

Position Paper: Gifted Students in the Inclusive Education System

Introduction

The New Zealand Ministry of Education aims for ‘Success for All, Every School, Every Child’ to be realised within a fully inclusive education system. The inclusion principle enables this vision with a curriculum that “ensures (all) students’ identities, languages, abilities and talents are recognised and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9). There are three key indicators of success for all: presence, participation and achievement. This is in keeping with New Zealand’s educational vision, as outlined in the Statement of Intent (*Ministry of Education, 2013*).

A world-leading education system that equips all New Zealanders with the knowledge, skills and values to be successful citizens in the 21st –century.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education promises this vision to gifted and talented students through the recognition of their special needs in the National Administration Guidelines. Every Board of Trustees in New Zealand state schools has obligations to identify gifted and talented students, and to develop and implement strategies for addressing their needs, under National Administration Guideline 1:

Each board, through the principal and staff, is required to:

(c) on the basis of good quality assessment information, identify students and groups of students:

- i. who are not achieving;*
- ii. who are at risk of not achieving;*
- iii. who have special needs (**including gifted and talented students**); and*
- iv. aspects of the curriculum which require particular attention.*

(d) develop and implement teaching and learning strategies to address the needs of students and aspects of the curriculum identified in (c) above.

Gifted and talented students have special learning, social and emotional needs which arise as a result of their exceptional abilities and qualities (Ministry of Education, 2012). Gifted and talented learners are also found amongst all priority learner groups. “For priority students, education acknowledges, supports and incorporates their identity, language and culture in their learning experience” (Ministry of Education, 2013).

This position paper supports the proposition that gifted and talented children and youth have a right to be acknowledged, recognised and catered for within New Zealand’s inclusive education system. This inclusive status requires Ministry of Education funding, resources, specialist teachers and support to ensure that all Boards of Trustees develop and monitor identification and provisions for gifted and talented learners. The Ministry of Education must acknowledge that these students have an equitable right to be engaged in their learning, to progress in their development and to achieve to their potential.

Discussion

Presence

Gifted students are present in all schools in New Zealand; consequently all schools must be prepared to offer appropriate learning opportunities in response to their unique learning characteristics, abilities and qualities. The identification of giftedness and subsequent provision of appropriate services and support within schools is variable and research into effectiveness is lacking. However, the evidence shows that currently gifted students tend to be underserved by many schools in the education system. This is particularly so with gifted Māori students, who are often overlooked (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Gifted learners require a curriculum that is qualitatively differentiated in content, process, and product, as well as learning environment (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Gifted and talented learners are recognised, valued, and empowered to develop their exceptional abilities and qualities through equitable access to differentiated and culturally responsive provisions (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Recent Ministry of Education initiatives in inclusive education advocate for multilevel curriculum and curriculum overlapping. This model of differentiation developed by American educator Michael Giangreco (2007) enables students of different ability levels to share activities or experiences with individual learning outcomes at an appropriate level of difficulty. The model recommends *more* outcomes at different levels of complexity for gifted students and advocates the need for individualised education plans and supports to meet individual goals (e.g., resources, adaptations).

Participation

Participation means belonging and being an active, valued member of the academic, physical, social and cultural life of a school. Enabling the participation of gifted students in schools is a whole-school responsibility, requiring strong leadership and solid understandings of the principles and practices of gifted education, as outlined by the Ministry of Education (2012).

The Ministry of Education (2012) provides an evidence-base for gifted and talented education:

The increased amount of research in New Zealand means that we can now confidently identify the core principles of effective practice. Those principles provide a platform on which schools can build their approach to supporting their gifted and talented students more effectively. There are five interrelated components of providing effective support for gifted and talented students: concept, characteristics, identification, programmes, and self-review.

Research evidence shows that there is a mismatch between defining, identifying and providing for gifted learners in New Zealand and the preferred approaches lack a substantial evidence base (Education Review Office, 2008; Riley,T., Bevan-Brown, J., Bicknell, B., Carroll-Lind, J., & Kearney, A., 2004; Riley & Bicknell, 2013). For example, schools report a preference for working with gifted students in regular classrooms, and yet there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of this

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approach. Evidence-based effective practices must be developed, interrogated and applied to reverse any potentially detrimental practices and enable real participation of gifted students.

Achievement

The New Zealand Curriculum has high expectations for all learners regardless of individual circumstances and, through National Standards, the expectation is that all learners will show progress and growth. However, the expectations for gifted learners have been set too low, with a failure by the Ministry of Education to explicitly recognise students performing well-above the standard and setting the highest bar of achievement at one year above one's age level. In line with the principles of inclusion, gifted learners have the right to teaching that meets them at their level – wherever that might be – and that takes them beyond it, to ensure that their learning needs are being met.

Recent PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results show New Zealand's top students are falling behind. PISA results show "a decrease over time in the proportion of New Zealand students achieving at the highest levels" (Education Gazette, 10 Feb 2014). Many of these students will be gifted and talented students whose needs have not been met within the school system.

Failure by the education system to identify and address the unique learning needs of gifted and talented students creates a 'delivery gap' that may result in underachievement (even though the standard required may be met). Higher levels of education and ability positively correlate with economic performance (Leung-Wai and Chen, 2014). Regardless of economic growth for our nation, gifted and talented students' needs must be identified and addressed in schools for the students' own sake, to develop their own gifts and talents, and to create confident, connected, competent citizens.

Collaboration

Embedding the inclusion principle in schools requires collaboration between teachers, school leadership, families and students. Evidence shows that most schools in New Zealand are not working collaboratively to meet the needs of gifted students (Riley and Bicknell, 2013). This reflects the historic exclusion of gifted and talented learners in Ministry of Education resources and support for embedding the inclusion principles in our schools. While some schools in New Zealand have access to Ministry of Education professional learning and development, including online resources, there are no specialist resource teachers or direct funding to schools for gifted students.

Inadequate funding, support and services result in a collective failure to realise the principles of effective practices that identify and meet the needs of gifted and talented learners in New Zealand. Consequently, there is a failure to meet the underlying principle of a fully inclusive education system; that all students' learning needs are addressed.

Action

The New Zealand Government and Ministry of Education is called upon to formally acknowledge and recognise gifted and talented students as learners with special educational needs.

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Gifted and talented students must be included by the Ministry of Education in Special and Inclusive Education, which provides funding, services and support for children with special education needs in New Zealand.

The Ministry of Education needs to increase funding to support the identification and provisions for gifted and talented students through direct funding to schools, increased opportunities for professional learning and development, including training of specialist resource teachers, and an increase in the development of an evidence-base of effective practices, thereby supporting schools in meeting their obligations under the National Administration Guidelines.

Boards of Trustees are reminded of their responsibilities under the National Administration Guidelines to identify gifted learners and provide for their special learning needs. The needs of gifted and talented students should form part of each school's strategic plan, as with other learners with special needs and in line with the principles of a fully inclusive education system.

The Education Review Office is called upon to report on schools' compliance with National Administration Guidelines by way of a national review of gifted and talented education.

Conclusion

Evidence shows that gifted and talented students are currently misunderstood and therefore underserved in New Zealand's school system, and as a result, many are very likely underachieving. The Government currently justifies the exclusion of a group of learners, their teachers and families, from policies and practices directly aimed at creating a world-class inclusive education system. This position paper asserts that gifted students need to be recognised and included in the current Ministry of Education's Inclusive Education push if it is to truly achieve the aims of the initiative: (an education) *where all children and young people are engaged and achieve through being present, participating, learning and belonging.*

A position statement supported by

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New Zealand Centre
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Empowering Extraordinary Minds



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