

Q & A - Dr Deborah Fraser

Dr Deborah Fraser is an associate professor of human development and counselling at Waikato University's School of Education. She started out as a primary school teacher and has a particular interest in gifted children and those with special needs.

How did you first become involved in the field of gifted education?

Probably when I had a handful of gifted children in my Year 4 class (then Standard 2) as a second-year teacher. It was exciting to have such curious, questioning, exacting children; it was also rather daunting and very challenging. I loved it, though. They varied so much yet shared some traits in common. It helped enormously that there were a group of them in the class, as they had some kindred spirits to interact with and thus built a strong sense of identity and belonging. There were also two twice-exceptional children in the class; boys with wonderful oral ability but very limited writing skills. Drama and storytelling were a godsend for them, enabling them to reveal their gifts.

I have a special soft spot for the highly creative. I have always been drawn to those children who are quirky, eccentric and highly original. Schools and society can be extremely conformist and those quirky kids are such a breath of fresh air; they really are the future ground-breakers and defy all manner of preconceptions.

What do those children need?

It's very important that children feel understood and accepted. Being exceptional is psychologically challenging and children (and adults) can feel incredibly lonely and alienated. It's our job as teachers to support such students and welcome them for who they are. I still feel regret over one boy whom I felt I did not extend enough. He felt socially accepted in my Year 4 class but his exceptional ability in mathematics was not catered for enough. Such lessons stay with you and provide the impetus for redressing this injustice. It is which sustains my interest in this area; to provide gifted children with a just and equitable education.

Were you a gifted child yourself?

I may have been tested – who knows. In those days there was no such thing as informed consent and parents, similarly, were kept in the dark. I was in the top-stream fourth form, but heck, we're talking a small, country high school. Spelling words of more than one syllable correctly probably made you a candidate.

But no, I really don't think I am. I have surprised people, and myself, with some accomplishments, but on another level I am rather naïve. I remember a dull day at home gazing out the window when I turned to my mother and said, 'I'm homesick,' to which she replied, 'How can you be, you're at home?' I said, 'I mean I'm sick of home.' Most kids who grew up in small country towns had brief phases when we were convinced that anywhere else had to be better than here, and we fantasised about how exotic it would be to live in a big smoke like . . . Hamilton or Auckland!

Incidentally, I don't mind being naive; it helps me ask the obvious questions that people don't like to ask in case they look ignorant.

Tell us about your childhood.

I came from a mid-to-low socio-economic background in a family with low aspirations in terms of education. Both my parents, however, enjoyed reading, albeit along gender-specific lines. My father thought I might make it as an air hostess if I was lucky. My success at school was a complete surprise. I loved primary school, especially any aesthetic opportunities (I still have an abiding passion for drama, dance, music, poetry and art). I also adored reading and the outdoor life. I rode my friends' horses, did ballet and gymnastics, worked on farms and cycled all over the countryside. The town dump was a magical place and whenever we went with Dad to discard a trailer of rubbish we inevitably found just as many 'gems' to bring home again. It must've driven Mum mad.

Friends were very important. We spent half our lives at the local swimming pool; failing that, any river or creek would do. Apparently, before I was five my eldest brother found me lying on the bottom of a local school pool. Luckily he was a great swimmer.

Originally published in *Tall Poppies*, the magazine of the NZ Association for Gifted Children, November 2010

Two of my fondest memories were singing along with my mother as she played the piano and gazing at our bookcase which seemed to fill an entire wall. I used to study the book spines and marvel at all those pages of stories waiting ever patiently to be opened. I tried out a few churches of my own volition (my family were not religious) and eventually joined a church which I attended for a few years. They must have wondered where this nine-year-old girl had come from as I sat alone in the pews.

Did you enjoy school?

High school left me rather cold. It all seemed far too restrictive and I barely scraped through School Certificate. I much preferred gaining qualifications in lifesaving and first aid. Come the sixth form, I seemed to get a new lease of life, helped no doubt by a move to an all-girls' school. I adored English, Art History, History, Geography and Biology, and did well, with top marks. I also topped the school the following year in various subjects. I played netball for fun, performed in plays and musicals and had a range of part-time jobs after school to earn pocket money. With three brothers I always yearned for a sister; that's very human isn't it? To want what you don't have. I did get tired of their hand-me-down clothes.

I joined Greenpeace, the RSPCA and the anti-vivisection movement. I still remember having a stand-up argument with a visiting Canadian exchange student about the Canadian policy of clubbing seal pups for pelts. I thought I was really cool riding a large, old, black bicycle which belonged to our elderly neighbour, to school.

How adequately are the needs of gifted children being met in New Zealand?

Current policy is so disappointing and a retrograde step. We had been making such promising headway with the hard work of gifted advisers and the PD throughout the country. We finally achieved support for giftedness in both policy and practice, yet the situation today resembles a wasteland. Given all the gains in recent years I hope that teachers will not forget this issue. We desperately need to support these children, regardless of whether gifted education is fashionable or not. Already, we look back on that era with a yearning for what was. I have much faith in NZ teachers and many are doing wonders, but, like any garden, the field requires tending so that it does not deteriorate due to neglect.

Originally published in *Tall Poppies*, the magazine of the NZ Association for Gifted Children, November 2010

You have strong views about national standards. Can you explain your objections?

The National Standards system, as proposed, threatens to be more punitive than educative. The same groups of low-achieving (and highly creative) will be measured within an inch of their lives and found wanting. The same groups will effectively be punished by a system that is supposed to nurture every child. As [Harvard psychologist] B.F. Skinner himself said, punishment does not work. There is no evidence to show that regularly reporting on children's inability to reach a target encourages them to learn. Children learn best when engaged and motivated, when they are able to see purpose and meaning, and when they feel that magic mix of curiosity, excitement, determination and elation. Relentlessly focusing on literacy and numeracy targets is unlikely to be the panacea for low achievement. Schools already have a tendency to disadvantage some groups of children, and national standards threaten to further penalise those already at risk.

What effect will this have on gifted children?

Gifted children will not be served by this policy. Too much emphasis on reaching an externally imposed goal has the effect of undermining intrinsic motivation. This is because people strive hardest for the goals *they* create. Mountaineers climb mountains because they are there. Scientists are curious to discover why things are the way they are. Humans find the exercise of control over their environment to be inherently motivating, gifted children more than most. Thus, national standards may have the perverse effect of turning our brightest off learning.

There are also the children who have outstanding visual/spatial ability, scoring above 90 per cent in the Ravens (an IQ test that measures visual/spatial intelligence), but not necessarily performing well in literacy and numeracy. Under the NS system they (and their teachers) would be considered failing.

You used a Beeby Fellowship in 2007 to look at the teaching of the arts in primary schools. Why do you consider this to be so important?

Well, the arts speak deeply to us; they help us to express things in ways that words and numbers cannot. The types of thinking that the arts tap are highly cognitive and extend our

Originally published in *Tall Poppies*, the magazine of the NZ Association for Gifted Children, November 2010

understanding of what it means to be human. The arts take us places that other forms of knowledge cannot. They illuminate rather than explain; they intuit rather than rationalise; they transport us rather than instruct. We come away richer and moved, without necessarily knowing why. And the arts can be highly cathartic, opening insights to our inner selves in ways that are uplifting and healing.

Do you think that New Zealand values the arts sufficiently compared to, say, sport?

Have you read the newspaper or watched the news lately? Imagine if the main news hour gave as much coverage to the arts as it does to sport. Imagine if the newspaper gave as many pages, an entire section every day, to the arts. Imagine if schools put the arts in the centre of the curriculum? Imagine if aesthetic imagination was valued in these ways?

One of your areas of specialisation is spirituality in education. Can you explain what this involves?

Spirituality is the eternal yearning to be connected to something bigger than our own egos. In some research I undertook on spirituality I explained it in this way: spirituality is more closely understood through experience, and that experience is invariably unselfconscious, meaningful and transformative. The spiritual experience requires connection to something or someone that develops the self, as Eisner would say, from both the inside out and the outside in.

Values, virtues and morals are not spirituality, but a spiritual experience is likely to reveal behaviour that seems to promote values. The difference is that there is no explicit intention in spirituality to 'do the right thing'. Rather, the spiritual experience involves a sense of connection that enhances people are in ways that are largely unpremeditated and unpredictable. Hence, a curriculum on spirituality is not viable but a classroom climate that enhances spiritual experiences is.

How should this be applied to gifted children?

Originally published in *Tall Poppies*, the magazine of the NZ Association for Gifted Children, November 2010

Spirituality as I've discussed it is relevant to all children. Funnily enough, the NZ curriculum has long acknowledged the importance of children's spirituality, with mention made of fostering spiritual development in state schools as long ago as 1937.

For those children who are spiritually gifted there are further implications. Parents and teachers can support children with spiritual gifts in various ways. It is important to help children realise that they *can* make a contribution which underlines our connection to one another and transcends the demands of the ego. For example, there are numerous service agencies to join – from Amnesty International through to World Vision, Greenpeace, Habitat for Humanity and Save the Children.

Parents and teachers can also encourage times of stillness and silence, where children can become transfixed and unfettered by timetables and subject changes. They can provide creative outlets through the arts wherein children can become immersed in the art form with which they are engaged. They can provide stories about resilience in the face of unrelenting hardship and injustice, and they can provide environments where it is safe and acceptable to have the courage of one's convictions.

Fear, regret, anxiety, bitterness and self-consciousness cannot co-exist with spiritual expression. We are invariably at our calmest, strongest and most accepting when we allow the spiritual dimension of our lives to flourish.

What are your own beliefs?

I believe it's good to have an older brother to save you from drowning.

If you had to choose one piece of advice to give to parents of gifted children, what would it be?

Seek out other parents and professionals who understand what it's like to live with a gifted child. Other parents are invaluable insiders and will provide a community of understanding.

And to gifted children themselves?

Be who you are; have the courage of your convictions. Seek out and nurture relationships with those who understand and accept you. Do not waste a lot of expensive energy on things

Originally published in *Tall Poppies*, the magazine of the NZ Association for Gifted Children, November 2010

that do not feed our souls. Go easy on yourself; you won't always be perfect, you will muck up, and being brilliant does not buffer you from loss and pain. While the options may seem overwhelming, focus closely on what is in front of you today.

Remember that the rational mind is a great tool but it is limited. Make a point of *not* thinking at regular intervals, so that you tap the power of your unconscious. Let some ideas come to you. It may be an old chestnut, but it's true: no amount of talent is a substitute for hard work.