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² Pseudonym

Chapter One

Towards Understanding Giftedness

A noble Neapolitan, Gonzalo,
... so, of his gentleness
Knowing I loved my books, he furnish'd me,
From mine own library, with volumes that
I prize above my dukedom.

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, iii

Defining giftedness: how and why¹

Picture yourself at a dinner party. It's one of those parties where no one has met before and silence has fallen as the hosts prepare the food. So someone asks about your professional life. You say you're an English teacher and their eyes glaze over. But say you work with gifted children and you're the centre of attention. You'll get one of the following reactions.

- What do you mean by gifted, exactly? (or bright, or highly able, or whatever—you can't avoid it by choosing another term). I mean, the girl down the road won the Maths Talent Quest when she was in Grade One, but she doesn't know her tables as well as my daughter...
- My daughter was reading before she started school. Of course I'm not saying she's gifted, but...
- I didn't really achieve at school (but look at me now...)
- I think my son could do much better than he is doing. He was really good at maths

in primary school, but this year he has a really bad teacher. In any case, at the moment he's more interested in football; he's trying for the state team. And he's hugely popular with the girls.

Behind each of these comments is a theory of giftedness waiting to be articulated. To understand the nature of intelligence and to know whether or not there might be ways of measuring it, creating it, and somehow controlling it, have challenged humankind for generations. High intelligence (or giftedness or talent²) has been a holy grail for at least that long. It is intriguing then that still we are not sure what it is for which we search.

Teaching, like parenting, is a great adventure. Who can tell what the effect of curriculum innovation and different school structures will be on children? As I write, the debate on the best ways of teaching reading rages yet again, and strong, persuasive views can be heard on either side. In setting out to create provision for gifted children, two truths should be set above in gilt letters.

¹ Some of the ideas outlined in this chapter elaborate on ideas presented in the paper *Directions in Gifted Education: Reflections on the implications of research for practice*. Melbourne: IARTV

² **A note on terminology**

The terms *gifted* and *talented* have themselves provoked considerable debate over the years, mostly along the lines of which comes first or which is the greater. Gagné's model, for example, depends on a distinction between the two in which gifts are inherited but talent is the manifestation. Thus people may be gifted but not talented. Other definitions use the terms more in line with intuitive understanding - that talents are more common, and less extreme, than gifts. Others adopt the terms interchangeably. There are no rules, but give the variety in which the terms are used even within the research literature, it is important to clarify how you intend to use them. In this book I shall use them interchangeably for reasons of expression.

I 4 Chapter One

- We can't be sure this is the *best* way; we can be sure it's not the *only* way.
- We can't be sure we've 'caught' all the appropriate children.

Increasingly research into giftedness is taking a long term view and exploring the effects of formal education and other influences on adults who are clearly high achievers in their fields, as well as on adults who as children showed promise but did not 'produce' in line with expectations. In schools, and in research, we have to begin to do both: to look at what resulted from our teaching, the 'end product', or even the 'mid product', which is the adult, and ask how this came to be; and we must ask about the children now in our charge what long term, mid term, and short term outcomes we expect to result from our interventions. Such investigations will lead to tantalising questions about the meanings we attach to giftedness, and the relationship between what we identify as giftedness—or potential for giftedness—in children and gifted performance in adults.

In this chapter the focus is on meanings of giftedness and the role that definitions might serve in the development of policies and programs. A combination of conventional theory and case study is used to draw out central issues.

Key ideas in this chapter

- Do I need a definition?
- How has giftedness been defined?
- Why examine a range of definitions?
- Shopping for definitions: Guidelines for practice

Do I need a definition?

We live now in an era of accountability. When we nominate children for participation in special programs of whatever kind, when we trumpet in our mission statements that we cater for gifted children, we must have a clear idea

what we mean by that and how the definition we have chosen relates to the selection procedures and to the provision.

On a practical level, a definition of giftedness is necessary to focus thinking at all levels of implementation: in planning, in the development of programs and identification procedures, in evaluation and in review. But that is far from saying that it is set in stone: it should be solid enough to provide direction and to avoid dilution of purpose (such as the unhelpful notion that all children are gifted), but it should retain a degree of flexibility born of the awareness that understandings of giftedness have developed and changed in the past, and will develop and change in the future. A definition, once chosen, should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure its usefulness for the program of which it is a part. (See Chapter 5 on Evaluation and Review).

During the process of examining and thinking about what giftedness might mean, difficult matters will arise in discussion. This is as it should be. When we teach, we hope to challenge children and make them aware that many issues become more complicated, not less complicated, the more we think about them. The same applies here.

How has giftedness been defined?

The ways in which giftedness has been defined over the centuries has changed according to what has been valued by different societies. In ancient Sparta, for example, the skills of weaponry and fighting were most important; more than two thousand years later, it was the launch of the Russian Sputnik which gave impetus to both science teaching and to the search for gifted children in the U.S. Who knows what will be seen as most valuable in the future?

In recent definitions there has been a move away from the idea of intelligence as something one has or has not, and an increasing awareness of the tantalising role of the environment, or Tannenbaum's (1986) 'chance' factors, in actualising talent. Significant is the shift away from the view of giftedness as some kind of general quality, towards the understanding that gifted or

talented performance can appear in many domains. Gardner's work with multiple intelligences has done much to popularise this idea, but it is not his alone, and the idea of a range of domains of ability can be seen in Marland's definition and in others. The table below lists some of the definitions which have been adopted at different times.

Changing Views of Giftedness		
Originator	Year	Summary
Terman	1925	The gifted are defined as those who score in the top 1% on an IQ test such as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale.
Passow, Goldberg, Tannenbaum, & French	1955	Gifted students have a capacity for superior achievement in any socially valuable area of human endeavour, i.e., 'such academic fields as languages, social sciences, natural sciences and mathematics; such fields as music, graphic and plastic arts, performing and mechanic arts; and in the field of human relations'. (p. 7)
Witty	1958	We consider any child gifted whose performance, in a potentially valuable line of activity, is consistently remarkable.
Marland Report (United States Office of Education [U.S.O.E.]	1972	'Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons [as having] outstanding abilities [and being] capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realise their contributions to self and society. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas: 1. General intellectual ability 2. Specific academic aptitude 3. Creative or productive thinking 4. Leadership ability 5. Visual and performing arts 6. Psychomotor ability (p. 9)
US Congress, Educational Amendment of 1978	1978	In this version, the last category—psychomotor ability was omitted. The rationale for this was partly the overlap between psychomotor achievements and achievement in the performing arts (dance, mime, for example) and partly the fact that students with exceptional athletic and sporting abilities already appear to be well catered for.