

The rising tide of gifted and talented children in New Zealand



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New Zealand has drawn very much from the theory behind Joseph Renzulli's use of the metaphor, '*A rising tide lifts all ships*', for meeting the needs of gifted and talented students in public schools. This theory encourages lifting the learning of all students by choosing classroom teaching and learning methods that really assist gifted students, but at the same time, do not hinder regular students. Renzulli likened this form of talent development to something close to the hearts of many New Zealanders – the ocean. There is something grand about looking out over a harbour near the top of the incoming tide. All boats have taken the benefit of the rising water, but to what extent? One can't tell unless they first observe what happens at low water mark. Are the boats all floating, or are some stuck in the mud, only to remain there until the next high tide comes around?

The history of the harbour

The history of gifted education in New Zealand

New Zealand is an island nation, totally surrounded by water. The early inhabitants were people groups who had ventured forth on vessels of all shapes and sizes and who founded a nation of passionate, hard-working, pioneer-spirited people. For many generations they were cut off from the rest of the industrial world and became very independent and capable of finding pragmatic solutions to their problems.

There has been a tendency to not single out advanced talent, through a lack of appreciation for people who stand out above the crowd – the Tall Poppies! Also, we have our Maori cultural influences which favour promoting group effort and reward and belief that gifts and talents belong to the whole community involved in helping to nurture those gifts (Bevan-Brown, 1996). An exception has been those who excelled in sports – especially rugby and sailing.

As a water-surrounded country, New Zealanders understand how harbours, tidal activity and the oceans operate. The waves flowing to and fro on the coast remind us of the activity that is inherent in the ocean. The ebb and flow of the tide nurtures the marine life along the rocky coastline. The surface effects of tidal activity and the moon's pull on the earth's water, are evident. Strong rips and currents at surf beaches are a constant reminder of the danger inherent in the ocean. But equally, the glasslike stillness in the harbour on an early

autumn morning could deceive one into thinking that all is well below the surface.

There are many aspects of education that are similar to the ocean – actively constructed learning, surface and deep content learning, nurturing, dangers and deception below the surface (of the quiet, underachieving learner).

Ripples started to grow within the gifted community in the mid 1900s, when there was a lack of appropriate identification and provision for, gifted students. This resulted in a half century of neglect, causing tension in the hearts of students, teachers and parents, all reacting to the difficulties gifted students have faced when not accepted by teachers and peers, or challenged insufficiently in the school environment.

Patience and pressure for change, from those understanding the concept of giftedness and backed by international research into giftedness, was finally rewarded at the beginning of the 2005 school year. A change was made to the National Administrative Guidelines, NAG 1 (iii) (a), to include the requirement to identify and provide programmes to suit the gifted and talented (NZ Min. Ed., 2004).

The first toe has been 'dipped in the water', so to speak, requiring all schools to implement adequate provisions for all gifted and talented students, who come from all cultures in our now, very multi-cultural society.

Now that legislation is in place, schools have the task of upskilling the workforce to learn teaching strategies that will assist the gifted to excel and at the same time enhance the learning for all other students in their classroom. New Zealand does not have a history of baggage to clear out in gifted education, especially from historical arguments over types of giftedness and IQ testing. But, before the strategic development of gifted education can start in many schools, there is an abundance of ridicule and prejudice against the gifted, borne out of general ignorance about this group of students.

Many 'otherwise excellent' teachers have not been trained to identify and understand the gifted students' unusual way of thinking and working and many gifted students have consequently been classified as students with behavioural difficulties. Rejskind (2000, p. 155) saw students 'intimidated into mediocrity' in his research. Mildrum was clear to point out that if gifted students didn't 'learn to use their unique voice, it could be irretrievably lost' (2000, p. 163).



We all know that if we don't keep watchful for pollution in our harbours, our pristine shores could also be lost forever.

'Rising Tides – Nurturing our Gifted Culture', the first national conference for the gifted and talented, was held in Wellington, in August 2006. It was 'under-girded' by the Ministry of Education as an 'opportunity to share knowledge about issues which affect gifted learners and their parents and *whanau*' ... gifted learners are found in every classroom and across all cultures and socio-economic groups' (Maharey, NZ Ministry of Education 2006). Surprisingly, in his welcome address to conference attendees, the Minister of Education omitted to mention teachers in this quote, the very group who, generally, still need to learn much more about gifted learners, in order to meet their needs.

Vessels in the harbour

Current players in the education system

The ships of old are no longer suitable for the market demands of current traders.

Likewise, the current school system, based on industrialised society, has been found lacking in the information society of today. Technological advancements mean that students are being educated today for jobs that may not currently exist.

We need to become a society of lifelong learners that keeps its market edge through innovative solutions to market and society problems. We need to nurture those creative students amongst us and foster a sense of encouragement for their perception and insight, rather than denigrate them. There are pockets of excellent work happening that benefit gifted students and often, others close to them. It is imperative to reduce the 'chance' element of finding each year, an empathic teacher, who can build on the momentum for these students to excel in their education (Gallagher, 2006).

Principals need to encourage the establishment of systems to identify all students' needs in school, and find ways to support teachers in meeting these needs. Gifted students have been ignored for too long, but now the tide is changing.

The tidal activity

Living with the new NAG 1 (iii) (a) requirements

There is natural provision for the tides to rise and fall each day and in doing so, provide for the needs of the various sea creatures on the shoreline. Ships in the harbour have to moor their vessels with this ebb and flow of the tide in their mind at all times, so they don't run aground. A variety of land and sea animal life has to co-exist inside the harbour entrances, but for those who can't survive in this environment, they must move to find something more appropriate. Some fish can stay afloat, even at low tide, while others flounder about and need to stay in the deeper channel.

The thrust of the ministry this decade has been to mainstream all pupils and for this reason, any teacher *could* be a teacher of the gifted and should be appropriately trained and ready, should the need arise. Teaching models should be encouraged that allow gifted students depth of content within the normal classroom

programme. If this is still not reaching the gifted student's needs, then alternative provisions need to be made.

Riding the wave of current interest seems to be the use of the internet to provide for gifted students, from beyond the classroom walls while keeping the students still seated within them. Some teachers feel well out of their depth and flounder as they try to meet all these needs in the regular classroom. Some students find gifted provisions from outside the school more appropriate.

Out on the reef

The gifted students outside the regular classroom

Out at the rocky harbour entrance, daily tidal activity brings nourishment into the inhabitants of the rock pools. It is a natural cycle of provision and the rock pools allow the occupants a safety zone from predators. When the tide falls each day, enough water and food is left to keep them going until the next inflow. Without a daily replenishment of nutrition, the rock pool inhabitants can lack nourishment and die.

Gifted students who attend out-of-school or one-day per week provisions to supplement what is provided in the regular classroom often feed well in their classes outside of school. But, this doesn't always keep them from becoming hungry when they return to the regular classroom, where they can become 'sick from boredom and insufficient challenge'.

Like reef fish, which all live together in and around the reef, the gifted can have some common needs, but other demands can be quite specific. Sally Reis tells us the gifted students can be 'many, varied, unique and diverse' (S M Reis 2001, p. 1).

Within the regular classroom however, there are the occasional *spring tides* that replenish the community and challenge all members to swim past their usual high points. The community likes to watch the activity on the shoreline at high tide, but they are not so interested when the tide is low. Students can struggle when the tide goes out and there doesn't seem to be anything left to sustain them. Life-encouraging schoolwork must be available every day of the school week.

There are areas of life beyond the rock pools - the reef, the tropics, or perhaps the ocean floor and dependent on the individual, one needs to find what area is most supportive.

Dangers lurking around the harbour

Issues facing gifted and talented students and their teachers

Clean, fresh seawater will accommodate most sea creatures better than dirty, polluted water. While it would be ideal for all sea creatures to live in pristine ocean reserves for their own health, sometimes a compromise is needed. What dangers are there lurking around the harbour?

In gifted education, often it is better for the gifted students to live among us, while we endeavour to keep their needs met as far as possible.



1. *Pollution from the uncaring is inevitable*

There needs to be whole school buy-in and professional development for gifted and talented programmes to run effectively (Dettmer & Landrum, 1998; Watts, 2006). Where the principal takes the lead in developing new policies and programmes and assists by budgeting for the professional development of all staff involved, there is more likelihood of acceptance of the changes needed. The timing of this change with regards to funding has been problematic, as it comes right on the tail of Literacy, Numeracy, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) developments in most schools.

2. *Identification can be problematic*

How do we know if every vessel coming into the harbour will be able to be catered for?

In classrooms, too often, gifted students become known by what they don't do particularly well, more than what they can excel at. Sometimes the latter is never discovered during their school years. The system of identification should naturally 'dovetail' into what information is already being collected (Meuli, 2006).

With the latest changes to NAG 1 (iii) (a), identification has been pushed to the forefront of the teachers' minds. Problems can occur during the identification process and to remedy this, the process must take place within a robust, transparent framework. Once identified, some positive action must be taken to respond to the needs of the gifted.

3. *Economies of scale*

A harbour that is put under the continual strain of working right at maximum capacity can result in dangerous build-ups of pollution, increased risks of vessel collisions, strain on the staff, financial pressures from equipment failure and other unwanted problems. This can cause problems for both humans and sea life.

In our smaller schools, we have teaching principals having to wade through as much day-to-day administration as other principals, as well as preparing to teach lessons. There are no 'floating' teachers, able to work through the process and organisation in the role as Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) coordinator.

All teachers in the school have to take on a greater amount of duties and responsibilities that can be shared out and rationalised in larger schools. This creates a barrier for implementation of all sorts of specialist programmes in the school. It can, however, create opportunities for teachers to become very skilled and even take on the role of GATE coordinator for a group of smaller schools, if funds are able to be pooled and this method is encouraged.

The ICT clusters that have led the way in professional development and the implementation of new technology into the schools is a method that could work well for gifted education, too.

4. *Natural selection – only the strong survive*

The gifted can be some of the most emotionally vulnerable students. They struggle to be understood and often don't have

their 'extreme sensitivity' recognised (Cross, 2002). Teachers need to understand how these students think and have empathy for their idiosyncrasies, rather than deride some of their more objectionable responses and behaviours. There are too many teenage deaths with their cause linked to a lack of self-worth. Adolescent years are difficult for all students, but especially so for the gifted and talented student who has continuously experienced an unwelcoming school system.

5. *Storm surges*

The inflow of water on a high tide, accompanied by the destructive influence of a major storm can destroy the harbour and its environs.

When we fully meet the needs of a gifted student in the regular classroom, the work involved on the teacher's part can consume them and the resulting workload can lead to stress and fatigue. Just as coastal cities prepare for storm surges with sandbagging, we need all teachers to be well-prepared for the challenges an exceptional student can bring to a classroom.

6. *An over-crowded harbour*

Planning needs to be well thought out so as to not place too much strain on the harbour facilities. Auckland has hosted major yachting challenges, but careful planning has meant it doesn't host the Auckland Anniversary Regatta, the America's Cup and the Round-the-World yacht races at the same time!

Gifted students can demand more teacher input at certain times, and it is vital teachers plan time into their daily routine to work on special projects with their gifted students.

A sail or motor boat can go much further once its fuel is topped up, or the wind blows a little stronger.

7. *Submarines*

Submarines act differently to other harbour vessels, if you actually see them! They don't necessarily rise with the incoming tide as regular boats do. They can maintain their depth under water.

Some underachieving gifted students are hidden and might also not gain with the rising tide of better teaching and learning activities (Rimm, 1997; Coil, 2004). Or they can stubbornly refuse to work in class and appear *subversive* to a teacher who is ignorant of their ways, rather than *submersed!* It is imperative that professional development occurs for all teachers to see through the 'behaviour' and learn how to bring out the potential in these students.

8. *Running an aquarium*

Gifted education should make allowances for the individualisation of student programmes and the availability of mentors for gifted students, who are able to discuss their passions at a similar level of expertise (Casey, 2000). Many innovative Talent Development Initiatives have been trialed throughout New Zealand and it now needs funding for *all* schools to be able to manage their own local initiatives. This could be done similarly to the successful Cluster Grouping used for developing ICT.



It is one thing to observe an aquarium of fish from behind a glass panel, but quite another to set up and manage an aquarium of your own.

Gifted students can then have their work showcased like their tropical fish partners.

Conclusions

It is imperative that we develop safe harbours for our gifted and talented students using educational methods that meet their specific needs. Once identified, we must have the time, funding and appropriate teacher support to allow their education to inspire them to reach out to their dreams. In many cases, the strategies we should use to reach the gifted and talented can be used in varying amounts to motivate and enhance all students' education.

There needs to be whole-school buy-in to the approach taken to cater for these students. It is important to include family, whanau, caregivers, teachers and other specialists in the decisions for their educational provisions, as well as collecting information from the students. It is possible the same implementation formula that has been used to raise the profile of ICT in the schools, the 'ICT Clusters', could also be used for the implementation of gifted programmes within the school.

Mainstreamed programmes, however, are not all going to suit the varieties of personalities and needs that can be found within the gifted and talent community of learners. Some are going to still require input from beyond the traditional four walls. The use of ICT could benefit gifted and talented students, by putting them in touch with mentors, other students with similar interests and abilities and online courses that can supplement the basic school curriculum.

Cultural sensitivity can help the school and the home work together for the benefit of gifted students, to reach their potential and prepare them for great futures. The tide is rising in gifted education, but to create the depth we need in our harbours for some of our 'tall ships', we may need to dredge some of the channels! As George Herbert is thought to have said, 'A great ship asks deep waters' (1637, Hutchinson, 1941, p. 336).

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Endnote

- 1 *whanau* Traditionally this refers to an extended family. Also used in modern times to refer to the nuclear family. Can be used in both literal and figurative senses and is often applied to other groups of people or organisations.

Biographical notes

Debbie Smith is a New Zealand registered teacher currently completing her Masters in Education with Massey University, specialising in Gifted Education and Educational Technologies. She has a passion for assisting members of her profession to work with gifted students and has recently written a set of Gifted Education workbooks for teachers. She is a regular contributor to *Tall Poppies*, the magazine of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children. She has also worked on various Ministry of Education exemplar projects over the past few years.