

Literature Review –

Concepts of Giftedness

- *A literature review of contemporary practices which inform educational provision for gifted Australasian indigenous students.*

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Abstract

Provision of effective educational programmes for gifted indigenous students within a dominant Eurocentric system has been a topic of pedagogic interest since the late 1980's. The focus and scope of this preliminary literature review is to explore the key player discourse which guides perception, practice and provision for gifted Australasian indigenous students since that time. It traces the influence of the discourse upon identification and provision procedures in Australasian schools. It concludes with a brief survey of research based approaches which describe the components of culturally sensitive alternative pedagogic practice.

Key Words: *Giftedness; Indigenous; Australasian*

Introduction

Research informs perception, policy and practice. Eurocentric methodologies perpetuate the myth of objectivity by inculcating the primacy of measurable outcomes within a supposedly level playing field. Linearity rules from research funding to pedagogic practice. A continuance of this situation results in significant marginalisation of communities which do not value such linearity. To thrive economically, socially and culturally, Australasian society cannot afford the continued dismissal of indigenous concepts of giftedness. An initial perusal of recent and current discourse which underpins gifted educational provision is timely.

Methodology

Criteria for text selection for the literature review included key word internet searches, perusal of library topic related texts, access to recent advisory and policy descriptors, conference notes, key player comment on the efficacy of current practice, practitioner comment and consideration of viable non-oppressive practices which recognise cultural diversity within the Australasian gifted community. A limitation of the methodology is that the topic is wide-

ranging and the word count is restrictive so critical review and quotation from sources to inform the discussion is constrained. A recommendation for a future review would be to create separate reviews to address the situation in each country but the comparison would be less effective and the focus on the common experience of the deleterious effects of the dominant hegemony would be diminished.

Background

Until recent times, the gifted educational arena has been dominated by linear identification and provision methodology which is premised on the collection of statistical data relating to cognitive ability usually expressed in IQ test: Wechsler Tests of intelligence, Stanford Binet Test, Woodcock Johnston Tests (Wechsler, 2003, Flanagan, 2012). Intense scrutiny of validity and freedom from bias are key components. Objectivity is its goal. Only 'Hard data' (European / American IQ tests, Teacher Observation Scales, test results) is admissible. Such vocabulary is redolent with Eurocentric post Enlightenment emphasis which relegates subjective tools (Parent/whanau input, cultural values recognition, interviews) as lacking in validity which is defined as solely quantifiable data. Nomination for inclusion in gifted programmes is predicated upon this data. Only those students who meet the selected criteria are admissible. Programme provision is designed in ways which reinforce the dominant Eurocentric paradigm as it is focussed on extension and enrichment or compacting of the existing curriculum. Evaluation of programme success is often limited to teacher observation which in turn reinforces a continuation of current practice. As there is little out of school consultation about efficacy of programme provision, the 'Praxis makes perfect' model continues. We can see a clear line of demarcation from linear research to pedagogic practice; a monocultural perspective which results in a paralysis of hope within indigenous communities.

Discussion

We begin by consideration of Australian gifted educational provision. Investigation is complicated by the federal structure of Australia. Each state acts autonomously so it is challenging to gain an insight into the Australian perspective. The main advisory group is the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) The council's parliamentary submission on gifted educational provision shows a clear preference for quantifiable identification data as the exclusive arbiter of giftedness.

Identification of giftedness has been limited by inconsistent and problematic assessment. Objective assessment is an important factor in the identification of academically able students but such assessment should have appropriate research-proven validity, reliability, sensitivity and reference range. (ACER, 2011)

There is a scarcity of research into the efficacy of provision for gifted students and that which does exist focusses on the monoculture practises of identification, provision and evaluation. These include tests of achievement related to curriculum content which is Eurocentric as evidenced in the policy statements. A typical example is the New South Wales advisory. (New South Wales Department of Educational & Communities, 2011) which demonstrates a preoccupation with curriculum differentiation. The curriculum descriptors in the support package for teachers reveal the monocultural focus. A perusal of documents relating to gifted educational provision in Australian schools shows that cognitive development is the focus. There is scarce mention of the assessment of affective abilities valued by the indigenous population as indications of giftedness. Concerns have been raised about equity, if the sole consideration is the dominant monocultural focus on assessments of student curriculum understanding or cognitive ability, based on verbal reasoning and perceptual ability as described in the standard IQ tests.

The argument developed views equity, in relation to assessment, as more of a sociocultural issue than a technical matter. It highlights how teachers need to distinguish the 'funds of knowledge' that Indigenous students draw on and how teachers need to adopt culturally responsive

pedagogy to open up the curriculum and assessment practice to allow for different ways of knowing and being. (Klenowski, 2009)

For indigenous students, the primary literature focus is on underachievement and this deficit model impacts upon the perception of teachers who also play a significant part in the identification of gifted students (Chaffey, Bailey and Vine 2003). Societal concepts of giftedness limit Aboriginal giftedness to music and art rather than intellectual prowess. This colonial legacy creates “a minority status” (Ogbu, 1994) which affects nomination procedures. Chaffey (2002) calls for identification procedures which assess learning potential rather than achievement levels but this is not current practice in Australian schools. The identification tools are not aligned to minority concepts of giftedness. Identification exclusivity ensures that Aboriginal students remain consistently unrepresented in gifted educational programmes.

Baldwin (as cited in NSW Department of Education and Training, 2006) says “It is of grave concern that students who are socially disadvantaged or Aboriginal are under-represented in gifted educational programs”. This paper discusses the factors associated with failure to recognise giftedness through traditional methods of identification, in particular the use of one-off standardised tests and teacher nomination.

Identification of giftedness remains firmly within the boundaries of quantifiable verification and teacher nomination. Thus the trinity of research referenced advisory recommendations, societal expectations and teacher nomination procedures ensure that identification of gifted students remains Eurocentric, despite availability of alternatives such as the Coolabah Dynamic assessment tool (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2006) which favours a mixed assessment procedure consisting of quantifiable and more culturally sensitive qualitative procedures. It is part of the WII GAAY project (Merrotsy, 2008) which attempts to address the needs of indigenous gifted students. Yet even this lauded project is of limited value as it teaches Aboriginal students how to succeed within the established Eurocentric

provision; it coaches the students in ways to improve their test scores so that they can gain access. This is referred to as removing “cognitive barriers”. A reading of the project descriptor also reveals the suggestion that successful students need to go beyond their cultural roots rather than embracing them, an implied criticism of the indigenous students’ culture.

Provision of educational programmes for gifted and talented Australian children entrenches the Eurocentric exclusivity as they are primarily focussed on curriculum based ability grouping and acceleration in academic subjects. This approach, it is claimed, is supported by a wide research base (Kulik, 1992). The ‘Ways of Knowing’ are limited to main stream Australian knowledge which is Western oriented, scientifically dominant and factually driven. Curriculum tests of achievement favour this perspective and so ability grouping persists as a typical form of gifted educational provision. Academic acceleration programmes are similarly tainted by a Western perspective which favours Eurocentric knowledge and test achievement as the arbiter of excellence. Some states adopt the Gagné model of provision which addresses affective giftedness. I could find little reference in policy statements to specific adaptation of provision for indigenous students. Without specific cultural adaptation, I believe the model is not likely to be suitable for indigenous students. The Australian Catholic Education Office position paper also refers to the Gagné model and the opening statement suggests that indigenous student needs will be met:

“All students regardless of race, age or gender, by virtue of their dignity as human persons, have a right to an education that is suited to their particular needs and adapted to their ability.” (Catholic Education Office, 2007)

The paper does make reference to the use of objective and subjective assessment tools and there is also identification of low self-efficacy as a cause of under achievement but other than the inclusion of photos which show Aboriginal students, there is no specific reference to addressing cultural needs.

Perusal of the dominant discourse relating to Aboriginal educational performance reveals persistent academic underachievement and educational disengagement within indigenous communities. The barriers are described as socio economic and cognitive (Chaffey, 2008). Detailed analysis of this literature is beyond the scope of this limited literature review. However, a comment on the tone of this research is appropriate. There is repeated emphasis on the need to remove these socio economic and cognitive barriers before Aboriginal educational achievement can be realised. This long view is of concern as is the suggestion that Aboriginal culture promotes disengagement. Such a perspective is likely to result in a continued Eurocentric provision and a "blame the victim" mentality and a loss of cultural esteem within the indigenous gifted community. Gibson (as cited in Garvis, 2006) stated that:

"Aboriginal community understanding of giftedness is limited. Gifted Aboriginal students may receive little encouragement from peers and family. Students who have the capacity for academic success at school find that their parents, siblings and particularly their peers give little or no encouragement."

What is evident is that consideration of Aboriginal aspiration and gifted educational provision is marginal and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

An initial perusal of provision for gifted indigenous students in New Zealand is, at first glance, a little better in terms of supportive research described below and government funded advisory documents which gives voice to Māori cultural perspectives of giftedness (Te Kete Inuring, n.d) but there is little previous evidence of significant improvement at classroom practitioner level as the Educational Review Office found.

The majority of schools did not adequately take into account Māori or multi-cultural concepts in their definition of giftedness and talent. Most of these schools had not considered Māori or multi-cultural concepts of giftedness and had not established school-whānau networks to help

them understand and incorporate these concepts. In some schools, Māori beliefs and perspectives were included in definitions, but there was little practical application of these in programmes or in strategies for delivery. (Educational Review Office, 2008)

To trace this disengagement from research base, recommended inclusive provision through to classroom practice we begin in the late 1980's when consistent research emerged which identified concerns about inclusive practices within the gifted educational community. Reid (1989) identified monocultural provision and reliance on test results as significant barriers to the identification of gifted Māori students. He also suggested that cultural disengagement was a contributing factor but this observation was refuted by later research which suggested that the latter observation resulted from a misunderstanding of cultural perspectives (Bevan-Browns, 1993).

It is my experience as a practitioner, that Eurocentric provision and reliance on quantifiable data and testing continues as the current norm within the New Zealand gifted educational community so little has changed since those initial observations. Te Kura requires a 95% or better score in Progressive Achievement Tests for Literacy and Maths as the threshold for inclusion in their gifted and talented programme. Most schools insist upon quantifiable evidence from an educational psychologist, preferably IQ tests. The most commonly used IQ tests are Stanford Binet and Wechsler. They focus on linguistic proficiency and perceptual reasoning. There is no assessment of affective ability which is a key indicator of Māori giftedness. Another provider of gifted programmes is The Gifted Education Centre which runs One Day School. Their entry requirement includes the Woodcock Johnson Test and the cost of attendance is significant.

Another form of nomination for inclusion in gifted programmes is teacher recommendation. The problem is that teachers are educated within the dominant hegemony which is likely to create a cultural lens, affecting teacher insight into and consciousness of Māori cultural values, concepts of giftedness and aspirations. Consistent research points to the importance of teacher awareness of and respect for cultural identities and ways of valuing giftedness.

More culturally sensitive observations scale such as Mac Alpine & Reid's Teacher Observations Scales for identifying children with Special Abilities are rarely cited as evidence of good practice (McAlpine & Moltzen, 1996).

A further problem is the deficit learning focus highlighted in a number of Ministry of Education advisories. As a school principal I was required by the Ministry to provide annual data on the achievement of Māori students in particular as they were considered to be at risk of educational failure. This deficit focus perpetuates the perception that Māori students are poor learners and these impacts upon teacher perception and consequently on the self-efficacy of students in their care.

This deficit theorising by teachers is the major impediment to Māori students' educational achievement for it results in teachers having low expectations of Māori students. This in turn creates a downward spiralling, self-fulfilling prophecy of Māori student achievement and failure (Ministry of Education, 2003).

The Pygmalion effect of teacher expectation impacts negatively upon the performance of indigenous students (Cooper & Good, 1983) it is unlikely that students will perform well in an educational setting which is not conducive to cultural safety. Bevan-Brown (2009) lists the attributes which describe the Māori concept of giftedness but these are not well represented in standardised identification tools. Thus a lack of cultural safety, negative teacher perception and inappropriate identification contribute to a diminished nomination of Māori students for inclusion in gifted educational programmes.

Programme provision is no less problematic. A tiresome protracted debate on whether to extend or enrich is almost exclusively focussed on the curriculum which is, for the most part, that of the dominant culture. Jenkins asserts that programme design and implementation is still largely Eurocentric, reflecting that conception of giftedness (Jenkins, H., Macfarlane, A., & Moltzen, R., 2004). If there is no culturally appropriate content in the programmes provided, then there is little chance that students will engage. I believe that

such a situation may result in either alienation from the programme or acceptance of it but with the nuance that the student's culture is not of worth since it is not included. Thus the primacy of the Eurocentric concept of giftedness is reinforced.

Once again Bevan-Browns (2009) provides an insight into provision for gifted indigenous students in her article for APEX Publication. Bevan-Browns posits that the Māori definition of giftedness differs significantly from the accepted New Zealand definition and that this difference in conception. She discusses strategies for indigenising gifted programme provision and most of the suggestions relate to teacher perception and practice. A number of researchers cited above emphasis the need for professional development for teachers which will allow them to become conscious of the need to identify indigenous gifted students and to provide appropriate provision for students in ways which support cultural self-esteem. One form of professional development is attendance at conferences which explore the needs of gifted students. During 2013 New Zealand was given the immense honour of hosting The World Council for Gifted and Talented Children (WCGTC) 20th Biennial World Conference, one of the most prestigious international gatherings of the gifted community. The conference was titled "The Soul of Giftedness" and its focus was on affective needs of gifted students.

Our conference is designed to focus on the emotional, social, spiritual, cultural, and ethical development of gifted, creative, and talented young human beings. (Council for Gifted and Talented Children, 2012)

A preconference target article by the president Taisir Subhi Yamin (2012) entitled 'Cultural Bias in Giftedness Research: A Road Map for Cultural Sensitivity' set the tone of the conference. A perusal of his article reveals a strong focus on cultural diversity and the need to provide for indigenous gifted students. Sadly, it did not take place in New Zealand. It was moved to America where financial support was provided.

It is with immense regret that the New Zealand Planning Committee announces the cancellation of the 20th World Conference for Gifted and Talented Children on ‘The Soul of Giftedness,’ planned for August, 2013. Despite sustained and immense efforts, we have been unable to find the sponsorship funding necessary to covering the costs of this conference. (The Soul of Giftedness, 2013)

I mention this conference failure to highlight the gap between visionary Ministry statements about inclusivity and the practical realities within New Zealand society and at class room level, realities which I faced as a teacher within the state educational system. It is my belief that there is currently neither the political nor the societal will to effect significant change to the status of Māori gifted students.

Nevertheless, there is hope on the horizon in the form of recent research projects which provide alternative discourses and suggest a way forward. One of the most influential is ‘Māori students experiencing success: a pilot research project’ (McRae, MacFarlane, Webber, Cookson-Cox, 2010) which is action based research. The research team addresses a key problem, that of deficit thinking which relegates indigenous students to low academic status. The perception influences teacher expectation and diminishes the likelihood of nomination for inclusion in gifted education programmes. The research team highlighted the need for recognition of personal attributes as key characteristics of successful learners:

- Discipline and self-efficacy
- Self and cultural confidence
- Reciprocity

It also places importance on the role of teachers and school management which support the aspirations of their students. As a roadmap for successful engagement and achievement it is a significant addition to current discourse on educational provision for indigenous students.

Bevan-Browns’ (2012) more recent work also provides insight into the Māori concept of giftedness and into ways of providing effectively for Māori gifted

students within the existing provision. Table one describes the Māori concept of giftedness in a succinct manner with the added comment:

These components show many areas of convergence with western, majority culture concepts of giftedness. There are, however, some notable differences, for example, group giftedness. This refers to the notion that giftedness emerges as a result of ‘people working together’.

Although it is not addressed specifically at gifted student needs, implementation of the Ministry funded Hikitia programme in 2008 – 2012 also offers useful strategies for addressing the needs of aspirational Māori students within the dominant hegemony but it is too early to assess the efficacy of this evidence based approach.

Summary

Gifted indigenous students walk between two worlds. This experiential dichotomy currently results in loss of self-efficacy within the affected communities since indigenous concepts of giftedness are not fully embedded within gifted educational practice and provision. While there is evidence of promising approaches to the indigenising of gifted educational provision, these recommendations are not yet of sufficient acceptance and dissemination to influence significantly current practises in Australasian schools which are largely premised upon the dominant paradigm of Eurocentric provision. While some acknowledgement of the needs of indigenous students is given in advisory and policy documents, a preoccupation with the deficit model of educational provision for indigenous students is still evident. This negativity impacts upon teacher perception, practice and provision. Until there is societal recognition and acceptance of the concept of indigenous giftedness, significant change is, I believe, unlikely. It is to be hoped that further investigation of educational provision for gifted indigenous students will elucidate the pathway to equity and provision of culturally appropriate educational practice and provision for students, as society cannot afford the loss of such talent and leadership.

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