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Abstract

An African proverb that resonates strongly with educators is that "it takes a whole village to raise a child". The proverb has been the inspiration for at least two books (Cowen-Fletcher 1994; Rodham Clinton, 1996) and countless t-shirt and greeting card designs, but, more importantly, its sentiment acknowledges the collective responsibility we bear for educating our children. Franz Monks has dedicated his long academic career to the field of gifted education and his wide-ranging contributions have epitomized this shared responsibility for ensuring that the gifts and talents of our young people are nurtured. Like many educators who have interacted with him over the course of his career, I have appreciated the countless conversations that I have had with Franz on the developmental needs of young people. In particular, he stimulated my research on the characteristics of effective teaching according to the perspectives of young people identified as gifted. Subsequently, that work has led to an interest in the role of school counsellors in fostering giftedness, which is the topic of this contribution.

Keywords

experience, australian, school, giftedness, role, fostering, counsellors

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The role of school counsellors in fostering giftedness: The Australian experience

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Introduction

An African proverb that resonates strongly with educators is that “it takes a whole village to raise a child”. The proverb has been the inspiration for at least two books (Cowen-Fletcher, 1994; Rodham Clinton, 1996) and countless t-shirt and greeting card designs, but, more importantly, its sentiment acknowledges the collective responsibility we bear for educating our children. Franz Mönks has dedicated his long academic career to the field of gifted education and his wide-ranging contributions have epitomised this shared responsibility for ensuring that the gifts and talents of our young people are nurtured. Like many educators who have interacted with him over the course of his career, I have appreciated the countless conversations that I have had with Franz on the developmental needs of young people. In particular, he stimulated my research on the characteristics of effective teachers according to the perspectives of young people identified as gifted. Subsequently, that work has led to an interest in the role of school counsellors in fostering giftedness, which is the topic of this contribution.

Giftedness in Australia

The National goals on education, as determined by the state ministers of education in Australia (MCEETYA, 2008), most recently focused on the outcomes of schooling for young people. The first goal of its ‘Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians’ (MCEETYA, 2008) was a broad focus on equity and excellence. Within the various descriptions of what would be needed to accomplish this goal, is the following expectation of school systems in Australia:

[to] promote a culture of excellence in all schools, by supporting them to provide challenging, and stimulating learning experiences and opportunities that enable all students to explore and build on their gifts and talents. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7)

This Declaration, and its predecessors, means that there is a recognition at the National level that students need to have their abilities appropriately nurtured at school. Similarly, at the National level there have been two inquiries into the status of gifted education, both of which have supported special educational approaches for gifted children (see Senate Select Committee, 1988; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001). There is, however, no current National policy specifically on the education of gifted students.

The responsibility for school education, primary and secondary, rests with the individual states and territories of Australia. By the 1990s, each of these educational jurisdictions had enshrined gifted education in policy statements. While this leads to inevitable variation in educational practices across Australia, there are also some common threads. For example, in most Australian state and territory policies, giftedness is defined as potential and talent as performance, in line with Gagné’s (2003) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent. This policy direction superseded previous definitions, which differentiated the two terms on the basis of quantity (i.e. you were gifted if you had multiple exceptional abilities and talented if you had one) or the type of ability (i.e. talent described creative endeavours while giftedness referred to ‘intellectual’ abilities).

Further, some form of selective schooling for students with gifted potential exists in most jurisdictions, but generally, commences in late primary years. In the most populous state, New South Wales, there are currently 73 primary schools offering ‘opportunity classes’ in Years 5 and 6 for academically talented students. At the secondary level, there are approximately 45 schools (of about 400 government secondary schools in the state) that offer places for students identified as academically gifted through standardised testing. Slightly fewer than half of those schools are fully selective while the remainder house selective classes within the comprehensive high school structure. This system-wide offering for gifted students, however, does not guarantee that all students are fully

catered for in New South Wales schools. There is a significant percentage of highly able students who, for various reasons, do not attend selective programs. Further, there is no selection system for the teachers in those selective programs, which could call into question whether the ability grouping is matched by appropriately-delivered curricula that are stimulating and challenging (Vialle & Quigley, 2002).

There is certainly sufficient research in Australia to suggest that the current situation for gifted education is still a policy in search of practice, with provision remaining largely ad hoc (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Chessman, 2005; Gross 2010; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001). In addition to resistance from teacher unions, teachers cite lack of resources and guidelines as barriers to catering for gifted students (Freebody, Watters, & Lummis, 2002; Vialle & Rogers, 2012), while the relative lack of pre-service teacher training on giftedness has also been identified as a barrier (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001; Vialle & Quigley, 2002; Vialle & Rogers, 2012).

Australian researchers have also investigated the attitude of teachers towards gifted students, including their willingness to differentiate the curriculum for such learners, and consistently demonstrated less than positive attitudes on the part of teachers (Gross, 2010; Gross & Sleaf, 2001; Watters & Diezmann, 2001). Some researchers have attributed these less than favourable attitudes to Australian society's egalitarian principles (Braggett & Moltzen, 2000; Gross, 2010; Watters & Diezmann, 2003). According to Gross (2010), for example, "the education of gifted children in Australia is hampered by the predominance of social myths and misconceptions, many of which centre on the harm which will supposedly arise if a child's academic talents are recognised and fostered" (p. 34).

It would seem that stereotypes surrounding giftedness are influential in teachers' attitudes towards gifted students. In a recent paper (Vialle, 2007), I argued that the stereotypes to be found in much of our popular culture reflect negative attitudes found in research. The characters portrayed in television shows such as *The Simpsons* and *Daria*, and in the popular Harry Potter book series, for example, reflect varying levels of acceptance of giftedness according to the 'package' that goes with it. This reflects Tannenbaum's classic research study on adolescent giftedness (1962), which demonstrated that gifted individuals were more likely to be accepted if they also possessed sporting prowess, while studious types were less favourably regarded. In Australia, Carrington and Bailey (2000) replicated this research with preservice teachers, examining their attitudes toward gifted students. Their research demonstrated that these preservice teachers held significantly more positive attitudes towards gifted students who were not studious than they did to those who were studious.

Other research has linked the attitudinal responses of teachers to differentiating the curriculum to teachers' lack of knowledge about giftedness (McKinnon, 1998; Wellisch, 1997; Whitton, 1997). It is not surprising, then, that Australian researchers have also consistently demonstrated that more favourable attitudes toward gifted learners, and differentiating the curriculum for them, are held by teachers who have greater knowledge about giftedness (Geake & Gross, 2008; Gross, 1994; Lassig, 2009; Plunkett, 2000). This positive attitudinal shift, accompanied by superior knowledge, was consistently found for teachers who had undergone specialised training in the nature and needs of gifted learners. Gross, for example, demonstrated that inservice teachers who completed a course in gifted education shifted to more positive attitudes about giftedness. Similarly, Lassig's (2009) study showed a strong significant relationship between training in gifted education and teachers' attitudes and knowledge.

Why school counsellors?

Much of the research on gifted provision in Australia has focused on the teacher and, as indicated, the current situation would suggest that the training of teachers at both the preservice and inservice level is a priority for our educational system. Indeed, Mönks, Heller and Passow (2000) argued that "appropriate teacher training is an imperative" (p. 846) for gifted education. The policy on the

education of gifted students in New South Wales delineates particular expectations of teachers in this area:

1.4 Teachers, with support, have a responsibility to identify the gifted and talented students in their classes.

1.5 Teachers have a responsibility to select and implement a variety of teaching strategies for inclusion in programs for the range of gifted and talented students in their classes. (NSW DET, 2006)

However, the policy does not single out a specific role for school counsellors. Like teachers, school counsellors receive very little, if any, training in gifted education despite the important role they play in the identification and support of gifted students in schools.

In New South Wales (NSW), school counsellors are qualified teachers with a minimum of two years' teaching experience. They have also completed the equivalent of a four-year degree in psychology and specialised training in school counselling. School counsellors are appointed to primary and secondary schools, with most serving multiple school sites over the course of their working week. Consequently, their workload is very high and schools will prioritise the tasks that they require of the school counsellor. The scope of the school counsellor's work is described as follows:

- assess students' needs using psychological and educational tests, rating scales and observation, and report the results to parents and teachers
- counsel students individually and in groups
- participate in the work of student welfare committees
- provide advice to review committees concerning the education of students with special needs
- refer students or their families to other agencies concerned with the health and welfare of students and liaise with such agencies as required
- work with groups of parents regarding the welfare needs of their children
- report and make recommendations when students have received a long suspension from school
- respond, as part of a team, to schools experiencing serious incidents. (NSW DET, 2008)

Given the low ratio of school counsellors to the student population and the multi-faceted role they are expected to perform, it is not surprising that gifted students are under-served in counselling services in New South Wales schools according to anecdotal evidence. Colangelo (2002) stated that gifted students did not receive the same amount of attention from counsellors in US schools as did their peers, a finding that was replicated in a recent New South Wales study (Hedrick, 2012). Hedrick's research with students and counsellors revealed that gifted students, particularly those who were achieving, were far less likely to access counselling services despite their reporting that they would benefit from those services.

Robinson (2002) suggested that counsellors are often inadequately trained to support gifted students. It has been clearly argued by researchers that giftedness brings with it particular counselling needs (Colangelo, 2002; Colangelo & Assouline, 2000; Peterson, 2009) and, therefore, specialised training in giftedness is essential if school counsellors are to adequately address those needs (Lewis, 2002; Robinson, 2002; Wood, 2010). Given the relative lack of training in giftedness experienced by teachers in Australia, it would be logical to assume that a similar lack of training on giftedness would be the situation for school counsellors as well.

Robinson (2002) suggested that advocacy was an important role for a school counsellor in relation to working with gifted students in addition to the usual array of cognitive and affective supports they provide the general student population. A study by Yoo and Moon (2006) sought the views of parents regarding the counselling needs of their gifted offspring. The parents reported that social-emotional concerns were the greatest need, particularly in educational contexts where the students' needs were not being met (Yoo & Moo, 2006). Further, they indicated that their children would benefit from counselling assistance that targeted educational and career planning, and peer, child and family

concerns.

While many counselling needs of gifted students are similar to those of the general student population, they also have distinct needs. The perception that giftedness equates to high scholastic achievement may mean that these distinct needs go unrecognised, and hence, unserved (Peterson, 2009). Peterson (2009) suggested that such “positive stereotyping of gifted and talented individuals has dangerous implications” (p. 281) because it may prevent gifted students from accessing the help they need.

As indicated previously, Colangelo (2002) argued that giftedness brings with it specific needs that counsellors are best positioned to address. He outlined the following evidence-based observations that need to be understood:

- Gifted students are typically as well adjusted as other peers.
- Social-emotional issues are present because of exceptional ability.
- In our society it is not smart to be smart.
- Meeting the cognitive needs of gifted students often meets simultaneously their social-emotional needs.
- Teenage years are the most difficult socially for gifted students.
- To be a gifted minority student is an added social challenge for these students.
- Intelligence is no assurance of character.
- Gifted students are not prone to suicide in any greater numbers than other students in their age group.
- Depression, anxiety, and isolation are among the common difficulties with gifted students.
- Gifted students do not have lower or more inflated self-concepts than nongifted age peers.
- Gifted students are more sensitive to the social needs of their nongifted peers than the reverse.
- The messages that students receive from society about exceptional talent are only ambivalent in regards to intellectual talent.
- Underachievement in schools by gifted students is a manifestation of a combination of social-psychological tensions.
- Parents do not always know what is best for their gifted children.
- It is possible to be gifted and disabled (or have a disorder) simultaneously.
- Children benefit from counselors as part of their development in schools. Gifted students get less than their share of counselor time and attention. (Colangelo, 2002, pp. 5-6)

School counsellors' views on giftedness

Since the 1980s, interest in the social and emotional lives of children has grown exponentially, which has led to a growing research focus on the school counselling role in supporting the development of giftedness. While Colangelo and Assouline (2000) pointed out school counselling and giftedness is a relatively new interest area for research, there is still a paucity of research on this important topic in Australia. To gain some insights into current practices in school counselling and gifted students, a preliminary survey was conducted with school counsellors in New South Wales. The questions we sought to answer were:

1. What are school counsellors' attitudes toward gifted students and their education?
2. How do school counsellors see their role in the education of gifted students?

Method

School counsellors in New South Wales were approached to complete an online survey related to their training and experience relative to gifted students. The survey comprised twelve open-ended questions that probed the level of training they had received on giftedness and how prepared they felt to work with such students. They were also asked to report the educational programs for gifted students that were operating within the schools they served, the percentage of their time spent working with gifted students, the types of issues that arose for such students, and their perceptions

of the most pressing needs for gifted students. Following these questions, the school counsellors were asked to complete the Gagné and Nadeau (1985) scale, 'Opinions about the gifted and their education'. This scale comprises 42 statements, which require respondents to indicate their agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items include:

1. Our schools should offer special education services for the gifted.
28. Gifted children might become vain or egotistical if they are given special attention.

Following the receipt of ethics approval from the University of Wollongong and the NSW Department of Education, surveys were sent to 400 school counsellors. The response rate was lower than anticipated at only 68 respondents (17%), probably due to issues at school sites in accessing the online instrument. The school counsellors varied between one and thirty years' professional experience, with the mean years of service equating to 9.65 years. Each of the responding school counsellors worked at between one and six schools as their caseload, which resulted in a total of 193 schools being covered by the research sample. Two-thirds of the sample participants worked in rural settings (67.7%) while the remaining one-third worked in urban schools (32.4%).

Results

About two-thirds of the sample (66.2%) indicated that they had received no information on giftedness in their initial university training while the remainder indicated that they had undertaken less than one course on the topic. However, half of the sample (51.5%) had attended a short professional development workshop or conference on giftedness. Further, a small number of respondents ($n = 3$) indicated that they had completed a unit on giftedness in their post-graduate studies. It is not surprising, given this limited exposure to specialised training, that 88.2% of the participants reported that they felt inadequately prepared to work with gifted students.

The participants also reported that 128 or two-thirds of the schools with which they worked (66.32%) did not provide any specialised programs to meet the cognitive needs of gifted students. Where programs were offered, they were more likely to be in urban settings than rural settings. For example, 20% of urban schools, compared to 14.49% of rural schools, offered 'special classes for the gifted in one or more major subject areas'; and, 'school-wide enrichment programs' were in place in 24 urban schools (43.64%) and in 38 rural schools (27.54%).

School counsellors reported that they spent proportionately less time working with gifted students than the rest of the school population. Indeed, over 20% indicated that they spent no time at all working with gifted students, and only seven school counsellors in total indicated that they spent more than 5% of their time with these students. The responses to the percentage of time spent with gifted students ranged from zero to 20% (the mean was 2.99%). Many participants were reluctant to posit an ideal percentage of their time that should be devoted to working with gifted students, and so these responses varied greatly, ranging from 3 to 40% with a mean of 13%, a percentage that is somewhat closer to their proportion (according to NSW policy) in the total school population. The school counsellors indicated that the proportion of time they could spend with gifted students was dictated by school priorities and the needs of the individuals, although there was a belief that the time spent should be proportional.

The nature of the work that school counsellors currently undertook with gifted students, and which they believed were the students' most pressing needs, included (in frequency order):

1. IQ testing/assessment.
2. Socioemotional concerns.
3. Assistance to teachers in programming for gifted students.
4. Behaviour issues.
5. Consultation with parents and teachers.
6. Advocacy.

The Gagné and Nadeau scale (1985) was used to determine the school counsellors' attitudes to gifted students and particular provisions for them. Overall, the school counsellors were moderately positive in their attitudes. The analyses showed that they slightly agreed on gifted students' need for support to reach their potential ($M=5.21$) and slightly disagreed that special provision for gifted students was elitist ($M=3.36$). However, they were neutral on their attitudes toward the efficacy of acceleration, a finding that is consistent with the ambivalence that many educators show toward accelerated progression (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Vialle & Rogers, 2012).

Only a few items attracted strong agreement or disagreement from the school counsellors. The participants strongly disagreed with the following items:

16. Our schools are already adequate in meeting the needs of the gifted.
26. Tax-payers should not have to pay for special education for the minority of children who are gifted.
35. All special programs for the gifted should be abolished.

They strongly agreed with only two items, namely:

13. Gifted persons are a valuable resource for our society.
14. The specific educational needs of the gifted are too often ignored in our schools.

Discussion

The findings of this preliminary study confirm that, like teachers, school counsellors need specialist training in gifted education. The school counsellors expressed the view that their effectiveness in helping gifted students was affected by their relative lack of knowledge of the particular counselling needs of the students. For many school counsellors, their work with gifted students is imbalanced toward testing and problem behaviours at the expense of more positive interventions, including advocacy. Accrediting bodies in Australia require a mandated unit in all teacher preparation courses on students with special needs, which may or may not include those who are gifted depending on the whim of the institution. It is time that study in the developmental needs of students with gifted potential is similarly mandated.

The unfavourable situation reported by school counsellors was exacerbated by the heavy demands on their time, which left school counsellors time-poor in working with gifted students. Other school priorities often deflected them away from proactive helping approaches for gifted students. Their lack of time impacted significantly, therefore, on how they could assist gifted students, their families and their teachers. In order to shift this focus to a more positive approach, educational jurisdictions need to seriously address the resourcing issue. At the very least, the ratio of school counsellors to school populations needs to be reviewed, and hopefully, increased. This would enable school counsellors to more evenly spread their time across their various roles within the schools they serve.

An incidental finding of the research herein was that a significant proportion of schools (especially those in rural settings) were not programming for gifted students. The school counsellors in our study expressed a strong belief that schools were not doing enough for gifted students but lacked the knowledge, time and resources to do anything about it. Some counsellors expressed their frustration that they do not have more time to help gifted students. This is a significant issue for the New South Wales Department of Education, given that school communities are required by government policy to identify and program for their gifted students. Again, policies do not ensure that practices change. If the government is serious about meeting the needs of all students and ensuring they reach their potential, policies need to be backed up by appropriate levels of professional development and resourcing. School systems need to be held accountable for the implementation of the policy.

Conclusion

In New South Wales, as in the rest of Australia, school counsellors begin their professional lives as teachers. In their counselling roles, they have a great deal to contribute to the development of giftedness in youngsters. Our research has revealed that they are mindful of this responsibility and

would embrace the opportunity to devote more time to helping such students reach their potential at school. However, they feel hampered by their lack of specialised training and their heavy workloads, which often mean that gifted students are not regarded as a priority. It is incumbent on school systems, then, to ensure that this important role is appropriately resourced so that all students can benefit from their work.

Franz Mönks has taught many of us in the field of gifted education that giftedness is a developmental process. Many people play a part in that development — indeed, it takes a whole village to raise a child and to ensure that the child reaches his or her potential. School counsellors are an important part of the ‘village’, even though their contributions are sometimes overlooked.

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