

Gifted? Neurodiverse? Finding a new and better name for giftedness

Ever since the term 'gifted' was first applied to children who demonstrated levels of ability significantly in advance of most of their fellows, there have been problems with the interpretation and application of the term.

It has almost routinely been assumed to mean that the parents or teachers who used the word were claiming some kind of superiority for the child, an attitude which – understandably – was anathema to other parents and to many teachers.

Consequently, even the very concept of there being such a child has often been rejected, frequently with accusations of parental egotism. The different learning behaviour of such a child, persistent questioning for example, may be seen as misbehaviour, being a nuisance, distractibility or being a show-off rather than as genuine interest and a search for a deeper level of understanding. Concern about something the child sees as injustice may be seen as excessive, perfectionism may be regarded as neurotic behaviour, untidy and unfinished work may be regarded as work refusal rather than as the desperate indicator of boredom with work which is too easy.

In vain have parents and teachers sought to find an alternative to the word 'gifted', an alternative which would convey the same meaning but without the stigma.

In New Zealand, these children were for a long time referred to as 'children with special abilities', but the objection to that is surely that ALL children are special. Thus various different terms have been used for gifted programmes or classes to disguise the real purpose. Names like 'accelerate' or 'advanced' are dead giveaways; 'shine' or 'star' are not much more successful; the best I've heard was the school which called its gifted class the 'Out-of-the-Box' class.

But none of this really succeeds: the children themselves soon work out why some kids are in a different class.

Nevertheless, people continue to try to find a name or label that will avoid these problems. The ideal is to find a label which somehow does NOT say 'these children are better than others', but which in some way suggests the reality – that children in this group have different learning needs, not all of which make life easy or guarantee success.

And now we have a new term: **neurodiverse**. Is this the long-wanted answer?

The term was developed to cover a wide range of conditions which in some way affected the individual's capacity to perceive, learn, and respond. Here is the official list of such conditions sent out by the New Zealand Ministry of Education:

Autism Spectrum Disorder; ADHD; Dyslexia; Dyscalculia; Dyspraxia; Tourette Syndrome; Highly Sensitive Person; Gifted; Auditory Processing Disorder; Specific Learning Disorder; Developmental Disorders; Giftedness

What distinguishes these disorders is that, in some way, to a greater or lesser extent, they each *impede the child's ability to learn*.

All except one: gifted. Being gifted is not a 'disorder'. It does not impede learning: it *enhances* the ability to learn.

What impedes the learning of the gifted child is the lack of understanding, of knowledge, or sometimes of sympathy of the teacher, of the education community at large, and of the official authorities.

Until we change that perception, our gifted children will continue to be denied the educational opportunities they deserve and need. “Neurodiversity” is not a useful or appropriate label for the gifted child.

Is there a better and stronger alternative?

One term suggested by a member of the internationally known Columbus Group of gifted experts is “Children with Complex Abilities”.

This is a term which is not restricted to academic abilities but more accurately provides for exceptional levels of ability in creative, physical, ethical, social and/or spiritual domains. Thus:

Some children are born with more than usually acute awareness of their surroundings.

Such children learn differently from others. They are children who have complex abilities.

In their early years, they are likely to reach some of the normal developmental milestones sooner than do other children. They tend to show intense curiosity, to ask endless questions, and to want to investigate for themselves.

At school, they are likely to be more persistent and more questioning than others, particularly in their areas of strength. In those areas, they are capable of, and need, the opportunity to learn at significantly more advanced levels than their age peers. They need opportunities to explore ideas in depth. They tend to be passionate about issues or ideas that concern them.

But they are also vulnerable. They can find it difficult to know how to fit in with other children who do not understand their different responses. They are often frustrated by limits on their learning. Many of them significantly underachieve in terms of their true ability. Confusing for their parents and teachers, they rarely have high ability “across the board”: usually it is asynchronous – present in some areas but not in others. They can suffer from lowered self-esteem as a consequence of all these issues.

Such children are present in every school. They come from every social level and from every culture. This specifically includes Te Ao Māori and the valuable insights it brings to this topic.

These children need teachers who accept and are comfortable with their different needs and who have a knowledge of the ways in which lessons can be differentiated to meet those needs without lessening the teacher’s commitment to all the other children in the class.

Comment:

This is a descriptor rather than a definition. Its great advantage is that it is an explanation which links to what teachers can see for themselves in the classroom.

It is inherently aligned to the traditional New Zealand holistic and child-centred approach rather than to a narrow achievement-centred approach borrowed from other cultures.

Its aim is expressed in these words:

The effectiveness of the education of our gifted children shall not be measured by their personal successes but by the contribution they make to the whole life of the community, whether that be in creativity, in knowledge expansion, or in leadership or service in the community.