

Gifted Children in the Early Years: Feedback from a Survey of the Education of Gifted Children Under 8 Years of Age

Valerie Margrain (Australian Catholic University) &
Sarah Farquhar (Childforum ECE Network)

Session Overview

- Background
- Survey design/Methodology
- **Findings**
 - Definitions
 - Identification/assessment of young gifted children
 - Responding to young gifted children
 - Resources to support teachers
 - Views of integration of special and gifted education
 - Views of early entry to school (before 5th birthday)
- **Recommendations for practice**
- Further discussion

Purpose of the Early Years Survey

Survey Purpose

- To document the findings of the survey of education of gifted children in the early years

Early Years

- Birth to age 8
- Early childhood education & early primary school
- Critical periods in child development
- Includes transition between the home, early childhood education and primary school
- Internationally, school starting ages vary

Introducing Sarah & Valerie

Dr Valerie Margrain

Australian Catholic University, Melbourne
Formerly at Massey University, New Zealand
valerie.margrain@acu.edu.au

Dr Sarah Farquhar

Childforum ECE Network
sarah@childforum.com

Background context

- Few programmes or resources for gifted education in New Zealand
- Even fewer supports for teachers working in early childhood education (ECE)
- In primary school, the youngest of learners have the least access to gifted education

Survey design

- December 2011 to January 2011
- 13 item online questionnaire
- Mix of single item & multiple response items

Questions explored:

- respondents' role, experience,
- beliefs regarding giftedness and gifted practice,
- values and observations of identification practices,
- values and observations of provisions,
- resources,
- beliefs about links with special education, and
- beliefs about early entry to school.

Respondents

- ▶ Recruitment through giftEDnz & Childforum
- ▶ 125 respondents – all connected in some way with provision of or use of education
- ▶ Almost half identified as being parents
- ▶ A third were in management/leadership roles
- ▶ A fifth were teachers.
- ▶ Just under half (45%) said they were involved in tertiary teacher education or research.
- ▶ (71%) were caring for or teaching a gifted child or children, or had in the past.
- ▶ (29%), had not had personal experience of engaging with young gifted learners.

Defining giftedness

- ▶ ¼ of respondents considered that just the top 5% of children should be regarded as being gifted.
- ▶ Just under ¼ (21.5%) stated that they believed *all* children were gifted
- ▶ 8% thought it possible for there to be no gifted children in any one early childhood or junior school class.
- ▶ 38% provided diverse individual responses and views

Examples of respondent definitions

Multi-Category

- ▶ *"Children can be gifted in different aspects/ways e.g. mathematically, linguistically, musically, socially, so it is hard to put a percentage on it."*

Holistic

- ▶ *"A multiple intelligences approach makes for more holistic view of giftedness therefore a holistic assessments is critical, both in EC [early childhood] and in primary education."*

Comparative

- ▶ *"Giftedness children are those who demonstrate abilities above those of their peer group. They could also be those who demonstrate the potential to achieve above their peers."*

Respondent definitions continued

Intellectual

- ▶ *"A child who has an intellectual grasp of ideas or concepts and who can put it into action or extend the theories beyond regurgitation of facts."*

Egalitarian

- ▶ *"I believe that given the right environment every child has the potential to be gifted."*

Non-labelling

- ▶ *"I am wary of labelling and aim to foster the strengths of all."*

Qualitative

- ▶ *"Gifted children are those who learn faster, see things in different ways from their age peers, exhibit curiosity and understanding which is 'more than' others, feel emotions intensely, don't fit easily - many of these characteristics in one child indicate giftedness to me."*

Should young children be identified as gifted?

- ▶ 82% – "yes"
- ▶ 12% – "sometimes"
- ▶ 5% – "no"
- ▶ 1% – "only if required"
- ▶ The 5% of respondents who replied "no" included those who were averse to formal assessment but supportive of teachers observing and responding to children's diverse individual strengths and interests. Observing and responding in this way *is* "doing something"

Methods for identification

- ▶ 85% – talking with parents and other people involved in caring for their child
- ▶ 82% – writing learning stories and carrying out other formal observation and assessment within education programmes
- ▶ 79% – informal observation/watching/listening
- ▶ Differing views as to whether Learning Stories are formal, informal or both
- ▶ Methods of IQ testing, other norm-referenced tests, primary school achievement tests and rating scales were less popular although still considered important to include within the identification toolkit by ¼ to a third

Observation

- ▶ Observation considered by respondents as the single most valued identification approach
- ▶ *"[Teachers] should be on the look out and allow the child to reveal their traits of giftedness."*
- ▶ *"Observation is probably the best method at this age, but only if the observer is aware of what to observe, and the significance of what is observed. To do this the observer needs to have a knowledge base about gifted education, on which to draw."*

Assessment as part of teaching and learning

- ▶ *"Not rigid testing per se but offering open tasks and opportunities for the giftedness to become apparent."*
- ▶ *"Providing opportunities for a wide range of experiences in which all children, including gifted, can practice and learn new or improved skills/understandings ... rich, responsive environments that serve to excite and stimulate children to have a go, to grow more."*

Responding to young gifted learners

- ▶ Strength-based approaches
- ▶ *"Teachers etc. should be providing opportunities for each child's individual needs regardless of their ability. Isn't that what they are paid to do?"*
- ▶ Disconnection between beliefs about appropriate responses, and observed practices

Disconnect – practices that occur less often than should

Actions	Beliefs	Observed Practice
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

Disconnect – practices that occur more often than should

Actions	Beliefs	Observed Practice
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

Negative responses

Respondents shared that they had seen teachers ignore gifted behaviour, "put down" or disparage giftedness, fail to keep children stimulated, or "make arbitrary decisions about how far a child should progress".

- ▶ *"It is rare to see teachers doing anything in particular" when working with young gifted children.*
- ▶ *"I have observed teachers and other children overtly criticise and alienate gifted children."*
- ▶ *"I have also seen teachers ignore and label children with special abilities, talents and strengths rather than supporting them. Very sad!"*

Resources

- ▶ *"It is extremely difficult to gain information to support very young children, let alone resources and reassurance that you are assisting them to attain their fullest potential."*

Resources for those working with young gifted children?

- ▶ 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 resources

- ▶ 24 respondents suggested diverse other resources, including funded postgraduate study, NZ book, DVDs, brochures, handouts, laminated cards, bookmarks, journal articles, parents ...
- ▶ *"I think all teachers need to be far more proactive about up-skilling their knowledge base ... it should be about making the teacher a better teacher rather than focussing on the "gifted" child as such. Teachers need to know how to cater for all children regardless of their ability."*

Alignment of special and gifted education

The Ministry of Education's Group Special Education team provides support for children with developmental and learning difficulties in schools and early childhood services.

Should Group Special Education include children who are gifted?

- 74.5% – "yes"
- 16% – "no"
- 9% – unsure.

Support for integration: complex needs and multi-exceptionality

- ▶ *"Gifted children have special learning, developmental, social and emotional needs which require extra support from adults."*
- ▶ *"These are special needs children too, with needs that cannot be met by mainstream education services."*

Challenging behaviour due to frustration and boredom, social and emotional sensitivity, or perfectionism

Concerns about integrated services – limited resources

- ▶ *"I wonder if gifted children would go to the bottom of their already overloaded lists."*
- ▶ *"There is not enough services for the children they are supposed to support now without watering the service down to gifted children."*

Flexibility for starting school before 5th birthday?

Children cannot start school in NZ until their 5th birthday. Should there be flexibility for early entry for young gifted children?

- ▶ 45% – “yes”
- ▶ 36% – “no”
- ▶ 19% – “not sure”

This question generated the most feedback. Of the 125 respondents 70 contributed comments to their answer.

Opposition to early school entry

- ▶ **1. Children benefit from the importance of relationships with same-age peers**
 - ▶ *“Physically they will still reach puberty at same age, so would be better with age peers, long term.”*
- ▶ **2. The emotional immaturity of children under five years of age to cope with the primary school environment**
 - ▶ *“Children may be intellectually mature in adults’ eyes, but they have not emotionally matured.”*
- ▶ **3. School providing a setting not appropriate to children under 5 years of age compared to the early childhood service setting**
 - ▶ *“Unless the school is prepared to differentiate according to their need then there is not a lot of point in their attending school early because they will become disillusioned earlier!”*

Support for early school entry

Children should be able to access and attend whatever environment would benefit their learning best and provide opportunities for academic and intellectual extension

▶ *“As the parent of a 4 year old who has been ready for school for over 6 months, it is difficult to have to hold them back for another 9 months before they are able to start school. If we wait too long we may start extinguishing the flame within that desires knowledge.”*

▶ *“Children who are gifted may become bored, frustrated, and hostile if their needs are not met ... let them develop at their own pace, even if it is outside “the norm”. If this can’t be done within an ECE setting, then there should be the opportunity to attend public school prior to a fifth birthday. Also – blow the insurance issue (as I’ve heard used in schools!)”*

Recommendations

- ▶ Strength-based approach
- ▶ Observational skills
- ▶ Resourcing
- ▶ Integrated special and gifted education service provision
- ▶ Acknowledgment of asynchronous learning
- ▶ Greater connection between beliefs and observed practice

Thank you

The study is being prepared for publication.

Contact us to discuss any aspect – especially what you might see to be the way forward now for research, policy development and teaching practices.

Discussion welcome ☺

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