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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GIFTED???

A New Zealand Approach

Rationale

If we are to describe some students as “gifted”, we must have a clear and defensible basis for making such a distinction. It is argued that the current focus on measurable achievement, particularly academic achievement, as the sole criterion and goal is *not* defensible, in that it sets a goal which is limited in vision and fails to acknowledge the multiple factors which in all individuals combine to produce ultimate learning outcomes and performance. A more realistic approach must take this multiplicity of factors into account and identify those factors which specifically differentiate the gifted from the non-gifted learner. This process also enables us to set a more appropriate goal for the gifted individual, one which has regard – as all learning must – for the future adult life of that individual in the community.

Developmental phase

1983 Families of gifted children nationally express frustration with school – needs not met.
 1985 Enrichment program in response > develop holistic model of needs: trial strategies, record, evaluate.
 1995 Establish gifted education centre + One Day School program: implement model, develop resources, record, evaluate: ultimately 600 chn, 18 venues nationally.
 2006 – now: Establish REACH Education: focus on professional development via in-depth online courses. Implement/further develop strategies & resources. Build conceptual approach. Publish materials. Integrate cultural perspective. Link with colleagues internationally.
 2021 Publish holistic definition – see diagram.

Discussion

Giftedness is not all about performance. That’s only the *end product* of a complex process. It isn’t a choice. It can’t be taught or learned. It is present at birth. It helps to shape a child’s whole experience of life. It can be identified long before school, sometimes even in infancy. It is grounded in the extraordinary *intensity* with which gifted individuals perceive and experience life. It is this which makes their responses so intrinsically different from those of other people. They often see long before others see, see much further, or see far more deeply and powerfully.



It makes sense that this intense engagement will lead to advanced performance. But this also helps us to understand the exceptional *qualities* we so often find in gifted learners –e.g. compassion, idealism, a sense of justice. This is crucial: it is someone’s qualities which determine *how they use* their abilities: Greta Thunberg vs Hitler. This is the most significant difference between an achievement-based and an holistic approach. It derives from the wisdom of New Zealand’s Māori culture.

Children’s abilities and qualities help shape their learning *needs*. Added to this, the gifted child’s development is typically asynchronous. Thus teaching strategies which meet the needs of the rest of the class can almost entirely fail for the gifted child. More time, more flexibility, more challenge, more depth, more choice: all are needed: how are they to be provided?

Abilities and qualities also help shape the child’s sense of identity. Gifted children cannot help but sense their differences from other children, often acutely. For some, the feeling of not being like others can lead to a negative self-concept that can limit their whole lives. But it can also cause the gifted child to question the circumstances around him or her, to seek deep answers to those questions. Through this process, the gifted youngster is forming the values that will help guide his or her life choices.

Very significantly, gifted individuals are then also likely to begin to form a *life vision* as their values begin to coalesce.

A life vision is a concept which gives someone a sense of purpose larger than themselves. It is about so much more than measurable achievement (though that may be involved). In childhood, it can begin very simply: “I want to be a vet to help sick animals”; in adolescence, gifted students may attach themselves to causes; in adulthood, those values can express themselves in any of a multitude of ways – creativity, invention, discovery, service, leadership.



The REACH Model of Needs



Thus abilities and qualities weave themselves together to lead to what can be truly visionary outcomes. Above all, it is the ultimate outcome for a gifted life.

References

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http://www.giftedreach.org.nz/key_concepts-1.htm

