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"If you talk, you are just talking. If I talk is that bragging?" Perspectives of Parents with Young Gifted Children in New Zealand.

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Abstract

This phenomenological study (Chellapan, 2012) investigates the perceptions and experiences of four sets of New Zealand parents with children identified as intellectually gifted based upon an IQ testing. The voices of parents with young gifted children have been missing from academic literature in New Zealand. Using a qualitative phenomenology approach, four sets of parents with a young intellectually gifted child were interviewed about their parenting experiences. In-depth interviews provided a rich picture of the experiences and perspectives of these parents. Although parents shared both joyful and painful moments of parenting, key findings included three particular areas of concern for parents: a) concern over misunderstanding and negativity; b) parents' concern with gifted children's intense behaviour; and c) parents' concern with gifted children's educational experiences. In response to these concerns, parents took on the role of advocates for their gifted children. The research findings draw attention to challenges that the parents of the gifted children face that complicate their parenting, including social stigma and limited access to gifted support services.

Introduction

This study explored parents' perceptions of raising a young intellectually gifted child in New Zealand. Parents' lived experiences and their day-to-day activities with their gifted children were investigated, alongside their perspectives on available support for gifted children and their families. The purpose of the study was to increase knowledge of the experiences of parenting young intellectually gifted children in a New Zealand context. Silverman and Golon (2008) note the importance of this area of investigation, stating that "While gifted children have parents and some teachers who advocate for them, their parents may have no advocates at all ... parents of the gifted need as much support as their children" (p. 199).

There is a vast amount of international literature in the field of gifted and talented education that focuses on the provision and identification of gifted students; however, there is a paucity of research undertaken within New Zealand. The extensive literature review conducted by Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind and Kearney (2004) identified the voices of teachers and students in relation to gifted education or gifted

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programming, but voices of parents are less often documented, including their experiences of raising a gifted child, challenges, and opportunities they associated with giftedness, and their understanding of giftedness. Further, research on parenting *young* gifted children is particularly scarce. This study addresses this aspect of research by focusing on parent perspectives from New Zealand families of young gifted children aged 3-8 years of age.

Background

Three areas of background literature of particular relevance to this article are discussed in this section. Firstly, some key policy initiatives are summarised to provide a brief New Zealand context for the study. Secondly, literature documenting issues of stress experienced by parents of gifted children is noted. Thirdly, a previous study on parental perceptions of a cohort of parents of gifted early readers is described because of the insight it gave to the research conducted in the study reported in this article.

New Zealand policy context for gifted education

Early childhood education and gifted education have been areas of national interest and policy development in New Zealand (Knudson, 2005; McDonough & Rutherford, 2005; Mitchell, 2011; Mitchell, Meagher Lundberg, Mara, Cubey & Whitford, 2011; Riley, 2005). The importance of parents' support for children's learning is acknowledged within both early childhood education and gifted education fields. New Zealand Ministry of Education guidelines to schools (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008; Ministry of Education 2000, 2012) indicated that the concerns of families of gifted children should be addressed, yet there is little indication of any change to parent frustration with limited educational responsiveness to gifted children (Bicknell, 2006; Cathcart, 1994; Education Review Office, 2008; Margrain, 2005; McDonough & Rutherford, 2005; Taplin & White, 1999).

A number of initiatives have been introduced at a national level in recent years to provide information on effective practice for both teachers and parents, including:

- Development of a Gifted and Talented Community placed on tki (Te Kete Ipurangi, an online resource for teachers, parents, and community – see www.tki.org.nz).
- A publication to engage families and communities was developed to provide brief information on the characteristics of gifted children and to promote a broad concept of giftedness and talent (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008).
- Online information such as Ministry contact people, regional and local offices to be reached.
- Question and answer forum (McDonough & Rutherford, 2005).
- Research and professional development funding.

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- National Administration Guidelines (NAG) change to explicitly acknowledge responsibility for gifted learners in schools.

These initiatives have been largely focused on the schooling sector, with little provided for the gifted children in early childhood or the earliest years of school. In addition, not all the initiatives have been sustained in their original form or had funding maintained.

The initiatives espouse the intention of responsive practice, yet "tall poppy syndrome" has long been a cultural practice in New Zealand. Tall Poppy Syndrome espouses the benefits of egalitarian approaches and rejects giftedness, considering that it unfairly gives special privileges to some children (Henshon, 2007; Moltzen, 2004; Silverman, 2000; Porter, 2008). This discourse results in confusion for families who experience confusing or negative experiences and outcomes for their gifted children as a result of the children being "cut down to size", held back, ignored because they are ahead of their peers and it is thus assumed they need no support, negatively reacted to or, misunderstood, ignored or forgotten (Bicknell, 2006; Cathcart, 1994; Margrain, 2005, 2010; Moltzen, 2004; Radue, 2009; Tapper, 2012).

Parental stress

Gifted children have characteristics and behaviours that differ from those of non-gifted children (Gross, 2004; Moon, 2003; Porter, 1999). Owing to challenges around emotional intensity, sensitivity and challenging behaviour, some parents of gifted children experience increased tension managing their gifted children's behaviours (Silverman, 1993). International research suggests that most parents of gifted children experience challenges with their ability to manage and assist their gifted child, and also negotiate social misconceptions of giftedness (Dwairy, 2004; Morawska & Sanders, 2008, 2009; Huff, Houskamp, Watkins, Stanton, & Tavegia, 2005; Margrain, 2005; Wu, 2008).

Studies by Gross (2004) and Sankar-DeLeeuw (2002) highlighted that parents are the first to identify if a child is gifted at a very young age. However, the literature also describes that parents of gifted children are often "left alone" in their parenting; the parents often feel they are unable to talk freely about their gifted children to friends or family members because this group of people do not understand about rearing a gifted child (Adler, 2006; Alsop, 1997; Delisle, 2001; Morawska & Sanders, 2008; Silverman & Golon, 2008). In addition parents may experience pressure and stress or feel uncomfortable when others probed and make judgements about their children's level of giftedness (Eris, Seyfi & Hanoz, 2008; Keirouz, 1990). Research suggests that families of gifted children function best when parents engage with other parents of gifted children who have experienced what they have experienced in their parenting (Adler, 2006; Alsop, 1997; Morawska & Sander, 2008, 2009).

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When parents of gifted children have attempted to advocate appropriate educational services for their children, they have often been regarded as 'pushy' or 'elitist', especially in the school and neighbouring community (Alsop, 1997; Eris, Seyfi, & Hanoz, 2008; Margrain, 2010). Alsop (1997) suggests that most parents of gifted children fear the label gifted because of the misunderstandings and negativity associated with the label, especially parents of non-gifted children. One of the mothers in Margrain's (2005) study commented, "I feel embarrassed; people will think I have been one of those pushy parents" (p. 239). Silverman and Golon (2008) argued that parents who try to advocate for their children in order to develop their children's abilities may also find themselves in conflict with teachers, school, and the educational system whose agenda is for an egalitarian approach even when articulating a discourse of partnership (Porter, 2008, 1999).

A previous study of parent perspectives

One New Zealand study that focuses on parents' perspectives and experiences of supporting young gifted children was undertaken in 2005, involving eleven case studies of precocious readers, their families and early years' teachers (Margrain, 2005). The parents in this study described "involving the children with daily life and activities that parents did was an important aspect of parenting ... parents involved children in everyday activities and community outings and valued the social and cognitive opportunities in early childhood education" (Margrain, 2005, p. 167). These activities were examples of ways in which parents responsively supported their children's motivation and realisation of potential.

However, the parents in Margrain's (2005) study also experienced lack of educational support for gifted children from early years teachers and negative responses in both education settings and the wider community. This negatively affected teacher-parent partnership, created a sense of frustration and encouraged the parents to take on a stronger advocacy role to support their children (Margrain, 2010).

Margrain's (2005) compilation of parents' experiences and their role in parenting supports understanding of the issues addressed by parents of gifted children in the present study. Firstly, the studies both valued parent perspectives, and secondly both studies were interested in discovering the every-day practices that families of the gifted children use to support young children's learning. Thirdly, the results validate the important advocacy role that parents play in gifted children's talent development. Finally, in both studies a number of common assumptions and misunderstandings are identified that are applied to the gifted label and the impact of this on gifted children and their families. The new study reported in this paper (Chellapan, 2012) explores these issues with four additional families of young gifted children.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative in-depth investigation of the perspectives of four families regarding parenting of young gifted children. Qualitative study is appropriate as the approach is concerned with describing, interpreting and understanding meaning (Litchman, 2010). In this section information is shared about the participants, the research methods, and limitations.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants whose experience of parenting provided an understanding of the phenomena of giftedness. Criterion for participation in the study included: having a child aged 3-8 years of age who was formally identified as intellectually gifted based upon an IQ test; and living within a specific region of New Zealand. Two of the families lived in urban areas and two lived in rural areas. Participants were initially identified through facebook networking and were sent information about the study by email. All four families were two-parent families.

Research Methods

Two semi-structured interviews (Hinds, 2000) were conducted with families as the primary research method, and document analysis utilised as a secondary method.

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes, in English, with some questions provided three days prior to the interview so that participants could consider their responses. Predetermined questions for the first included:

- a) What is it like parenting a young intellectually gifted child?
- b) What factors influence parenting a gifted child especially the young intellectually gifted?
- c) Is parenting a young gifted child different from parenting any other child? If so, what is different and what remains the same?
- d) What kinds of support do the parents of gifted children need in relation to their parenting?

The second interviews probed further information emerging from analysis of the first interviews, for example: "... was a word that you used often when you talked about challenges in parenting gifted children. I would like to explore that a little more with you. Can you talk about that please?"

Document analysis involved review of documentation provided by parents, including: children's personal records such as learning portfolios and certificates of achievement, and

also parents' personal records such as journals and photographs. These records were able to be aligned against the interviews and field notes.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, applying inductive reasons and theorising (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2006; Mutch, 2005). Analytic memos constructed and participant checks undertaken in order to validate interpretation of findings.

Limitations

This is a qualitative study which is focused on only four parents within a single geographic region and it is impossible to generalise the conclusions to all parents of gifted children. Caution needs to be exercised when generalising the findings from any study to broader populations. Further interviews with a broader and more extensive range of participants from diverse cultures, especially non-Western, would extend and enrich the findings of this study. The families in this study were all two-parent families and the stresses that they experienced may be compounded even further for single-parent families; although assumptions should not be made about the resilience and risks for any individuals or families.

The teacher-parent related concerns identified in this study were found from talking solely to the parents. Including teacher voices would provide alternative perspectives, although the aim of the study was specifically to document the voice of parents. Additionally, further research would be valuable which includes parents and teachers of a broader range of ages between early childhood and adolescence to further increase understanding of the challenges and stressors that occur across a range of developmental and transition milestones. Such research could also include child voices and perspectives on giftedness, family, community and education support. The study reported in this article focuses very specifically on the perspectives of parents of young gifted children.

Key Findings

Families believed parenting a gifted child was to parent a child with special needs, and considered that this was neither an easy task nor an easy responsibility. Parenting gifted children was described as being a lonely journey and frequently misunderstood. The community contexts in which parenting took place were seen to be very stressful, with limited social, educational and family support available to the parents or gifted children. Although parents shared both joyful and painful moments of parenting, key findings included three particular areas of concern for parents:

1. Parents' concern over misunderstanding and negativity
2. Parents' concern with gifted children's intense behaviour

3. Parents' concern with gifted children's educational experiences

In response to these concerns, parents took on the role of advocates for their gifted children.

Parents' concern over misunderstanding and negativity

In this study, parents spoke about their lonely parenting due to the communication breakdown between the parents and interaction with other people. All the parents in this study felt that others especially family members, friends or educators failed to understand their problems, concerns, and issues in having to raise a gifted child. Almost all the parents voiced that, instead, negative judgements and misunderstandings occurred from friends and community members soon after their child was identified as gifted.

"If you go out there in our society in New Zealand and say you have a gifted child, people will look at you like 'who do you think you are'? You know people would judge you immediately when you say your child is gifted." (Sandy – parent of a gifted child)

"They often think we are elitist and pushy parents. I heard from other parents ... labelling my children gifted and myself [as] 'braggy'." (Lily – parent of a gifted child)

Unfavourable community reaction towards giftedness by friends, some family members, and other parents were of concern to parents in this study. Parents reported that the use of hurtful names (e.g 'nerd', 'geek', 'hyperactive') for their children was quite disheartening for them. Anticipating such reaction from others, some parents in this study preferred to hide their child's giftedness. Some parents felt that they were unable to talk freely about their gifted child, or ceased communicating with other parents, friends, or family members. Parents indicated trying to make others understand that raising a gifted child was very challenging and stressful.

"Rejected – 'nerd' the kids call him ... he didn't have many friends ... he got picked on, teased. He got in a few fights, bullied and when it comes to group work he was purposely left out by other students." (Janet, parent of a gifted child)

One parent in the study shared her experience of gifted children and families being judged differently: "If you talk, you are just talking but if I talk, is that bragging?" The risk of being regarded as bragging or pushy parents, made the parents hesitate to share their experience and thoughts about raising a gifted child to anybody who did not understand them

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emotionally. Parents were also disturbed when their child misbehaved and others (e.g. family, other parents, or friends) would overreact and comment unfairly on their disciplining of their child.

"We had a visit to some friends' house ... and Tim was ... particularly full on and the mother, my friend, made some comments about Tim's behaviour which really hurt me." (Kate – parent of a gifted child)

Parents' concern with gifted children's intense behaviour

All the parents agreed that managing their children's emotional intensity and sensitivity was the most challenging aspect of parenting gifted children. Parents were often confused and perturbed by experiencing that their children's behaviour was markedly different to that of other children and the parents considered that it was more difficult to manage a gifted child's emotional intensity, sensitivity, and overexcitability compared to a non-gifted child. Of course the parents also discussed their children's strengths and competencies, but the areas of behavioural challenge resulted in significant family stress. Examples of stressful experiences reported by parents related to their child's behaviour included: uncontrollable behaviour in public such as running around and screaming, tantrums; difficulty in adjusting to winning or losing in a game, being intensely uncomfortable with noise (covering ears and crying due to the noise level); fussy eating; challenging sleeping patterns; school avoidance (refusal to go to school due to boredom); and challenging social skills (for example stubbornness or rudeness).

"No one really knew what was going on, everyone was just assuming that we were terrible parents, that we couldn't get our child to sleep ... that was terrible." (Lily – parent of a gifted child)

Almost all the parents only decided to get their child tested after experiencing the difficult moments and negative comments in response to managing the child's emotional intensity, heightened sensitivity, and challenging behaviour. Kate, one of the parents, made the following comments:

"I knew he was bright, and I knew he was alert but it was his behavioural stuff that really drove me to figure out something." (Kate – parent of a gifted child)

Parents' concern with gifted children's educational experiences.

Even though the parents in this study experienced stress and challenges related to their children's behaviour, they all accepted their children's gifted label positively. However, all of

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them appeared to fear the reaction of educators and others in the community to the identification of giftedness.

Parents expressed concern that some teachers and schools were overtly negative about their children, and also reluctant to accept their children as being gifted or to accept the evidence that proves that their children were indeed intellectually gifted. All the parents in this study believed the Tall Poppy syndrome exists in New Zealand and they had experienced this directly. Some parents in the study suggested that they would not choose to label their children gifted because people might think that they are expecting unreasonable responses from the education system.

Parents also voiced their frustration at teachers' lack of knowledge in gifted education. Teachers' reluctance to provide challenging activities, failure to offer Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), and inability to provide a differentiated curriculum were ways in which parents felt their children's special needs were not responded to. Limited expertise and training in gifted education within the regular education sector was also a concern the parents. Parents felt that this lack of access to gifted education support resulted in their children experiencing increased boredom and lack of motivation in regular classrooms. Because of the limited knowledge or support for giftedness in regular education settings, parents valued external and specialist gifted education options such as One Day School.

"Being six months in school ... all his huge amount of enthusiasm, energy ... pretty much gone ... It's all gone. It's knocked out of him ... The One Day School is our saviour. The school makes him feel alive and that makes us feel alive too." (Sandy – parent of a gifted child)

"At the school, he gets bored with the repetition and spoon-feeding, possibly because his giftedness wasn't nurtured ... they tried to stamp him down." (Janet – parent of a gifted child)

"We know his needs aren't met at school and we have to find the way to meet them elsewhere. I mean for instance the One Day School. We made a decision that we have to find money and he has to be able to go because ... it's half of his wellbeing and it has to come down to who is going to survive and be happy and how to save him." (Lily – parent of a gifted child)

Becoming an advocate

Parents increasingly developed a range of skills and knowledge, including: advocacy skills, knowledge about giftedness and related issues such as challenging behaviour and emotional sensitivities; and skills in responding to their children's interests and special needs. These

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skills and areas of expertise were developed in response to the challenges of dealing with community negativity and misunderstandings, and to the limited educational support. The parent narratives below highlight many of these aspects.

"I am singly an advocate for my child. I am sure others see me as pushy, elitist, living vicariously through my son, however I am nothing more than a parent of a child with special needs, who has had to up-skill to become an educated advocate for his needs ... I am simply here to help him with his educational, emotional, social and intellectual needs. I know my child better than anyone else does and I am prepared to go out to bat for him to have his needs met. Others who label me misinterpret my motivations." (Kate – parent of a gifted child)

"We are our child's advocates. That is the role of a parent, to work on your child's behalf to make sure that they are safe and their needs are being met." (Lily – parent of a gifted child)

"I speak for my son. He needs our support and who else can be there for him if not we, the parents?" (Roger – parent of a gifted child)

"If they can't help the we have to do it by our own ... we advocate for his needs ... though it's difficult sometimes but, yeah, he needs his parents' support and we are always there for him." (Gary – parent of a gifted child)

Discussion

In order to support and respond to a gifted child, parents need to have a deep and broad understanding of giftedness, including psychological, emotional, social and intellectual dimensions. The absence of this understanding of giftedness within the community and many education settings means that it is even more important that parents are able to become knowledgeable advocates for their gifted children. However, lack of wider understanding means that parents frequently experience a lonely, frustrating, stressful and misunderstood journey. The experiences of the parents in this study reflected experiences of many other parents of gifted children, with a blatantly unfair experience of being misjudged and negatively labelled for taking on advocacy role in the best interests of their children, and in the absence of any other advocates.

Parenting is full of challenges, but the narratives of the families in this study highlight that parenting can be compounded when raising a child who is gifted because of characteristics and behaviours that differ from those non-gifted children. Parents do not initially have

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expertise in giftedness, or even know that this is the cause of aspects such as challenging behaviour, social and emotional sensitivities. Thus, rather than having to be advocates and experts, parents of gifted children actually need support, reassurance and information. This is yet one more study that provides evidence of the absence of such support for parents.

The findings that gifted children were tested only as a response to external negative concerns about challenging behaviour is concerning in many ways. Firstly, the negativity and intolerance experienced by families remains distressing. Secondly, all gifted children merit appropriate assessment and identification, not only those with challenging behaviour. It is unfortunate if gifted children who do not have challenging behaviour are unrecognised, and also unfortunate if assumptions are made that all gifted children have challenging behaviour, as they do not. But it is somewhat understandable that being misunderstood and rejected would have a negative impact on behaviour

It is important to all parents that quality educational support is provided for their children, and is understandably no different for parents of gifted children. Parents have the right to approach an education setting and ask whether there is a policy (for example, guidelines a Board of Trustees has written) or procedures (a set of guidelines the senior staff have written) on gifted and talented children. Parents can also go online and find the information about education settings. These documents can provide a basis for parents and education staff to be able to constructively discuss opportunities that exist to ensure gifted children are supported. However, parents in this study indicated that they were fearful of discussing giftedness with friends, family, community and education personnel because of the negative reactions and judgments other people made about giftedness. We need to continue to do much more to support and reassure families, and to indicate acceptance of giftedness in practice.

Conclusion

While findings from such a small qualitative study cannot be considered definitive or necessarily generalisable, the consistent and powerful patterns and views shared by the parents in this study suggest some key directions that should be shared with other parents of gifted and non-gifted children, mainstream educators, and professionals in gifted education. Parents have shared experiences that are stressful, lonely and confusing, and their need to take on advocacy roles in response to a lack of educational support.

Negative educational and community discourses about tall poppies and egalitarianism are confusing to parents, as their lived experience indicates that gifted children are not all treated fairly, equitably, or supportively. As the title of this article indicates, comments

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made by a parent of a gifted child are reacted to quite differently than comments made by parents of non-gifted children. Pride is misjudged as 'bragging', advocacy is misjudged as 'interfering' and support misjudged as 'being pushy'.

Significant opportunities exist to harness the skills, energy and willingness of parents within an educational partnership that more effectively supports children's learning and wellbeing. We will know we are doing a better job of partnership with parents and support for children when other families are interviewed and have stories to share that talk less about stress and more about support, less about rejection and more about inclusion. Parents should not have to be the only advocates for their children, and all parents should feel it is safe to be able to talk with pride about their children.

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