Rethinking Practices for Gifted Young Children : A Collaborative Action Learning Project

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Introduction

The project reported in this paper took place in an independent school in an Australian capital city. The project was a collaboration between a teacher–researcher and a university-based researcher. The project was initiated because the school made a decision to support the implementation and development of policy and provisions for gifted students.

Why Early Childhood?

The project focus was in the preschool to Year 3 classes. This decision was made in the light of a strong body of research and agreement that early intervention is likely to offer the most significant benefits to gifted students (Harrison, 1995; Porter, 2000). The literature supports early intervention since gifted young children are more likely to experience loneliness and to underachieve because of the restricted age range of their peers; hence, underachievement may be prevented by early intervention (Porter, 1999, p.5).

Other researchers have highlighted the significance of early intervention for gifted children in order for them to realise their potential (Diezmann & Watters, 1997; Harrison, 1995; Kitano, 1990; McBride, 1988). Therefore, it was decided that the project reported in this paper would involve early childhood teachers.

Methods

After the administration of the initial questionnaire, the project involved the teachers in four half-day professional development sessions offered over two school terms. These sessions were developed in a collaborative fashion by the university-based researcher and the on-site teacher–researcher. The staff kept anecdotal records of their observations of children, and interacted with each other and with the school-based researcher as they needed to. The university-based researcher visited the school on three occasions to talk with teachers about their programs for gifted students and to provide professional support for the implementation of strategies to cater for gifted students. Each of the whole-group meetings was tape-recorded and transcribed, and field notes were also taken on each visit. A content analysis was applied to the transcripts and field notes to identify key themes and issues arising from the research. The questionnaire was repeated at the conclusion of the project.

The Teacher Participants

Five of the seven early childhood staff employed at the school agreed to become involved in this action research and professional development project. Those involved included one pre-primary teacher, three Year 1 teachers and one Year 2 teacher. The teacher–researcher was an on-site specialist teacher with an interest in gifted education. This teacher's role in the school was to develop intervention programs for children with special needs, and this was to include programs for gifted students. In this project, the teacher–researcher's role was to provide on-site support to the classroom teachers in the implementation of curriculum innovations, and to contribute to action learning group discussions.

The teachers who participated in the project had experience ranging from only one year to more than twenty-five years' experience in the classroom. None had any preservice training in gifted education, and two indicated that they had received some limited professional development.

At the inception of the project, teachers responded to a simple questionnaire that revealed that none of them had class policies in place to support special provision for gifted students, and none had developed or implemented formal strategies to differentiate the curriculum to any significant degree. None had specific strategies in place to identify gifted children, and nor did the school have a formal program of identification or intervention for gifted students.

Anecdotal comments from parents, made to the teacher–researcher, suggested that two of the teachers in particular were highly respected for their work with very able students. Both teachers felt that such a perception may have had more to do with their awareness and support for individual differences—this led to improved outcomes for all students, including very able ones.

The School Context

Because of the school's socioeconomic profile, students tended to be well resourced and have a high level of parent support, and most also tended to be high achievers academically.

The junior school policy on screening was similar to the policy of many other schools. General screening programs were avoided, and the testing of individuals tended to occur only after significant concern about levels of achievement had been raised by teachers or parents. There was a diagnostic assessment and support program available after students have been identified by their teachers as requiring such interventions. Hence, individual students' needs being diagnosed relied entirely on classroom teacher identification.

Screening programs did not occur as part of a whole (junior) school program, and no classrooms adopted a screening strategy. The rationale for this position was the belief that such a program may lead to labelling, with subsequent disadvantage to some students. Hence, at administration level, there was confidence that the classroom teachers would identify students at educational risk of failure or underachievement through more naturalistic tools such as classroom observation and work sample assessment.

At a school level there were no timetabling adjustments made to support cross-setting (ability grouping among students from mixed classes at the same year level) or cross-grading (gifted students placed in higher grades in order to work with students of similar ability in particular curriculum areas). In fact, both these approaches were discouraged. However, extra support was offered to lower ability and learning-disabled students, and to students with English as a second language, but not to gifted students.

The Classroom Focus

All students in the participants' classrooms tended to work at a standard pace in line with developmental expectations for age. However, according to teachers, there was a degree of enrichment offered in all classrooms (although extension beyond the year level tended not to occur). Nevertheless, the level of expectation was generally very high, because of the relatively large number of very able and motivated students in the classrooms.

There was also some work being done in some of these classrooms in the area of learning styles theory (Dunn & Dunn, 1992), increasing the likelihood that individual differences in learning style might be catered for. Students were encouraged to pursue special interests and to explore topics in learning centres or to work at more complex tasks, but this was generally after completing work set for the whole class.

The participating teachers were enthusiastic about their involvement in the project because they recognised that some gifted children in their classrooms were not formally identified, and that underachievement was probably occurring amongst those who were identified, as well as amongst those who were not. All teachers expressed, in their discussions with the researchers, dissatisfaction with the level of provision for gifted children that they perceived was occurring in their own classrooms.

Professional Development and Classroom-Based Action Research

There is evidence from studies reported by Lee (2000) and Smyth (2001) that initial teacher education does not adequately prepare early childhood professionals for the unique demands of working with gifted children.

Lee's (2000) study of sixteen early childhood teachers found that there is confusion regarding the nature of giftedness, appropriate methods for identifying gifted students, and the distinction between 'gifted' and 'bright'.

Competition for space in initial teacher education programs makes it difficult to ensure adequate preparation for teachers to cater for a diverse population of students—despite the purported benefits of the developmental outcomes focus enshrined in the *Curriculum Framework for Western Australian Schools* (Curriculum Council, 1998). Hence, graduating teachers feel inadequately prepared to cater for gifted children (Smyth, 2001).

This study examines teacher provision for gifted children and the role of action learning/research in developing strategies for catering for gifted young children. Through the course of this project teachers were asked to *reflect* on their existing practice, *rethink*—through action learning-based professional development—their programming and practices in relation to catering for gifted children, and then to *refocus* their efforts for the future. Subsequent sections of this paper are organised to highlight teachers' participation and responses to the project at each of these stages.

Reflecting

The initial task for the teachers was to reflect on their current practices in relation to gifted children. A simple questionnaire was given to each teacher and they were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. What in your opinion does it mean to be gifted?
2. How do you feel about catering for gifted children in your classroom?
3. What are some appropriate strategies to cater for gifted children's learning needs?
4. Are there issues about gifted children that you are particularly concerned about?

Teacher responses

Teacher responses to each question were collated. The results of this analysis are organised to facilitate a comparison before and after the action learning project (see Tables 1 and 2).

In response to the first question—What in your opinion does it mean to be gifted?—teachers in this study responded initially in the following ways:

- advanced skills in any of the multiple intelligences;
- special talents in one area or general high ability;
- leadership, creativity or intellectual ability;
- level of knowledge/learning speed above age peers;

- potential to achieve in one or more of the multiple intelligences.

Teacher responses to the second question—How do you feel about catering for gifted children in your classroom?—were as follows:

- happy to cater, but need practical ways of making it work;
- very inadequately equipped;
- it's my job to cater for all children's development;
- would appreciate more guidance and practical ideas;
- I need a lot more effective strategies.

The third question targeted teachers' existing strategies for catering for gifted students. The teacher responses included the following:

- open-ended learning activities;
- book review, research, reading challenging books;
- stimulate and excite children about learning;
- learning centres, games, hands-on tasks;
- problem-solving activities, research projects.

The teachers were challenged in subsequent professional development sessions to see these approaches as also appropriate for students achieving at an average level, and were asked to reflect on the extent to which their program was truly differentiated for gifted learners. As a result, most teachers agreed that their fundamental obstacle in differentiating curriculum was to resolve their professional position about teaching 'the basics'. Later in this paper we will highlight ways teachers were assisted to resolve their dilemma over teaching 'the basics' to students who had clearly already established mastery of them.

When teachers were asked in the fourth question to identify issues of concern in relation to gifted students, their responses highlighted how their concerns were mainly focused around identification and provision for gifted children; their concerns at the beginning of the project were:

- would love to see examples of best practice;
- identifying and meeting their needs;
- identifying which children are gifted;
- to be able to positively identify gifted children—not just a gut feeling or a whim;
- how to identify gifted children and strategies to cater for these children;
- classroom provision.

This last question was designed to provide the researchers with a focus for subsequent teacher

professional development and to give a sense of ways in which this project might be supportive of teachers. Hence, when the questionnaire was readministered at the conclusion of the project, this question was not included. Clearly, the priority areas for professional development, established from responses to this question, were *identification* of and *provision* for gifted students.

The strategy of teaching or providing experiences in the basics first, before any extension work was provided, was adopted by every teacher in this group. Braggett (1994) calls this the 'add-on' approach whereby children, regardless of their ability or mastery of particular content, are required to complete set whole-class work before they can undertake additional enrichment or extension tasks. Many gifted children report boredom and frustration as key factors in deterring their interests and engagement with school learning (Hall, 1996). We argue that the 'add-on' approach contributes significantly to the boredom and frustration experienced by many gifted students.

In identifying and discussing the problems surrounding such an approach to early childhood curriculum, one teacher, speaking of a gifted child in her class, said:

> He seems to have lost motivation to do the challenging work. We give extra challenges…after he's finished his work, but now he doesn't really want to do that *as well as* his work [our emphasis].

This student was clearly unwilling to go through the motions with work already mastered in order to gain the right to be challenged and extended. His response to the teacher's add-on approach in providing for his high ability was to withdraw his interest in the classroom program.

Typically, teachers identified that they were not catering for gifted children adequately but did not have the strategies to change this situation. One teacher stated: 'We're not getting to him…we're not meeting his needs. I don't quite know what to do about that.'

Hence the researchers identified two important factors arising from the analysis of the initial questionnaire: The first , the teachers' willingness to admit they were not equipped to meet the needs of the gifted students in their classes, and the second, their desire to develop their professional understandings in this area. These two components were identified by the researchers as essential prerequisites for meaningful change. It was thus decided that professional development based on action learning may assist teachers to make informed decisions about provision for gifted

children. This project facilitated such a process and allowed teachers and researchers to explore the possibilities in a supportive framework. The emphasis on action learning facilitated collegial support and a reflective cycle in which innovation and change became integral to teachers' practice.

Refocusing

The teachers each chose one gifted child to focus on, and each identified areas of priority for that child. Most of these priority areas were curriculum areas where the child was deemed to be not currently reaching her/his potential.

Initially, professional development sessions for the teachers focused on models of giftedness and suggestions for education provision; in particular, the following themes were discussed:

- Definitions and models of giftedness (Gagne, 1991; Renzulli, 1977; Sternberg, 1997);
- identification of gifted children (Burns, Matthews & Mason, 1990; Education Department of Western Australia, 1997);
- strategies for classroom provision and programming (Braggett, 1994; Renzulli, 1983);
- developing higher order thinking skills (Bloom, 1956).

The following examples highlight some of the strategies teachers were encouraged to trial in this project:

- curriculum compacting, or reviewing the requirement to do the basics for children who had already mastered these, ie. omitting, speeding up, modifying or replacing aspects of the program for gifted students (Braggett, 1994);
- enrichment, extension and acceleration;
- independent library research on a topic of interest;
- student self-selection of reading texts.

Having engaged with some of these theoretical frameworks and practical strategies, the teachers were keen to explore the practical implications of this in their daily programs by making innovations in the way they designed curriculum for gifted children. In essence, they were ready to start rethinking their existing practice in the light of new insights and ideas developed through the professional development phase of the research.

Rethinking

In group discussion, teachers grappled with the theory and sought support and clarification from their peers and the researchers. This was an intense

time, as the teachers confronted their own practice and acknowledged their desire to change their program, but also expressed some apprehension about making changes. Some of their concerns centred around questions like: What will the parents say? Will I have the support of school administration? How can I timetable these changes? Once these issues were discussed and resolved, the teachers then formulated plans based on the models they had learned about in the professional development sessions. Some of their selected strategies were:

- grouping children of similar abilities within year levels or across year levels for particular experiences (cross-setting and cross-grading);

- swapping reading and mathematics materials across year levels to better cater for individuals;

- providing enrichment materials for gifted children to work with *instead of* regular class activities (this contrasts with previous approaches in which children had to complete set class activities first).

After a full school term of trialing combinations of these strategies, teachers reported that the strategies were highly effective in improving student behaviour, motivation and engagement with learning. Some organisational issues about student access to other classes (cross-grading and cross-setting), and supervision of students visiting the library, were negotiated among teachers, and a high level of teacher collaboration was developed.

Dilemmas in Differentiating Curriculum

Most significant change in practice was evident where teachers had decided to move from an add-on approach to curriculum provision to an approach that changed the basics (Braggett, 1994) for children who had already mastered these. However, this was not achieved without some professional dilemmas.

Two teachers made comment on the dilemmas they faced in differentiating the curriculum for gifted students. These comments go to the heart of gifted provision and illustrate how notions of curriculum provision can be tied more to expectations regarding students' chronological age than to their individual and developmental differences:

> For me the whole concept of saying it's OK for them not to do the work that everyone else is doing...it's fine, you don't need to do that...enabling things to

happen...in their portfolio they don't have the work that everyone has, they've got something different.

One teacher expressed concern at the potential consequences of modifying curriculum for gifted students. Her concern centred around parents or school administration reacting negatively to a child being out of step with the rest of the class:

> I always feel guilty about it because I feel you've got to be quite sure that they understand the concept before you let them carry on with extension *because you are accountable*.

Clearly these are important issues, and this teacher was encouraged to use diagnostic tools to assess the child's level of mastery of particular concepts before moving ahead to more challenging work. In addition, she was encouraged to meet with parents and discuss her approach to programming using differentiated curriculum.

Final Questionnaire

At the conclusion of the project, teachers were asked to respond to the questionnaire a second time. Little or no change was recorded in response to the question: What in your opinion does it mean to be gifted? This reflects the emphasis of the professional development program on catering for previously identified gifted students rather than on identification per se. Hence, change in response to this question was minimal and could be anticipated given the emphasis of our project.

Considerable change, however, was noticed in the following questions: How do you feel about catering for gifted children in your classroom? and What are some appropriate strategies to cater for gifted children's learning needs? Table 1 and Table 2 are provided to facilitate a comparison with responses from the initial questionnaire. The responses have been pooled (Marton, 1981) and are not direct comparisons of individual teachers.

The reader will recall that it was decided not to ask the teachers to respond to the final question—Are there issues about gifted children that you are particularly concerned about?—in the concluding questionnaire. This question appeared only in the initial questionnaire to assist the researchers in identifying key areas for professional development and ways in which the research might best support the teachers.

Table 1
How Do You Feel About Catering for Gifted Children in Your Classroom

Initial Responses	Concluding Responses
Happy to cater, but need practical ways of making it work Very inadequately equipped It's my job to cater for all children's development Would appreciate more guidance and practical ideas I need a lot more effective strategies	More confident More comfortable about making simple changes in the classroom to cater for gifted children More motivated—this flowed on to the children

Table 2
What are Some Appropriate Strategies to Cater for Gifted Children's Learning Needs?

Initial Responses	Concluding Responses
Open-ended learning activities Book review research, reading challenging books Stimulate and excite children about learning Learning centres, games, hand-on tasks Problem-solving activities, research projects	Open-ended activities Independent research on topics of interest Questioning using Bloom's taxonomy—develop higher order thinking Ability grouping Learning centres Provide support for challenging tasks

What Issues Were Raised by the Teachers Involved in the Project?

During group discussions some issues became prominent. In particular, the concerns teachers expressed in relation to the implementation of curriculum innovations were centred around school-based accountability. This was seen as the major impediment to change. The dilemma for teachers was particularly problematic in areas where they were challenged to remove the basics from the program for children who had already mastered them. Their belief was that they were obligated to teach the basics first before providing extension work.

Another concern expressed by teachers about omitting the basics was centred on parent perceptions. Some teachers in the study described their concern that fee-paying parents expected the year level textbooks to be completed. These concerns were clearly based on school administration issues, and teachers were encouraged to meet with school administrators to discuss alternatives to the traditional lock-step methods they felt constrained to teach. Teachers were also encouraged to share texts across year levels to provide for the diversity of ability within each class.

Prior to their involvement in this project, every teacher in this group had been providing experiences in the basics before any extension or enrichment work was provided for gifted students. In identifying and discussing the problems surrounding such an approach to early childhood education, teachers identified that they were not catering for gifted children adequately but did not have the strategies to change this situation. One

teacher stated: 'We're not getting to him...we're not meeting his needs. I don't quite know what to do about that.'

Hence, the changes teachers introduced were facilitated by confronting a professional dilemma. Teachers were candid in their reflections of their original approach to teaching gifted children. They each identified that their original framework was ineffective in meeting the needs of students of high ability. What became an issue for the teachers as a result of confronting this was their concern about how others might perceive their professional stance on the issue of changing the basics for gifted children.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this study are profound in their simplicity. As a result of our involvement in this project we have concluded that providing teachers with professional support to trial innovations in curriculum provision for gifted students is highly effective. The provision of simple strategies empowers early childhood teachers to cater for gifted children, and the children respond favourably to these interventions. A related outcome of this is that teachers express a level of professional satisfaction at meeting the needs of gifted children they had not previously experienced.

Another finding of the research is that there is a considerable amount of uncertainty about how one might go about differentiating curriculum for gifted students. Teachers in this study were most apprehensive about issues of accountability and the perception by parents and administrators that they were introducing a 'classroom chaos' approach to curriculum. Teachers need the support and confidence of their colleagues to implement curriculum change. Indeed, individual teachers in this study were motivated by support from their colleagues and parents to try new ideas. Teachers said they found this support stimulating and engaging for them professionally.

Clearly, the support of school administration, staff and parents is essential to making such programs successful across the whole school, so that students who are gifted in early childhood may continue to realise their academic potential throughout their school life. Gifted students will benefit by experiencing the satisfaction of having their educational needs met in a flexible and differentiated learning environment.

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