Primary Teachers’ Perceptions of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Gifted and Talented Education

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Abstract

This study investigated teacher attitudes and experiences and understandings of the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children. It addressed the issues within Aotearoa New Zealand Primary school settings. The study used a mixed methodology approach. Data was collected in the form of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that many teachers are uncertain about the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children. Teachers expressed positive attitudes towards gifted and talented children while acknowledging their lack of personal knowledge about gifted and talented education. The findings also identified teachers’ frustrations at barriers affecting their ability to support gifted and talented children’s social and emotional needs in their classroom programmes, including limited personal knowledge and skills, lack of professional development, lack of time to spend with gifted and talented children, and school directed priorities for meeting the needs of other children.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to report the author’s research and highlight teacher attitudes, experiences and understandings of the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children in a New Zealand context.

Cognitive complexity gives rise to emotional depth. Thus gifted children not only think differently from their peers, they also feel differently (Silverman, 1993, p.3).

In many ways, gifted children have the same social and emotional needs other children have, but their needs are often intensified by the characteristics that make them gifted. A commonly held belief by teachers is that gifted and talented children have social and emotional problems and therefore need to work on these skills. If educators fail to understand their needs gifted children can be at risk for academic underachievement social isolation and depression, potentially resulting in a loss to the whole of society because of unrealised potential and contributions (Moltzen, 2004).

The Ministry of Education (MOE, 2000) recognises that “all teachers are teachers of the gifted and talented, in need of professional development that ensures they can cater
appropriately for gifted and talented students” (p.11). In New Zealand, “Many teachers have the willingness to cater for the needs of these students, but lack the knowledge and skills to be able to do so successfully” (Moltzen, 1998/99, p. 62).

In a Ministry of Education national research project (Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind, & Kearney, 2004) researchers found that “Definitions of giftedness and talent reported by schools were broad, however cultural, spiritual and emotional giftedness were often overlooked” (p.3). The researchers identified several areas for improvement by schools including: meeting the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented students; providing individualised and appropriate education for them; and better provision for gifted and talented students from under-represented groups, especially Maori and other ethnic minority groups. They concluded that the success of gifted and talented education in New Zealand was reliant on educators reflecting the core principles of the gifted and talented education policy announced in 2002. The current research was based on the core principles of gifted and talented education, in particular: “Schools should aim to meet the specific social and emotional needs of gifted and talented learners” (MOE, 2000, p.6). New Zealand educators are expected to meet the core principles outlined by the Government, in 2002, in the Government’s initiatives for gifted and talented learners.

Gifted children have unique affective characteristics and needs (Gross, 1997; Nugent, 2005; Piechowski, 2006; Silverman, 1998). Gifted children not only think differently they feel differently (Winner, 1996). Some gifted individuals possess a level of emotional sensitivity and intensity that sets them apart from others. A frequently voiced concern, according to the literature and anecdotal evidence, of parents and educators is that children who are gifted are prone to developing social and emotional problems. Empirical evidence, however, does not support the perception that individuals who are gifted have higher levels of social or emotional problems than the general population (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Sager Brown, 2007).

Freeman (2001) reported that teachers and parents seem more inclined to label children identified as gifted as difficult, odd, or unhappy. Is this because when gifted children are not displaying any negative behaviour they go un-noticed and simply meld into classroom instruction? Bain, Choate and Bliss (2006) found:

Perceptions that giftedness is typically associated with serious social and emotional problems may, indeed, cause harm in terms of expectations, as well as potential misallocation of resources to remediate a problem perceived as dominant across children who are gifted (p.5).

According to the literature, giftedness influences social and emotional outcomes for children, but whether these outcomes are positive or negative seems to depend on the type of giftedness, educational fit, and personal characteristics (Corso, 2007; Gross, 1997; Nugent, 2005; Silverman, 1990, 1998; Vialle & Geake, 2002; Versteynen, 2005). Children

who have been identified as gifted and talented commonly report feelings of having difficulty making friends with age peers and of being estranged, different, alone, teased and rejected (Clark, 2002; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Piechowski, 2006; Vialle, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2007).

Although each gifted and talented child has their own unique pattern of characteristics Clark (2002) has listed several affective characteristics that are common to many, including: knowledge of own and others’ emotions; sensitivity to others feelings and expectations, keenness of humour; heightened self awareness and feelings of being different; unusual emotional depth and intensity; heightened expectations of self and others; and perfectionism. Other researchers (Gross, 1993; Renzulli, 1977, 2004; Silverman, 1998) have also explored the affective characteristics of gifted and talented children and reported common characteristics including super sensitivity and intensity of emotion; perfectionism; asynchronous development/ dysynchrony; underachievement; difficulty making friendships, and loneliness. Gifted individuals can be extremely sensitive and show intense emotions towards everyday occurrences (Dabrowski, 1964; Silverman, 1990, 1998; Piechowski 1991), for example bursting into tears while being read a sad story. Their emotional reactions can be hyper elevated or depressed (Clark 1997; Piechowski, 1991).

Schools should aim to meet the specific social and emotional needs of gifted and talented learners. There is some awareness and recognition of the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented children, however only isolated examples of provisions specific to these are reported by New Zealand schools (Riley et al, 2004). These authors are concerned that “The nature and extent of reported planned programmes for gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools could have a negative impact upon students’ social and emotional well-being” (p. 278).

Teachers need to provide a responsive learning environment if gifted and talented children’s social and emotional needs are to be met. According to McAlpine (2004) if we accept that giftedness is something that is not fixed in an individual, and that it emerges and changes, then the creation of a responsive learning environment is fitting, in that it offers continual opportunities for these gifts and talents to surface. Teachers need to create a caring, socially rich, and cooperative classroom where differences are accepted. Promoting children’s social-emotional development requires a comprehensive approach that includes creating a social context, teaching social skills, and facilitating children’s emotional development (Corso, 2007). Relationships are essential to implementing effective practices to support children’s social-emotional development. The social environment of the classroom provides the context for children to develop the social skills and emotional foundations that they will need to be successful in school and life. Important goals related to children’s social-emotional development include initiating and maintaining relationships with others, resolving conflicts, making friends, and communicating feelings, emotions, and needs in appropriate and effective ways.

Research clearly shows that it is the individual teacher that plays the central role in identifying and providing for the gifted and talented child (Clark, 2002; MOE, 2000; Riley, 2004a, 2004b). It is therefore up to the individual teacher to identify and provide the appropriate programme for gifted and talented students within their class. The MOE (2008) found that where schools were providing appropriate programmes for gifted and talented the:

> Teachers are able to appropriately identify gifted and talented students. They are aware of and recognise the diversity of characteristics and behaviours for gifted and talented students, including ways of learning, creative thinking, motivation, social leadership, and self-determination (p. 6).

It is to both the gifted child’s and the teacher’s advantage for the teacher to provide support for the child’s holistic growth and development:

> No teacher will be wasting their time by maximising gifted and talented children’s self concepts. The benefits that flow from enhanced self concepts can only enrich gifted and talented children’s educational experiences and contribute to maximising their full potential (Craven & Marsh, 1997, p.126).

Researchers suggest that teachers’ beliefs have a powerful influence on the ways that they act in the classroom. Plunkett’s (2000) study revealed that teachers were generally positive toward gifted students but had misconceptions and or ignorance regarding their educational needs. Of more concern, Davidson (1996) “found teachers not trained in gifted education tend to be more apathetic and even hostile toward gifted students” (p.242). McAlpine (2004) suggests that teacher beliefs and expectations can be a barrier to identification, planning and delivery of programmes for the gifted and talented children. As the literature suggests, teachers’ lack of knowledge and understanding, due to lack of training is believed to be a main cause of negative beliefs and attitudes (Clark, 2002; Collins, 2001).

Lassig (2003), in her study of Australian teacher attitudes, found in terms of acceleration, almost half of the teachers thought that gifted children who are accelerated would have difficulties with social adjustment. However, studies of accelerated gifted students have shown that they are often better adjusted than gifted students who are not accelerated, as well as non-gifted students (Braggett, 1994; Gross, 1993). Davis and Rimm (2004) also recognise the significance of attitudes towards the gifted when developing programmes. Teachers with informed attitudes toward gifted students might be seen as more likely to create an environment that was conducive to achievement and social and emotional well being. Many teachers view gifted education as elitist and inequitable (Clark, 2002; Collins, 2001; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). Another common belief held by teachers is that special provisions, particularly ability grouping and acceleration, will lead to feelings of superiority and egotistical behaviours in gifted students (Clark, 2002; Collins,

2001). Many teachers assume that gifted and talented children will succeed without any special or additional help (Clark, 2002; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Collins, 2001; Davis & Rimm, 2004) resulting in under stimulation, boredom, and even disengagement from school, sometimes provoking the gifted student to engage in behaviours viewed as problems (Freeman, 1994; Plucker & McIntire 1996).

The New Zealand Educational Review Office recommended that teachers need to “develop awareness of the particular social and emotional characteristics of gifted and talented students, and promote their holistic wellbeing” (ERO, 2008, p. 54). Although there is awareness and recognition of the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented students, by some teachers in some schools, there are very few schools providing appropriate support in this area (ERO, 2008). In fact there is concern that some of the identification methods and provisions provided by schools could have potential negative effects upon the social and emotional well-being of gifted and talented students (ERO, 2008, p. 54).

Many educators believe that children who are gifted and talented have social and emotional problems. These beliefs may cause harm in terms of ensuring gifted and talented children receive appropriate education. The appropriate identification of and programming for gifted and talented students depend greatly on teachers’ attitudes, views and understandings of gifted and talented education. The beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgments, which in turn, affect their behaviour in the classroom. It is essential therefore that we understand what primary school teachers’ understandings and perceptions of the affective aspects of gifted and talented learners are and how this will predict their success in meeting the needs of gifted and talented students in their classes.

Few would argue that underachievement and unrealised potential among gifted and talented children has devastating costs to the individual but also represents an immense waste to society. It is important therefore for the social and emotional, as well as the academic needs of gifted and talented children to be met in regular classes. When these needs are met these children will be able to reach their full potential and in turn their gifts and talents can be realised as taonga (valuable contributions) in all aspects of society in Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Research methodology**

The research questions investigated were:

1. What are primary school teachers’ understandings of gifted and talented children’s social and emotional needs?
2. What are primary school teachers’ attitudes towards gifted and talented children?

This study was guided by a combination of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and grounded theory research designs using a mixed methodology; both quantitative and qualitative methods. A Questionnaire provided a sample of the extent to which primary school teachers hold beliefs about the social and emotional characteristics of giftedness. Four interview participants were selected randomly from those who indicated positively to being interviewed on the questionnaire. The interviews were semi structured, face to face, having key questions that were open-ended. The key questions were determined after the questionnaires had been analysed.

Teachers from five Rotorua Primary schools participated in the questionnaires. Rotorua is a small city (70,000) located in the North Island of New Zealand, serviced by 26 state Primary schools. Schools were selected using criterion and convenience sampling based on their characteristics, to ensure a range of different schools were included in the sample. Characteristics included: decile, roll size, primary (years 0-6), full primary (years 0-8), intermediate (years 7& 8), urban, and rural. Schools selected were all state schools. The five participant schools were representative of Rotorua state schools with a range of deciles; role size; urban and rural; and one intermediate school.

Forty Four participants voluntarily completed the questionnaires. All questionnaire participants (39 women; five men) were primary school teachers (39 classroom teachers and 5 management). It is unlikely that this small sample is representative of all primary teachers in New Zealand. Participants were mostly of New Zealand European decent (36, 89%). Six (14%) identified themselves as New Zealand Maori and a further two (4%) as of both Maori and European decent. Participants teaching experience ranged from two to ten plus years. The majority of participants had more than 10 years teaching experience. Purposeful sampling was used to select four interview participants (three women; one man) who were representative of questionnaire participants in terms of gender and experiences. Lara is a New Zealand European female teacher who teachers a year 3/4 in a decile 2 primary school. She has been teaching for eight years at the same school. Ruby is a New Zealand European female teacher who teachers a year 4/5 class in a small rural decile 9 full primary school. She is a beginning teacher and has been teaching for one and a half years at the same school. Tane is a New Zealand Maori male teacher who teachers a year 7 class in a decile 2 intermediate school. He has been teaching for three years at the same school. Moana is a New Zealand European female who teachers a year one class in a large decile 5 primary school. She is currently on study leave. She has been teaching for 22 years in a range of age levels and variety of primary schools.

**Discussion of the findings**

The raw data was collated and analysed. Descriptive statistics were used in order to find themes and trends. The trustworthiness of the data was ensured as far as possible using data triangulation, member checks, and pilot study use of questionnaires. Table 1 shows participants’ responses to the twenty statements about social and emotional
characteristics of gifted and talented children and Table 2 shows participants’ responses to the belief statements. Statements with an asterix (*) are phrased negatively i.e. agreement with the statement means agreement with a negative trait. Responses for agree and strongly agree were combined and are treated as Agree. Percentages were derived from the raw data. Responses for disagree and strongly disagree were combined and are treated as Disagree. The bold figures show the highest percentage of responses for each statement and the italic figures show the majority of responses for each statement.

Participants’ written answers to the open ended question at the end of the questionnaire were coded into categories. The seven most recurrent themes were: each child is an individual, uncertain responses, comparisons with low ability learners, the term gifted and talented, comparisons with low ability learners, teacher knowledge and comparisons with low ability learners. The following examples are representative of participants’ comments,

Each Child is an Individual: “Students cannot be put in boxes. Each child has their own giftedness and it affects each one differently.”

Uncertain Responses: “I marked uncertain, not because I was uncertain but because Gifted and Talented is so broad and the ratings would be different for gifted vs talented.”

Comparisons with Low Ability Learners: “I feel gifted and talented children can have similar social problems as those children who struggle in the school system” and “However, my time is taken up meeting the needs of low-level learners”.

The Term Gifted and Talented: “I am unsure about the terminology re GATE. I see giftedness relating to a very small minority of people with extraordinary abilities in an area. I see talentedness as a second tier with more people included. Given the concept of multiple intelligences I am still really unsure whether every human being has a gifting or talent.”

Comparisons with Low Ability Learners: “Personally believe every child has a talent” and “All students are gifted at something I believe”.

Teacher Knowledge: “It’s an area of primary education that I know little about” and “I find this really interested area of learning and one I would like to learn more about”.

Professional Development: “PD for staff is essential” and “I would love some”.


Table 1: Social and Emotional Characteristics of Gifted and Talented Children Participant responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gifted and talented children...</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>are mature socially and emotionally.</td>
<td>20.93%</td>
<td><strong>51.16</strong>%</td>
<td>27.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2*</td>
<td>have trouble relating to peers (same age).</td>
<td><strong>45.24</strong>%</td>
<td>21.43%</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>have a keen sense of humour.</td>
<td><strong>53.66</strong>%</td>
<td>12.20%</td>
<td>34.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4*</td>
<td>have emotional problems, e.g. anxious.</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
<td>15.00%</td>
<td><strong>55.00</strong>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>have high expectations of others.</td>
<td><strong>60.98</strong>%</td>
<td>12.20%</td>
<td>26.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6*</td>
<td>have behavioural problems, e.g. hitting.</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td><strong>52.50</strong>%</td>
<td>35.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>have special social and emotional needs.</td>
<td><strong>58.54</strong>%</td>
<td>12.20%</td>
<td>29.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>have emotional depth and sensitivity.</td>
<td>42.50%</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
<td><strong>47.50</strong>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9*</td>
<td>are easily frustrated.</td>
<td><strong>60.98</strong>%</td>
<td>9.76%</td>
<td>29.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10*</td>
<td>have lower self – esteem.</td>
<td>15.00%</td>
<td><strong>47.50</strong>%</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>have greater self-awareness.</td>
<td><strong>48.78</strong>%</td>
<td>12.20%</td>
<td>39.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>have high expectations of themselves.</td>
<td><strong>76.19</strong>%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>show empathy to others.</td>
<td>20.51%</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td><strong>46.15</strong>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>have social problems.</td>
<td>15.38%</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td><strong>51.28</strong>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>are sensitive to the needs of others.</td>
<td>28.21%</td>
<td>20.51%</td>
<td><strong>51.28</strong>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>worry about world issues.</td>
<td><strong>60.98</strong>%</td>
<td>12.20%</td>
<td>26.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>think other people view their talents positively.</td>
<td><strong>46.34</strong>%</td>
<td>21.95%</td>
<td>31.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18*</td>
<td>view their talents negatively.</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td>42.50%</td>
<td><strong>45.00</strong>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>are self motivated.</td>
<td><strong>42.50</strong>%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>make friends easily.</td>
<td>7.50%</td>
<td><strong>47.50</strong>%</td>
<td>45.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Belief Statements Participant Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>26.83%</td>
<td>63.41%</td>
<td>9.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>53.49%</td>
<td>25.58%</td>
<td>20.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>93.02%</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>46.34%</td>
<td>31.71%</td>
<td>21.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>97.62%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>2.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>26.19%</td>
<td>52.38%</td>
<td>21.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7*</td>
<td>25.58%</td>
<td>51.16%</td>
<td>23.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8*</td>
<td>11.63%</td>
<td>55.81%</td>
<td>32.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9*</td>
<td>65.12%</td>
<td>13.95%</td>
<td>20.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>51.22%</td>
<td>19.51%</td>
<td>29.27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes statements that are stated negatively.

The overall perception was that teachers were uncertain about the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children. The results showed that participants ranked one third of the statements as uncertain. This could be due to lack of knowledge but also partly due to participants’ reluctance to agree or disagree with generalised statements and quite rightly challenged the statements with “it depends on the individual and the context they are in”. Most teachers expressed positive attitudes towards gifted and talented children. However many had a genuine concern for their lack of
personal knowledge about GATE, and therefore expressed apprehension and uncertainty about answering the questions.

There were several repeated themes throughout the interviews. All interviewees expressed feelings of lack of knowledge, understanding and skills about gifted and talented education. All interviewees have had very little PD in gifted and talented education and believed they would benefit from PD. The common characteristics of gifted and talented children reported by interviewees were: high intelligence; specific talents; thinking skills; odd behaviours; emotionality; lack of social relationships with age peers; and ‘naughty’ behaviours. The social and emotional characteristics the participants reported were as follows:

**Lara**: challenging, difficult, unusual behaviours, perfectionism, highly emotional, emotionally immature, difficulty in making friends, strong sense of justice, isolate themselves, ostracised by peers, temper tantrums, frustration, and highly strung. “I can remember one boy in particular that he cried virtually every day and yet he was an extremely capable boy but he was probably bordering on perfectionist. And even if he got one mark wrong in a test it would be the end of the world. And that boys gone on at high school and is doing so well, playing eight instruments, he was one out of the hat. He was just different right from the word go”.

**Ruby**: quirky, naughty, defiant, non conformist, attention seeking, dynamic and having a sense of humour, “I think they know that they’re a little bit different and they don’t fit in, and so they do push boundaries or do something outrageous to just get an effect.” Despite the many negative behaviours the children exhibit, Ruby points out their positive ones “it’s like she’s like this diamond ... you grab the right light and it reflects all through”. She shows empathy towards her gifted and talented children and lets them know she believes in their abilities academically and behaviourally, “she knows I really believe in her.” Ruby has a unique insight into her role in supporting gifted and talented children, “you have to as the teacher unlock a new door of affirmation...“you’re just flicking on a light switch”. She believes that much of one boy’s negative behaviour is due to self fulfilling teachers’ beliefs, “Most of teachers expected him to be badly behaved at lunchtime and he was always on detention always booked... always.”

**Tane**: mostly refers to negative behaviours, for example, “gifted children can be a pain in the backside”, they don’t like doing the work they are given, they cry out for help, they are painful because they want your attention and they want you to recognise what they’re good at, and they often have bad behaviour.”
Moana: odd, well behaved, naughty if not challenged, easily bored, emotional and having feelings of superiority: “I think some gifted kids are up themselves and their parents are too!”

The interviewees suggested the best way to meet the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented children in their classrooms was to be supportive of their affective and intellectual needs by providing high level thinking/learning strategies. They also discussed the importance of developing positive relationships with each child. They all expressed the difficulty of catering for gifted and talented children’s needs when other children at the lower end of the spectrum were perceived as ‘needier’. Another common theme from the interviews was the perceived negative attitudes of other teachers within the interviewees’ schools.

In line with the review literature (Clark, 2002; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994) the majority of questionnaire participants indicated that they believed gifted and talented had trouble relating to same age peers and difficulty making friends. This was reinforced by the interview participants who expressed the gifted children’s feelings of ‘being different’, ‘not fitting in’, ‘having difficulty with friendships’, ‘preferring adult company’, ‘not mixing well with other kids’, ‘isolating themselves’ and ‘enjoying own company’. Sometimes teachers perceive an inability to form friendships with age peers as emotional immaturity but it may actually be that the gifted child has reached a stage characteristic of older children (Gross, 1999).

Many studies have found that teachers’ attitudes towards gifted and talented children and GATE are negative (Clark, 2002; Collins, 2001; Davidson, 1996; MOE, 2000). The findings of this current study were contrary to the prior research as the majority of participants’ expressed positive attitudes towards gifted and talented children. This could be due to the fact that participation was voluntary, therefore it could be more likely that people with interest in GATE would participate and correspondingly have positive attitudes. Plunkett (2000) also found that the participants in her study, in Australia, were generally positive toward gifted students. However they were prone to misconceptions and uncertainties. In New Zealand research, Riley & Rawlinson, 2006, found participants to have a “commitment to and enthusiasm for gifted and talented education shown in their responses, many of whom used terms like “passion” to describe their interests” (p.85). Needham (2007) also found pre-service teachers had positive attitudes towards gifted and talented children.

Research states that a commonly held belief by teachers, despite research evidence to the contrary, is that acceleration is harmful to the social and emotional development of gifted and talented children and is a reason it should not be used (Braggett, 1994; Cross, 2002; Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Rogers, 2002a & 2002b; Townsend, 2004). However the participants did not agree with this. One reason could be because New Zealand teachers are familiar with the concept of grouping children in order to meet their instructional needs based on
their level of ability. It is therefore accepted that if a child needs to be accelerated in a particular area it is beneficial for the child academically, socially and emotionally.

Researchers (Bain et al, 2007; Cross 2002a; Rogers, 2002; Winner, 1996) have indicated that popular myths affect the attitudes and practices of teachers where GATE is concerned. This current study looked at several of these myths and found many teachers did indeed hold many of these understandings. The findings in this current study indicated that many teachers believe that all children are gifted and talented, and that being gifted is something you are born with. Evident also were the opinions that gifted and talented children are socially and emotionally immature, and they have trouble relating to their same aged peers and therefore should be with students their own age.

“Nothing is more difficult than competing with a myth” (Chinese proverb). It is therefore important that these myths be dispelled by providing teachers with research evidence to negate the assumptions that are commonly made. In particular, the myth: “gifted and talented children do just fine on their own without any special help”. It is commonly reported that teachers believe that gifted and talented children will succeed even without special provisions (Cathcart, 1996 & 2005; Riley, 2000a & 2000b; Silverman, 1990 & 1998). For instance, a commonly held belief (that is discredited by research) is that gifted students will be successful regardless of the quality of their education (Henderson, 2007). Another example of this is referred to in the regularly quoted metaphor “Cream always rises to the top”. This was not the case for participants of the current study, who clearly indicated that there was indeed a need for special support and programmes needed for gifted and talented children.

Despite teachers being keen to support the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented children there are barriers to them achieving this, including lack of personal knowledge, lack of time and school priorities. Lack of teacher knowledge of the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children is an obvious barrier. Teachers cannot cater for what they don’t know about. Many participants had a genuine concern for their lack of personal knowledge about GATE, and therefore expressed apprehension and uncertainty about answering questionnaire questions.

One of the barriers to supporting gifted and talented children that teachers expressed was the need to support children at the lower end of the behavioural and ability spectrums. Consistent with prior research was the finding that concerns were expressed about lack of time to cater for needs of gifted and talented as they have lower ability children needing support (ERO, 2008; Riley et al, 2004). Many participants expressed that gifted and talented children had just as much need for special programmes as low ability children. There was a sense of higher priority given by schools to getting the slower children “up to speed” and therefore gifted and talented children were not seen as a priority as they were “doing ok” without any specialist help, as discussed earlier.
Significance of study and implications for practice

This study brought out a number of important points in relation to the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children. The first step toward teachers helping these children is to acknowledge that their social and emotional characteristics and experiences are different to non–gifted children and therefore their needs are also different. To be effective in supporting gifted and talented children’s social and emotional needs teachers need to understand these unique characteristics and ways of effectively meeting these needs within their regular classroom programmes. If gifted children are to achieve their potential, the social and emotional aspects of giftedness must be recognized and developed in these classroom programmes.

Effective gifted and talented programmes help students to be healthy, innovative, creative and confident learners who achieve to their potential. These programmes recognise giftedness and talent in specific academic subjects, thinking, arts, sports, culture, creativity, spirituality, and leadership. Through these programmes students are encouraged to take pride in who they are and in their abilities, and to use these attributes in contributing to New Zealand society (ERO, 2008, p.3).

Although participants had generally positive attitudes toward gifted and talented children, they were prone to misconceptions and uncertainties in relation to the social and emotional requirements for this group. Teachers need to be aware of their own beliefs and attitudes towards GATE and how this impacts on their interactions and practice. Teachers interested in up-skilling their own understandings of the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented children will find the evidence very useful.

For teacher educators, those responsible for PD in schools, school management and GATE co-ordinators, this study offers insights into what teachers are currently thinking and what they perceive as their needs in order to appropriately cater for the needs of gifted and talented children in their classrooms. It gives a good idea of the frustrations and barriers facing classroom teachers. In particular this study suggests that many teachers feel under prepared to meet gifted and talented children’s needs but willing to do the necessary PD in order for them to become more knowledgeable. The data suggests that even though there is definite need for PD in GATE many teachers feel confident in being able to meet the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented children in their classrooms as they already endeavour to cater to the needs of every child’s unique needs. Another important finding that relates to school management is the fact that teachers are overwhelmed by meeting the needs of the children at the lower end of the spectrum and therefore leave the gifted and talented to “fend for themselves” as they “are already doing well academically”. What really matters is the fact that these gifted and talented children are not always meeting their full potential and in fact may be underachieving. Teachers therefore must consider the need for meeting the requirement of NAG 1 (iii) (c) that

requires schools to identify and implement teaching and learning strategies to meet the needs of gifted and talented.

This research supports the recommendations for improvement proposed by ERO (2008), that schools develop awareness of the particular social and emotional characteristics of gifted and talented students and promote their holistic wellbeing; that school leaders develop and foster a school-wide understanding of gifted and talented education; promote ongoing participation in school-wide PD and specialist training and development for people specifically responsible for gifted and talented education. The current research also supports (Riley & Rawlinson, 2006) call for teacher education providers to carefully examine their current and future offerings in gifted and talented education though internal investigations and planning.

**Conclusion**

This article highlights that many teachers have positive attitudes towards GATE however there is a self-reported lack of understanding about the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented children. Teachers are frustrated at their own lack of knowledge and the barriers that hinder them in providing appropriate social and emotional support for gifted and talented students. This study however leaves the researcher optimistic that teachers are willing to improve their understandings and practices in order to support gifted and talented children in becoming all that they can be - “where there’s a will there’s a way”.

**References**


Delisle, J., & Galbraith, J. (2002). *When gifted kids don’t have all the answers: How to meet their social and emotional needs*. USA: Free Spirit publishing.


