



Tina Richardson, head teacher at MindPlus, works on an SPCA cat enclosure project developed by one of the students.

– THE GIVE AND TAKE OF – **GIFTEDNESS**

The term ‘gifted child’ can invoke dramatic eye-rolling from many people, but the reality for these children can be complicated – what should be an easy path to achievement and success can instead be a clash of stigma and misunderstanding.

WORDS Victoria Matsunuma
PHOTOS Roger Richardson

At only three years old, both Katja Eager’s children had taught themselves to read and write. But when her eldest son reached seven years old, he was gripped by intense feelings of isolation, looking for ways to end his sadness.

“We were on the brink of depression with him, he was crying himself to sleep at night saying he doesn’t know who he is anymore, he doesn’t know if he belongs here. And it scared me, it really frightens you as a parent if your seven-year-old comes up with big stuff like that. Something had to be done.”

Both her children have been identified as gifted, a broad label used to describe children who have exceptional abilities beyond those of their same age peer group. Extensive research shows no two gifted children are the same, giftedness manifests

in numerous ways and is not limited to one demographic. Two children with the same high IQ may have completely different educational and emotional needs.

Their development may be asynchronous, the child may have strengths in one area like maths but be poor in reading or they may just be an overall high achiever. They may have more demanding emotional needs, have heightened sensitivity that leads to an ‘over-responsive’ behaviour that can be difficult for teachers and other students in the classroom.

The stereotypes of a gifted student can be cruel - depicting a precocious and privileged child who excels in everything and life is a breeze. But some parents of these children have a different story to tell, despairing as their kids end up as bullied outsiders, who are misunderstood and misrepresented by the current school system.

There are a large number of gifted learners who for many reasons are struggling in our schools who have not been identified as gifted. Some may be deliberately underachieving to fit in or, acting out because they are so frustrated because they are not challenged by the class work.

A study done in the UK and the Netherlands revealed up to 20 percent of early school leavers are gifted.

“It is so important to pick those kids up, to help them because research shows, that gifted children and gifted adults are prone to mental illness, they show up really highly in suicide rates and are over-represented in the world’s prisons because they don’t find their feet in society because they’re so isolated.”

Desperate to find options to support her children Katja sought out other parents in her position, but because of the stigma that is associated with giftedness, it wasn’t

easy. Many will say nothing because their child may be excelling at school and the problems their children face are deeply personal and overwhelming.

“I was looking around for other people in the same situation. But people don’t talk about that, when you have a bright child and things aren’t going well, because no-one wants to hear it.”

Eventually, Katja found a group of families and they were empowered by their shared experience. The families all felt that their children were falling through the cracks in the education system, so with Katja as chairman, together they formed the Taranaki Gifted Community Trust.

“We realised that teachers in this country are desperately overworked, they’re really stretched. Instead of continuously nagging and being the problem for teachers, we decided, ‘let’s find a solution’ and offer a solution that teachers can tap into to provide for their gifted students if they happen to have one in their class.”

The TGCT hired a teacher, Tina Richardson, and in 2014 they started out with an enrolment of nine students. The TGCT is run by volunteers, partners and three educators who implement the MindPlus Taranaki programme.

This year there were 64 students enrolled between the ages of six to thirteen, four days a week. MindPlus Taranaki is based on the New Zealand Centre for Gifted Education’s curriculum. This is an internationally researched curriculum that complements what schools are already doing, with additional key elements gifted learners need.

Tina Richardson has a background in environmental education, in Wisconsin. She retrained to teach primary and Montessori when she immigrated to New Zealand and then completed further education in gifted education.

The MindPlus curriculum is broken into three parts - personal development, talent development, and conceptual development.

The personal development component focuses on helping students to understand their giftedness and how to self-manage all that implies, how to relate to others, participate and contribute. Talent development encourages in-depth exploration of their strengths and

development of self-directed learning. Conceptual development explores universal concepts and big ideas. Children attend once a week for at least one school year. However, the programme is designed to be delivered over several years.

Tina says the personal changes that occur in students when they start working in the MindPlus classroom is rewarding to watch.

“It lights a fire in a lot of them.

They suddenly realise ‘this is just the beginning. There is so much more to learn and discover’. It’s strengths based, which is different to most classrooms which are primarily deficit based.

Nobody goes into a job doing what they hate or what they’re not good at. So here we’re really building their self-understanding of what they’re good at. They’re learning transferable skills by learning how to push themselves further out of their comfort zone. How to set goals, plan, research and reflect on their learning and growth. After several years in the programme students are so proud of how much they have grown.”

TGCT member Aya Doron’s daughter had been recognised as gifted in the school system in Israel, where all children go through extensive screening for giftedness when they reach seven. If they are deemed


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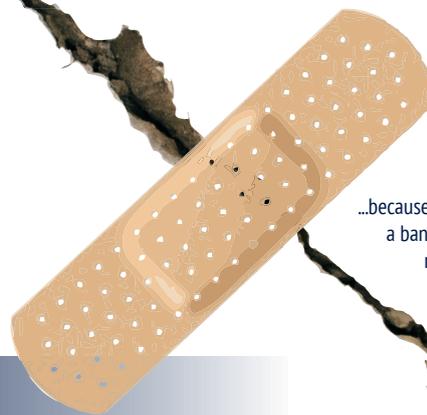


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to be gifted, they then participate in a specialised programme to support their needs and further their abilities, but the family moved to New Zealand shortly after the testing, hoping she would cope in our school system.

“There is only so much you can do as a parent, if your child has really advanced abilities and struggles to make friends with kids who are the same age. If you would like to talk about politics or computer programming in school, other kids just don’t get it. It’s really difficult to form relationships.

“Because many gifted children have different emotional needs the class content at MindPlus guides students towards better self-management of emotions, which translates into better experiences in the general classroom.”

Aya saw considerable improvements in her daughter’s happiness after attending the programme.

“MindPlus was amazing for her. The biggest benefit I saw was her personal development, getting a better understanding of herself and her abilities. She understood that she had a place in the

world, and that she’s actually amazing. She thrived in the programme.”

The Thursday MindPlus classroom is buzzing with productivity and focus.

In one area, a group of students are busy building cat enclosures from recycled materials to donate to the SPCA. The project is masterminded by 12 year-old Sula Bennet, who is concerned about animal welfare and is driven to make a difference.

Tina explains that a high number of these students have an overwhelming sense of worry about global issues and

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social responsibility. By helping them to direct their energy towards positive projects, like Sula's, it encourages them to use their talents to make a change, building a sense of contribution and empowerment.

Another girl is researching the exoplanet Janssen (55 Cancri e). A third of Janssen is made of mass similar to that of diamond. She believes that if we could harvest just a small portion of this planet, we could eliminate world poverty and solve our environmental problems.

With the positive outcomes reported by teachers, parents and the children themselves, it would seem logical for the Ministry of Education to back the programme, but MindPlus and programmes like it, receive zero funding from the Ministry of Education. MoE currently allocates funds \$800,000 per-year towards teacher training in the area, but nothing for these specialised classrooms.

As the principle of Welbourn School for 18 years, Kay Crofskey, had first-hand experience trying to accommodate the broad range of student's learning needs.

She believes better understanding in the wider public of what a gifted learner is, would help encourage better outcomes for these children.

“They have the potential to be our innovators and high achievers in the future if their giftedness is supported and celebrated, not met with negativity.”

There are 15 local cluster schools in the programme, but the trust can't increase that number without extra funding. Cluster schools contribute a yearly amount and they subsidise the costs of referral, which is expensive. Then the parents pay \$45 per week for the child's attendance.

“This is still much more affordable than programmes in other areas, in Auckland in Wellington they pay almost twice that,” Aya explains. “We are not willing to raise the fees for parents, because it makes it unaffordable for families. In our vision, in the long-term, we want to offer scholarships to students.”

Because giftedness runs in families, some are having to pay for multiple children to attend.

“There are kids who are gifted who are not being referred because their parents can't afford it,” says head teacher, Tina. “And it creates that inequity, that only privileged

children are gifted when that's not at all true.”

Trust members estimate they are only catering for ten percent of the gifted learners in Taranaki.

TGCT regularly host events with visiting experts in the field of gifted education, from paediatricians to education academics. Their website has extensive reading resources to help inform parents and teachers.

Just before this issue of Live went to print, the New Zealand Lotteries Grants Board approved funding of \$15,000 for the coming year to cover rent, electricity and internet costs in the MindPlus classroom, and a smaller grant from the Community Organisation Grants Scheme was also given.

The TGCT receives the financial help with enormous gratitude.

If you have an interest in the work of the Taranaki Gifted Community Trust and MindPlus, would like to see how your child could be involved or would like to support or sponsor a child, contact the centre at contact@tgctrust.org.nz or call 021 170 2477

Keep up to date with events and information via their website:

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Both Taranaki locals treated by Julian. Left Jodie treated with Incognito hidden braces. Right Rebecca treated with Clear ceramic braces. Photo Mark Dwyer



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I can't confess to being a Bob Dylan fan and in fact, this is the only record of his that I know but the title is very apt as we reach another year's end.

The one constant in our industry is change and this has been highlighted by the recent news that AMP is selling its life insurance business to Resolution Life. AIA have already taken over Sovereign and CIGNA is in the process of finalising its takeover of OnePath Life.

This can be a worrying and confusing time for people not knowing who their policies are with or who to deal with if something goes wrong. This is where having a good Adviser comes into play, as they should remain “the constant” in your insurance/investment planning and be your ‘go to’ person for any help or information you require

about your financial planning. We certainly hope that our clients feel that way about us.

Change doesn't have to be bad though and reviewing where we're at and our changing needs and requirements as we go through life, is important. What is right at 20, isn't what you need at 40 and this follows through with our insurance and investment planning. As small business owners we also have to adapt and embrace change, especially over the last few years with social media playing a more important role in advertising and marketing, and the ever growing need to embrace technology to 'streamline' our business, whilst not losing that personal touch.

So, as we say goodbye to this year and welcome in 2019 the one thing we know for certain is that next year will bring changes to us all, some good, some bad. We have to learn to deal with the punches and whilst insurance planning will not stop sickness, disability and death, it does help with the financial side of things, which in turn gives us confidence, more control, and enables us to make choices moving forward.

Here's to wishing you happy holidays and safe travels and remember, if you ever need help to plan with Foresight, give us a call! To get in touch with Mike and Amanda, please call (06) 751 4510 or email mike@foresightfinancial.co.nz.



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