Mrs Michele Whitby

I am a four year trained primary teacher with more than ten years experience in educational settings. I am a Master of Education (Special Educational Needs) student while at home with my three young, intelligent children.

It is a given that the students that collectively comprise a class group will have a range of interests and insights, strengths and weaknesses. It is also a given that, almost without exception, a teacher is willing, and more or less competent in adapting the curriculum in order to make it accessible for students operating at the lower than average end of the spectrum. The same cannot be said in regards to students found to be achieving at an above average level; and much less so for students we would label as gifted. There is a definite need to redress this imbalance, to ensure that all students are able to access stimulating, challenging curriculum that motivates, extends and builds upon their knowledge, so that they might enter the world with a greater awareness of who they are as learners, thinkers and contributors to society.

Schools, both government and non-government, purport to providing an education program that caters for the specific, individual needs of each learner, however the degree to which this occurs varies tremendously between schools, and the degree to which the special needs of gifted students in particular are catered for is discouragingly low in comparison to the way in which the special learning needs of students operating at the lower end of the spectrum are catered for. A myriad of explanations and excuses could be offered to explain this, but at the heart of the matter, the reason that gifted students are not adequately catered for in an educational setting is because the vast majority of teachers are simply not trained in this area. In my four year undergraduate degree, the learning needs of gifted students was covered in one lecture, whilst adaptation of curriculum for less able students was covered in one lecture, whilst adaptation of curriculum for less able students was a regular discussion throughout the course.

Schools “have a commitment to ensure that the potential of each student is recognised, nurtured and developed through the provision of a relevant education which stimulates growth and helps students to realise their full potential.” (MOE, Singapore). The need to cater for gifted students is a response to a School’s Policy that all children deserve to have their learning needs met, intellectually, emotionally and socially.
Three main arguments are commonly used to justify Gifted Education programs (‘Advanced Studies in Gifted Education Reader’, 2009). All offer valid justifications as to the importance of educating the gifted, though the strength of any one argument alone leaves room for opponents to easily disregard the information presented. Together, these arguments provide a strength that is difficult to ignore.

The first argument suggests that by providing a curriculum that is challenging, stimulating and motivating to the brightest students, teachers can avoid the pitfalls faced when dealing with an indifferent, disengaged (non) learner. This behaviour management rationale aims to increase the participation level of gifted students in the classroom, ensuring that they are engaged, focused and learning. Winebrenner (2000) argues that over recent years significant efforts regarding curriculum modification and adaptation have occurred to ensure the content is accessible for students operating at the lower end of the spectrum, whilst for gifted students, the opposite is true. If we are to legitimately cater for the learning needs of gifted students, we must recognise that the difference in ability between an average and gifted student, is the same as that between an average and retarded student (Winebrenner, 2000; Gottfredson, et al Colangelo & Davis, 2003).

The second argument is basic; it is the fundamental right of all students to receive education that caters for their individual needs, based on their strengths and weaknesses. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) argue that “Children's academic and artistic gifts and talents must be systematically encouraged and thoughtfully supported to allow them to reach their full potential.” The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore suggests that it is “not sound practice to give every student the same education and expect him/her to move at the same pace as his/her peers.” And yet, more often than not, in relation to gifted students, this is precisely what is lacking.

Winebrenner (2000) argues that while much attention has been given to students who are not learning, very little has been given to students who are gifted, because, she suggests, (some) gifted students tend to perform well on assessments: the assumption being that learning is occurring, as opposed to the assessment being a reflection of the student’s prior knowledge. A requirement for teachers to be trained in being able to identify gifted students and to effectively cater for their educational needs is fundamental in addressing this situation.

A final argument proposes implications for broader society: that the educating of gifted students will have significance on inventions, discoveries, creations and ideas that are yet to be made. By educating high achieving students, we are ensuring the possibility of our country’s ability to compete and contribute in a world wide market. Whilst this may appear to be a politically motivated argument, it is an important one: Renzulli (2003) argues that by developing ‘social capital’, communities benefit in terms of civility and prosperity, and that an expansion of the definition of giftedness is required, beyond that of those who perform well on paper and pen tests, in order for
society to be able to tap into “a rich source of potentially gifted contributors in a broad and diverse population of non-selected students...”.

These arguments make direct appeals to the teacher, the individual and the broader community of the importance of educating gifted students, from positions that are held by three distinct audiences. The current overwhelming need of gifted education advocates to continue to persuade and push for gifted education programs is a reflection of the resistance still commonplace in our educational settings, and of the negative attitude and myths that pervade the community at large.

**MYTHS**

Myths abound in relation to gifted education, and unless considered and refuted, will fuel an argument against gifted education into the future. Winner (1996) offers for consideration eight myths that create a false view of giftedness and gifted programs. The following four are ones I argue that we as teachers commonly hold to, and need to rethink.

The first is the idea that a person gifted in one particular academic domain will be gifted in all curriculum areas: that gifted students are “Globally Gifted”. The reality is that giftedness is often specific to a subject area, and that a student can be gifted in one area while having learning difficulties in another. A gifted musician is no less likely to have, for example, a language disorder than a non gifted counterpart. Teachers need to be able to identify and recognise a student's strengths as well as weaknesses, seeing through a disability which be hiding a true gift (NAGC).

The underachievement of gifted students is an area of concern. Teachers need to be aware that gifted student who are bored and disinterested in the classroom due to a lack of challenge, may not be performing to the best of their ability, and as such, the results and achievements of that student may not reflect their giftedness at all. For other gifted students, the desire to fit in with their peers and not stand out as ‘different’ encourages them to hide their true abilities, ‘dumbing themselves down’ so as to fit in. Supportive teachers are required in both these situations so that gifted students can feel encouraged, understood and recognised, ensuring that their many hours in the school environment are relevant, stimulating and motivational.

Frustration can lead to a gamut of behavioural issues in the classroom, for all students, not just the gifted, and therefore teachers need to be adequately trained and supported in understanding the needs of all learners.

Another myth that Winner argues against is the differentiating between the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’. The ‘talented’ in the title “Gifted and Talented Program” could perhaps be renamed “Gifted Program” in order to avoid people wishing to make a distinction between those two adjectives. Winner (1996) dismisses the myth that ‘giftedness’ relates to academic domains only, whilst highly capable musicians,
artists, sportsmen are ‘talented’. She argues that the characteristics present in a
gifted person are not domain dependent: the gifted musician and mathematician
alike demonstrate precocity, independence and obsessive interest within their areas
of giftedness.

That a person must be in possession of a high IQ in order to be gifted is a nonsense.
An exceptional IQ is indicative of intellectual competence, but excludes many other
areas in which a person may be gifted. Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences offer eight
domains in which a person may display giftedness, three of which are certainly not
reliant upon a high intellect: the domains of bodily / kinaesthetic, musical / rhythmic
and visual / spatial. The dancers, musicians and artists of the world may indeed be
highly intelligent, but their ability to achieve greatness in their field is not a reflection
of intellect, but of great kinaesthetic, musical or artistic talents.

A final, dangerous myth opposed by Winner is that gifted children become eminent
adults. As educators, we must question how much of this is due to the personality
and character of the child, and how much is the result of the gifted child not being
catered for throughout their many years of formal schooling, more than half of which
is in kindergarten or primary years.

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) website asks whether or not we
would ask a gifted athlete to prepare for competition at an elite level without a coach,
and compares this situation with that of the gifted child who is presumed to be able
to succeed as an adult without the input, encouragement and guidance required to
help them develop further in the area they are gifted in. The argument that gifted
children will make great accomplishments unaided, merely because they are gifted,
is weak.

Winner purports that only a handful of gifted children go on to become gifted adults,
changing and re-shaping the domain they are gifted in significantly. She argues that
the gifted individual’s personality is fundamental in indicating which children do or do
not go on to become eminent adults in their field, as opposed to a difference in level
of ability – elements of risk-taking, non-conformity, discontent, depressive or manic
natures playing an important role.

Un-catered for gifted children perhaps never reach their potential as adults as they
have unachieved for a significant amount of time, and see no purpose in changing
that pattern in later life. Gifted children perhaps become uninspired adults who have
grown tired of their ‘childhood passion’, or see no ‘adult’ value in it, and their gift
becomes nothing more than a hobby at best. Other children, having perhaps been
pushed to excel, refuse to do so when the power is in their own hands.

Winner also debates four additional myths such as the idea of giftedness being
‘created’ by either a pushy parent, or by either hard work or an innate ability; the
proposal that gifted children demonstrate excellent psychological health, and also
the idea that all children are ‘gifted’. These too are arguments that should be
considered by teachers seeking to broaden their understanding of the issues related to gifted education, particularly these myths that impact on the development, resourcing and implementation of such programs.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Winebrenner (2000) suggests that teacher training is the reason behind an educators seeming unwillingness to cater for the needs of gifted students. Teachers without training in this area make assumptions and perpetuate the myths surrounding gifted students: for example, that they require little assistance, cannot be gifted if they have a learning disability, that if they are gifted in one area, they are gifted in all areas.

The importance of improving the quality of teacher training, or indeed, encouraging teachers to further their own professional development in the area of gifted education, is paramount to the success of any gifted program. The NAGC argue that whilst teachers do their best in relation to catering for gifted students, many of them have little training and are unfamiliar with the specific learning needs of such students. Perhaps it is the misconceptions, the elitist view of gifted education that sees more than enough teachers receiving training in order to better cater for struggling students, while the number of teachers interested in catering for the special needs of gifted students is left wanting.

If teachers are to effectively cater for the learning needs of gifted students, it is fundamental that they are able to identify students who are potentially gifted. Both subjective and objective measures must be used in identification. The following professional development, much of which is based on subjective observations, is imperative for teachers in identifying gifted students:

- Knowledge of Winner’s four characteristics of gifted students (Winner, 1996)
  Teachers need to be aware of the characteristics demonstrated by gifted students as suggested by Winner, being precocity, independence, being creative and having an obsessive interest.

- Knowledge of how gifted students learn.
  Teachers need to know that gifted students learn differently from other students. Winebrenner suggests five fundamental differences that teachers need to be aware of: learning content quicker; remembering what they have learnt; demonstrating more abstract and complex thinking skills; being passionate about specific topics; functioning on multiple levels of concentration at the same time.

- Knowledge of underachieving gifted students
Teachers need to be aware that, for a variety of reasons, gifted students can be underachievers. An underachieving student is not necessarily gifted, but the reverse is also not true. Teachers need to be able to see beyond lack of effort and poor results in order to discover a student’s true ability.

- Knowledge of the twice exceptional student.

Teachers need to be aware that a student is capable of being both gifted in one area whilst having learning difficulties in another; a learning disability does not annul being gifted.

- Knowledge of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences.

Teachers must be aware that exceptional academic ability is not the only form of giftedness, and that students gifted in other domains often remain unidentified.

Objective measures, such as formal testing, should also be used in identifying gifted students, though teacher should be aware of the limitations of such tests in truly identifying gifted students who may also have learning disabilities, or be from a disadvantaged background.

Formal tests (www.dest.gov.au) that could be used include:

- IQ test such as the WISC-IV or the WISC-III and the Standford Binet-V test
- Aptitude tests such as the OLSAT, Henman-Nelson or Kaufman
- Standardised tests such as PAT Maths, PAT English or TORCH
- Raven’s Standard Progressive Matrices (RSPM)
- Teacher assessment of topics

Sousa (2003) suggests some other indicators that could be effectively used by teachers in the initial identification of potentially gifted students, following high performance in one or more areas:

- Leadership ability: displaying exceptional interpersonal abilities in order to achieve group goals, or to lead individuals an agreed decision.
- Creative and productive thinking: students demonstrate an ability to think beyond the norm, are able to relate unrelated concepts and are able to develop new meanings.

Other methods of identifying gifted students that could be used by include the following as suggested by Deakin University’s Bright Sparks Professional Development program, though the use of some dependant upon beliefs about giftedness or limitations of the school. (’Advanced Studies in Gifted Education Study Guide’, 2009, p. 15, Deakin University, Geelong)

- Self nomination
- Multiple intelligences self-report
TEACHING STRATEGIES TO EMPLOY

For teachers to be successful in the teaching of highly able students, they need to be familiar with a range of strategies proven to be effective in curriculum delivery. Teachers need to demonstrate flexibility and open-mindedness about employing different teaching approaches, and also a respect for the special abilities of the gifted students they are teaching. If teachers are to confidently and effectively attempt to provide for the educational needs of gifted students within their classrooms, a minimum of 12 hours professional development is recommended (Vantassel-Baska).

Gifted students require work that is unusually complex and challenging. Dr Miraca Gross, Professor of Gifted Education from the University of Sydney, points out that the specific characteristics and needs of very able students should be taken into account in any curriculum that is designed for them. In all cases however, they need:

- A climate where they can take risks and make mistakes.
- To work from their strengths.
- An element of choice.
- Challenging activities.
- Opportunities for creativity and student initiated activities.
- To be encouraged to achieve excellence.
- Curriculum content that is rigorous and beyond the scope of the regular classroom.”

Sousa (2003) argues that the curriculum modification, adaptation or replacement, and by moving gifted students beyond the level expected by their peers is essential practice in catering for the learning needs of gifted students. Likewise, he suggests that differentiation of the processes, products and environment are also fundamental aspects of curriculum delivery. Gifted students need to be taught using learning strategies the allow for depth and complexity; Renzulli argues that teachers need to present instruction so that it engages students in different kinds of thinking: analytical, creative and practical. They need to be provided opportunities to develop their giftedness, and present any discoveries to an audience that can appreciate the outcome, and they need to be able to work independently, but also collaboratively.

Gifted students learn at a greater pace than their peers (Clark 1996), and so need to be able to access content and/or instruction that is beyond the upper level of the
class, whether in or outside of the physical classroom. The following teaching strategies will form an effective toolkit for any teacher hoping to motivate, challenge and develop a gifted student.

- Knowledge of how to develop an Individual Education Plan (Toll).

- Teaching and using higher order thinking skills: the higher three levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, analysis, synthesis and evaluation should be a part of a gifted student’s curriculum (Toll).

- Problem based learning opportunities which ensure the learning is relevant, more meaningful and engaging.

- Triarchic approach: teachers need to present instruction so that it engages students in different kinds of thinking: analytical, creative and practical, while solving problems (Renzulli).

- Use of the Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli).

- Curriculum compacting (Toll).

- Divergent thinking (Toll).

- Special Interest Centres (Braggett, cited in Frydenberg & O’Mullane).

- Acceleration (Braggett, cited in Frydenberg & O’Mullane)

- Supplementary Programs (Braggett, cited in Frydenberg & O’Mullane)

- Other organisations such as Tournament of the Minds, Maths Olympiad, (Braggett, cited in Frydenberg & O’Mullane)

- Early entrance and exit (Sousa)

- Telescoping (Sousa)

- Advanced study program through universities (Sousa).

- Acceleration through technology (Sousa)

- Within-class ability grouping (Sousa)
- Pull-out grouping (Sousa)
- Full-time ability grouping (Sousa)
- Independent work grouping (Sousa)
- Flexible pacing
- Differentiated curriculum
- Ability grouping
- Time-tabling, which allows students to attend classes at a higher year level
- Individual Education Programs
- Individual support
- Mentoring

No one approach, no one strategy is going to effectively cater for the educational needs of all gifted students, and as such, teachers should equip themselves with a range of techniques in an attempt to as effective as possible, to all students, each and every time they stand in front of a class and call themselves ‘teacher’.

This range of organisational structures is broad and as such offers many choices for gifted students and their teachers. Opportunity is provided for individual, inclusive, cooperative and competitive learning experiences, and this balance, on paper, ensures that gifted students with different learning needs and preferences will all be structurally catered for. (‘Advanced Studies in Gifted Education Study Guide’, 2009, pp. 26-27, Deakin University, Geelong)

CONCLUSION

Schools must continue to be leaders in the development and provision of gifted education programs, by ensuring staff are confident and skilled in teaching students, gifted or not, and by undertaking to regularly reflect on the way teachers do what they do. Ensuring that professional development in the area of giftedness is provided to each and every teacher, so that they might become capable, confident and perhaps exemplary, is imperative.
It is encouraging that as time passes, the interest in gifted education increases; as myths are demystified, as giftedness is understood as a ‘special need’, as school communities strive to improve their ability to cater for and value gifted students, so will gifted students strive to be their best, to achieve the great things that they are capable of, and which inspire us all.
REFERENCES


Colangelo, N. & Davis, G.A. 2003, Handbook of Gifted Education, 3rd edn., Allyn and Bacon, Boston, USA


Gottfredson, L.S., The Science and Politics of Intelligence in Gifted Education in N. Colangelo & G.A. Davis (Eds.), 2003, Handbook of Gifted Education, 3rd edn., (pp.24-38), Allyn and Bacon, Boston, USA


Gross, M. U. M., 2001, Gifted Students in Primary Schools: Differentiating the Curriculum, GERRIC, UNSW, Sydney, Australia


Olszeswki-Kubilius, P., Special Summer and Saturday Programs for Gifted Students in N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), 2003, Handbook of Gifted Education, 3rd edn., Allyn and Bacon, Boston, USA


Schiever, S. W. & Maker, C. J., New Directions in Enrichment and Acceleration in N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), 2003, Handbook of Gifted Education, 3rd edn., Allyn and Bacon, Boston, USA

Sousa, D., 2003, How the gifted brain learns, Corwin Press Inc., California, USA


Winner, E. 1996, Gifted Children: myths and realities, Basic Books, New York, USA

WEBSITES

www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/gifted-education-programme/rationale

www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=569

www.nags.org/index.aspx?id=538