GIFTEDNESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

THE SEARCH FOR
COMPLEXITY AND CONNECTION

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A portfolio submitted in the fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
at
University of Western Sydney
2003
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
GIFTEDNESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Catherine Anne Harrison B.Ed (Early Childhood) M.Ed

The University of Western Sydney, 2003

This portfolio documents an investigation of the nature of giftedness during the early childhood period of birth to eight years. It provides an in-depth exploration of a number of developmental domains including social, emotional, spiritual and cognitive development. Aspects of play and learning for young gifted children are also investigated. This exploration provides rich description of the experience of being gifted during early childhood and offers new insights into the early development of the gifted child. It documents aspects of this development such as spirituality, previously given little consideration within early childhood texts. The use of both child and parent voices provide insight to the realities of the lived experience of being young and gifted. The notion of giftedness as 'the search for complexity and
connection' is proposed as a valuable construct to raise awareness of the nature of giftedness in early childhood.

The insights that emerged from the research are subsequently used to challenge aspects of early childhood pedagogy frequently evident within western approaches to early childhood education such as the developmentalist discourse traditionally used to inform early childhood policy and practice. The findings of the study suggest that to ensure responsive education for young gifted children early childhood educators need to reconceptualise the child and the relationship between the three protagonists of child, family and educator. Collaboration between the three protagonists can facilitate the provision of opportunities for in-depth investigation and abstraction within early childhood curricular that can empower young gifted children in their search for complexity and connection during the early childhood years.
APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Education Portfolio

GIFTEDNESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
THE SEARCH FOR
COMPLEXITY AND CONNECTION

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2003
STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

No part of this portfolio
has been submitted previously
for a higher degree or similar award
to another university or institution

Signed: ________________________________

Catherine Anne Harrison B.Ed (Early Childhood) M.Ed

Date: ________________________________
DEDICATION

To Brendan, Sarah and Emma
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the contribution of the children and families who so graciously opened the doors into their lives and invited me in.

Thank you to my doctoral supervisors, Associate Professor Toni Downes and Doctor Diana Whitton who supported me in the process of doctoral completion. I also extend my thanks to Adjunct Professor Christine Deer who provided valuable assistance through her written feedback and encouragement, and to Karen Swibel who assisted with the formatting of the final version.

As a third generation early childhood educator within my family I also wish to acknowledge the inspirational lives of my great aunt Isabell King (Early Childhood Educator, writer and teller of stories) and my aunt Ruth Harrison (Early Childhood Educator and Principal of Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College 1967-1981). I hope that I have continued the commitment to young children modeled by these women whose lives have born witness to the contribution that women make to the lives of children and families, to early childhood education and to the community of scholars.

I would also like to acknowledge the very precious contribution made by my three children, Brendan, Sarah and Emma who have been a source of love and inspiration and taught me much about life. Lastly my sincere and heartfelt gratitude to Ros - without you this would not be.
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OVERARCHING STATEMENT

1. Explanation of the Portfolio

This portfolio begins with an overarching statement. Its purpose is to give insight into the contextual framework in which the portfolio is located and to outline the professional contributions that have been made throughout the processes of completion. The overarching statement provides: a rationale for the portfolio; an explanation of the genesis of the research and professional contributions; an outline of the approaches and frameworks that have informed it and, the methodology used. It concludes with the consideration of the implications for early childhood pedagogy that emerged from the study and an overview of the future directions to be explored.

The contents of the portfolio document a professional journey undertaken with young, gifted children and their families. It includes two sections. Section one contains chapters 1-7, focusing on the nature of giftedness in early childhood. These chapters are organised in a developmental sequence to give coherency to the exploration of the development of young gifted children
during the early childhood period of birth to eight years. The sequencing of these chapters is based on professional judgment acquired through more than ten years of teaching play and child development to undergraduate students within early childhood education programmes. Section 1 begins with a chapter on giftedness in infancy and continues with the exploration of a number of developmental domains and aspects of play and learning in early childhood. The notion of giftedness in early childhood as the search for complexity and connection emerges from these investigations into different aspects of the nature of giftedness. This section culminates in the final papers (included as Chapters 6 and 7) that explore in greater depth the notion of giftedness in early childhood as ‘the search for complexity and connection’.

Section Two contains chapters 8-13. It explores the implications of giftedness as ‘the search for complexity and connection’ for early childhood pedagogy. This section is organised in chronological order of completion of the various articles during the period 2000 to 2003 providing evidence of an ongoing professional contribution. Figure 1 provides an overview used in the process of completing the portfolio.

The particular nature and diversity of the various chapters has been used intentionally to provide evidence of the multi-faceted and collaborative nature of the project. A number of the presentations and research articles indicate connections with scholarship in gifted education (Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6) while others provide links between the gifted education field and the early
childhood profession in both prior to school (Chapters 2, 8, 9, 10, 12 and 13) and early school settings (Chapters 3, 7, 8, and 11). Other chapters have been included specifically to illustrate the strong connections to children and families within a community context (Chapters 1 and 11). The chapters included within the portfolio vary in format and genre in response to the particular audience for which they were developed. These links are illustrated in Table 1. The various chapters included within the portfolio also demonstrate links with a number of different geographical contexts including articles developed for international, national and local audiences as evident in Table 2.

The portfolio documents professional and research contributions that are both unique and cumulative. It includes six research projects that are interwoven and complementary. Six chapters include material in the public domain: four within refereed journals (Chapters 4, 5, 9 and 13); one within a community based journal (Chapter 1); and, the fifth a chapter in an early childhood text (Chapter 3). One chapter of the portfolio is a policy developed for use within an early childhood setting in New South Wales, Australia (Chapter 10). Two additional articles (Chapters 2 and 6) have been submitted to refereed journals. The portfolio also includes conference presentations (Chapters 7, 8, 11 and 12) as required for completion of the degree. The research and professional contributions are outlined in Table 3.
Figure 1. Overview of Portfolio Completion
### Table 1

**Research and Professional Contributions Included in the Portfolio**

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<tr>
<th>Research &amp; Scholarship in Gifted Education</th>
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<td>The Social and Emotional Development of the Young Gifted Child: Insights from the Voices of Children and Families&lt;br&gt;In review - submitted to Gifted Child Quarterly 2002</td>
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2. The Rationale for the Study

**Gifted Education**

Research and scholarship in gifted education (Ehrlich, 1989; Gross, 1993; Harrison 1999; Mares, 1991; Porter 1999) continues to highlight the particular educational and affective needs of young gifted children and identify significant issues for their families. Both Harrison (1999) and Porter (1999) discussed a special educational approach to the needs of young gifted children suggesting that both qualitative and quantitative differences from the norm require responsive education whether these differences are due to developmental delay or developmental precocity. The rate at which young gifted children proceed through developmental stages is frequently more rapid than same aged peers. The early acquisition of language, the rate of learning, the ability to grasp and utilise complex concepts (Clark, 1997; Harrison, 1999; Mares, 1991; Porter, 1999) suggest that young gifted children require experiences in early childhood which are responsive to their particular learning strengths, their interests and socio-emotional needs. This requirement is often problematic for early childhood practitioners who adopt pedagogical practices which strictly adhere to Developmentally Appropriate Practice, [DAP] (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The social and emotional vulnerability and heightened emotional intensity of young gifted children, identified within the literature, also suggests that awareness and support for qualitative differences should be provided (Gross, 1993; Harrison, 2000; Silverman,
1993). Greater awareness of giftedness in early childhood can assist parents and teachers to support the strengths, interests and needs of young gifted children more effectively.

Another useful source of validation for research into giftedness in early childhood was provided by Geake (1999). In his paper entitled The Report on the Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children: A Ten Year Report Card Geake outlined the outcomes in relation to each of the nine recommendations in the 1988 Report. These recommendations supported the special educational provisions for gifted children, relevant teacher education programs and resources and the establishment of a national research centre. Geake (1999) noted that government response to the recommendations has been negligible and that the developments in gifted education have essentially resulted from the commitment of the gifted education community. Progress in gifted education seems to be largely the result of concerned practitioners, families and interested professionals. A second Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Children followed this initial report ten years later. The Inquiry provoked considerable media attention and helped to stimulate community interest in gifted education. The final report of this committee released in October 2001, (Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children, 2001) provided an update on the implementation of the recommendations included within the 1988 Senate Committee Report. The 2001
recommendations again affirmed the need for greater focus on, and commitment to, gifted education within Australian education systems and within the broader community.

**Developments in Early Childhood Education**

The recognition of the particular strengths, interests and needs of the young gifted child is congruent with early childhood practices which focus on individual differences and child-centred approaches to planning and programming (Arthur, Beecher, Dockett, Farmer & Death, 1996). Research in the area of giftedness in early childhood is also relevant to current international developments in early childhood education such as the Reggio experience (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998), the critiquing of developmentally appropriate practice (Bloch, 1992; Fleer, 1995; Lubeck, 1994) and the reconceptualising early childhood movement (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999).

A number of recent developments in early childhood education within the Australian context have also affirmed the need for well informed practice and the revision of policy in relation to the care and education of young gifted children. Stonehouse (1998, p. 5 - 6) in a review of the Australian Early Childhood Code of Ethics reaffirmed the importance of well informed and responsive approaches to the care and education of young children. Specific aspects identified included commitment to acknowledging each child’s uniqueness and potential, the valuing of strengths, competence and self esteem, the focus on interests, enhancing
autonomy, initiative and self worth, the recognition of the role of the family, and ensuring that practices reflect consideration of the child’s perspective. Each of these aspects emphasises the need to recognise and support the young gifted child.

Recent developments at a NSW state level, such as the new curriculum framework released by the Department of Community Services, in May, 2002 also provided an opportunity to add giftedness to the early childhood agenda. *The NSW Curriculum Framework – The Practice of Relationships* (Department of Community Services, 2002) focuses on the young child as strong, capable and able to initiate his or her own learning. It stresses the importance of play and learning experiences for children which are responsive to the particular interests and strengths of each child. It also emphasises the significance of child, family, and staff collaboration. It draws on the educational approaches of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and contemporary approaches to documentation and planning such as emergent curriculum (Jones & Nimmo, 1994), child created curriculum (Tinworth, 1997) and the project approach (Helm & Katz, 2001; Katz & Chard, 1989). These contemporary approaches challenge traditional early childhood practices and support the provision of responsive curricular for all children. This challenge is particularly important for young children who operate outside mainstream culture or normative developmental expectations such as children from diverse socio-economic, cultural and language backgrounds, children from families with different family structures and children who are differently-
abled. My research with young gifted children indicates that they too need to be recognised within considerations of diversity and anti-bias. This notion is further explored in Chapter 12, *Giftedness on the Anti-Bias/Diversity Agenda?* There are many points of intersection between gifted education and these new directions in early childhood education as outlined in Harrison (1999) and further pursued within this portfolio, particularly in Chapter 13, *Sharing the Lived Experiences of Children* (Arthur, Beecher, Harrison & Morandini in press). This chapter, written collaboratively with early childhood colleagues at the University of Western Sydney, documents some new ways of thinking about planning and programming within early childhood settings that have emerged from the results of our various research projects with young children and families from diverse communities and perspectives.

There is also evidence that suggests giftedness should be on the agenda in early school settings as well as prior to school settings. The NSW Department of Education and Training Strategy for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students (1991) affirmed the need for greater awareness of the education of gifted children. Specific objectives within this document focus on the development of the potential of gifted students within school settings and the use of flexible approaches to education. There is also recognition of the importance of early identification and the need for specific interventions to support the gifted student.

The current developments, in both early childhood and gifted education within local, national and international contexts, make further research
and publication in the area of giftedness in early childhood particularly timely.

3. Approaches and Frameworks

Collaborative Connections

The first edition of *Giftedness in Early Childhood* (Harrison, 1995) resulted from a collaborative project with KU Children’s Services. KU Children’s Services is a peak body in early childhood education within the Australian context that provides education and care to many children through preschools and childcare settings. The publication of this book was an exciting opportunity to disseminate knowledge of giftedness in early childhood to the early childhood education community. The distribution of the book to all KU Centres helped in this process of putting young gifted children onto the early childhood agenda within the Australian context.

This initial publication and its subsequent re-publication by the Gifted Education, Research, Resource and Information Centre [GERRIC] in 1999 provided an opportunity for further interaction and connection with young gifted children and their families. GERRIC is considered the leading gifted education research centre within Australia (Senate Select Committee Report, 2001). As a result of this book my connections with young gifted children and their families increased drastically. This development was at times in the role of educational consultant offering support to young gifted children, their families and teachers and also through workshops, seminars,
conference presentations and many phone and email conversations. These opportunities generated many questions and increased the commitment to raising awareness of the nature of giftedness in early childhood within educational systems, in both the prior to school and early school sector, as well as in the general community.

In my conversations with, and presentations to, parents of young gifted children I frequently encouraged families to take on the advocacy role for their young gifted children suggesting that the children needed adult support for their strengths to be recognised and acknowledged within educational settings and within the broader community. I realized, however, that if parents were to be resourced and empowered as advocates for their young gifted children then I too needed to continue in both my personal and professional capacity as an advocate for young gifted children and their families. My relationship with the children and their families contributed significantly to this commitment to ongoing research in the area of giftedness in early childhood. The sharing of the personal experiences of giftedness in early childhood by the families was such a privilege that it demanded both personal and professional commitment. On a personal level this commitment meant being available, listening and at times offering suggestions. On a professional level a commitment was made to find ways to make a difference so that the treasured stories, so willingly shared, would not be wasted. As a result I sought ways to ensure that the shared experiences could be used to inform
the research and scholarship in gifted education, to help raise awareness of the nature of giftedness within the community and educational systems, and to challenge pre-conceptions within both gifted education and within early childhood pedagogy and policy.

The experiences that children and families shared with me also reinforced the awareness that there were many unanswered questions in relation to young gifted children. In the book *Giftedness in Early Childhood* (Harrison, 1995) I used the analogy of completing a puzzle to explain the process of writing the book. I concluded the book with the following words:

> The puzzle should however remain incomplete. Each reader can complete the puzzle by adding his or her own knowledge derived from the responsive interactions with young gifted children. The last and most important piece of the puzzle belongs to each gifted child. (p. 100)

The challenge that I offered to the reader continued to also be my challenge. As I continued my work with young gifted children, I discovered new aspects of giftedness that warranted attention, analysis and further research and investigation.

Collaborative relationships with early childhood colleagues have also been fundamental to the work documented within the portfolio. The opportunities to share the experiences and insights, to discuss, and to ponder with colleagues the implications of my research for early
childhood pedagogy has been invaluable. While my colleagues have not pursued the same research agenda the questions and insights from their own research agendas have been a significant contribution, enriching my thinking with multiple perspectives on diversity and difference. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) suggested that a perspective which foregrounds diversity, complexity and multiple perspectives is likely to be productive of more equal and dialogic relationships and of a form of knowledge that respects the others without absorbing it into the same. Chapter 13 within the portfolio is included as an example of the results of this collaborative exploration of new directions for early childhood pedagogy.

This portfolio documents the process of ongoing investigation with each chapter providing evidence of the continuing journey. The experiences of the young gifted children and their families outlined within the portfolio suggest that there is much to be done in both gifted and early childhood education if early childhood educators are to provide educational opportunities that honour and empower our youngest children.

The Reggio Experience

In April 1999 I participated in a study tour to the early childhood centres of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1994; Katz & Cesarone, 1994). Prior to this experience I had read extensively of the philosophy of Loris Malaguzzi, founder of Reggio Children and the approaches to early childhood education adopted in this area of northern Italy, and had suggested in previous publications that the Reggio
experience had much to offer both early childhood and gifted education (Harrison, 1995; Harrison, 1998). The insights gained through the first hand experience of Reggio Children however have proved pivotal in my professional and personal journey. As a result of this experience my conceptions of the child within the early childhood period were redeveloped and my recognition of the potential of early childhood education intensified. More detail regarding the impact of this experience is provided in Chapter 8, Responding to Giftedness in Early Childhood: The Lessons of Reggio Emilia.

The pedagogical approaches of the early childhood experience in Reggio Emilia are particularly relevant to the directions taken within this doctoral portfolio. The notion of a journey undertaken in collaboration with children and families, a 'progetazione' with the three protagonists of children, families and educator and no itinerary established a-priori is indicative of the directions followed throughout the period of portfolio completion. My work with young gifted children followed various tangents suggested by the protagonists (as in child-initiated and family-centred curricula) and also responded to unexpected opportunities and serendipitous events. Chapter 5 gives greater detail of these happenings.

The process of doctoral completion has been more spiral than linear in nature and founded on the key interactions with the protagonists and ongoing collaboration and reflection. At times my role seemed to be as a conduit enabling the richness of the lived experience to be made known
and therefore able to be recognised as a previously unrealised richness inherent within the community, a potential untapped. This portfolio provides documentation of a project in the tradition of Reggio Children, and like many Reggio projects is an attempt to make the thinking and early experiences of children visible.

Reconceptualising Early Childhood Movement

The debates associated with the reconceptualising early childhood movement provided a powerful catalyst for the doctoral work undertaken and documented within the portfolio. The opportunity to engage in and contribute to the dialogue regarding the reconceptualisation of early childhood was strengthened by participation in the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education Conferences in Hawaii (1998) and Brisbane (2000). Cannella (1997) when explaining the reconceptualising childhood movement suggested that,

Reconceptualisation requires a collective dialogue in which we openly share our values, our aspirations, or visions for a new beginning. In a world in which equity is of great importance, reconceptualisation would involve sharing our beliefs and biases openly, respecting and valuing multiple realities and possibilities and constructing a collective vision for action. (p. 161)

Pinar (1994) also called for critique that transforms. Woodrow (1999) identified the need to make the hidden assumptions in early childhood
education visible and to identify the problematic nature of some largely uncontested images of children and childhood. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) noted that:

Theories used to describe children’s development have a tendency to start functioning as if they were true models of reality becoming a kind of abstract map spread over the actual territory of children’s development and upbringing. Instead of being seen as socially constructed representations of complex reality, one selected way of how to describe the world, these theories seem to become the territory itself. By drawing and relying on these abstract maps of children’s lives and thus decontextualising the child, we lose sight of children and their lives: their concrete experiences, their actual abilities their theories, feelings and hopes. (p. 36)

Comments such as these provided the impetus to use my research with young gifted children as further evidence of the need to reconceptualise the child and to explore new directions within early childhood pedagogies.

The debates within the reconceptualising early childhood movement were also significant to my research methodology and professional contribution as they provided increased familiarity with the research perspectives advocated by post-modernist approaches and the new sociology of childhood (Christenson & James, 2000; James & Prout, 1997; Lewis &
Lindsay, 2000). Greater awareness of, and respect for, the child and family perspective required research methodology that included the protagonists as participants and honoured their perspectives. The use of a collaborative approach was considered fundamental to the research process. As Readings (1996, p.165) commented when stressing the importance of openness and listening to thought, ‘rather it is to think beside each other and ourselves to explore an open network of obligations that keeps meaning open as a locus for debate’. Dialogue with families and the contribution of parent feedback to the ideas being explored enabled the inclusion of families in the formulation of research directions and theoretical propositions. The inclusion of both child and parent voices was seen as a way in which frequently forgotten perspectives could be heard.

The use of data emerging from authentic contexts was also considered essential given the age of the children involved and the sensitivity of the issues being explored. When considering research with children Graue and Walsh (1998) proposed that:

> Researchers think of children as living in specific settings, with specific experiences and life situations. We suggest that researchers spend less time attempting to develop grand theories and more time learning to portray the richness of children’s lives across the many contexts in which children find them-selves. (p. 5)
This portfolio is an investigation undertaken with the three protagonists – children, families and researcher. It is located within a number of broader contexts.

Figure 2. Diagrammatic Representation of the Doctoral Thesis
4. Methodology

An Interpretivist Paradigm

Glesne and Pushkin (1992) suggested each researcher must adopt a paradigm that is consistent with her own worldview. In my case this worldview is founded within the socio-cultural contexts of family life within my home, local community and my work experience as an early childhood educator. It is a worldview that emerges from both personal experience as a parent of gifted children and professional experience within both early childhood and tertiary education settings. The recognition of personal subjectivity and awareness of the complexity of the phenomenon being studied required a paradigm that would provide opportunities for personal presence, avoid simplistic generalization and also acknowledge, with sensitivity, the inherent complexities of the area being investigated. The research undertaken within this portfolio was therefore based on an interpretivist paradigm in which Ellen (1984) suggested,

Experiences are transformed into data through encounters between the research and researched; they are translated from one cultural context to another; and they are constructed drawing upon the interpersonal subjectivities of those involved. (p. 10)
The interpretivist paradigm ensured that the lived experiences of young
gifted children and their families formed the basis for the methodology,
analysis and the theory that emerged from data. The data contributed by
the participants emerged from authentic and naturalistic contexts,
involving minimal if any disruption to the lives of the children and their
families. Graue and Walsh (1998) argued that:

Just as our view of children must be contextualised we
recognise that as researchers we too work in context. The rich
descriptions that are the hallmark of good interpretive research
must be connected to those contexts in which they are
embedded – the child within her setting, the setting within a
larger community, the researcher within her scholarly culture
and ideas within theoretical frameworks. (p. 14)

A Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology acknowledges the multiple, interconnected realities and
inter-dependence of the various protagonists participating in the research
process. It also allows the researcher to investigate the phenomenon in its
fullness and complexity, including aspects such as thoughts and feelings.
As Maykut and Moorehouse (1994, p.14) suggested, ‘the
phenomenological position sees the world as complex and inter-connected
thus research must maintain the complexity if the explanation is to be
trustworthy, a web of meaning emerges from the interconnection of the parts’. The methodology used within the research was based on a phenomenological approach.

The research documented within this portfolio attempts to provide rich, or ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the children’s experiences. Geertz indicated that such description goes beyond superficial reporting to the complex elements of intentions, context, situation and circumstances as relevant to the study. The focus of this research on the early experiences of young gifted children, like all human situations is complex and multi-faceted, full of multiple, and at times, conflicting interpretations. Awareness of such intricacies required that relevant theory must both acknowledge and emerge from this complex reality (Denzin, 1988).

In line with the phenomenological approach collaborative processes were used within the research as evident in the data collection, analysis, formulation of theory and the reporting phases. Collaborative relationships with families ensured minimum intrusion into the lives of young children and their families during the period of data collection. The involvement of the families in the analysis, formulation of theory and the reporting phases provided opportunities for the co-construction of theoretical perspectives and the textual dissemination of the research findings. Such participatory and collaborative approaches meant that families who may other wise be marginalised in educational decision
making in school settings were given voice and positioned as experts, central to the production of knowledge (Burke, 2002; Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999). Hughes and MacNaughton have noted that parent voices have been absent, particularly in relation to early childhood knowledge and expertise. They suggested that early childhood professionals and families can ‘co-create expertise as both the foundation and the outcome of social relations between them’ (1999, p. 31). Both the methodology and the results of the study affirm the validity of the parent perspective and give support to the re-imaging of the family as informed participants in the research and educative process.

The personal experience of the researcher as a parent of gifted children provided ‘the interpersonal dynamic of sameness’ (Hey, 2000 p. 176). Although the role of researcher was clearly different from that of research participant, the shared personal experience and the ability to identify and empathise with family members facilitated collaboration. The research process therefore was not one of detachment but rather of involvement in relationships of trust and reciprocity. As Burke (2002) identified in relation to her own study, the nature of the research involved the relationship of research consultant and friend, reinforcing as well as complicating the research process. Rather than denying the subjectivities involved and attempting to remain objective such complexities are acknowledged. Denzin (1988) commented:
Interpretivists see the goal of theorizing as providing the understanding of direct lived experience instead of abstract generalisations. Originating in phenomenology, lived experience is not just cognitive but also includes emotions. Interpretive scholars consider every human situation is novel, emergent and filled with multiple and often conflicting meanings and interpretations. The interpretivist attempts to capture the core of these meanings and contradictions. In a conceptual framework descriptive categories are placed within a broad structure of both explicit and assumed propositions. (p. 49)

The phenomenological approach utilised within the study has also supported my commitment to child-centred research and my determination to ensure that the perspective of both child and family are heard. Recent discussions associated within the reconceptualizing early childhood movement and the new sociology of childhood (Cannella, 1997; Cannella 1997b; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Silin, 1995; Woodrow, 1999) suggested that research has in the past objectified and depersonalised the experience of the child. Christenson and James (2000, p. 2) commented that children are ‘social actors in their own right, in contexts where traditionally they have been denied those rights of participation and their voices have remained unheard’.
An essential component of the phenomenological approach is the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives. The diary records, anecdotal observations of the children’s behaviour, comments and conversations within the study give gifted children and their family’s voice and a forum to share the stories of giftedness from the inside, a perspective that only they can share.

The words of Coles (1989, p. 22) provided a source of personal and professional validation for the research processes undertaken. ‘What ought to be interesting is the unfolding of a lived life rather than the confirmation such a chronicle provides for some theory.’ The poignancy of the lived experience of young gifted children and their families documented within the portfolio is difficult to ignore. As Miles and Huberman (1994, p.1) suggested, ‘words especially organised into incidents or stories have a concrete and meaningful flavour that often proves far more convincing to a reader, another researcher, policy maker, or a practitioner than pages of summarised numbers’. The stories of real children within real families also find resonance with other children and families and can help to diminish feelings of difference and alienation.

When we seek to acknowledge the richness of the human spirit, as evident in the research described within this portfolio, then we must find ways to capture the spirit, the essence of those that participate with us in the investigation. For me this has required the use of the shared story and not
the methodologies of statistical analysis that leave numbers without names.

As discussed previously, the new sociology of childhood (Christenson & James, 2000; James & Prout, 1997; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000) calls for the inclusion of children as participants in the research process. Given the age of the children whose experiences are documented within the portfolio it was not possible to include them in decisions regarding research design and methodology however the voices of children and their families are clearly evident within the data. Spaggiari (1995) commented:

Very few writers have been able to give us back the true voice of children without falling into falsifications or distortions. In books written by adults in fact, the words of children often take on a strange artificial sweetness that makes them lose their freshness and originality. Children talk, they have always talked though their words are rarely listened to and leave no trace. The words of children may at times seem strangely similar to our own but they may recall faraway and unknown worlds and meanings to which we as adults too often remain deaf and insensitive. Giving a voice to childhood thus means recognising children’s rights to be the primary authors of their lives. (p. 113)
As previously indicated the voices and perspectives of the families so crucial to the portfolio are evident within the directions taken within the portfolio, in the research processes and the data collected. The families have been ongoing participants contributing ideas, areas of concern and providing essential feedback to the processes of analysis and writing. The children, where age permits, have also contributed commenting on issues of confidentiality and authenticity with one child commenting ‘I want you to use my real name but don’t tell them where I live.’

The experiences of the children, their playfulness, creativity and willingness to explore new ways of knowing, provided the inspiration to explore and include another voice - the intuitive voice. Given the focus on rational ways of knowing within the academic world to acknowledge the role of this voice in my work was somewhat challenging, however to not acknowledge the contribution of the intuitive voice would be to omit a significant aspect of my work. The intuitive voice has been part of my subjectivity and part of my professional contribution, particularly in the connections with the families. Nachmanovitch, (1990, p. 41) commented, ‘Intuitive knowledge proceeds from everything we know and everything we are. It converges on the moment from a rich plurality of directions and sources. In this way you pass beyond competence to presence’. At times writing has been what Csikszentmihalyi (1988) described as a flow experience. Nachmanovitch, (1990) also described the creative process of
flow that is associated with improvisation when discussing play and intuition. ‘We improvise when we move with the flow of time and with our own evolving consciousness rather than with a pre-ordained script or recipe’ (p. 17). The professional and personal experiences associated with doctoral completion suggest that there is the need to find a space within the academic world for play, creativity and intuition. For ‘intuition, dream and vision also have a claim on truth’ (Harrison, 1997). Block (1997) too asserts this, as evident in the following comment:

As the world of waking life may partake of the world of dream perhaps education as an exemplar of the waking life might be informed by the insights dreams offer us about the lives of children - for if as Thoreau suggested we can be most truthful in dreams then we must look to dreams as an authentic place for experiencing self and constructing subjectivity. Then we might understand. (p. 35)

It seems that in a time of greater awareness of the evolving human consciousness it is essential to include other ways of knowing within the academic discourse. There is then a need to acknowledge the power of the meditative process in the formulation of new ideas and concepts, in the empowering, risk taking and creativity. ‘Blessed is the silk road that brings the east to the west’ (Harrison, 1997, p. 56).
Data sources

The documentation provided by the families consisted of diary records including records of developmental milestones, anecdotal observations of the children’s behaviour, drawings and work samples, comments and conversations. In most cases the process of documentation began initially as a result of parent interest in infant development. When the parents sought help in determining effective responses to their child’s advanced and at times unusual behaviour they were encouraged to continue to document examples of advanced development as evidence of giftedness. They were also advised that such documentation could provide valuable data if they were required to substantiate a request for future special educational provisions or socio-emotional support for their gifted child. Parents noted significant events and milestones as well as conversations and incidents of interest. These records were subsequently offered for collaborative research purposes.

Gross (1993, p. 59) suggested that parent records and diaries are useful sources for relevant and detailed observations of the gifted child, stating that ‘they are a product of the real life situation in which they developed and are grounded in the context under study’ (Gross, 1993 p. 78). In *Researching Children’s Perspectives*, Dockrell, Lewis and Lindsay also noted the advantage of parent observation over researcher observation. They
suggested that parents ‘may interpret the child’s speech or actions better as they know the child and they can observe without disturbing the child or other members of the household’ (Lewis & Lindsay 2000, p. 51).

Participants

The participants in the study were fifteen highly gifted children residing in metropolitan and regional areas of Sydney, Australia. Fourteen of the children were Anglo-Australian and one child was Indonesian-Australian. Six of the participants were boys and nine were girls. The small sample size is reflective of the rate at which high levels of giftedness are evident within the general population that is 1:1 000 to 1:10 000 (Gross, 1993).

Each child was initially identified as gifted by parent nomination with seven of the children subsequently tested using formal identification methods designed for young children (WIPPSI- R intelligence test) and identified as highly gifted. The remaining children had not been tested at the time of reporting. However analysis of the qualitative data of early development provided by the families confirmed the parent nomination of giftedness and indicated that the children were highly gifted. This analysis was undertaken according to characteristics of giftedness identified within the literature (Ehrlich, 1989; Gross, 1990; Harrison, 1999; Silverman, 1993; Tannenbaum, 1992) and when compared with normative development in early childhood (Berk, 2000). The early attainment of developmental
milestones such as sitting, walking and talking as well as aspects such as intensity of focus, exceptional memory, creativity and intrinsic motivation characterised the children within the sample. Given the age of the children involved and the phenomenological nature of the study, the diversity of the evidence, as previously outlined, provided rich documentation of giftedness in the period of early childhood. Table 4 provides details of the children and the nature of family participation within the research.
## Table 4

### Participants’ Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Parental Involvement</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis and verbal feedback</td>
<td>1994-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis and verbal feedback</td>
<td>1996-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis and verbal feedback</td>
<td>1999-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis and verbal feedback</td>
<td>2000-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records, assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis and verbal feedback</td>
<td>2000-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, analysis, written &amp; verbal feedback</td>
<td>1996-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, analysis, written &amp; verbal feedback</td>
<td>1997-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, analysis, written &amp; verbal feedback</td>
<td>2000-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis and verbal feedback</td>
<td>1995-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis &amp; verbal feedback</td>
<td>1995-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis &amp; verbal feedback</td>
<td>1995-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis, verbal &amp; written feedback</td>
<td>1998-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, verbal feedback</td>
<td>1995-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, written feedback</td>
<td>1995-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis &amp; verbal feedback</td>
<td>1995-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records, assessments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis and Interpretation of Data

As previously indicated the study used a phenomenological approach and involved the interpretive analysis of parent diary records, anecdotal observational records of the children’s behaviour, children’s comments and conversations. The data, comprising of the various paper documents, was read and re-read to ensure a high level of familiarity. The coding of the data was then undertaken in a number of stages. Initial coding was by age, gender and developmental area such as physical, language, social, emotional, sensory-perceptual development. Data included within the various developmental areas was then further coded in relation to characteristics of giftedness as identified within the literature (Ehrlich, 1989; Gross 1993; Harrison 1999; Silverman, 1993; Tannenbaum, 1992). Annotations were used to indicate the frequency of the occurrence of the particular characteristic of giftedness. Examples of both children’s and parents’ voices within the documentation that provided rich detail of the quality of the characteristic and highlighted the nature of the phenomenon under study, were identified. The data was subsequently synthesized, using the annotations, in an attempt to further clarify the emergent themes and issues of interest. Further discussion and analysis was subsequently undertaken in conjunction with the families in order to clarify the contextual framework from which the particular data had emerged.
The analysis of the rich data provided by the families thus emerged through a process of the description of the phenomenon, the identification of properties and dimensions and then the further contextualisation and clarification of these with the assistance of the families. Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 22) noted that ‘contextualising assists analysis by helping the researcher to explore ideas and concepts and dimensions from many different angles and perspectives’. Family participation also involved the identification of aspects of the data that confirmed and/or challenged the propositions as they emerged. As Maykut and Moorehouse (1994, p. 13) suggested ‘the phenomenological position is oriented toward the discovery of salient propositions. The discovery of propositions, by observation and the careful inspection of patterns which emerge from the data are the hallmarks of the phenomenological approach’.

The selective and interpretive dimensions of data analysis were recognised as problematic and the possibility that distortions and misinterpretations could occur was considered. As recurrent threads and themes emerged from the data, clarification with families was sought through dialogue and through verbal and written feedback on draft text to ensure authenticity and responsiveness to both contextual features and the many complexities of research undertaken in naturalistic contexts. The casual interactions and identification with the participant families facilitated relaxed and candid discussion and their active participation in
the research process. This active participation involved the reviewing of data and the analysis, the generating of new questions for consideration and at times resulted in the subsequent modification of the interpretation and the positions taken. This interactive process undertaken prior to the public dissemination of the research findings also contributed to the final textual version.

Schatzman and Strauss (1973) suggested that in order to construct meaning and develop theory the researcher seeks the unifying link within the data that reflects the manner in which the dimensions identified from the data work together to tell the story of the data. Data analysis in this case resulted in the rich description of giftedness in early childhood and the formulation of the construct of ‘giftedness in early childhood as the search for complexity and connection’, the title of this portfolio.

**Trustworthiness of Data**

As previously indicated, the ongoing collaborative relationship and dialogue with families, a process of indwelling (Maykut & Moorehouse, 1994) was integral to the research documented within the portfolio. While the initial analysis of the data involved a holistic perspective the collaborative reflection with families as participants resulted in the subsequent identification and analysis of specific patterns that emerged from the data. The process of member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
provided the opportunity to ensure accuracy, trustworthiness and authenticity.

Collaborative approaches with the families were also integral to assessing the validity of the construct, 'giftedness in early childhood – the search for complexity and connection.' This was particularly evident in one parent's suggestion that the construct is also applicable to the social and emotional development of the gifted child as well as to cognition. This proposition was subsequently explored and outlined in the presentation *Giftedness in Early Childhood – The Search for Complexity and Connection. Implications for Social & Emotional Development* included within the portfolio as Chapter 7.

The use of multiple data sources and the inclusion of parent, child and outsider perspectives helped to ensure the plausibility of the patterns identified within the data and to assess the validity of the construct that emerged from the analysis. Given the complex, multi-faceted and sensitive nature of the area under study such processes are considered essential to ensuring the authenticity and validity of the theory that emerged from the research.

5. Outcomes - Implications for Early Childhood Pedagogy

The outcomes of this research give rise to a number of implications for early childhood pedagogy. These relate to the reconceptualisation of the child and the relationship between the three protagonists of child, family and educator. The results of the research also suggest that early childhood educators need
to reconceptualise early childhood pedagogy, including both the content of the curriculum, and the strategies for teaching and learning.

Reconceptualising Roles and Relationships in Early Childhood

Collaborative Partnerships with Children

The results of this study bring into question the conceptions of the young child that pervade the community and are evident within early childhood education. The use of the word 'little' to describe the young child (Jackson, 1993) has promoted the deficit view of the child and a focus on what the child is not when compared to more mature or adult forms and ways of being. The strict adherence to developmental perspectives has been considered by some fundamental to early childhood education. This developmental tradition has dominated early childhood pedagogy and promoted a view of the child defined in terms of age/stage based characteristics within various developmental domains. As Graue and Walsh (1998) assert,

Piagetian theory has had near hegemonic influence on perspectives on young children particularly in the field of early childhood education for the past three decades. It continues to exhibit remarkable persistence in the face of a growing body of disconfirming evidence. (p. 142)

The comments, drawings and work samples of the children included within this portfolio challenge the deficit view of the young children and
provide powerful evidence of young children as complex, capable, curious and intrinsically motivated in pursuing their search for complexity and connection. The topics selected for investigation and the focus of the children's interests suggest that during early childhood children contemplate and pursue abstract and sophisticated concepts in thoughtful and reflective ways. The sensitive manner in which the children's thoughts, theories and feelings are expressed, suggest that adults can learn much from the young child's way of being and seeing the world. Rather than seeing the young child as deficient the suggestion is that greater recognition should be given to the value that our youngest children contribute to adult ways of knowing and being. Qualities such as curiosity, intrinsic motivation, playfulness, creativity, empathy and sensitivity are much needed within a rapidly changing, troubled and globalised world.

The research also provokes the question, 'who is expert?' and the need to reconceptualise roles and relationships within the educative process. The research suggests the need to recognise that, in relation to some areas of interest, the three, four or five year old may know more than the adult. Such awareness challenges the notion of who is teacher and reinforces the need for collaborative learning and teaching partnerships with children. It suggests that adults need to admit and feel comfortable with their own ignorance and be willing and eager to undertake their own further research and investigation. Such processes and investigations can be
undertaken with children as co-learners. The admission of ignorance, rather than being seen as inadequacy can highlight authenticity, curiosity and risk taking. The processes of investigation, such as accessing dictionaries, encyclopaedias, telephone directories, the World Wide Web and museum and university experts, modeled and scaffolded by the adult, can assist the gifted child in becoming empowered as an independent researcher able to seek out answers and test hypotheses. The adult modeling of adult curiosity and enquiry may also reinforce the child's intrinsic motivation and curiosity.

**Collaborative Partnerships with Families**

The results of the study suggest that early childhood educators need to reconceptualise parents and families as experts who have much significant knowledge and experience to contribute to the education and care of the young child. The first hand experience of parenting from birth provides insight into temperament, personality and learning style that is too frequently ignored or discarded by educational professionals. Collaborative partnerships between those in educational settings and families are essential for ensuring that the young gifted child's strengths, interests and emerging development are recognised and considered in educational decisions. The search for complexity and connection, as previously outlined, suggests an intense and often insatiable appetite for more. A collaborative response between families and educators is more likely to ensure that such demands are met.
Perceived difference from same-aged peers can result in the masking of behaviour and underachievement. Although underachievement and accommodating to group norms was more evident within the girls in the study, the need to accommodate to the social context was frequent throughout. If educational settings create situations in which children feel the need to modify their intellectual ability, knowledge and thinking to fit in with the norm then it is very difficult to establish a true understanding of the child’s capabilities. In such situations ongoing dialogue with families is essential.

Reconceptualising Early Childhood Pedagogy

Relevance of Early Childhood Curricula

The results of this research suggest that the notion of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), so influential in early childhood education, must be re-considered and balanced by the new understanding of children within the socio-cultural context of family and community and by the need for individual relevance. Decisions regarding curriculum and resources based on developmental norms are not responsive to the particular strengths and learning approaches of the young gifted child as evident throughout this portfolio.

The range and complexity of interests of the children, evident throughout the study, demand that early childhood educators reconsider assumptions regarding what is relevant curriculum in early childhood. Adult determined curricula are frequently based on developmental
considerations and may not reflect or be responsive to the true abilities, interests or theories of the young gifted child. A pre-occupation with everyday realities and concrete experiences of children may provide few opportunities for gifted children to explore areas of interest and to use their powers of abstraction and symbolization. Brief and superficial coverage of topics of interest may deny the in-depth exploration of areas of interest, which these children frequently appear to crave. The ability to move beyond direct experience, to understand sophisticated and abstract concepts and to maintain interest for extended periods needs to be recognised and supported. Opportunities for solving real problems, sharing decision making, offering their own theories and perspectives allow young gifted children to utilize and extend their cognitive abilities.

Numerous issues for discussion and problems to be solved arise within any day in an early childhood setting. Such incidents or provocations are sources of complexity and connection and can be used as curricula opportunities. These opportunities occur when adults share decisions with children and involve children in their resolution. Paley (1986) gives insight into this approach with examples of children solving problems such as measuring the rug, moving a heavy bag of sand and making applesauce. The investigations with children from the early childhood centres of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) also provide exciting examples of curricula decision-making shared with children.
Resistance to the introduction of ‘academic’ curricula in prior to school settings may deny young gifted children opportunities to use their advanced literacy and numeracy skills. The lack of relevant opportunities and resources may reinforce the masking of ability and underachievement. For example, the young gifted reader who is never asked to use this ability within the early childhood setting, who sees no other child reading, who is offered no reading material that is appropriate for his or her level may find no validation for the ability to read within the early childhood context and conclude that reading is something that is not done at preschool or day care. Early childhood educators are encouraged to reconsider curricula decisions and the resources offered.

**Responsive Grouping of Children**

Licensing requirements and a focus on developmentalist approaches in early childhood settings often results in the grouping of children based on chronological age. Age associated entry requirements in both prior to school and school settings and the strict adherence to the grouping of children by age, may however, deny the young gifted child opportunities to work and play with like-minded peers. It may prevent the child who is gifted child from accessing more relevant resources and experiences that are more responsive to the child’s abilities, interests and strengths. The two year old who is able to be an effective play partner with four to five year olds, who is eager and able to participate in longer and more complex music and language experiences, who does not need or want an afternoon
sleep may become extremely frustrated in a situation where such opportunities can be observed but not participated in. Similar outcomes occur within school settings when gifted children are unable to access relevant curricula due the strict adherence to age/stage requirements. Early childhood educators in both prior to school settings and within the early school years are encouraged to consider flexible approaches to grouping such as mixed age grouping, special interest groups, and acceleration. Such opportunities can be part time, occasional or full time provision depending on the needs of the child and the constraints within the setting.

Teaching Strategies

Early childhood educators are also encouraged to re-visit their strategies for teaching and learning. The re-imaging of the child as strong and powerful, the sharing of curricula decisions with children, partnerships with families and flexible approaches to grouping can assist in this process. The role of co-learner requires a greater willingness for adults working with young children to engage in an informed partnership. This informed partnership requires a willingness to listen to each child’s perspectives, ideas and theories. It also requires educators to offer open-ended experiences that enable the gifted child to respond in ways that are personally relevant rather than predictable. The use of ‘think time’, which allows children to consider and reflect before responding, helps to create an environment in which children are taken seriously. Questioning, used as a genuine means of gaining information that is not known rather than
as a tool to assess the child’s knowledge acquisition or memory recall also assists the adult in gaining insight into each child’s own thoughts and perspectives and validates the individual perspective rather than reinforcing the notion of correctness or one right answer. The judicious use of praise and a conscious move to self-evaluation provides young gifted children with opportunities to use their higher order thinking skills and abilities in abstraction and reflection.

The use of ‘plan, do and review’, work contracts, work diaries and research investigations undertaken by individual and small groups of children can help gifted children in their search for complexity and connection. In such experiences young gifted children can be encouraged to participate in serious business while engaged in meaningful play and exploration. The use of learning centres and information and communication technologies can support diverse and complex interests. They also provide support for independent and/or collaborative research and investigation and can provide opportunities for gifted children to take some responsibility for aspects of the learning environment through the introduction and care of new resources and reference material. Such strategies ensure that children are acknowledged as intelligent and reflective participants in the learning community.

6. Future Directions

It is difficult to find a point of conclusion to this investigation of giftedness in early childhood and rather than signaling an endpoint it seems more fitting to
outline future directions. It is vital that research in the area of the nature of giftedness be included in both the gifted and early childhood academic literature. This research must also be accessible to families and early childhood educators through dissemination within the public domain via seminars, public lectures and less scholarly literature.

The success of the book *Giftedness in Early Childhood* (Harrison, 1999) evident through positive feedback from academics, parents and teachers and by the development of a third edition indicates that there is a need within the community for this information. I am looking forward to the realization of a possible future publication which would also provide support for young gifted children and their families and teachers entitled *Giftedness in Early Childhood: The Search for Complexity and Connection*. This publication would increase community awareness regarding the strengths, interests and emerging development of young gifted children and offer support to early childhood educators and the families of young gifted children. Familiarity with research in gifted education can also be used to inform policy development within early childhood settings and included in debates regarding approaches to pedagogy in early childhood education and teacher education. The collaborative research, conference presentations and publications outlined within this portfolio and completion of this Doctorate of Education will contribute to this goal.

Several articles included or referred to within the portfolio will be reworked for publication during a period of post-doctoral writing. These include 'Trick
or Treat – Early School Experiences of Young Gifted Children’, ‘In Search of an
Alternative Paradigm – Montessori, Steiner, Reggio’, and ‘Sharing Childhood
with Young Gifted Children – Collaborative Partnerships’.

There are many unanswered questions to be pursued. These include
investigation of the child who is gifted in the physical or kinaesthetic domain.
This gift has become strongly apparent within one of the siblings of a child
included in the study and has aroused my curiosity and provoked the need to
understand and document this gift and its implications for the child and
family.

There is also another aspect of giftedness evident within my research that I
have yet to write about. It appears to be the antithesis of the proposed
construct. For a number of the children in the study there is the need for time
out from thinking, a need to rest and to still the mind. I wish to document this
other search – the search for simplicity and solitude that is also part of the lives
of young gifted children and their families. This investigation would be
included as a chapter within the proposed publication Giftedness in Early
Childhood - The Search for Complexity and Connection. On a personal note I also
wish to find more time for this aspect of my own life. I intend to allocate time
to the organisation of my own intuitive writing for a publication entitled ‘The
Parallel Journey - The Search for Simplicity and Solitude’.
References


SECTION 1

Chapter 1

GIFTEDNESS IN INFANCY

‘Although I have known he was different from a young age,
no-one has ever talked about experiences of a child like this as a baby.’
- Mother of a highly gifted child.

Harrison, C. (2000). Gifted infants – the realities of the

Preface

Rationale

The article, Gifted Infants – The Realities of the First Weeks and Months
(Harrison, 2000), was requested by the editor for inclusion in the bi-
monthly journal of the New South Wales Gifted and Talented Children’s
Association, *Gifted*. The editor, Cate Turner, advised that it is the early
childhood period that generates the highest number of enquiries to the
Association, a community based advocacy organisation. One of the
parents of the children involved in the study of young gifted children,
which forms the foundation of my research, was also asked to write an
article for this edition. Lea Marsh’s article appears in the same edition and is entitled ‘Insomnia’ (Marsh, 2000). My article (Harrison, 2000) provided a theoretical and research based foundation for the personal experiences outlined in Lea’s article. The two articles when read in conjunction provided both a theoretical and practical approach to the issues associated with giftedness in infancy and reflected the collaborative and participatory nature of the research documented within the portfolio.

This article is included as the first in the portfolio for several reasons. First, the focus of the portfolio on early childhood as a period of human development has inherent within it the notion of a period of development that begins at birth. A chapter that has as its focus, giftedness in infancy, provides a logical foundation for the subsequent explorations of play, learning and development that are included within the portfolio.

Secondly, the placement of this article at the beginning of the portfolio also deliberately foregrounds my commitment to the dissemination of information about young children who are gifted, to their families and educators. Such dissemination can effectively occur through collaboration with the community-based organisations that best support them within the part of the world in which I live and work. This article also affirms the powerful connections between the research process and the community of young gifted children and their families who have been integral to the
development of the portfolio. The portfolio could not have been written without such connections.

Context

The New South Wales Association for Gifted and Talented Children [NSWAGTC] is a community-based organisation that is a registered charity and a public benevolent institution. The primary aims of the association are ‘to overcome the disadvantage, suffering and misfortune experienced by gifted and talented children and their families’ (NSWAGTC, 2000). It supports the 100 000 gifted children in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, Australia and is managed by a voluntary committee. In meeting the stated aims the association organises conferences for families and teachers, enrichment experiences for gifted children, comments on policy development, produces a bi-monthly journal and serves as an advocacy group for gifted children within the Australian community.

Outcomes

*Gifted* is a publication that is both accessible to, and user friendly for, families of gifted children. Subsequent to the publication of the article I received a number of emails and letters from parents of young gifted children. It was apparent from the feedback received that this article in *Gifted* provided some reassurance to parents of young gifted children. The following comments from two of the letters reflect the tone of the correspondence received:
I read your article in Gifted and the book you published early last year and have decided to write to tell you about my son.... My older two boys are gifted and are in enrichment programs at school. Both had the usual infancies with wakefulness and colic and reflux that so many parents comment upon. G however was different.... Not all gifted children are a parenting nightmare.

(Extract from personal correspondence, dated 11th September, 2000)

I have just read Insomnia by Lea Marsh and your article ‘Gifted Infants – The Realities of the First Weeks and Months’ and I wanted to add something of A’s first months. Reading Lea Marsh’s article I was astonished. It was like reading my own story with a few of the details changed. I couldn’t believe that someone had actually gone through what I had gone through. It was such a relief to feel that I wasn’t crazy.

(Extract from personal correspondence dated, 7th September, 2000).

Correspondence such as this re-affirmed my commitment to young gifted children and their families and consolidated my determination that my work would continue to involve collaborative partnerships with families. Such relationships clearly offered families support and gave them opportunities to share their experiences of the young gifted child. I hoped that this would result in greater awareness of giftedness in the community and within educational policy and early childhood pedagogy. Mayall
(1996) suggested that in new approaches to understanding childhood and youth, the aim should be to work for children rather than on them and to describe their social worlds with a view of influencing social change.

The feedback received from families subsequent to the publication of the article both confirmed and challenged some of the sentiments expressed in the articles on infancy (Marsh, 2000; Harrison, 2000). The resulting dialogue reinforced for me the value of the collaborative process and the realisation that while I had much to offer the families of young gifted children there was much that I had to learn from their unique insights and experiences. The notion of the teacher as learner and learner as teacher (Paley, 1992) and the re-imaging of parents as experts (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999) found resonance within the experience of writing, publishing and receiving feedback on this article. The differences between the parent experiences of giftedness in infancy, as evident within their written and verbal responses to the article, highlighted the complexity of the phenomenon. It was evident that ongoing family collaboration was essential to ensuring the validity of the research. The importance of indwelling and reflexivity (Jenks, 2000) was also emphasised by this experience and renewed my commitment to continue undertaking research which ensured the integral connection between research and reality. As Mayall (1996) noted,

The construction of an argument needs to be sensitive to its quality of fit - a theory must be measured against the
experiences of those it purports to describe. There needs to be an interaction between theory and the experience, each building on and refining the other. (p.12)

References


Gifted infants
-the realities of the first weeks and months

By Cathie Harrison

Acknowledgement

Many parents of young gifted children are reluctant to disclose aspects of their child’s behaviour and advanced development. Fortunately some are willing to come out of the closet and share the realities of parenting their exceptionally gifted infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers. Parents, like Lea and David, who are willing to share their experiences help to raise awareness of the particular needs of young gifted children and their families. In situations where parents of gifted children get together, where it is safe and socially acceptable to share such experiences, the memories and feelings surface. Parents of gifted children who attend the two-day Parenting Courses run each year by the Gifted Education Research Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) at the University of New South Wales find comfort in the safe place which this opportunity provides to share similar experiences. Some of the experiences of the parents of young gifted children were used to illustrate this article. Thank you to Lea and David and to all those parents and families of young gifted children who have shared their experiences of giftedness in early childhood.

Parents of young gifted children, like Lea and David, recall vividly the dilemmas that come with parenting a gifted child in the first year of life. Some whose experience of parenting may be very dissimilar may doubt the truth of the claims but those who are parents of young gifted children would identify with and feel reassured by the story, ‘Insomnia’. Community ignorance about giftedness means that little is known and little support offered to parents of very young gifted children within the local community. There is frequently the assumption that children cannot be gifted until they start school and begin academic tasks. Parents of young gifted children, however, can identify aspects of behaviour and development, which indicate giftedness in the first days and months of life. Although young gifted children, particularly infants and toddlers, are considered an understudied and underserved population (Harrison, 1999) a brief review of relevant literature and research validates the existence of giftedness in infancy and offers some strategies for parenting young children who are gifted during their first year.

Giftedness results from both genetic and environmental factors (Clark, 1998). Given the significant influence of the genetic inheritance, giftedness impacts on development from, and perhaps even before, birth. As Clark (1998, p9) suggests:

‘Giftedness is a biologically rooted concept that serves as a label for a high level of intelligence and indicates an advanced and accelerated development of functions within the brain, allowing its use to be more efficient and interactive. Giftedness impacts on all aspects of development including physical, sensory, emotions, cognition and intuition.’

This broad conception of giftedness, which suggests that giftedness impacts on various developmental domains, endorses the reality that is familiar to many parents of young gifted children. Lea’s account of the behaviour of her highly gifted daughters, Emma and Megan, affirms this high level functioning soon after birth. Advanced and accelerated brain development can be evident in the first few months in various aspects of behaviour. There can be indications of increased alertness to sensory input such as visual and auditory stimulation. One parent recalled that her new born baby reoriented herself in the hospital crib, wriggling her body and lifting her head, to see the toy which had been placed in the upper corner of the crib. Another described her baby at two months with the following comment, ‘so alert, looking at things so closely, echoing the pitch of my voice in a reciprocal sort of game.’ Gross (1993, p 88) reports the experience of Jade:

When she was four weeks old we took her to the Drive-in with us one night. She was lying on the back seat of the car in her bassinet and we thought she was asleep. Mike had a bud cough and he began to cough and surprisingly, from the back seat, came a cough from Jade. This kept on for some time. At first we thought it was coincidence but then we began to realise that there was a pattern to it: each of Mike’s coughs was followed by a cough from Jade. We began to try her out and sure enough, she mimicked every cough, laughing up at us after each one as if it was a big joke! We were just amazed.

Advanced physical development can also be evident in infancy with greater head and upper body control. Lea notes Emma’s early ability to hold her head unsupervised. Another parent noted ‘at about ten weeks she would stop moving as if to listen more intently (Harrison,
This can be followed with early mobility in rolling and crawling and later sitting and walking. Harrison (1999, p23) notes the example of Amaan.

'Although only thirteen weeks, Amaan was able to somehow propel himself along the floor. We would place him on the blanket as other parents of young babies would. Their children would remain in the same spot but Amaan would be off in some corner of the room staring at some object that had obviously caught his interest.'

This example also highlights the intense curiosity that can be typical of the young gifted child even in infancy. This can be seen in wakefulness, early visual focussing and tracking, long concentration span and the intense investigation of new objects and environments. Smutey, Veenker and Veenker (1991, p4) include this description of David at less than three months,

He soon began scuttling about on his stomach like a fish on water, poking into everything. He couldn't have been more than three months. I would find him running his finger over objects, turning them around in his tiny hands and examining them with tremendous concentration. His attention span at the age of five months on only a few simple objects, at times spanned over an hour or two. He never got tired of handling new objects, moving them around and letting out shrieks of delight every once in a while as he squirmed over to another part of the room.

While some young gifted infants can occupy themselves for extended periods others demand the constant stimulation of new objects and the constant presence of an interested play partner. This can be particularly demanding for parents who are adjusting to the parenting role and may have expected their new-born infant to spend most of the hours, of both day and night, asleep. The gifted infant may express intense frustration when an object of interest is removed or when he or she is removed from a situation of interest and expected to sleep. The need for stimulation seems powerful and ever present and can result in intense crying episodes. As Lea and others have experienced, this tends to be interpreted and explained by the medical profession, friends and family members from the assumptions and expectations of typical development. Conditions such as hunger, pain, or over tiredness are thus often cited as the reason for the infant's distress. Parents can then be advised to respond to such distress by transferring the baby from breast to bottle, varying the mother's diet, trying various medications and persevering with efforts to get the baby to sleep. The result is often over tired and distressed parents as well as distressed infants.

Giftedness can also be evident in emotional sensitivity and this can be seen in the early forming of attachments, and the sensing and sharing of others distress or anxiety. One parent recalled her baby's distress when hearing another baby crying. Another commented on her young baby's responsiveness to her own moods and emotions. The infant's intense sensitivity to emotion can also be problematic when expressive language has not yet developed and the infant is unable to verbalise feelings of fear and anxiety. Parents can feel inadequate when trying to make sense of seemingly inexplicable emotional outbursts.

The behaviour of the gifted infant can be both fascinating and perplexing for parents. It can be exciting to share daily experiences with an infant who is highly alert and responsive. There is real joy to be found in parenting the gifted child. The opportunity to play with an infant who remembers the patterns of interaction of simple games, who engages adults in their play through intense eye contact, early smiling, cooing and babbling, who understands more than could be expected and who adores his or her caregivers can be a great privilege. There are, however, also the difficulties that come with the delights. Caring for a gifted infant can be a mixed blessing. Parents of gifted infants face issues of:

- Who else can care for this demanding baby who expects so much of his or her care?
- How do you respond to the often contradictory advice which suggests possible remedies but does not indicate understanding of the gifted infant?
- How do you deal with the emotional sensitivity which creates intense emotional reactions?

The research suggests that the advanced development of the gifted infant should be responded to. This requires the provision of a rich and stimulating environment and a responsive caregiver and play partner who can interact with the child in ways which are responsive to the observed behaviours (Clark 1998, Harrison 1999, Smutey and Eby 1990, Tannebaum 1988). The adult needs to cut off the child, observing closely and listening intently to the infant's efforts to communicate. Interesting parents note that gifted infants quickly find ways to communicate through different crying behaviours to indicate different needs. Lea suggests that Megan already has an angry cry which is different from her distressed cry. Body language and facial expressions are also used effectively by gifted infants to direct the responses of the attentive adult.

Clark (1998) suggests that during the early learning periods of a child's life the most appropriate focus for concerned adults is on allowing the child to continuously interact with materials and people that the child finds interesting. 'High intelligence regardless of how it is expressed results from the interaction between inherited and acquired characteristics supported by a rich, stimulating environment' (Clark 1998, p9).


Shore (1997, p ix) emphasises the significance of the relationship between child and care-giver for healthy brain development in the first years of life.
Throughout the entire process of development, beginning even before birth the brain is affected by environmental conditions, including the kind of nourishment, care, surrounding and stimulation an individual receives. The impact of the environment is dramatic and specific, not merely influencing the general direction of development but actually affecting how the intricate circuitry of the brain is wired.

Erikson’s eight stage theory of human development (Erikson, 1964) also affirms the need for responsive interactions and care-giving in infancy. The first stage outlined by Erikson, ‘trust versus mistrust’, suggests that it is during the first year of life that the infant develops feelings of trust or mistrust depending on the responsiveness of care which is given. Eby and Smutney (1990) affirm the need for interactions which are responsive to advanced development as does Tatzenbaum (1992, p.128) who identifies the need for care which is tailor made for the gifted child’s development. ‘Children with superior inner resources can fulfill their promise only if the nurturance they receive is tailor made to meet their special needs.’ (Linke, 2000, p. 5) suggests that the effects of stress during infancy are also significant. ‘For infants everything is new...’ It is the repeated sensitive response to infant’s needs over the early months that builds a sense of security and lays down the foundation for being able to cope with later demands and stresses.’ The needs of gifted infants are at risk of being ignored or misunderstood if a preoccupation with typical development over-rides consideration of the needs of the gifted individual.

The message from the research clearly affirms the need for interactions and stimulation in infancy which are responsive to the particular child. For the gifted infant, this may require play opportunities and interactions which may be considered more relevant for an older child. These might include reading stories of interest, looking at and talking about pictures and objects in the natural environment, listening to music of various types and experiences that may be considered developmentally inappropriate for a child so young. It may require visits to places of interest, seeking out other families with older children or other gifted children who can provide stimulation, and calling on friends and family to take turns at meeting the demands of a very curious and intensive child.

Opportunities for parents to share strategies and tactics employed to get through this demanding period reveal an interesting range of responses. They include strategies such as:

- Organising the extended family to take turns caring for and playing with the infant.

- Having a night-time roster for parents and/or grandparents to occupy the baby.

- Allowing the infant to have the light on at night and toys to play with.

- A daily trip to the local library to borrow books for the baby and the use of taped stories to listen to when others in the family are sleeping.

Parents also become very resourceful with finding play opportunities in household objects. They also learn to cope with a home that may appear chaotic but reflects the active engagement of the gifted infant in the many play and learning possibilities that the home environment offers.

One of the most useful survival strategies appears to be establishing a connection with other parents and families who share similar experiences. It is in an environment that is safe and affirming where parents and families willingly share the delights and dilemmas of parenting their gifted infant during the first months of life. This can help to overcome the isolation which many parents of young gifted children experience particularly during the period of infancy, when the child’s needs are largely met within the context of the immediate family.

Gifted infants demonstrate particular behaviours and require care-giving responses that are responsive to their advanced and distinctive development. The sharing of the experience of parenting the young gifted children can help others to recognise and respond effectively to giftedness in infancy.

If you too would like to document and share your experiences of giftedness in early childhood please send to Cathie Harrison, University of Western Sydney, PO Box 555 Campbelltown 2560. Confidentiality will be respected.

References


Cathie Harrison is a lecturer in early childhood education at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur. She is the author of the book Giftedness in Early Childhood published by GERRIC at UNSW. Cathie is currently completing her doctorate which focuses on the nature of giftedness in early childhood.
Chapter 2

THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE YOUNG GIFTED CHILD

'They never want to listen to my rules...
... just when I get it all set up
they go off and do something else.'

David (5.2 years)

Harrison, C. (in review). The social and emotional development of the young gifted child: Insights from the voices of children and families.


Preface

Rationale

The focus within early childhood education on holistic approaches to the care and education of young children highlights the significance of social and emotional aspects of development. As the following article explains the areas of social and emotional development are also being increasingly recognised in definitions and studies of giftedness. These areas of development are integral to our understanding of the young gifted child
and thus it is an area that must not be overlooked (Gross, 1994; Harrison, 1999; Porter 1999; Roeper, 1982; Silverman, 1993).

This paper documents aspects of the social and emotional development of the participants in a phenomenological study. The analysis of the data gathered throughout the study clearly indicated that the social and emotional areas of development were particularly important for the highly gifted children within the sample, impacting significantly on the overall development of the gifted child as an individual and on the child within both the family and educational context. In particular the social isolation, emotional intensity and vulnerability that were at times experienced by the children became a powerful source of concern for children, families and educators.

The richness of the data and the poignancy of the words of both children and families were such that this paper demanded to be written. I considered that a portfolio that had its focus on giftedness in early childhood would be incomplete without an in-depth consideration of social and emotional development.

**Context**

The ideas included in this paper were explored within my invited presentation for the 9th National Conference of the Australian Association of the Education for the Gifted and Talented to be held in Sydney at the Power House Museum from 20th to 23rd October 2002. This conference included as keynote and invited speakers both national and international
scholars in gifted education. The targeted participants of the conference were teachers, administrators, psychologists, counselors, parents, community members, academics and researchers. The Conference, was entitled *The Gifted Journey: Reflecting Forward*, and had as its stated aim, 'using our knowledge and experience to enhance future practices in gifted education while continuing to research for understanding of gifted learners and their needs'. My presentation focusing on the social and emotional development of the young gifted child explored the gifted journey from the perspective of young highly gifted children.

**Outcomes**

To be identified subsequent to the publication of the paper.

**References**


The Social and Emotional Development of the Young Gifted Child

Insights from the Voices of Children and Families

Abstract

During the early childhood period from birth to eight years, young children begin to establish a sense of personal identity and form connections with others, establishing their place within the social context. For the young gifted child this process can be a complex and challenging one. Heightened sensitivities and perceived differences from others can result in an array of responses including intense feelings of rejection and isolation. Informed adult support can assist young gifted children to find their place within the social context of family and educational settings. In this paper, data gathered from research with young gifted children is used to elucidate the nature of giftedness in early childhood and to highlight the significance of the domain of socio-emotional development for young gifted children and their families. The diary and developmental records kept by parents give emphasis to the complex and multi-faceted nature of giftedness in early childhood and the acute sensitivities that young gifted children
may experience. The words of the parents and children document the powerful influence of social acceptance and the importance of feelings of self worth for the young gifted child.

Introduction

The social-emotional area of development of the young child is a particularly complex one, open to numerous interpretations, explanations and theoretical perspectives (Berk, 2000). For many families and early childhood educators, who share the lives of young gifted children, it remains an aspect of development that provokes numerous unanswered questions. The domain of socio-emotional development is however being increasingly recognised as integral to the understanding of the young gifted child (Dalzell, 1998; Harrison, 1999; Porter, 1999; Silverman, 1993) and an area worthy of substantial investigation.

Literature Review

Definitions of Giftedness

Socio-emotional development has gained increasing significance within definitions of giftedness. Roeper (1982, p. 21) defined giftedness as a ‘greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences’ and made the following comment, ‘a child is a total entity; a combination of many
characteristics. Emotions cannot be treated separately from intellectual awareness or physical development; all intertwine and influence each other.' Betts and Neihart (1988, p. 248) stressed the importance of the 'whole child' recognising the interaction of emotional, social, cognitive and physical factors. The Columbus Group defined giftedness as asynchronous development and highlighted the inner experiences of the gifted that differentiated them from the norm (1991, p.1). Giftedness is recognised as a multi-dimensional concept impacting on all aspects of development (Harrison, 1999). Given the inter-relatedness of development and the fundamental influence that social and emotional development has on the young child's learning, relationships and developing personality, it is an area that must be addressed.

Giftedness in Early Childhood

Smutney (1999, p. 3) suggested that young gifted children are given less attention by educators, policy makers and researchers than older gifted children. Research in giftedness during early childhood suggests however that giftedness is evident from infancy and impacts on behaviour and development from the first weeks and months of life (Harrison, 2000). Early indications of giftedness include alertness and attention (Fisher, 1990; Gross, 1993; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1981; Storfer, 1990). Such
characteristics impact on the emerging development of self and the nature of social interactions.

Research regarding aspects of the social development of children in the pre-school years has suggested that gifted children are more advanced than their same aged peers in choice of friends, play interests, socialization and moral judgments (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Janos & Robinson, 1985; Lewis & Louis, 1991; Robinson & Noble, 1991; Robinson, 1993). Young gifted children have also been found to have higher levels of social understanding and more mature views of friendship and social understanding than children of average ability (Roedell, 1980; Gross, 2000). The early development of self identity and awareness of difference of others was also found amongst young gifted children (Gross, 1998; Lovecky, 1997).

Young gifted children are also described as being more emotionally sensitive (Morelock, 1996; Piechowski, 1997; Silverman, 1993). The characteristic of emotional sensitivity is also identified as one domain of over-excitability within the theory of positive disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). Dabrowski used the term over-excitability to describe a greater intensity of experience within the psycho-motor, sensual, intellectual, imaginative and emotional domains. While
this theory does not focus on young gifted children it is useful in providing a description of the exceptional emotional sensitivity and intensity that can accompany giftedness.

Studies of social and emotional aspects of young gifted children have used a range of research methods including observational study (Lessany-Abdi & James, 1980), parent questionnaire (Childs, 1981), teacher questionnaire (Barnett & Fiscella, 1985) participant observation (Kitano, 1988) and case study (Gross, 1993). Recent discussions within the reconceptualising early childhood movement and the new sociology of childhood (Cannella, 1997a; Cannella, 1997b; Christenson & James, 2000; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Silin, 1995; Woodrow, 1999) call for greater inclusion of the child’s voice within early childhood research. The suggestion is that in the past, research in early childhood, has objectified and de-personalised the experience of the child. Grant and Piechowski (1999) also advocated naturalistic enquiry and child-centred research in gifted education to help us to ‘understand giftedness from the inside’. They suggested that ‘we need rich well developed accounts of how gifted children, think feel and experience, and of their self defined interests and goals’ (p. 11). Roeper (1998) used the voice of ‘The Self’, to poignantly and powerfully express her desire to communicate the complexities and paradoxes inherent within being young and gifted and offered the following challenge,
Find a way to make people understand me and all the other selves, especially the children’s selves, which are so tiny and so vulnerable. Humankind needs to learn about me, my power and complexity. Make me visible for I need to grow just as the physical body does.... Translate me into the way people can recognize me and that the knowledge can be helpful to understand me from the inside out. (p. 145)

The research outlined within this article is a response to this challenge to ‘bring to life’ the experience of being young and gifted. The purpose of the study was to take up the challenge of Grant and Piechowski (1999, p. 11) and ‘to offer insight into the child’s perspective and inner life to aid us in assisting children in finding their own way in life.’ The study is an attempt to elucidate more clearly the phenomenon of giftedness in early childhood through the lived experiences of young gifted children and evidence of their emerging sense of self.

Methodology

The research undertaken within this study used an interpretivist paradigm that allowed for naturalistic enquiry and interpersonal and professional connections with the participants. A phenomenological approach was used in an attempt to capture the richness and complexity of the nature of the social and emotional development for the young
gifted child during the period of early childhood. Phenomenology allows
the researcher to investigate the phenomenon in its fullness and
complexity, including aspects such as thoughts and feelings. A range of
data sources (detailed later) were used providing access to rich detail
while ensuring minimum intrusion into the lives of the children and their
families. Gross (1993, p. 78) suggested that parent records and diaries are
useful sources for relevant and detailed observations of the gifted child
and Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay (2000) noted the advantage of parent
observation over researcher observation. They suggested that parents
‘may interpret the child’s speech or actions better as they know the child
and they can observe without disturbing the child or other members of
the household’ (p. 51).

Collaborative relationships with families facilitated the processes of
analysis, formulation of theory and the reporting of the study (this is
further outlined in the analysis and interpretation section). Opportunities
for the co-construction of theoretical perspectives and for giving feedback
on the textual dissemination of the research findings were provided. This
meant that families, who in some cases had experienced marginalisation
in educational decision-making in school settings (Hughes &
MacNaughton, 1999), were considered participants able to share valuable
experience and contribute expertise.
Data sources

The documentation provided by the families consisted of diary records including records of developmental milestones, anecdotal observations of the children’s behaviour, drawings and work samples, comments and conversations. The process of documentation by families began initially as a result of parent interest in infant development and therefore entries were random and varied in depth and frequency. When the parents sought help in determining effective responses to their child’s advanced, and at times, unusual behaviour they were encouraged to continue to document examples of advanced development as evidence of giftedness. Parents continued to note significant events and milestones as well as conversations and incidents of interest. These records were subsequently offered for collaborative research purposes.

Participants

While there were 15 participants in the eight-year study this aspect of the research (social and emotional development) focused on 7. The children participating in the research resided in metropolitan and regional areas of Sydney, Australia. Six the children were Anglo-Australian and one child was Indonesian-Australian. Four of the participants were boys and three were girls. The small sample size is reflective of the rate at which high
levels of giftedness are evident within the general population that is 1:1
000 to 1:10 000 (Gross, 1993).

Each of the 7 children was initially identified as gifted by parent
nomination with six of the children subsequently tested using formal
identification methods designed for young children and identified as
highly gifted. The analysis of the qualitative data of early development
provided by the families of the remaining children suggested that each of
the children participating in the study were highly gifted when compared
with normative development in early childhood (Berk, 2000; Harrison,
1999). The early attainment of developmental milestones such as sitting,
walking and talking as well as aspects such as intensity of focus,
exceptional memory, creativity, abstract reasoning and intrinsic
motivation characterised the children within the sample. Given the age of
the children involved and the phenomenological nature of the study, the
diversity of the evidence, as previously outlined, provided rich
documentation of giftedness in the period of early childhood. The
following table provides details of the children and the nature of data
contributed by families involved in the research.
# Table 4

## Participants’ Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age 2002</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Parental Involvement</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis and verbal feedback</td>
<td>2000-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records. Retroactive data 0-6 years. Current data 6-8 years. Ongoing contact with family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, analysis, written &amp; verbal feedback</td>
<td>1996-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records. Retroactive data 0-6 years. Current data 6-8 years. Ongoing contact with family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis and verbal feedback</td>
<td>1995-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records. Retroactive data 0-3 years. Current data 3-8 years. Ongoing contact with family 8-10 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis, verbal &amp; written feedback</td>
<td>1998-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records. Retroactive data collected for 0-4 years. Current data collected for 4-6 years. Ongoing contact with family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, analysis, written &amp; verbal feedback</td>
<td>1997-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, work samples, drawings, diary records. Retroactive data collected for 0-4 years. Current data collected for 4-8 years. Ongoing contact with family 8-9 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, written feedback</td>
<td>1996-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records. Retroactive data collected for 0-3 years. Current data collected for 3-6 years. Ongoing contact with family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Data collection, detailed analysis &amp; verbal feedback</td>
<td>1995-2002</td>
<td>Anecdotal observations, diary records, work samples, drawings. Retroactive data collected for 0-3 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis and Interpretation of Data

The data, comprising of the various paper documents, was coded in a number of stages. Initial coding was by age, gender and area of development such as physical, social-emotional and language development. Data considered relevant to social and emotional development was then further coded in relation to characteristics of social and emotional development of the gifted child as identified within the literature (Clark, 1997; Gross 1993; Harrison, 1999; Silverman, 1993; Tannenbaum, 1992). Those characteristics which occurred most frequently and across the age span were identified. Annotations were used to indicate the frequency of the occurrence of the particular characteristic. Examples of both children's and parents' voices within the documentation that provided rich detail of the quality of the characteristic and highlighted the nature of the phenomenon under study, were identified. The data was subsequently synthesized, using the annotations, in an attempt to further clarify the emergent themes and issues of interest.

Further discussion and analysis was subsequently undertaken in conjunction with the families in order to ascertain additional detail or to clarify the contextual framework from which the particular data had emerged. Family participation also involved the identification of aspects of the data that confirmed and/or challenged the propositions as they
emerged. This process helped to ensure accuracy, trustworthiness and authenticity.

Results and Discussion

The Experiences of the Children and Their Families

The results reported provide documentation of social and emotional development during the early childhood period from birth to eight years. A four part chronological or developmental sequence has been used to highlight the emerging issues in relation to social and emotional development for the young gifted child, namely infancy, the toddler years, the pre-school years and the early school years. Within this sequence a number of characteristics previously identified within the literature are explored. These include heightened sensitivity, advanced social interactions and mature and complex interests. These characteristics occurred frequently within the documentation and were identified within discussions with families as of particular significance to their experience of the social and emotional development of their young gifted children. Examples from the data have been selected to highlight the manner in which the characteristics are demonstrated over time. The examples chosen were selected for the richness of detail and were considered reflective of other examples included within the data. The age of the child is given in brackets after the relevant documentation.
The Period of Infancy

The new brain research (Gunnar & Barr, 1998; Newberger, 1997; Shore, 1997) has provided detailed evidence regarding the potentialities of the young child during the period of infancy. The infant’s ability to focus and fixate on objects, the responsiveness to sound and in particular the human voice and responsiveness to tactile stimulation is now recognised.

Heightened Sensitivities

Heightened sensitivities were evident across a number of domains as suggested by the theory of Positive Disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964; Dabrowski & Piechowski 1977). Most frequently documented by parents were sensitivities in the sensual, intellectual and emotional domains. The documentation undertaken in the first weeks and months of life by parents of the children within the study and subsequent recollections suggested that the sensory capacities of the young gifted infant appear to be marked by even greater awareness, alertness and heightened sensitivity. One parent noted that her newborn daughter E. had well-developed head control from birth and had remarkable perceptual awareness evident even in the first few days of life. For example, ‘She seemed to be studying the posters on the walls of the nursery in the hospital.’ Another noted the following in relation to her newborn infant.
A. was extremely alert and with good head control from early on. People constantly commented on his alertness and focus at this early stage. He was always looking around... As he grew it was clear that he was extremely sensitive to light and to loud noises. The first time I put his feet in the sand he pulled away. He was very sensitive to all sorts of sensations.

This sensitivity to sensory stimuli was also accompanied by intense emotional reactions such as frustration.

I noticed as still a young baby, six months old, that A. was constantly frustrated by things. He would try to do something become intensely focused then be unable to do it and become upset and frustrated. Other babies the same age did not focus on things so intensely or exhibit the sort of frustration he experienced.

Another parent noted her infant son's remarkable emotional sensitivity toward her and the resulting intensity of the mother-child relationship from birth.

As soon as he could open his eyes after birth, he made such long and intense eye contact that I felt like I had a very old and wise person staring back at me. I also had the strongest feeling in the
first few days that he was ‘checking things out’ and people and
making a decision whether to not to stay.

And later from five months of age, if I was out of the room when I dirtied his
nappy, when I returned he would make a certain type of intense eye contact and
make me aware of what had happened. This sensitivity and intense interaction
was also accompanied by the early development of empathy:

He was watching and listening to the video ‘the three tenors’. J’s
favourite performer was Pavarotti and when he was watching him
perform ‘Ave Maria’ J. became emotional and teary eyed and moved
his head with the rhythm of the music. (1.1 years)

Such examples give weight to the claims made by Lovecky (1997) that
‘highly gifted children who may require more intense stimulation from
parents, more attention and involvement, may also require more intense
early attunement and that early attachment and mutual attunement
contribute to mutual empathy. (p. 91-92)

Social Interactions

The reciprocity of the infant-parent relationship was found to be deeply
rewarding for parents and facilitated further engagement with the child.
Research in the area of child development recognises the significance of the
child’s first relationships and in particular the importance of bonding
between infant and mother (Berk, 2000). Dalzell (1998, p. 260) emphasised the significance of this relationship noting that ‘the mother-infant dyad is seen as the primary instigator of the child’s intellectual growth’. Some parents noted the joyous qualities of their early interactions with their young gifted children facilitated by the ability to focus, awareness and the intensity of the response to external stimuli. The need for constant stimulation and the intensity of reactions meant that in some cases the period of infancy was a difficult one with negative implications for families also noted in the diary records. Two families in particular recalled this period as one of difficulties, sleeplessness and anxiety. Each noted their infant’s intense crying and lack of need to sleep.

_I was told that what I was experiencing was impossible. That no baby cried endlessly all day in and out and barely slept. We rang every help line there is. The pediatrician assured us that there was nothing wrong with A. Somehow I struggled through._

_The key to the treasure chest was entertainment. Books music, toys that make a noise and (dare I say it) TV, talking, singing, going for walks around trees and flowers, talking some more. Anything that didn’t involve rocking, pushing, patting or lying down or a lullaby sustained E’s happiness. (7 months)_
These parents also noted the lack of support and information to help them to understand the behaviour of their young gifted child, with A’s mother commenting that, *No-one has ever talked about experience of a child like this as a baby.* Conversations with these parents indicated that providing appropriate stimulation for their gifted infants was an ongoing process of discovery with little meaningful advice coming from the medical profession or from the wealth of ‘baby books’ accessed for answers. A process of trial and error and tailoring interactions and care to the individual child proved the most effective. The parents commented that this meant that they adopted patterns of interaction and levels of verbal communication not normally used with children of this age.

*Walking E. to the cradle meant tears. Rocking or patting E. meant tears and placing her in the lying position in our arms was tantamount to heresy! Whilst E. was stimulated with books, toys, talking, singing or games she was the perfect angel. (6 months)*

**Mature Interests**

Evidence of developing imagination and the intense need to engage with and understand their world were documented well before two years. The following examples highlight this.

*N. will sit and have 4 or 5 books read in a row. She gets about 30 books a day read to her. She pleads to have books read to her. If she*
finds a book she either flicks through it herself or brings it to the nearest adult and pleads. She likes to point to named pictures, match pictures and to match a named picture to a real object or person. (1.1 years)

A. brought me magnetic letters from the fridge making noises so I eventually said what the letter was and so on with all the letters he came back with. (14 months)

A. has an intense interest in sea-shells to the exclusion of everything else. He knows every shell in his shell book and correctly identified the ones we have. (1.10 years)

Such experiences, resources responses may not have been considered ‘appropriate’ in terms of normative development (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and some in the community interpret this style of intellectual stimulation as ‘pushy parenting’ however parents noted the child’s need for stimulation as the catalyst for such experiences.

The Toddler Years

Erikson (1963) suggested that the second stage of psychosocial development ‘Autonomy versus Shame’ generally occurs during the period from two to three years. This period is characterised by the child’s growing independence and autonomy over self and the environment. For the young gifted children,
participating in the study, behaviours associated with this stage appeared earlier.

**Heightened Sensitivities**

Increased independence is typically evident during this period particularly in relation to various self-help tasks. For the gifted child this period may be somewhat problematic as advanced development may not be evident in all areas of development. Heightened sensitivity in the form of intense frustration occurred when the child’s desire for independence was not matched by the requisite physical skills. For example,

> *N’s fine motor skills seem to frustrate her. She desperately wants to write numbers and letters. (1.11 years)*

Apparent maturity in some areas at times resulted in exaggerated expectations by adults in relation to performance in other areas. The reverse also occurred. Assumptions about typical development resulted at times, in others underestimating or interacting with the child in ways that the child had long outgrown. This tended to happen within interactions outside the family such as at pre-school, day care or at social functions with less familiar adults. The level of awareness and the intensity of the reactions to such situations reflected the heightened sensitivities that seemed to characterise these children from birth.
We are building a house. A lot of R's toys are packed in boxes in a shed under the house. He was very sad one day, gazing at the shed. When asked what was wrong. He replied, 'It's all my toys - they are all packed away in boxes down there.' He was so sad, his arms went up and dropped to his side in solemn recognition of the hopelessness of the situation. (2.0 years)

Social Interactions

Heightened sensitivity was also evident in awareness of, and interactions with, others. At times parents noted their surprise at the maturity of social interaction and degree of empathy in children so young. A number of examples within the data reflect this.

N. judges people on TV as happy, sad, cranky, shy, naughty, good, etc. She is showing a lot of empathy and will cry at a picture of someone crying or someone being hurt. (2 years)

N. was talking about her grandparents the other day and told me Pop was shy. I asked her who else was shy and she gave me about 4 or 5 names of children who were actually shy. I suggested some names and she corrected me if I gave her incorrect suggestions. (2 years)
Mature Interests

The children appeared to have an insatiable appetite for more information during this period. This eagerness for intellectual stimulation was demonstrated in intense engagement in play experiences, book reading, visits and visitors, conversations with adults and viewing of television programs often designed for older audiences. Interactions with others at times reflected this drive for complexity.

\[N. \text{ is trying to sort out the difference between numbers and letters.}\]

\[She \text{ still wants books and more books...her fine motor skills seem to frustrate her. She desperately wants to write numbers and letters.}\]

(1.11 years)

\[D. \text{ has to know everything. The questions are constant. (2 years)}\]

\[N. \text{ can read many lower case letters and is just beginning to read words in a repetitive book. I began reading the book but she soon worked out the word with the 'curly c' was cat and the other word was dog. She worked the 'in' and 'out' from the pictures. After she read a few pages she looked at me and said 'my reading words'. (2.0 years)}\]

\[A. \text{ became interested in plants in the garden. He was not satisfied with bush, flower etc he wanted to know what each one was. Within}\]
no time he know about 20 garden plants by name – bougainvillea, rhododendron etc. (2.2 years)

The Preschool Years

During the ‘pre-school years’ children assume additional responsibility for themselves and for what constitutes their world. Erikson’s stage of Initiative versus Guilt (Erikson, 1963) is relevant during this period and is characterised by interactions with the social world that challenge the child to actively participate, to acquire new skills and be productive.

Heightened Sensitivities

Parents of children within the study noted the heightened sensitivity that became increasingly evident during the pre-school period. This is effectively illustrated in the following examples:

A. had intense reactions to things, such as television, videos and even books. With videos he would be so overcome that he would be unable to speak for an hour burying his head in a pillow. Children’s videos such as Wind in the Willows, Peter Rabbit or various Disney stories would elicit this response. He was terrified of some of it but mostly he couldn’t stand that people were mean or cruel or violent. He didn’t and still doesn’t understand why people would be like this. His feelings in response were too intense for him to easily deal with.

(4 years)
During bath time, for some unknown morbid reason R. wishes that there were no people on earth. No Mums, Grandads and Dads and Grandmas, not even himself. It possibly could be the influence of TV wildlife programs and Kids Shows such as Fern Gully and Blinky Bill where humans are portrayed as bad for the earth and animals. If not then he must just have a dark side. (4.10 years)

Social Interactions

The pre-school years are characterised by rapid social development for all children as they become increasingly aware of others and develop social skills. ‘Children learn many social skills during the pre-school years. They learn to communicate their needs, interact positively with others, establish friendships and acquire leadership skills’ (Lupowski 1989, p. 124). For the gifted child patterns of social interaction may be more complex and more advanced than what would be normally expected. This can be evident in social competence and maturity in relation to perspective taking, sharing ability to express ideas and negotiate plans within play (Harrison & Tegel, 1999) as evident in the following:

D’s participation in play experiences was marked by joyful and exuberant participation in a whole range of play experiences. A first friend shared many of these experiences and enthused him with her own bubbly temperament. (4.2 years)
E. reads the social context and seems to know just what the other children need and how to sustain their play. (4.7 years)

Greater awareness of others and more advanced play patterns also resulted in frustration and some difficulty engaging in social interaction with same aged peers.

_How come they just waste time? They just don’t get it! (4 years)_

_They never want to work out the rules and just when I get it all right they go off and do something else._ (5.2 years)

Gross (1989) suggested that mental age stands out as the pre-eminent factor determining friendship choices. Subsequent research by Gross (2000) regarding friendship and young gifted children found that the friendship needs of young gifted children moved beyond partnership in play to relationships of trust, with real friends providing a safe shelter. For several of the children in the study this resulted in solitary play within groups of same aged peers. Each of the children within the study enjoyed interactive social play and friendships with older children and adults.

**Mature Interests**

From three to four years interests pursued passionately by the participants included interests such as the sea, the environment and bio-diversity, volcanoes, drainage systems, planets, social relationships, and
understandings of life and death. Extracts from parent records highlight the developments that occurred at this stage.

A. developed an interest in planets and soon knew them. He then began making up his own planets beyond Pluto and gave them names such as Blapfatson. From three to three and a half he had an intense interest in flags that extended to maps and countries. (3.0 to 3.5 years)

She has endless imaginative games with small dolls and miniature creatures. She is incredibly creative inventive and so absorbed in her own imaginative world. She plays for hours sustaining her interest and concentration. (3.2 years)

Dalzell (1998) suggested that during this stage children must be given the freedom to select personally meaningful activities and to make decisions in order to develop a positive sense of self. For the children in the study, parental support was given in the commitment to providing appropriate resources and experiences. At times responding directly to the gifted child’s interests again involved crossing the boundaries of what might be considered appropriate and parents at times being judged by others as a ‘pushy’, ambitious or misguided.

The accessing of documentaries, science programs, computer programs and web sites, visiting museums, galleries and theatre became required
recreation for families, though the children were just three to five years old. Providing support also meant the emotional support of acceptance and encouragement with positive and accepting responses to sometimes idiosyncratic, outlandish and unexpected behaviours. Parents noted that other members of the extended family or community, too, did not always understand this.

The Early School Years

The years from five to eight are marked for most children by the transition into a formal educational setting. This is a significant milestone for the children in the study and their families. Issues associated with heightened sensitivities, social interactions and mature interests that emerged for the children and their families during the prior to school period were accentuated within this more formal, and, often less flexible and supportive educational setting.

Heightened Sensitivities

The heightened sensitivities apparent during the years before school were reflected in a number of factors. For several children sensitivity to physical stimuli was noted by families. A’s mother noted for example that:

At six A. is still very sensitive to all sorts of sensation. He cannot tolerate loud noise, bright light, and still hates getting his hands
dirty. A noise that is normal to most people such as a lawn mower, the buzzing of a door intercom etc are perceived to him as very loud.

(6 years)

The parents of the children in the study typically noted that the children were aware of, and sensitive to, expectations and had unusually high, and at times, unrealistic expectations of them selves. They typically expected to be able to learn new skills effortlessly and to do things straight away. At times these unrealistic performance expectations resulted in feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. Several parents commented on the difficulties associated with tasks such as learning to swim and to ride a bicycle, both being tasks which require some practice and persistence. Difficulties associated with perfectionism also arose around the completion of school tasks as evident in the following diary entries:

Completing homework – time elapsed to completion about an hour and a half... with various interruptions. It’s not that R. finds the exercise hard it’s that he wants to do such a good job that the actual time taken over each little detail is excessive. (6.5 years)

R. was in tears over several failed attempts at producing a home project on the Titanic. He’d screwed it up and threw the pen across the floor not wanting to see what he’d done. (6.7 years)
Heightened sensitivities were also reflected in the intensity of the feelings that emerged during this period. As well as a result of unrealistic expectations and perfectionism, intense feelings of social isolation were also experienced. This heightened sensitivity meant that several of the children experienced low self-esteem and despondency. This is poignantly expressed in R’s comments such as,

*I don’t want to grow up. You become an adult like you Dad and then you die off. (5.0 years)*

*I don’t know about life. No one cares about me. Everything is boring, this is boring, school is boring. (6.5 years)*

*Sometimes I wish that we all didn’t exist it would be better to be dead. I need someone to care for and be gentle with. (6.7 years)*

The responses and acceptance the children received from their families were quite different to those experienced at the school or on the soccer field, dancing class and, at times, a sense of identity confusion resulted. Such discrepancies are evident in the following comment:

*Apparently in the class he appears more like a child with disabilities not a gifted child. It’s because he mucks about and he’s always in a mess and he never knows where his books are and he spends a lot of time ‘wasting time’. Yet most of what he has experienced at school is of little interest to him and I think that he learnt to tune out. But I’ve*
seen him sit and read for hour after hour and work on 'lego technic' for hour after hour or watch a documentary over and over again, rewind it, listen to it. He wouldn’t miss Quantum (a science documentary television program) for the world. That’s an hour of fairly technical stuff and his eyes don’t leave the screen. And at tee-ball (a junior version of base ball) - he’s just started playing and he’s there lined up, he’s listening, he’s sitting where he’s got to sit. He’s just there where he wants to be because he wants the information. It’s all new skills and it’s something he doesn’t think he knows all about and he wants to be good at it. (8 years)

Social Interactions – Emerging Friendships

The children within the study continued to demonstrate awareness of others and complex social interactions. Mature conceptualisations of friendship were also evident as in the following:

She talked about being a different sort of friend to different children within the class. She was very perceptive about the other children and was able to accommodate to their various needs and expectations. She puts a lot of energy into making it work – a real nurturer. (6.2 years)

R had C over to play today. They play well. It was particularly nice when C had drawn a boat and it had two bumps on the bottom. R
tactfully asked if this was the keel and went to great effort to get permission first to show her how to draw a keel. She gave him permission and he drew one for her. It was very thoughtful of him and sensitive how he did it. (6 years)

We had a short discussion about what it means to be a friend and R told me how a human could be friends with a guinea pig and may be even a fish but not a shark. We settled on the fact that the more similarities that friends have the easier to be friends. He explained how guinea pigs had four legs and that we could pretend to be guinea pigs because we can use our arms as front legs. Also guinea pigs eat some of the same things that we eat and he told me that they also have five fingers. He had more trouble finding similarities with a fish but concluded that it might be possible that a human could be a friend, swim with a fish and also with a whale. (6.1 years)

This analysis of who or what can be a friend suggests that R had spent considerable time reflecting on the possibilities for friendship that might exist within the social contexts of home and family. His comments highlight the reality that establishing friendships may not be a spontaneous and unconscious process for some gifted children but rather the source of considerable reflection and conscious deliberation.
Three of the four boys in the study had some difficulties finding friends within their class of same aged peers. At times this was due to the inability to find and sustain mutual interests, at other times it was the result of different expectations of play and friendship.

*When asked why he didn't want to go to school A. replied, 'No-one at my school does my kind of thinking, Mama.' (6 years)*

*R. complained that he was losing all his friends. In his words, 'All my friends are growing out of me, X is starting to be silly and Y is not as a good friend any more.' There were complaints that all the kids at school wanted to do was to play on the monkey bars and that they take no notice when he suggests that they play a different game. (6 years)*

**Mature Interests**

The interests of the children continued to be complex and sophisticated with increasing levels of abstraction and depth. The intensity of the interest and the inability to share the focus and depth of interest with same aged peers was problematic with significant implications for social and emotional development. For example,

*R was watching TV. He said, 'Dad can you bring me a bucket to pee in. I don't want to miss any of this.' He was watching the Future Eaters a documentary about the arrival of Aborigines to Australia*
40,000 to 60,000 years ago. It is a documentary pitched at adult level about the land management of the Australian Aboriginals. (6. years)

He watched a show about Stephen Hawking’s Universe and after a part that explained how Mendelev constructed the periodic table he said, ‘Does that mean that Mrs. P is wrong about God? She’s got no proof’ (6. years)

The nature and complexity of interests pursued at times became problematic as the children struggled with, if and how, to explain their thoughts and ideas to their same aged peers and what did it mean if new information contradicted that which had been given at school. The children themselves were aware that communication with peers at school became difficult. This was particularly evident when pursuits that were taken very seriously could not easily be discussed with same aged classmates who were unable to understand the depth or nature of the topic of interest. For example,

She agonised over the talk she had to give on her favourite book fearing that if she didn’t get selected to talk first no one in the class would listen. When asked to explain she commented, ‘because they just don’t read books like that!’ (5.6 years)

R. became stressed about his project on the Titanic. He used the words ‘fat’ for broad and ‘heavy 45,000 tons’ for ‘45,000 tons
register' again explaining that other kids in his class would not understand if he used those words. He was so proud of the final result commenting, 'In a fire this and my Titanic book would be all that I would save'. (6 years)

Attempts to obtain educational experiences matched to intellectual ability rather than chronological age, for five of the children, resulted in difficult relationships with the school. Parents noted that they felt that their intentions were misunderstood.

This is evident in the following example:

The reaction from the school Principal about letting R slip into the year 1-2 class was downright oppositional. One minute 'Sure, no problem.' The next it's all too hard. We got into an argument with the school counsellor. We got accused of pushing for a grade skip. They seem to think he is an immature little boy. Later we asked R if he ever played with any of the 'Kindies'. He said 'Sometimes.' I asked him if he was ever silly with them and he said again, 'Sometimes.' When asked why he acted silly and replied, 'To make them happy'. (6 years)

There was also evidence of feelings of identity confusion more typically associated with much older children.

Why am I here? What am I meant to do? What can I do? (6 years)
These comments indicate concern about personal identity and the meaning of life. Such sentiments are indicative of Erikson’s stage of Ego-Identity versus Role Confusion (Erikson, 1963) more generally experienced in adolescence. The need to accommodate an authentic self in order to fit into the social context of same-aged peers created tensions for the five of the children. Such tensions were compounded by the need to mask intellectual abilities to fit within the expectations of mainstream educational settings. Early school experiences provided little in the way of personal validity for these highly gifted children. Given the sensitivities and emotional intensity that they also experienced meant that the children were placed in a position of emotional vulnerability.

As Lovecky (1993, p. 3) commented:

When gifted children are encouraged to remain silent about their own needs and conform only to the needs of the rest of society, they are suffering abuse. They are in fact being taught not to trust that there is anyone who can understand them, and in so doing, they never learn how to get others to appreciate them for what they can offer.

Conclusion

The words and experiences of children and families from this study provide rich description and valuable insights into the area of socio-
emotional development of the gifted child in early childhood, during the years from birth to age eight. The inclusion of the parental observations recorded during infancy highlights the reality of giftedness in the first weeks and months of life. This is a time when families frequently seek support with parenting from others within the extended family and wider community. Greater awareness of the indications of giftedness in infancy amongst infant health practitioners and early childhood educators could assist families as they attempt to respond to some of the demanding aspects of gifted infant care.

The characteristics of heightened sensitivity, advanced social interactions and mature and complex interests, are reflected at different developmental stages and in relation to different contexts. These characteristics although at times challenging to adults responsible for the care and education of young gifted children, can be seen as strengths that the gifted child brings to the family and to the educational context. With greater awareness such attributes as sensitivity, empathy and maturity can be acknowledged, validated and viewed as positive contributions rather than as liabilities. As gifted children are affirmed for who they are and recognized as valuable members of the learning community whether in day care, pre-school or school, they can learn to participate more effectively in the social context, respond to the needs of others and be supported in the development of social skills. Greater awareness of the
nature of the gifted child’s experience in early childhood will assist educators to offer the young gifted child the support that they may need. As Silverman (1998) commented, ‘with greater societal awareness, understanding and acceptance of the differences inherent in being developmentally advanced much of the pain and isolation of being gifted can be healed.’ (p.205)

The words of the children and families included within this article provide the reader with stories that capture the reality of the lived experience of being gifted during the period of early childhood. The shared story provides a powerful means of building understanding and can elicit responsiveness, in this case, to the phenomenon of giftedness. The methodology and the results of the study also affirm the value of the parent perspective and suggest the need to acknowledge parent expertise in educational decisions. The unique insights evident in the comments of the parents suggest that greater respect for the parent perspective will facilitate the process of ensuring responsive interactions and experiences for young gifted children in formal educational settings.

The comments of the children included in the study are perhaps the most difficult to ignore. The thoughts and feelings that they express give insight into the inner world of the gifted child and suggest the need for both parents and early childhood professionals to take time to listen to
the perspective of the child. Collaborative partnerships between gifted children, their families and educators can help to ensure that the responsive interactions that empower and engage young gifted children as infants and toddlers can continue throughout the pre-school and early school years. Such responsiveness is essential for effective social and emotional development and the emergence of positive self-identity for the highly gifted child.
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Chapter 3

PLAY AND THE GIFTED CHILD

'When you are playing it is different because you get to ask your own questions and find out for yourself in just the way you want to.‘

(David 6.0 years)


Preface

Rationale

The discussion of the play of young gifted children included in this chapter highlights the particular strengths and learning needs of young gifted children. Consideration of the nature of giftedness provides useful information to early childhood educators and families endeavouring to identify and support young gifted children in both home and educational contexts. The inclusion of actual examples of play emphasise differences in the rate of development. Such examples also illustrate the qualitative
differences of the play and learning as evident in the types and complexity of play themes and situations that engage the minds of young gifted children. The discussion of possible ways in which the play of the young gifted children can be supported provides much needed guidance for educators and families who are frequently perplexed about how best to respond to the advanced development of the young gifted child. The inclusion of aspects such as creativity, numeracy and literacy in the context of play challenges the use of structured, teacher-directed academic tasks in response to giftedness in early childhood. The identification of the valuable learning that occurs within the context of play for the young gifted child reaffirms the crucial role of play in the education and care of all young children.

**Context**

This chapter was requested for inclusion in an edited book designed for an audience of early childhood teachers and undergraduate students. Kim Tegel, friend and co-author of the chapter was at the time of publication a colleague at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur and an academic in early childhood education with post graduate qualifications in gifted education. The editor of the book, *Child’s Play – Revisiting Play in Early Childhood Settings*, Elizabeth Dau, has major research and publication interests in the areas of children’s play, particularly socio-dramatic play and anti-bias. The publication was endorsed by the Australian Early
Childhood Association (Dau 1999, p. 218). The following description of the book was provided by Dau (1999):

Through a range of topical issues explored by practitioners and educators in the child-care field, Child's Play - Revisiting Play in Early Childhood Settings uncovers the intricate relationship between play and learning. The role of play in furthering young children's social, cognitive and emotional development is examined with a particular focus on the acquisition of social skills and the development of attitudes. Central to the text is its 'anti-bias' theme, which is highlighted specifically in chapters addressing gender boundaries, cultural variance and the differing abilities of young children. (p. iv)

Outcomes

This chapter Play and the Gifted Child (Harrison & Tegel, 1999) provided the authors with an opportunity to put the experiences, strengths and needs of young gifted children and their families on the early childhood education agenda within the Australian context. We found authoring this chapter a particularly exciting opportunity as inclusion of content related to gifted children was not frequently evident in generalist early childhood texts at this time. As a result of this experience the opportunity came to be involved in another publication, Bending the Rules: Play and Pedagogy in Early Childhood (Dockett & Fleer, 1999). Chapter 11 of this publication,
Individual Differences in Play, also includes discussion of the play of young gifted children with information provided by Tegel and Harrison.

References


Child's Play

Revisiting play in early childhood settings

ELIZABETH DAU
Chapter 8

Play and the gifted child

Cathie Harrison and Kim Tegel

Introduction

Giftedness is a significant aspect of human diversity that is evident in early childhood. Research indicates that giftedness is both inherited and acquired, and a reality for infants, toddlers and young children, as well as their families and caregivers (Clark 1992; Piechowski & Colangelo 1984). Young children who are gifted require education and care which nourishes and fosters their uniqueness and supports the many aspects of childhood that they share with all children. To reach their full potential, they must be provided with experiences and interactions that are responsive to their advanced development and particular characteristics.

For young children who are gifted, play is a precious and valuable experience. The context of free and spontaneous play can be the source of powerful learning and personal satisfaction. In play, the child is free to initiate, direct, complicate and pursue an interest to a point of personal resolution. For the gifted child, this play may be far more involved and complex than that typical of most children their age. Gifted children can also explore and ‘play out’ some of the social, emotional and moral issues which fascinate and perplex them.

At school I feel like I’m in a big boundary. I can’t get to find out about the things I want to find out about. When I’m playing I have more time, more time for just one thing, instead of doing five things at once: spelling, maths, story-writing, up-and-down sums and reading. At school they tell you before you get to find out for yourself in your own way. When you are playing it’s different because you get to ask all your own questions and find out for yourself in just the way that you want to.

(Comments of a gifted child aged six)
Unfortunately for the gifted child, such play is often considered a waste of time by adults, and periods of free play are replaced with structured activities and academic tasks. However, free and self-directed play provides one of the most effective contexts which adults can provide to meet the socio-emotional and learning needs of the gifted child (Harrison 1995; Parke & Ness 1988; Tegel 1992; Wright 1990).

Characteristics of the gifted child

Gifted children are a diverse group and it is important to recognise that there is no typical gifted child. Giftedness may be demonstrated in a range of ways (Tegel 1994) and may or may not be evident across all developmental areas. Characteristics of the young child who is gifted may include:

- advanced physical development;
- intensity of purpose;
- curiosity;
- exceptional memory;
- rapid pace of learning;
- early reading skills;
- asking probing questions;
- advanced mathematical ability;
- creativity and imagination;
- sense of humour;
- ability to generalise knowledge and apply it to new situations;
- being articulate and expressive with an extensive vocabulary;
- offering alternative and divergent solutions to problems;
- ability to follow complex instructions;
- wide range of interests;
- advanced social interactions;
- heightened sensitivity;
- social maturity;
- differences in play patterns;
- perfectionism;
- resisting unfairness and having a strong sense of social justice;
- questioning authority;
- being perceptive regarding the feelings of others.
(Based on Ehrlich 1985; Gross 1993; Harrison 1995; Silverman 1993)
Play patterns of the gifted child

The characteristics of giftedness outlined above have a significant influence on the way young children who are gifted play with others and with resources. Research by Barnett and Fiscella (1985, cited in Harrison 1995) indicates that the play of gifted children tends to be developmentally advanced, often resembling the play patterns of older children of average intelligence. They suggest that, in general, gifted children prefer the company of older playmates and demonstrate more advanced play styles, use higher levels of imagination and creative playful interactions. They are also more pro-social in their play, acting more cooperatively and exhibiting more sharing behaviour than their peers.

Social maturity and high levels of imagination and creativity can result in a range of responses and play behaviours in gifted children. Some become frustrated by their differences from their peers and vent their feelings in aggressive or destructive behaviour, while some seek out like-minded peers or more mature companions in the form of older children and/or adults. For others, solitary play provides the most satisfying play experience and this can result in social isolation that may be perceived as introversion.

While this perception may be common, it is important to note that introversion has been defined as a basic personality trait in which individuals gain energy from being alone rather than, as with extroverts, being with others. As Silverman says, ‘introverts feel drained by too much association with others: they need to retreat from the world to regain their sense of balance’ (Silverman 1988, in Whitmore 1986, p. 82). Such personality differences need to be respected if each child is to develop a positive self-concept. Differences in play patterns need to be supported with a variety of shared and solitary experiences. Valuable play experiences can occur without observable interaction with other people.

Often one of the prime objectives for offering play experiences to young children is to assist in the processes of their social development. Social development involves a sense of self-acceptance that comes from positive interaction with others, regardless of age, and for many young gifted children this may well be with an adult. As Silverman observes: ‘Lasting friendships are based on mutual interests and values, not on age. Individuals with good social development like themselves, like other people, demonstrate concern for humanity and develop
mutually rewarding friendships with a few kindred spirits.' (Silverman 1992, p. 15)

Characteristics such as commitment to a particular task, curiosity, an unusually long attention span and ability to understand and use abstract concepts may also impact on the nature of the play of the gifted child. Such children may pursue interests that are unusual in early childhood. For example, although most children in early childhood demonstrate play themes and interests which are based on the familiar and the concrete, it is often the abstract and unfamiliar which preoccupies the gifted child. For gifted children, interests and play themes can include such diverse aspects as ecological issues, astronomy, ancient civilizations and cultures, current political and sociological issues and moral dilemmas. Such interests are often pursued through various forms of play with an intensity, creativity and complexity which may surprise adults.

Amanda, Sabine and Said, all aged four, were playing in the family corner. They began to play out the roles involved in food preparation using the plastic food available.

Sabine: This stuff is no good for babies. It's too big and they won't be able to digest it. We need mushy stuff.

Amanda: We don't have any mushy stuff.

Sabine: Well, the babies will die then — you know — malnutrition like the babies in those countries where there isn't enough food. They get big tummy's but they aren't fat. You know those ones in Africa when it doesn't rain or where there's a war... and they can't go to the shops.

Said (listening intently): Let's play that then. You know, where they go out looking to find food. We could go and dig in the sandpit and pick some leaves and get sticks.

Sabine (enthusiastically): Yeah, let's do that — and we could mash up some sand and some leaves and then feed them and they wouldn't die.

The three children left the family corner to continue their play that involved foraging for food. Their play was accompanied by much complex conversation about the difficulties of survival in the third world.

This play scenario was repeated with variations in the outdoor environment over several weeks. The same three children also collaborated in the task of building a shelter with sheets and mats under the trees.
Play: a context for learning

Young children who are gifted gain much from opportunities to engage in rich and complex play experiences (Harrison 1995; Tegel 1994; Wright 1990). Adults should be aware of some of the important aspects of play for these children and plan for opportunities like the following:

1. Participating in experiences which use executive operations, such as forecasting or predicting, hypothesising, planning, decision making, communicating and evaluating (Kitano 1982). Critical and flexible thinking is developed when children evaluate and make decisions regarding issues and occurrences in their play. In this approach, it is the processes rather than a particular outcome or product which is considered significant, and trial and error learning is legitimised. In play, mistakes can be perceived as learning experiences; that is, as alternative pathways or directions rather than errors of which to be ashamed. This is particularly important for the child who is gifted and demonstrates a tendency towards perfectionism.

Tracey and Sam, Joanna and Tim gathered the sheets and blankets from the family corner. They asked to borrow the rugs used at fruit time and disappeared down to the back corner of the playground. After 20 minutes, it was obvious that the children had been working well together. Several of the rugs were suspended from low branches of the tree to form walls, and another was spread between two branches as a makeshift roof. The windy conditions had demanded particular resourcefulness, problem solving and collaboration. The children had used the pegs from the painting area and skipping ropes from the outdoor shed to secure the rugs. Some old tyres from the climbing area served the dual purpose of anchoring the floor and functioning as furniture, such as baths and beds. When asked to explain the play to the adults and other children, the four children gave a long and detailed explanation of the various steps and stages in their construction.

2. Playing out and following through the events they have experienced, stories they have read or unfamiliar concepts of which they have become aware.
3. Participating in the processes of research and documentation.
Emma, aged three, was playing and painting with water on the path. She noticed that the water disappeared all by itself and asked, ‘Where has it gone? How can it just disappear?’ The adult responded, ‘Yes, it’s gone. I wonder where it has gone to? Do you think that it disappears when we paint in the shade? What about when we spill water on the floor inside? Does it disappear by itself too? Let’s go and paint in some other places and see what happens.’ Other questions included, ‘What happens to the water in the washing when we hang it out to dry? What happens to the puddles left after the rain?’

The adult supported Emma’s thinking and discovery by responding positively to her sense of wonder and by encouraging her to participate actively in exploring this interest.

Since young children who are gifted are capable of acquiring knowledge more easily than their peers, they require less time to master routine tasks. They also benefit from being able to take responsibility for their own learning (Karnes, Schwedel & Williams 1983). Play facilitates this, because it encourages children to pursue their interests and allows for their differing levels of ability. Play environments can be pre-planned by the early childhood educator to help develop the child’s individual strengths and needs.

**The role of the supportive adult**

**Engaging children**

Play supported by a sensitive and observant adult provides an excellent forum for gifted children to develop their character and particular interests or skills. Adults need to adopt strategies that will engage children in processes to help them achieve this. These strategies could include involving the child in planning the play environment, selecting resources, organising group projects and sharing information with others. Young children who are gifted can use advanced language, literacy, numeracy and/or research skills in this process.

Adults need to ask open-ended questions which focus on the how and why.
Olivia, aged three and a half, found a measuring tape in the garage. 'What's this?' she asked her mother. Her mother responded, 'It's a measuring tape. You can have a look at it. Have you seen one of these before?' Olivia shook her head. 'Well, have a play with it. See what's written on it? How do you think that you could use it? Why don't you take it outside and play with it and see how it works?' Olivia returned after about 15 minutes. She spoke quickly and excitedly: 'I need one of these at preschool. I need it to know which one of the children is the biggest and which is the littlest. I need it when we are building with blocks so we know who has the longest road. I need one too!'

In such situations the direction is determined by the child and the particular solution reached by the child is personally meaningful and does not need to be evaluated by the adult.

The posing of additional questions by the adult can engage the child in research by encouraging him or her to draw on previous observations, knowledge and understanding to focus on a new dilemma. Rather than answering a question directly, the adult 'scaffolds' for the child, enabling the child to reach a new point of understanding. Adult and child can engage in co-construction of knowledge. Together they share the play with ideas as well as resources and participate in further research and investigation.

The adult needs to be sensitive to opportunities for:

- formulating and testing new hypotheses;
- experimenting and researching through books;
- accessing experts.

These opportunities give gifted children greater understanding of the initial puzzling question, as well as assisting them to develop autonomy in research. This is invaluable not only because it empowers the child to become an independent learner, but also because it alleviates some of the pressure on educators and families to satisfy the insatiable need for new information often demonstrated by gifted children.
Resourcing children’s play

Access to additional resources is necessary in children’s play, as is the presence of an adult open to those resources being used in new and unexpected ways. Access to open-ended resources can facilitate the child’s participation in satisfying play experiences. Play resources, such as blocks and dress-ups, have infinite possibilities for complex and creative use. The creative possibilities such resources offer—and the varying degrees of complexity of play which can be attained with them—are determined by the child, who will find them personally satisfying as well as challenging.

Early readers can soon learn to access indexes and catalogues, phone books, dictionaries, maps, directories and encyclopaedias, while the adult can act as a mentor or guide. It is important, however, to allow the child to take the lead and to be responsive to the child’s thinking. Adults who adopt this role should not be inhibited or constrained by expectations of a child’s typical interests or levels of understanding. Young children who are gifted frequently pursue interests in great depth and complexity and often contemplate issues not generally considered in the early childhood curriculum. They often have high levels of task commitment, curiosity and persistence. If gifted children are to retain their intrinsic motivation and curiosity, the ideas and issues that are self-generated must be acknowledged and responded to regardless of their complexity.

Exploring complex issues

Young children who are gifted are able to demonstrate a heightened sense of social justice, and frequently demonstrate intense emotional sensitivity towards their own feelings and those of others (Harrison 1995; Kitano 1982). They therefore need opportunities to play out feelings, reflect on situations of concern and pursue moral dilemmas to complex levels. During play, children can enact a moral dilemma and then develop a number of responses to it. Tegel (1992) suggests that in play children can repeat experiences and scenarios and so take as much time as they need to express and come to terms with feelings, interests and everyday experiences as well as unfamiliar, perplexing and even fearful events.

In addition, adults can guide and support the child’s thinking in contemplating issues of concern. They can empathise with the feel-
ings which the play may generate and encourage alternative and creative responses.

George, aged four, found block play very frustrating. He wanted to build complex structures that required the use of many blocks. He became very angry when he saw other children; as he said, 'wasting blocks just making long straight roads.' The adults, who wished to support the play of all children in the centre, spent considerable time observing the block play area. They discussed the incidents in the block area with the children thoughtfully, and all together worked out particular strategies to solve the problem. This experience provided George with the opportunity to verbalise his feelings, use his creative problem-solving abilities and help him understand the perspective of others.

**Connections with like-minded peers**

Young children who are gifted require opportunities to connect with like-minded peers. Koopmans-Dayton & Feldhusen (1987) support this notion as does Harrison (1995) who further suggests that mixed age grouping increases opportunities for peer cooperation, while also responding to individual needs. Play offers this opportunity because children with similar interests can play together, regardless of age. Play also allows children to participate as they wish and to take the play to a level of complexity which suits them. This suggests, then, that children may play together at the same play experience, but the play which takes place may vary depending upon each child's interests and the level of complexity satisfying to that child.

**Time for play**

Gifted children may require longer periods of uninterrupted time and the opportunity to revisit an experience over several days, weeks or months before they can explore an interest or concern to a point of resolution and personal completion. It is important that the child has the opportunity to determine this point of closure rather than having it imposed by the adult. Frequently, adults inform children that an experience is finished, saying such things as, 'you have done enough of that now—come and do something else', rather than allowing the children to determine this for themselves. Gifted children may respond to this with an emotional outburst that can be surprising to the adult!
Characteristics of giftedness such as intense feelings, heightened sensitivity and perfectionism may manifest themselves in this situation, so a sensitive and supportive response is required from the adult. The ability to empathise with the child is significant. For instance, the adult may comment, ‘I know that you’re not finished yet and it must be difficult to have to pack away.’ This acknowledges the child’s feelings and legitimises them. The adult may then offer the child an opportunity to think of alternative solutions to the dilemma, which in turn helps the child to identify and manage the problem. Reminders of pack-away time and opportunities to revisit the experience by taking photographs of the play process and products or videotaping them can help the child to feel more comfortable about the transient nature of much play.

**Opportunities for creativity**

Young children who are gifted also require adults to implement strategies that will support the use and further development of their creativity. Free play with open-ended resources can provide opportunities in which adults can encourage a range of creative processes such as:

- fluency—the ability to give many different responses;
- flexibility—the ability to change perspective;
- originality—the ability to produce unique responses;
- embellishment—the ability to develop or add detail. (Torrance 1969)

Socio-dramatic play—such as that using blocks, sand and water, construction materials, paints, paper and clay—provides infinite opportunities for the child to develop these processes. Adults can facilitate creative and divergent thinking in children by observing, listening and extending their play in numerous ways.

First, they can give young children the opportunity to play and explore things in a safe atmosphere; that is, provide a context which encourages unusual and unique responses on the part of the children, which acknowledges and is supportive of differences rather than conformity, and which supports risk-taking. The imaginative use of resources and the provision of uninterrupted and extended playing time is fundamental. Open-ended resources again play a vital part. Visual art experiences such as collage, drawing, painting and work with clay are excellent ways to assist the development of these thinking skills.
Second, adults can enhance opportunities to develop creative thinking by giving encouragement and affirmation to the unusual and unexpected as, for example, with comments such as: 'That's an interesting idea. I have never thought of that before! What do you think will happen?' or 'Why?' or 'You could give it a try and see what happens. Let's watch carefully and see what happens and then we can talk about it and think about it further.'

Third, the adult can serve as a role model by demonstrating personal creativity and playfulness. Adults who show curiosity and a willingness to explore and investigate the unfamiliar can help empower the child. In the case of the gifted child who shows perfectionist tendencies, the opportunity to observe risk-taking, trial and error, failure and realistic self-evaluation is valuable. Adults who can admit that they make mistakes while learning, and that they do not know all the answers, offer a safe environment for the child to also make mistakes and ask unusual questions. Adult and child can then share in mutually satisfying investigation and discovery.

**Complex language and advanced literacy and numeracy skills**

Young children who are gifted need opportunities to use language in a variety of complex ways. Play allows children to experiment with language in rich and meaningful ways at a level that suits their needs and particular stage of development. Tegel (1992) further suggests that when children are involved in an experience, they often use words to describe it. Discussion can include a description of what they are doing and how they are feeling. The children learn from each other and have opportunities to use words that would not necessarily be needed or used in other experiences.

Oona and Jye, both aged four, were playing with plastic cars in the sandpit. As Oona pushed her car through the sand it got stuck. Jye reached over, picked up the car and looked at it. He said: 'Well, if we could lift up the bonnet we could see if it's the radiator, or if it's the hoses, or the transmission. All sorts of things can go wrong with a car engine, you know.'

Young gifted children often learn to read at an earlier age than other children of the same age. The early reading ability and complex
interests frequently demonstrated by gifted children should be supported by access to an appropriate range of literature. They need to have the opportunity to read fiction and factual texts which interest them and which are written to a level of complexity which satisfies them. Access to complete books, encyclopaedias and dictionaries as well as to publications such as manuals, catalogues and atlases can also be useful.

Literature and learning centres can be set up as part of a play environment in a non-structured and child-directed manner. Adults can assist by identifying children's interests through observing and listening to them and talking with their families. Resources relevant to a particular interest—such as books, objects, slides and videos—can then be accessed through public libraries and museums and through the support of families and the community. Children can also benefit greatly from opportunities to share their interests with an expert or someone who has a passionate interest in a similar topic. Such a person can act as a mentor and share the journey of discovery with the child.

Young children who are gifted need opportunities to use advanced skills of numeracy and literacy in meaningful contexts. These needs can be supported by access to literacy and numeracy resources in the context of play. Frequently children's first attempts at writing occur during play, where it is used for purposes that are relevant and significant to the children themselves. Play also offers opportunities for children to practice and develop numeracy skills in meaningful and appropriate ways. Resources often need to be shared with others, amounts calculated, measurements taken and sometimes, depending upon the nature of the play in which the children are involved, complex mathematical formulas developed, implemented, evaluated and then redeveloped.

Adults can support this process by offering relevant resources and 'scaffolding' to enable the child to reach a new understanding that may be beyond typical developmental expectations. Resources such as pencils, pads of paper, small writing books, chalk and chalkboards, beads, counters, buttons, calculators, computers, rulers, and measuring tapes can be helpful.

**Conclusion**

Adults who engage in the processes of supporting and participating in play with the gifted child develop a far greater understanding of the individual child. Play provides a window on children’s develop-
ment and the nature and depth of their thinking and feeling, and an insight into their interests and concerns. Such information is invaluable to both families and educators who seek to maximise positive learning opportunities for children. The information gathered by observing and documenting play provides an excellent basis for identification of giftedness. This information is also useful when planning a child-centred and responsive curriculum and when determining appropriate educational placements for the gifted child. Carefully documented examples of the child’s learning through play can also help to explain the value of the child’s play experiences to parents, families and others.

Children who are gifted, as all children, have a right to be affirmed and acknowledged for who they are. They, too, have a right to play. It is in play that young gifted children explore both their physical and social worlds. It is through their interaction with others in the context of play that such children begin to develop a sense of who they are as part of a community. In play, they learn to value themselves as unique individuals—individuals who are able to make a positive contribution to the world of which they are a part.

For further thought and discussion

1. What strategies could be used to assist a group of children to value and utilise the contributions of all children, including that of the gifted child?
2. In what ways can educators encourage families with gifted children to feel empowered and share in aspects of their child’s development and home experiences?
3. How can the educator support gifted children and their families in the transition between child care services, preschools and school settings?
4. In what ways can the educator communicate the value of play for the gifted child to their families and other professionals?

References


Chapter 4

VISUAL REPRESENTATION AND THE YOUNG GIFTED CHILD.

'This is Mad Dad and his dog out in the noon day sun.
The dog has only one eye because he is on the side.'
Gaby (4.2 years)

Roeppe Review, 21(3), 189-194.

Preface

Rationale

The article, *Visual Representation and the Young Gifted Child*, (Harrison, 1999) reflects my commitment to the richness and complexity of the visual languages used by young children as a means of self-expression and communication. In drawing young children make their thinking visible. The research that informed the development of this article emerged in response to the vast collection of drawings and paintings collected over a number of years in my work with young gifted children and their families, and more specifically collected in the process of preparing the first edition.
of the book, *Giftedness in Early Childhood* (Harrison, 1995) for publication. This article focused on the development and nature of visual representation for the young gifted child. While not all young children who are gifted, use visual and graphic representation as a primary means of making sense of the world, it is an area frequently given only cursory attention within gifted education research, scholarship and by early childhood practitioners.

In this article data gathered from research with young gifted children is used to highlight this important aspect of early childhood experience. The drawings, paintings and accompanying annotations are a powerful source of insight into the nature of giftedness within the early childhood period. The results of the research suggest that the drawings of young gifted children provide a valuable means of identification of giftedness during the early childhood period when multiple methods and multiple sources of identification are recommended (Harrison, 1995; Kitano 1990; Porter 1999; Roedell, 1989). The results of the study also encourage early childhood educators and families to move beyond superficial observations of, and responses to, children’s drawings and to recognise visual representation as a powerful source of insight into the young gifted child’s interests, development and learning.
Context

This article was submitted to and accepted by the American journal, The Roeper Review in 1997 and published in 1999. The mission of the Roeper Review (Brodsky, 1999) is as follows:

To publish thought provoking innovative articles that deal with research, observation, experience, theory and practice as they relate to growth, emotions and education of gifted and talented learners and to the cultures in which they live. This journal invites manuscripts that address philosophical, psychological, moral and academic issues affecting the lives and experiences of gifted and talented individuals across their life span. (p. 170)

The Roeper Review is a refereed journal that accepts contributions from teachers, scholars, researchers and students in gifted education and related fields. This particular article was included in an edition of the journal focusing on young gifted children. This special edition of the Roeper Review was edited by Joan Franklin Smutney, Director of the Centre for the Gifted at National Louis University Evanston, Illinois. Smutney is a recipient of the National American Gifted Children Distinguished Service Award and the author and co-author of several books including Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom. In her editorial comment Smutney (1999) noted that:
Historically young gifted children have not received the same attention from educators, policy makers or researchers that older high ability students have. Deeply entrenched beliefs and practices in the field of early childhood education resist the idea that gifted children need special services in the early years. Many educators still emphasise the importance of socialisation and shy away from anything that appears to pressure young students in to high achievement. In addition, giftedness is not easy to identify in young children and relatively few teachers feel comfortable differentiating instruction to meet their needs in the classroom. The following articles present a strong case for early identification and intervention. The authors have studied and worked with young gifted children and have seen their hunger for new challenges transform into disinterest and the extraordinary capacity for reflection and creative thinking, energy and enthusiasm gradually surrender to frustration and boredom as they sit in classrooms that fail to meet their educational needs. (p. 178)

Outcomes

The increased professional credibility that resulted from the publication of this article was evident within the Australian context in the increased numbers of accepted and invited presentations for inclusion at national
gifted education conferences such as the Australian Association for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students held in Brisbane in July 2000 and the Education of Gifted Students, Fourth Australasian International Conference held in Melbourne 2001. Interestingly an invitation to present also came from a professional body of art educators. This increased recognition of the artwork of very young children was gratifying.

The feedback regarding the article from American colleagues was also positive and provided a basis for subsequent publications and scholarly collaboration. Feedback from Joan Smutney, the editor of this edition, included the following comment in personal correspondence dated July 7th 1997:

May I say I keenly enjoyed this article with all the drawings that indicate different states and stages of mental development in young gifted children. The collection is really superb, especially accompanied by your informed analysis. I have read other articles on the use of visual representation as a means of identification but never this extensive nor with the range of visual drawings you provide.

My staff development program proposed in an application in 2000 was designed to build on international connections in gifted education. Unfortunately financial constraints at the University of Western Sydney did not enable the realisation of these plans in 2000 and it is hoped that they will be re-established on doctoral completion.
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Visual Representation of the Young Gifted Child

Cathie Harrison

The changes in visual representation which occur during childhood have created interest among psychologists, therapists, teachers and parents. The interpretation of these changes has been significant in the past in estimating stage of development, i.e., personality and emotional disturbance. An analysis of the drawings of young gifted children can provide data useful in the process of identification of giftedness indicating advanced development in many areas. An analysis of both the drawings and the processes involved can also help gain an understanding of the nature of giftedness in early childhood. This article outlines the patterns and processes of visual representation which occur during early childhood and suggests some differences which may be apparent in relation to the young gifted child. The use of children’s drawings as indicators of giftedness is also outlined.

Cathie Harrison is a lecturer in Early Childhood Education at the University of Western Sydney in New South Wales, Australia. She is the author of Giftedness in Early Childhood, lectures on the subject, and serves as a consultant to parents and teachers of young gifted children.

During the early childhood years significant changes occur in the way children represent themselves and their environment in their paintings and drawings. From as early as twelve months children gain pleasure from the visual impact which they can have on their environment. They also enjoy the kinesthetic experience of manipulating an implement in circular or linear motion. This may involve the marks made by pencil on paper or a finger on a sandy window, toes in damp sand, the results of a stick dragged along the ground or fingers in mashed potato. From these early attempts children progress to much more sophisticated and detailed representations of the human form and objects of interest in the environment. These developments generally occur in a predictable sequence and some similarities across cultures are apparent. An awareness of these stages can facilitate an understanding of child development and indicate advanced functioning across a number of developmental areas. The study of both the processes and products of visual representation of young gifted children is particularly useful for parents and educators who seek to understand and support giftedness in early childhood. Such study can give indications of advanced development and provide insight into the nature of giftedness in early childhood by highlighting some of the particular characteristics which gifted young children demonstrate. It can also assist educators and caregivers as they attempt to identify, understand, document and support giftedness in early childhood.

The review of relevant literature has been integrated into the discussion section in this article in order to more effectively link the analysis of the visual representation of gifted children with the normative data of visual representation in early childhood. It is hoped that the integration of the literature review with the discussion will demonstrate the advanced development and distinctive quality of the processes and products of visual representation of the young gifted child in comparison to same aged peers.

Method

Sample

The following discussion of visual representation by the young gifted child is based on an extensive collection of drawings produced by a sample of 50 gifted children. The 50 children (28 girls and 22 boys) comprising the sample ranged in age from twenty months to eight years with a mean age of 4.6. The majority of the sample were white, middle class, Australian children but the sample also included three children of Japanese and one of Chinese background.

The collection is comprised of drawings produced by three groups of children. Group 1 included 7 children identified as gifted by their parents and teachers and interviewed over a period of two to eight years. Group 2 included 14 children nominated as gifted by their parents and educators and subsequently identified as gifted by formal testing procedures. The children in this group participated in 1:1 interviews which offered opportunities for observation of both the child’s drawing processes and products as well as the recording of the child’s discussion of these. Group 3 included 29 children identified as gifted by parents and educators or by formal testing procedures. The annotated drawings of these children were contributed to the collection by children, parents and educators.

Data

The data collected for the purposes of this study is outlined in the following table:

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<th>PROCEDURE</th>
<th>DATA</th>
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<td>child/parent/teacher contributions</td>
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Table 1

Analysis

Data was analyzed by comparing the items within the collection with normative development of visual representation of children during the early childhood period (Cox 1992, Gaitskell, Hurwitz & Day 1982, Linderman & Herberholz 1972, Lowenfeld and Brittain 1987). Both the rate of progress through the stages of visual representation and the particular characteristics of the processes and products of visual representation were compared with normative data. Analysis of the processes and products of visual representation was also carried out in relation to recognized characteristics of giftedness (Gross 1993, Harrison 1995, Silverman 1993). The comments of the children and parental observations were used in the interpretation of the data.

It is interesting to note that the sample included both chil-
Results and Discussion: Stages of Development in Visual Representation

First Attempts - The Manipulative Stage

A developmental sequence in visual representation has been recognized by art educators for many years (Gaiteskell et al., 1982, Herberholz and Hannon 1995, Lowenfeld and Brittain 1987, Luquet 1913). The first stage in the development of children’s art or visual representation is characterized in the literature as the manipulative stage (Gaiteskell et al., 1982) or the scribbling stage (Linderman, & Herberholz, 1974). Both terms indicate the nature of the child’s efforts at this stage. The term scribbling, perhaps has a somewhat negative connotation suggesting that this stage is of limited value. Mathews (1984, p.3) refutes this notion when emphasizing the significance of this stage for subsequent development: “Far from being thoughtless scrawl, drawings made by children during this part of the developmental sequence are in fact meaningful experiments in representation.” Although this stage is often specified as being from two to four years when appropriate opportunities are provided, it may begin and end much earlier. This is particularly apparent in the population of young gifted children.

During the first phase of this stage, random manipulation is enjoyed by the child, which they can have on the medium. The movements are initially random and uncontrolled and may involve the entire arm and upper body. This stage involves exploration of the medium, the tools used, and the effects which they create. As in play, the young child in this phase, also derives great pleasure from the discovery of cause and effect in the process. “The rhythmic movement of the arm and wrist, the stimulation of watching lines appear where none existed before are themselves satisfying and self-justifying. They are intrinsic sources of satisfaction” (Eissner, 1978 p.6).

This period of manipulation and exploration provides the child with an ever increasing repertoire of marks and lines or graphic symbols. With experimentation and practice, the child’s manipulations become increasingly adept as he or she moves into the phase of Controlled Manipulation. Over time the child’s first attempts at drawing become increasingly rhythmic, controlled and purposeful as a wide variety of lines and formations are used in numerous combinations and repetitions. Up until this time the child’s work has remained nameless, with no attempt to use the graphics in symbolization. This phase provides an important foundation for future development when drawing becomes increasingly varied. “The child who develops a variety of graphic marks during the scribbling years will manifest this visual vocabulary to produce symbolic drawings that increase in richness and sophistication as the child matures” (Gaiteskell et al., 1982 p.146). For the young gifted child this may be particularly apparent.

Development into the next phase of this stage, Named Manipulation, is indicated by the labeling of the child’s manipulative paintings or drawings. It may be that the scribble reminds the child of something familiar, generating a response, for the drawings at this stage that are not preplanned. Although often unrecognizable to adults the child frequently names the various parts of the drawing. At this time the child often begins to verbalize while drawing, accompanying the drawing process with a simple explanatory narrative although there is little or no apparent resemblance to the labeled object. For example, “Here is the house and here is me. And here is you watching.”

Young gifted children often proceed through these early stages rapidly as characteristics of giftedness such as advanced physical development, the ability to concentrate for extended periods, task commitment and intensity of purpose (Gross, 1993, Harrison, 1995, Silverman, 1993) are brought to the task of drawing. This results in the precocious development of fine motor skills and the more rapid acquisition of a repertoire of lines and shapes to be used in the process of symbolic representation. The following example (Figure 1), a drawing by Brendan, (1.8), provides evidence of advanced conceptualization and heightened awareness. The labeling of configurations within the drawing as numbers not only indicates awareness of numerical forms but also an attempt, from an early age, to give scribbles meaning. It also indicates the realization that symbols communicate meaning. The labeling of the single line in the drawing as a vapor trail is not only interesting and accurate but also demonstrates the advanced nature of the young gifted child’s interests. This child, under two years of age, was interested in airplanes, helicopters, stars and cloud formations. Toddlers are generally more pre-occupied with their personal daily reality in a very tangible and concrete form. Initial drawings generally focus on more concrete and familiar realities. For this young gifted

Figure 1

Grandma would like a tissue.
child, advanced conceptualization and understanding as well as mature interests were evident in a simple drawing.

Children at the stage of Named Manipulation have also been observed to use the drawing tool, the pencil or crayon, as they would a simple toy giving it additional imaginative characteristics. For example the crayon may become a car leaving its own trail behind it as it moves across the page, with the child adding the script: "Round you go. Up and down. Now you had better stop... the light says stop..." Wolf and Perry (1988) label this use of symbolism as gestural representation and Matthews (1991) uses the term action representation to denote the same. As Cox (1992, p.18) comments, "the children are attempting to commit meaning to paper even though the marks they produce do not look like the objects involved; it seems to be the movement or functional aspects of the objects which attract them and which they are intent on representing.

The young gifted child frequently accompanies the drawing process with an extensive verbal commentary as the early development of language, the ability to use and understand complex vocabulary and lengthy sentences facilitate this process (Harrison 1995). At times there is a detailed and imaginative story to accompany the drawing process, indicating complex and advanced thinking and understanding. The complexity and sophistication of this narrative can be quite surprising to the unexpecting adult.

The child's development during this stage of Named Manipulation, is a function of a range of factors including muscular development, perceptual skills, intelligence, physical health and the opportunities available for practice and experimentation. The data collected for this study indicates that young gifted children rapidly acquire a repertoire of strokes and forms which quickly become utilized in the creation of recognizable forms. A sophisticated awareness of form and detail can also be apparent. As Winner (1996, p.75) comments, "ordinary children draw from schemas (for example a circle for a head, a line for an arm), but gifted drawers seem to notice the actual shape of things." Emma M. (2.6) demonstrates her well developed fine motor control and a mature awareness of the form and distinguishing features of a whale in her drawing which she entitled "Baby Beluga." (Figure 2) The drawing of a stegosaurus by BJ (3.2) (Figure 3) also indicates the ability to use basic strokes and forms to denote an object of particular interest. Although, still developing control over the strokes used he is able to depict the salient features of the stegosaurus.

In accompanying notes his mother recorded his fascination for visual design and symmetry in stained glass windows and floor tiles, and recorded his description of a striped frog as a "tiger frog", and the new growth on a eucalyptus as "a peacock tree". BJ's comments indicate his heightened visual and aesthetic awareness as well as his creative thinking.

The Symbolic or Preschematic Stage - First Representational Attempts

During the Symbolic or Preschematic Stage the child progresses from the use of somewhat illformed and primitive symbols to indicate the human form, to complex and detailed representations of the human form and objects of interest. Initially the circular and linear forms practiced during the manipulative stage are linked haphazardly together to form a symbol which may represent a range of objects. For example, a shape may be used to indicate mother, self and house. As Arnheim (1974) suggests, this first symbol is indifferenced, marked by the use of minimal detail and with the human form frequently being represented by a rough circular form for the head and the remainder represented by lines which may or may not be attached. Gradually the child's attempts are more refined and the resulting form becomes more recognizable, while still immature. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) suggest that the first representational attempts occur around four years of age with the control of scribbling motions to produce simple symbols. By eight years of age greater control allows for the experimentation with a variety of symbols. Thomas and Silk (1992) suggest that children of three and a half frequently begin representational drawings. For the young gifted child this may be evident at around two years.

Gradually the use of symbols becomes more sophisticated and representations of the human form become increasingly detailed and accurate. Tadpole figures give way to figures with the various body parts in a more realistic configuration. Cox (1992, p.47) suggests that this is "the result of positive self motivated action in the search of better representational forms." Sarah (2.9) commented, "I found out a new way...I thought and I thought, and I thought it up." The child at this stage draws with intention but tends to draw from the known schema rather than from what is actually seen. "Non-visible characteristics may be included, and the whole scene may contain objects and parts of objects viewed from radically different perspectives" (Cox, 1992 p.62).

The young gifted child may enter and proceed through the stage of Symbolic Representation much earlier than expected. Current data indicates that the human form frequently emerges around two years of age. The attention to detail and the pursuit of realistic portrayal is also evident early, with young gifted children frequently experimenting with ways and means of representing facial features, limbs and body shapes. At this stage there may also be changes to the style used in drawing and painting. The use of continuous line to depict the human form rather than separate lines joined together is also typical of...
gifted children: “Preschoolers typically draw additively, juxtaposing geometric shapes. In contrast, precocious children draw the whole object with one fluid contour line” (Winner 1996, pp.76-77).

Accompanying the changes in the body representation is the use of greater detail in the child’s drawing. “The human form appears with more details, such as feet, hands, fingers, noses, teeth and perhaps clothing” (Gaitskill et al., 1982, p.153). This becomes an aspect of great interest for some children who become most painstaking in their attention to the finest detail such as the addition of eyebrows, eyelashes, and freckles to faces, rings on fingers and buttons, pockets and shoe laces to items of clothing. For the young gifted child this may be the investigation and portrayal of particular characteristics such as those from books and television programs. Gabrielle’s drawing (4.2) which she entitled ‘Mad Dad and his dog out in the noon day sun’ indicates remarkable attention to detail and her comment “the dog only has one eye because he is on the side” indicates an early awareness of perspective (Figure 4).

The drive for realistic portrayal frequently is evident in the drawing processes of young gifted children. Brendan’s drawings (3.3) depict the various engines from the Thomas the Train Engine television series indicating the significant features of each one. Several months later this interest focused on the historical development of steam trains. Where observed, perfectionism, attention to detail, task commitment and ability to focus for extended periods were evident in the persistence and total absorption in the task of drawing.

During the Symbolic Stage children work through the difficulties involved in the realistic portrayal of space. Initially the figures and objects seem unrelated to each other on the page and appear to float in space. “At first, objects and symbols produced and placed on paper are not related to each other by the child” (Gaitskill et al., 1982 p.157). For most children there is gradual progress towards positioning figures in space. In time a ground line is introduced although this may still appear to have little significance for the figures included. A skyline may also be added with the objects or shapes quite distinct with no overlapping. These developments frequently occur between four and five years. The child’s use of space also indicates growing awareness and the motivation to produce a more realistic image. For the gifted child there is frequently a beginning awareness of perspective with the early realization that not all aspects of an object are observable from one perspective. For example a painting by Sarah (3.4) portrayed the full figure who was sitting at the front of the table at a birthday party, the upper body of the person who was sitting on the side and only the head and shoulders of the person at the back. At an early age this child was attempting to replicate the reality of the positioning of bodies in space. Such awareness can also be evident in the comments of the gifted child in relation to proportion. Kinsey (1984, p.111) notes the comments of a three year old, “Mummy is small because she is a long way away.” He suggests that “even at three the child has a well developed sense of perspective.” Brendan (4.8) also indicates this advanced awareness of perspective with his comments while demonstrating with his fingers: “people get smaller as you move away.”

Throughout the stage of Symbolic Representation children generally use a number of schemata in their drawings. These are developed, modified, and refined over time and often focus on the human form but may also include objects such as cars, animals, and houses. The gifted child’s drawings, from around three to four years of age, frequently move beyond schematic representation to attempts at realistic portrayal. There is often an intense focus on a particular interest and in this data interests encompass areas such as earth moving machines, sea creatures, trains, and dinosaurs. There is typically great attention devoted to careful replication of detail - a very intense and serious preoccupation for some gifted children. One parent recalled that her son would pause and repeatedly reassemble his drawings of the sea while he drew fish and sea creatures. Winner (1996) confirms this aspect of the gifted child’s visual representations suggesting that, gifted drawers do not depict a generic object, but include a rich amount of detail.

Peter dressed his figures in robes. Elian added gas tanks, axles, bumpers, headlights and break boxes to his vehicles. Another child drew dinosaurs with scientific accuracy, using paleontology books to acquire the needed information. Including details is one way precocious children achieve realism in their drawings (p.77).

For gifted children with the characteristic of perfectionism the distinguishing features of the objects of interest ‘have to be correct’ and this can result in much research and many discarded attempts. The parents of the gifted children included in the study frequently commented on the level of paper consumption!

At the symbolic stage the child is demonstrating the early stages of symbolic representation and the ability to hold a mental image of an object. The drawing is no longer an arbitrary symbol but increasingly takes on the characteristics of what it represents. Children become more concerned with visual resemblance and as Goodnow (1977) characterizes this process, with the search for equivalents. This is a fundamental change. The child realizes that lines and shapes can be used to create meaning and that he or she is able to produce such forms at will. This is the child’s first meaningful encounter with the use of symbols as a way of communicating with others and an obviously significant stage in the development of literacy. This often indicates a mature conception and understanding of the use of lines and symbols to convey meaning (Harrison, 1998).

For some young gifted children there appears a fascination to represent that which is not readily observable, to go beyond the obvious and explore the subject in more depth. John’s

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drawing, at age five, of house and family involved a cross-section view of the house as well as the careful depiction of significant aspects or roles associated with each member of the family. His mother indicated that it was clearly very different to the schematic representations produced by his classmates. It would seem that the motivation to tackle the abstract impacts on the gifted child’s exploration of visual representation. Luka (3) in the drawing which he entitled ‘My Family and Me,’ also demonstrates the ability to conceptualize and depict the notion of family in a mature and sophisticated way (Figure 5).

For some gifted children there is a sensitivity to emotion and an interest in expressing emotion through drawing and the use of symbols. Drawing is sometimes used as a means to explore the subtleties and complexities of human emotion, relationships and societal structures.

For some young gifted children the motivation to research and depict the unfamiliar rather than that which is familiar, overt and obvious results in the pursuit of topics of interest not usual in young children. Owen from age five explored an interest in pirates and ancient civilizations which resulted in an extensive collection of sophisticated drawings of the world of Vikings and medieval knights (Figure 6).

![Figure 6](image)

The Schematic or Pre-Adolescent Stage
The Schematic or Pre-Adolescent Stage is marked by the attempt to portray depth both within particular objects and in the relationships between objects: “Children now begin to draw from a particular viewpoint and proportions and relationships are worked out accordingly” (Thomas & Silk, 1990, p.38). Cox (1991, p.62) affirms this with the comment that, “the child moves on to the schematic stage, at approximately 8 to 9 years, in which she attempts to draw a scene from a particular viewpoint and tries to show the depth of individual objects and the depth relationships between objects.” Visual realism is the focus at this stage and greater attention is given to background details such as light and shade and perspective.

The analysis of the drawings of the young gifted children in this sample indicates that gifted children, particularly highly and exceptionally gifted children, as defined by Gross (1993), may enter this stage during the early childhood period, for some at age four and five years. Winner (1996) confirms this,

Gifted children achieve the illusion of realism not only by drawing differentiated shapes and details but also by depicting the third dimension. Typically children do not draw in perspective until late childhood or even early adolescence, and when they begin to do so they are probably using a conceptual strategy, applying rules that they have learned. Here again is an example of how gifted children are not just faster, but do things in a qualitatively different way. (p.77)

The young gifted child frequently demonstrates the ability to move from the known reality or familiar view of an object. It is as if the child is aware that an individual’s observation is only one point of view and that as Cox (1991, p. xvii) comments “only one of a number of possible views.” The ability to decentralize, conceptualize and depict the object from an imagined perspective can be apparent. The focus of interest may move to the portrayal of the object from multiple perspectives. Daniel (4, 4) expressed his interest in the unobservable as he commented on the appearance of the underside of the bus or the view of the bus from a tall city building. His drawings also pursued this interest, indicating awareness and understanding of perspective. He drew vehicles from different perspectives and faces from the front and side and commented, “this is what you would see from the front and from the side you would only see one eye.” Edward (4) in his drawing entitled “Edward likes painting” reflects his ability to observe and describe himself from another perspective.

Owen (5) in his drawing of upward looking faces takes a most unusual perspective.

At times there appears a fascination with the unobservable view and the desire to extrapolate from the known to the unknown. Golomb (1990) in her study of the drawings of Eyyan comments:

His interest extends beyond what is easily visible. He exposes views from underneath the hood of the car, depicts an inside view of a compressor with it’s belts and rotating parts, and offers views into the cockpit of the pilot. He teaches himself how to represent the objects that fascinate him until he can represent them as fully and as clearly as he desires. For Eyyan, to draw is to know and understand (pp.11,13).

The drawings of Sam (4,9) also indicate the desire to represent that which is not readily observable and must be deduced from what is observable. His very accurate and detailed depiction of an aerial view of a chair lift and the cross section of a long loader indicate his desire for realistic portrayal and his amazing ability to think abstractly and conceptualize complex forms.

Visual Representation and Characteristics of Giftedness
Analysis of the development of visual representation amongst young gifted children indicates that they frequently bring to the process of drawing a number of the characteristics of giftedness. As suggested previously, aspects such as alertness, intensity of purpose, task commitment and concentration impact on the development and acquisition of drawing skills. Advanced development in the physical domain facilitates eye hand co-ordination and the development and refinement of fine motor skills.

Heightened perceptual awareness enables the young gifted child to attend to and utilize visual stimuli effectively and well developed visual memory facilitates the detailed representation of objects of interest. The characteristics of perfectionism and persistence are evident in the refinement and mastery evident in both the processes involved in production and the actual drawings.

Creativity is often evident in the way a message is conveyed and in the way resources are used. For Sarah (4, 2) the chance finding of a piece of clear cellulose covered with white dots enabled the transformation of her collage of people, trees and houses into ‘a snowy day’. At four years and six months she uses an attached cardboard door adding, meaning and significance to her drawing and story.
Awareness of and delight in humor may also be evident in the drawings of young gifted children. The drawing of Emma (4.6) of a 'Scottish octopus' demonstrates her sense of humor and delight in playing with known realities (Figure 7).

Emotional sensitivity and the ability to empathize can be evident in the drawings of young gifted children. The ability to empathize facilitates an interest in the perspectives of others and the expression of the emotional responses is also depicted. The early demonstration of emotional expression in human faces is evident in the data collected. Clare (3.3) explores the expression of emotion in her drawings of children by using distinctive facial expressions and text. John, aged five years, investigated the changes in the angles of the mouth and eyebrows which occur when different emotions are being expressed in a sequence of drawings on this subject. The ability to conceptualize and symbolically represent emotion with the use of graphics, evident in the data from the age of four years, further demonstrates this quality of emotional sensitivity. For example, Sophie (5) demonstrated the ability to graphically represent the intangible qualities of a relationship and the associated emotions, in her drawing which she entitled 'Mum and me' (Figure 8).

The ability to pursue a topic of interest in depth and detail is reflected in attention to detail and accuracy. The topics chosen are frequently mature interests, subjects which are not readily observable and are not a familiar daily reality to young children. Brendan (6.7) became interested in dimerial fish found at the deepest ocean depths and illustrated his first encyclopedia entry 'From the Surface to the Deep'. The interest of ancient civilizations, vehicles and aircraft and the internal organs of the human body have also been observed. Golomb (1990) also identifies this quality in the drawings of Eytan.

Eytan draws an astonishing array of vehicles: sports cars, convertibles, jeeps, trucks, buses, vans, campers, ambulances, trailers, tractors, bulldozers, airplanes, helicopters, an air balloon, and trains. His detailed representations reveal how carefully he observes these powerful and fascinating machines. (p. 11)

Advanced conceptualization and the ability to think abstractly is evident in the drawings of many young gifted children. Many of the drawings studied indicate fascination with that which is intangible and unfamiliar such as emotions, relationships, ancient civilizations and astronomy. For most children during this period drawing tends to focus on very familiar aspects such as the human form, trees, flowers, animals and houses, objects and forms which are a concrete and familiar reality.

**Conclusion**

Visual representation has been found to be a distinctive process for the young gifted children included in this study. The drawings of the children studied were advanced and significantly different from those of same aged peers. Early childhood educators, parents and others who seek to identify, understand and support the gifted child in early childhood can use the processes and outcomes of visual representation of the young gifted child as a means of gaining insight into the nature of giftedness in early childhood. The drawings of the young gifted child can be used in conjunction with a range of identification procedures as an indication of cognitive precocity and as a concrete demonstration of some of the distinctive characteristics which young gifted children demonstrate. The subject and focus of the drawings of the gifted child can also provide a useful indication of the gifted child's interests and concerns at a particular time. Knowledge of a particular interest can assist families and educators to plan and implement enrichment experiences which allow further exploration and investigation of the gifted child's current interest. Indications of heightened sensitivity and emotional vulnerability, frequently experienced by young gifted children, can enable families and educators to become more aware of the affective needs of young gifted children.

Drawing is a means by which young children express and formulate ideas, a language of childhood which is deserving of adult recognition and support. This is no less so for the young gifted child who brings to the processes of visual representation the distinctive characteristics and advanced development associated with giftedness. The young gifted child, while using the media of drawing to develop and communicate ideas, provides invaluable data for those who are attempting to understand the phenomenon of giftedness in relation to the young child. Such a wealth of information should be treasured rather than ignored.

**REFERENCES**


Chapter 5

SPIRITUAL AWARENESS
AND THE YOUNG GIFTED CHILD

'I think that your soul must be like a bird
but one that you don't see.
It can even talk to you from heaven.'
Harriet (3.2 years)

gifted child. Advanced Development, 9, 31-43.

Preface

Rationale

The area of spiritual awareness first emerged for me in my role as a mother
of a highly gifted child (identified as highly gifted on WIPPSI R at aged 5.5
years). The experience of sharing the freshness of a world view of a gifted
infant, toddler and young child, untainted by cynicism and as yet
'unsocialised' gave me some insight into a level of wisdom and awareness
that was beyond chronological years. The questions and observations, the
insightful comments, the empathy and sensitivity, and ways of seeing beauty and mystery in the world left an indelible mark and an intense commitment to taking children seriously. These initial experiences challenged my knowledge of child development, my preconceptions about children’s thinking about spiritual issues, my assumptions about childhood and my religious convictions. Subsequently, as a lecturer of child development to undergraduate students in early childhood education, my colleagues and I gave careful consideration to the young child in terms of physical, social, emotional, moral, language and sensory, perceptual development but no consideration was given to the child as a spiritual being. I wondered if this aspect of human development was thought to be too abstract or too ‘alternate’ to be included in Western modernist ways of seeing the world. I wondered if there were children born within a white Anglo Christian culture who had the spiritual gifts recognised within eastern mysticism. I wondered if children, particularly within the dominant white Anglo-culture, quickly learnt to be silent about such matters and that the early spiritual awareness of toddlers and young children was soon lost. I considered the words of Cannella (1999):

A discourse of education has emerged that legitimizes the belief that science has revealed what younger human beings are like, what we can expect from them at various ages and how we should differentiate our treatment of them in educational settings. The scientific notion of the child has been
fully accepted and continues to dominate current practice. (p. 37)

My early interest in spiritual awareness was subsequently reinforced while working with the families of young gifted children during the period of study. It was an aspect of giftedness that kept re-occurring amongst the participants. Although it remained a personal interest pursued through reading, intuitive writing, workshops and the exploration of psychic phenomena the concept of spiritual awareness seemed, at this time, too complex and understudied an area to pursue within the realms of academic life. Spiritual awareness remained an aspect of the nature of giftedness evident within the data but left undeveloped.

In 1999 I received the copy of the Roeper Review that included my article on visual representation (Harrison, 1999) and the young gifted child. This particular edition of the journal included the following call for papers for inclusion in a special edition of the Advanced Development Journal entitled Spirituality and Giftedness (Noble, 1999).

Advanced Development Call for Manuscripts ‘Spirituality and Giftedness’, Guest Editor: Kathleen Noble

Research into the relationship between spirituality and giftedness is a complex, embryonic and multi-disciplinary undertaking. This special issue of Advanced Development will explore the phenomenon of spiritual awareness and its role in the psychological, cognitive and affective and moral
development. We invite original and unpublished material on the following topics: spirituality and psychotherapy with gifted individuals; research on spiritual intelligence; gifted children’s spiritual experiences; spirituality and gifted education; literature reviews of spirituality and advanced development; exemplars of spiritually gifted adults. Also relevant are essays exploring definitions of spirituality and the methodological issues that are involved in studying spirituality.

This call for paper was a serendipitous event for me. It provided both the justification and validation for further investigation of this area of personal interest. This special edition on spirituality and giftedness provided the forum for the dissemination of the experiences of spiritual awareness of the children with whom I had worked and provided a legitimate rationale for the further investigation and documentation of an aspect of the nature of giftedness that I had been previously too afraid to undertake.

The writing and publication of this article is a powerful example of responding to the intuitive voice and to the chance opportunity. It resulted from a process of listening to the intuitive voice that enticed me to pursue this direction even though it appeared to have little credibility at that time within academic circles and within the scientific discourses associated with either early childhood or gifted education.
Context

The article *Out of the mouths of babes: Spiritual awareness and the young gifted*, was published in the special edition of the journal, Advanced Development entitled Spirituality and Giftedness. This refereed journal is published by the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development situated in Denver, Colorado, USA. The statement of the purpose of the journal is as follows:

The Institute for the Study of Advanced Development is a non profit research corporation with an international advisory board directed toward the study of giftedness, advanced development, and undeveloped potential, especially in women. Advanced Development is the official publication of the Institute providing an international forum for the exploration of these new frontiers of knowledge. The journal serves the worldwide community with theoretical expositions, case studies of moral exemplars, research therapeutic applications and international contributions on advanced development. (Advanced Development, 2000, inside front cover)

Outcomes

The feedback received in association with the publication of this article was positive and included the following comment in personal correspondence from Betty Maxwell the editor (dated 29th June, 2000):
Reviewer 23 spoke personally to me of the importance of an article such as yours, which maintains the respect for the children involved and ‘preserves their autonomy’. Especially well received was the articles’ evocation of the flavour and intensity of the searching minds of these seven young children with their extraordinary questions.

The writing and publication of this article was significant in the forming of collaborative partnerships with overseas colleagues also researching in this area. The guest editor for the special edition of Advanced Development Journal, Spirituality and Giftedness, Kate Noble offered editorial support. Noble is the Halbert and Nancy Robinson Professor, a licensed psychologist and the director of the Robinson Centre for Young Scholars at the University of Washington. She is the author of the book *Riding the Wind Horse: Spiritual Intelligence and the Growth of Self* (2000).

This article also led to a connection with Barbara Kerr, another contributor to the special edition of the Advanced Development Journal. Barbara is Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University. She has a PhD in counseling psychology and her research interests in extraordinary talents led her to study writers, artists, architects, inventors and most recently shamanic healers. I was fortunate to be able to meet Barbara at the Fourth Australasian International Conference on the Education of Gifted Students held at the Hilton on the Park in Melbourne from 18th to 20th August 2001.
Barbara was a keynote presenter and I was an invited presenter at this conference.

References


Out of the Mouths of Babes:

Spiritual Awareness and the Young Gifted Child

Catherine Harrison

Catherine Harrison is a lecturer in early childhood education at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, in New South Wales, Australia. She has her Master of Education degree, specializing in gifted education, and is currently completing her doctorate in this area. Ms. Harrison has authored a number of publications in relation to giftedness in early childhood. She also serves as a consultant to parents and teachers of young gifted children.

ABSTRACT: Young gifted children frequently share characteristics that impact the rate and nature of their development. As documented in the literature, these characteristics relate to physical, social, cognitive, emotional, moral, and language development, and suggest that the gifted child's experience of early childhood can be qualitatively different from that of typically developing children. Rarely documented in the literature, however, is the fact that, when given opportunities to voice their inner thoughts, feelings, and reflections, young gifted children may also share distinctive characteristics in relation to spiritual and psychic awareness. This article documents the comments and behavior of several highly gifted young children in relation to spiritual and psychic awareness. Providing insight into the inner world of the gifted child, it raises awareness of these aspects of development and identifies the need for further research. The study of gifted children is multi-dimensional and needs to include the perspective of the child.

Young gifted children are an understudied and under-served group, yet giftedness can be evident from birth (Clark, 1997). Giftedness is demonstrated as heightened perceptual awareness, lack of need to sleep, intense curiosity and engagement, advanced language use, and extreme emotional sensitivity, all of which can be observed in gifted infants and toddlers (Harrison, 1999). Gifted pre-schoolers show similar behavioral characteristics as well as advanced play and moral development, exceptional memory, and early reading. Parents and early childhood educators are frequently in the position of responding to the atypical and perplexing behaviours of the highly gifted young infant, toddler, or pre-school child in isolation and with little support from educational institutions or other child health care agencies. A child's divergence from normative development often results in reluctance to discuss aspects of giftedness with other family members, which compounds the problem of isolation (Harrison, 1999). Even parents of gifted children who attend conferences, seminars and courses designed for them are often hesitant to identify their child as

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gifted or discuss their particular concerns with friends and family members. One parent's comment, "How can I say I think my child is gifted?" highlights the embarrassment, awkwardness, and sensitivity that many parents feel. Reluctance to discuss the developmental characteristics and needs of highly gifted children can create anxiety for parents of young gifted children (Keirouz, 1990). This is particularly evident when children demonstrate an interest in aspects of life that are not considered the domain of early childhood, such as issues associated with spirituality.

A number of parents of highly gifted children have identified their child's interest in spiritual issues, such as death, afterlife, and reincarnation. These parents also suggest that this interest in spiritual issues is accompanied by a heightened concern for the well being of others that at times creates distress for the child and the family. The recognition that some young gifted children demonstrate aspects of spiritual sensitivity, spiritual and psychic awareness, and intense emotional sensitivity can help educators to support the young gifted child at home and within the educational context.

The Nature of Giftedness in Early Childhood

Giftedness is defined in various ways in the literature, but the complexity of the construct is increasingly acknowledged (Silverman, 1994). There is greater recognition of the importance of social and emotional as well as cognitive aspects of giftedness, particularly in relation to the young gifted child (Harrison, 1999). Giftedness can be seen as a multi-dimensional phenomenon in which there is constant interplay between all areas of development and between the individual and his or her environment.

Giftedness is a complex and intricate web of developmental relationships that form an integrated and interconnected whole. Because each aspect of development affects others, it is essential that research about young gifted children address all aspects of development, including spirituality (Gross, 1994; Lovecky, 1997; Roepi, 1982; Piechowski, 1997). Lovecky (1997) found that "there have been few studies of the spiritual concerns of children. There has been even less written about the spirituality of gifted children, and what is available is anecdotal. Nevertheless, this anecdotal evidence is rich and compelling" (p16). She also suggested that spiritual sensitivity is an appropriate term for the spiritual concerns of gifted children.

In gifted children spiritual sensitivity encompasses precocious questioning, unusual types of questions asked at an early age, and reported transcendent moments. It also encompasses areas of faith and compassion. The seeking of the transcendent may be an experience of connection to something larger than oneself, to nature, the universe, or as an inner experience of wonder and awe (p. 179).

The occurrence of contemplative comments within the gifted population has long been recognised (Hollingworth, 1942). Silverman (1994) acknowledged the work of Terman and Hollingworth in this area and commented, "gifted individuals because of their greater facility with abstract reasoning have complex inner lives,
early ethical concerns, and heightened awareness of the world" (p. 11). To ponder such issues can be a difficult process for the young child, however, who may experience intense emotions and yet who has limited life experience in which to locate such complex observations and thoughts. This is evident in the example of Dibs in Axlene (1964) and Jeannie cited by Morelock (1992),

As Jennie grappled with the sudden onslaught of increased abstract capacity, she was forced to deal with the emotional repercussions of her own thought. Thus, in Jennie’s mind at the age of four, God could not possibly be a loving God if he would refuse Heaven to anyone. And the terrible realisation of her own mortality could not be softened by her mother’s reassurances, because “Nobody knows for sure; children die sometimes.” In spite of her impressive capacity for abstract thought, Jennie was only four. Her emotional needs like those of other four-year-olds, included a trust in the strength and reliability of her parents and the predictability of secure world. However, her advanced cognitive capacities left her emotionally defenseless in the face of her own reason. (pp.25-26)

Lovecky (1997) affirmed this, “young gifted children may ask content related questions without recognising the potential emotional impact. For example the four-year-old child may be able to ask complex questions about the finality and universality of death, and then have difficulty coping with the now recognised fact that parents and self will also die” (p.180). The complex inner world of the young gifted child invites further investigation.

**Background to the Study**

The initial impetus for this study arose from conversations with parents of gifted children. While discussing aspects of social and emotional development, a number of parents identified an interest in aspects of spirituality in their young gifted children. The depth and intensity of the concerns expressed by the children suggested that this was an aspect of giftedness that required further study as well as a sensitive and well informed response. The parents of the children involved in the study shared their stories in the hope that the study would result in greater awareness of the complexity of giftedness in early childhood.

This study is also an attempt to create new ways of seeing and responding to young children. The new sociology of childhood suggests that researchers and theorists have in the past colonised childhood—that is, stood outside childhood and objectified the experience of the child (Cannella, 1997). New ways of thinking, such as those of the reconceptualisation of early childhood movement (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999), demand that researchers document the child’s perspective to ensure that this perspective is listened and responded to, with respect and sensitivity.
Out of the Mouths of Babes

Participants

This study involved a sample of seven highly gifted young children. Each of the participants was identified as gifted by parent nomination, with five of the seven subsequently tested and identified as highly gifted. The remaining two participants were not old enough for formal testing by the time of publication. The participants in the study reside with their families in suburban and regional areas of Sydney, Australia. The sample consisted of two girls and five boys. At the time of reporting, participants' ages ranged in age from eighteen months to eight years. The small sample size is indicative of the small number of such children found within the general population—approximately 1:1000 to 1:10,000 (Gross, 1993).

The ethnic background of six of the subjects was Anglo-Australian with the seventh being of Australian-Indonesian descent. The participants in the study were chosen because of their interest in spiritual issues. Six of the families designated their religious affiliation as Christian, non-practicing at the time of the study, with the seventh family being practicing Catholic. For the six families without strong religious affiliation, parents were initially surprised at the level of interest demonstrated by their young gifted children in such matters. Each of the families was undertaking documentation of their child's developmental milestones as well as the child's comments and conversations that were indicative of giftedness prior to and during the study. The parents of one participant chose to use a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality whereas the parents of the other six participants preferred the use of the child's first name.

Methodology

Case study methodology was utilised within this study. Gross (1993) argued that case study method is a useful approach to the gathering of specific information in relation to the nature of giftedness. It allows for the documentation of the diversity and richness of each child's individual experience within a holistic framework. It also enables the child's comments and behaviours to be observed and noted as they occur rather than recorded less accurately at a later date.

Case studies also allow for the collection of data within a familiar context by familiar adults. This is particularly useful when studying very young children. Interactions with familiar and trusted adults and observations of the child in familiar and secure settings provide a depth of information that would not be apparent in an unfamiliar and structured situation. A sense of trust and security are essential if children are to feel free and able to express themselves without restraint. As Gross (1993) observed,

"Close observation of the child in natural settings, the analysis of subjective factors such as his or her feelings, views and needs, and the use of a wide range of observation procedures, all of which are characteristic of good case study research, enable a more comprehensive observation of..."
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"an individual than is possible with any other research methodology." (p. 60).

Robert Coles (1990) studied the spiritual life of children and reported that the sensitive nature of the study of children's spirituality as well as the need for ongoing relationships of trust were essential as a basis for uncovering the thoughts of children.

I have no survey research to offer; nor am I interested in making general psychological statements without reference to idiosyncrasies and exceptions. So often our notions of what a child is able to understand are based on the capacity the child has displayed in a structured situation. (p. 23)

Another significant factor in determining the methodology for this study was the need to ensure that the child’s perspective was pre- eminent— that the child’s voice was heard. As Coles (1990) said “My job (as a researcher) is to listen, to record, and to try to make sense of what I have heard and seen” (p.27). Grant and Piechowski (1999) argued for research that is child-centred. They suggested that “being child-centred means respecting children’s autonomy, providing experiences that enable children to follow their passions and be self actualizing, and seeking to understand things from the child’s point of view” (p.8). Because children’s voices will be heard only when they feel safe and affirmed, close observation and profound caring are fundamental to the process of collecting data about children’s inner worlds.

In this case study, parent involvement was critical to the documentation of children’s thoughts and feelings. It allowed the researcher to respect the experiences of the participating children, allowed the children to give voice to their inner thinking, and provided a window on their thoughts and feelings.

Parents collected information about their children’s development that has continued until the present time. The data collected for the study included parent observations, diary records, and the dated documentation of comments made and questions asked by the children over an extended period. Interviews with parents were conducted by the researcher when clarification of written documentation was required. Such interviews were used to provide additional contextual data (for example, where the conversation took place, or any relevant preceding events).

Parents of the children in this study were initially involved in the process of recording various aspects of their child’s development to document advanced development and to substantiate parent nomination of giftedness. Observational records typically focussed on developmental milestones such as walking and talking, examples of advanced cognition, exceptional memory, reasoning ability, and examples of emotional sensitivity and empathic behavior. It was during the process of observing and documenting development that the parents noted aspects of spiritual development that did not fit readily into the typical developmental categories of early childhood. In two cases psychic awareness was noted. The term “psychic awareness,” for the purposes of this study, has been defined as the ability to perceive and respond to information that is not processed through the ordinary senses.
The Words and Thoughts of Children

Spiritual awareness is a powerful aspect of giftedness during the period of early childhood for some highly gifted children (Feldman, 1991; Lovecky, 1997; Piechowski, 1997; Roeper, 1982). For the children in this study, it was an aspect of development that had a clear impact on their thinking and behavior. The comments of the children provide insight into the nature of their thinking and reflection. Each child demonstrates a heightened sensitivity to others. With the exception of the youngest subject, who was less than two years of age at the time of reporting, all the children have grappled with issues relating to the meaning of life, death, God, good and evil. For this study, “spiritual awareness” was defined as: exploration of ideas of life and death and reflection on mortality; consideration of who is God; sensitivity to others; grappling with complex concepts; and psychic awareness.

Children’s Ideas About Life and Death

Hattie (aged 2.10) was visibly distressed by the outpouring of emotion on television news programs at the death of Princess Diana. This prompted her consideration of a number of issues relating to the meaning of death and the concept of justice. Particularly poignant was her question to her mother, “If you die before you have finished all you have to do, do you get to come back again and do some more?” Hattie also tried to make sense of the experience in terms of her own experience, and asked her mother later, “If people bring you flowers when you die and Cathie brings you flowers, does that mean that you will die?” Later (at 3.2) Hattie asked, “Where do you go when you die?” Her mother told her that your body dies but your soul goes to heaven. Hattie replied, “I think your soul must be like a bird, but one you don’t see. It can even talk to you from heaven.”

James, aged four, also grappled with the realities of death: “What happens when we die? I mean what really happens? What happens to our spirit, the ‘me’ bit?” Later, at age 7.11, he struggled with the implications of such questions for the meaning of his own life and daily reality. “Why am I really here? What am I here for? What is it that I have been put on the earth for?” Given the absence of strong religious affiliation these comments were unexpected and somewhat perplexing for his parents.

Contemplating Morality

Some of the earliest questions about life and death begin in the preschool years as children first discover the reality and finality of death. These questions appear to be asked at an earlier age by gifted children. More in-depth answers may be needed and have farther reaching emotional consequences (Lovecky 1997, p.182). For example, Ryan (4.6) asked, “How many days am I going to live?” and one month later, asked “What is it like to be dead?” Charles’ and James’ parents noted similar comments. After the death of a pet, James (5.2) commented, “It will happen to me too, won’t it, and we don’t know when.”

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Consideration of Who is God

Ryan’s father recorded the following conversation with Ryan at age six. “Dad, is God real?” When asked what he thought about this himself, Ryan replied, “I don’t think so. Why would a giant man be floating around in space? I think that it all came from nothing.” His father noted that Ryan was simultaneously struggling with the impact that human civilization had on the natural environment, particularly the animal kingdom. “If there were no humans on earth, not even us, you or me, or Grandma, that would be better; then the animals would be safe.” Another conversation subsequently recorded by his mother indicated that Ryan continued to be puzzled and perplexed about these issues at age 6.1.

Ryan: “Mum why do birds eat meat?”
Mother: “Some birds are carnivores as well as herbivores.”
Ryan: “Why?”
Mother (without thinking I said): “Because God made some of his creatures that way.”
Ryan: “Who is God?”
Mother: “Well if you can answer that question, Ryan, you’ll do better than anyone else so far.”

Later she noted the following in her diary. “Then I explained that some people believe in God and some people believe in evolution and how God was supposed to have made everything. And he said, “Well, who made God?”

At age seven, James struggled with the assumed universality of spiritual beliefs. He commented, “People say that they belong to the same religion but how do they know that what they believe in is the same thing? How do they know that they share the same God? I mean, how do you even really know that what you see is blue is what I see as blue. You can never really know what someone else really thinks and feels.”

Sensitivity to Others—
The Need to Reduce the Suffering of Others

Gifted children’s heightened sensitivity and ability to empathise are well documented in the literature (Gross, 1993; Harrison, 1999; Silverman 1993). These characteristics were also observed in the children who participated in the present study. At the age of ten months, Jake, the youngest participant in the study, demonstrated an awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of others. His mother documented the following example. “My youngest sister has a child seven weeks younger than Jake. My nephew has always had a dummy (pacifier), which seems to fascinate Jake. (We did offer him one; however, he took it out of his mouth and turned it around and around and examined it.) When Jake was twelve months old, every time my nephew

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would lose his dummy Jake would crawl over, retrieve it and offer it back to him.” Later at thirteen months Jake’s mother recorded that he was watching and listening to the video *The Three Tenors*. Jake’s favourite performer was Pavarotti and when he was watching and listening to him perform “Ave Maria,” Jake became emotional, teary-eyed, and moved his head with the rhythm of the music.” The depth of emotion that this very young child expressed was surprising to his parents.

When Saxon was aged 5.9, his mother recorded an incident that indicated his extreme sensitivity to others. “It was Christmas Eve, and at the conclusion of the bed-time story, when we often have a discussion, the tears welled up in Saxon’s eyes and he said, “I don’t want any presents tomorrow, Mummy.” My response was a heart-wrenching tug but I inquired, “Why do you feel that way?” Saxon replied, “All the children who won’t have any presents.” Saxon went on to say that he would give all his presents back... then commented, “I’ll keep only one.” I said how kind and thoughtful he was to be thinking of others. We discussed that (although it was too late to be able to do things for other children for this Christmas) perhaps Saxon would like to select from his toys and activities things that he would be able to give the needy children via the Smith Family (a charitable organization). This was the only way Saxon would be appeased, and he still went to sleep insisting that he only wanted one gift. Each day thereafter until New Year’s Eve (which I suggested would be a good day to do it), I was reminded by Saxon of what we were going to do. Saxon was extremely generous when we did as promised.”

Saxon’s sensitivity and concern for others was also demonstrated by the following incident recorded by his mother: “I was discussing with Saxon (aged just 5, six weeks into the school year) a number of incidents of him being manhandled and called a pipsqueak by other boys at his school. Saxon was not showing signs of being upset, but in discussing the events I inquired whether it was upsetting him. Saxon responded with “While they are bothering me they’re leaving someone else alone.” Then he added, “I’m quite sure it won’t be the last time that people will be saying things about me.” Saxon was positive and in no way bitter or in distress.”

Parents of participants documented the intensity and depth of their children’s emotions as well as concomitant difficulties such as sleeplessness, anxiety and at times despondency. For example, Jake’s parents reported the following incident. “When Jake was seven and a half months we went on a holiday. We were walking back to our room through the resort and stopped to look at an outdoor screening of *The Little Mermaid*. Jake became very distressed and started crying. When we couldn’t work out what was wrong with him, we followed his gaze and realised that the movie was what was upsetting him. The movie was showing an octopus which is the evil character. The depth of the emotional response was surprising in a baby so young.”

The words of Ryan at 6.1, emphasise the depth of emotion frequently experienced by the gifted child. Ryan: “Sometimes I wish we all didn’t exist. It would be better to be dead. I need something to care for and be gentle with.” Ryan’s parents suggested a pet. His father recorded, “We’ll take him to the pet shop on Saturday” and later noted Ryan’s comments, “This is my first happiest day of my life.” I asked him how much he loved his guinea pig and he said with starry eyes, “More than one hun-
dread percent.” I asked, “Are you happy?” Ryan replied, “Yes when I have a sad and weary day I can come home and just get my guinea pig and stroke it.” And later, “This is when I need my guinea pig; but I’ll never have that level of sadness again.”

**Grappling with Complex Concepts**

“Infinity. I’ll tell you what infinity is. A frog lays eggs, eggs hatch into tadpoles, the tadpole grows back legs and becomes a frog and then lays its eggs again. Now that’s a circle. It’s infinity. Everything that is alive is infinity. We’re infinity. A boy grows up makes a baby. We die when we get very old and the baby grows up and makes another baby. Even trees.” (Ryan 6.1)

Participants demonstrated a desire to pursue abstract concepts that are not typically found in early childhood. The desire to conceptualize complex concepts is at times evident in the drawings of the children (Harrison 1999b). Hattie (aged 2-4) was interested in spirituality and human relationships whereas James (aged three to four) was interested in the history of steam engines. He demonstrated this interest in his drawings, his selection of reading material at the local library and in his conversations with adults. Charles (aged four) was fascinated by codes and signals. Ryan pursued explanations about evolution that involved God, the Big Bang Theory, and the diagrammatic representation of what he entitled “an ager,” designed to date rocks.

**Psychic Awareness**

Parents of two of the children in this study reported incidents that appeared to indicate psychic awareness. From the age of 6 months, Emma exhibited behaviors that suggested that she was conscious of another presence within the room. Her parents noted that she would maintain focussed attention as if looking and at times interacting with a presence which was not visible to others. When asked, at 1.2 years, to whom she was talking Emma replied, “I am talking to the angel that followed us from the house with Daddy.”

Jake’s mother recorded a similar incident when Jake was 15 months. “Jake was in his cot and started screaming. When we went into the bedroom Jake was crying and standing at one end of his cot pointing a finger across the room and saying ‘There’. It took a while to calm Jake down and then after we had discussed what had happened, my husband said that my father (who had died 13 years earlier) was in the room and was quite visible. Part of the process to calm Jake down was to find some photos of my father with the family members Jake knows. Immediately upon opening the photo albums, Jake started pointing to my father. So we spent some time looking at the photos and talking about who he was and that he would not ever want to scare Jake. We have had similar incidents since that time but nowhere as intense.”

Emma’s and Jake’s parents also reported a psychic connection between parent and child. Emma, at age 3, expressed deep and serious concern for her mother’s safety; she felt that something bad was going to happen to her mother and that they would then be separated from each other. Her behaviour became uncontrollable with temper tantrums, screaming and apparent feelings of panic associated with intense separation anxiety. Her mother noted, “We kept telling her nothing was going to hap-
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pen, but then it did.” Several weeks later, Emma’s mother suffered a serious fall that resulted in extended hospitalization. Her mother noted, “After the accident and during the period of hospitalization Emma coped extremely well and was calm about all that was going on. She knows things that she couldn’t possibly know. I used to dismiss it but she has been proved right too many times. She has another sense. I am sure.”

Jake’s mother made similar observations. “Ever since Jake was born we have sensed that he sometimes responds to someone else in the room when there is no one else visible in the room. Jake has been aware when someone is talking about him particularly if it is his father or me. We first noticed this in hospital after he was born. I have always known what Jake wants even before he indicates that he wants something. It does not matter where in the house the object is located; it is usually in another room out of sight. I have always known when he is in pain or if he is not well.”

Discussion

The words and thoughts of the children included in this study are a poignant reminder of the complexity of the experience of being gifted, particularly during early childhood. The sensitivity and authenticity expressed by the children is as a gift, one that should be treasured and valued within both families and communities.

To ponder complex issues, such as those identified within this study, can, however, be a difficult process for the young child. The complex and sophisticated thoughts and reflections are frequently accompanied by the emotional intensity and sensitivity that is typical of highly gifted children. The depth of emotion that accompanies the intellectual process appears to be compounded when children are so young. Young children have only limited life experience in which to locate such complex observations and thoughts. The comments of the children included in this paper illustrate the complexity of the experience of being gifted and affirm that giftedness impacts on both emotional and intellectual aspects of development. As the children grapple with complex concepts on an intellectual level, they face the reality of the implications of this awareness. The intellectual process becomes an emotional experience.

It is primarily the families of gifted children, particularly during the period of early childhood, that carry the responsibility for providing the emotional and intellectual support for children who are grappling with complex issues such as those outlined within the study. Although during later childhood and adolescence the peer group may offer such support, during early childhood there is generally a lack of like-minded peers with whom such insights can be shared. Gross (1989) suggested that the search for like minds and like companionship appears to begin in very early childhood as gifted children seek others with whom they can share their questions and contemplation. Interests such as those described within this study are not typical of young children, and consequently same aged peers rarely provide the intellectual and emotional support required for the contemplation of complex issues.

Finding an appropriate response to the complex questions and comments of gifted children can be difficult for parents, especially when made by children so
young. Charles at age four developed an interest in the concept of good and evil that lasted several months. This interest also developed into an exploration of, “Who is God? Who is the Devil, Satan, and Lucifer?” His parents recorded his comments at age 4.11, “I want to know about this, Who is the devil?” and “Are children born bad and they become good, or are children born good and they become bad?” The issues identified here were also problematic for the parents themselves, and a suitable response was difficult to find when the issue was yet to be resolved in the mind of the adult. Several other parents commented on their own discomfort and sense of inadequacy in similar situations.

The parents of participants in the study also expressed a very genuine, heartfelt concern that discussions such as those documented would not be readily understood by others outside the family. They feared that they may be seen to be leading the child into areas thought inappropriate for the consideration of young children. There are times when adults seek to keep young children within a safe and fixed agenda of what is appropriate for childhood perhaps through fear of the unknown or feelings of personal inadequacy. It can, however, be difficult for children who ask questions that adults are not ready or willing to discuss (Lovecky, 1997). To deny the child’s interest, to ignore or reject the child’s questions and ways of seeing the world, can deny the child the chance of self-discovery. Complex thoughts and feelings are fundamental to the young gifted child’s way of being and it is the child’s perspective that needs to guide the adult’s response to his or her giftedness. “An understanding of the child’s perspective and inner life aids us in assisting children in finding their own way in life” (Grant and Piechowski 1999, p. 8). For the gifted children within this study, this has meant supporting and affirming their spiritual awareness.

Parents of the participants in the study expressed concern regarding the intensity of the interest and the length of time for which the interest dominated the child’s attention. Parents of four of the seven children commented specifically on their child’s apparent preoccupation and need to revisit the subject again and again. These parents recognized, however, that the child’s need for resolution of the issue outweighed their own feelings of discomfort. The participants within the study benefited from family relationships of trust and security in which they could share the questions that perplexed them.

The lack of appropriate emotional and intellectual companionship was evident in Virginia Axline’s (1964) account of play therapy, *Dibs in Search of Self*. Dibs, at age six, grappled with issues of spiritual identity. In the absence of secure relationships with peers and family, the therapist provided the emotional and intellectual support needed for contemplation of spiritual issues and spiritual identity.

Parents can support children by listening with patience and sensitivity and by acknowledging the complexity of the issue. To admit that they, too, as adults, also wonder about such things can open the dialogue further and encourage the mutual sharing of insights and dilemmas. Young children need time to explore these issues within a safe context where emotional reassurance is provided.

Incidents of psychic awareness such as those described in the study are particularly difficult to explain and leave parents pondering, but, as Feldman (1991) commented, “One should not necessarily dismiss a phenomenon as untrue simply
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because it cannot be easily explained" (p. 191). Young children who demonstrate psychic awareness also need emotional reassurance and validation rather than rejection. It is essential that when parents share such experiences with early childhood educators and others, they too be treated with sensitivity and respect.

Greater awareness of giftedness in early childhood among early childhood educators can help to them to create educational contexts that also offer a sensitive response to the gifted child’s exploration of complex issues, such as those identified within the study. Collaborative partnerships with parents can help to alleviate parental isolation and feelings of inadequacy (Harrison, 1999). The world of the gifted child is often a confusing array of insights and paradoxes. Adults within both the family and educational setting, need to provide young gifted children with time and a secure context for the exploration and reflection of complex issues so that wondering and discovering are seen as valuable and kept alive.

If parents and educators are to support the young gifted child during the somewhat difficult journey through early childhood, then they must continue to seek out the reality of what it means to be gifted. The results of this study affirm the complexity of giftedness in early childhood and highlight the need for greater awareness of the richness and diversity of the experience of being gifted.

The results of this study support the use of naturalistic, child-centered study that documents the child’s perspective, the child’s inner thoughts, feelings and unique insights. If we are to celebrate the unique individual, we need to honour and affirm the richness of his or her inner experience in all its dimensions and complexity.

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Chapter 6

THE SEARCH FOR COMPLEXITY AND CONNECTION

'No-one in my school does my kind of thinking, Mama.'

Andre (aged 6)


Preface

Rationale

This chapter continues the exploration of the nature of giftedness in early childhood with particular focus on aspects of cognition. The statement, ‘No-one in my school does my kind of thinking, Mama’, made by six year old Andre provided the catalyst for this article. The poignancy of the statement was difficult to ignore and motivated further exploration of the
nature of the ‘kind of thinking’ that can isolate highly gifted children within the context of early school experience. As the article explains Andre is a highly gifted child who was struggling to find his place within the classroom of mixed ability peers.

Context

The initial thoughts included in this article were presented at the Eighth International Literacy and Education Research Network Conference held in Spetses, Greece. My participation in this conference provided the opportunity to present gifted education research at an international education conference. This meant that the education of the gifted was included within discussions of innovations within mainstream education, hence accessing a wider audience. A presentation at an international conference was required for the completion of the Doctorate of Education degree at the University of Western Sydney. The Learning Conference was supported by the Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and The Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Its themes were identified as: new worlds; new literacies; new learning; new persons.

The presentation developed for the Learning Conference was subsequently revised and presented to two very different audiences, at The National Australian Early Childhood Conference held in Sydney from 18th to 21st July 2001 and at The Annual Conference for Doctoral Students
at the University of Western Sydney (also a requirement for candidates of
the doctoral programme at the University of Western Sydney) held at
Katoomba from 13th to 14th September 2001. The Australian Early
Childhood Conference brings together early childhood educators, policy
makers, and academics from around Australia, Asia and the Pacific. The
annual University of Western Sydney Doctoral Conference provides
doctoral students with the opportunity to present their research to other
students, colleagues and academic mentors who provide specific feedback
regarding research methodology.

Outcomes

Each of the opportunities for presentation of this paper provided valuable
feedback on the thesis of the paper, that is, the notion of giftedness in early
childhood as the search for complexity and connection. Some of the
feedback suggested that consideration should also be given to the
implications of the search for complexity and connection for affective
development. This direction was pursued in a subsequent paper, Giftedness
in Early Childhood- The Search for Complexity and Connection -Implications for
Social and Emotional Development (Harrison, 2001) presented at the fourth
Australasian International Conference for the Education of gifted Students
in Melbourne in from 19th to 20th August 2001. This paper is included in the
portfolio in Chapter 7.

The National Australian Early Childhood Conference provided an
opportunity to re-establish a connection with Dr Louise Porter author of
Gifted Young Children (1999). This led to a valuable email exchange regarding educational alternatives for young gifted children. Louise advised of the potential of the Waldorf Steiner educational philosophy and approaches for meeting the needs of young gifted children. These ideas are to be further explored in a proposed paper entitled, Educational Options for Young Gifted Children - In Search of an Alternative Paradigm. This paper will outline some thoughts on the philosophy and practices of early childhood education based on the educational philosophies of Montessori, and Waldorf Steiner Schools and the Reggio experience. This investigation will be further pursued after doctoral completion.

References


'No-one in my school does my kind of thinking Mama.'

Giftedness in Early Childhood -
The Search for Complexity and Connection

Abstract

Young gifted children, although a diverse group within the population, demonstrate a number of distinctive characteristics particularly in the cognitive, social and emotional domains. This paper explores the nature of the young gifted child’s thinking during the period of early childhood. The discussion is illustrated with examples provided by the families of young gifted children. The examples of children’s conversations, drawings, and work samples from the study highlight the reality of the lived experience of young gifted children. They also challenge adult pre-conceptions of the young child and suggest the need to reconceptualise the roles and relationships within early childhood pedagogy. The notion of the ‘search for complexity and connection’ is proposed as a useful construct to assist families and educators to both understand and respond to the young gifted child’s ‘kind of thinking’.
Introduction

'No-one in my school does my kind of thinking Mama' is a statement made by six year-old Andre, a statement that provided the impetus for this paper. Andre is a highly gifted child who has struggled to find his place in the classroom. At the time this comment was made he was withdrawn and despondent and isolated within a class of mixed ability, same aged peers. He appeared to be immersed in his own inner world more frequently than connected with others or engaged in class activities. Andre’s statement expressed very powerfully the sense of isolation and difference that sometimes comes with being gifted. This situation is particularly apparent with young children, like Andre, who are at the higher levels of giftedness, such as the exceptionally and profoundly gifted. Leta Hollingworth (1931) noted that the years between 4 and 9 can be the most problematic for gifted children as they try to establish a sense of personal identity. The search for self-identity was a complex one for Andre. This paper reports on research which sought to clarify Andre’s 'kind of thinking', the kind of thinking that differentiates young gifted children, like Andre, from same aged peers.

This particular research is part of a larger study that investigated and documented the complex and multi-faceted nature of giftedness in early childhood. Previous research has investigated a number of aspects of giftedness in early childhood. These include giftedness in infancy (Harrison, 2000a), play and the gifted child (Harrison & Tegel, 1999), the
development of visual representation (Harrison, 1999a; Harrison 1999b), and spiritual awareness in young gifted children (Harrison, 2000b). In endeavouring to better understand what Andre describes as ‘my kind of thinking’ the focus for this particular research study is on aspects of cognition.

The Nature of Giftedness in Early Childhood

The defining of giftedness is problematic even amongst scholars and researchers in the field of gifted education. There are numerous definitions within the literature reflecting the diversity of approaches to the subject. A review of recent literature (Clark, 1997; Dalzell, 1998; Porter, 1999) suggested that giftedness continues to be a difficult concept to define with new definitions proposed and utilised in the field of gifted education. While recognising the importance of a clear definition, Dalzell (1998, p. 259) noted that the diversity of definitions reflects ‘the broad mindedness of our current culture’ within the gifted education community. The diversity of definitions also reflects the impact of the ongoing research and suggests that knowledge of giftedness is continually being refined and challenged.

For the purposes of this study of giftedness in early childhood there are a number of particular considerations in relation to the definition. Giftedness is seen as a multi-dimensional construct that includes both potential and performance. This knowledge recognises that within the early childhood period the child may not yet have had the opportunity or experience required to translate potential into performance. Giftedness is seen as
impacting on the whole child with the recognition that each aspect of development, particularly during the early childhood period, has significant impact on the other areas of development. There is also the recognition that in early childhood children use many languages (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) to express their interests, thoughts and feelings and that giftedness may be manifest in diverse ways (Harrison, 1999a). For the purposes of this study the following definition (Harrison 1999a, p. 20) was used:

The gifted child is one who performs or who has the ability to perform at a level significantly beyond his or her chronologically aged peers and whose unique abilities and characteristics require special provisions and social and emotional support from the family, community and educational context.

Although less frequently acknowledged within the gifted education research and literature, giftedness is a phenomenon that is evident within the population from infancy and throughout the early childhood period of birth to eight years (Clarke, 1997; Harrison, 1999a; Smutney, 1999). For example parents of gifted children have identified particular behaviours, demonstrated within the first weeks, months and years of life, which indicate that their child is gifted (Dalzell, 1998; Harrison, 2000a; Winner, 1996). Thus consideration of giftedness should begin in relation to the earliest years of life.
Literature Review

The study of the nature of giftedness in early childhood is not new. The literature includes much discussion of the early signs of giftedness (Robinson & Noble, 1991; Roedell, Jackson & Robinson, 1980; Roedell, 1989; Tannenbaum, 1992) and characteristics of giftedness are frequently listed (Ehrlich, 1985; Hall & Skinner, 1980; Harrison, 1999a; Porter 1999). Giftedness in the first years of life is acknowledged and its impact on families noted. The literature suggests that parents are faced with developmental characteristics unique to their gifted child (Chamrad & Robinson, 1986). In particular, parents of gifted children noted early oral expression and unusual curiosity as characteristics of their gifted children (Creel & Karnes, 1988) and parents of exceptionally gifted children have cited unusual retentive memory, capacity for abstract reasoning, high level of questioning, intense curiosity, desire to learn, and unusually advanced sense of humour as characteristics of their gifted child (Gross, 1993). Gifted preschoolers have also been described in the literature as divergent thinkers, highly focused on their interests, curious, persistent and able to make abstract connections in learning (Louis & Lewis, 1992; Roedell, 1989; Tuttle, Becker & Sousa, 1988; Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982). Kitano (1985) found that young gifted children displayed advanced thinking skills, conceptual knowledge and creativity as well as pre-logical thinking and avoidance or discomfort with ambiguity and Harrison (1999b) noted that young gifted children demonstrated advanced visual representation.
Research suggests that awareness of the nature of the giftedness is important for both families and early childhood educators who share the responsibility of early education and care. The significance of family support and understanding for the gifted child’s interests and advanced development to the development of personal identity and adjustment is noted (Gross, 1993) and supportive, open family relationships have been found to be important to the gifted child’s self esteem and interpersonal and personal adjustment (Cornell & Grossberg, 1987).

Early childhood educators also contribute to the emergence of self identity and the social adjustment of young gifted children (Gross, 1999; Harrison, 1999a; Morelock & Morrison, 1999; Smutney, 1999). The beginning of preschool or kindergarten in particular, can be a critical time for gifted children (Sankar-De Leeuw, 1999). Gifted children often cannot find peers at their level with similar interests and this can result in frustration and boredom (Hollingworth, 1942; Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982). Young gifted children engage in social comparisons significantly earlier than same aged peers (Robinson, 1993) and may also develop fear or anxiety about going to school and choose to hide their abilities. This masking of ability can also be evident before school entry as children enter day care and pre-school settings (Gross, 1993).

While the research acknowledges the significance of giftedness on both development and learning in early childhood and characteristics of giftedness are frequently listed in the literature, ignorance of the nature of
the phenomenon of giftedness continues to impact on gifted children and their families. Parents of young gifted children express concern at the apparent lack of understanding of giftedness evident within the community and amongst early childhood educators (Gross, 1999; Harrison, 1999a). It is important that researchers explore ways in which new knowledge and understanding can be both accessible and meaningful to families and educators, who are in direct contact with young gifted children, as well as disseminated to other researchers and scholars in gifted education. The inclusion of rich description of the reality of the lived experience of giftedness, using parent and child voices, helps to translate the phenomenon of giftedness in ways that are both evocative and informative.

The Study

Purpose of the Study

Although the nature of the young gifted child's thinking has been documented within the literature parents of young gifted children continue to express concern at the apparent lack of understanding of giftedness evident within the community and amongst early childhood educators (Gross, 1999; Harrison, 1999a). The purpose of this study was to elucidate the nature of the young gifted child's thinking, or what Andre described as my 'kind of thinking', and to capture the reality of giftedness in early childhood through the use of the words of gifted children and their families. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 1) suggested that 'words
especially organised into incidents or stories have a concrete and meaningful flavour that often proves far more convincing to a reader, another researcher, policy maker or a practitioner than pages of summarised numbers'. It is hoped that the results of this study are both challenging and provocative, and promote greater responsiveness to giftedness in early childhood within early childhood pedagogies.

The study involved a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. The inclusion of multiple perspectives and voices are an essential aspect of the phenomenological approach. Given the age of the children and the complex nature of the area under study family participation was crucial. The families of the children were actively engaged in the research process collecting data, giving valuable insight and feedback to the process of data analysis and responding to draft reports of the study.

Theoretical Framework that Informed the Study

An essential determinant for the methodology of the study was the desire to document the experience of being gifted from multiple perspectives and most essentially to document the voice and perspective of each child in the study. The call for a more child centred approach in research is evident within gifted education. Grant and Piechowski (1999) suggested that there is a richness to be found in the lived experiences of children, which is not apparent through standardised test scores, and that working with children in naturalistic contexts provides new understanding in relation to the gifted
child. Haensly (1999) commented that ‘reliance on standardised testing as methods of identifying and understanding giftedness is questionable.’ She cited the often quoted statement by Bronfenbrenner (1977, p. 513, cited in Haensly 1999, p. 275) ‘dependence on standardised test scores alone, is a measure of the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest periods of time’. The importance of the environmental context is increasingly acknowledged within the gifted education literature, with a growing emphasis on the observation of children in familiar contexts by familiar adults.

Non-traditional methods for observing intellectual competence in the young child must be found. Such methods must include following children in their natural settings in their encounters with their peers and significant caregivers, engaged with the objects and events occurring there. The development of ability in children must be studied in the specific learning environments where their interests, processes and strategies become evident. (Haensly, 1999, p. 275)

The reconceptualising early childhood movement also advocates a more child centred approach to research. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) Cannella (1997) and Christenson and James (2000) identified the need to move away from research methodologies which objectify the child and call for research which shows greater sensitivity to the child’s perspective. This study attempts to ensure that children’s perspectives are illuminated and that it is their voices, which are given primacy. By families observing
and documenting the play and work of young gifted children engaged in authentic experiences within naturalistic settings, insight into the child's authentic modes of operation can be gained. As Haensly (1999) asserted, 'insights and interpretations emerge inductively from the exemplar cases as set in the context of theory and research described in the literature' (p. 275).

The commitment to child sensitive approaches resulted in a number of considerations when determining the methodology for the study. These included: the use of familiar play environments as the context for data collection; the involvement of familiar adults, such as parents who had an existing rapport and relationship of trust with the children; and, the use of a broad range of data reflective of the many modes of expression used by children during the early childhood period.

Data Sources

Data that provided rich description of the young gifted child’s ways of thinking was essential given the purpose of the study. Data included parent diary records noting developmental milestones, parent observations of children’s play, anecdotal records of comments and conversations recorded by parents, and dated children’s drawings and work samples. This broad range of documentation was reflective of the many languages that young children use to express their thoughts, ideas and emotions (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). The data was
obtained within naturalistic contexts of home and family life ensuring minimal disruption to the children or families.

The process of documentation was initiated by parent interest in infant development. When the parents sought help in parenting their young gifted children they were advised that such documentation provided useful evidence of giftedness and they were encouraged to continue to document developmental milestones, significant incidents and conversations of interest. This documentation was subsequently offered for collaborative research purposes with a desire to increase community awareness of giftedness in early childhood.

The initial contact with the participants was established through the parents of the children seeking advice and educational support in relation to their young gifted children. Informal interviews focusing on play and development and any parental concerns occurred with one or both parents. The parents of the children subsequently offered records of early development, work samples, drawings, and stories indicative of giftedness for research and publication purposes. Contact with the families has been maintained and continued over eight years through informal interviews and the ongoing sharing of work samples and anecdotal records of conversations and significant milestones observed throughout this extended period. This ongoing contact and the analysis of the drawing and work samples have provided opportunities for the researcher to confirm the authenticity of the parent records.
Participants

The participants in the study included a total of 15 gifted children between the ages of six months and eight years with the predominant age at the time of data collection being three to five years. They consisted of 6 boys and 9 girls residing in metropolitan and outer regional areas of Sydney, Australia. The cultural background of the 14 of the participants was Anglo-Australian with the remaining participant being Indonesian-Australian. The participants in the study were initially identified by parent nomination. The research (Ciha, Harris, Hiffman & Potter 1974; Jacobs, 1971; Louis & Lewis, 1992; & Robinson 1993) supports the validity of parent nomination of giftedness particularly in the early childhood years. Five of the children within the group have been assessed during the study period and identified as highly gifted by formal IQ testing. Observation and the analysis of the documentation provided by all families supported the parent nomination of giftedness.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

The analysis and interpretation of the data was undertaken in a number of stages. Initial analysis involved coding by age and gender and developmental area such as physical, social, language, cognitive development. Data relating to aspects of cognition was then analysed in relation to characteristics of cognition of young gifted children identified within the literature (Ehrlich, 1985; Gross, 1993; Harrison, 1999a;
Tannenbaum, 1992). As specific patterns emerged from the data annotations were used to facilitate synthesis and interpretation.

Subsequent analysis and collaborative reflection was then undertaken with the families as participants. Parents provided additional contextual information where necessary. They also gave feedback and provided additional comment and suggestions regarding the validity of the portrayal of giftedness that was emerging through the data. Maykut and Moorehouse (1994, p. 13) described the phenomenological position as ‘oriented toward the discovery of salient propositions. The discovery of propositions, by observation and the careful inspection of patterns which emerge from the data are the hallmarks of the phenomenological approach.’ The collaborative relationship and dialogue with families, was a process of indwelling (Maykut & Moorehouse, 1994) which enabled the clarification of the data and facilitated further reflection and analysis. The process of member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) provided opportunity to ensure accuracy, trustworthiness and authenticity. The use of multiple data sources and the inclusion of parent, child and researcher perspectives helped to ensure the plausibility of the patterns identified within the data.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study provided rich examples of a number of primary characteristics that highlight the nature of the young gifted child’s thinking. These related to cognitive approaches and processes, interests and outcomes and include the following: curiosity, intrinsic motivation
and independent investigation; exceptional memory; creativity; the
formulation of research and testing of theories; advanced awareness of
literacy and numeracy concepts and processes; and, advanced and
detailed visual representation.

Curiosity, Intrinsic Motivation and Independent Investigation

The characteristics of curiosity, intrinsic motivation and the ability to
undertake and pursue independent investigations were clearly evident
within the documentation collected by the families. The data gathered
suggests that the direction for many play and learning experiences and the
impetus for enquiry and investigation comes from the child and is not the
response to some adult determined agenda.

Megan (6 months) could be characterized as a relentless explorer, eager,
curious and seeking out that which was unfamiliar. Her mother described
her fascination with tags on clothes and sticky labels or price tags attached
to new toys. She would carefully examine, search out and find the bit that
was different, that didn’t belong. She would then touch, feel, taste and
manipulate this discrepant part of what was the otherwise smooth surface
or consistent texture of an object.

This curiosity and desire for stimulation is apparent within the data from
infancy throughout the early childhood period. Parental records of the
first weeks and months of life frequently note the lack of need for sleep
(Harrison, 2000b). The heightened visual and auditory awareness, the rate
of consumption of reading material, and incessant questioning were also
frequently recorded throughout the toddler period as evident in the following comment:

At 21 months she is beginning to recognise numbers, knows 9 shapes, asks quite complex and abstract questions, wants to learn all day. She is currently asking about the days of the week.

This eagerness for information was also observed in patterns of television viewing, for example, Ryan (1.6 years) ‘would sit and watch wild life documentaries over and over again’ and in questions to parents, for example Ryan (4.8 years) asked ‘Dad how do we know names? Why do we know names? How do we know things?’

John (4.5 years) demonstrated his curiosity about sounds in his interest in phonetics, specifically the initial sounds in words, in a set of drawings. These drawings were John’s own personal response to a self-generated task and reflected his interests at the time in fairy tales, dinosaurs and the Green Peace ship, The Rainbow Warrior. This unique combination of objects reinforces that it is the child’s own thinking and motivation that is reflected in the data.

The curiosity and intrinsic motivation reflected in the data collected within the home and early childhood setting is not apparent when many of the participants in the study reach more formal educational settings. The following reflection of Ryan’s father regarding work sheets indicated Ryan’s intense curiosity in response to self generated tasks compared to homework set by the teacher.
I can't help but think that compared to his open ended undirected play with the Jurassic Park book in which he was recalling the plot of the film, describing the rock that the ship crashed into in the “lost world”, learning that the actors had real names and stage names and describing where on the map equated to various scenes from the film, this work sheet was a total waste of time. More so, when he got distracted when trying to balance his pencil across the round edge of his pencil box, and wanted to know why it wouldn't balance, and why his pencil did not slide down the lid of the box when it was placed at the top and amazed at how the fan blew one of his pencils clean off the table, and wanting to experiment to see if the fan could blow all his pencils away. ...We missed out on an informal lesson on friction, wind power, levers and stability for the sake of 3+3=6 which he knows anyway.

Exceptional Memory

There is evidence of well-developed memory within the data collected. The strength of visual memory noted by parents is evident in the ability to recall in depth and detail the visual elements of shape, size, pattern and colour in relation to past events and experiences, when drawing objects, dictating stories and giving explanations or directions. Examples from parent records affirm this.

Ryan (1.4) could identify all of the Thomas engines just by seeing a sub second flash of part of the picture. He could also rapidly point out
every animal in a book of 32 animals from rosella to budgerigar to crocodile.

Emma (1.7) can usually tell me where we are going when we are a street away from the destination.

C. (4.1) commented: I remember things because I have pictures in my head.

Exceptional auditory memory is also apparent with parents commenting on the memorization of rhymes, jingles and songs from an early age. J. (1.6) ‘memorises nursery rhymes like Twinkle, Twinkle and Mary, Mary Quite Contrary.’ Nicole (2) ‘can complete almost every sentence in about 10-15 books like Possum Magic and Alexander’s Outing. This is by rote memory because she couldn’t possibly know words like invisible, Darwin, Hyde Park... ‘C. (5.0) ‘remembers events that occurred three years ago in remarkable detail.’

Creativity

Creativity is clearly evident within both observations and work samples with ingenious and creative approaches to tasks and with examples of the combining of familiar elements in new and novel ways. Examples documented by parent’s also included creative use of toys, recycled materials, highly imaginative stories and games. Nicole (aged 2 years) ‘put two cups on her head when bored in the supermarket trolley and told me they were her antennas. I asked her who had an antennas and she replied a robot.’ The creative use of language is also evident within the documentation. For
example Ryan (5.9 years) described the speed of his running into the
house as, 'I raced inside like a light on a motor cycle'.

The creativity of the gifted child can be both problematic as well as
humorous. Amelia’s mother made the following comment about Amelia
at age four,

*She also likes to deliberately do things incorrectly, for fun, especially
if she knows someone is expecting a particular answer! So it may be
hard for a teacher to pick up on what she knows. She finds it
extremely amusing to "muddle" things up. For example tonight she
said that two and three of something were five, then immediately she
said 'no, no, it’s four.' I said, ‘no it’s five.’ She said ‘let’s just pretend
it’s four.’ This then turned into a game of muddling up the number of
pigs in "this little piggie" so that I had to think up things for 6, 8, 10
pigs and then how to do it in 2, then 1 pig - great fun - she has a
great sense of humour.*

**Formulating, Researching and Testing Theories**

The data collected throughout the study suggested the child’s need for
detailed explanations of observed phenomenon and events as well as
abstract concepts. For example:

*Ryan watched a show about Stephen Hawking’s Universe and after a
part that explained how Mendeleve constructed the periodic table he
said, 'Does that mean that Mrs. P is wrong about God? She’s got no
proof' (6. years).*
There is an apparent eagerness to know, to formulate theories and test hypotheses. The investigation of past eras and civilizations was evident in a number of protracted, in-depth research explorations. The consideration of complex environmental issues was also a shared interest with intense concern regarding the effects of humanity on the planet, recycling, and endangered species evident among the children. A number of children were intensely interested in aspects of bio-diversity and theories of evolution. Emma (5) for example wanted to know when were you old enough to decide whether you believed in evolution or Adam and Eve.

Hattie (3.2) formulated theories about death and the after life after the death of Princess Diana, suggesting that the human spirit could be like a bird. Ryan (4.0) hypothesised that viruses came from outer space on a ‘meteor rock’ and that, ‘dinosaurs came from another world. So do monsters. There are many worlds.’ At 5.11 years he designed an ‘ager’ for testing the age of rocks.

The contemplation of spiritual issues and the awareness of ethical considerations were also apparent within the conversations and comments of the children. An interest in complex family dynamics and relationships was evident in play, stories and drawings.

Advanced Awareness of Literacy and Numeracy Concepts and Processes

Advanced literacy was evident in an early interest in words and symbols (ie. under two years), the complexity of stories selected and enjoyed by the children, and by the ability to read prior to school entry for many of the
children. Stories written and/or scribed revealed a rich and creative use of language and well-developed imagination. The early interest in and use of mathematical concepts was evident in the children’s play and their questions and conversations. Examples include:

Nicole (21 months) is trying to sort out the difference between numbers and letters. She still wants books and more books...her fine motor skills seem to frustrate her. She desperately wants to write numbers and letters.

Later at 2 years -

She can read many lower case letters and is just beginning to read words in a repetitive book. I began reading the book but she soon worked out the word with the ‘curly c’ was cat and the other word was dog. She worked the in and out from the pictures. After she read a few pages she looked at me and said ‘my reading words’.

Early letter and number recognition was evident within the participants as well as an interest in mathematical processes evident in comments such as:

When asked how many she will sight recognise 2 or 3 but will still attempt to count out more - she usually adds a few numbers but knows that the last one is ‘how many. (2.0 years)

Several parents also described an early interest in complex mathematical concepts, such as infinity and negative numbers. Ryan (6.1 years)
explained the concept of infinity by using the metaphor of the life cycle of
frogs.

I’ll tell you what infinity is. A frog lays eggs, eggs hatch into
tadpoles, the tadpole grows back legs and becomes a frog and then
lays eggs again. Now that’s a circle. It’s infinity. Everything that’s
alive is infinity. A boy, grows up, makes a baby. We die when we get
very old and the baby grows up and makes another baby. Even trees.

Advanced and Detailed Visual Representation

The quality of the children’s drawings suggested a rapid development of
the skills of visual representation with an interest in complex themes and
processes. The processes involved in the completion of such drawings
also indicated characteristics such as intrinsic motivation, persistence and
perfectionism with some children completing many, many drawings of
similar objects in the process of refinement. There appears to be the need
to grapple with the complexities observed by detailed observation and the
exploration of every possible aspect of the topic. The interest in, and
exploration of, the possibilities of graphic representation is evident in
work samples as is the study of perspective and an interest in cross
sections. Such interests suggested the need to move beyond what is
concrete and easily observable to greater levels of sophistication and
abstraction.
The Search for Complexity and Connection

The results of the study provided insight into Andre's 'kind of thinking', the kind of thinking that characterises and at times isolates the young gifted child. Analysis of the results suggested that young gifted children, from birth, seek to move beyond the concrete and familiar experience. They are curious and seek out new stimulation and opportunities to develop sophisticated understandings. Young gifted children search for complexity and abstraction, divergence and difference and attempt to make meaningful connections between the known and the unknown. They generate complex theories and hypotheses and creative ways for testing these. The experience of being young and gifted could be described as a search for complexity and connection.

This notion of giftedness in early childhood as 'the search for complexity and connection' may help families and educators to reconsider the adults' role in their interactions with the gifted infant, toddler and young child. The suggestion is that rather than attempting to simplify, to give quick and superficial answers or solve problems for children, adults should explore ways in which they can offer complexity and challenge, as well as time and resources for in-depth investigation and reflection. The notion of giftedness as the search for complexity and connection may serve as a useful construct for helping families and educators to re-conceptualise the roles and relationships in early childhood and to more effectively respond to giftedness in early childhood.
Implications for Early Childhood Pedagogy

The outcomes of this research give rise to a number of implications for early childhood pedagogy. These support the reconceptualising of the roles and relationships in early childhood and the relationship between the child, family and educator increasingly being debated within contemporary approaches in early childhood education (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; Silin, 1995; Woodrow, 1999).

Reconceptualising Roles and Relationships in Early Childhood

Reconceptualising the Child

The results of this study challenge pre-conceptions of the young child that pervade the community and are frequently evident within early childhood education (Morelock & Morrison, 1999). The defining of the child in terms of ages and stages has been a dominant paradigm in early education (Graue & Walsh, 1998). The use of the word ‘little’ as an identifier in relation to young children (Jackson, 1993) has also resulted in a diminished view of the capabilities of the child within the period of early childhood. The documentation provided by the families of the gifted children within this study challenges the deficit view of the young child and provides powerful evidence of young children, from birth, as complex, capable, curious and intrinsically motivated in pursuing their search for complexity and connection.
Reconceptualising the Family

The detailed documentation provided by the families participating in the study suggest that early childhood educators also need to reconceptualise parents and families as experts who have extensive and significant knowledge and experience to contribute to the education and care of the young child. The experience of parenting provided valuable insight into aspects such as temperament, personality and learning style. Such insight is too frequently ignored or discarded by educational professionals. Given that for the gifted child, perceived difference from same-aged peers can result in the masking of behaviour and underachievement, it is very difficult for educators to establish a true understanding of the child’s capabilities without meaningful dialogue with families.

Reconceptualising Roles and Relationships

The research also suggests the need to reconceptualise the roles and relationships within the educative process, challenging the notion of who is teacher, who is expert. The qualities of curiosity, intrinsic motivation, playfulness, creativity, and empathy so poignantly evident in the words of the children are qualities needed by both adults and children at a time when the effects of rapid change and globalization are so profound. The sensitivity of the children, evident in the expression of their thoughts, theories and feelings, provides a valuable lens through which adults can look again at the world. The children’s depth of knowledge regarding particular topics of interest indicates that at times expertise resides within
the child rather than the adult. The awareness that there is much that adults can learn from children reinforces the need for collaborative learning and teaching partnerships between children and educators (including family members) in which adults are willing to admit their own ignorance and are eager to engage in reflection and to undertake their own further research and investigation.

The role of co-learner requires a greater willingness for adults who are educating and caring for young children to engage in an informed partnership based on a willingness to listen to each child’s perspectives, ideas and theories. The use of ‘think time’, which allows children to consider and reflect before responding, helps to create an environment in which children are taken seriously. The use of ‘plan, do and review’, work contracts, work diaries and research investigations undertaken by individual, pairs and small groups of children can help gifted children in their search for complexity and connection in both home and centre-based care. In such experiences young gifted children can be encouraged to participate in serious business while engaged in meaningful play and exploration. The use of information and communication technologies can support diverse and complex interests as well as independent and collaborative research and investigation. Questioning, used as a genuine means of ascertaining the child’s perspective in all its complexity, rather than as a means of assessing the child’s knowledge acquisition or memory recall, can give insight into each child’s thoughts and perspectives. Rather
than reinforcing the notion of simplistic responses, correctness or one right answer, this validates the search for complexity and connection and supports the individual perspective and the creative and reflective response.

The results of this study highlight the nature of the young gifted child's, or as Andre suggested 'my kind of thinking', as the search for complexity and connection. This search for complexity and connection need not however be the source of frustration and exclusion for the young gifted child. With greater awareness and collaboration young gifted children can be increasingly acknowledged and respected as sensitive, intelligent and reflective contributors to the learning community.

Note: The children, in consultation with their families, selected pseudonyms for themselves.
References


Chapter 7

THE SEARCH FOR COMPLEXITY AND CONNECTION -
IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

'No-one knows any one else's feelings. That's what makes life so hard.'
Ryan (aged 6)


Preface

Rationale

The focus of this presentation was determined by the need to explore the implications of the notion of the construct - 'giftedness in early childhood as the search for complexity and connection' for the social and emotional development of the young gifted child. Although I felt an intrinsic need to undertake this investigation and analysis, external sources also provided an important catalyst. The suggestion from one parent that the construct was also applicable to the social and emotional development of the young
gifted child was particularly influential. The discussion and feedback following the presentation, 'No-one in my school does my kind of thinking.' Giftedness in early childhood: The search for complexity and connection (Harrison, 2001) also confirmed this direction. The investigation and analysis of the construct, giftedness in early childhood - the search for complexity and connection in relation to the social and emotional domains of development forms the basis of this presentation.

**Context**

This presentation, entitled *Giftedness in Early Childhood - The Search for Complexity and Connection - Implications for Social and Emotional Development* was developed as my invited presentation to the 4th Australasian International Conference Education of Gifted Students. This conference was held in Melbourne, Australia on 19-20th August 2001. The theme of the conference was 'Creativity and Diversity'. In outlining the themes of the conference the then Minister of Education, State of Victoria, Honorary Mary Delahunty, MP (2001,p.3) stated that:

The conference will provide a forum for professionals in the field to discuss major issues, research and advances in gifted education, provide professional development and share understandings.
Outcomes

I was fortunate to meet with Barbara Kerr, Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University while participating in this conference. Barbara was a keynote presenter and I was an invited presenter at this conference.

References


Giftedness in Early Childhood

The Search for Complexity and Connection -

Implications for Social and Emotional Development

Invited Presentation 4th Australasian International Conference
Education of Gifted Students ‘Creativity and Diversity’
Melbourne, 19-20th August, 2001

Abstract

Young gifted children, although sharing a number of characteristics are a diverse group within the population. In this presentation the complex nature of giftedness in early childhood will be explored and illustrated with examples drawn from experiences with young gifted children. The presentation will focus in particular on aspects of social and emotional development with examples of children’s conversations and drawings used to highlight the young gifted child’s search for complexity and connection with others. Examples of the play behaviour and social interaction of young gifted children highlight the sensitivities of the young gifted child and reinforce the need for well informed adult support
for the gifted child during the early childhood period. The presentation will include discussion of strategies for parents and educators and consideration of the implications for early childhood pedagogy.

Introduction

In this presentation I want to respond to the focus of this conference—'creativity and diversity' and to the challenge that has been provoked by the young gifted children who I have come to know. As I have listened, watched and tried to understand, as I have read the research and reflected with gifted children and their families I have been challenged, on both a personal and professional level, to honour difference and divergence. I have learned to value the unexpected and to cherish the imaginative and creative response. I have also been confronted with the challenge of the children to take some personal and professional risks, to be creative, to have the courage to be an authentic self, even if it means doing the unexpected and daring to do things differently. And so within the context of this presentation I want to share some of the different ways of knowing that I have discovered through my work with young gifted children. I want to step outside the scientific discourse that claims to know truth as a result of objective investigation and to acknowledge the subjectivity and the multiplicity of perspectives and ways of knowing and being. I will offer no grand generalisations, assertions or claims but want to share some personal, but for me powerful, insights and reflections. In this process I
want to use names rather than numbers, to share stories rather than statistics, to share the drawing, the story, and the metaphor. I want to weave together the personal and the professional, acknowledging that both are the source of my perspective. In this process I want to validate the many languages used by young children and to claim a space for the richness and complexity, for the ambivalence and paradox, the depth and breadth of being young and gifted. I want to respond to the call from my own intuitive voice that wrote early one morning - ‘be evocative rather than didactic, find the poetry rather than the equation, give the children voice and tell their story.’

The Genesis of the Approach

There is not the space or time to detail the influences which have determined the approach I have to take within my research and evident within this presentation. I would however like to acknowledge the significance of the following: young gifted children and their families; the new sociology of childhood (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1998; Christenson & James, 2000), the Reggio experience (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998); and, the call for more child centered research in gifted education (Grant & Piechowski, 1999; Haensly, 1999). The following comment by Haensly (1999) has particular resonance for me.

Non traditional methods for observing intellectual competence in the young child must be found. Such methods must include following children in their natural settings in their encounters
with their peers and significant caregivers, engaged with the objects and events occurring there. The development of ability in children must be studied in the specific learning environments where their interests, processes and strategies become evident. Insights and interpretations emerge inductively from the exemplar cases as set in the context of theory and research described in the literature. (p. 275)

Explanation of the Title and the Source of the Construct

I have entitled this presentation, Giftedness in Early Childhood - The Search for Complexity and Connection, Implications for Social and Emotional Development. As I reflected on many of the interactions, work samples, play episodes and documentation of behaviour and development that I have collected during my work with young gifted children and their families, the notion of the search for complexity and connection seemed particularly relevant. In a previous presentation (Harrison, 2001) I explored the notion of the 'search for complexity and connection' in relation to the cognitive domain. While discussing this idea recently with several of the parents of young gifted children I received additional support for the relevance of this construct in relation to the affective domain. One parent said 'The idea makes sense to me. It is like what we live'.

I would suggest that the notion of the 'search for complexity and connection' is a valuable construct for understanding, interpreting and raising awareness of the nature of giftedness in early childhood. In this
presentation I want to explore the relevance of the construct for the social and emotional aspects of giftedness in early childhood. I will offer the experiences of the young gifted children and their families that have been shared with me to highlight the search for complexity and connection in relation to social and emotional development and consider the implications for social adjustment, and personal identity. Permission from the families has been given for the use of their stories and all names have been changed to ensure anonymity unless otherwise requested.

The Search for Complexity and Connection -
Implications for Social and Emotional Development

Early Social Awareness

The need for social connection may first be apparent in the social awareness of young gifted children during infancy. The early ability to establish head control, focus and track with the eyes facilitates an interpersonal connection that precedes oral language. Emma at five weeks is described as wide-eyed with wonder, having exceptional upper body control, and little need for sleep. To quote her mother,

*Walking Emma to the cradle meant tears. Rocking or patting Emma meant tears and placing her in the lying position in our arms was tantamount to heresy!* Whilst Emma was stimulated with books, toys, talking, singing or games she was the perfect angel.

The nature and intensity of early social interactions may be surprising. Parents of young gifted children have noted early attempts to establish
interactive communication. One parent described her son’s responses to her voice in the hours following his birth.

*I discovered that I only needed to speak or sing to him if he woke in the night...of course he still needed feeding or changing at times but often the sound of my voice was enough to settle him. When we brought him home he would spend long periods of time looking at books stuck down the side of his cot grizzling when a change of page was required.*

Another parent noted the following in her journal, ‘At two months so attentive, studying everything, seems to copy my voice – like a game’.

The exploration of social interaction which begins with significant care givers moves toward including others. Megan, aged three months, participated in her mother’s adult conversation with friends, ‘When we talked she babbled, when we paused, she paused. When we laughed, she giggled.’ Another parent described her child at 7 months as ‘the shining light at family gatherings. She just glows around other people especially children.’

This alertness, responsiveness and early social awareness of the gifted infant suggest an eagerness to engage with the world.

*He was extremely alert with good head control from early on. People constantly commented on his alertness and focus at this early stage. He was always looking around. Other friends’ babies the same age did not focus on things so intensely or exhibit the sort of frustration he experienced.*
The ability to focus attention facilitates interaction and engagement with others and with objects. It is perhaps one of the first indications of the search for complexity and connection.

The creative use of various forms of communication - facial expression, non-verbal utterances and gesture; and, the early development of receptive language feed the social connection and the complexity of the interaction between infant and caregiver. The child's efforts to communicate stimulated further social interactions with significant family members and others. Parents have described their own increasing absorption and engagement in the emerging social relationship with their very young child. If a significant adult is available to respond directly to the overtures of the infant then the complexity of the interactions and the strength of the connection increases rapidly.

Reflections of Social Awareness in Language, Play and Drawing

As gifted children move from infancy through the period of early childhood they explore and use their developing skills in oral and receptive language, play and social interaction. Over time the search for complexity and connection becomes evident in increasingly sophisticated forms of self-expression. Experiences shared with young gifted children provide rich examples to illustrate, particularly in relation to creative play with language, play and drawing.
Language

The search for complexity and connection in the social and emotional domain can be evident in conversations with very young gifted children. Their questions and comments suggest a drive to make sense of both personal and public experiences. This is evident in incessant and intense questioning and in perceptive observations of events and situations in the environment. One mother described how her child at eighteen months commented on the absence of one of the educators from child care even before they had opened the gate. Her daughter commented, 'Josie won't be here today. Her car is not in the car park. I wonder what is wrong with Josie?'

Parents of a number of the children noted that their very young children were particularly concerned at the death of Princess Diana and tried to make sense of this experience. Hattie (aged 2.10) was significantly affected by the visible expression of emotion depicted on television and over the next few months asked many questions about life and death including 'Why did she die? Where is she now? What's a spirit? Where is heaven?' 'If you die before you have finished. Do you get to come back again and do some more?'

Ryan (aged 5.10) also reacted to the incident. His father noted in his journal, 'while in the car he was quiet and then burst into tears saying, 'If Princess Diana had not died, then everyone would be happy'. Ryan’s emotional response also reflects the level of feeling that frequently accompanies such questions. The emotional intensity can be problematic for families as they try to offer support and understanding in relation to issues that they may find difficult to explain (Harrison, 2000a).
Play

In play young gifted children also demonstrate social and emotional aspects of the search for complexity and connection. The ability to empathise and the sensitivity of the young gifted child frequently result in play themes and interactions that focus on issues not expected in early childhood. The content or focus for the play of young gifted children may also reflect this search. Particularly powerful was an observation of the play of several gifted four year olds, which focused on foraging for food and the difficulties of surviving in the third or majority world (Harrison & Tegel, 1999). The search for complexity and connection can also be evident in the awareness of the social dynamics in play, greater richness and higher levels of collaboration than anticipated.

Drawing

Social awareness and the search for connection and complexity can also evident in some of the early drawings of young gifted children. For example the ability to produce a human form between the ages two and three reflects visual alertness and the heightened social awareness previously described. The desire to explore the range of facial features as evident in the angle of eyebrows and the expression of emotion in graphics and drawings reflects the exploration of emotional complexity and the search for connection with others. Each of these aspects suggests the ability to observe, to remember and the desire to make sense of the social and emotional experience.
As some gifted children become even more skilled in visual representation, the search for complexity and connection is evident in the greater awareness, creativity and sophistication of expression reflected in their drawings. The following examples illustrate this. Joshua (aged 5) depicted the nature of emotion and the complex relationships within his family. Sophie (aged 5) explored ways to represent feelings in her drawing of her mother. Emma (aged 4) in her depiction of people living in flats also provides us with an expression of her social awareness and the need to make sense of complex social relationships. Creative expression through visual representation, story and metaphor by young gifted children is a powerful reflection of a greater awareness of others and this search for complexity and connection.

**Social Adjustment**

It has become evident through my work with young gifted children and their families that the need for both complexity and connection can become problematic as young children move into group care situations. Different children respond to this in different ways but both the diversity and complexity of the nature of the responses are significant.

**Teacher Pleaser/Perfectionist**

Gifted children can be highly sensitive to the social context as indicated in Ryan’s comments. While drawing a picture of himself (age 5.11) Ryan commented *I never used to give arms or a nose, but now I do; but I always drew the neck. We don’t draw hair. None of us do except L. L.L. that is, not L.S*. They
may adopt ‘teacher pleasing’ behaviour and become the teacher’s willing assistant. They may also be overly compliant, become perfectionists, fear failure and underachieve in personal and later academic tasks.

**Child/Adult**

Some gifted children respond by adopting adult like behaviours, at times, becoming more like an adult member of staff at the child care centre or pre-school. Some children are eager to help with the babies and younger children, others are very vocal and well informed regarding the routines, procedures and acceptable behaviours at the centre. Early childhood educators at times become concerned that a gifted child appears to feel more comfortable in an adult like role than in relationships with same aged peers. At times more opportunities for leadership and complex play are offered to attract the child back to experiences with peers. The advanced play behaviour that comes with being gifted requires flexibility of grouping, more open ended, complex experiences and resources, and greater awareness of the complex social dynamics in play (Harrison & Tegel, 1999).

**Frustration and Social Isolation**

Some gifted children find the issues associated with social adjustment a source of incredible frustration. This may result in intense tantrums and aggression or withdrawal and despondency. At times some gifted children find solitary play more satisfying and the interior world of
thoughts and imagination more attractive than the social interactions of
the classroom.

Each of these responses has implications for social relationships, the
type of play and the choice of play partners. Some young gifted children
seek out connections with older children for play and interaction. Some
seek out adult conversation and relationships often shadowing teachers or
family members who will discuss topics of interest with them. One child
described how you could hear all sorts of interesting things in adult
conversations if you sat close but looked in the other direction. Other
young gifted children withdraw from the social scene and play alone, at
times finding solitary play more satisfying and less pressured than
accommodating to the demands of playing with same aged peers. Some
find satisfying social connections with other gifted children whether same-
aged, older, or even younger peers. Parents noted the significance of the
programmes for young gifted children offered by the state Gifted and
talented Children’s Association and by the Gifted Education Research,
Resource and Information Centre [GERRIC] at the University of New
South Wales. At times participation in the programmes is infrequent or
irregular, and so indirect contact is established between families
(including between children) and my-self by phone or email. The
knowledge that there are other children who share similar interests and
ways of thinking can provide a considerable source of validation for
young gifted children and their families.
Search for Personal Identity

When surrounded by same aged peers, and interactions, resources and an environment designed for typically developing infants, toddlers and young children some young gifted children, begin to mask their true abilities in order to conform to expectations. My work with young gifted children and their families suggests that young gifted children, particularly girls, begin to mask behaviour at a surprisingly young age. Silverman (1993) when highlighting gender issues, suggested that girls have greater social adaptability than gifted boys and that gifted girls experience the greatest difficulty in schooling, at key transition periods including the pre-school kindergarten.

The discrepancy between the personal and the public identity highlights some of the difficulties associated with this search for complexity and connection. Concerns regarding personal identity generally associated with adolescence may surface for both genders during the early childhood period as gifted children become increasingly aware of their difference from same aged peers. Gross (1994) discussed the pressure to conform,

Gifted children may become aware at early age that they are different in many ways from the other children around them. They may feel acutely uncomfortable and, and may act swiftly to change their behaviour and conform to the social or behavioural norms of their age group. (p. 7)
Complex interests are difficult to share with same aged peers who may be totally unfamiliar with the language or concepts involved. The need to remain silent or conform to the expectations of the peer group creates difficulties for the children and their families.

**Emotional Complexity and Connection**

The nature of the social interactions of young gifted children may also be characterised by a degree of emotional sensitivity and intensity that can be unexpected and disturbing for both children and families (Roeper, 1982; Silverman, 1993). The notion of early childhood egocentricity and the inability to understand another’s perspective is at times challenged by the empathy and emotional sensitivity of the very young gifted children. Comments such as: ‘At 12 months Jake would crawl over retrieve it (his cousin’s dummy or pacifier) and offer it back to him’. At (age 1.1) Jake’s mother recorded his intense response while watching and listening to Pavarotti perform Ave Maria in the video of the three tenors. ‘Jake became emotional, teary eyed and moved his head to the rhythm of the music’ (Harrison, 2000a).

Another parent noted in relation to her child (aged 1.6), ‘He would have intense reactions to things. Videos, television even books. He would be unable to speak for an hour, burying his head in his pillow.’ Saxon (aged 5.0) was also able to empathise with others and was motivated to alleviate suffering. When his mother expressed concern at the way in which he was being teased at school Saxon responded with ‘while they are bothering me ‘they’re leaving someone else alone... I’m quite sure it won’t be the last time that people
will be saying things about me.' Saxon (aged 5.9) was also deeply concerned for others at Christmas and insisted that he should get only one present as some children would have no presents at all (Harrison, 2000a).

Within the first months and years such social and emotional responses may appear atypical and outside normative developmental expectations. An emotional intensity frequently accompanies the behaviour described. A level of despondency may accompany the social and emotional aspects of the search for complexity and connection. Ryan clearly showed this when he commented:

\begin{quote}
No one knows any one else’s feelings. That’s what makes life so hard’ and ‘I don’t know about life. No one cares about me. Everything is boring. This is boring. School is boring. A tells lies and B is stupid and C just goes silly. They think that all that they are at school for is to play about but that’s not right is it? You are there to do work… learn things… and a bit later ‘Sometimes I wish we all didn’t exist. It would be better to be dead. I need someone to care for and be gentle with.’ Ryan aged 6.2 to 6.3 (Harrison, 2000a)
\end{quote}

The emotional intensity that can accompany such feelings is difficult for both children and families to manage at times. The life experiences, which can help to provide a more balanced perspective, are of course not available to children so young. The situation is compounded when young children feel powerless to do anything to alleviate their concerns. Emotional intensity is at times interpreted by others outside the family, as
evidence of immaturity or lack of parental control. To see such behaviour as part of a bigger picture of giftedness, and one aspect of the whole child, helps to promote a more sensitive response. Such behaviour when seen in the context of being gifted can indicate aspects such as heightened sensitivity and emotional maturity and perspective taking that is beyond even some adults.

Implications for Early Childhood Pedagogy

Image of the Child

The stories, comments and drawings that I have shared help to raise awareness of the complex nature of giftedness in early childhood and challenge our image of the child. If we are limited by strict adherence to developmental norms then there will be much that is overlooked, misinterpreted or denied. My recent research in relation to young gifted children and current thinking in early childhood suggests that the need to rethink our perspectives on childhood. The suggestion is that we need to move away from defining children in terms of what they are not and begin to acknowledge all that they are (Cannella, 1997; Christenson & James, 2000; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1998; Woodrow, 1999). The children described throughout this presentation may be little in size but not in any other way. The creativity and perceptiveness, the complexity and sensitivity, the ingenuity and wisdom, forces us to rethink the question: who is expert? It also causes us to consider that there is richness in early childhood that is too quickly and too frequently lost.
Curriculum

The young gifted child’s search for complexity and connection can be demanding for families. Although external child care situations can alleviate some of the pressure on families it can be difficult to ensure that educational settings, other than the home, are responsive to the advanced and at times complex nature of the play and development of the gifted child. The question, what is relevant curriculum for these children is an important one. Curricular based on developmental norms and designed to meet the learning needs of the average child may provide little in the way of intellectual challenge and social and emotional support for the children described within this paper. Early childhood educators in both prior to school and school settings are encouraged to look at the potential of the project approach (Katz & Chard, 1989), emergent curriculum (Jones & Nimmo, 1994), and the Reggio experience (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) when making decisions regarding relevant approaches to curriculum. Curricular decisions are also best made in consultation with children and their families to ensure that what is offered are responsive to the individual child within the social context. Given that young gifted children frequently mask their natural abilities, dialogue with families and children can help to determine a more realistic image and understanding of the child.
Grouping

A flexible approach to grouping within both prior to school and school settings can also be an important response to the need for complexity and challenge. Mixed age grouping and special grouping of children of similar abilities or interests can provide opportunities for young gifted children to connect with like-minded peers. Allowing young gifted children opportunity to work alongside or with older children can also provide additional opportunity for connection and complexity. This may involve toddlers sharing in small group story, music or interest based experiences with three to five year olds, three year olds participating in literacy experiences designed for four and five year olds or partial acceleration or grade skipping within school settings. Such opportunities can be part time, full time, or an occasional provision. Such flexibility can ensure that experiences provided are not simply offered as a response to chronological age with little relationship to the individual child.

Strategies for Teaching and Learning

Families and early childhood educators frequently seek advice regarding strategies for teaching. While there is no simple formula or recipe book there is much that can be gained from reading the gifted education literature (Clark, 1997; Gross, 1993; Harrison, 1999; Porter, 1999; Silverman, 1993). There is also much to learn from gifted children themselves. The process is one of reciprocity, of both teaching and
learning. Adult and child are both learner and teacher. There is much that is worthy of reflection when we take time to watch and listen.

The families and educators of young gifted children I have worked with have often expressed surprise at the levels of creativity and ingenuity that the children have demonstrated. They have commented on aspects such as the commitment to self-initiated tasks, the sophistication of the problem solving skills and the beauty of the visual and verbal imagery that the children produce. Such observations can provide powerful moments for self-reflection if we consider these strengths in relation to ourselves. There is much that we can learn about strategies for teaching and learning through taking up the challenges offered. These challenges might include rekindling our own creativity, increasing our willingness to take risks, working on our motivation to try another way rather than give up or daring to explore possibilities for self-expression through language, play and drawing.

Conclusion

In early childhood in particular, the search for complexity and connection is frequently undertaken within the context of a mixed ability group of same aged peers. Such a context may offer little personal validation and little or no opportunity to connect with like-minded peers. For some gifted children there is a debilitating loneliness and sense of isolation that comes with perceived difference from others. As O'Donoghue (1998) commented in his book, *Eternal Echoes Exploring Our Hunger to Belong,*
Our hunger to belong is the longing to bridge the gulf that exists between isolation and intimacy. Everyone longs for intimacy and dreams of a nest of belonging in which one is embraced, seen and loved ... the shelter of belonging empowers. (p. 4)

Gifted children need adults within both families and educational settings who can acknowledge their struggle towards a sense of self, give validation and try to offer a safe sanctuary. In their struggle to find out who they are, in their search for complexity and connection, our children offer us the chance to be fellow travelers, also searching for that illusive resolution of who we are. We have the chance to share the search for complexity and connection, to offer our love and companionship as we each continue in our own personal search for truth and belonging.

I want to conclude with some of my own words written on the night before Mother's Day 2001. These words seem relevant to parents and early childhood educators as they seek to respond to the young children within their care.

You are not the doormat or the broom. You are the door that opens for them to pass through and beyond, to find their own path. Open their eyes to the possibilities, to wonder and curiosity, to the question not the answer. Stretch wide your arms and your heart that they will journey knowing that your love has set them free. The mother bird does not carry her
babies in flight, but takes them to the edge. She says, 'Watch me flying free. Come, you too have wings, strong and powerful. Step into the unknown for you have all you need and more for the flight into forever. Dare to do it, with your own wings. Fly free on the winds of a mother's love and who knows where these winds will take you beyond where I can see into the unknown possibilities of tomorrow.

Note - All names have been changed to ensure anonymity unless otherwise requested.

References


SECTION 2

Chapter 8

RESPONDING TO GIFTEDNESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: THE LESSONS OF REGGIO EMILIA

We have to look at children with different eyes and a different mind, curious to encounter them in their field of action, to grasp the unknown or unusual nuances (which are many) with the aim of offering back to children a picture of many identities.

Castagnetti and Vecchi (1997, p.96)


Preface

Rationale

In April 1999 I participated in the Australian and New Zealand Study Tour to the early childhood centres of the region of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. Reggio Emilia has an international reputation within early childhood education that is considered by many early childhood professionals around
the world as best practice. Although familiar with the Reggio experience from the literature regarding approaches to early childhood education in Reggio (Edwards, Gandini & Forman 1998; Hendrick, 1997) and the philosophies of Loris Malaguzzi, the first hand experience of the Reggio schools was life changing. The lectures given by Reggio pedagogistas (academics) and others were inspirational and provided much ‘food for thought’. The Reggio experience, as indicated in the overarching statement, had a powerful influence on my doctoral study. Elements of the Reggio philosophy are evident both in the discussion of theoretical perspectives and in the methodology used within the various articles included in the portfolio. The experience of early childhood education in Reggio Emilia was particularly relevant to a conference entitled ‘Igniting Potential’. The lessons, which the Reggio experience has to offer gifted education, are explored within this presentation.

Context

This presentation was developed for the eighth National Conference of the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented [AAEGT] held in Brisbane, Australia from 2\textsuperscript{nd} to 5\textsuperscript{th} July 2000. The introduction to the conference was provided by the AAEGT Organising Committee (2000, p. 1):

The Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented [AAEGT] represent the only National Association concerned with the welfare and education of gifted children in
Australia. The Association convenes a biennial conference attended by delegates from around Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Rim countries and elsewhere. The National Conference provides a forum that brings together parents, teachers, academics and other interested stakeholders from around Australasia and the region to discuss and learn about issues concerning the education and well being of gifted children. Conference 2000 offers us an opportunity to examine some of the assumptions that we hold about the gifted, about their personalities, about their cognitive skills and about how we as stakeholders can support these children at all stages of their lives.

Outcomes

This conference provided opportunities to form collaborative networks with other academics, early childhood educators and policy makers working in the area of gifted education. Significant connections were established with Libby Lee from Murdoch University in Western Australia and Karin Morrison president of the Victorian Gifted and Talented Children’s Association. Karin subsequently supported my proposal to visit Bialik College in Melbourne where she is the gifted education co-ordinator. This visit was part of a research proposal that was included in my staff development leave application in July 2000. Unfortunately due to the reduced numbers of staff development leave places offered within the
Faculty of Education and Languages at the University of Western Sydney in 2000 my application was unsuccessful and this research project was not implemented.

I have continued to access the current literature regarding the Reggio experience (Ceppi & Zeni, 1998; Fraser & Gestwicki, 2000) and the emerging implications for early childhood pedagogy and policy as evident nationally in *The NSW Curriculum Framework - The Practice of Relationships* (Department of Community Services, 2002) and internationally in the reconceptualising early childhood movement. I am currently working with the Victorian Schools Innovation Commission investigating the potential of the Reggio experience for facilitating innovation in pedagogy in both early childhood and middle schooling, and have participated in the Australian study tour to Reggio Emilia in January, 2003. Implications for early childhood pedagogy are further explored in Chapter 13, Sharing the Lived Experiences of Children.
References


Responding to Giftedness in Early Childhood: 
The Lessons of Reggio Emilia


Abstract

The early childhood centres of Reggio Emilia, Italy are considered ‘best practice’ in early childhood education, internationally. Reggio Emilia is an area in the north of Italy which has continued to develop and refine innovative educational practices for young children. The philosophy and educational approaches based on a socio-constructivist model which have been developed in Reggio Emilia are particularly relevant to those who are responsible for the care and education of our young gifted children. In this presentation key elements of the philosophical perspectives and educational strategies of Loris Malaguzzi and others will be outlined with consideration given to the relevance of this approach for young gifted children. Aspects to be covered include the image of the child, the emergent curriculum/project approach, co-
construction of knowledge, the environment as the third
teacher and collaborative partnerships with parents.

Introduction

I have been working and studying in the area of giftedness in early
culthood for over 15 years. Over that time I have become increasingly
aware of the nature of giftedness in early childhood and the particular
learning and socio-emotional strengths and needs of young gifted
children. My recent research with young gifted children has further
highlighted this, identifying the significance of the young gifted child’s
search for complexity and connection. Another research project, which is
investigating the transition to school for young gifted children, has
suggested that the educational experience can be problematic for young
gifted children and for their families. Data gathered to date indicates that
both the families and teachers of young gifted children are searching for
an educational experience that is responsive to the strengths and interests
of the young gifted child.

In 1995 the first edition of my book Giftedness in Early Childhood (Harrison
1995) was published. In that book I outlined positive aspects of the Reggio
approach for gifted education. Since that time I have continued to read of
this philosophy and educational perspective. In 1999 I visited Reggio as a
member of an Australian and New Zealand delegation. The Reggio
experience raised as many questions as it answered but the experience
affirmed that those of us who are concerned for the education and care of
young gifted children have much to learn from our Italian early childhood colleagues. It is difficult to know what to say about such an enormous topic in such a short time. I also feel as if I am telling a story second hand that would be much more meaningful if experienced, seen and heard by each of you, first hand. Like watching someone's holiday slides, a presentation such as this, does not really do justice to the lived experience. I have decided to use direct quotes, slides and images of the Reggio Emilia experience to illustrate where possible. Perhaps like the Reggio experience this presentation will raise more questions than it answers. It will hopefully motivate the beginning of your own interesting journey exploring the possibilities of the Reggio experience for young gifted children. Given the frequency of contact I have with parents who are disillusioned with educational options for their young gifted children, it is journey well worth taking.

So where is Reggio Emilia?

An article in Newsweek (1992, p. 93) described Reggio Emilia in the following way:

Reggio Emilia is a city of 130,000 people in a wealthy region of Northern Italy. Over the last thirty years a system of early childhood education has evolved under the leadership of Loris Malaguzzi and the collaborative efforts of parents and teachers. Today the city has responsibility for 13 infant/toddler schools and 22 preschools that are municipally funded and
community managed. The city allocates 12% of its total budget to programs for infants and young children, demonstrating their commitment to the importance of early childhood education. The children remain with the same two co-teachers for their 3 years in the schools and this extended relationship between children, teachers and families provides the foundation for learning and understanding for all those concerned with the program. This collaboration has assisted in the development of a distinctive and innovative curriculum, pedagogy and method of school organization which recognises the potential of young children to question, reflect, problem solve, theorise, experiment and express their findings.

When provided with sufficient opportunities and time to explore, children master the many tools and skills of communication and are able to actively translate what they perceive not only through the spoken word but through the other powerful languages of drawing, sculpture, sound, drama, and movement as symbolic representations of their discoveries about the world.

There are many aspects of the Reggio experience worthy of investigation.

For the purposes of this presentation we will focus on:

- The image of the child;

- The emergent/curriculum/project approach or progettazione;
• The environment as the third teacher; and,

• Collaborative partnerships with families.

The Reggio Experience

Image of the Child

Fundamental to the Reggio experience is the image of the child as strong and powerful. Malaguzzi, (1998, p. 81) founder and philosopher, described children in a way which would reflect the experience of working with young gifted children. ‘They are autonomously capable of making meaning from their daily life experiences through mental acts involving planning, co-ordination of ideas, and abstraction’. Gandini, a Reggio pedagogista, described children as having ‘preparedness, potential, and curiosity, and interest in engaging in social interaction, establishing relationships, constructing their learning, and negotiating with everything the environment brings to them’ (1997, p. 17). My work with gifted infants, toddlers, pre-school children and early-schoolers affirms this image: the infant who studies each new object relentlessly; the toddler who demands that you read again and again the book recommended for four year olds and over; the preschooler who has to stay up late because Quantum is on the television; and the child in Year 1 who is thrilled to hear something new, commenting ‘Hey Mum I learnt something new at school today. We did antonyms and synonyms.’ To again quote Malaguzzi (1997) who stated that:
From the very beginning, curiosity and learning refute that which is simple and isolated. Children yearn to discover the measures and relations of complex situations, even seeking out the pleasure of transgressing these measures and relations, changing their meanings, creating their own analogies, metaphors and anthropomorphic and realistic-logical meanings. Because of children’s way (both biological and cultural) of being and dealing with things, people, peers, images and even with themselves - through multiplying forms and increasing levels of adaptation and competence - it is wrong to lock them into hierarchical and linear stages or to attribute to them some sort of (nonexistent) egocentrism, animism or disvalued magic, all of which are seen as weak and erroneous paths from which children must be liberated by the archangel of reason. (p. 15)

Young children, in Reggio, are conceptualised as intelligent and capable, able to theorise, make meaning and formulate connections from birth. There is strong focus on all that the child is - on ‘being’ rather than ‘becoming’. To illustrate rather than considering the young infant as unable to communicate, the language of the gesture is recognised and considered as a powerful and complex medium for communication of ideas, needs and interests. The expertise and unique perspective of children is recognised and they are involved in such projects as
preparation of a booklet containing information for the incoming three year olds and for designing an information booklet for their city.

Children are trusted to make sense of experience and the child’s search for complexity is honoured and supported. Adults allow children time, extensive periods of time, and repeated opportunities to formulate and test their own hypotheses and theories rather than offering children simplistic solutions. The adult’s role is thus considered ‘a provocateur’, challenging, complicating and problematising rather than simplifying. In the story of the Shoe and Metre children are confronted with a real life situation: the school needs another worktable, one that will be identical to the others, same shape and same size. The documentation of this experience tells the story of how a small group of children grappled with the complexities of this problem. Their investigation lasted about ten days, with 40-50 minutes of work time per day. Rinaldi (1997) described the experience thus:

The real structuring processes were those that extend over time, that are shared, that allow for pauses, silences, retreats and differences and divergences: processes that involve the individual in his or her cognitive affective and social wholeness. The real problem then is not when and how to explain or present a problem such as when to present standard measuring instruments to children (at what age? in what way?) but rather to ask how we can create the conditions that enable
the development of divergent and creative thought, how to sustain the ability and the pleasure involved in comparing ideas with others rather than simply confronting a single idea that is presumed to be right or true. The path of learning that children and adults construct together originates from these ways and worlds represented by each child. We construct not only knowledge but also awareness of how this construction takes place, exchange, dialogue, divergence, negotiation and also the pleasure of thinking and working together which is the real pleasure of friendship. It is also this awareness that brings truly new elements into the didactic dialogue. (p. 103)

Adults act in ways that ensure that they are fully attentive to children.

Edwards (1998) commented:

Listening means seeking to follow, to enter into the active learning that is taking place. We must be able to catch the ball the children throw us, and toss it back to them in a way that makes the children want to continue the game with us, developing, perhaps, other games as we go along. (p. 181)

Children are encouraged to explore and investigate their interests as part of a team using the various strengths and interests that different children bring to the learning context. A mixed age group setting also facilitates this and in the case of the gifted child provides for social interaction with like-minded peers. There is the recognition that children learn from each
other and small group work is used to facilitate meaningful interaction, the exchange of ideas, collaboration and negotiation and the co-construction of knowledge. A study of the various projects undertaken by Reggio Children captured in videos such as ‘Amusement Park for Birds’, ‘Portrait of a Lion’ and ‘The Long Jump’ and books such as ‘Shoe and Metre’. Castagnetti and Vecchi (1999, p. 96) highlighted this.

Creativity and exceptionality can be found more easily in process than in results. These aspects can be clearly seen in the daily thinking and constructing of children, provided that children are working in a context that does not superimpose pre-constituted values and methods but instead studies and listens to their autonomous processes. Working in this way has given us the utmost faith in children’s self-organizational strategies and abilities.... We have to look at children with different eyes and a different mind, curious to encounter them in their field of action, to grasp the unknown or unusual nuances (which are many) with the aim of offering back to children a picture of many identities.

_Emergent Curriculum, The Project Approach, Progettazione_

The interactive-constructivist approach of the early childhood centres of Reggio Emilia proposes not to teach children what they can discover for themselves. In this way of thinking the crucial role of the teacher is to intervene indirectly offering contexts that provoke questions and facilitate
learning. The curriculum is thus determined by the interests and questions of the children themselves, rather than predetermined, either by educational bureaucracies or by the educators. In the centres of Reggio Emilia curriculum emerges from the children, as teachers and children work together listening to, and learning from, each other. Teachers inform their interactions with children by carefully scrutinising and analysing the detailed observation and documentation of children’s conversations with others and their interactions with the world expressed in the many languages of childhood such as visual representation, music, dance, sculpture as well as oral communication. Conversations and an array of symbolic expression give insight into the theorising of children. Castagnetti and Vecchi (1997) suggested that,

Children produce many theories and hypotheses for interpreting the surrounding reality, but these often remain unexpressed because they are not listened to. We thus need to be aware of how little we actually know about children’s autonomous learning strategies. We need to get close to children, to observe and document them with respect, curiosity and solidarity, to ask ourselves many questions, not be afraid of doubts, and not let ourselves be seduced by overly rapid generalisations of the information we gather. (p. 94)

This process of observation and documentation, called the probe, is fundamental to the learning process. It serves as both an opportunity and
an instrument for observing and analysing, for developing knowledge of knowledge. Hendrick (1997) affirmed this when discussing pedagogical approaches used in the early childhood centres of Reggio Emilia.

After observing children in action, they compare, discuss, and interpret together the observations and make choices that they share with the children about what to offer and how to sustain the children in their exploration and learning. In fact the curriculum emerges in the process of each activity or project and is flexibly adjusted accordingly through this continuous dialogue among teachers and children. (p. 22)

Rather than provide children with ready made answers or explanations for that which bemuses them the educators encourage the children to question, hypothesise, test, research, investigate, explore and represent their thoughts and findings in various ways. Children are provided with opportunities for in-depth investigation, exploration, reflection and research. The processes of discovery and investigation are documented to allow the children to reflect on the ways in which their understandings and perceptions have changed. Children are encouraged to revisit their initial ideas and theories, to re-cognise and further reflect on the learning that has taken place.

Symbolic expression is considered an essential aspect of this learning process. Children are encouraged to explore their thoughts, perceptions and discoveries through various forms of symbolic representation. An
atelierista (artist in residence) as well as an atelier (studio/workshop) containing resource materials, tools and equipment is provided for children to facilitate the exploration of new discoveries through symbolic representation with a variety of art media.

In the centres and schools of Reggio Emilia continuity is valued and supported with a flexible attitude to time. The pace is leisurely with a full day program utilised to support children’s changing needs within a day. ‘Time is not set by a clock, and continuity is not interrupted by the calendar. The children’s own sense of time and their personal rhythm are considered in planning and carrying out activities and projects’ (Hendrick, 1997, p. 19).

The Environment as Third Teacher

The physical environment of the Reggio Emilia centres and schools is carefully planned and space is thoughtfully organised to contribute to the implementation of the educational philosophy and approaches. The effective use of space is seen as a fundamental determinant of learning outcomes with attention given to aesthetics and architectural structures which will further encourage and support the educational practices and philosophies of Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). The comment ‘nothing by chance’ is typified by the care with which the environment is set up. Careful deliberation is evident in the strategic use of lighting, furnishings, architectural features such as windows and doors. Hendrick (1997) commented that:
The layout of physical space, in addition to welcoming whoever enters the schools, fosters encounters, communication, and relationships. The arrangement of structures, objects, and activities encourages choices, problem solving and discoveries in the process of learning. (p. 18)

**Collaborative Partnerships with Parents**

Young children are pivotal in the Italian community and the children are seen as learning and growing within the social context. There is recognition of the importance of community to the educational process in a fundamental way, such that our endeavours in this regard appear for the most part shallow and tokenistic. The relationships and interactions which children have within their families, with each other, with teachers and the school community, as well as, the local community and wider society are seen as interconnected and utilised as integral to the educational opportunities and experiences for children. The comments of one of the parents are cited in Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1998, p. 151):

The kind of attention given the children at the infant toddler centres was just the beginning of something that has continued in a coherent way. In fact there has been continuous growth, both from the point of view of the child’s learning and from our point of view as parents. Because of this attention to our child, we became involved immediately and we came to look at our child’s education as involving our participation. What
they do for us is useful for us but they also need us. Yes, both
the infant toddler centres and the pre-primary schools live on
our participation.

The consistency of teachers and children over a three-year period (from 0-
3 in the infant and toddler centres and 3-6 years in the pre-primary
schools) helps to create a community of learners including children,
families and teachers. Care and education is a genuinely collaborative
process with the expertise and unique perspective of each party, including
children, acknowledged. For example the knowledge and expertise of
parents are recognised and genuinely sought in relation to understanding
individual children but also integral to the progetazione undertaken by the
children.

For many parents of young gifted children such opportunities would be
relished. Too frequently parents express feelings of exclusion from the
educative process as well as frustration regarding the limited credibility
they are given when speaking as experts regarding their child’s
development and learning needs. There is much to be gained for parents,
teachers and children when open dialogue and the sharing of perspectives
is the norm. Given that young gifted children frequently behave
differently in different contexts and often mask their abilities the sharing
of observations is essential to the process of ‘knowing the child’ and
determining appropriate responses in both family and educational
contexts. The Reggio experience highlights the immense value for
children, teachers and educators when collaborative partnerships are developed.

Conclusion

The journey to Reggio Emilia opens new possibilities for children and new ways of looking at childhood. It is an experience that is confronting and challenging and demands reflection and analysis of current practice and pedagogy in both early childhood and gifted education. The Reggio experience has much to teach us if we are willing to pursue the journey. This journey does however require that we critique our own practices, attitudes and perspectives and continue the never-ending task of advocacy for the rights of all young children. The Reggio experience affirms that all children have the right to a childhood that honours and enriches their unique potential.
References


Chapter 9

RE-THINKING EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

‘But three year olds can’t’


Preface

**Rationale**

The invitation from the editors, Associate Professor Sue Dockett and Associate Professor Glenda MacNaughton, to write this paper for the Australian Journal of Early Childhood provided the opportunity to present the results of the research into the visual representation of young gifted children to a national early childhood audience. This was a significant opportunity to use the results of research in gifted education to challenge early childhood education, pedagogies and policies within the Australian context.
The inclusion of the article in a special edition that focused on the reconceptualisation of early childhood education was also highly valued. It was an opportunity to have giftedness included within the debates currently occurring within early childhood education both nationally and internationally regarding developmentalist perspectives and diversity and difference. This article was used to support the re-imaging of the child as strong and capable. It also promoted the role of visual arts as an important medium of communication for young children (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and a way to make their thinking, interests and advanced development visible to others.

**Context**

This article appeared in the second special edition of the Australian Journal of Early Childhood, entitled Reconceptualising Childhood. The Australian Journal of Early Childhood [AJEC] is published by the Australian Early Childhood Association. The Australian Early Childhood Association (2000) suggests that the purpose of the journal is to:

Disseminate information about development on early childhood in Australia and overseas and to provide a forum for the discussion of new and controversial ideas. All articles submitted to the journal are subject to a peer review process. The AJEC committee invites contributions on all aspects of education and care of young children. (inside front cover)
The editors of this special edition invited me to write an article that considered the implications of the results of my research with young gifted children for the reconceptualising early childhood movement. In their editorial comment within this special edition MacNaughton and Dockett (2000, p. ii) noted that:

Contributors to this second themed edition of the Australian Journal of Early Childhood on reconceptualisation argue that our service models, curriculum policy, theories of the child, and conceptions of parenthood each need to be reframed. Each of the contributors argues for this reframing by problematising and critically engaging with taken for granted assumptions about how we should understand and practice early childhood education and care.

Outcomes

This paper contributed to ongoing discussions amongst early childhood scholars and practitioners regarding key issues in contemporary approaches to early childhood education and the reconceptualising early childhood debates. This dialogue continued in the context of a number of professional development workshops I conducted for peak bodies in early childhood education within Australia, such as KU Children's Services and SDN Children's Services (Appendix C). The work associated with the research and publication of this particular paper was also used to inform subsequent papers presented at the Reconceptualising Conference 2000 and the Eighth
National Conference of the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented held in Brisbane in July 2000.

Growing awareness of, and commitment to, the reconceptualising early childhood movement and its critical analysis of early childhood pedagogies and policies has also been evident in my teaching and involvement in undergraduate course development at the University of Western Sydney. This is most apparent in three units I have developed, and now teach in collaboration with my colleagues within the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education Degree, Contemporary Perspectives of Childhoods, Curriculum, Pedagogy and Professional Experiences 1 and Creative Arts in Early Childhood.

The inclusion of the parent perspective within the article through the use of diary records highlighted the value of parental insight and expertise an issue also being debated within the reconceptualist movement (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). My research with young gifted children and their families clearly demonstrates the value of the parental perspective in both gifted and early childhood education and can contribute to debate regarding the re-imaging of parent as expert. This aspect of the research was considered in subsequent papers and presentations and will be published in a further paper after doctoral completion.

Interest in the results of the paper in relation to visual representation also resulted in a professional development session for teachers at St
Catherine's School Waverley that focused on the use the drawings of young children as a means of identification of giftedness. Teachers in this session were also referred to the article, *Visual Representation and the Young Gifted Child* (Harrison, 1999) to assist them in this process in the process of identifying young gifted children.

**References**


But three-year-olds can’t …
Glass ceilings in early childhood—Implications for gifted children

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Although a diverse group, young children who are gifted frequently demonstrate developmental precocity and particular learning styles which may differentiate them from same-aged peers. The strong developmental focus and strict adherence to developmental norms within many early childhood programs can result in exclusion for some young gifted children. When development is interpreted within strict age parameters, the behaviour and development of the young gifted child may be misinterpreted by early childhood educators. Analysis of the drawings of young gifted children provides a useful means of illustrating the differences in the nature and rate of development for such children and a basis for considering the implications of educational experiences mismatched to individual development.

Introduction

I remember Renee (2.11) wanted to draw a special Easter greeting for her grandparents. She asked for a very large piece of paper and marker. The paper measured approximately 1 metre by 1.5 metres. Renee drew a very large rabbit. It was a drawing of a head with large floppy ears attached, and eyes, nose, and whiskers. She drew elongated shapes for paws located at the base of the body and smaller circles on the upper body for front paws. Her grandparents were thrilled with the drawing, finding it an amazing depiction of a rabbit for a child not quite three. One year later Renee was at preschool, and during the week before Easter the children were told that they were going to make special Easter pictures of rabbits. Renee selected a piece of paper and a marker and began her drawing. Her teacher interrupted, removed the piece of paper and said, ‘Here, darling. Here is one for you to colour because we need real Easter bunnies for the wall, and three-year-olds can’t really draw rabbits, can they?’ I couldn’t believe it. Renee went through a long period of refusing to draw, and even now is reluctant to participate in drawing experiences. She seemed to have concluded that her drawings were not real and of little value.
(From a parent interview)

These comments of a parent of a gifted child reflect a remarkably common situation. Early childhood education has traditionally been firmly founded in child development research and scholarship. Early childhood practitioners frequently pride themselves on the strong developmental basis for the planning of curricula and learning environments and suggest that best practice is developmentally appropriate and child-centred (Arthur, Beecher, Dockett, Farmer & Death, 1996). For young children who are gifted, the strict adherence to developmental norms and ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ without serious consideration of individual differences and ‘individual appropriateness’ can impose a glass ceiling on development and learning. For the young gifted child this can result in under-achievement and social isolation (Harrison, 1999; Whitmore, 1980). A narrow approach to development and lack of understanding of giftedness in early childhood can also result in the misunderstanding and alienation of parents and families of young gifted children (Harrison, 1999).

Data gathered in relation to the development of visual representation of highly gifted children highlights the significant developmental differences that can be seen in this population (Harrison, 1999b). The analysis of this data emphasises a number of characteristics associated with giftedness.
It also provides insight into the implications of the adherence to strict developmental norms and the subsequent imposition of a glass ceiling on expectations which limit possibilities for the child who is gifted. Awareness of developmental differences and particular characteristics associated with giftedness can assist early childhood educators to move beyond a restrictive developmental focus and to provide relevant educational experiences for young gifted children and support for their families.

Method

The following discussion of visual representation by the young gifted child is based on a longitudinal case study of seven gifted children from one to eight years. The children in the sample were a sub-sample of a larger study of visual representation of the young gifted child (Harrison, 1999b). The children in this sample were initially identified as gifted by their parents and subsequently by their teachers and/or formal testing procedures. Documentation of developmental milestones and anecdotal records of development for this sample were kept by parents in the form of diary records. Data collected in the study included drawings and paintings completed during the study period. Parents also documented the child’s expressed feelings and perceptions regarding their current educational placement (for example day care, preschool, or school). Interviews with parents and children were conducted at irregular but significant intervals during the study period of one to eight years, in order to clarify comments previously recorded in the parental diary.

Analysis

The data were analysed by comparing the drawings within the collection with typical stages of development of visual representation of children during the early childhood period documented in the literature (Cox, 1992; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987). The rate of development through the relevant stages as well as the distinctive characteristics and qualities of the processes and products of visual representation were compared with normative data. The documented processes and the collected work samples (drawings and paintings) were also analysed in relation to characteristics of giftedness noted in the literature (Gross, 1993; Harrison, 1999; Silverman, 1993). The anecdotal records of developmental milestones, the records of feelings and perceptions regarding the educational context, and the comments of the children and parents were used in the interpretation of the data and were fundamental in considering the implications of the study.

Analysis of the collection of children’s drawings and the comments of the gifted children and their parents provide a clear indication of advanced development and highlight the inappropriateness of planning and programming which caters only for normative development. The heightened sensitivity and emotional vulnerability that characterises gifted children (Gross, 1993; Harrison, 1999; Silverman, 1993) frequently compounds the effects of inappropriate interactions and experiences.

Results and discussion

The sequential development of visual representation has been well-documented and discussed in the art education literature (Herberholz & Hanson, 1995; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987). The first identified stage, the manipulative or scribbbling stage, is characterised by random exploratory movements. During the first phase of this stage, Random Manipulation, movements are initially random and uncontrolled and may involve the entire arm and upper body. With experimentation and practice, the child’s manipulations become increasingly adept as he or she moves into the phase of Controlled Manipulation in which drawing becomes increasingly rhythmic, controlled, and purposeful. Typically, until this time the child has not been interested in naming the work, and generally there is no attempt to use the graphics in the process of symbolic representation. The third phase of this stage, Named Manipulation, is characterised by the labelling of the manipulative drawings and paintings. Rather than the drawing or painting being pre-planned, it is more likely that a shape or form produced inadvertently may remind the child of something familiar.

For young gifted children, development through these early stages may proceed rapidly. Characteristics of giftedness—such as advanced physical development, the ability to concentrate for extended periods, heightened perceptual awareness, task commitment, and intensity of purpose (Gross,
have significant impact on this area of development. The advanced development of fine motor skills and the more rapid acquisition of an extensive repertoire of lines and shapes are evident within the sample. The ability to comprehend complex concepts and to process information can also have a significant impact on the development of visual representation. A drawing by Brendan (1.8), Figure 1, provides evidence of advanced conceptualisation and an interest in symbolic representation at an early age. His labelling of configurations within his drawing as numbers not only indicates awareness of numerical forms but also some realisation, at under two years, that symbols communicate meaning. His naming of the single line in the drawing as a 'vapour trail' demonstrates visual awareness and the advanced nature of his interests which included types of aircraft, stars, and cloud formations. The interests of most children during the toddler period are generally focused on daily realities. Learning experiences and resources provided in early childhood settings generally support domestic play, interest in animals, and familiar objects. Play interests tend to focus on the concrete and tangible, with children provided with opportunities for interaction with familiar objects to facilitate learning. Initial drawings also generally focus on more concrete and familiar realities.

During the next stage, the Symbolic Stage, the child progresses from the use of somewhat awkward symbols to represent the human form, to representations which are increasingly complex and detailed. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) suggest that the first representational attempts occur around four years of age, and Thomas and Silk (1990) suggest that children of three-and-a-half frequently begin representational drawings. For the young gifted child this may be evident at around two years. Sarah (2.2) completed the following drawing of the human form.
actually seen. 'Non-visible characteristics may be included, and the whole scene may contain objects and parts of objects viewed from radically different perspectives' (Cox, 1992, p.62). For the young gifted child the stage of Symbolic Representation may begin and end much earlier than expected, with the data indicating that the depiction of the human form frequently emerges around two years. The attention to detail and the pursuit of realistic portrayal is also evident earlier than expected. The use of continuous line to depict the human form, rather than separate parts joined together, is evident within the sample of gifted children. 'Preschoolers typically draw additively, juxtaposing geometric shapes. In contrast, precocious children draw the whole object with one fluid contour line' (Winner, 1996, p.76). This drawing style was clearly evident in Renee's (2.11) painting of the rabbit outlined earlier.

At the symbolic stage the child is demonstrating the early stages of symbolic representation and the ability to hold a mental image of an object. The data collected indicate a mature conception and understanding of the use of lines and symbols to convey meaning. This is affirmed also by the drawing of Joshua (Harrison, 1999) in which he successfully portrayed the complex nature of relationships in his family by the careful organization of lines and symbols (Figure 4).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 4**

For the child who is gifted an awareness of perspective may also be evident much earlier than is typical. Both the drawings and comments made by the children within the sample indicate the realisation that not all aspects of an object are observable from one perspective. For example, a painting by Sarah (3.4) portrayed the full figure sitting at the front of the table at a birthday party, the upper body of the person sitting on the side, and only the head and shoulders of the person at the back.

The gifted child's drawings from around three to four years of age frequently move beyond schematic representation to attempts at realistic portrayal. The intense focus on a particular interest was evident in the study, with interests encompassing topics such as earth-moving machines, sea creatures, trains, and dinosaurs. Great attention to the careful replication of detail was also evident. Winner (1996, p.177) confirms this aspect of the gifted child's visual representations, suggesting that:

*Gifted drawers do not depict a generic object, but include a rich amount of detail. Peter dressed his figures in robes. Etian added gas tanks, axles, bumpers, headlights, and brake boxes to his vehicles. Another child drew dinosaurs with scientific accuracy, using palaeontology books to acquire the needed information.*

For gifted children who demonstrate perfectionism, the distinguishing features of the objects of interest 'have to be correct', and this can result in much research and many discarded attempts. It may also result in the refusal to participate in drawing and painting experiences for fear of 'getting it wrong'. Renee's reaction to the experience outlined at the beginning of this paper was to cease drawing both at preschool and at home.

For some young gifted children there appears a fascination to represent that which is not readily observable, to go beyond the obvious and explore the subject in more depth. John's drawing, at age five, of house and family involved a cross-section view of the house as well as the careful depiction of significant features associated with each member of his family. His mother indicated that it was clearly very different from the schematic representations produced by his classmates. For others within the study, the motivation to research and depict the unfamiliar rather than the familiar, overt, and obvious results in the pursuit of unusual topics of interest. Harrison (1999) affirms this with the drawings of Owen (5) which explored an interest in pirates and ancient civilisations resulting in an extensive collection of sophisticated drawings of the world of Vikings and medieval knights (Figure 5).
We shudder at those who would teach four-year-olds like fourth graders, but we must also shake our heads when 19-month-old children are expected to function like four-year-olds.

A problem arises, however, for children who do not fit developmental norms. This is particularly apparent for gifted children who may be developmentally more akin to children several years older. For the children included within this study, development in the area of visual representation was more rapid and significantly different from that documented in the literature. Advanced and distinctive development in other developmental domains was also evident in the diary records of the parents. For example:

It’s hard to get ‘D’ (3.9) to preschool these days. He says that he wants to be in the ‘getting ready for school’ group. He wants to be in their longer story time and do the letter writing using the fine tipped markers. He cannot understand why, if he can read, he has to look at books with mostly pictures and hardly any words. At home he builds cubbies with the older children in the street, reads for himself, loves Quantum, does ‘serious science’ with his Grandpa, and is learning to search the net, but at preschool he plays by himself and when he asks to do other things he is told ‘but three-year-olds can’t’!

Gross (1999) discusses developmental precocity in the areas of speech, mobility, and reading and also identifies the difficulties associated with educational experience which is unresponsive to the individual developmental stages of the gifted child.

If early childhood education is to be child-centred and developmentally appropriate, then each child needs to be considered as a unique individual. The drawings of the young gifted children within this study provide powerful evidence of the gifted child’s distinctive development, emotional sensitivity, and particular areas of intense interest. For the gifted children in this study, as for most other young children, drawing is a way of expressing, exploring, formulating, and communicating ideas. It is a language of childhood that is a rich source of insight into each child’s uniqueness, and merits...
adult respect and support. Closer attention to the drawings of all young children may enable early childhood educators to move beyond restrictive developmental frameworks which impose glass ceilings in early childhood and to provide educational experiences which are responsive to each child's unique development.

References


Chapter 10

POLICY AND PRACTICE

'What about young gifted children?
They have special educational needs too!'
Parent of a Pre-School Child

Keiraville Community Pre-School.

Preface

Rationale
In May 2000 I was approached by the Director of Keiraville Community
Pre-School, located in the Illawarra region, south of Sydney, to provide
assistance with the development of a policy for the inclusion of gifted
children within the pre-school programme. My role was to provide insight
into the issues in gifted education as relevant to young children within a
pre-school context. I also provided validation for a gifted education policy
using evidence from the current research and scholarly literature in gifted
education. I undertook these tasks and produced a rationale for the policy
that considered the specific context, recent developments in early childhood education and issues in gifted education. I subsequently worked collaboratively with the director, to develop a gifted education policy for the centre that was consistent with the recently developed approaches and frameworks being used within the centre.

During the period 1999-2000 the centre was undergoing a period of change and renewal associated with the appointment of a new director and some subsequent changes to the staff and the programme. At this time the preschool was also in the process of developing an innovative programme for children aged three to five years based on the experiences of Reggio Emilia and the philosophies of Loris Malaguzzi (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). The early childhood educators at the centre were exploring new visions for programming and planning in partnership with families and children, culminating in a new curriculum framework for the centre.

During the discussion regarding the development of their new curriculum framework the staff and families identified the need for ‘inclusive approaches’ with children and families in which various aspects of human diversity would be acknowledged and celebrated. As part of this discussion the staff also identified the need to acknowledge and support the particular strengths, interests and needs of young gifted children. It was from this initial concern that the commitment to the development of a specific policy emerged. I was asked to give advice regarding the current literature on relation to giftedness in early childhood and to recommend
key issues to be considered in the process of policy development. A policy for the support of young gifted children and their families was subsequently developed based on the documentation and advice given, and with ongoing collaboration with staff.

This policy is included as further evidence of the collaborative processes that have been such a significant aspect of the study of young gifted children outlined within the portfolio. The determination to disseminate research findings and insights gained from the literature has resulted not only in collaborative partnerships with families but also ongoing relationships with early childhood professionals in both school and prior to school settings. There seemed little value in producing work that would remain limited to scholarly value only. Rather the challenge was, and continues to be, to find ways in which the research can make a difference to the lives of young gifted children and their families. This can be through the direct experiences through consultancy, giving lectures and workshops to families, teachers and interested persons, involvement with community groups such as the NSW Gifted and Talented Children's Association and research centres such as the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre [GERRIC] at the University of New South Wales, producing user friendly as well as academic publications, and participation in policy development.

Collaborative partnerships have been invaluable in strengthening and refining the research process and provided a powerful experience of the
commitment to research informing practice and practice informing research as outlined in Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1998).

**Context**

Keiraville Community Pre-School is located in an urban setting in New South Wales, Australia. The centre is licensed to care for 40 children per day and 120 families access the centre per week. The Pre-School enrolls children aged between three and five years of age. There are five fulltime employees - a teaching director, a teacher, two Associate Diploma childcare workers and a childcare assistant; and, two permanent part-time employees - an administration assistant and a speech pathologist.

Keiraville Community Pre-School is State Government Funded, non-profit pre-school and is open to all members of the community. The centre provides high quality care and education within a welcoming and relaxed environment. The hours of operation are currently Monday to Friday 9am to 3pm, forty-two weeks per year. The Pre-School is a community-based organisation which is managed by a parent elected management committee.

**Outcomes**

The gifted education policy developed in collaboration with the centre Director, was included in the Pre-School’s policies in May 2000. It was used to inform the inclusion of, and support for, several young gifted children who attended the centre in 2000 and continues to inform the
centre’s ongoing support for young gifted children. Keiraville Community Pre-School has become increasingly recognised for its innovative practices by tertiary education institutions in the area, such as Wollongong Technical and Further Education College and Wollongong University, as well as the University of Western Sydney and Macquarie University. The Centre also subsequently undertook a major collaborative research project in conjunction with Wollongong City Art Gallery entitled ‘Children as Creative, Social Beings.’ This joint project culminated in an exhibition at the gallery of the pre-school children’s artwork entitled ‘If Children’s Hands Could Sing.’ Professor June Wangman from the NSW Office of Child Care was invited to open this exhibition. It was very gratifying to have been part of the development and implementation of new directions in early childhood pedagogy and policy that occurred at Keiraville Community Pre-School during 2000.

References

Vision and Mission

The management committee, staff and families of Keiraville Community Pre-School were actively involved in the ongoing development of the preschool during 2000. A consultation process with staff members and the wider early childhood community resulted in the formulation of vision and mission statements and the development of a curriculum framework for Keiraville Pre-School. The vision sets a very clear dream for our direction as practitioners and the management in terms of our strategic planning process.

Vision

To be the facilitator of innovative family centred learning within a safe and supportive environment.

Mission

Build family centred learning through our approach to children, family/community, staff and our use of the environment as the third teacher.

The Curriculum Framework is a series of statements about the centre’s beliefs and used as a guide to reflect current best practices.
A Policy for Giftedness in Early Childhood

After a process of research and discussion between staff, families and others with expertise in both early childhood and gifted education the following draft policy was proposed.

Definition of Terms

The following discussion outlines key terms used within the Keiraville Community Pre-School Gifted Education Policy including

A) Giftedness and

B) Individual Educational Programme.

A. Definition of Giftedness

Literature Review

A review of the literature (Clark, 1995; Harrison, 1999; Davis & Rimm, 1989; Porter, 1999) suggests that giftedness is a difficult concept to define with a wide array of definitions proposed and utilised in this area of education. Porter (1999, p. 14) recognised the importance of a clear definition of giftedness but also suggested that there are a number of contradictory definitions within the literature.

A number of publications (Davis & Rimm, 1989; Harrison, 1999; Porter, 1999) provide discussion of the significant factors which influence the approach to defining giftedness. Porter (1999, p. 14) suggested that definitions fall within several categories conservative versus liberal, single
versus multi dimensional and potential versus performance. Harrison (1999) commented that there are a number of considerations that are particularly important when determining a definition of giftedness to be utilised in early childhood. She suggested that the definition should allow for differences in development, acknowledging that given the rapid rate of development within the early childhood period, variations may occur both within particular developmental domains and between developmental domains. Giftedness should therefore be acknowledged where it is demonstrated rather than denied because of uneven or inconsistent patterns of development. She also argued that the definition should be responsive to differences in temperament, personality, socio-economic disadvantage and cultural diversity. The aspect of cultural diversity is particularly relevant to early childhood settings where giftedness may be masked by language backgrounds other than English (Vialle & Konza, 1999).

A review of the literature regarding the definition of giftedness also suggested that the definition should include recognition of the impact of giftedness on different developmental domains such as social, emotional and moral development. Silverman (1993) discussed the emotional sensitivity of the gifted child suggesting that the definition of giftedness
should focus on this aspect of development. Roeper (1982 cited in Silverman 1993, p. 3) commented that ‘giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences.’ Lovecky (1993) also identified the emotional vulnerability of the gifted child as well as aspects such as creativity and divergent thinking. In a subsequent paper (Lovecky, 1997) identified moral sensitivity as an aspect of giftedness. Giftedness clearly impacts on the whole child. The definition of giftedness therefore needs to be a multi-dimensional and holistic. Such a definition is in keeping with Keiraville centre’s philosophical approach in relation to children.

The recognition of giftedness as potential not just performance allows for the inclusion of many different groups of children. These include the gifted learning disabled child, the behaviour disordered child as well as gifted children, who given their immaturity, are not yet demonstrating high performance levels or talents in particular areas (Vialle & Konza, 1997). There should also be scope within the definition to ensure that the child who is under-achieving can also come within the definition.
The centre’s philosophy and approaches to early childhood education also require that the definition should focus on the child’s current needs rather than on some future potential productivity. Harrison (1999, p. 19) stated ‘the definition of giftedness should reflect the purposes of identification.’ For the purpose of the gifted policy under development, the focus is clearly on the gifted child’s educational and social and emotional needs rather than on some attempt to predict future success. For the purposes of this policy the definition proposed by Harrison (1999, p. 20) is used by Keiraville Community Pre-School.

A gifted child is one who performs or who has the ability to perform at a level significantly beyond his or her chronologically aged peers and whose unique abilities and characteristics require special provisions and social and emotional support form the family, community and educational context.

B. Individual Education Programme (IEP):

Every child in the pre-school is a unique individual and is treated accordingly. Knowledge of each child’s strengths, interests and emerging development helps to shape the Pre-School programme. The Director, in
consultation with other pre-school staff, parents, and, where appropriate, outside consultants, will develop an IEP to address the additional needs of individual children. The IEP will be implemented within the Pre-School and, where applicable, also within the home setting. The child’s progress will be monitored and evaluated regularly by both staff and families and adjusted as necessary to support the continued care and education of the child. The child will be encouraged to participate in ongoing self-evaluation through verbal responses, work samples for his or her portfolio and by contributing where appropriate to the regular more formal collaborative evaluation process, such as an IEP meeting.

The Pre-School Team works in partnership with each child’s family (parents/caregivers). Learning outcomes identified on the child’s IEP will be more likely to be realised when communication between Pre-School staff and the family is open and when there is consistency between Pre-School and home in methods employed to work towards each learning outcome on the child’s IEP.

A Policy for Children Who Are Gifted

Objective: To prepare a draft policy and consider the teaching implications for giftedness within an inclusive pre-school environment.
Policy Statement:

- Under the direction of the Management Committee, the Director and staff of Keiraville Community Pre-School are responsible for the identification and programming initiatives undertaken for a child who is gifted in accordance with other centre policies (eg, equal opportunity, inclusive education) and current theories and trends in early childhood education;

- Families will be supported and encouraged to be actively involved in their child’s care and education;

- Children who are gifted have additional needs and have the same right to access early childhood services as other children and to be supported in ways which support the best interests of the child;

- Keiraville Community Pre-School enrolls, educates and cares for young children offering all children the least possible restrictive environment;

- Effective inclusive practices reflect the diversity of human development and experience and will thus enhance the pre-school programme for all children, staff and families;
• Offering a flexible and responsive approach to the care and educational needs of children who are gifted;

• All pre-school team members have a responsibility to be aware of and utilise a variety of teaching interventions to ensure they are providing a responsive programme for children who are gifted;

Access to ongoing professional development should be facilitated by the early childhood service to develop competencies of staff working with young children who are gifted.

Implications for Practice

To recognise and support the young children who are gifted by:

• Utilising a range of identification procedures and strategies (parent and/or teacher nomination, checklists, anecdotal observation, IQ testing if required eg. to support an application for early school entry);

• Providing an environment in which families can freely discuss their child’s learning and affective needs;

• Providing a range of open ended play and learning experiences which allow for the formulating of theories and testing hypotheses, complex problem solving, and in-depth investigation;
- Providing opportunities for creative expression through music, visual arts, dance and drama;

- Providing opportunities for children to think divergently;

- Utilising group work to allow for leadership, decision making and child initiated learning;

- Encouraging the development and utilisation of research skills and independent learning;

- Presenting children with resources that provide challenge and stimulation. Eg. Reference books, more complex children’s literature, resources for experimentation and investigation;

- Providing opportunities for exploration of literacy and numeracy resources and access to computer facilities;

- Providing opportunities for peer tutoring and the involvement of community members who can share an area of specific expertise with the children. Eg. Providing specific expertise to enable children to pursue interests in depth;

- Supporting the successful transition of a child who is gifted to an appropriate education placement;
• Documenting examples of the child’s thinking and learning to support the child’s possible early access to school;

• Identifying and supporting children who are gifted from minority groups such as children who have a Language Background Other Than English [LBOTE], children from Aboriginal background, socio-economically disadvantaged, children disadvantaged by gender issues and gifted learning disabled children;

Having ongoing collaborative discussions with families to share knowledge, insights and to enhance the responsiveness of the current programme;

• The early identification of giftedness in early childhood and wherever possible the creation of an Individual Education Plan [IEP] to further address the care and educational needs of a child who is gifted.
Identification of Giftedness

The processes of identification are many and varied and the identification of young gifted children raises a number of particular issues. For the purposes of the policy, identification of young gifted children will be based on multiple methods of identification from multiple sources. As Harrison (1999, p. 54) suggested ‘the use of a diverse range of complimentary methods of giftedness would appear most appropriate in identifying giftedness in early childhood.’

Identification would be based on a range of teacher and or parent observations and documentation. The use of the nomination forms for families and educators included in the publication ‘Giftedness in Early Childhood’ (Harrison, 1999) will facilitate this process. Additional documentation could include the following:

- annotated work samples including children’s drawings (Harrison, 1998), stories, block constructions;

- examples of mature and creative thinking and problem solving;

- examples of children’s sophisticated and divergent responses to the open ended learning environment;
• examples of mature and complex responses to familiar peers and adults;

• evidence of advanced development such as early reading, mathematical skills;

• evidence of the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation;

• advanced and complex language use;

• books, television programmes and computer programmes enjoyed;

• books read.

It is important to note that each record needs to be dated to provide the evidence of chronological age needed to document advanced development.

Information gathered at the centre as outlined above would be included in the child’s portfolio. This portfolio along with anecdotal records and documentation of developmental milestones provided by families, would provide supportive documentation for future educational placements and support such educational provisions as early entry, acceleration, special grouping or enrichment programmes.
Although less frequent in prior to school settings, identification of giftedness can also be based on formal intelligence testing by a qualified psychologist. An IQ score is sometimes required to support an application for early entry to school and results on particular subtests within the overall assessment can provide insight into specific strengths.
References


Chapter 11

SHARING CHILDHOOD WITH YOUNG GIFTED CHILDREN
COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

'Education is the creation and construction of common meanings. Each subject – parents, children, teachers presented in wholeness with body, mind, emotions and personal story, knowledge, values, and curiosity to know and understand. The quality of the system depends on its reciprocity. The well being of each affects others.'

Rinaldi, 1999.


Preface

Rationale

This paper was presented by invitation of the organising committee of the Sharing Childhood Conference sponsored by the Catholic Education Office, Parramatta New South Wales, Australia held from 30th to 31st March 2000. The theme chosen for this conference, Sharing Childhood, provided an effective catalyst for outlining some insights regarding the collaborative
partnerships that had emerged from my research and personal experiences with young gifted children and their families. It was an ideal opportunity to raise awareness of both the child and family perspectives that, from my personal and professional experience, are too frequently misunderstood particularly within more formal educational systems. In preparing the presentation I was reminded of the many phone calls and emails from distressed parents that I have responded to in recent years. These situations frequently emerge when relationships between school and family break down in frustration and disappointment. This conference provided an opportunity to challenge assumptions about relevant expertise and the processes involved in making educational decisions for children. A collaborative process of three-way dialogue and decision-making was advocated.

Context

The Sharing Childhood Conference brought together teachers, parents and administrators involved in early childhood education in New South Wales. The focus for the conference was developing effective partnerships with families in the care and education of young children. As part of this overall theme a paper pertaining to the particular needs of young gifted children was sought.

Outcomes

The discussion and shared experiences of the participants contributed significantly to the value of the paper and resulted in additional
unexpected opportunities for collaborative partnerships. A number of teachers and administrators intended to continue the notion of sharing the childhood experiences of young gifted children by actively seeking opportunities for maintaining their own professional and personal collaborative relationships and sharing insights.

One particularly valuable contribution made by a participant at the seminar was the idea of a 'secret book' given to each child within her kindergarten class. The book was used when children had time to fill at the completion of a class activity. Rather than a somewhat meaningless or frivolous task the book had become a very important aspect of the classroom community - and an opportunity for children to be taken seriously. This book was used as a means of self-expression and private communication between child and the teacher. In relation to young gifted children, the book became a safe space in which to express and document interests and abilities in authentic ways. The teacher found that the young gifted children in her class were more able to disclose their own strengths, needs and interests within the context of the secret book than in any other class activity. The secret book became an essential basis for discussion with both children and families plus a useful source of data used for informing subsequent discussions regarding educational decisions in relation to curriculum, enrichment and acceleration. The teacher noted that a very simple strategy, stumbled upon by chance, had become one of the most important aspects of her classroom community and an essential
aspect of sharing the authentic childhood experiences of the children within her class.
Sharing Childhood with Young Gifted Children
Collaborative Partnerships

Paper presented at the Sharing Childhood Conference sponsored by the Catholic Education Office Parramatta
Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, New South Wales

Abstract
The world of the young gifted child can be one of infinite possibilities as well as complexities and contradictions. While life may appear easy for the child who is quick to learn, difference from the norm on any dimension can create tensions for children, families and teachers. The heightened sensitivity, which characterises many young gifted children, can exacerbate feelings of difference and exclusion. Learning environments, which are responsive to the strengths and interests of young gifted children, are most likely to be created by the collaboration of families, teachers and children. Each can learn much from listening to the voice of the other. In this presentation the reality of giftedness in early childhood will be discussed and strategies for establishing collaborative partnerships between gifted children, their families and educators outlined.
Nature of Giftedness

Young gifted children, although a diverse group, generally share a number of characteristics. These characteristics are evident in the various developmental domains. The cognitive development of the young gifted child is often marked by such attributes as alertness, curiosity, rapid pace of learning, concentration, exceptional memory, problem solving ability, imagination and creativity. Young gifted children are frequently able to analyse and to synthesise information from a number of sources and form new connections. They can be voracious consumers of information and seek out possible sources of intellectual stimulation and challenge. Unsuspecting adults can be monopolised and as a parent of a young gifted child I frequently had to deal with the somewhat embarrassing situation of fellow train passengers being interrogated by my three and a half year old regarding his latest scientific theory.

Young gifted children often develop language early and use complex sentences and vocabulary with ease. There is frequently the rapid acquisition of receptive and then expressive language and, later the early ability to read. The social and emotional development of young gifted children is characterised by such attributes as heightened sensitivity, the ability to empathise, sense of humour, and perfectionism. Young gifted children can also display particular characteristics in relation to moral development. Qualities such as questioning authority, resisting unfairness, awareness of world issues and a strong sense of social justice
are frequently evident and can be the source of some confusion for young gifted children. Some of the more recent definitions of giftedness focus on the aspect of emotional vulnerability and asynchrony when attempting to formulate a definition of this complex phenomenon. Silverman (1993, p. 3) for example cited the following definition:

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened sensitivity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

Giftedness is clearly a multi-faceted construct that impacts on the various developmental domains. Aspects such as emotional sensitivity, perfectionism, strong sense of justice can compound the young child’s sense of isolation and difference from peers.

**Difference from the Norm**

Although well equipped to maximise the potential of the learning environment, through advanced development and superior cognitive functioning, many young gifted children find the transition from home to educational setting a difficult one. They attempt to establish their place in
an environment that is generally designed to support normative development and typical learning needs. Young gifted children use their heightened perceptiveness when reading the social and educational context in which they find themselves. They learn from a very young age what is ‘normal’.

Young gifted children can however be very conscious of the ways in which they differ from their same aged peers. They become very adept at reading the social context and modifying their behaviour so that they appear less different to the other children. As Gross (1998, p. 168) suggested, ‘many highly gifted children retreat behind a mask of social conformity.’ Some adopt less mature patterns of behaviour; others seek out older playmates or adults for conversation and social interaction. Others retreat into a more solitary existence choosing to play or work alone rather than with others. Other children offer gifts and services as a way of placating their peers and finding a safe place. Some examples to illustrate:

*Mother: I was listening to her read after a couple of weeks at school.*

*She had been reading since about three and a half so I couldn’t believe what I was hearing I said to her, ‘Why are you reading like that. It is so slow and jerky?’ She replied with, ‘But that is how you read when you go to school.’*
Mother: When I asked him why he came home so hungry he told me he that he gave his lunch away so that the other kids would let him play.

Teacher describing gifted boy aged 5: He walks around the perimeter of the playground. He doesn’t seem to know how to enter the play or what to do.

These examples are most apparent in relation to children at the higher levels of giftedness.

Levels of Giftedness

The issue of difference is clearly greater the further the child is from the norm and so it is important that the varying levels of giftedness are recognised and responded to. For children of slightly above average ability there is clearly not the same degree of difference from the norm. For children who are highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted the problem is greatly increased. As Gross (1990, p. 9) commented,

When an exceptionally gifted child is placed in a heterogeneous classroom where few other children are intellectually gifted she is likely to become ostracised by her classmates. Her academic achievement levels, interests and advanced vocabulary, accelerated moral development and worldviews are so different from those of her age mates, that there is likely to be little point of contact between her and the other children.
Difference from the norm on whatever measure can be isolating and all of us desperately need that sense of I am valued, I belong. Gifted children need to feel that they have a meaningful place in the educative environment of the classroom with work that it has relevance and meaning for them. They also need to find their place within the social context of the classroom and playground. Gross in a study of 600 Australian children aged between 5 and 12 found that children’s conceptions of friendship were linked to mental age rather than chronological age. Gifted children were found to have more sophisticated needs in relation to peers than their same aged peers. Gifted children were beginning to look for friends with whom they could develop close and trusting friendships at ages when their age peers were looking for a partner in play or more simply, someone to play with. Gross found that the majority of exceptionally gifted girls (i.e. those with IQ 160+) aged 6 or 7 already displayed conceptions of friendship which did not develop in children of average ability until age 11 or 12 (Gross, 2000).

We generally acknowledge the need to support cultural and linguistic diversity and to provide additional assistance to children who are developmentally delayed – as we should. However there appears to be a reluctance to recognise and provide support for the child who is different, because of giftedness. If we are to effectively meet the needs and support the strengths of all children then we need to find ways in which we can also share the childhood of the young gifted child.
Collaborative Partnerships

The most essential basis for determining an appropriate response to giftedness in early childhood is the collaborative partnership of parents/families, educators and children. Each can do a much better job with the support of the other than can ever be achieved in isolation. Recent scholarship in early childhood education reaffirms the essential family/setting connection. The schools and centres of Reggio Emilia, Italy, which are considered internationally, best practice in early childhood education, have this relationship as one of the fundamental tenets of both philosophy and practice (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998).

Research in gifted education also supports the family school partnership as the basis for effective curricular planning. The family school partnership is essential for gifted children, as with any child with a particular educational or affective need. The research and experience clearly indicates the frequent disparity between behaviour at home and in the educational context. We cannot effectively support or plan for a child if we only know one part of the story.

Determining an appropriate response to giftedness can prove to be a dilemma for both parents and educators alike. Given that each gifted child is a unique combination of characteristics, strengths, interests and needs there can be no prescribed or pre-determined response to giftedness which will be appropriate for all young children who are gifted. Families and educators share the task of meeting both the educational and socio-
emotional needs of young gifted children (Hertzog & Bennett, 1998). As Porter suggested 'curriculum planning will need to promote a two way exchange between teachers and parents so that teachers can learn from parents about their child's interest, needs and abilities and can inform parents about the aims of the curriculum' (1999, p. 168).

Education and care which is responsive to the strengths, needs and interests of the gifted child is more likely to result when educators, families and children participate in open and ongoing dialogue, when each can hear the perspective of the other. As previously discussed, children can present very differently in different contexts and thus teachers and parents may know the same child in very different ways. When each view is shared openly and respectfully then each sees a more authentic child. When family and school are able to share their knowledge of the child they are more able to glimpse the complexities and dilemmas involved for the child. This collaborative approach can provide the support that will enable the gifted child to be more comfortable as an authentic participant in the classroom environment. The sharing of perspectives can enable greater understanding of the child moving between two worlds.

For the child who is trying to establish self-identity there may be an emotional vulnerability which silences and disempowers the child. An authentic disclosure of self is difficult if not impossible for the gifted child in an environment that appears to provide no personal validation.
Classrooms designed for children of average ability may offer limited opportunities for the use of advanced literacy and numeracy skills or the broad general knowledge and sophisticated or abstract interests of the gifted child. Without adult support it is unlikely that the gifted child will feel able to share the extent of his or her capabilities within the school context.

The Child’s Perspective

The Reggio experience (Edwards Gandini & Forman, 1998) and the new sociology of childhood (Cannella, 1997) also challenged adult assumptions about childhood and demanded that we recognise children as strong and capable and able to determine their own learning paths and directions. Cannella (1997) suggested that adults have in the past objectified and colonised childhood, making decisions for children in a paternalistic fashion without real regard and respect for the child’s own perspective.

The increased commitment to child-initiated curriculum and self-evaluation supports the child as strong and capable of determining his or her own learning paths. The sharing of decision making with children indicates a genuine commitment to children as empowered and as key players in the development of their educational opportunities. The involvement of children in forecasting, planning, communicating and decision making is congruent with a number of models within gifted education such as those proposed by Maker, Taylor and Kaplan (cited in Gross, Pretorius & Sleep, 1999). Opportunities to actively participate in
real situations and to solve real problems, and to be taken seriously within the educational environment are also recognised as valuable aspects of gifted education. Renzulli (1977) suggested curriculum for the gifted that involves actual investigations, real problems or topic, tangible products, real situations.

Collaborative partnerships should also include the child's perspective. It is essential that we establish an open and ongoing interchange/exchange of information that includes the voice of the child so that we can each clarify our understanding of the child and come to have a much greater awareness of the child's strengths, needs and interests and how each can offer support to the other.

Establishing the Dialogue

Effective dialogue can be facilitated when there is a genuine recognition of the different expertise of both parents/families and educators. Research by Jacobs (1971) found that parents were the most effective identifiers of giftedness and Seeley (1998) noted that parents are the most well informed sources of information about their children. Hughes and MacNaughton suggested that difficulties in parent staff interactions arise largely from the particular conceptions of expert knowledge. 'Conceptions of expert knowledge create tensions in staff - parent relations and discourage parents from becoming involved in early education' (1999, p. 28).
It is important to acknowledge that parent/family expertise is typically anecdotal and based on the particular whereas educator expertise is generalist in nature with a theoretical base. Given the diverse nature of giftedness (Clark, 1997; Silverman, 1988), the educator’s generalist or theoretically based responses to giftedness need to be tempered with specific detail of the developmental strengths, interest and learning requirements of the individual child provided by the family. Knowledge of developmental milestones, personal and family history, personality, temperament, and specific interests are built over time and are more evident to families within the home context. The recognition that one perspective can contribute to, rather than invalidate, the other will enable the more effective sharing of childhood. Educators are therefore encouraged to establish a dialogue with families. This involves a genuine sharing of perspectives and a willingness to listen without judgment. Rather than dismissing parent observations as unlikely, exaggerated or impossible educators can seek clarification of parent information by asking for the sharing of stories and examples from the lived experience. Rinaldi (1999) in a lecture given to Australian and New Zealand delegates entitled the Pedagogy of Listening spoke of the power of listening without judgment. She suggested that,

Education is the creation and construction of common meanings. Each subject - parents, children, teachers - presented in wholeness with body, mind emotions and
personal story, knowledge, values, and curiosity to know and understand. The quality of the system depends on its reciprocity. The well being of each affects others. Listening means being open to others. It is an active process enabling the construction of knowledge, making connections, and interpreting messages.

The relationships of trust that emerge from ongoing dialogue provide the foundation for collaborative partnerships.

**Documentation**

It is difficult within any school system to find enough time for ongoing dialogue with every child and with every family. This oral exchange can however be supported by written communication in the form of child diaries, journals or communication books.

Families, educators and children can engage in three way conversations through their contributions to a shared journal. The sharing of anecdotal observations, collections of children’s work, photographs of constructions, block buildings, computer generated work samples, lists of books enjoyed, read, television programs watched when dated and annotated with an explanation, where relevant, can help to establish an authentic awareness of the child. This documentation can also support the gifted child through transitions within and between different educational settings. The sharing of the stories and the documentation of giftedness in the context of open
dialogue can facilitate the processes of collaborative planning with young gifted children as well as support both parents and educators in the task of meeting the affective needs of the gifted child.

Conclusion

Families and educators share the task of meeting both the educational and socio-emotional needs of young gifted children. Education and care which is responsive to the strengths, needs and interests of the gifted child is more likely to result when educators, families and children participate in open and ongoing dialogue, when each can hear the perspective of the other. Given that children can present very differently in different contexts teachers and families may know the same child in very different ways. Unless each view is shared openly and respectfully then each sees but a portion of the child. Young gifted children are supported to be who they really are and effective education is more likely to result when the experiences of childhood are shared.

References


Chapter 12

GIFTEDNESS ON THE
ANTI-BIAS / DIVERSITY AGENDA?

'It is in fact only when the stories of these uniquely different outsiders are heard
and understood that the community can climb to the next rung of the moral
ladder. The process by which the stranger becomes a fully participating member of
the group is one which we must act upon in our classrooms.'


Harrison, C. (2002). Giftedness on the anti-bias/diversity agenda?
Paper submitted for presentation at the second annual conference of the Centre for
Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood. Honouring the Child, Honouring Equity
University of Melbourne, 7th-9th November, 2002.

Preface

Rationale

This presentation entitled: Giftedness on the anti-bias/diversity agenda? was
developed in a climate of increasing awareness of anti-bias and diversity
issues amongst early childhood practitioners and academics. The
commitment to diversity and social justice is frequently evident in the
philosophy, and in goal and mission statements of early childhood centres.
The call for a commitment to 'Anti-bias' (Derman-Sparkes, 1989) is
frequently identified in advertisements for staff, and sought in employment interviews within the early childhood sector. The commitment to the celebration of diversity is strongly evident in the Australian Early Childhood Association Code of Ethics (AECA, 1998), teacher education courses and publications. Within the Sydney metropolitan region there is an active advocacy group, Social Justice in Early Childhood.

While there is a genuine commitment within the early childhood profession to the task of identifying and counteracting bias in relation to gender, race and disability, a bias in relation to intellectual giftedness is less frequently acknowledged. The strong adherence to developmental theoretical perspectives, which has characterised early childhood education, may be one such professional bias. This bias at times results in interactions with, and expectations of children, which are limited to normative development or a concept of the universal child developing in a predictable age-based pattern. This creates a biased view of children, who are different, and can result in negative responses rather than an openness to difference. The devotion to developmental psychology within the early childhood profession can result in an unwillingness to recognise and respond to advanced development. The notion of the ‘hurried child’ (Elkind, 1988) and the perceived threat of academic curriculum to play-based approaches can result in the rejection of the need to recognise and support intellectual giftedness within early childhood programs. The teacher perception of the ‘pushy parent’ of gifted children is evident
amongst early childhood educators in prior to school settings and teachers in early school settings. The comment 'Why can't they just let them play? They are just babies' is indicative of this response to giftedness in early childhood. While commitment to diversity is to be applauded and while 'Anti-bias' is a useful paradigm it is only when reality replaces rhetoric that such an approach can significantly impact on early childhood pedagogy and policy.

The comment 'but all children are gifted' is one that is frequently made by early childhood teachers within the context of workshops and seminars. While acknowledging that yes all children bring special gifts, the term 'gifted' within the literature of gifted education, has a more specific definition in relation to intellectual precocity.

Within the Australian context there is a notion of the 'tall poppy' and the desire for egalitarianism. This cultural moré has the tendency to reject intellectual precocity and academic success while at the same time there is frequently the adulation of sporting prowess and achievement. Unfortunately adherence to some prejudices and stereotypes is so entrenched that there is lack of awareness of any personal, professional, or community bias. MacNaughton and Dockett (2000, p. ii) discussed the importance of critical reflection or 'troubling our knowledge base' within the early childhood profession. They suggested that this 'involves critically engaging with, questioning, and debating the assumptions and theories that drive our decision making in the early childhood field'. This
presentation was developed to raise awareness of giftedness in early
closehood, to challenge early childhood orthodoxies and to encourage
early childhood educators to celebrate giftedness as another aspect of
human diversity. Such concerns have also motivated the critiquing of
developmentalist assumptions in relation to television for young children
through my role as an early childhood advisor to the well known
Australian Broadcasting Commission [ABC] television programme Play
School. Research with young gifted children and familiarity with current
thinking in early childhood education has been used to inform my
contribution as an early childhood advisor and was used in the
development of two conference presentations that outlined current
thinking in early childhood education that has been used to inform
programme development (Harrison, 2000; Harrison, 2001).

**Context**

This paper was prepared for presentation at the second annual conference
of the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood entitled
Honouring the Child Honouring Equity to be held at the University of
Melbourne from 7th - 9th November 2002. This conference was designed
for early childhood educators in both prior to school and early years of
school settings, early intervention and health professionals, parents,
guardians and carers. The following are the stated aims of the conference
as outlined in the call for papers:
• To identify innovative strategies for building communities that honour young children’s rights and produce greater social justice;

• To explore how early childhood research, theory and policy and practice can honour the child and honour equity;

• To inspire participants to commit to collaborative change projects in their local community; and,

• To identify and plan strategies for maintaining networks and actions post conference.

The key themes for 2002 were identified as: risking change in theory practice; and, research for equity and children’s rights. The topic Giftedness on the Anti-bias/Diversity agenda? was chosen in response to these stated aims of the conference for 2002.

Outcomes

This presentation provoked an interesting and informative discussion. It generated another significant issue for consideration, that is, how do we ensure that diversity and anti-bias are on the gifted education agenda? It was clear from the discussion that concern existed in relation to the stereotypes and biases that are also inherent within gifted education and that impact on various aspects of the pedagogy and policy within this field. Questions were raised in relation to a number of issues:
Definition

How do we define giftedness to include the gifted children who are found in equal proportions in all cultural groups? How do we define giftedness so that the gifted disabled child is not over looked? How do we ensure that the definition of giftedness is not linked to gender stereotyped indicators of performance?

Identification

Awareness of diversity has an impact on the process of identification of young gifted children. An acknowledgement of diversity issues also impacts on the methods used to identify the young child who is gifted. How do early childhood educators ensure that the processes of identification do not unfairly disadvantage children from a minority culture, a language background other than English, or the child from indigenous communities? How does the early childhood educator ensure that the economically disadvantaged, the under-achieving gifted child, or gifted disabled child are included in the definition and identification of giftedness? How can biases in relation to gender be excluded from the processes of identification?

Responding to Giftedness

How do the responses to giftedness within early childhood settings allow for the diversity within the gifted population? How do these responses to giftedness acknowledge the needs of the gifted child from a minority
culture, or with a language other than English, or from an Aboriginal background or the gifted disabled child?

**Supporting Parents and Families of Gifted Children**

How do early childhood educators support the parents and families of young children who are gifted who may feel alienated not only by the differences in their child’s behaviour but also their own differences in culture, language, family practices and values?

The discussion that accompanied these questions provided much provocation and served as a catalyst for further thinking and investigation regarding these issues. It reinforced the value of the process of critical reflection and collaboration between early childhood colleagues and reinforced the commitment to the role of co-learner, rather than expert and the realisation that the journey continues.
References


Giftedness on the Anti-bias/Diversity Agenda?


Abstract

Anti-bias approaches and support for diversity and difference are frequently evident in Australian early childhood settings, in the selection of resources, in curricula, the employment of staff as well as in policy development. The particular strengths and needs of children who are gifted and their families are, however, less frequently acknowledged. Research undertaken with young gifted children and their families on the nature of giftedness in early childhood highlights the need for greater awareness of this group within early childhood educational settings and within the community in general. Although perhaps less frequently considered young gifted children and their families have a place in discussions and debates associated with social justice, inclusion and the celebration of diversity and difference. In this presentation the results of research with young gifted children
and their families will be used to identify the particular strengths and needs of gifted children and their families and to outline ways in which early childhood professionals can acknowledge and support this aspect of diversity.

Introduction

My work with young gifted children and their families has made me increasingly aware that the early childhood profession needs to include ‘giftedness’ on the anti-bias/diversity agenda which so many of us have embraced so closely. The anti-bias approach (Derman-Sparkes, 1989) and commitment to diversity (Arthur, Beecher, Dockett & Death 1997; Creaser and Dau, 1995; Dockett & Fleer, 1999) have found a place in the educational philosophies and practices of many early childhood educators in Australia. Louise Derman-Sparkes in a visit to Australia in 1995 commented on the level of commitment to anti-bias issues in Australia. She was surprised at the level of support for diversity in the early childhood course at the University of Western Sydney where I teach and was impressed at the way in which staff used the learning environment to develop awareness of diversity in our undergraduate students. Perhaps we have greater acceptance of diversity in our more egalitarian society than our American counterparts. In the next breath I am forced to wonder if this strength is also our weakness. Are we in our Australian society as willing to support diversity in the form of intellectual giftedness? Do we still take pleasure from knocking down the tall poppy?
Issues of diversity and the acceptance of individual differences are fundamental to a child-centred early childhood philosophy that purports to support the unique individual and the realisation of potential. This continues to be a major strength of early childhood approaches. This then begs the question - Does ‘Giftedness’ have a place on the anti-bias/diversity agenda? Should we consider the needs of the child, who is gifted, along with our consideration of the child who is disabled, the child from a minority cultural, indigenous communities or language background other than English or children disempowered by gender stereotypes? Do some of the same issues apply? Although Derman-Sparkes and the Anti-Bias Task Force (Derman Sparkes, 1989) did not deal specifically with the needs of the gifted child in the anti-bias curriculum are the same issues relevant? Do young children who are gifted also require consideration when we seek to:

- acknowledge and value diversity and individual differences;
- empower children; and,
- provide for differences in development, learning style and family or cultural background (Derman Sparkes, 1989).

Are these issues also relevant to the child who is gifted?

My experiences since completing the book, Giftedness in Early Childhood (Harrison, 1995) have reinforced the realization that yes, gifted children, particularly those at the higher levels of giftedness also deserve a place on
the anti-bias or diversity agenda. Giftedness too needs to be considered an anti-bias issue. Young children who are gifted require interactions and experiences that acknowledge and support their particular needs. Their families too often also require particular support. What are the experiences that have convinced me that this is so? What are the experiences that have reinforced this reality?

Since 1994 I have given many conference presentations, workshops and seminars to early childhood educators from long day care, pre-school and early school settings and to parents of young gifted children. I have had the opportunity to work with the parents of young gifted children through the NSW Gifted and Talented Children’s Association and the Gifted Education, Research, Resource and Information Centre [GERRIC] at the University of New South Wales. I have also been fortunate enough to meet and get to know a number of young gifted children and their families through my consultancy work. Each of these experiences reinforced the reality of giftedness in early childhood as well as providing me with interesting stories to share and exciting challenges to contemplate and work through. I believe that the ‘shared story’ is a very powerful means of communication and I hope that you too will have the opportunity later in this session to share your own stories of giftedness in early childhood.

Ten years ago, in 1992, I attended the Creche and Kindergarten Conference in Brisbane entitled, The Art of Play. At that conference I
listened in awe to the wisdom of the writer and early childhood educator Vivian Gussin Paley. In a paper entitled, ‘Every Child a Story Teller’ (1992) she made the following comment:

It is, in fact only when the stories of these uniquely different outsiders are heard and understood that the community can climb to the next rung of the moral ladder. The process by which the stranger becomes a fully participating member of the group is one which we must act upon in our classrooms. (p. 58)

This comment was made in relation to children who were different not by their giftedness but because of cultural differences, developmental delay or emotional vulnerability. My experience suggested that these words also have relevance for many highly gifted children, their parents and families. Difference from the ‘norm’, on whatever measure, can be isolating and all of us desperately need that sense of ‘I am valued’, ‘I belong’. I believe that if we take time to hear the stories of gifted children and their families and respond to the reality of the gifted child, each of us will be enriched as well as challenged by the young gifted children in our care. I would like to share some of the stories which others have so kindly shared with me and to introduce you very briefly to some of the remarkable children whom I have been privileged to meet. The following are comments from parents:

No one ever talked about children like this as a baby.
I just wish that he’d get invited to a birthday party. He always seems to be on the outside.

When our daughter was born it seemed to be with the wisdom of ages.

I have never talked about this before. It’s not the sort of thing you can discuss with the mothers at Playgroup. He clearly is so different from their children and in so many ways so far ahead. I haven’t told anyone except my husband that I came here today. How do you say I think my child is gifted?

And to some comments from the children themselves:

What happens to the water that I painted on the path? It seems to disappear? There must be an explanation. (Girl 3.2 years)

I made this huge city in the block corner. It took ages. I wanted to use every block but other people kept snatching them just to make straight roads. I don’t understand why they want to waste blocks on straight roads. (Boy 3.6 years)

I told them all of the rules but they didn’t wait to play the game with me. (Boy 4.8 years)

I have worlds in my head - all sorts of different worlds. (Boy 4.5 years)

Responded to, her mother’s question ‘Why are you reading like that? It’s so slow and jerky.’ ‘That’s how you read when you go to school.’ (Girl 5.2 years)
Hey Mum, I learnt something new at school today. It was about antonyms and synonyms. I'd never heard of that before. That’s never happened at school before. Everything else I always knew. (Boy 6.5 years)

At last we talked about negative numbers. I thought there must be negative numbers when I was at pre-school. (Boy 6.8 years)

After Matt went to high school I had to give the other kids my lunch and recess nearly every day so that they would let me play. (Boy 7 years)

Some of these sentiments are affirmed by comments of gifted students attending a national Student Symposium on the Education of the Gifted and Talented in the United States over twenty-five years ago. The student’s comments were included in an article entitled 'On Being Gifted' (Kreuger, 1978). The following comments were made:

Now let’s be blunt: we are not normal and we know it; it can be fun sometimes but not always. We tend to be much more sensitive than other people. Multiple meanings, innuendos, and self-consciousness plague us. Intensive self-analysis, self-criticism, and the inability to recognise that we have limits make us despondent. (p. 9)

My earliest memory of being an outcast was in the fourth grade. (p. 25)
The teacher asks a question regarding the assigned homework. I raise my hand and respond correctly to his query. He continues to ask questions and I continue to answer them. After a couple of rounds I begin to look around sheepishly to see if any one else has a hand raised. No one does so I answer again. I hear annoyed mutterings from my classmates I just know their thinking, “She thinks she knows everything.” So in a futile attempt to satisfy them I sink down in my seat a little and let the rest of the questions slide by. (p. 24)

What does the academic literature have to say about some of these issues?

The research also affirms and acknowledges the sentiments expressed in many of these stories, both the stories of the children and their parents. The Columbus Group’s definition of giftedness defines giftedness not on the basis of intellectual performance or potential but on the basis of socio-emotional vulnerability. Silverman (1993, p. 3) cited the definition proposed by the Columbus Group (1991):

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in
parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

Roeper (1982, p. 21) also referred to this aspect of development defining giftedness as ‘a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences.’ Janos, Fung and Robinson (1985) in study of elementary children of high IQ found that 37 per cent conceptualized themselves as being different from their peers and this was associated with difficulties forming friendships and lower self-esteem. To quote, ‘they need help in gaining a balanced view of their own self worth in a social as well as intellectual context’ (Janos, Fung & Robinson, 1985 p. 81). Lovecky (1992) in an article entitled ‘Hidden Gifted Learner’ also discussed this aspect of giftedness. She described the intense emotional responses and pre-occupation with detail, which can make the gifted child vulnerable, and suggested that children need adults with whom they feel comfortable and able to share their unique worldview. Silverman (1997) while describing her work with young gifted children and their families stressed the importance of social and emotional development and suggested that the expectation that gifted children should always be expected to fit group norms creates difficulties for the gifted child and may result in self-alienation. She suggested that our focus should be on helping the child who is gifted to realise a deep level of self-acceptance that leads to true friendship with others. Provisions which foster positive
social development rather than socialization should be the aim for the gifted child.

The evidence from the research and the comments from gifted children and their parents requires us, I believe, to take time to analyse and reflect upon our own practices and how they impact upon the social and emotional vulnerability of the gifted children in our care. This analysis and reflection is particularly important for children who are at the higher levels of giftedness. Such children are statistically rarer within the population, within the range 1:1 000 to 1:10 000 (Silverman, 1998, p. 117) and demonstrate behaviours and abilities that are more atypical. The greater difference from the norm the greater the need for informed support.

I have strong recollections, of my own gifted child and gifted children who I have worked with and, believe that it is useful to think of the gifted child/children in our own families, centres and communities and to ask ourselves a number of question in relation to the educational context in which we work:

- How do we affirm the young gifted child’s identity, strengths and interests within the early childhood environment?
- What resources do we provide that affirm the advanced abilities in literacy and numeracy, information and communication technologies, drawing, writing, playing music, problem solving?
• Is this gifted child subject to stereotyped responses and non-inclusive behaviours? Are there practices that we follow which disadvantage or exclude the child who is gifted?

And in relation to families:

• Does the family of the child who is gifted need particular support in order to feel welcome and valued within this early childhood or school setting?

• Would the family of the child who is gifted feel able to disclose some of the unique strengths and needs that concern them?

• Could the family of the young gifted child feel isolated from other families?

• How could we demonstrate greater acceptance and support for young gifted children and their families within the early childhood setting?

The answers to these questions will of course vary depending on the individual child and the particular setting but I believe that they are worth asking. I believe too, that with time for reflection on attitude and practices, and with greater understanding of giftedness, as early childhood educators, we will be more cognisant of both the difficulties and delights of caring for and educating the young gifted child. Early childhood education has a strong record in terms of responsiveness to the learner, openness to, and acceptance of, human diversity. This record is one that surpasses that of many other levels of education. It seems to me that if we
take time to identify and indeed celebrate some of the attributes of high quality early childhood education, that ensure that it is responsive to individual differences, we will be well equipped to support young gifted children and their families. Through this process we may also become more effective advocates of early childhood educational philosophy and practice.

And so to some more questions:

- What aspects of early childhood philosophy, pedagogy and policy are supportive of the gifted child?

- How can the quality of our interactions with young children also be responsive to the learning and affective strengths and needs of the child who is gifted?

- Are the resources and learning environments that we provide responsive to the strengths, needs and interests of the young child who is gifted?

- Are the learning experiences that we plan for the gifted child responsive to the particular learning needs and interests that they demonstrate?

- How do we ensure that they are?

**Implications for Early Childhood Pedagogy and Policy**

The distinctive characteristics, which are demonstrated by gifted children, have significant implications for those who are responsible for their
education and care. The depth, intensity and quality of their participation in experiences, and the rate at which they learn, make them avid consumers of new and interesting experiences. It is often difficult for adults to sustain the level of input required to occupy and interest such children. The never-ending questions, which often accompany experiences of interest to the gifted child, create a challenge for both parents and teachers who struggle to provide appropriate information and answers to questions which they might not ever have contemplated.

Open-ended play experiences, opportunities for autonomous learning, resources which have infinite possibilities for creative use, self expression and the development of mastery, and activities for discovery and investigation are all important for the gifted child as for all children. It is important for the gifted child, from an early age to be actively involved in satisfying play experiences. Such children also need to be encouraged to develop strategies for independent problem solving. They need to be given opportunities to learn how to access reference resources such as dictionaries, encyclopaedias, the World Wide Web and experts in particular fields of interest. Research skills enable children to achieve a significant degree of independence in finding answers to the numerous questions that they formulate. A caring partnership between the adults and children in the process of investigation can help to develop these skills and also provide the model of a fellow investigator. Parents and teachers do not need to know the answers to all of the child’s questions
but rather be prepared and willing to share the task of finding acceptable and satisfying solutions.

Young gifted children need a positive and effective response to their learning strengths but they also need a sensitive and caring response to their socio-emotional needs. We may wish to ensure that the gifted child realises his or her intellectual potential. We may be desperate to provide adequate stimulation and challenge but we also need to ensure that we are responsive to the socio-emotional vulnerability which many gifted children experience. Each child needs to feel valued for his or her own intrinsic worth and to feel an accepted and valued member of a group. Each child needs to feel that his or her questions are important and worthy of a response, even if they seem obscure to others and even if they are much more difficult for adults to answer. Each child needs to feel that his or her interests are valued even if they are as unusual as ‘vacuum cleaners’ or as advanced as quantum physics. Each child needs opportunities to interact with like minds, and for the gifted child that may be other gifted children, perhaps older children or at times adults. Each of us has probably experienced the pleasure and empowerment that comes with interaction with someone who understands and cares about what it is that we are trying to communicate. It is essential for the gifted child too, to experience the pleasure and positive feelings that come with meaningful communication with others.
The young gifted child, though perhaps more capable of being an independent and autonomous learner, and perhaps more comfortable playing alone than with other children in the group also needs positive interactions with and connectedness to others, responsive care-giving, and individual time and attention. The young gifted child is first and foremost a child and though may demonstrate maturity and advanced behaviour in many ways, shares the need to be loved and valued with all children. At times young children who are gifted fit Paley’s description of ‘uniquely different outsiders’ (Paley, 1992, p. 58). We need to listen and respond to the stories of our young gifted children so that they can experience the sense of belonging and all that they bring to share with others can enrich us.

My experiences as I talk with young children who are gifted, their parents and teachers also powerfully affirms that it is the early childhood context which is potentially the most responsive educational context which the gifted child will be part of. My experiences have encouraged my belief in, and commitment to, quality early childhood education and early childhood professionals. I believe that we have so many attributes that enable us to be responsive to the gifted children in our care:

- We provide a child centred program;
- We know how to document, observe and record;
- We use children’s interests, strengths and emerging development as a basis for planning;
• We value family collaboration and seek to understand the child within the family and community context;

• We see education as a partnership with families and encourage family involvement in our programs;

• We promote child initiated curriculum, allowing children to pursue their own interests through collaborative investigations and peer scaffolding;

• We value play, experiential and discovery learning and provide access to open ended materials, basic art experiences, music and dramatic play resources daily; and,

• We encourage creativity, interdependence and autonomy.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators have much to share with other levels of education. Please don’t let us make the mistake of doubting the value of early childhood practice and philosophy through our own insecurity or community pressure to provide a more academic approach particularly in response to advanced development. The gifted child does not require us to push the school curriculum down but rather to work hard to push early childhood philosophy and practice up into the higher levels of education. The process of critical reflection and greater awareness of giftedness in early childhood can inform our response to giftedness in early childhood. We need to reflect carefully on what we do so that we can explain it to others. We need to be familiar with current research and educational
thinking and we need to develop our understanding of giftedness so that we are well equipped to validate our practices when questioned and perhaps criticised by others. We need to become more effective and articulate advocates of early childhood child initiated philosophy and practice.

In the conclusion to my book *Giftedness in Early Childhood* (Harrison, 1999) I commented that the last piece of the puzzle belongs to each gifted child. Please be encouraged to take time to come to know the gifted children in your care more closely. Listen to their stories. They and their families can teach us much more about giftedness in early childhood than anyone. The child who is gifted can enrich the lives of children, staff and families and indeed the community just as other groups enrich our lives by their unique contribution to human diversity in our world.

References


Chapter 13

SHARING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN

'When educators, children and families share the lived experiences of children and when experiences and resources are flexible and culturally responsive, engagement in enriched interactive learning occurs.'


Preface

Rationale

The article, Sharing the Lived Experiences of Children (Arthur, Beecher, Harrison, & Morandini, in press) was the result of a collaborative investigation by early childhood academics within the School of Education and Early Childhood Studies at the University of Western Sydney [UWS]. This investigation explored contemporary approaches to planning and programming within early childhood settings. The issues identified within the paper first emerged as significant challenges for both students and early childhood practitioners as they struggled to respond effectively to changes within the community and within the early childhood profession. The redevelopment of the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) [B.Ed, EC] degree, associated with the restructuring of
the University, was utilised as an opportunity to rethink, redevelop and redesign aspects of early childhood pedagogy. The changes that emerged through this process helped to ensure that the B.Ed, EC degree at UWS was both innovative and responsive to the realities of early childhood education within both the local and international contexts. The development of this article also provided an opportunity for me to use my research with young gifted children to influence new directions in early childhood pedagogies within mainstream early childhood education. This included the reconceptualisation of the roles and relationships of the three protagonists of child, family and educator as previously outlined within the portfolio.

**Context**

This article was accepted for publication in the Australian Journal of Early Childhood in October 2002. The Australian Journal of Early Childhood [AJEC] is the refereed publication of the Australian Early Childhood Association. The purpose of the journal is outlined in Chapter 7.

**Outcomes**

To be identified following publication of the article.

**References**


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Sharing the Lived Experiences of Children

Abstract

This article explores possibilities for linking children, families and early childhood settings through processes that celebrate and document the richness of children’s daily realities. Changing images of the child, greater recognition of the child in social contexts of the family, community and the early childhood setting, as well as the dynamic nature of early childhood services have contributed to innovative approaches to curriculum and documentation. New ways of thinking about children and planning affirm children’s competencies and celebrate their learning. Effective learning communities involve the collaboration of children and families in all stages of documentation and decision-making.
Theoretical Frameworks

Early childhood education is currently undergoing change and renewal in both national and international contexts. Cross-cultural and post-modern perspectives shared through increased globalization and collaborative research have challenged many long held assumptions about children and childhood within early childhood pedagogies. The early childhood educational experiences of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and Scandinavia (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) and increased familiarity with the socio-constructivist perspectives of Vygotsky (1978) have resulted in greater awareness of the importance of the socio-cultural context in early childhood education. Contemporary images of children, increasing recognition of children’s learning in home and community contexts and current approaches to planning prompt us to consider flexible approaches to documentation.

Images of Children

The contemporary image of the young child as strong, capable and able to make meaning from diverse experiences, challenges simplistic assumptions about children and the adult’s role in teaching and learning. As Malaguzzi (cited in Edwards, Gandini & Forman 1998, p. 81) commented in relation to children,

They are autonomously capable of making connections from their daily life experiences through mental acts involving planning and co-ordination of ideas and abstraction. ...meanings are never static
or final: they are always generative of other meanings the central act of adults therefore is to activate especially indirectly the meaning making competencies of children as a basis of learning.

Discussions within the reconceptualising childhood movement (Bloch, 1992; Cannella, 1997) have also contributed to re-thinking images of the child and childhood. The traditional focus on developmental discourses has been significantly challenged with greater awareness of the significance of socio-cultural contexts. Simplistic assumptions regarding the ‘universal child’ constructed within age/stage based developmental theory no longer adequately reflect the reality faced by early childhood educators working within culturally and linguistically diverse Australian communities. As Silin (1995) argues, the belief that child development universally describes children actually denies the multiple realities of children’s lives. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1998, p. 43) also offer this challenge.

From a post modern perspective there is no such thing as the child or childhood, an essential stage waiting to be discovered or realized. Instead there are many childhoods each constructed by our understandings of childhood and what children are and should be.

Block (1997) suggested that the socio-cultural appearance of childhood must be understood as a narrative construction of contemporary adult society and therefore subject to critique and evaluation and able to be re-
invented. The recognition that our understandings of childhood are the product of our own time and place suggests that uncontested conceptions of childhood should be the subject of discussion and analysis. Such analysis can contribute to the increased recognition of childhood as a unique and legitimate period within the lifespan of human development, rather than as preparation for what will come next within the schooling system. The celebration of childhood for its unique richness can promote greater recognition of all that each child brings to the learning community and increased awareness of the importance of creativity, play, learning processes and positive dispositions towards learning rather than a focus on specific skills and content. Similarly, the notion of ‘generativity’ suggests that early childhood educators recognise their work with children as an investment in the childhood experience of future generations. This realisation can create opportunities for sharing the intimacy and richness of the present moment with children and families and involving children and families in determining early childhood curricula.

Families’ and Children’s Worlds

Within the context of their families and communities children learn the cultural tools of their world including languages, literacies, expertise, passions, experiences, understandings and attitudes. This learning is social, cognitive and reflective of the particular socio-cultural experiences
of each family and their community. Significant family members provide the challenges for extending children's zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Authentic curriculum requires educators to find out about children's worlds. This is more than collecting background information for inclusion in children's portfolios, but rather as Comber (1997) suggested, foregrounding family information. Strong and authentic partnerships between educators and families provide many opportunities for educators to find ways to connect to children's worlds and incorporate them into the early childhood curriculum. Children are then able to utilise their expertise and investigate their passions, resulting in authentic and dynamic curriculum opportunities.

It is sometimes difficult to acknowledge the everyday experiences of families when they are different to our own and challenge long held values and assumptions. However, there are many influences that shape everyday realities for families that include social, economic, political, legal, local and global circumstances. Children and families at any setting will have a wide range of experiences, expertise and interests. When these are recognised and valued within the early childhood setting there are unlimited opportunities for curriculum that is significant and relevant to children's lives and that integrate social, cognitive, emotional, environmental, mathematical, and human society fields.
Just as images of children are being contested within early childhood education, images of families can also be challenged by moving beyond simplistic assumptions and commonly held stereotypes about families. Acknowledging the diversity of patterns of interactions, experiences and goals within families and recognising the complex and changing reality of families within the Australian context has the potential to transform early childhood curriculum. An inclusive view of families, getting to know families, and finding out how families’ interests, experiences and values shape their goals and expectations for their children, increases the likelihood of educators recognising and incorporating into the curriculum the everyday worlds and expertise of all children and their families.

The ways forward with family partnerships may lie within broad open contexts for dialogue, friendly disagreements and ongoing conversations where people co-construct ideas (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Fair and open relationships support people taking on multiple perspectives and reflecting on similarities and differences. A focus on shared decision making and ongoing dialogue enables ‘little narratives’ (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000) to occur, where partners respond to local events in a participatory way.

Approaches to Planning

Contemporary approaches to documentation and planning such as emergent curriculum (Jones & Nimmo, 1994), child created curriculum
(Tinworth, 1997) and the project approach (Katz & Chard, 1989; Helm & Katz, 2001) challenge traditional early childhood practices. The work of Fleet and Patterson (1998), and more recently The NSW Curriculum Framework (Department of Community Services, 2002), have also been the source of much provocation for early childhood educators in Australia. These approaches and frameworks reflect socio-cultural and social constructivist theories of learning which highlight the ways that learning is constructed in social and cultural contexts and is supported and extended through social interactions with peers and adults.

Socio-cultural perspectives suggest that children learn best when curriculum is connected to their everyday lives and interests. Children’s home and community contexts, for example experiences with everyday texts such as shopping catalogues and food packaging or with texts of popular media culture, can be effectively integrated into a range of play experiences and projects in early childhood settings (Jones Diaz, Beecher, Arthur, Ashton, Hayden, Makin, McNaught & Clugston, 2001). The provision of such authentic artefacts connects the early childhood curriculum to children’s worlds and to intellectual capital, and provides opportunities for children to integrate literacy and numeracy and their own knowledge and experience into their play.

Contemporary theoretical perspectives emphasise the importance of educators balancing spontaneity and planning. Effective programs are flexible and responsive to children’s ideas yet also include careful
planning of experiences, resources and strategies that enable children to engage in processes of exploration, investigation, problem-solving and discovery in collaboration with others.

Implications of Contemporary Theories for Practice

Each of these theoretical influences serves as a catalyst for reflection, and for creating new ways of working with children and families as empowered and active participants in learning communities. Implications for practice in early childhood settings include:

- Dialogue between families, educators and children and strategies to include children’s and families’ voices in the processes of documentation and decision-making.

- Sensitive discussions with children about their intentions, meanings and understandings, enabling staff to respond to children’s directions.

- Promotion of reflection, prediction, problem solving, analysis and self-evaluation through adult modeling as well as opportunities for children to investigate, create, reflect on and share ideas with others.

- Experiences, projects and learning centres that involve in-depth investigations of children’s questions and ideas, integrating a range of curriculum areas and linking to children’s families and communities.

- Large blocks of time and a range of resources - including paper and digital texts and open-ended materials - that enable children to pursue their interests, to investigate ideas, to construct understandings and to represent their thinking.
• Opportunities for small group experiences that promote peer and adult-child conversations and co-construction of knowledge and understandings.

• Documentation of children’s learning that celebrates their competencies, that focus on the processes in which children engage and that provides opportunities for educators, families and children to participate in and reflect on children’s learning.

Changing Contexts

In addition to new theoretical perspectives, the changing nature of early childhood settings along with external factors that impact on service provision have influenced thinking regarding approaches to planning in a number of settings. These factors include the increasing numbers of one and two day enrolments and varied enrolment patterns in many settings along with pressures on staff to meet a range of accountability requirements such as quality assurance and risk assessment. In response, systems for planning and documentation need to be manageable and to provide meaningful information to educators and families.

Flexible Documentation

Documenting children’s learning is an essential component of all early childhood programs. The systems that we select must support our approaches to learning and be workable within our given context. If we believe that spontaneous interest-based learning, projects, learning processes and social interactions are important the challenge then is to
ensure that our systems of documentation and planning reflect this. If we believe that children learn within their socio-cultural contexts then ways to find out about and incorporate children’s home and community experiences in the early childhood setting must be explored. If we believe in the value of multiple perspectives on children’s learning then all participants – including children, families and educators with all levels of training – must have opportunities to contribute to documentation and have a voice in decision making.

Sharing the lived experiences of children can effectively occur through interest based planning and spontaneous support for small groups of children who pursue a common interest. Interests derived from popular culture, for example a child singing part of a theme song from a television program, can provide a connection between children and be a useful catalyst for collaborative exploration when reinforced by a positive response from educators to children’s requests for particular resources. In this way children determine the agenda with educators being responsive to what it is that is intriguing to children.

Some interests can be extended to a project where children are able to engage in an in-depth investigation of a topic that is of interest to them. Projects may emerge from an interest a child or a group of children bring to the early childhood setting, a shared experience at the setting, or a staff member’s passion or a family member’s area of expertise (provided this is of interest to children).
By talking with children and finding out about their current understandings and what they are interested in knowing more about, educators can involve children in the planning processes. Children’s current knowledge and questions for further investigation can be documented through webbing and displayed for children, staff and families to reflect on. Educators, in collaboration with children and families, can then plan a range of possibilities for play and resources that extend children’s interests and understandings as well as the processes of investigation and literacy. While there is a pre-determined planning focus, resources and experiences are adapted or introduced depending on the directions children take, and can include contributions from family and community members.

A flexible approach to documentation honours the child within the community of learners while providing opportunities for integrated curriculum as children pursue their own questions. Concepts and processes are explored and developed through intellectual and social engagement as children take cues from each other. Children experience the ‘a-hah’ moment when the self is suspended in anticipation of the shared celebration and delight in making new connections or discoveries.

The provision of tools and open-ended resources enables children to represent their understandings through a range of media. Photographs or sketches of children’s constructions, samples of writing and drawing, videos of children’s dramatic play, transcripts of children’s conversations
and recordings of children’s music can provide ‘windows on learning’ (Helm, Beneke & Steinheimer, 1998). The addition of anecdotes of the processes children engage in and documentation of works in progress provide additional information for reflection and analysis.

The display of these products and accompanying anecdotes and analysis provides opportunities for children, families and educators to celebrate and reflect on children’s learning. These displays can assist in making children’s thinking visible, reflect present interests, provoke questions and comments and provide entry points for others to contribute to the process of investigation and discovery through sharing further ideas and resources. At the completion of an investigation items on display can be put together to make a project book that encourages parents and children to revisit past experiences.

In addition to displays of children’s work, the use of a daily diary and individual child portfolios provides a system for educators to document group and individual learning. A daily diary or journal enables educators to document and reflect on small group collaborative explorations and projects, friendship groupings, emerging interests and experiences, interactions and teaching strategies and to identify possibilities for future play experiences, resources, projects and strategies related to a group of children. Individual children’s learning can be documented, reflected on and linked to planning possibilities in a child portfolio. This portfolio includes regularly updated family information as well as anecdotes.
samples, photographs and diagrams of the child's interactions, investigations and creations. Where a number of children are involved in an experience the richness of the interactions, as well as children's language and ideas, can be captured through the inclusion of a number of children on the one observation format. This observation can be photocopied for inclusion in each child's portfolio for later reflection and individual analysis. Photographs and samples that are used for project documentation can also be included in individual portfolios by photocopying or by printing multiple copies of digital photographs.

Children can be involved in the documentation process by selecting items for display and for inclusion in their individual portfolio as well as by contributing to the narrative to accompany displays and portfolio items. As children become increasingly familiar with such opportunities they begin to take the lead and exploit more fully opportunities to explore, extend and document that which is relevant to them, making their meanings visible and taking ownership of the process.

Family members can contribute samples such as writing and drawing from home and artefacts such as movie ticket that are linked to children's experiences as well as contribute to the reflection on the child's understandings. Portfolios are an open and responsive form of documentation and communication, where all partners are valued and are able to contribute their insights and understandings in personal and meaningful ways.
The location of project books near a welcoming lounge can be reflective of a familial context that fosters conversations where shared history is revisited with friends and family. In these conversations knowledge is co-constructed and shaped within a social context, where each partner reflects his or her own social, cultural and historical influences. Open communication is mediated by all partners: children, family members and educators as they construct new meanings around the interests, passions and the focus at hand. Within continued conversations and deepening relationships partners revise previous understandings, ask questions, initiate new directions and provoke new connections.

These dialogues broaden and extend the learning community beyond the walls of the centre. What emerges is a ‘learning co-operative’ with all members participating as valued contributors to the intellectual capital that can be shared by all participants. This can only really happen when educators share a vision with families that celebrate the richness of the diverse contributions made by each of the participants. When we believe that children and families have many precious insights to contribute we seek ways in which such inputs can be made. Effective learning communities involve the collaboration of children and families in all stages of documentation and decision-making.

Conclusion

Reconceptualising images of children and acknowledging the socio-cultural nature of children’s learning challenges us to explore approaches
to planning and documentation that affirm children’s competencies and celebrate their learning. The challenge for educators is to let go of preconceived ideas about what children need to learn and planning formats that focus on predetermined experiences. When educators, children and families share the lived experiences of children and when experiences and resources are flexible and culturally responsive, engagement in enriched interactive learning occurs.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Professional Contribution

Publications


Appendix B - Professional Contribution

Presentations 1999 – 2002


Harrison, C. (2000, January). Play and the gifted child and Responsive curricula for young gifted children. Co-teaching Master Class - Gifted Young Children 0-8, with Professor Nancy Robinson from the Halbert Robinson Centre for Capable Youth, University of Washington at University of New South Wales.


Appendix C - Professional Contribution

Professional Development Workshops - 1999-2002


