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Conceptions of Giftedness in a Global, Modern World: Where are We at in Aotearoa New Zealand, 2012?

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Abstract

Conceptions of giftedness have undergone several paradigm shifts in recent decades. Giftedness in the New Zealand context has been influenced by these shifts and consequently there are implications for educators in New Zealand. Conceptual understandings influence the pedagogical decisions made about gifted education as a whole and it is thus important for educators to be confident in their understanding of the conceptions that guide programmes and policy in their own school or centre. This paper reviews some of the current debates around the concept of giftedness and talent and relates these trends to concepts described in the New Zealand based literature of the last decade. The lack of common conceptualisations of giftedness in New Zealand is questioned with a recommendation that teachers are helped to become more knowledgeable about current conceptualisations which in turn may provide them with a sounder framework for underpinning pedagogical decisions.

Introduction

Writers have continued to research and reflect on the concept of giftedness during the last decade and there is no doubt that understandings about the very notion of giftedness have undergone significant changes in this time, but still without any agreement being reached (Borland, 2008; Dai, 2010; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Riley, 2005; Schroth & Heifer, 2009). Dai (2010) suggests that “the term gifted or giftedness has never been more problematic than it is today” (p. 8). Ontological issues around how those in the field might conceptualise the nature of giftedness have led to unresolved tensions. An understanding of how giftedness is conceptualised is important for educators and families as they advocate for the needs of these children both educationally, and emotionally and socially (Phillipson, 2007). Miller (2008) maintains that a comprehensible conception of giftedness has important relevance for pedagogy, as it is around this conception that curricula, teaching practices, and programming will be based.

What are the current beliefs about the construct of giftedness and talent and how do these understandings impact on a particularly Aotearoa New Zealand conceptualisation? This article aims to review some of the common trends around the concept of giftedness and talent in today’s global, modern world, to explore the influence of these trends on New Zealand conceptions with reference to the New Zealand literature of the last decade, and to discuss the issues that face New Zealand practitioners as they endeavour to construct their own conceptions which in turn have implications for their pedagogy.

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Current trends in conceptualising giftedness

To summarise every debate relating to the tensions that still exist in conceptualising giftedness is not possible in this article. Nevertheless, in order to provide a background to the way in which giftedness is viewed currently in our global, modern world, and in particular how these beliefs have impacted on New Zealand conceptualisations, three of the common arguments that have influenced current conceptual understandings are briefly reviewed here.

Developmentalism versus essentialism

The traditional essentialist view of giftedness, a legacy of Lewis Terman's early work, is based around the premise that there is a specific formula for defining and measuring what is gifted and what is not (Dai, 2010). Those who have the required high level of intelligence are blessed with fixed traits that set them apart from those who do not have these 'gifts'. From an essentialist perspective, high intelligence is something that is genetically endowed, is a neurological advantage that sets one apart from one's peers and along with the right environmental circumstances it is the possession of this high intelligence that will lead to ultimate achievement in later life (Balchin, 2009; Dai, 2010; Horowitz, 2004; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008; Matthews & Folsom, 2009).

In contrast to an essentialist view, developmentalist approach is grounded in the beliefs that giftedness is dynamic, malleable and that the very nature of talent itself is constantly changing. Giftedness is an interaction between an individual and his or her environment; it is not stable and can change over time. Horowitz (2004) maintains that conceptions about giftedness may differ at different periods in the life span. It is clear from the recent literature that the debate between developmentalism and essentialism in terms of conceptions of giftedness that are held today is currently weighted in favour of developmentalism (Balchin, 2009; Horowitz, 2004; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008; Reis & Housand, 2008; Sternberg, 2000). However, it is still acknowledged by most writers that some tenets of the essentialist view contribute to an overall understanding of giftedness, in much the same way that it has become accepted that nature and nurture work together to influence a child's development.

Domain general versus domain specific

Early ideas about giftedness focused on domain general definitions of giftedness in which a child would possess certain traits that were applicable across all areas of ability. A domain general view sees giftedness as being about an exceptional ability to reason, to think in an abstract way, to solve problems and acquire knowledge (Dai, 2010). Tannenbaum (2003) maintains that a domain general view of giftedness is about a general intellectual ability that is transferable from one kind or task to another and that this overriding intelligence can be applied across a range of areas of human competencies.

In contrast, a domain specific view of giftedness focuses on diversity. A gifted individual can show excellence in at least one of a variety of aptitudes but not necessarily all aptitudes. Domain specific theorists see giftedness as an achievement in a particular domain brought

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about by an ability to adapt to any environment or challenge related to that domain. A domain specific view of giftedness fits more easily with a developmentalist belief (Matthews & Folsom, 2009).

A domain specific conceptualisation encompasses a more equitable approach and acknowledges that there can be asynchronous development for some (Matthews & Foster, 2009), meaning that an individual may be seen as gifted in one domain or even several domains yet show average abilities in other areas, but that very few are gifted in all areas. There is, however, some disquiet over the acceptance of this model. Passow (2004, p.10) poses the question, "Can an individual be outstanding in some very narrow area, only mediocre or even below average in most other areas and still be considered gifted?" Critics of Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory, for example, state that it could lead to the belief that all children are gifted in some way; that there is an 'intelligence' for everyone (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008; Matthews & Foster, 2009; Tannenbaum, 2003). Never the less, it is this more inclusive and egalitarian domain specific view that currently has the most support both theoretically and pedagogically in most Western educational societies at least (Van Tassel-Baska, 2005; Ziegler & Heller, 2000).

Giftedness as a socio-cultural phenomenon

A major and ongoing paradigm development in thinking about giftedness is a shift from a traditional view of giftedness as a measurable, trait-based construct to a multi-dimensional view that has an awareness of diversity and may mean different things to different cultural groups. There is a growing and empirically evidenced view that understandings about giftedness and talent are specific to culture (Cohen, Ambrose, & Powell, 2000; Ford, 2003; Phillipson, 2007; Sternberg, 2007). Phillipson (2007) maintains that any conception of giftedness would, in current times, be acknowledged as being "a socio-cultural phenomenon" (p.14).

Reis (2009) maintains that society, and educators within that society, should recognise that the ways in which we think about giftedness are based on the different traits within each differing societal population and that programmes should be developed to reflect this diversity. A socio-cultural conception of giftedness takes into account the socialisation and nurturing of individuals in different cultural settings (Chan, 2009) and acknowledges that giftedness is a relative construct which is viewed differently by different groups (Ford, 2003).

Such understandings have implications for pedagogical practices in any multi-cultural society. There can be no single 'right' definition of giftedness that holds true across culture and time (Phillipson, 2007). Therefore, it is the development of such talents that will be useful for the particular socio-cultural context that an individual belongs to that will surely be of interest to educators and administrators who design and fund programmes for our talented youth. Further, educators whose teaching is underpinned by a socio-cultural conception of giftedness will recognise that simplistic, universal views of giftedness are not appropriate in a multi-cultural classroom or in our global society (Phillipson & McCann,

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2007). Within one country, or one school or one classroom there may be several different understandings about giftedness held by several different cultural groups.

The previous discussion on debates that exist currently about the construct of giftedness and talent illustrate how different paradigms around gifted education have shaped the understandings that educators and researchers have about the notion of giftedness (Cohen, et al., 2000). This article moves now to a discussion on giftedness within the social and cultural milieu of New Zealand.

New Zealand conceptualisations of giftedness

Understandings about New Zealand conceptions of giftedness are constrained by the limited literature on giftedness and talent that is New Zealand based. The small body of research that does exist has seen a strong reliance on overseas research to direct thinking and policy in New Zealand which does not always reflect the context of New Zealand schools and centres (Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind, & Kearney, 2004), although a greater understanding of the socio-cultural aspects of giftedness has influenced policy in recent years. This dilemma in no way minimises the importance of endeavouring to understand how New Zealand educators view giftedness and talent, for as Meuli (2006) asserts “what one believes giftedness and talent to mean will drive what one is alert to look for” (p. 106). She maintains that the particular concept chosen by schools acts as a focal point for decisions around practice. This is supported by another New Zealand writer, McAlpine (2004) who argues that:

Discussions on the nature of giftedness and talent are at the very heart of gifted education. Parameters of giftedness determine who will be identified as gifted and what the nature of programmes will be that cater for their learning needs. The interrelationship between concept, characteristics, identification and programming is crucial to the understanding of gifted education (McAlpine, 2004, p. 59).

Historically, no one common definition of giftedness and talent has been identified in New Zealand. This lack of national direction led, in the past, to an overall picture in which some schools were innovative in their approaches and others failed to develop any policies at all for their gifted students (Knudson, 2006). There was certainly no designated New Zealand conceptualisation of giftedness that educators could rely on to promote programmes for these students in their schools. Reflecting the philosophy that schools should determine their own definition of giftedness, The Ministry of Education, to this date, has not denoted a national definition.

Does this continued laissez-faire approach to denoting a specifically New Zealand concept of giftedness and talent leave educators swimming in a sea of uncertainty or allow freedom for the inclusiveness that we in New Zealand adhere to so proudly? In 1999, Roger Moltzen wrote that “while there may be dangers in assuming a very narrow and exclusive approach

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to giftedness, there can be greater dangers in broadening it too far". In 2012, is this concern still relevant or are educators now more secure in their understandings about the concept of giftedness and the consequences for practice? A brief review follows, outlining some of the New Zealand based literature from the past decade as well as policy documents available to schools and centres as they might search for a conceptualisation of giftedness and talent that fits within the current New Zealand cultural milieu. Links are made between the statements reviewed and the debates on current conceptualisations discussed earlier in this article.

Conceptualisations within New Zealand literature and policy documents

Taylor (2001), in her book *Gifted and Talented Children: A Planning Guide*, is succinct in her advice to teachers about formulating a definition of giftedness and talent. She recommends that any concept "should be underpinned by understandings" about diverse abilities, skills and qualities that are relevant for the cultural groups that might make up a particular school community, and about "potential for gifted behaviour as well as achievement or performance" (p. 14). An obvious relationship to both domain specific and socio-cultural tenets of giftedness and talent is evident, and, in common with other writers, she uses the word "potential" to underline the importance of a developmentalist approach to recognising gifted and talented learners in our schools and centres.

Knudson (2006), too, holds a developmentalist view. He sees giftedness as a "diffuse concept" that can be affected by environmental influences and recognises that understandings change over time. He believes that "we no longer regard giftedness as a global concept" (p.18). Knudson also mentions the importance of acknowledging giftedness in several domains but does not expand upon this in depth. He does include the construct of cultural diversity in his concept, recognizing that different talents are valued by different cultures.

Bevan-Brown (2004) maintains that a Maori concept includes a recognition of giftedness in a group context, a belief that one's talents should be used to benefit a community, that exceptional personal and moral qualities as well as outstanding skills are valued as areas of giftedness and that a strong knowledge of Maori culture and identity can be seen as an indicator of giftedness. Several New Zealand writers have written in more depth about giftedness and talent from a Maori context (Bevan-Brown, 2009; Macfarlane, 2010; Webber, 2011) but such a concept undoubtedly links to socio-cultural and domain specific views. There is recognition that talents and skills that are valued from a Maori perspective may come from different domains than those valued by Pakeha communities, supporting a multi-categorical approach to definitions.

In terms of policy documents, all New Zealand teachers have access to the Ministry of Education handbook *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools*, published in 2000, which should reside in all schools in New Zealand. At the time of writing, the handbook was due to be republished in an updated form. The section in the

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handbook on 'Definitions, Characteristics and Identification' includes the statements that the gifted and talented "are not simply those with high intelligence" and that "the concept of giftedness and talent has become quite broad over the years" (p.12). This is in line with a developmentalist view of the changing nature of talent, rejecting the essentialist view of a fixed, high intellectual level. The writers also allude to a developmentalist slant when they include the statement that "some definitions accept potential performance as part of their criteria" (p. 13), and they recommend that teachers offer experiences in schools that will lead to the realisation of students' "potential".

The "broad" view of intelligence along with the statement that "the gifted and talented represent a wide range of students with many different abilities" (p.12) aligns with a domain specific argument and this is emphasised further as the statement goes on to list some of the "special abilities" such as general intellectual abilities (thus, holding on to some tenets of essentialism in the definition), leadership abilities and creative abilities. In addition, a socio-cultural influence on the conception presented in the handbook is manifest in the statements below:

New Zealand is a multi-cultural society with a wide range of ethnic groups...It is important that each school incorporates relevant cultural values into its concept of giftedness and talent. (p.12)

Despite a reasonably lengthy discussion around concepts and definitions, no definitive conceptualisation for schools to adhere to is offered in this handbook, in keeping with Ministry of Education philosophy in 2000.

Another Ministry of Education document that is available to all New Zealand schools and centres is the commissioned research by Riley et al. (2004). It is unlikely that many teachers would take the time to read the full research report but an appreciation of Riley et al.'s summary about conceptions of giftedness and talent would be of assistance to teachers in helping them make sense of New Zealand educational policy on gifted and talented education. Riley et al. support a developmentalist, socio-cultural approach to the concept and state categorically that "the concept of giftedness is dynamic, sensitive to time, place and culture" (p.11). They suggest that a domain specific viewpoint is popular with New Zealand educators:

Multi-categorical concepts of giftedness and talent appear to be favoured by New Zealand educators – they are broad, inclusive and liberal, sitting well with egalitarian philosophies and beliefs. (p.12)

The research report takes the developmentalist position that giftedness is a dynamic, changing concept and that cultural values and beliefs influence constructions. In addition, there is acknowledgement that in contrast to some other countries, there is no common definition of giftedness in New Zealand. There is mention, however, of "underlying principles" that could guide conceptions (p.11).

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These principles are echoed in a further government document available to all educators, the Education Review Office Report, *Schools' Provisions for Gifted and Talented Students* (Education Review Office, 2008). The report states that when reviewing policy around definitions of giftedness and talent in schools ERO was looking for evidence that:

“...the school’s definition of giftedness and talent reflected the context and values of the school community, was multi-categorical, incorporated Maori concepts, incorporated multi-cultural concepts and was grounded in sound research and theory.” (p. 17)

The principles affirmed in this report emphasise the preferred understandings about giftedness that ERO expects schools to use as a guide to developing practice, and link to the statements from the Ministry handbook of 2000. Domain specific and socio-cultural approaches can be recognised in these principles. Developmentalism is referred to under a section on evidence of a school’s identification processes which ERO noted should be ongoing and should include “potential and actual/demonstrated performance” (p.17).

While not specifically policy, The Ministry of Education website, *Gifted Online*, updated in 2011, is a further source teachers can access for information about the field. The website has a page entitled *Definitions of Giftedness and Talent*. A link to an article by Mansfield (2009) is posted here, which recommends Gagne’s Differentiated Model of Gifted and Talent as a framework for policy and practice in schools. Mansfield sees this model as fitting with “the broadening of conception from the historically narrow recognition of giftedness as a measure of academic ability” thus supporting the move away from an essentialist view to the developmentalist approach that seems to be favoured by most New Zealand educators. Different domains of ability are also recognised in Mansfield’s recommendation to link concepts to Gagne’s model.

I contend that some overriding premises about a New Zealand concept of giftedness are consistent in the body of work produced in the past decade from New Zealand authors, including Ministry of Education documents. These foundation principles are the clear support for a multi-categorical understanding of giftedness consummate with a domain specific view, the recognition of a developmentalist approach that identifies potential as well as performance, and the understanding that giftedness is apparent across all societal groups and is in relation to what is valued by a particular culture, reflecting a socio-cultural position.

Issues and implications for teachers

The different conceptualisations of giftedness and talent described in recent New Zealand literature and policy and encompassed in the principles above, present both theoretical and pedagogical implications for New Zealand teachers. The domain specific conceptualisation of giftedness, with its broader focus, has been adopted by educators from countries with an egalitarian tradition such as Australia and USA and also, with great enthusiasm, by those in

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New Zealand. Both the philosophical and pedagogical implications of linking to this approach, rather than the traditional domain general belief, are more easily accepted within societies with ostensible egalitarian traditions. It can, perhaps, be expected that such a conceptualisation would be favoured because a domain specific theory of giftedness allows for a wider population to be considered gifted and in a diverse range of fields of human activity. This inclusive approach seems to sit well with most New Zealand educators.

However, there is a danger in embracing too broad a definition of giftedness. The concept should be about exceptionality in a particular area. A move towards too inclusive a conception could lead to the focus on exceptional performance or potential that frames the concept, being lost. This could lend support to the 'every child is gifted' discourse which is still held by many educators in New Zealand. Moltzen, in 2004, wrote that he worried that such a conceptual belief might work against the provision of equitable opportunities for gifted and talented learners. In an address to teachers at the Gifted and Talented National Hui in 2011, he revisited this concern, suggesting that the conceptualisation of giftedness and talent can present as "a minefield for teachers" and that such a "nebulous concept can affect traction" for programming and policy development in the field (Moltzen, 2011). It is left to teachers in schools and centres to adopt a particular conceptualisation and then select the group of learners who will be designated 'gifted and talented'. This can present as a theoretical challenge for many teachers with only broad, inclusive constructions to guide them.

The writers of the handbook of 2000, which included Moltzen, were only too aware that there was a conundrum for them in not providing a single definition of giftedness and talent in this definitive document for schools but they adhered to the belief that schools should develop their own pedagogical approaches, underpinned by their own contextualised definitions. Conversely, they also recognised that if they presented too many options for teachers then this could lead to further confusion. In terms of practice within our schools, it could be argued that confusion does indeed reign, as evidenced by the Education Review Office report of 2008. The reviewers found that only 5% of schools reviewed were working from "highly inclusive and appropriate" conceptualisations (p.17). Such a low rate indicates that most schools, and more than likely most centres, in New Zealand, are still struggling to understand the conceptual framework that underpins their pedagogical practices in the area of gifted and talented education. Such a lack of understanding can lead schools to revert to an essentialist approach in identification methods, in which students who perform at a high level, rather than those who have the potential to do so, as the developmentalist approach would support, are those more likely to be identified for programmes in schools. It is possible that tools such as PATs, National Standards, and test or examination results become the identification 'crutches' for teachers who are not knowledgeable about current conceptualisations of giftedness. Programmes are driven by identification methods and teachers face mixed messages as they grapple with the responsibility of identifying those who are eligible for gifted services in their schools. Emerging findings from my own ongoing doctoral research indicate that teachers are still struggling with the dichotomy of aligning an inclusive philosophy with the need to identify a specific group in their school or centre for their gifted and talented register. One teacher interviewed for the study remarked:

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I like to think all kids are gifted though, in some ways. I guess though we label gifted and talented as – what is it though? (Secondary school teacher)

I would argue that further research involving New Zealand teachers would show that there has certainly been an acceptance in this country of a diverse range of definitions of giftedness supported by what Knudson (2006, p. 20) terms the “eclectic, inclusive approach” evident in the Handbook. This strongly inclusive philosophy towards a conceptualisation of giftedness and talent certainly fits with the principles outlined in New Zealand policy documents and recent literature. However, the ERO report indicates that it is apparent that teachers may require more assistance to develop the contextualized concepts that are needed to guide their identification methods and thus their programme development. Sound professional development around current, global conceptions of giftedness and talent and in linking these global concepts to the needs of a particularly New Zealand cultural milieu is needed for teachers in our schools and centres. This would enable teachers to engage with different conceptualisations of giftedness as a first step in framing practice in schools and centres for their gifted and talented learners that aligns with the particular concept of giftedness chosen. It is through a rigorous process of debate and discussion that a deeper conceptual understanding will emerge. It would seem that a strengthening of the inter-relationship between how a school or centre conceptualises giftedness and talent within their own context and the identification and programming that is then developed is still required in many schools and centres.

Conclusion

It is not enough for teachers to rely upon generic characteristic and identification lists to support a gifted programme. All teachers within a school or centre need to be knowledgeable about the concept of giftedness and talent that ultimately drives their practice. If, as this writer would suggest, the majority of educators in New Zealand in 2012 are still swimming in a sea of uncertainty when it comes to understandings about concepts of giftedness and talent then moves to ameliorate this confusion are needed from both national policy makers and professional development providers in the field. In addition, further research is needed around the beliefs that New Zealand teachers have about the concept of giftedness. The focus of future studies should be those who work at the ‘coal face’, and who are responsible for both policy and practice in our schools and centres.

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