

Let's begin with the obvious question: what does it really *mean* to be gifted?



Some people think it means children achieving in the top 10%, others, that it's the top 5% or the top 1%. Some people think it's about academic performance; others think it covers performance in all fields. Some think it's the quirky kid, the one who is a nuisance in class; others, that's it's the absent-minded daydreamer, lost in a world of their own. Some people think it's elitist to talk about giftedness. Other people think *all* children are gifted. Some people think anyone can be gifted if they work hard enough. Other people think giftedness doesn't exist at all – it's just a myth! No wonder we need to ask what is it *really*!

Yet it's an observable fact that some human beings seem somehow to be capable of working or achieving at a level that's way beyond most of us, no matter how hard we try or how long we practise. I know that no amount of striving would ever turn me into another Maria Callas or another Jackson Pollock, and certainly not another Stephen Hawkins. How did these people get to be so astonishingly capable?

For us as educators, a myriad of questions arise. What's our responsibility in all this? Will individuals like this be obvious right from the start, or if not, how do we recognise them? How do we support children whose abilities may inherently be way beyond our own? Is high level achievement the only goal? If not, what else do we need to consider?

We will be adding to this list of questions. For example, is parent perception of exceptional ability valid? What about children from cultures other than our own? Do gifted children ever come from socially and economically deprived families? Do genuinely gifted children ever underachieve?

For now, let's come back to that really fundamental question, what does it really *mean* to be gifted?

In seeking to answer that question, we're drawing on around a hundred years of research into this topic, research which has increasingly moved from a narrow achievement-based approach to a more holistic understanding of this complex human possibility. We're also drawing on our own decades of work directly with gifted children and their families.

The starting point

Giftedness isn't a choice. It can't be taught or learned. It is present at birth. It helps to shape a child's whole experience of life. It can be identified long before school, sometimes even in infancy. Or it might never be identified: some gifted individuals go through life unrecognised, unhappy, their potential never developed, often some of life's misfits. So much depends on the knowledge and on the attitudes and perceptions of the people around that child – parents, other adults, other children, teachers, the school system, society in general.

So what *does* it mean to be gifted? *How* does it influence a child's life and experience? How does it shape, not only childhood, but the whole lifetime? Perhaps the very best answer ever written comes from researcher Michael Piechowski (1991, p.2). He wrote:

Giftedness is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding – a way of being quiveringly alive.

Piechowski was referring to the extraordinary *intensity* with which gifted individuals perceive and experience life. It is precisely this which makes their responses so intrinsically different from those of other people. They often see long before others see, see much further, or see far more deeply and powerfully.

Understanding this helps us to understand the exceptional abilities we see in our gifted learners. It makes sense that this intense engagement will lead to advanced performance, at least in some areas of learning.

But also – and in the end more importantly – this also helps us to recognise and understand the exceptional *qualities* we so often find emerging in gifted learners – compassion for others, deeply-felt convictions about how things *should* be, passionate commitment to causes and to ideals. These are qualities which can create leaders who inspire and guide others. Ability alone does not drive these crucial human responses.

In fact, it's someone's personal qualities which ultimately determine *how they use* their abilities and skills, whether those abilities are used constructively, wisely, for good purposes – or otherwise. History is richly laden with examples of those who did otherwise and thus proved the point – think Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, Genghis Khan...

How does all this affect the gifted learner at school?

All children's abilities and qualities are reflected in their behaviour at school. Given that inbuilt intensity, a gifted child's characteristic behaviours or traits often differ markedly from those of others in their age group.

For example, when a gifted child's interest is aroused, intense curiosity and desire to know can lead to persistent questioning beyond what the teacher has allowed time for, and beyond what other children understand or can put up with. Sharp intellectual awareness can help a gifted child to grasp abstract concepts much more quickly and more fully than their peers – but it can also produce a very sharp wit and a sense of irony not always appreciated by others. Heightened emotional sensitivity can generate strong empathy for others, which might be reflected in feelings of distress and anxiety – or which might lead the child into becoming an impassioned advocate for another person or cause, eventually perhaps an inspirational leader in some way. A deep sense of the interconnectedness of all living things can emerge and influence responses even in the preschool years.

Clearly, these characteristic behaviours are also going to shape the child's learning *needs*. Teaching strategies which are entirely effective with the rest of the class can almost entirely fail for the gifted child. More time, more flexibility, more challenge, more depth, more choice: all are needed: how are they to be provided?

As if all this wasn't already sufficiently complicated, another reality is that the gifted child's development is almost always *asynchronous* to some degree. All of us demonstrate some asynchrony – we're all better at some things than we are at others – but in gifted children, as one would logically expect, this is much more marked. For example, one child might show extraordinary ability in language development and expression but flounder in maths and be decidedly bored with team games and sports.

First recognised by the Columbus Group of experts in the 1990s, such discrepancies are not only confusing and frustrating for the child. They also make the child vulnerable to the expectations and criticisms of adults: all too often we hear, "If he/she is so bright, how come I can't see it here?" When adults do not understand, how can the child?

Shaping identity

Gifted children cannot help but sense their differences from other children, perhaps sub-consciously, perhaps acutely. Childhood through adolescence is the time when every human being begins to form a sense of identity, of their individual self, of their worth and value to others. For gifted children, that can be a considerably more difficult process than it is for most.

For some, the feeling of not being like others, not belonging, can lead to low self-esteem and a negative self-concept. Without help, that can limit their whole lives.

But it also can be that that enquiring gifted young mind allied to that inherent sensitivity begins to question the circumstances around him or her. Why doesn't everybody feel like I do about teasing other children or about teachers who shout at kids? Why do they make me learn so much stuff I already know? Why don't other kids get upset about what they see in the news? Why don't people who hurt animals get treated just like people who hurt people? Why aren't grown-ups doing more

about the environment? How come Mrs S. listens to my questions but Mrs. B. gets impatient? Why are some adults so different from others? How will I do things when I'm adult?

Through this process, the gifted youngster is forming the values that will help guide his or her life choices.

Forming a life vision

Very significantly, gifted individuals are then also likely to begin to form a *life vision* as their values begin to coalesce.

A life vision is a concept which gives someone a sense of purpose larger than themselves. It is about so much more than measurable achievement (though that may be involved). In childhood, it can begin very simply. "When I grow up, I want to be a writer and write books about experiments and science for kids like me." "When I grow up, I want to be a vet and help sick animals." In adolescence, gifted young people may attach themselves to causes that help them to articulate their emerging guiding values. SADD (Students Against Drunk Driving) and the Student Volunteer Army, helping after the earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand, are examples of such causes. In adulthood, those values can express themselves in creativity, in invention and discovery, in service, in leadership, at a multitude of levels and in a multitude of ways.

A life vision continues to evolve and mature as time brings new experiences and insights. It may make a person seem driven because of the depth of their commitment. It can involve pain, disappointment and hurt. It can involve great joy and satisfaction, even while that person sees the next horizon to reach for. It is here where abilities and qualities weave themselves together to lead to what can be truly visionary outcomes.

Above all, it is the ultimate outcome for a gifted life. Thus we weave together all these understandings into this one fundamental statement:

Giftedness is grounded in the extraordinary intensity with which gifted individuals experience life. Such intensity makes possible the exceptional qualities and abilities which characterise giftedness.

In childhood, such exceptional qualities and abilities profoundly shape the child's developmental and learning needs. In adolescence and adulthood, exceptional qualities and abilities can lead to a life vision, creating a sense of purpose larger than self: the ultimate outcome of a gifted life.

Discussion

A crucially important aspect of the material you've just been reading is its emphasis on the *qualities* of the individual. We know of no Western definition of giftedness which makes this central, as our definition here does. And yet, as we've tried to show, it is precisely those qualities which can so significantly influence the way in which exceptional abilities are expressed and used.

So where does our recognition of this come from? As people living in Aotearoa New Zealand, we have the valuable opportunity to connect to the rich insights of Te Ao Māori, the Māori world view, which is deeply rooted in centuries of history and tradition. It reflects concepts of Manaakitanga (honouring, serving and caring for others), Wairuatanga (the spiritual dimension) and Whanaungatanga (family values).

This leads directly to the Māori concept of giftedness. It links to the spiritual understanding which is so central to Māori culture, to the way in which relationships are so closely intertwined and interactive in the Māori community, and to their belief that abilities are there to be used in service to the community.

This so clearly reflects the sensibilities of gifted children and young people described above, yet is simply not reflected in so much of what is written about gifted children and practised in schools. But here we do acknowledge this, and it is central to how we shape our approach to teaching these children.

References

- Bevan-Brown, J. (2011). Gifted and Talented Māori learners. In R. Moltzen (ed), *Gifted and talented New Zealand perspectives* (3rd ed.) (pp. 82-110). New Zealand: Pearson.
- Piechowski, M.M. (2006). *"Mellow Out" They Say, If Only I Could*. P. 2. Wisconsin: Yunasa Books.
- Neville, C.S., Piechowski, M.M. & Tolan, S. (2013). *Off the Charts: Asynchrony and the Gifted Child*. New York: Royal Fireworks Press.

© Rosemary Cathcart 2018 – 2022.