

Keeping Gifted Education on the Agenda: Interview with Professor Roger Moltzen

By Deborah Fraser, University of Waikato

Transcribed by Jane Baldock

What drew you to the field of gifted education? Was there a specific incident?

There was - when I was teaching in a primary school there were two children whose ability just outstripped that of their peers. This fascinated me. For both of them their ability, at a rough estimate, was three to four years in advance of their peers. In those days group special education was called the psychological service. One of their functions was to undertake IQ testing of children, so I contacted them and said, "I think these children are gifted, would you like to test them?" which they did. The psychologist at the time said they were both gifted and asked how I spotted them, saying I did very well. He flattered me and I thought this was an interesting field. At the same time I was doing university study in psychology and in education, and developed an interest around intelligence and creativity in giftedness. Those two children were eight year olds and there was something about them that intrigued me and sparked my interest.

Were you a gifted or talented child yourself?

No. I don't believe that I was in any area.

Do teachers need to be gifted themselves, to teach gifted children?

No I don't think for a moment that is true. I think most teachers of gifted and talented students are not gifted themselves. I think sometimes teachers who are gifted have a particular perspective and may have an extra quality they bring to what they can do. I have seen a few teachers who I believe are gifted; there is an extra dimension that probably teachers who are not gifted don't have. Is it a critical dimension? No, it's more value added.

You've made a huge contribution to the field of gifted education; what are you most proud of?

The work that had the most impact was chairing the Ministry's Working Party in 2000. I think that was more successful nationally than any other initiative, and it remains the singularly most transformative development in gifted education in New Zealand. While I claim that as a contribution I made, it has to be realised that I chaired a committee of nine people; it was not solely my contribution by any stretch of the imagination. But to lead that initiative and to come up with a whole set of recommendations that the cynics said would not be accepted because they had not been accepted in the past was special. In fact one person warned me about being optimistic and to prepare myself for disappointment and in fact the opposite occurred and the Minister accepted every recommendation. And over the

next few years every recommendation was implemented, some of course have ceased, but that's not to say that their impact is not enduring. I don't think we have built on that sufficiently in this decade to feel really positive on where things are at, but some things like the change to the NAG that mandated gifted education has in fact been huge. In as much as that changed the face of gifted education in New Zealand schools forever and had ripple effects to the wider society, that's the one that I feel made the most impact.

You've talked to many audiences both here and overseas- what were some of your most memorable moments?

I think the work with teachers is probably the most rewarding, most challenging - and is a strong indicator of how applicable your ideas are. It's easy in many ways to stand up at an international conference and give a keynote address - if you speak for long enough you may limit the amount of questions you get - you could probably get away with anything. If you do a one-day workshop with teachers it's a different environment altogether. They will press and test you and ask for examples. If you can do that and they get something from it and tell you subsequently it has transformed their practice, *that* is where the greater satisfaction lies. For me it's seeing you may have made an impact on gifted children- which in my role at the university, teaching students, you hope you might - but you generally would not have a clue. Sometimes when you get teachers in classes who tell you they have changed things, that's great, but most of our students are pre-service teachers so you just hope you have challenged some attitudes and raised some awareness.

Your comment says a lot about our community work, that we need to ensure we are maintaining and feeding community awareness.

To me that has always been a big part of it - to engage as I will be this week with students in a school. That is, you're right, incredibly important.

Who are some of the people in the field you admire and who have Influenced you?

Don McAlpine was a tremendous influence and just a wonderful supporter when I went to him first with the notion of doing a book. I was a senior lecturer here with a bachelor's degree. He may have been an associate professor at the time. I was a nobody - I hadn't published more than a couple of articles but he said, "Let's work together and do it." Without him I would never have developed a career in this area. He was supportive, encouraging, and a role model. He walked the talk and was a highly creative individual himself. He loved fun, loved left-field responses, and we got on really well. He was certainly the primary mentor; a guru for me.

You've always been a passionate supporter of creativity- in this standards-based environment at present are we neglecting this area and these children?

I think we are at risk. I still think there is space there for teachers who have a will and commitment to do this, who are creative themselves and who can find avenues, vehicles and mechanisms through which to support creative activities. But it's hard and if you needed more support as a teacher, more modeling, more space, it's not there, so I'm not totally skeptical (but I am pretty skeptical) about the role of creativity in schools.

I can remember coming into teaching in the 60s during the Elwyn Richardson/Stan Boyle era (where arguably it was a bit too loose at times) but if you wanted to pursue art all day you did and you could. It was unusual to have anyone breathing down your neck if you did not do maths for a couple of days - you would make that time up probably. The structure was much more fluid. Creativity was more highly valued and examples of role models of creativity were put in the foreground. Whether it was creativity in maths, science or the arts, it seemed to be much more highly valued and pursued. It was a legitimate educational activity and pursuit. I think now it's on the margins and its "fit it in if you can" - but you probably can't. It's to the demise of our children and country's development. I think we have got this significantly wrong. One day we will wake up and see that, but how many generations will have gone through our school system and not been given that opportunity?

Is it inevitable that with increased accountability in the teaching profession that the sacrifice is creativity?

It is inevitable in some ways because when you get into accountability mode you get into measurable mode, when you get into measurable mode you get into reductionist mode, when you get into reductionist mode you get into quantifying. So therefore what is of value is that that can be quantified. In the very essence of creativity it is not about quantification, it is not about measuring or comparing levels of output. So as long as accountability drives our values I guess creativity will be reduced to something that can be measured or it won't be valued as it can't be measured.

Were you surprised that the Labour coalition government put gifted education firmly on the education policy agenda, and the National led government has virtually ignored the area? What do you think is behind this?

Very surprised really, although in light of the 1989-90 move towards Tomorrow's Schools, which was also Labour, probably one should have not been so surprised. You're right - for a government more to the left to recognise gifted education seems at first to be surprising. It mirrors what happened in the UK as well, so yes it was surprising. All credit to Minister Mallard. He achieved more for gifted education than any of his predecessors or successors.

Which country do you think is doing an admirable job of catering for gifted children? What can we learn from them?

It is too difficult to choose one; it is fluid so I would have said in the mid-2000s we probably were a world leader. I remember feedback from the World Council conference in Vancouver, where international colleagues said to me the best papers and most encouraging evidence of progress came from New Zealand. This was heard from people from a wide range of countries. That illustrates how variable things are as I'm not sure we could hold that position today. In countries like Australia it is hard to say how they are doing because states vary tremendously and some states historically are quite strong such as Victoria, whereas other states probably less so. There are developments in Scotland that I regard, because they have taken a very inclusive approach, and I think philosophically I am quite intrigued by Scotland. In terms of catering for the extremely gifted Israel probably has one of the best models in the world. In terms of support for gifted children in regular classrooms, which is where most of them are around the world, I think our approach to teaching and learning in New Zealand positions us potentially as probably one of the best in the world. Whether we take advantage of that environment enough for the gifted I think is a moot point. Potentially our philosophy of teaching and learning is very compatible with effective practices for gifted and talented students.

There still persists the mistaken view that gifted children do not come from every sector of society- why do you think this persists and what can we do about it?

The first is certainly stereotyping. We are born with them [stereotypes] from the very youngest age. Children have notions - we know from research - of what comprises physical attractiveness. Two-year-olds can use adult rankings of attractiveness in how they assess or position photos of people. They rank in a very similar way to adults. At two years of age, children have very adult stereotypes of what is physical attractiveness. So it stands to reason that at that age and increasingly they are exposed to stereotypes of what is smart and those stereotypes endure. So when a teacher goes into a classroom, unless that teacher has been made aware of the pervasiveness and potency of these stereotypes, they will act on them. We do that in so many areas, so it is dispelling those stereotypes that's the first thing we have got to do.

So popular shows about gifted people like the Big Bang Theory - does it do more harm than good?

Yes quite likely; it's only one of many. How often in television is say, the African American boy the nerd? How often is the really attractive girl the highly intelligent one? She's usually portrayed as the bimbo. It's so powerful. I have shown this in various ways using children's names and how people will quickly align levels of intelligence with a name that reflects a socio-economic and ethnic background. We have got to challenge these notions. The other thing is that we really have to value giftedness from a broad cultural perspective rather than a Eurocentric perspective. New Zealand has done a lot of conceptual work in this area. I think in applying that in schools and classrooms we have been less successful. Also, our identification practices have to include ways of finding talent that may be hidden – that may

be in places that are not expected. So that is why we talk about extending identifications to include whanau, kaumatua and leaders in other ethnic groups, so we are constantly on the lookout for giftedness. My approach is to say to teachers, "Consider every child in your class as potentially gifted". Not that every child is gifted, but every child is potentially gifted. So if you use that lens they may not be exhibiting it today but they might in a particular activity you create tomorrow, or you may find out something from their whanau that will give you an insight that you would not get anywhere else. And it is a long way from saying every child is gifted - I am saying look through the lens that every child could be potentially gifted. I think that is really important. In other words, don't put any child in the non-gifted basket, keep them in the potentially gifted basket.

It's one of the problems we have with categorising gifted as a group. I have not found the answer to *not* doing this so it's easy to say this, because once you have a fixed group you have a non-gifted group and I worry about the non-gifted group. In a regular classroom in a primary school that may not be an issue, as your groups could be fluid. Kids can move in and out, group division does not matter; access to activity is what matters. Once you get to intermediate and say, "These are the gifted classes" then I can see some strength in doing that but you can create a whole population which are not gifted and that to me is problematic.

What do you feel are the biggest challenges for parents of gifted children?

I think contrary to popular belief, for most parents there are not a lot of challenges. For most parents I think it is a joy, a delight and it can be relatively plain sailing. I think for a percentage of children and a percentage of parents there are real challenges. There are challenges for some parents of understanding their gifted children, as they find it hard to empathise as this is outside their experience. For some parents it is just trying to understand. For some parents it's getting advice - where do they go? In our education system there is really nowhere they can go. If they can't find it within their school they have to pay a psychologist. There are concerns often for parents around peer groups for their gifted children, so some parents join groups where they get together with like-minds.

A real challenge for parents is sometimes having schools accept that their children are different, are gifted, and require something to support them. They fear that their children may be bored and that they will give up on schooling, so I think those are some of the challenges. Sometimes the specific social and emotional challenges are big for profoundly gifted children. I think for the moderately gifted, school can work very well - in fact they can be amongst those for whom school is a very good fit and they come out doing very well and continue doing very well. But there are those on the margins, and they are amongst our most profoundly gifted and highly creative, for whom a safe place is often difficult to find. We try to bring them in inevitably - teachers try to include such students because it's their job. "We are all about inclusion so come and join us", but in effect [for the profoundly

gifted] they lose their edge. My message to teachers is to make it safer to stay on the margins. Don't feel that you have to mainstream these kids because by bringing them in they can lose that perspective, that dimension that you only get from being on the margins. But it must be safe to be on the margins. That's the challenge and that's the challenge to parents, to allow their children to occupy a place on the margins and feel safe.

What advice would you give to gifted children?

Find a purpose in life and pursue that purpose because those who find a purpose in life will achieve so much more than those that think life owes it to them. Stick with a purpose in life.

Could we not say that to any child....?

You could do but I think gifted children are singular in their focus. Often from an early age, [they realize] this is what I want to do, and [they] have clarity about that and that is not as common amongst other children. I think you're right though. This is the dilemma of gifted education in a way, in that what is good for gifted children you could argue is good for all children. Gifted pedagogy is only good pedagogy but it has a few extra dimensions. If in fact the pedagogy was right the need to focus separately on gifted children would be non-existent because it is just good pedagogy. I think the other thing about gifted children and giving advice is... dare to be different. There is a cost, but dare to be different - and that it's ok to be obsessive, to have singularity of focus. You don't have to be all things to all people. I think those are some of the things I would say.

Set your own measures of success. Don't allow others to dictate what is success. You determine what is success for you and just dare to be different. Be prepared to cut your own path, don't allow yourself to be distracted from what you see is your purpose, why you have been put here on earth.

This field tends to strongly divide people - what do you think is behind this?

I think what is sometimes problematic is the word 'gifted' and I have wrestled with this all my working life and I have not resolved it in my own mind. In an egalitarian society in particular, giftedness basically reflects an assumption that you get something for nothing and that through some quirk of fate, genes, or DNA you get a particular 'advantage' or 'gifts', just simply because that's how the world is. Egalitarian societies hate that notion. They like that it's a level playing field, that we have all been born with similarity of opportunity and that simply by providing the right environment anybody can be anything and it's an absolute nonsense. We need to get over ourselves and to celebrate the fact that some people can achieve to very high levels in particular fields - they have that potential to do it - and others simply don't. They may have strengths in other areas. This idea that you have been given a gift without working for it doesn't sit terribly comfortably with us. Our heroes are people like Ed Hillary - born with nothing, no advantage, good hard-working bloke, one of us and got to the top. Any whiff of arrogance or preference and we object and

I think there is a lot of that in our society. I dare to say I think, typically, New Zealanders can be very jealous and I don't know where that comes from but we seem to think if someone succeeds above someone else, we don't like that. So we take more delight in when you lose because that elevates us rather than when you succeed because that diminishes us. I don't know quite what the roots of it are. It does seem, in my experience, more characteristic of us than other cultures that seem much better at celebrating success. We are hypercritical [though] because sometimes we will ride on the back of another's success internationally to almost an unhealthy level - the Peter Jacksons, the All Blacks, the Valerie Adams. I think it says something about a basic insecurity.

There is always more to be done. What do you see as the major priorities now?

I think we need to have people who will lead initiatives and be go-to people. We have really achieved quite a bit. I remain positive about what we have achieved. A lot of that has been around individuals who have made a noise. I acknowledge all the people who have really raised awareness levels. I think giftEDnz is a wonderful initiative. It has brought professionals together in an association that can lobby and has a presence in various spaces. This is important. We have got to stay [visible] and always be on the agenda. If we don't do it as people that understand and advocate for gifted and talented children, no one else will do it. It is not something that will naturally flow through. Some areas you can say it will always come to the surface as so many people are aware. The gifted and talented [area] is not like this. The other thing is, as well as standing out and up, we have to be engaged in the mainstream of education. Too many instances of what people are saying and standing for [in] gifted education is a mismatch with the trends in general education. That's fine if that mismatch is justified, but often that position is held without a knowledge of things like Ka Hikitia and the national curriculum. [There are] so many things you have to understand and engage with, otherwise gifted education or the voice becomes irrelevant. I have always argued that our success is dependent on us being involved in the mainstream of education or, even better, leading thought but not being out of touch. We always have to be engaged. If we separate ourselves out too far we cease to be relevant. We get picked off. We have to be relevant and know, and be engaged with, what's happening in the mainstream because that is where we sit. We don't sit outside that - we need to be in the mainstream of education.