

Gifted Kids Curriculum: What do the Students Say?

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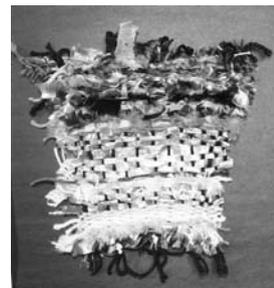
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ABSTRACT

Gifted students have different learning, social and emotional needs to their peers. The needs of some gifted students can be met within their mainstream school. Other gifted students need learning, social and emotional support beyond the school gates. The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2000) advocates for a continuum of provisions for gifted students, including in-class and out-of-school options, such as withdrawal programmes. Gifted Kids (formerly the Gifted Kids Programme) is one such programme.

Research conducted with Gifted Kids alumni students (Clark, 2009) found that students who attended Gifted Kids experienced academic, social and emotional growth as a result of their time on the programme. Clark utilised online surveys and focus-group interviews to gather alumni students' perceptions about their Gifted Kids experience. This article explains the Gifted Kids Curriculum (GCACT, 2010), which acts as a framework of goals and objectives for a specialist programme, using 'student voices' to demonstrate its value.

Research paper

Keywords: *Curriculum, gifted, responsive, student voice*

INTRODUCTION

Programmes for gifted and talented students require "comprehensive and coherent frameworks of goals and objectives" (Riley, 2011, p. 305), and yet, New Zealand research shows that the majority of schools do not use a curricular model for specialist programmes (Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind, & Kearney, 2004). This puts gifted and talented learners at risk of unplanned, accidental and coincidental learning, rather than consciously addressing their needs (Ministry of Education, 2000). As the Ministry of Education (2012, p. 70) explains, curriculum design is essential and

"... learning experiences should have clear, attainable learning outcomes that are carefully sequenced within a prescribed time-frame.

The curriculum should also be comprehensive, taking into account all the cognitive, social, cultural, and emotional needs of gifted and talented students."

Over the past twelve years, Gifted Kids has developed a robust, research-based curriculum specifically designed for gifted students in a one-day withdrawal programme. The Gifted Kids Curriculum (GCACT, 2010) equips students with skills, knowledge, and self-understanding, using a framework that develops talents, conceptual learning, thinking skills, and the affective domain. Aspects of the curriculum can be adapted for use in a mainstream school for some students, but the curriculum as a whole is neither designed nor suitable for a mixed-ability class. As this article will explain, the curriculum was purposely designed for implementation by specialist teachers working with like-minded gifted and talented learners. It is essential that withdrawal programmes for gifted students use an appropriately planned and differentiated curriculum, allowing the teacher to respond to individual student needs (Rogers, 2002). The article also provides evidence to support the effectiveness of the curriculum in its delivery and implementation to students, by using their voices from Clark's study (2009).

GIFTED KIDS CURRICULUM OVERVIEW

As described by Riley (2011), a curricular framework, such as the Gifted Kids Curriculum, serves as a model upon which programme delivery and classroom instruction develop and are implemented. The curriculum is implemented initially by teachers, but as students progress through the programme (students can attend Gifted Kids for up to six years), they take greater control of their learning choices and begin to use the framework to plan their own learning journey. So, as the Ministry of Education (2012) advocates, the curriculum is an important structure for teachers and students, ensuring longevity and wholeness in their learning, rather than fragmentation.

As has been stated, a curriculum has a set of defined goals and purposes. The Gifted Kids Curriculum (GCACT, 2010) is based on the

following curricular goals, with the purpose being that students attending Gifted Kids will interact with like-minded learners to:

- develop an understanding of themselves as gifted individuals;
- explore and develop gifts, talents and interests;
- engage in abstract and complex learning;
- experience and embrace new challenges, and
- create and innovate.

The goals translate into four integrated cornerstones:

- talent Development;
- conceptual Learning;
- mental edge: thinking skills, and
- affective domain.

Using this combination of cornerstones in authentic settings provides students with academic enrichment, accelerated learning, creative extension and social, emotional and cultural support that matches their unique needs (Clark, 2009). The curricular goals clearly reflect not only cognitive development, but also social and emotional development. The opportunity for gifted and talented students to develop self-understanding, including exploring and developing their gifts, talents and interests, while also engaging with like-minded peers, is an expectation of programmes for gifted students (Gifted Kids, 2009).

Learning With Like-minds

Archiving over the five curriculum goals, Gifted Kids advocates for gifted students to learn with like-minded peers. This is an essential condition of the delivery of the Gifted Kids Curriculum (GCACT, 2010) and a provision that is recommended by research in this field (Bate, 2012; Clark, 2009; Feldhusen & Moon, 1992; Rogers, 2002). Gifted students need opportunities to socialise and learn with like-ability peers (Rogers, 2002) and out-of-school gifted provisions, such as one-day withdrawal programmes, are an excellent vehicle for like-minded peer interaction (Freeman, 1991; Riley, 2009). Learning with like-minded peers allows students to be appropriately challenged, encourages motivation and helps with a realistic understanding of their own abilities (Feldhusen and Moon, 1992; Clark, 2009).

Delivering the curriculum to a like-minded peer group provides academic challenges, as seventy-five percent of participants in Clark's study (2009) with Gifted Kids alumni revealed. Their comments included:

"They [Gifted Kids peers] made me more confident to do harder things."

"I feel that attending Gifted Kids with like-minded students helped me to strive for excellence in my regular classwork and to set challenges and goals for myself."

Students engaging in the curriculum feel challenged to try harder and push themselves beyond their usual limits. Clark's research (2009) also highlighted the ease with which students can not only learn, but also socialise, with others of similar interests, who have a comparable sense of humour and think the same way:

"It was easy to fit in and feel part of things and to make friends, which was a novelty to me and not like regular school where I was not really like the others."

"They understand the same things."

The power of having a curriculum that has been planned, implemented and evaluated for like-minded peers cannot be underestimated, but it is the cornerstones of the curriculum that enables its effectiveness in meeting the unique needs of gifted and talented learners, as the next section describes.

UNPACKING THE CURRICULUM CORNERSTONES

Talent Development

Talent Development is an essential component of a gifted curriculum. Rogers (2002) states that a curriculum for gifted students should include regular opportunities to work in their areas of passion and talent. Gifted students not only need to work in their areas of talent, passion or interest, but need to be challenged in these areas (Piirto, 2000). Feldhusen (1998) states that students whose talents are at levels exceptionally higher than their peers require access to instructional resources and activities that are commensurate with their talents and it is only through this that students will make significant progress.

At Gifted Kids, Talent Development involves setting individualised goals to assist in developing their talents and passions, and providing students with resources, support and opportunities to meet these goals. Students are given a substantial amount of time to work on a chosen project, allowing for sustained and in-depth learning. Specialist tutors and mentors are used to support this cornerstone of the curriculum.

Alumni students participating in Clark's research (2009) identified Talent Development as a key point of difference for Gifted Kids.

Talent Development not only allowed them time to pursue their identified passions, but also to discover new areas of learning. Talent Development is broad and wide-ranging, and is always driven from students' interests, strengths, and needs, as their comments show:

"[I did] all the stuff I was interested in - maths, science, computers, some music and lots of critical thinking and oral stuff, all the time."

"Mathematics was my strength and Gifted Kids recognised that and extended my maths abilities. I also discovered creative thinking and drama which I was quite good at and Gifted Kids helped me to enjoy them and learn at the same time."

"Talent Time and Passion Time were great to help me in advancing in the things I love and the things that I could use. It helped me to focus on my strengths and taught me how to improve on the skills I have."

Talent Development enables students to actively engage with their own ideas, through self-selected, in-depth study. Other opportunities for in-depth study are delivered through Conceptual Learning, the next curriculum cornerstone.

Conceptual Learning

Conceptual Learning is the study of universal concepts that are timeless, abstract and broad which can be shown through a variety of examples, such as Change, Systems, and Patterns (Erickson, 2001). At Gifted Kids, each year, a common universal concept is studied by all classes. The contexts in which the concept is explored are decided by each teacher and their classes. Generalisations related to the concept (sometimes referred to as 'debatable truths' or 'big ideas') are developed and explored in different contexts. Learning experiences are offered at core and complex levels to cater for differing levels of ability.

Conceptual Learning suits gifted students because they are mostly global thinkers and are able to grasp abstract ideas and underlying principles (Cathcart, 1994). Conceptual Learning is 'whole-to-part learning', particularly suited to gifted students (Rogers, 2007). The Gifted Kids Conceptual Learning cornerstone is based on The Model of the Relationship of Unit Components (Roberts & Roberts, 2005). This model was chosen because it is suited to all levels and areas of the curriculum, supports curriculum differentiation, incorporates assessment and facilitates transfer of learning across concepts. The model is applied in the example below, which is taken from a Gifted Kids classroom.

Concept: Change

Generalisations: All change has a cause and effect; Change can be influenced; Change happens over time.

Contexts:

Migration; Innovations; Myth Busters

In practice, gifted students undertaking the study of change were able to explore a range of content knowledge and skills, and it is not surprising that more than eighty percent of participants in Clark's study (2009) found this challenging! More than seventy percent experienced new knowledge and purposeful experiences. As one student described: "... [it's] always interesting, harder and different to school. I found it very motivating." Conceptual Learning lends itself to inquiry approaches, which are heavily reliant upon students' development of a mental edge in their thinking. This connects with the third cornerstone of the curriculum.

Mental Edge: Thinking Skills

At Gifted Kids, the Mental Edge: Thinking Skills cornerstone is broken down into five areas – creative thinking, critical thinking, caring thinking, metacognition and questioning. The ultimate goal is to use combinations of these skills resulting in complex and effective thinking applied through authentic problem-solving and advanced content. Kaplan and Cannon (2010) advocate for the inclusion of thinking skills learning and application in a curriculum for gifted students, in particular creative thinking, critical thinking, logical thinking and problem solving.

Each Gifted Kids teacher fosters a culture of thinking in their classrooms through the use of a thinking vocabulary, the explicit teaching of thinking skills, and enabling opportunities for complex and effective thinking. Students participating in Clark's research (2009) made the following comments about the thinking curriculum at Gifted Kids:

"[There were] loads and loads of thinking opportunities and thinking in lots of different ways which was very cool. You were appreciated for thinking outside the square, which was a novelty in school."

"At Gifted Kids we really explored ways of thinking, which I really enjoyed. This is something that I feel I have benefitted from."

One of the characteristics of gifted learners is well-developed thinking skills (Clark, 2008). A curriculum for gifted students should help to develop these skills further and give students opportunities to apply them. One way to do this

is to differentiate process, helping to stimulate thinking, questioning and metacognition, and to get students thinking about issues, concepts and ideas in more abstract and complex ways (Clark, 2009). As one student in Clark's (2009) study elaborated:

"Thinking outside the box is a phrase I would use to describe my years at Gifted Kids and also thinking in-depth."

Affective Domain

Gifted students need to understand themselves, their giftedness, the reasons for challenges they may face, as well as to develop the skills to tackle challenges and to create personal and social change. They can show extra perception, super-sensitivity and tendencies toward perfectionism (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Gifted children need to learn about self-concept, self-esteem, sense of fairness and justice, attitudes and values, motivation and concern for others (Department for Education and Children's Services, 1997). For some gifted students, these areas denote a strength, and they need opportunities to apply their strength. For other students, these are areas of weakness requiring support.

At Gifted Kids, students explore different theories of giftedness, such as Renzulli's Three-Ring Concept of Giftedness (Renzulli & Reis, 1997) or Gagne's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (2008), by looking at how their own strengths, weaknesses and experiences align with these theories. Students may also explore concepts like fairness, perfectionism, and ego to equip them with strategies and choices to get on in the world. Students analyse other gifted people in their fields of interests, looking at the person beneath, not just the achievements. Students also explore how they can use their own gifts to make a difference in the world around them.

The Affective Domain was not a formal cornerstone of the Gifted Kids Curriculum (GCACT, 2010) when Clark conducted her research in 2009, but programme surveys and focus group interviews still provide evidence of affective development in comments such as the following:

"Gifted Kids was about being OK to be me and then taking risks and accepting opportunities."

"I learnt to laugh, even at myself too sometimes."

"I think it made me feel better about myself and understand myself a bit better."

CONCLUSION

Research strongly advocates for withdrawal programmes such as Gifted Kids to have an appropriately planned and differentiated curriculum (Riley, 2011; Tomlinson, 2003). VanTassel-Baska (2003) describes a differentiated gifted curriculum as one which includes the following: acceleration, complexity, depth, challenge and creativity. The Gifted Kids Curriculum (GCACT, 2010) meets these criteria. It is well-supported by theory and research and reflects 'best practice' in gifted education (Gifted Kids, 2009).

Gifted Kids is just one provision for gifted students in New Zealand. It is an example of a quality, specialist education provision for gifted students based on sound research and educational principles. Gifted Kids is successful in helping to meet the cognitive, social and emotional needs of the students who attend. Their voices attest to this.

"Gifted Kids is a life changing experience. I am forever grateful to my teachers and the programme for providing me with such great opportunities and the encouragement to take these opportunities and make the most of them. Without Gifted Kids I wouldn't have achieved all that I have today. Gifted Kids rocks my socks off!"

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Gifted Kids

Gifted Kids is a nationwide, non-profit organisation working predominantly in low socio-economic areas. Gifted Kids is committed to challenging intellectually and creatively gifted children to grow their exceptional talents, by delivering a one-day-a-week specialised programme and providing professional learning and development in New Zealand schools.