

What does it 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 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*!

Here's where we need to note that even the word “gifted” bothers some people. But no-one seems to have come up with a generally acceptable alternative, either internationally or in this country.

Whatever the term used, what matters is that we recognise that children who fall into this category have some learning and developmental needs which are significantly different in various ways from those of most of their age peers.

Essentially, it's simply 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? 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?

But 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 international research into this complex human possibility, centuries of Māori tradition, and the insights from our own decades of work directly with gifted children and their families and communities.

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 most illuminating 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 most 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 such intense engagement will lead to advanced performance, at least in some areas of learning and performance.

But ability does not determine everything about how someone lives their life. It also makes sense that this intensity of perception will influence the *qualities* the individual develops - those attributes a person has that help to shape how they *feel* and *respond* to what they experience.

This too can emerge very early in life. Some actual examples: a four-year-old trying to unite his kindy playfellows in a litter campaign to stave off pollution, a three-year-old deeply distressed by realising the implications of an Anzac parade, an even younger child crying at how lonely trees must be when their leaves fall in winter.

Western definitions used by schools have largely overlooked the significance of this aspect of giftedness. Where it is acknowledged, it is mainly as a factor in identification, not as a fundamental and integral part of what it means to be gifted. And yet, as the above examples show, that is precisely what it is. We cannot understand or provide for the gifted child unless we accept the impact of this exceptional intensity on every aspect of their lives.

Uniquely, Māori culture has taken this understanding a crucial further step: in recognising someone's giftedness, the qualities that person has are considered first, *before* considering abilities.

Māori culture does this for the very practical and common-sense reason that 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.

This is an insight which originally developed within the close communal life Māori traditionally lived. In that situation it is clearly hugely important that those with the highest levels of ability and skill should be prepared to use those abilities and skills to ensure the welfare of the whole community. Thus we find Māori culture shaped by concepts such as manaakitanga (honouring, caring and serving others), whanaungatanga (keeping family values strong), kaitiakitanga (looking after the environment and resources), and wairuatanga (the importance of the spiritual dimension, linking past and present).

We live now in a vastly larger and more varied community. And yet these basic premises of Māori culture surely hold true in our larger community, indeed across all of society. It is surely true that the values of manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, kaitiakitanga and wairuatanga resonate across our 21st century lives. We must surely hope that our leaders and our most able fellow citizens will in various ways demonstrate guiding values like these in their lives and work.

So while our immediate concern is with identifying and supporting our gifted children while they are young and throughout childhood, we should also be aware that their giftedness will help shape their lives beyond school and on into adulthood, and we must ask ourselves how we can contribute positively to that future.

How does all this affect the gifted learner at school?

All children's abilities and qualities are reflected in their behaviour at school. It's very necessary for us to recognise that simple fact and to use that knowledge to help us understand and look after *all* the children in our care.

But 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 loathe all team games.

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, for example, 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: the longer view for the gifted child

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

Of course, we should at once acknowledge that all individuals, not just the gifted, begin at some stage to form some sort of vision of what they want or expect their future life to be. Often this relates to possible future occupations – one youngster is keen to be a mechanic and work with cars, another wants to go into the building trade, another dreams of being a fashion designer. Ideas may change as children grow up, but many such hopes are perfectly realistic and do become true.

Sometimes someone simply hopes for happiness and a peace that perhaps they have not known so far in life.

But gifted children often have a life vision which in some way is about *change*.

A life vision is a concept which gives someone a sense of purpose larger than themselves. It is about 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.” “Ka pakeke au ko tāku he roia, hei awahi i te iwi aku whanaunga, te iwi Māori” (“When I grow up, I want to be a lawyer to help my relations, family, and all Māori”). “When I grow up, I want to be a vet and help sick animals and stop people who hurt 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, are examples of such causes. In adulthood, those values can express themselves in creativity, in invention and discovery, in service, in leadership in the community, 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, not just for self, but for community and society also.

Above all, it is the ultimate outcome for the life of the gifted individual.

So in seeking to write a definition that will work for all of Aotearoa New Zealand, 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.

From this we have a basis for beginning to understand why the behaviours and responses we see in gifted children can sometimes be so different from those of their age peers, to see why this can create issues for them in their learning and in their relationships, and to see the need for us as teachers to look for strategies that will support these learners in their search for learning opportunities that match their different learning needs.