

Testing times in Vancouver



Lynn & Rose (centre) with friends in Vancouver

Auckland psychologist Lynn Berresford reports on the 18th Biennial World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children, held in Vancouver.

NZAGC president Rose Blackett and I were invited to give a pre-conference workshop in Vancouver. It was the city where I originally went to university so it was exciting to have the opportunity to pay a visit.

As you can imagine, lots of emails went back and forth between Rose and myself, but by the time we left we had put together a very presentable PowerPoint with a recognisable New Zealand green koru background to the title: Understanding and Effectively Using Psychometric Tests for the Gifted.

Internationally, the Wechsler Intelligence and Achievement tests or Stanford-Binet tests are used for identifying gifted students, and as measurements for entry purposes into gifted programmes. Alternatively, these tests may be used for pre- and post-programme testing for research purposes. The importance of diagnostic, cognitive psychometric testing and analysis of the data is often largely ignored in the identification of specific learning needs. Large numbers of ideas, feelings and myths surround the tests, both positive and negative, and interestingly, they are often narrowly understood by academics and frequently misunderstood by teachers and parents. Our workshop offered attendees the opportunity to gain an understanding of psychometric assessment and analysis with regard to gifted and talented children, including those with academic, social and emotional challenges.

We received excellent feedback from those who attended our three-hour workshop, which was truly

interactive – complete with Whittaker’s chocolate prizes for those who contributed ‘answers’ to our questions. New Zealand chocolate is widely acknowledged to be better than Canadian chocolate by anyone who has had the opportunity to compare. Our workshop closed with the Don McGlashan song *The Closer You Get, The Bigger I Look*, sung by dDub.

It was a privilege to give a pre-conference workshop, but it did mean we were unable to attend any of the others: Dr Donald Treffinger on ‘Clustering Creative and Critical Thinking in the Classroom’, Dr Ken McCluskey’s ‘Meeting the Needs of Talented ADHD Students’, and Dr Shelagh Gallagher on ‘Cultivating Intellectual Passion Through Problem Based Learning’.

However, Treffinger and McCluskey were also speakers at a plenary session later in the conference. Dr Treffinger is the president of the Centre for Creative Learning in Serrasota, Florida. The author of many articles and books, he is particularly well known for his studies on the ‘nurture of creativity and creative problem solving’. He has given presentations and workshops worldwide and I have enjoyed hearing him speak at two previous conferences. At Vancouver, he provided an overview of the current Creative Problem Solving (CPS) framework and emphasised ways in which it can empower students to manage changes, and to express and apply their personal strengths and talents. He also illustrated the Levels of Service (LoS) model of talent development, showing how this makes it possible for educators to bring out the best in all students and to integrate them in the school setting and beyond. Although I was familiar with the CPS framework it was interesting to revisit key concepts. The LoS model of Talent Development was new to me and seemed to present a ‘creative’ progression which would be well worth learning more about.

Dr Ken McCluskey is a dean and professor of education at the University of Winnipeg. He is best known for his innovative work with at-risk youngsters. I met him in Winnipeg in the 1990s, when he invited me to come and talk to his Master in Education students. I also met his very ADHD daughter who was then training to be a teacher. McCluskey’s book about his daughter – *Understanding ADHD: Our Personal Journey* – is written for teachers and parents and is an interesting read.

In the plenary session Dr McCluskey reviewed several Manitoba projects that are identifying and nurturing the talents of ‘marginalised’ young people, for example: MARS – Mentoring At Risk Students; PLUTO – Please Let Us Take Off; SATURN – Store Front Activities to Unleash Resilience and Nurturing; NEPTUNE – Nurturing Enrichment Programming Through University Networking and Empowering; and EARTH – Encouraging Autonomy and Responsibility in Teen Households

McCluskey is a seemingly laidback speaker in sweatshirt and jeans, but he is not a laidback mentor or educator. He is a very motivating speaker and teacher, and the artwork by one of ‘his’ students that he presented was an unforgettable testimony to the power of identifying and nurturing talent.

The keynote speakers at the conference were excellent. I always enjoy Dr Joseph Renzulli, a professor at the University of Connecticut who also serves as Director of the National Research Centre of Gifted and Talented. He seems to have been around a long time but he is never repetitive and continues to be of the utmost relevance. His presentation on ‘The Empire Strikes Back: Redefining the Role of Gifted Education for the 21st Century’, revisited, re-examined and expanded

his theories and teachings. He talked about new directions in the assessment of human potential; motivational and self directed learning skills that promote maximum performance; the technological skills required by both students and teachers; and the intelligences outside the normal curve that should be part of the curriculum for gifted young people.

At most conferences there is a plethora of potentially fascinating presentations and workshops. I try to attend anything on the assessment of the gifted and talented, so I went to Dr Jack A. Naglieri's keynote speech on 'Identification of Gifted Children Using Non Verbal Ability Tests: Cross Cultural and Linguistic Advantage', and a follow-up presentation: 'Helping All Gifted Children Learn: Using Results of a Non-Verbal Test'. Naglieri's Non Verbal Ability Test (NNAT2) is: 'a non verbal measure of general ability that does not rely on language yet yields scores predictive of scholastic success. This widely used culturally fair test requires reasoning and problem solving without using verbal and quantitative skills regularly relied on in schools.' I still have unanswered questions about the NNAT2; it unquestionably does what promises, but for me, language fluency is still integral in identifying 21st century intelligence.

The 18th World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children was well organised. At the opening reception a warm welcome was extended. The sunset cruise was gently delightful and some of my New Zealand colleagues got to steer the ship. I also enjoyed the banquet dinner as it provided time to catch up with New Zealand and international friends.

Canada is not dissimilar to New Zealand. There are pockets of gifted and talented educators, gifted and talented programmes, and increasing awareness of the needs of gifted and talented students. Important changes in rigid thinking and inflexible learning structures are being made here in New Zealand and around the world.

Lynn Berresford, a registered psychologist, was sponsored by the Auckland branch of the NZAGC to attend the Vancouver conference. She can be contacted via the Indigo Assessment and Counselling Centre: www.indigo.org.nz.