Tensions with the Term ‘Gifted’: New Zealand Infant and Toddler Teachers’ Perspectives on Giftedness

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Abstract

There is much contention surrounding the term ‘gifted’ within Aotearoa New Zealand and international literature. Five teachers who were identified as exemplary teachers of gifted infants and toddlers by surveyed gifted and early childhood communities participated in this study. Whilst the majority of the community members used the term ‘gifted’ comfortably, the minority of teachers within the study were not confident to do so. Their reluctance to use the term gifted is examined through the power/knowledge dynamic drawing from the theory of Michel Foucault. This study found that giftedness was normalised or abnormalised according to the perspectives of the teachers, promoting particular ways of viewing the child. There was found to be a significant disconnect between the teachers’ and communities’ usage of the term ‘gifted’ which holds implications for their ‘exemplary’ designation.

Introduction

Current literature, both internationally and within Aotearoa New Zealand, expresses contentions between differing concepts of giftedness (Ambrose, Tassel-Baska, Coleman, & Cross, 2010; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2012; Tapper, 2012; Ziegler, Stoeger, & Vialle, 2012). Moltzen (2011) contends “we are further than ever from developing a universally accepted definition of giftedness and talent” (p.31). Likewise, conceptions of infants and toddlers are diverse. Infants can be conceptualised as innocent and vulnerable, and also as needy, demanding, and requiring a highly structured routine to conform with normative expectations (Nyland & Rockel, 2007). In the realm of toddlerhood, dominant discursive images of the ‘unpredictable toddler’ recur within research studies, inadvertently developing this image into a normative ‘truth’ (Cipriano & Stifter, 2010; Garner & Dunsmore, 2011; Neppl et al., 2010; Szabó et al., 2008). Yet there are other images which press against these images, such as the ‘confident and competent’ child of the early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017).

Alongside these diverse images, consideration should be given for the consistent presentations of the gifted young child within educational research (see Allan, 2001; Gottfried, Gottfried, & Guerin, 2006; Harrison, 2004). Yet, despite this information, the image of the gifted infant and toddler is arguably a conceptual space which is underrepresented and under-theorised within curriculum policy (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). Despite the consistent presentations of young children’s gifted characteristics, these representations run against the image of the ‘unpredictable’ developmental trajectory of infancy and toddlerhood. Furthermore, the utilisation of the term ‘gifted’ within educational literature in early childhood education is sparse.

This paper will argue that the utilisation or rejection of the term gifted constitutes power relationships between teachers, parents, and children. At the outset of this paper, the Foucauldian theoretical underpinnings for the research will be outlined, then a small section on discourses of giftedness within Aotearoa New Zealand will be discussed to contextualise the present study. The methodology for the study will be outlined, followed by the findings and a discussion section. The paper will conclude with a section which will serve to reconcile the contextual information and the findings into final arguments.

Theoretical Framework

The theories of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) were concerned with the location of power within society. Foucault (2001a) explains: “If I were asked what I do...we try to bring to light what has remained until now the most hidden, the most occulted, the most deeply invested experience in the history of our culture – power relations” (p. 17). Foucault (2000) rejected the once prevalent notion of power as a direct action between autocratic individuals or factions and subjugated individuals in order to approach power as a relationship. Within Foucauldian theory, power is not located within one individual which is denied or taken from another. Instead it is located within “a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms
produce the relation in which individuals are caught up” (Foucault, 1979, p. 202).

Power is located within relationships, constituted within everyday ways of being, and reproduced through conventional constructs which are considered to be ‘just the way things are done’. These constructs are implemented through institutions; Foucault called these disciplines (Foucault, 1979). To give further clarity, within the bounds of this study, the disciplines of education, pedagogy, and developmental psychology were of particular importance. These disciplines designate programmes for behaviour, for example, by instructing how and where actions are performed, and how they ‘should’ be performed. Disciplines guide conduct, and according to Foucault (1979) “discipline ‘makes’ individuals” (p. 170). Individuals adhere to the expectations of the discipline because their existence becomes normalised through the discourses of the society.

The enactments of disciplines, which promote discursive images of appropriate behaviour, become a method of control. Individuals conform to particular ways of being because they are normalised within society as “an average to be respected or an optimum towards which one must move” (Foucault, 1979, p. 183). As discourses become the ‘optimum’ to achieve, or the ‘average’ to be maintained, individuals with alternate positions can be marginalised or subjugated. Often these conventions are conformed to by individuals because of the potential ill effects of such subjugation or marginalisation. Within the enactment of discipline through discourse, the mechanisms of the power/knowledge relationship are obscured. People conform without even realising the ways in which she or he is being subjugated.

Power and knowledge are intertwined, as power is exercised to promote forms of knowledge as appropriate, producing individuals. Consequently, within Foucauldian theory, knowledge is not viewed as truth, but rather as a construction. Knowledge is disseminated through discourses which, in turn, reinforce positions of power (Foucault, 2012). Discourse also acts as a mechanism of power as the promotion of discourses reifies legitimate knowledge and affects how one is viewed, and how one views oneself. The positioning of ‘appropriate’ knowledge denotes normal and abnormal behaviours and locates individuals inside or outside these bounds. In representing the power/knowledge dynamic, Foucault intended for individuals to identify power as something disseminated, not automatically located, and to reconstruct and reclaim power for themselves (Foucault, Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988).

Discourses of Giftedness within Aotearoa New Zealand

Discourses of giftedness have been documented in Aotearoa New Zealand as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1908, an article within the Nelson Mail (“Over-Taught Children”, 1908) argued that gifted children are only exceptional as a result of intense parental instruction. The author wrote that the promotion of ‘prodigal’ children within society results in mothers who push their children to perform at unnatural levels, at the expense of the child’s happiness. Furthermore, such intense instruction produces emotionally disturbed children and adults. Mothers who push their children will later have to “swallow their chagrin” (“Over-Taught Children”, 1908) when their brilliant child does not turn out to be an eminent adult. This article promotes a discursive image of the ‘hothoused’ child who becomes a sensitive and psychologically damaged adult and intertwines this image with high levels of ability. This correlation confuses the boundaries between giftedness and intense instruction, conflating one with the other.

Later, this discursive positioning was revisited within the journal of the Free Kindergarten Association by Ashby (1970) who argued that perceptions of gifted children lay between two extremes. One extreme is illustrated in the previous paragraph, viewing gifted children as individuals who are forced into brilliance, and emotionally damaged as a result. The other considered gifted children as the hope and solution to the problems of today and the future, a position held by those who would seek to advance gifted children in order to develop ‘superior’ minds (Ashby, 1970). In this discursive image, giftedness was viewed as an ability to be shared for the betterment of society. Negotiating between these multiple discursive images, the gifted child is compartmentalised. These dominant images may compete with the gifted child’s own self-perception, and the discursive images held by their family.

The 2001 Working Party on Gifted Education found that within education, dominant discursive images of the gifted child as ‘privileged’ reduced community support for gifted education initiatives (Working Party on Gifted Education, 2001). This is certainly the case for early childhood education where government-led initiatives into gifted education are virtually non-existent. There is little information to guide the early childhood teacher’s discursive construction.
of giftedness (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008). There is no reference to gifted children within the first edition of the early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996), where the only information relevant is related to inclusion of children with special needs. However, considering giftedness as a special need produces its own problems as the discourses of giftedness and special needs contest each other. Special needs within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand is a discursive term which replaces the discourse of ‘disabled’ (Alliston & Research New Zealand, 2007; New Zealand Education Review Office, 2012; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014; TeachNZ, 2014). As explained earlier, gifted children are considered to be privileged, not ‘disabled’. The revised edition of Te Whāriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017) is positioned as a curriculum which is inclusive of all children, and while not explicitly describing giftedness, has been found to textually support gifted education practices implicitly (Margrain, 2017). Yet, as highlighted above, the discourse of inclusion within the bracket of ‘special needs’ is under-theorised in relation to giftedness. Early childhood educators have been positioned as the ‘expert’ in comprehending giftedness by the Ministry of Education, who encourage parents to consult their child’s early childhood teacher if they have questions about their child’s giftedness (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2012). Educators need to unpack the current curriculum document to discern what practice may mean for gifted learners (Margrain, 2017), and there is no guarantee that they will fully comprehend the characteristics of giftedness, nor how to extend the gifted learner.

These historical and discursive images influence contemporary practices, which in turn affect the lived experiences of gifted infants and toddlers and their families. Margrain and Farquhar (2012) found that there was a significant disconnect between what was thought to be ideal practice, and the actuality of practice for gifted learners and this was in part connected to the lack of a clear definition of giftedness in the early years. Foucault (2002) insisted that discourse is “really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this ‘not-said’ is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said” (p. 28). The lack of representation of gifted children within the early childhood context produces individuals and relationships of power. The discourses of giftedness within the context of early childhood education remain a site of contestation, further exacerbated by their invisibility within the curriculum.

Impacts of the Theoretical Framework upon the Methodology

The findings illustrated within this paper draw upon a larger research study conducted in partial compliance for the Masters of Education, through the University of Canterbury (Delaune, 2015). The aim of the larger research was to investigate discourses which inform perceptions of giftedness. The perceptions of interest to the larger study were those held by members of early childhood and gifted communities, and teacher participants nominated by these communities as ‘exemplary teachers’ of gifted infants and toddlers. The discourses of the teacher participants as exemplary teachers were examined through the power/knowledge dynamic. These discourses were also compared and contrasted against those held by the communities in order to make sense of the dominant and subjugated discursive positions within gifted and early childhood education.

As befitting the Foucauldian theoretical framework of this larger study, terms such as ‘gifted’, ‘exemplary’, and ‘infant and toddler’ were viewed as discursive constructs to be problematised. Consequently, these concepts, particularly the concepts of ‘giftedness’ or ‘exemplary practice’ were not outlined for the participants by the researcher. This enabled the research to make sense of the understandings constructed by the participants without imposing a particular view or stance.

The positioning of the nominated teachers as ‘exemplary’ teachers of gifted infants and toddlers was also investigated. Teachers involved in the larger study were investigated as the nominated embodiment of appropriate pedagogical practice for gifted infants and toddlers. By promoting the community members to recommend the participants, the implications of the construct of the ‘exemplary’ teacher for gifted children within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand was investigated.

Within the larger study, another aim of the analysis was to compare and contrast the teacher participants’ discourses with the findings from a community questionnaire. Consequently, the complexity of the contradictory discourses and discursive positions between the communities and the teacher participants were to be investigated without the necessity to stabilise them. This is also in line with a Foucauldian oeuvre, as the findings of the study are not necessarily concerned with commonality; rather, it was the points of disruption that were sought.
The negotiation of the teacher participants between varying discourses were sought as an enactment of power relationships. These power relationships are only relevant to particular individuals, in a particular time and context. As a result, the findings of this current study will not be generalisable (Edwards, 2010); however, the findings are not intended to be seeking a singular truth for other educators to follow, but rather a new way of viewing commonly held ideas. The purpose of the larger study was to unsettle dominant discursive images of the ‘gifted’ child and the ‘exemplary’ teacher in order to enable alternate discursive images to be considered.

Methodology

Participants. All of the five teacher participants were female. Of the five participants, four chose to identify themselves as European or New Zealand European, and one chose not to identify her ethnicity. Over the course of the research, three of the five participants revealed that they were born and raised in countries other than Aotearoa New Zealand and had migrated in their adulthood. At the time of the research, three of the five participants (Mina, Esy and Iri) were currently employed as teachers for infants and toddlers, or toddlers (children under the age of 3). Linda had held a position working with infants and toddlers in the last year, but was currently employed in a primary setting, and Elaras taught part time with toddlers.

All five of the teacher participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms. Of the five participants, four - Linda, Esy, Mina, and Elaras - all expressed a passion for gifted education for infants and toddlers. These four participants were willing to participate in the research. Conversely, Iri was initially reluctant to participate in the study due to her perceptions of giftedness, and although initially she was not a part of the study she was happy to be included at a later date as her perceptions would provide an alternate view to those represented by the other educators. Additionally, it would be misrepresentative of the ‘exemplary’ teacher if she was not included. All participants were given right of withdrawal, and teacher participants were supported to clarify, amend, or omit portions of their interviews if they chose to do so.

 Measures/Data Collection. The five teacher participants were involved in an initial questionnaire and a follow up interview designed to expand upon the perceptions identified within the initial questionnaire. The interview was semi-structured, allowing the opportunity to expand upon points made by the participants, with additional questions being asked by the researcher. The questionnaire and interview questions sent to the participants can be viewed in the main report of the study (Delaune, 2015).

Collecting two forms of data from the teacher participants promoted research validity through assessment of the consistency of the individuals’ responses over two data collection points. However, my concerns with the validity of my research were also tempered by my consideration of the Foucauldian framework, particularly sensitivity to individuals’ negotiation of multiple subject positions and the rejection of continuity and coherence within individuals. Hughes (2010) asserts that “the task of the researcher is to explain this constant instability without attempting to ‘capture’ or stabilise it” (p. 50). The shifting and changing of the participants’ perspectives, and the inconsistencies and the contradictions within their views, would be crucial in my analysis.

Procedures. As the research sought to problematise the concept of ‘exemplary’, the selection process for participants was set up to facilitate this undertaking. At the outset of the research, a questionnaire and nomination form were disseminated to a wide array of communities of gifted education and early childhood education within Aotearoa New Zealand. This was then shared through social media platforms (such as Facebook) to international organisations. Over the two months that the survey was online for community respondents, 202 people viewed the survey. Of those, 85 fully completed the survey and 11 partially completed the survey, giving a total number of 96 community respondents. These comprised of a mix of educators, parents of gifted children, and academics involved in education. Of these 96 community respondents, 44 were from Aotearoa New Zealand, and 52 were from other countries. As befits the scope of this study, to consider the specific context of Aotearoa New Zealand, only the data from the 44 questionnaires completed within Aotearoa New Zealand were utilised within the study. From this questionnaire and nomination form, seven teacher participants within Aotearoa New Zealand were suggested by community members to be involved in the study. Upon contact with the nominated teachers, two were unavailable to join the study, and five assented to participate.

Findings

In relation to the use of the term ‘gifted’, Iri explained that it was not used by the teachers within her education and care centre stating:
...we probably didn’t use the word gifted, really...we just said, you know, we think they are very talented, and isn’t it amazing that they can read? And this and things like that, we have said more about what we saw, but we didn’t call them gifted.

Later in the interview, Iri explained that she and her colleagues were reluctant to use the term gifted as they do not consider themselves “qualified to say that”. Esy also expressed unease in using the term gifted as she considered herself as lacking sufficient expertise to do so; she would “not want to place, um, myself in a position where I could not really...provide enough evidence”. Likewise, Mina was reluctant to use the term ‘gifted’ due to her experience working with a child who was not able to be identified as gifted until a psychologist had assessed the child. She identified that her team were fairly certain that the child was exhibiting gifted characteristics but were only able to gain support for an assessment because the psychologist was assessing other exceptionalities at the time. The assessment for giftedness was undertaken upon the teacher’s recommendations, yet despite these views they were reluctant to use the term ‘gifted’ until this was confirmed by the psychologist.

**Avoiding the Term ‘Gifted’**. Elaras contended that the problems attached to the image of the ‘gifted child’ can be circumvented when the term gifted is not utilised to describe gifted infants and toddlers. Elaras argued the term gifted is not necessary when the gifted individual is considered according to their “areas of interest”. By “teaching to the child...you don’t even have to mention the word gifted if you don’t, you know if you don’t want to” she argues. Conversely, the use of the term gifted was used deliberately by Linda within her educational practice. Linda asserted that the term gifted was “another part of the language that we use generically...around children”. Despite this promotion of the term gifted, Linda’s experiences were frustrated by her colleagues’ limited understanding of giftedness. Linda argued that the lack of information led to negative or inappropriate views of gifted infant and toddlers within the early childhood setting.

Within Esy’s early learning setting, her colleagues avoided the term gifted when talking about children’s abilities. When Esy worked with a child she suspected may be gifted, she still avoided using the term:

...I think that the word that we just use for him is, yeah, he is intelligent...he is advanced for his age, he is very good with language...the word gifted is not used at all...he is not, um, termed as being gifted.

As described earlier, Esy was reluctant to use this term as she considered herself unable to supply the necessary evidence to support this claim.

**Use of Alternate Terms**. Iri used the term gifted to describe children once within the course of the interview; however, this was rapidly amended:

...some Japanese children that were gifted, well mum I mean, she didn’t actually say they were gifted, but, um, they were highly talented anyway, and um, they could read English and Japanese, adult um, you know quite advanced....

Despite the term ‘gifted’ being revised, the terms “highly talented” and “quite advanced” were used straightforwardly. When asked about a programme for gifted children that used to be run by the teachers within the early learning setting where she works, Iri stressed it was a “gifted and talented programme”. Iri demonstrated more comfort in using the term talented, as used previously when Iri said “we think they are very talented”. Furthermore, Isi and her team chose to position all children as ‘confident and competent’, reflected in a section of the aspiration statement of *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017). If the term ‘gifted’ was to be used by Iri, she argued that she would choose to position the child first, stating “It’s a child who is gifted rather than a gifted child”. Furthermore, Iri chose to identify the child as ‘confident and competent’ rather than use the term ‘gifted’.

Esy’s teaching team also avoided the term gifted when discussing children’s abilities within their education and care centre. Esy explained the experience she had with a child she considered to be potentially gifted:

...I think that the word that we just use for him is, yeah, he is intelligent...he is advanced for his age, he is very good with language...the word gifted is not used at all...he is not, um, termed as being gifted.

**Parents Usage of the Term Gifted’**. In contrast to Iri and her colleagues, Iri stated that parents commonly used the term gifted with the teachers and expressed a keen interest in positioning their child as a gifted individual. She indicated that parents felt very strongly that their children are gifted, and they often came in and said that to the teaching team. Despite Iri
and her team’s hesitation with the utilisation of the term gifted, parents identified strongly with the term gifted and utilised this term in a positive manner. Although Iri’s team did not position children as gifted, she explained that they were very receptive to the parents’ opinions and asked how they could help to extend the child’s learning further. Iri insisted that, upon enrolment, the teachers within her team gave parents an “understanding [of] where we are coming from” with regards to their position on giftedness, and the parents chose to stay or leave based upon this understanding. The promotion of the discursive image of the child as ‘confident and competent’ by the teachers potentially positioned Iri and her teams’ discursive image of the child as the dominant discursive image to parents.

In contrast to Iri, Esy explained that, in her experience, parents did not use the term gifted. Instead, parents at Esy’s early learning centre preferred to discuss behaviours that the child was exhibiting or the accomplishments they had achieved. She stated:

[M]ost of them are just saying that there is something. Most probably we would say...‘Oh, look, your child has used this word and he is just amazing at what he is doing’ and then they would...quantify that by saying what they are doing at home too.

Esy agreed that parents may be wary of using the term gifted for their child as teachers did use this term within her education and care centre. Iri also described situations in which parents avoided the term gifted, instead waiting for the teachers to initiate conversation. Mina also acknowledged that parents did not use the term gifted for their child, and instead referred to the behaviours of the child. She stated:

...I don’t think we had any parents coming to say ‘Oh, my child is gifted’, but we have parents saying ‘oh, um, this is what my child does’. You know, ‘what do you think about it’?

Mina acknowledged that, in her experience, parents actively avoided using the term gifted for their child as the term gifted could ‘label’ the child.

Discussion

Discrepancies between the Community and the Exemplary Teacher. Despite the term gifted being the primary term that was used by respondents to the survey, there was a certain polarity in the usage of this term, dependent upon whether the respondent endorsed or objected to the concept of giftedness. Within the data, many issues surrounding the discursive positioning of the gifted infant or toddler intensified the tensions with the use of the term ‘gifted’. Despite the majority of the community respondents using the term gifted in a positive manner, the teacher participants struggled with using the term for a wide variety of reasons. This has implications for the image of the ‘exemplary’ teacher of gifted infants and toddlers, which will be discussed in the final section of the discussion.

Concerns with Expertise. Teachers are positioned as experts within the domain of early childhood education (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2012). Their promotion of a particular discursive image of children is maintained to be a truth within the setting. The teachers’ reluctance to identify children as gifted implicated an expert discourse. While this point is expanded further within the wider study (Delaune, 2015), for the purposes of this paper, it is important to highlight the correlations between their reluctance to use the term ‘gifted’ and their deference to the authority of the ‘qualification’ of the psychologist. Esy and Mina refuted utilisation of the term gifted as they considered themselves to be unqualified to designate a child as gifted, yet although some concerns about the role of the external ‘expert’ are raised by Mina within the wider study, both Mina and Esy would prefer to avoid using the term ‘gifted’ unless a qualified expert confers ‘giftedness’ upon the child. Wong and Hansen (2012) assert that most early childhood teachers would agree with the intentions of gifted education but are uncertain how to use the term ‘gifted’ without further professional development. The qualification of the expert denoted an ‘expert status’ which surpassed the intimate knowledge the teachers held of their students. In doing so, the exemplary teachers both resist their ‘exemplary’ status and reduce their experiential knowledge of the children. When the child is defined according to ‘legitimate’ knowledge (that knowledge which is deemed appropriate through dominant discourse) spaces are created which normalise or abnormalise the child (Foucault, 2003).

Avoiding the Term ‘Gifted’. As articulated earlier, Foucault insisted that discourse is “really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this ‘not-said’ is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said” (Foucault, 2002, p. 28). There are issues relating to the power/knowledge dynamic when the term ‘gifted’ is avoided. When teachers are positioned by the Ministry of Education as the experts for
parents to consult about giftedness, and teachers show reluctance in their utilisation of the term, there is a dominant discourse invoked for the educational setting which affects those involved within it: teachers, parents, and children. Dominant discourse obscures power relationships, and individuals can be oblivious to whom the power serves (MacNaughton, 2005). These relationships of power produce individuals, and the gifted infant or toddler is constituted as a subject through these power relations, and using or not using the term ‘gifted’ produces individuals accordingly.

Use of Alternate Terms. Foucault (2001b) maintains “[o]n one level, discourse is a regular set of linguistic facts, while on another level it is an ordered set of polemical and strategic facts” (pp. 2–3). The utilisation of alternate terms in the place of gifted serves as a linguistic fact as alternate terms serve to supplant the term gifted. The usage of alternate terms is also a strategic fact as these terms can serve to displace individuals who identify as gifted. If we consider how discourse limits and promotes particular ways of being (Duncan, 2010), then the usage of alternate terms produces individuals who are claimed by multiple discourses, and constructed through multiple discursive images. Dominant discourses which negatively construct the image of the gifted infant and toddler limit the available normalised subject positions for individuals who choose to adopt a gifted subject position. The query is: what power relationships are generated from these discursive positions, and whom does the discourse serve (Foucault, 1980b)? The use of alternate terms to ‘gifted’ promotes alternate linguistic terminology, strategically constructing an accepted image of ‘not-gifted’ children within the setting supplanting families their own discursive images. Although there is a history of utilising alternate terms within research and policy in Aotearoa New Zealand (Hill et al., 1971; Parkyn, 1948), utilisation of alternate terminology delineates between promoted images and suppressed images, forcing individuals to make a choice between the desirable and the undesirable.

Parents’ Usage of the Term ‘Gifted’. Within Iri’s context, where the term gifted is not used and parents are informed of this on enrolment, a contested terrain between those who align with the term gifted and those who do not is created. Foucault (1982) asserts: “[Power] is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely” (p. 789).

Discursive positioning of the gifted infant or toddler enacts power relationships by making certain actions and positions available, and limiting others. Parents who employ a discursive image of their child as gifted must choose between promoting this discursive image within the early childhood setting, or adopting the discursive image promoted by the teachers. The parent’s discursive image of their child as gifted and the teachers’ construction of the child as ‘confident and competent’ create tensions for the teachers, families and children, potentially impacting upon the infant and toddlers’ perceptions of themselves as normal or abnormal. Power relationships between Iri and parents are highlighted when the teachers reject the term gifted, and promote the term confident and competent, particularly when this action modifies others’ actions (Foucault 1982).

Implications for the ‘Exemplary’ Teacher of Gifted Infants and Toddlers

These findings have resounding implications for the construction of the term ‘exemplary’ in regard to teachers of gifted infants and toddlers. Within the wider study (Delaune, 2015), it was found that the discursive image of the exemplary teacher in gifted education was constructed by the respondents based upon their own perceptions of giftedness. For respondents who maintained the actuality of giftedness, the discursive image of the exemplary practitioner in gifted education is a teacher who is knowledgeable of the ‘needs’ of gifted learners, holds qualifications in gifted education, demonstrates sensitivity to gifted learners, and not only accepts but promotes a concept of giftedness in their practice. For respondents who question the concept of giftedness, the discursive image of the exemplary teacher is one who refutes a ‘label’ of giftedness, who enacts the same teaching practices for all children irrespective of ability yet is sensitive to the individuality of the child, and who considers the ‘whole’ child without compartmentalising their gifted ability. Consequently, the notion of the ‘exemplary’ teacher for gifted infants and toddlers is heavily informed by the discourses of giftedness maintained by the community respondents.

The tensions the teacher participants had with the utilisation of the term ‘gifted’ contrasted the comfort with which it was used by the majority of the community which nominated them. This raises questions about the disconnection between the community perceptions of giftedness, and those held by the ‘exemplary’ teachers. This has implications for the construction of the ‘desirable’ model of a teacher for gifted infants and toddlers, and the philosophy and pedagogy of the teachers. The
approaches thought to demonstrate exemplary practice by the teacher may not be those enacted by teachers nominated as ‘exemplary’. However, problems are further compounded when the exemplary teachers’ discourses of giftedness are examined through the power/knowledge dynamic. The promotion of the community of these teachers as ‘exemplary’ teachers for gifted infants and toddlers denotes a position of power, which is reproduced through the relationships the teacher holds with children, parents, and the wider community. Discursive images of giftedness promoted by the exemplary teachers become the “average to be respected or an optimum towards which one must move” (Foucault, 1979, p. 183).

Conclusion

Within the wider research about gifted education, new ways of constructing giftedness are being interrogated, and other ways of defining and identifying giftedness in infants and toddlers beyond the empirical/modernist frame are being sought (Hughes & McGee, 2011). Based upon the findings of this research study, it is the view of the researcher that teachers’ philosophical positions which affect their pedagogy, and how these compare and contrast with those held by the wider community, must be considered alongside each other. Keen (2005) argues there is no common lexicon within early childhood education regarding giftedness and gifted education. This research study demonstrates that, not only is there a lack of a common lexicon, but there is potentially a significant disconnect between the perceptions of the teachers considered to be ‘exemplary’, and those of the wider community nominating them as such.

Whilst this could be positioned as an alarming situation, the determination of a ‘desirable’ single model of exemplary practice for gifted infants and toddlers is a contestable domain. There are problems in aiming for cohesion and uniformity when negotiating a phenomenon such as giftedness which is affected by cultural and societal perceptions. While there is merit in increased understanding and awareness of giftedness to improve educational practice for children, uniformity in conception can have a limiting effect. The approach undertaken within this study, seeking to make sense of the purposes and perceptions surrounding and informing a phenomenon such as giftedness, may provide more headway into comprehending the ever-increasing complexity facing educators, children, and parents.

References


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