

Introducing gifted education into a preschool

A child may spend no more than two years at preschool, but during this time they are developing at a breathtaking, though highly individual, rate. The staff at Nambucca Heads Preschool have always prided themselves on identifying and helping any child whose development is unusually slow. In 1993, however, they set out to identify and help children at the centre whose abilities were outstanding. Mimi Wellisch describes how they went about this.

The setting

Nambucca Heads is a small country town with a population of approximately 2000-3000 people on the mid-North Coast of New South Wales. The population comprises ex-Sydney and other city dwellers, many surfing enthusiasts who grew into parenthood during their surfing days, and country folk who have lived in the region for generations. Unemployment is quite high, and a third of the families using the preschool qualify for the State subsidy because of their low income.

The preschool at Nambucca is a 2-unit traditional country preschool that operates between 9 am and 3 pm during school term. The preschool takes 3- and 4-year-old children, and approximately a hundred children attend throughout the week. Most children attend two set days per week, although some children attend on odd days because of their parents' work requirements.

Preparing the ground

In order to pave the way for a new system, our regular newsletter featured a small section on our intention to introduce accelerated learning. We also announced the

project in the director's report to the Board of Management.

Parents of the identified children were invited to an information night. We wanted to:

- inform parents of their children's potential
- explain to parents what it means to be gifted and talented
- let them know what they could do next
- give parents a chance to meet with one another
- tell them about our teaching intentions and strategies.

At the meeting we asked parents to fill in a questionnaire devised by Clewitt (1990) that would provide information we needed in order to create a differentiated curriculum. We added an extra question: "Do you mind your child learning to read and write at preschool?" and explained the pros and cons of doing this.

We invited parents to ask questions, of which there were many. One parent asked how the accelerated learning groups would be organised. We explained that we would use half of the afternoon group time

and that my assistant and I would take turns in taking the groups out so that the composition of the grouping would not be obvious to the children. We also said that we would be flexible about the grouping, and allow other children to join in if they wished to.

The evening was very successful, and parents were inspired and enthusiastic. They wanted to know which local schools were most likely to meet their gifted child's needs in the early years and what could be done about schools that did not. As it happened, we had organised a parent night and invited nine local schools to speak on school readiness later that term, so parents were encouraged to attend that night and ask these questions then.

Parents also said they would like a follow-up meeting or a written bulletin so that they could find out about the accelerated learning teaching processes and outcomes.

During the evening I emphasized the fact that these children were only *potentially* gifted and talented, and that their parents' own continued interest in the children was vital. I also pointed out that the cut-off point for inclusion into the groups



Children who are especially gifted may take over at group time and monopolize the teacher's attention.

had been relatively arbitrary, and chosen by me, and that many other children could have been included in the groups. I asked parents to keep the meeting to themselves as I did not want unhappy parents of children *not* included in the groups to assail me and possibly stop the accelerated learning program being implemented.

Of course it did not work out that way. I received irate phone calls as early as two days later... country towns will be country towns. A bit of active listening helped, but further protest was to come.

Getting the okay

The following Board meeting was unusually well attended. Yet another unhappy mother raised the point that children not identified would miss out on quality teaching and learning and that this was an example of elitist teaching of arbitrary groupings. One Board member, a parent who was also a teacher, came to the rescue by pointing out that if those more assertive and verbal children who normally took over during group time with questions and comments would be going out to their special groups, it would allow the less outgoing children to open up in their small group and therefore receive more attention. This idea seemed to satisfy some parents.

The mood for or against the practising of accelerated education swung backwards and forwards during the meeting. I knew that it had to be the choice of the community, so I made this clear to them. I reminded them that gifted and talented preschool children had not been grouped in the past, nor had their special needs been known to us. Theoretically we could choose to continue in this way for a few

more decades. I suggested that it would be a waste not to go ahead with the program, now that this area had been identified, but that if parents felt uncomfortable, I was quite willing to let it go.

This was the key. When, as a community, the parents realised that they could lose what they thought they were there to fight me for and that I was willing to let it go, they recognised the disservice they were doing to themselves, and it was unanimously decided to institute the groups provided parents could be reassured that all the other children also had the right to a needs-based education.

The Board thought that in order to avoid further problems from parents who had not voiced their concern but were unhappy, they should make some kind of a reassuring statement in the next newsletter. They wanted me to guarantee that staff would consider *all* children as special and that every child's educational needs would be met, regardless of whether they were gifted or had special needs or were neither. I explained that this was what preschool education *was about*—attempting to meet individual educational needs—and that although we, as educators, had not been aware of a group called “gifted and talented”, we had always tried to meet each child's particular needs. The fact that we now knew more about these children did not in any way limit our ability or alter our practice of catering for the individual needs of other children.

The Board unanimously decided to publish this statement in the next newsletter.

In this way the parent Board arrived, 15 years after the preschool had begun operating, at the corner stone of early childhood education, and all because we had attempted to institute an accelerated learners' group. Examining the status of “giftedness” raised parental perception of what actually happens at preschool. It opened up a forum on educational rights and practices and changed the emphasis from how the preschool could help with children's socialisation and deficit needs to how we could develop children's potential abilities.

In fact, parents claimed and embraced the realities and basic tenets of early childhood education, which is the secret aim of all early childhood educators and the motivating factor in their overt and covert parent education activities.

Follow up

Once we had implemented our initial 5-week program we sent out the promised bulletin to the parents of the children in the groups. In this bulletin we also asked what changes, if any, parents had noticed in their children and what impressions of the groups their children had reported.

Summary

Looking back, our biggest mistake was in trying to keep the composition of the groups a secret from the other parents. This act of secrecy was seen as suspicious, as some kind of conspiracy to exclude some children. And it was rightly seen as something on which parents had no say.

This mistake, however, did lead to some wonderful conclusions. It led to the parent body demanding that every child's educational needs be met. It also resulted in the community choosing to institute the teaching of gifted and talented groups. And all mistakes—even those of educators—are learning experiences. We certainly will not go about forming our groups in this way again!

Some schools in the Nambucca area have also been forming gifted and talented groups and classes. I noticed late last year that one school had published an item in their newsletter, asking parents to nominate their own children. I know that even this method does not satisfy all parents, but this will be the method that we will adopt in the future. Should the parents of those children whom we have identified as gifted and talented fail to nominate their children, we will bring our professional assessment to their attention and recommend their child's inclusion in the groups.

As for parents who nominate children we have not identified, we intend to listen to the reason for their nomination, ask them to fill in a questionnaire, observe their children, look at our checklists, and pay extra attention to the children's lan-

I'm really sorry... but I can't find any figures on 1yr old reading ability



guage. If we finally find that the children are not, in our opinion, gifted and talented, we can relay this to the parents. If the parents are still unhappy, we will offer to include their child in the type of group that suits the child's claimed area of talent.

Future challenges

We use the local media to raise public awareness on educational issues and on innovations that we pursue. Our gifted and talented groups have therefore also received good publicity.

Introducing gifted and talented groups into our preschool setting has been a challenge, but well worth the effort. It has been accepted by the community to the extent that we now face an additional and unexpected problem. Since word got out that we work with gifted and talented groups at the preschool, parents have been bringing in photos of their children doing magnificent drawings, presenting us with samples of their children's art and with pieces of written work that have obviously been done by an adult. They have started up false rumours that their child has been identified. It is now very "in" to have a gifted and talented child at Nambucca. Knowing how to deal with this type of reverse "talent-scouting" is a little baffling.

Educating the public is obviously the long term solution.

Implementation—the first seeds

You may be wondering what prompted us to implement the program in the first place. It all started, when two 4-year old boys, D and R, were observed to have gifted traits. R had attended preschool the previous year when it was noticed that he had outstanding verbal and cognitive abilities. When the area speech therapist was assessing children with speech problems at the preschool, she also assessed the two boys, and both children's "information" and "grammar" categories came out at over 7 years of age.

D attended on Mondays and Wednesdays, and R on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We could not, therefore, work with them at the same time, so we decided to create a small group around each of them ("Grouping gifted children together seems to be relevant for mutual stimulation and realistic self-appraisal. Grouping is not always possible unless there are sufficient numbers..."(Kitano, M., 1982, p.17)).

Forming the groups

We used our regular checklists (Kitano, 1982) to identify other children who had already achieved the cognitive standards

normally expected by the end of their preschool attendance, and who could therefore do with additional stimulating activities.

One child was not selected through this methodology. His checklist was not outstanding but his nature seemed to point to his being gifted and talented—he was highly sensitive, easily hurt and always dissatisfied with his excellent artistic flair. It was therefore decided to include him in the accelerated group regardless of his checklist.

Fifteen children were included in these groups, all but one from the 4-year-old room. Additionally, two other children were identified in the 3-year-old room, but in the case of one child, the mother was anxious about the entire notion of her child being different, and thought it best to file it all away until next year ("...many parents are apologetic about their children's label..." (Kitano, M., 1989)). In the case of the other 3-year old, his brother was identified in the 4s room and somehow his own case was never addressed by the parents. They did not fill in the questionnaire given to them, and as we suspected more than a mere oversight by the parents, we decided not to pursue the matter any further.

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The children we identified as gifted*

E, 4.6 years, was a very quiet little girl. The previous year mum had had a lot of trouble bringing her to preschool and leaving her without major trauma. The next year E. had come to preschool reasonably happily. She had a close friend at preschool who moved away, and she became a bit of a loner. She preferred not to speak at all, nodding or shaking her head in response to interactions with adults. She had a 12-year-old brother.

R, 4.7 years, was identified as "gifted and talented" in a case study. Since then R. had had a speech evaluation that showed him to be three years ahead in information and grammar.

G, 4.8 years, was a very determined little girl. She was a leader in play situations, very serious and quite moody. G's dad was a high-school teacher, and she had a brother who was two years older than herself.

H, 5.0 years, could have gone to school the previous year, but it was decided during a parent/teacher interview that he was emotionally too immature, and should have another year at preschool. This had proved very worthwhile, but he was getting quite bored and needed extension. His mum was the local doctor, and dad was a psyche nurse. He had a younger sister.

J, 4.11 years, was a very sensitive little boy. He struck me from the beginning of the year as extremely sensitive: he often collapsed in tears if there seemed to be an injustice done to his person, but he did not seek adult help in these instances. J's artwork was very thorough, sensitive and creative, and he spent a lot of time on this type of activity at preschool, even when his friends—on whom he relied a great deal—did not choose to engage in such activities. J's parents chose not to let J learn to read and write at preschool on their questionnaire. He had three brothers.

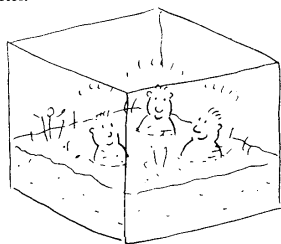
K, 5.1 years, was a precocious child who could have gone to school last year, but mum wanted to keep her back, partly, I think, because K was her baby. Her conversation was "cute" and short, which was a pity. She seemed to me to be hiding her light, or "talent" (Kitano, M, 1989, p58). K had an elder brother and everything of importance seemed to be centered around him in her perception. She often talked of his achievements rather than sharing information about herself.

L, 4.11 years, was a quiet little girl who had had great problems in separating from her mother. She seemed very mature, ca-

pable, knowledgeable and sensible. She was also sensitive and emotionally available to others, finding it easy to share herself. She allowed herself to be comforted after mum left in the mornings, where other children might resist comforting. She was also aware when other children needed comfort or help in some way. She was very fond of animals.

D, 4.6 years, was the second child identified as gifted and talented; he was observed to have exceptional language ability during the previous year. His questionnaire was returned on the last day. His mother seemed to resent his giftedness and met my initial enthusiasm about his ability with suspicion, brushing his ability aside with the comment that although he seemed bright he sometimes did terribly silly things. Yet she took an active part in the preschool, and obviously spent a lot of time with her children. It was his father, who was a lecturer at a university, who came to the parent meeting. His father also sounded delighted when he was told of D's outstanding speech assessment.

M, 5.0 years, was a very talkative little girl who seemed to need constant adult company and interaction. Her peer interactions were minimal. M stood out right from the start. She was the only child out of 100 who refused to wear the preschool hat (which was blue). As the year wore on, her determination did not waver, and the one pink hat in the playground was bound to be hers. Group time was a bit of a trial with M, as she wanted to talk at length on any issue all the time. I often had to ask her to let someone else have a turn. M seemed to me to be a child who had overheard too many adult concerns. For instance, her first reaction to the idea of an excursion was: "Does it cost money? Mum probably can't afford it!". I got the impression that mum relied a lot on M for company and understanding with the result that M was emotionally precocious. M had an older sister.



"Grouping gifted children together seems to be relevant for mutual stimulation and realistic self appraisal."

N, 4.5 years, was the child of a single mother. She had no access to her father, and mum was quite overcome with gratitude and relief that she had obviously "done a good job with N since she was doing so well". N had a very happy, bubbly and outgoing disposition, but underneath this was a very sensitive little child. She was very social, friends were most important to her. She shied away from potential conflict or from the rowdier children.

O, 4.5 years, almost did not get included into the group as his checklist was not quite one hundred per cent. But as he attended three days per week and seemed so very inquisitive, seeking out my company often, I decided to include him with the others. O was a very secure little boy, the eldest of three brothers, obviously mother's helper at home. He was sensible, kind, and caring, a gentle boy, preferring girls as company.

P, 4.3 years, was a very special little girl. She was very knowledgeable and inquisitive, seeking out mainly adult company. She was extremely preoccupied with her own looks, and expected a reaction to her outfit upon arrival. She conversed with adults in an intimate, sincere manner, commanding total attention. Her verbal ability was enormous, and she often summed up situations; for example, "First it was hot, then it was cold and now it's windy!" J's dad was mainly unemployed and therefore spent a lot of time with her. She was an only child.

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Mimi Wellisch was the director of the Nambucca Heads Preschool from 1991 to 1994.

*Initials have been changed to avoid embarrassment.