the Special Education Grant for the student is probably justified. If the answer is 'no, we **just** want to provide an extension programme,' (emphasis added) then it is probably not a valid use of the Special Education Grant" (Ministry of Education, 2000, p.2). Within this excerpt it is clear that gifted and talented learners are being discursively situated outside of the special needs area. This begs the question, if the focus is on raising achievement for all, how is this expected to be a possibility if schools are effectively discouraged from funding programmes for gifted and talented learners, and discouraged from prioritising any such expenditure?

In keeping with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the associated education principle (Ministry of Education, 2012b), the Ministry recognises that "Māori medium education institutions have a collective vision, a kaupapa that provides guidelines for what constitutes excellence in Māori education ... English medium institutions with a multicultural student base including Māori can embrace such a philosophy or agenda for achieving excellence in language and culture that make up the world of Māori children" (Ministry of Education, n.d.f). For this kaupapa to be realised, gifted and talented education must also have a place to belong within this vision and philosophy, as well as the training and practices which are embedded within these. Again, it is an absolute necessity that gifted and talented education has a place within national level policies and documentation for full immersion, bi-lingual and English- speaking schools, to ensure Māori success as Māori (Ministry of Education, 2013).

When exploring training and practices which support educators in realising their kaupapa, it would seem that there are significant areas for improvement in this area as well. The government-funded Post Graduate Specialist Teacher training programme is one clear example, whereby grants are offered for each of the seven specialist endorsements – except gifted and talented. Furthermore the other endorsements do not include learning in relation to supporting gifted and talented learners. This raises the question: if there is no access to formal training for Ministry-funded Special Education practitioners (such as Early Interventionists, Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour, or Special Education Advisors) in the area of gifted and talented education, and no other Ministry-funded gifted and talented specialists to work with interprofessionally, then how can educators expect to access information and support for their practice, particularly as it is compounded by the on-going insufficient inclusion of gifted education content in pre-service education and the loss of centrally funded professional development?

Research

Ministry-contracted research in gifted and talented education has been lacking in recent years, with the last major research having been undertaken 12 years ago (See Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind and Kearney, 2004). Slightly more recently, the Education Review Office (2008a) evaluated schools' provision for gifted and talented students,

publishing the findings from this research and, separately, examples of best practice (Education Review Office, 2008b), in order to promote more appropriate and effective practice in response to the needs of gifted and talented learners. Given the changes in the educational scene over the years since this data was gathered, it would be an apt time for more up-to-date research to be undertaken to reflect the current state of provisions for gifted and talented learners in school. This evaluation process is critical, being necessary to determine the effectiveness of the policy and provisions made available as a result of the data collected in both 2004 and 2008, and also to identify where further guidance and support is required for schools as they strive to meet the unique and special needs of gifted and talented learners. This will enable a strong foundation from which to step when determining further policy and provision.

Looking into research conducted through the tertiary sector, there is also much room for increased research to guide practice. In conducting a search of the New Zealand Educational Theses Database (New Zealand Council of Education Research, n.d.) using the keyword 'gifted', only 31 theses were identified as having been published since 2006, with NZResearch.org.nz (National Library of New Zealand, n.d.) identifying the slightly higher number of 33. Interestingly, only 13 journal articles were listed on NZResearch.org.nz however giftEDnz, the national Professional Association for Gifted Education lists 76 articles based on New Zealand research. These low numbers raise questions. If this is due to low levels of research being conducted in the field, then what needs to change to promote increased levels of research to enable up-to-date evidence based practice? If it is due to a lack of translation from research to journal articles, then what is needed to promote this to occur to increase the accessibility of new findings to provide guidance for practice? Further to this is the concern that there is no one main repository from which research can be located and obtained with ease by practitioners. Steps need to be taken to remedy the challenges faced by educators to access research based evidence in order to support and improve their educational practice.

Action

It is imperative that governmental policies, other governmental documentation, and dissemination of resources, demonstrate that gifted and talented education belong within the greater educational context. Recognition, resources and research are needed to ensure this becomes an actuality, so that learners are not constrained by narrow nor inconsistent interpretations of gifted and talented education, but are empowered by consistent cross-sector approaches which enable gifted and talented students to strengthen their identity as gifted learners, to learn, and to feel a sense of belonging and enhanced wellbeing, as educators strive to raise the achievement of all. Specifically, Ministry funding needs to be allocated under the Special Needs budget for all sectors – early childhood through to secondary school - on a consistent and ongoing basis, for:

- research;
- post-graduate education and training in gifted education;
- development and implementation of Individual Education Plans for gifted and talented learners;
- development, maintenance and evaluation of gifted education programmes around New Zealand as per the continuum of provision;
- the creation of a position of responsibility for gifted and talented education within each school and early childhood centre, with the requirement of holding, or undertaking, a post graduate degree in gifted and talented education;
- the creation of a position of responsibility for gifted and talented education within Group Special Education at the Ministry of Education; and
- inclusion of gifted and talented education resources under the Special Needs banner on the Inclusive Education TKI website.

Only when these issues are addressed will we be able to say that gifted and talented education, and thus gifted and talented learners, has a place of belonging within the New Zealand education system.

Conclusion

A firm sense of belonging may be an unlikely outcome for gifted and talented learners without a firm place of belonging for gifted and talented education within the wider education sector as a whole. Gifted and talented learners have special education needs, and are recognised as such through the National Administration Guidelines (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015). Special Education is where gifted and talented education belongs, and it is from here that recognition, resourcing and support ought to stem, reflective of the fact that these learners have unique and special needs. Within the wider umbrella of Special Education, gifted and talented education can be viewed as another special need, with rights to provisions and recognition. Further to this, gifted and talented education needs to be a prominent component of strengths-based practice, with this practice being woven tightly into the core of all educational policy, planning and provisions, across subjects, culturally-specific education, education sectors, and special education.

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