

Writing because I want to, not because I have to: Young gifted writers' perspectives on the factors that “matter” in developing expertise

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ABSTRACT: The study reported on here sought to better understand the development of writing talent from the perspectives of a group of gifted adolescent female writers. Recent shifts in how giftedness and talent are conceptualized has led to an increased focus on domain-specific abilities and the importance of understanding how specific talents can be identified and supported. Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) (see Gagné, 2000; 2003; 2007; 2008) distinguishes between gifts and talents. Gifts represent the potential for outstanding achievement, while talents are the manifestation of this potential. Of particular interest to teachers and parents are the conditions that are influential in gifts being realised as talents – what Gagné refers to as catalysts. The participants in this study were asked to reflect on the development of their interest and ability in writing over time. Emerging from their feedback were two categories of catalysts: the intrapersonal and the environmental. For this group of students, intrapersonal catalysts were more influential to the realisation of their writing talent than environmental catalysts. This intrinsic motivation to write, and from an early age, is consistent with studies of eminent adult writers. Parents and teachers featured as important environmental catalysts. The participants in this study valued the input and support of teachers, particularly during the early years of their schooling. However, as they moved through the school system, these students felt the nature of the curriculum, and assessment practices increasingly threatened their intrinsic motivation for writing and diminished the satisfaction gained from writing at school. An unexpected outcome of this research was the important influence of music on their current writing.

KEYWORDS: Gifted, talented, writing, young writers, talent development.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade in New Zealand, there has been a growing awareness of the needs of gifted and talented children and young people. This shift is reflected in a raft of Ministry of Education initiatives that recognise the critical part played by teachers and schools in the realisation of talent. These initiatives are consistent with a re-conceptualising of giftedness and talent from a narrow IQ-based approach to one that values talent across a range of human endeavours. This expanded view of giftedness and talent has caused some researchers to argue that it is more appropriate to focus on gifted behaviours rather than on gifted individuals. As Renzulli and Reis (2009, p. 235) maintain, “Giftedness is not a state of being, it is not fixed, and it does not reside in a chosen few over their lifetimes as a fixed entity. It is, rather, developmental – in some children and adults with high potential, at certain times, under certain

circumstances, and with appropriate levels of support, time, effort, and personal investments and choices.” Sternberg (2000) emphasises the importance of abilities as “developing” expertise and argues that, “A model of fixed individual differences, which essentially consigns some students to fixed levels of instruction based on supposedly largely fixed abilities, can be an obstacle to the acquisition of expertise” (p. 63). According to Sternberg, it is much more appropriate to view giftedness as “expertise” rather than “ability”. Expertise is not an end state, it is developing, and “Gifted individuals need continually to be developing the kinds of expertise that render them gifted” (Sternberg, 2000, p. 55).

In a 2005 study of 28 outstanding New Zealanders, Moltzen asserted that, “A better understanding of how talent develops must translate into a greater percentage of talented children and young people achieving great things” (p. 311). Writers such as Smutny (2000), Van-Tassel-Baska (1998) and Feldhusen (2001) view teachers’ abilities to recognise and nurture young gifted and talented students’ specific talents within quality differentiated programmes as vital to the development of individual potential.

The study reported on here focused on a group of talented female writers. The major aim of this study was to better understand how talent in this domain develops and to learn what young writers themselves attribute their interest and ability in writing to. The study group was drawn from students that were part of the school’s “gifted and talented writing programme”. The students made formal application to participate in this programme. The teacher leading the programme described the group as possessing “advanced writing abilities”.

There appears to be no New Zealand research and only a small number of international studies focused on young gifted writers. Of these, a small number of longitudinal studies have examined how writing talent develops (for example, Edmunds & Noel, 2003; Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005; Noel & Edmunds, 2007) and an extensive search of the literature located only one contemporary study of precocious child writers (Shavinina, 1999).

Current understandings of the development of writing talent have been largely informed by retrospective studies of eminent adult writers. Indeed, gifted writers are regarded by Olszewski-Kubilius and Whalen (2000) as the most studied sub-group of the adult gifted population. Typically, these retrospective studies are based on information drawn primarily from biographical sources (for example, Piirto, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2004; Van Tassel-Baska, 1996; Kaufman & Gentile, 2002). Piirto (2004) considers that these studies offer very limited insights into the early years of eminent writers’ lives.

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE TALENT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Both the original and revised versions of François Gagné’s *Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent* (DMGT) are premised on the notion of talent development as a life-long transformational process (Gagné, 2000; 2003; 2007; 2008). Talented individuals are those who successfully transform high levels of natural ability or gifts within one or more of four general domains (intellectual, creative, socio-affective and

sensorimotor), into outstanding levels of performance in a particular field or fields (Gagné, 2003). The actualisation of gifts as talents requires sustained commitment to learning, practice and training in a particular skill or skills over time (Gagné, 2000; 2003). Various intrapersonal and environmental *catalysts* are believed to enhance, restrict, or even curb the talent development process at different points in time (Gagné, 2003). The role of chance, in the form of unexpected encounters or opportunities, is regarded as a third potentially important catalyst (Gagné, 2000; 2003).

The revised *Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent* accords increased significance to the role of natural abilities and intrapersonal factors, while acknowledging that, “in most situations *all* components play an important role in the talent development process,” (Gagné, 2008, p. 6). Natural abilities or gifts are regarded as the most influential factors overall, with intrapersonal attributes proposed as the most significant catalytic influences on the development of expertise over time (Gagné, 2008). Gagné asserts that an individual’s high level of interest in a talent domain or sub-component of a domain is potentially the most powerful intrapersonal catalyst in the talent actualisation process. Passion is believed to be the highest possible form of such an interest, and a very rare phenomenon (Gagné, 2008). Will-power and self-determining behaviours are also specifically highlighted as significant intrapersonal influences.

Environmental influences are ranked below the structured process of learning and practice. Gagné (2008) contends that, “The bulk of the environmental stimuli have to pass through the sieve of an individual’s needs, interests or personality traits” (p. 4). He believes that individuals can determine the degree to which they will be influenced by particular environmental stimuli presented at any given point in time. The role of chance is significantly diminished within Gagné’s revised framework as a result.

Of interest in this context is the extent to which Gagné’s revised “hierarchy of influence” is confirmed by studies of gifted writers, and the degree of compatibility with what a group young gifted writers reported as influential to the realisation of their gifts as talents.

INTRAPERSONAL INFLUENCES ON DEVELOPING WRITER EXPERTISE

The literature consistently reports that eminent writers demonstrate high levels of interest in, and volition for writing from an early age. For example, Van Tassel-Baska (1996), in a study of the lives of Charlotte Bronte and Virginia Woolf, reports that both enjoyed writing from as early as four years of age. According to Van Tassel-Baska, “No outside influence was as strong as their own internal need to write” (p. 53). Many gifted writers satisfy this need by keeping journals and diaries, often on a daily basis (Piiro, 1999; Patterson, 2003; Van Tassel-Baska, 1996). Edmunds and Noel (2003), in a single case study of a gifted young writer, reported that he began writing at five years of age and wrote daily for up to three hours. He penned between 1700 and 1900 pages of text in a year, and “considered writing to be his *job*” (Edmunds & Noel, 2003, p. 186). He would only write when he felt a real need, producing sophisticated works indicative of exceptional writing precocity (Noel & Edmunds, 2007).

It would seem that eminent writers are emotionally “charged” to write from an early age (Piiro, 2004). To Piiro, emotionally based writing reflects high levels of intensity of emotional response to life experiences. She considers that high levels of emotional intensity and high intelligence to be fundamental personality attributes of the creatively gifted writer, allowing them to write effectively for cathartic and expressive purposes.

These dispositional differences could account for the higher levels of emotional sensitivity evident in many young gifted writers. The single, case study referred to previously provides evidence of heightened compassion, empathy and an ability to convey emotionality in writing from as early as five years of age (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005). This young writer also preferred to compose most of his writing in the confines of his bedroom. Indeed, writers such as Ward (1996) and Piiro (2004) believe that young writers generally prefer their own company, actively seeking solitude to allow for extended periods of uninterrupted and focused writing effort. The childhood biographies of eminent writers examined by Piiro reveal that young writers often seek solitude to fantasise and exercise their vivid imaginations within their own imaginary worlds (Piiro, 2002, 2004). Dreams are also identified as a significant motivational element for this group (Piiro, 1998). Some gifted writers demonstrate imaginal sensitivity by connecting their imagination and dreams with the innovative and often unique use of metaphor and analogy (Piiro, 2002; Piechowski, 2006). Created metaphors appear to enable young writers to gain greater self-understanding, and to communicate their understandings to others (Fraser, 2003).

It has been claimed that children with creative writing talent are capable of responding in intensely imaginative and intellectual ways to written text, and are often precocious readers (Piiro, 1998; 2004). The ability to read from around three years of age has been linked to writing precocity from approximately five years of age (Edmunds & Noel, 2003; Shavinnia, 1999). Piiro (2004) found amongst the eminent writers that she studied that this early passion for reading usually continued into adolescence. Other researchers are more cautious about drawing a link between early reading and an interest and fluency in writing (for example, Jackson, 2003; Olszewski-Kubilius & Whalen, 2000). As Noel and Edmunds (2007) note, the lack of evidence to support a relationship between early reading and writing precocity may be simply a reflection of the dearth of research into talented young writers.

Adult writers commonly recall parents reading to them on a regular basis during childhood (Piiro, 1999; Moltzen, 2005). This practice may contribute to an interest in language generally and how words can be used to express ideas and feelings (Piiro, 2002). Piiro (2004) reports that talented young writers tend to have keen appreciation of the musicality of words and the rhyme, rhythm, accent and intonation inherent within the spoken word. They are also confident in the use of writing conventions such as paradox, metaphor, simile, alliteration, personification and assonance.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES ON DEVELOPING WRITER EXPERTISE

The family has the potential to affect the talent development process for young writers in different ways. The childhood biographies of eminent American writers suggested that parents were typically avid readers themselves (Piiro, 2004). They fostered a

love of words in their children through reading to them, providing them with books to read, and modelling positive reading behaviours. Edmunds and Noel's (2003) study of a precociously gifted writer noted that his parents supported his uninterrupted writing time and provided the necessary material resources to facilitate his writing. However, they were certain "that this highly favourable element of his environment was as much due to Geoffrey's abilities and motivation as it was due to the 'space' his parents gave him" (p. 191).

A positive and supportive home environment is not necessarily the norm in the childhood experience of gifted adult writers. Common themes in the lives of contemporary American writers included experiencing unconventional family life, and family traumas (Piiro, 1999; 2004). Some mentioned removing themselves physically from stressful family situations to withdraw into reading, daydreaming or writing (Piiro, 2004). Writing became an expressive outlet for a number of these writers in dealing with traumatic childhood incidents such as the death of a parent or parental illness, alcoholism or neglect (Piiro, 2004). It would appear that childhood experiences of dysfunctional or traumatic family circumstances can act as positive or negative catalysts in the talent development process.

The positive impact of both male and female teachers in nurturing writing talents is a common theme in the researched biographies of eminent American writers (Piiro, 1999). However, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) believes effective teachers are those with an awareness of the conditions motivating young writers to write with ease. Some research findings also note that adolescent writers are more energised to write when the curriculum allows them to express emerging beliefs about themselves and their world, and where teachers support them in the process of making sense of their experiences (Bloland, 2006; Potter, McCormick & Busching, 2001).

Potter, McCormick and Bushing (2001) reported that almost all the adolescent writers in their study placed considerable significance on teacher assessments of their writing as indicators of "school success and as important representations of themselves" (p. 48). However, "most of them also retained a sense of themselves as writers that was independent of school definitions" (p. 48). It is not uncommon for eminent adult writers to report that they actually loathed school and the curricula offered (Piiro, 1998). Some make a distinction between "real" writing and writing done as part of school programme requirements (Ward, 1996). What they see as real writing is writing that involves author choice and flexibility in terms of writing genre, style, topic and time allowed.

A variety of other environmental influences are mentioned in research findings. Young gifted writers appear to value opportunities to test out their ideas within a supportive environment of like-minded peers (Van Tassel-Baska, 1996). In her study of eminent American authors, Piiro (2002) notes the value writers place on being close to nature and/or in unfamiliar settings, which are seen as aids to enhancing motivation (Piiro, 2002). Piiro also reports that artworks and music were cited as additional sources of inspiration for gifted writers. Some of the gifted writers in her group were also talented musicians.

THE RESEARCH

The aim of this study was to better understand the development of talent in writing from the perspectives of young gifted writers themselves. The study provided an opportunity for a group of 32 young gifted and talented writers to “voice” their personal views on the key influences on their writing, from early childhood to adolescence. A qualitative research design using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews was selected as an authentic means of capturing student perspectives.

The research sample group was drawn from Years 11-13 (15-17 years of age) female students within a decile 10¹, urban secondary school for girls. The students were part of the school’s gifted and talented writing programme and access to this programme was on the basis of self-nomination. There was no attempt to explore with teachers how talent in writing was conceptualised but it would be reasonable to suggest that “writing” in this instance was viewed in a more traditional and conservative manner and did not extend to demonstrated ability in less recognised genres such as cartooning or web design.

All of the participants completed a questionnaire with a combination of closed and open questions. The questionnaire sought to explore how participants accounted for their ability in this area, what had influenced their writing over time, and the place of writing in their lives. More than half the participants that completed the questionnaire indicated a willingness to participate in a more in-depth individual interview. Purposeful sampling was used to select a group of six students from the 19 that volunteered to include those whose questionnaire responses reflected commonly expressed themes as well as more diverse ideas. The interviews were semi-structured and offered an opportunity for participants to expand on questionnaire responses but also to raise additional issues and present new ideas.

The analysis of the data involved a search for patterns within and between over 450 individual questionnaire responses and six, semi-structured interview transcripts. From this analysis a number of themes emerged and these closely resemble Gagné’s notion of intrapersonal and environmental catalysts (see Gagné, 2000; 2003; 2007; 2008).

YOUNG GIFTED WRITERS’ VIEWS ON THE INFLUENCES THAT “MATTERED” IN DEVELOPING WRITER EXPERTISE

The findings from this study have been clustered under three emergent themes: the potent power of “the personal”; the shifting influence of “significant others”; and music, as a significant emergent influence. The themes are discussed in an order that reflects the relative influence ascribed to each by the participants and incorporate data from both questionnaires and interviews.

¹ “A school’s Decile indicates the extent to which it draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students” (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The potent power of the “personal”

Piirto (2002) asserts that, “inspiration provides the motivation to write” (p. 90). Most young writers in this study seemed primarily inspired to write “from within” They drew on their imagination, dreams and fantasies as well as personal experiences, thoughts, feelings and emotions. While the degree of inspiration appeared to be fairly consistent over time, some significant shifts in emphasis were reported.

In their early years, imagination featured as the most powerful source of inspiration. Dreams and fantasy were also identified as significant influences at this stage. The students recalled fantasy-writing episodes about personal aspirations, such as “winning an Oscar for acting”. The aspiring Oscar winner “would write speeches for what I would say”. Two students mentioned the influence of animistic and magical thinking tendencies. One wrote exclusively about such things as “the magic house”, “the talking boat” or “the dancing tree”. The other engaged in “what ifs” such as “what if my stuffed horse were alive?”

The biographies of eminent American writers highlight the imagination as a feature of early writing and heightened imagination as a personality attribute of eminent writers (Piirto, 1999, 2002). Some of these eminent writers also linked their imaginings and their dreams in their writing (Piirto, 2002). While research findings certainly endorse the influence of imagination, dreams and fantasies on gifted writers over time, there is less evidence of the relative intensity of this influence from childhood to adolescence.

The majority of the participants in this present study reported reading as an important early influence on their writing. Early writing episodes were recalled in vivid detail, and largely focused on magical themes and imaginative versions of traditional fairy tales. Their early writing experiences appeared to be both personally memorable and possibly influenced by an early preference for fiction. Fictional and fantasy-based contexts could potentially enable young writers to experience other forms of reality from an early age.

There is also evidence of a high level of “sensual investment” in participants’ writing, particularly in their current work. One student said she lacked the inspiration to write when she was too tired to engage her senses in experiencing the world. Several others specifically mentioned using their ability to “hear” the sound and rhythm of words and different word combinations to good effect in their writing. For one student, this ability enabled her to create a desired auditory impact for the reader. Piechowski (1997) would likely link these examples to a propensity amongst gifted individuals for “wacky visual, auditory or associational images” (p. 368). According to Piechowski giftedness is frequently characterised by an intensity of response, what Dabrowski (1972) refers to as “overexcitabilities”. Dabrowski defines these overexcitabilities as heightened modes of experiencing in psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal and emotional domains.

Two students described a fascination for incorporating “made up” words. One had resisted her teacher challenging the legitimacy of an original word choice, by writing “marmaladed for something....Marmalade on the knife, it was marmaladed.” Resistance could potentially be a more problematic option within school-based writing, especially where specific criteria need to be achieved in relation to a

prescribed standard. The alternative is compliance, which could inhibit imaginational expression and dampen sensual intensity.

Piirto (2002; 1998) believes the imagination can definitely be enhanced or repressed in teacher-directed writing opportunities. It is possible, she believes, for adolescent writers to experience a “developmental crisis” as their writing experiences become more formalised to meet specific criteria. As a consequence, these young people can lose a natural spontaneity and become increasingly conditioned towards writing to comply. Sternberg (2003) believes creativity is often less evident in older children because a societal tendency towards intellectual conformity has repressed creative potential.

There views were consistent with those expressed by a number of participants in the present study. While most of these young female writers regarded their imagination as a significant influence on their current writing, half considered this to be less influential than previously. Dreams and fantasies had also declined in influence. Some participants suggested that as younger writers they were more influenced by their imagination and fantasy worlds and were encouraged to use their imagination more. In adolescence, the expectation of their writing was the exact antithesis of this. School-based writing was now perceived to be less focused on imaginative writing and more directed towards conveying personal thoughts, feelings and experiences of the “real” world. Additional research would need to be undertaken to determine the degree to which a decline in imaginational and fantasy based writing at the senior secondary school level is student initiated or teacher and/or curriculum driven.

The young writers in this study reported high levels of personal satisfaction from writing affectively about personal experiences, thoughts and feelings. They referred to their ease in writing this way from a young age. They said that they found it personally satisfying and enjoyable to express the “personal” in a written form. Gagné’s revised model of giftedness and talent positions such a high level of internal motivation or interest as the most powerful intrapersonal catalyst in the talent development process. Piirto (2002) associated this compulsion to satisfy personal, emotionally based needs with “volition or will” in young gifted writers (p. 34). Maslow (1943) put it this way, “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if [one] is to be ultimately happy....This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything one is capable of becoming” (p. 383).

The findings from this study suggested a clear shift in writer motivation and focus over time. The student participants expressed increased motivation for writing about thoughts, feelings and experiences that were of significance to them as adolescents. The “drive to write” now appeared to involve an intensity of response towards personal experiences within family relationships and personal friendships. It also included an expanded personal perspective, focusing on events and issues of national or global significance. Several students felt that they currently wrote at their best when they had strong feelings or opinions to express, especially about personal relationships. The intensity of feeling was utilised by two students to deliberately provoke with the aim of stimulating reader reaction.

A small group of participants felt that, while they were not always in control of their thoughts and feelings, these “unconscious expressions” could still be positive

influences on writing outputs. One student felt that her best writing was the “unbidden stuff”. Piirto (2002) believes it is common for writers not to be aware of their thoughts until they have expressed them in a written form. Similar sentiments were expressed by Parkyn (1995) in relation to both visual and verbal arts, asserting that, “we often do not know the meaning of what we have created till we have said it, found expressive form for it, ‘formulated’ it” (p. 48).

Some young writers in the current study mentioned an ability to create characters based on their own feelings, which facilitated the process of character and plot development. One student described this facility as forming an “artificial emotional attachment” with a particular character. In her mind, the relationship became “real” over time. In a sense, these students seemed able to use their emotional intensity and sensitivity to *become* their characters, experiencing the unfolding storyline at an intensely emotional level *with* characters.

Many participants recalled that their writing at an early stage centred largely on their personal lives and their immediate environments. While this focus remained relevant to their writing, it was now more about understanding themselves and their multiple relationships, and observations and affective responses within a much wider socio-cultural context.

McKeough, Genereux and Jeary (2006) provide a possible explanation for the perceived shift in affective emphasis found in this study. Their research analysed stories written by students aged from 4 to 17 years of age to further understand the development of narrative thinking abilities over time. “Narrative thought” was defined as the “encoding, representation, interpretation and construction of experience in story form” (p. 203). Their findings revealed significant shifts over time. Up to four years of age the stories focused on the reporting events of personal significance. From six to 10 years of age, children conveyed through their writing a greater understanding of their world in relation to their own thoughts and feelings. In adolescence, the writing involved much greater attention to interpreting the world around them.

Within the present study, 25 students felt they now produced their best writing when alone, with uninterrupted time for exploring and processing their thoughts and feelings. Writers such as Ward (1996), Piirto (2004), and Edmunds and Edmunds (2005) see young writers’ preference for writing in solitude as vital to sustaining excellence in writing outputs over time. However, what remains unclear is the extent to which these young gifted writers sought solitude to continue with “school writing” at home. Was their “best” writing personally initiated, rather than school initiated?

The shifting influence of “significant others”

Within the current study, family, teachers and friends were identified as the key “people” influences on the talent development process for young gifted and talented writers. However, there was some variation in the perceived degree and nature of influence over time.

Friends were mentioned as an influence on early writing by 18 of 32 participants in the current study. However, their influence appeared to be rather one-dimensional in nature. Friends were primarily esteemed as a source of ideas for writing. There was only one mention of a “critical friend” approach to appraising early writing. Piirto

(2002) believes that writers prefer their own company as young children, and tend not to be “joiners” (p. 90). Van Tassel Baska (1996) notes that young writers only seek feedback from friends with similar abilities and interests once they have personally matured in their writing.

Within the present study, the young writers’ needs and interests could possibly have regulated the nature and extent of friendship influences in the early years. As emergent writers, it is plausible that their focus was more self-centred and introspective as they explored their ability to communicate personal thoughts, feelings and experiences in a written form. It is also possible that they placed greater value on the support and stimulation provided by teachers and family in the early years.

The young gifted writers in this study commonly recalled high levels of positive support and encouragement for early writing efforts from parents and teachers. They placed high value on positive parental and teacher feedback in relation to early writing outputs. One participant appreciated her teacher encouraging her to enter writing competitions at an early age. Another had fond memories of dictating a story to her mother before she could write, and being successful in persuading her mother to send it to a publisher. Some students particularly enjoyed having both parents and teachers read to them. One student was certain her teacher’s passion for books had led to her personal love of language. The eminent writers in Piirto’s (2004) study recalled parents reading to them, providing ready access to books and generally modelling positive reading behaviours.

Coleman (1997) believes that “domain specific development” in an area such as writing “is more responsive to environmental and personal factors because it only happens in particular environments in which it is encouraged” (p. 120). This would suggest that extrinsic “environmental” motivation could enhance and support an individual’s intrinsic motivation in the development of expertise. Winner (2000) provides an interesting perspective on this subject, by challenging the degree of influence that could be directly attributed to a supportive family environment. Winner suggests that gifted children might already be highly intrinsically motivated to achieve. While a supportive family environment might afford the young gifted child the necessary freedom to explore and practise in their talent area, the child might in fact demand such an enriched and independent home context (Winner, 2000).

Within the present study, several students reported that teachers played an important role in their development as writers during their early years at school. One student said her primary school teacher provided her with “the opportunity and inclination to write”. For another, her primary school teacher helped her to realise that writing was something she was good at and because of that she “grew to love it”. However, only two students reported that their teachers had helped improve and refine their current writing. Nearly half the Year 11-13 students in this study now struggled with the nature of teacher influence over their writing outputs.

Within the present study participants generally felt they had less freedom and autonomy in their writing with school assessments taking priority over personal writing. School-based writing was perceived as being less experimental and more focused on responding to a specific assessment brief to suit “teacher wants”. Thirteen students expressed difficulty with the degree of perceived teacher “manipulation” during the editing process. As one asserted, “It’s not in me to write according to a

picture created by someone else. My freedom to write what my mind feels like is my greatest strength. Only then can I write with my heart and soul.” These participants believed that the intent and personal integrity of their writing was often edited to such an extent that its personal significance was lost.

Schultz and Delisle (2003) acknowledge that adolescence is often a time of significant emotional turmoil and physical change. It can also be the stage in life when gifted adolescents develop a strong sense of personal identity and an appreciation of their unique capabilities (Schultz & Delisle, 2003). Leggo (2007) believes an intellectually and emotionally supportive classroom environment could allow young writers to construct their identities and learn about their world “through words” (p. 10).

It would seem important to ensure that there is a balance between “teacher directed” writing and “student selected” writing opportunities within primary and secondary school based writing programmes. Otherwise, there is the potential for reduced student motivation that could also undermine writer efficacy. An imbalance within school-based writing could also fail to fully support young gifted writers’ particular emotional and cognitive needs. Within the secondary school setting in particular, there would seem to be a tension between satisfying personal writing needs and meeting the requirements of the English curriculum.

Potter and colleagues (2001) note that the majority of adolescent writers in their study did value teacher assessments of their writing as indicators of “school success and as important representations of themselves” but “most of them also retained a sense of themselves as writers that was independent of school definitions” (p. 48). Within the current study, teachers seemed to be viewed less positively, more by association than by action. In fact, there was a sense within interview responses particularly that the teacher’s expertise as a writing coach and mentor was valued. The students’ unease was directed more at the assessment demands of the secondary school English curriculum.

The young gifted writers in the present study also shared some innovative ways of maintaining their sense of self as a writer. Van Tassel-Baska (1998) would likely explain the following examples as indicative of students’ “owning and asserting their own talent” (p. 4). One student was sufficiently confident to challenge the teacher’s editing of her work. Another demonstrated writer independence in the selective use of teacher feedback. Another student said she that often had two versions of a piece of writing. One version had been changed by teacher editing and was submitted to meet assessment requirements. The “original” version was retained as a valued piece of personal writing, while the submitted version was subsequently deleted from her computer.

The 15 to 17-year-olds in this study chose to contextualise much of their current writing around their personal observations and experiences of family relationships and friendships. Writing now reflected their dominant thoughts and feelings as teenagers. While family members were valued as current sources of inspiration for writing, there was less need for their support in the writing process. Some students were also less inclined towards parental perspectives and opinions. They were now more focused on developing and expressing their own perspectives and exploring others’ views and opinions.

Friends *were* valued for their critical feedback of current writing. Several participants were happy to share writing with friends and to consider their friends' opinions and to test their perspectives against their own. One student regarded the feedback process as a way of testing the reliability of her "own narrative". Two students would only share their writing with their "best friends".

All participants in the current study had self-nominated for the gifted writing programme offered within their school. It could be possible that their "writing friends" were also part of the programme. The self-nomination process would have been explained as an example of a deliberate act rather than a chance opportunity within Gagné's (2008) revised *Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent*. The particular needs, interests and personality attributes of these young writers had likely determined their actions on their immediate environment. Their actions indicated a sound awareness and understanding of their writing abilities in accessing an accelerated writing programme, like-minded peers and an expert teacher.

Music, as a significant emergent influence.

While just over a third of the participants regarded music as a significant early influence on writing, responses were limited to a few early memories of making up songs and writing them down. It appeared that music was generally less influential in the early stages of developing writer expertise.

However, music emerged as a highly significant and positive environmental influence on current writing for two thirds of participants. This was an unexpected outcome as the link between music and the development of writing talent has not been highlighted to any extent previously. The teenage participants in the current study were able to identify a number of explanations as to why and how music impacted on their writing. Several students drew interesting parallels between writing and music. These included one reference to music as "like writing in your ears", and another to writing as being "like songs without music". Some participants referred to the emotional impact of music being the same as writing. Teenage years were described as an emotional period of their lives. Emotions and issues expressed within musical lyrics and scores were regarded as reflective of "popular youth culture". Students related to such musical content easily, linking it to their own thoughts and emotions, and ultimately using it in their writing. Piechowski (2006) believes that an individual's ability to perceive emotion in music is dependent on the mind's capacity "to recognise in music the likeness of our emotions" (p. 71).

Students in the present study were primarily influenced by song lyrics, and the messages conveyed, although two students believed they were influenced more by the actual music and its conveyed mood. One believed that "the chords and the feeling and the mood of a song can be evocative to writing about that feeling." Another felt that "music kind of reflects human nature like writing does....I think you can relate it to a character or a feeling or a mood....If I write poetry it tends to be more lyrical and musical." Six students believed they actually wrote at their best when listening to music.

While Piirto (2002) did mention music as a potential source of inspiration for gifted writers, it was further noted that some gifted writers were also talented musicians, with "correlative talents" (p. 101). Jackson (2003) intimated that early evidence of

precocity in reading and writing might indicate other intellectual strength areas. It was proposed that alphabetic code-breaking skills could facilitate mastery of numeric or musical coded systems, leading to possible mathematical or musical giftedness (Jackson, 2003).

Freeman's (2000) study of 12 outstanding young musicians, aged from eight to 11 years of age, concluded that very young children could demonstrate a similar degree of sensitivity to both linguistic and musical phrases. Five of the six participants interviewed within the current study were keen musicians. Four played a musical instrument, and two were singers. One of the five played and sang in a band, and composed some of the music performed.

Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen (1993) believed that musically gifted children typically experienced high levels of academic success. Winner (2000) reported links between music, academic abilities and IQ from research into children studying classical music. She suggested that these children were likely to achieve highly in music and academic studies as a result of enriched opportunities provided by educated parents. Gardner (1999) suggested that "certain families, and perhaps also certain ethnic groups, strongly emphasise scholastic and artistic accomplishment, expecting their children to do well in school and perform creditably on musical instruments" (p 104).

CONCLUSION

The last decade has seen a major shift in both attitudes and responses towards gifted and talented students. These young people are now less likely to be regarded as holding an educational and social advantage that should preclude them from any specialised educational provisions. They are much more likely to be viewed as another group deserving of differentiated provisions commensurate with their interests and abilities. To meet this need requires a commitment to better understanding the talent development process within different domains of ability.

This current research adds to a rather scant pool of knowledge about the development of talent in writing. While acknowledging that this small-scale study undertaken in a decile 10 girls' school has limitations, it is unique in that it reports on the perspectives of the writers themselves.

It is maybe not surprising that the participants in this study reported that their primary motivation to write came from within. Heightened levels of intrinsic motivation have been found to characterise exceptional achievers irrespective of the domain of endeavour. It would seem that the greatest gift adults can give to a gifted young person is an environment that recognises this inner desire "to be". While it is important that talent of this kind is supported by way of modeling, encouragement and guidance, it is apparent from the findings of this study that *freedom* and *space* are more critical to gifts being realised as talents. The primary school curriculum would seem better suited to provide these conditions. Interestingly, as these students progressed through the school system, the constraints over their writing freedom increased. However, they were much more inclined to link such constraints to the curriculum and assessment practices than to the expectations of their teachers.

Finally, Gagné's *Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent* (DMGT) (Gagné, 2000; 2003; 2007; 2008) would appear to offer a valid explanation of the talent development process in writing. It is hoped that this study adds to our understanding of the catalytic process in the transformation of gifts to talents.

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