

Gifted learners' needs fall under the radar

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Associate Professor Tracy Riley

A new study has revealed New Zealand's smartest kids may not be getting the specialist support and programmes they need to reach their full potential.

Under-achievers receive the bulk of resources, leaving gifted learners in some schools at risk of stagnating, says Massey University gifted education specialist Associate Professor Tracy Riley.

She co-wrote Gifted and Talented Education in New Zealand Schools: A Decade Later with Waikato University's Dr Brenda Bicknell, published this week in the New Zealand Journal of Gifted Education. They surveyed primary and secondary schools to find out whether gifted learners are getting a better deal from the education system since the Ministry of Education investigated ten years ago.

They found that while a number of new initiatives developed by the ministry had been adopted with positive results, "the support for gifted and talented education by the Ministry of Education has declined, with cuts to funding and support since 2009.

"Gifted and talented education has seen its advisory group disbanded, targeted funding for innovative programmes lost when the Talent Development Initiatives were abandoned, and no Minister with responsibilities, and a revolving door approach within the Ministry of Education resulting in continuous changes in personnel explicitly responsible for identification and provision for these learners," the report states.

More recent ministry initiatives – including a revised curriculum; the implementation of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement, including New Zealand Scholarship for secondary students; the introduction of National Standards for primary and intermediate students; development of Ka Hikitia, the Maori Education Strategy, and the Pasifika Plan; and the release of Success for All: Every School, Every Child – were relevant to gifted and talented learners. Yet none explicitly addressed their needs, the report says.

The researchers invited all New Zealand schools to take part in an online survey, resulting in 327 responses (13 per cent of schools).

Just over three quarters were from high decile 6-10 schools, with just

under a third from lower decile schools where there is "an increased focus on priority learners (Maori, Pasifika, and special needs), perhaps with a detrimental effect on gifted and talented students," the report says.

Dr Riley says just over 90 per cent of respondents reported having a person responsible for coordinating gifted education policies and plans – up from 72 per cent ten years ago. But a decreasing number of schools had a team to support the coordinator, down to 37 per cent from 42 per cent a decade ago.

The study found confusion persists in some schools in regard to how to define and identify gifted learners, particularly students from minority cultures where giftedness may be expressed collectively, says Dr Riley, who is chair of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children.

As part of Gifted Awareness Week this week, a 10-year-old gifted learner articulated her frustration in a blog saying; "A problem about being gifted is that you think [school](#) would be great if it were like most people describe it: a challenge and a place to learn. But then, after attending your average class in your age-co-ordinated grade, you think 'why didn't I get the one thing I wanted out of this hour? New knowledge!'"

The authors say new national guidelines introduced in 2005 for gifted education have increased awareness. But their research led them to question whether we are closer to fulfilling the ministry's vision that: "Gifted and talented learners are recognized, valued, and empowered to develop their exceptional abilities and qualities through equitable access to differentiated and culturally responsive provisions."

The study echoes concerns voiced in a joint statement this week from the Professional Association for Gifted Education, the New Zealand

Association for Gifted Children, and the New Zealand Centre for Gifted Education calling on the government and the Ministry of Education to prioritise recognition and funding for gifted learners.

Provided by Massey University

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