

Personalised Learning Pathways Meeting The Needs Of Gifted Students In Senior Secondary School

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ABSTRACT:

In 2005 we won a major three year contract with the Ministry Of Education to develop and pilot a programme for gifted students in a senior secondary school. Our programme was also the only school-based programme in New Zealand to be selected for formal academic research. The programme has been very successful and has been selected by the Education Review Office as a model of good practice in the education of gifted students.

This programme is holistic and individualised. The programme has multiple strands and is inclusive of parents and the community.

This paper outlines the processes involved in the personalisation of learning for gifted students in a senior secondary school, years 11 - 13. I am a practitioner and this paper is presented for fellow practitioners in gifted education. However, I believe that principles of good practice are universal and have value and potentially positive outcomes for all learners, even though they may have initially been developed specifically for target groups. I therefore believe that all senior secondary students would benefit from this programme, not just the gifted students for whom the programme was originally developed. Nevertheless, this programme was developed

for gifted students and has successfully met their needs and it is in this context that this paper is presented.

This paper will cover:

Background Information

The Objectives of the Programme

Target Groups

The Identification Process

The Programme

Evaluation

Professional Development

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

GOVERNMENT POLICY

In 2000, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE) published *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools* (Learning Media Item 23872, 2000). In December 2003 the National Administrative Guideline (NAG) 1(iii c) was amended with the footnote 'including gifted and talented students'. This guideline 1(iii c) requires Boards of Trustees, through the principal and staff, on the basis of good quality assessment information, to identify students and groups of students who have special needs (including gifted and talented), and to develop and implement teaching and learning strategies to achieve their full potential. As a result, in 2005 it became mandatory for all state and integrated state schools to demonstrate that they were providing for gifted and talented students.

This year, the Education Review Office (ERO), the government agency that reviews schools on a national level, has begun to review the progress that has been achieved in schools and our school has been one of the first to be reviewed (July 2007). The review process of programmes for gifted and talented students focuses on key areas as illustrated by the pre visit profile (Appendix 1) and outlined below:

“How well is your school supporting gifted and talented students to achieve to their potential?” (Education Review Office. Providing for Gifted and Talented Students, July 2007) is the underlying question driving reviews with the following evaluative questions:

- How well does the school leadership support the achievement of gifted and talented students?
- How inclusive and appropriate are the school’s processes for defining and identifying giftedness and talent?
- How effective are the programmes for gifted and talented students?
- How well does the school review the effectiveness of their gifted and talented programmes?
- To what extent do gifted and talented programmes promote positive outcomes for gifted and talented students?

To support the implementation of this policy, the MOE created a contestable pool of funding (Talent Development Initiative - TDI) so that educational organisations could develop and trial models of good practice in gifted and talented education. These are

three year contracts and we applied and successfully gained funding for the second round of funding in 2005 to begin our programme in 2006. This funding is linked directly to the contract against outcomes which include student/programmme, salary, ICT and professional development. As yet there has been no confirmation that there will be a third round of funding.

Applying for funding is time consuming and it is often a daunting process. There are also skills and knowledge needed to create proposals in the necessary format and with the level of content to target specific objectives. Get as much help as possible from previously successful applicants, have a team within your school who have a commitment to this process and who will, over time, develop a sound skill base, build networks within multiple organisations for support and expertise and do not be afraid to include student representatives in your team. Once you have successfully gained funding, you will feel much more confident in your ability to pursue further contracts. The first application is always the most difficult. Hold on to the fact that your students deserve the opportunities this extra funding will provide.

RESEARCH

The MOE has also funded a formal academic research project to evaluate selected programmes as part of the TDI initiative. This project team is led by Dr Roger Moltzen from Waikato University and Dr Tracey Riley from Massey University, both of whom were key advisors to the Ministry of Education during the development of the gifted and talented policy. Our project was the only school-based project from the five projects selected for this formal academic research. The other four are the Marine Studies Department at Otago University, The George Parkyn Centre and The One-Day School programme, both of which provide professional development and finally, the University of Auckland Arts On Line project. Our research team is led by Dr Moltzen and they are actively evaluating our programme as it progresses.

RUTHERFORD COLLEGE

Rutherford College (www.rutherford.school.nz) is a co-educational school set in Te Atatu Peninsula, West Auckland. Te Atatu was traditionally a working class suburb but recent changes have seen a shift in demographics as real estate near the city has become highly sought after. The school decile rating (socio economic rating) has just increased from 4 to 5, (10 being the highest). The roll of 1200 students is 48% European, 19% Maori, 17% Pacific Island, 16 % Asian.

Our school policy for gifted and talented education is driven by our following definition statement:

‘Rutherford College recognises and celebrates gifted and talented learners through a multi-categorical approach (academic, creative, sporting, cultural, technological, leadership and social). We recognise that such students have outstanding abilities (in relation to their peers), both demonstrated and potential, in one or more areas and come from different communities and cultures. We acknowledge that they have individual needs which we endeavour to identify and nurture so that we are able to maximise their potential.’

PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

Giving students a voice and listening to what they have to say

Secondary schools are traditionally, and by their very nature, curriculum driven and some would say increasingly assessment driven. An individual student entering this environment enters a myriad of systems, routines, processes and the associated culture of learning. The student enters the system and they fit into it. We suggest that the student comes into our school and we create a programme of learning and a learning environment around their needs. The starting point is different and the approach to learning is different. Too often the existing barriers, when attempting to meet individual needs in secondary schools, are seen as rigid, fixed and non negotiable. This is not the way it has to be viewed. If you start with the needs of the individual student, as opposed to a cohort, you will build a successful programme because you have prioritised needs and have looked beyond the traditional school systems and curriculum. You negotiate and advocate on behalf of the student for flexibility and change. We have attempted to achieve these goals within our junior Kaleidoscope

programme for able students and our individualised programme for gifted students in the senior school. The junior school refers to students in year 9 and 10 and our senior programme refers to students in years 11 to 13.

This programme also intends to actively involve parents in the process. Parents become increasingly isolated as the student progresses through the schooling process and we have sought to actively involve parents from the outset. This includes interviews and regular contact with regard to the individual child, as well as regular parent meetings/evenings with various guest speakers.

We have a programme of learning for parents, parents and students and for parents of Maori students. This has been parent-driven and again we undertook a process of identification of need and developed a programme to meet these needs. I am currently developing a programme for parents of our Asian students as they also have specific needs. For example we have had specialised careers evenings and an evening with an educational psychologist who discussed issues around being gifted, stress management etc.

Our Maori parents group has chosen to support one of our student initiatives that aims to raise the achievement of Maori students. These parents will form an advocacy group and play an active role within the school to support able Maori students in maximising their potential.

TARGET GROUPS

We formed a small team of teachers to drive and take responsibility for gifted and talented programmes within the school. Our group developed a definition of gifted and talented that is multi-categorical and multicultural. We have also a contractual obligation under the TDI contract to develop processes and programme specifically for Maori and Pasifika groups. We have therefore given equal value to cultural and multi-categorical concepts of giftedness. This is an important principle within a secondary schooling environment where academic, and to a lesser degree, sporting and cultural pursuits, are the primary objectives of endeavour and achievement. In practice, this shift in pedagogy requires a shift in values and thinking for students, parents, teachers and the wider community so that outcomes are tangible. For example, I have students who will state, when asked why they are on the gifted programme, that they have exceptional interpersonal skills, or that they have an extensive knowledge of their own culture. They can state this with confidence alongside another student who may cite their exceptional abilities in a more traditionally recognised area of maths and science for example, because the students have been valued both in principle and in practice.

IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

We have chosen to adopt a multi-faceted approach to identification including student self referral, peer nomination, parent nomination and teacher nomination. In some instances it may also be necessary to have a professional assessment undertaken to identify a student especially when the student is an underachiever with behavioural issues.

All of the above parties will only make nominations if the climate is conducive to doing so and if there exists a common understanding of the characteristics of gifted and talented students. You will fail to see something if you are not looking for it.

We primarily use Purdue's¹ scales because they are a good frame of reference for subject teachers whose primary relationship with a student and knowledge of them is within the context of their classroom teaching in their subject. The Purdue underachieving gifted profile is also utilised by classroom teachers. We also utilise the parent, peer and self nomination profiles as a starting point in the identification process.

The NZCER (NZ Council for Educational Research) profile is a useful tool for teachers who know the student from a range of experiences and over a period of time.

Once a student is identified within a school context the parents are asked to complete the Purdue parent profile. This is another tool that can be utilised in the initial stages

¹ Feldhusen, J.F., and Saylor, M.F (1987)

of the parent/student/facilitator interview process and in establishing the relationships that are necessary for the success of the programme.

In our first year we were concerned that no girls were being identified for the senior programme, either by peers or teachers, so last year we extended the senior programme into Year 10, by targeting individuals in the Year 9 group. Apparently it is not an uncommon phenomenon to have difficulty identifying girls at this level as the culture of the Year 10 cohort age group sees girls hide their talents under a blanket of conformity. Interestingly, when we began to probe the Year 10 girls further through written questionnaires, we unearthed some covert bullying by the Year 10 boys in the form of nonverbal tactics, verbal putdowns, and intimidating behaviour when girls participate in activities and contribute to class discussions. We believe by targeting the Year 9 cohort for identification we will identify and nurture girls through Year 10 and counteract the current culture and enhance positive change.

For Maori and Pasifika students the identification process begins with the core values of their cultures which have identifiable behaviours and characteristics by which to identify students who are gifted.

MAORI CONCEPTS OF GIFTEDNESS REFLECT THESE VALUES:

The kumara does not speak of its own sweetness

Manaakitanga: generosity, honouring, caring and giving mana to others which in turn maintains your own.

Whanaungatanga: family values and relationships.

Kaitiakitanga: caretaker of knowledge, environment and resources.

Wairuatanga: spirituality.

Rangatiratanga: leadership that inspires unity.

Matauranga: knowledge.

Te mahi rahi: physical and artistic performance.

Tikanga: customs and protocols that reinforce beliefs and values.

Celebrating tall pohutakawas

PASIFIKA CONCEPTS OF GIFTEDNESS REFLECT THESE VALUES:

Possession of knowledge (acknowledged by others)

Social status (within a group)

Knowledge has to be worthwhile to society

Able to teach others that knowledge

Has spiritual/mystical elements which give power/influence.

(Lesieli MacIntyre and Ingrid Frengley-Vaipuna)

ASIAN CONCEPTS OF GIFTEDNESS

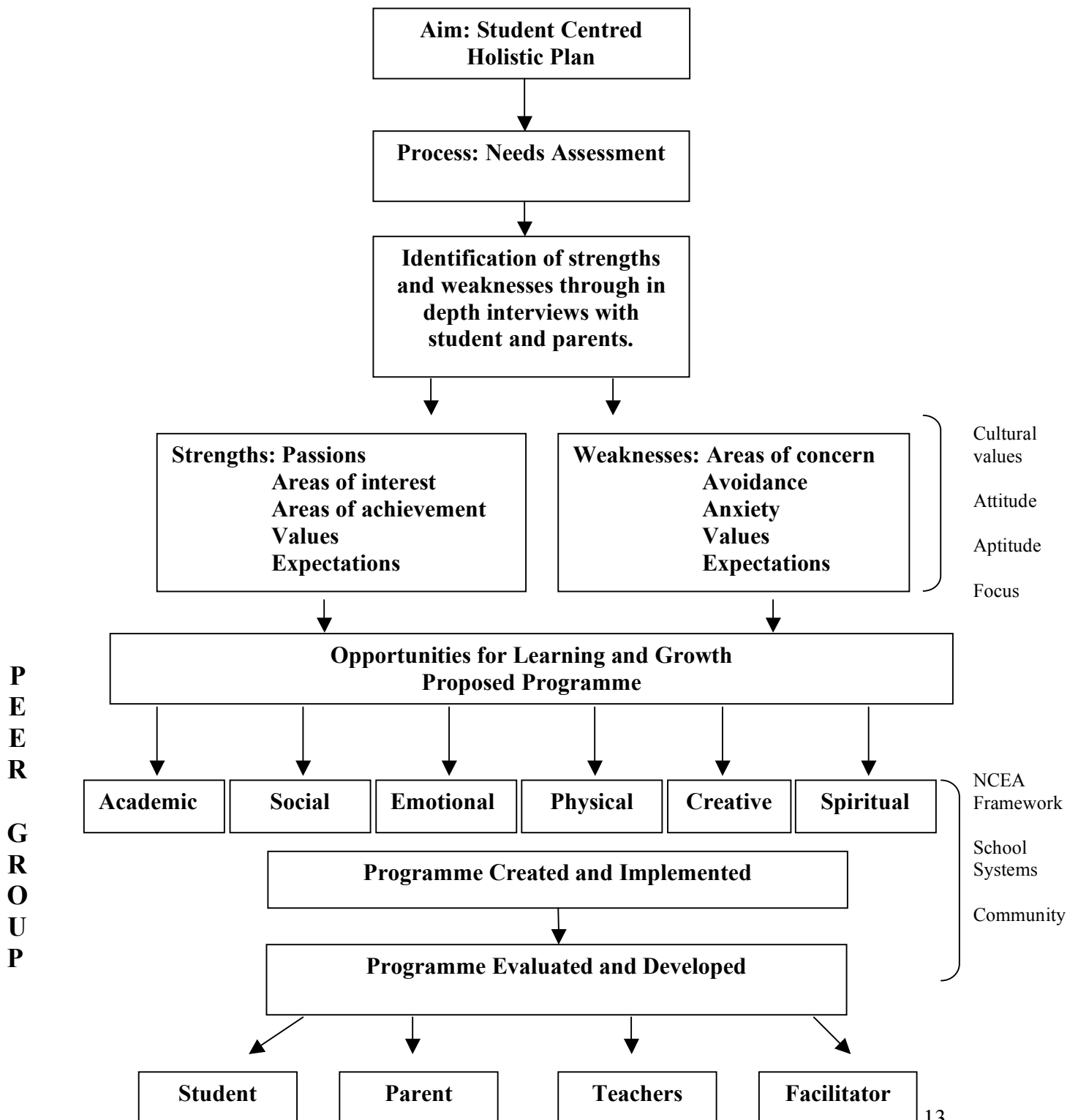
This is an area that we are exploring as there is little in the way of New Zealand research available. There are definite cultural perspectives and needs for Asian students and their families that we need to acknowledge and explore so that we are better able to meet their needs.

In our first year we focused on identifying achieving gifted students in general. This year we have included gifted Maori and underachievers using the wider concepts of giftedness. Next year we will include Pasifika students.

THE PROGRAMME

PROGRAMME COMPONENTS

At the heart of the programme is the student and the desire to create a holistic pathway of learning that sees the student fulfilling his or her potential.



We also established a peer group through a vertical form of Year 11 – 13 students with the Year 9 and 10 students joining us one form period a week. We have a form group, or tutor group, period for twenty minutes each day. We held a camp at the beginning of the year to establish relationships. This camp saw us go to the seaside for two days and participate in a number of water-based team building activities and soaking in hot pools during the evening. The students have also started organising regular social events. The students have identified the importance of having a peer group both academically and socially.

We want to celebrate success and this is an important characteristic of the programme to recognise, acknowledge and celebrate success and the effort it has taken to achieve success. For example every Tuesday we have ‘Show and Tell’ where individual students give a presentation about an aspect of their lives that they are passionate about. These are very entertaining and special for the students involved because of the acknowledgement and support they receive from their peers. We also celebrate birthdays. We have a student whiteboard where accomplishments are announced and celebrated.

BASIS OF THE PROGRAMME: IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Once a student has been identified, s/he and her/his parents are asked to take some time to reflect on the student’s strengths and weaknesses before the initial meeting. They must undertake this process independently of one another. At the first meeting each person, starting with the student, is asked to share what he or she considers to be

his or her strengths and weaknesses. Each person is given uninterrupted time to speak. This is important and for most parents very difficult. Often the student has difficulty communicating his or her strengths and weaknesses. For many they have never been asked this question. That is why it is important to give them time to reflect before the first meeting. The facilitator needs to summarise what has been shared and to begin to identify key factors so that key areas of need can be decided upon and targeted at. At this stage it is important to remember also that the student and his needs is the focus. Having said that, you do want to work as a group so you need to respect all parties. We are establishing a relationship that requires a lot of trust and respect so again this first meeting is important.

Training in facilitated questioning is very valuable. Several of our staff members undertook training and are continually utilising these skills.

The next step is for all parties to consider how best these needs are met. It is safest to start with the academic programme and then over time consider other areas. The second meeting sees the academic programme discussed and finalised and perhaps one other area is introduced, discussed and initial strategies agreed upon.

The process continues from this and once you have established relationships you can further refine and develop the student's programme so that it becomes increasingly comprehensive and holistic.

Flexibility is crucial. Seek new opportunities and make the most of opportunities as they arise, and respond to changing needs and circumstances.

THE FACILITATOR

The facilitator creates the optimum environment for learning. This role is very different from traditional pastoral and academic roles within secondary schooling because of the holistic approach to meeting the special needs of the gifted student. My role is fulltime.

The facilitator has the key role in this holistic process and he or she must have very good interpersonal skills as the success of the programme lies in his or her ability to identify the needs of the student and to have the creative thinking and problem solving skills to create ways (in which) to meet these needs. If opportunities do not exist, they need to be created.

I work alongside the student, parents, teachers and people in the community. I have to establish good working relationships with all parties and am constantly seeking and building relationships with people in the community to ensure that we have access to important learning opportunities.

The students have identified my role as their advocate as a key component of my overall role. It is a sad indication of our culture when I think of the situations where I have had to advocate for them.

EVALUATION

Evaluation is an active process and must be viewed as an important component of a process that seeks to develop and improve programme outcomes.

Students need to be given the skills to undertake effective evaluation. This process must be an active one that demands reflection, critical thinking and the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses and possible solutions. Do not presume that students have these skills; they need to be developed. You cannot possibly have a programme for students if it doesn't actively involve them in the process. From the initial stages of development to the critical stage of evaluation, the student is the focus. Furthermore, evaluation should not be confined to 'the end of the year'.

Evaluation should be an ongoing process; an active process of reflection, critique and creation/solution utilising a variety of tools.

This process should also include parents and staff through meetings, phone calls and formal and informal meetings.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development is multi-faceted with specific objectives for targeted individuals and groups. Whole staff professional development is obviously more generic than that for individual staff members, but both programmes have common objectives that include identification, curriculum content, curriculum delivery and evaluation.

We have a small group of enthusiastic staff who have had a number of years undertaking various learning pathways. The most influential was being part of a cluster of schools in the three year iPAINT (integrated Powerful Adventures In Thinking) initiative which focused on ICT and gifted and talented education led by Pam Hook (www.hooked-on-thinking.com). This cluster was funded in the first round of the Talent Development Initiative.

We have also enlisted Pam's help in professional development workshops for teachers to develop knowledge and skills in the planning and delivery of thinking skills aligned with our National Certificate of Educational Achievement as well as workshops for students and parents involved in this programme.

This group of teachers had worked to set up our junior programme in years 9 and 10, and have extended into skills and knowledge into the senior school, years 11 to 13.

The whole school professional development programme looked to introduce staff to gifted and talented education whilst also catering for staff members who were actively involved in our junior school programme. Our school is also undertaking a new model of professional development based on Guskey's² principles so that the gifted and talented programme reflects school objectives and practice especially in the delivery of professional development.

I have led a series of workshops that covered concepts of giftedness, identification, behaviour and characteristics of gifted and talented students, strategies to help meet

² Guskey, T.R (2000)

the needs of gifted students, and a session where students and parents shared their needs and concerns, giving students (and their parents) a voice.

CONCLUSION

This programme represents an exciting development in the education of our gifted and talented students. The students on this programme have a unique opportunity to drive their own learning and personal development. The students are able to develop to their potential through a holistic approach to learning which ensures that they are challenged and that they have confidence in their ability to create opportunities and maximise opportunities presented to them.