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Same Age, Different Page: Overcoming the Barriers to Catering for Young Gifted Children in Prior-to-School Settings

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Abstract Despite well-articulated social inclusionist and anti-bias agendas in early childhood, the needs of young gifted children in prior-to-school settings appear to have been neglected. The purpose of this paper is to examine the tensions and contradictions that seem to exist between educators working in the fields of early childhood education and gifted education. Areas in which misunderstandings may occur regarding the education of young gifted children are discussed: the identification of young gifted children, the labelling of young gifted children, the application of appropriate gifted education strategies in the early childhood context, the application of current early childhood approaches to meeting the needs of young gifted children, and the socialisation of young potentially gifted children in the educational setting. Recommendations are offered regarding ways in which educators in the two fields might collaborate more effectively to cater appropriately to the unique characteristics of young gifted children.

Résumé Malgré qu'il y ait des orientations sociales inclusives et sans préjugés bien articulées en petite enfance, les besoins des jeunes enfants doués paraissent avoir été négligés dans les services préscolaires. Le but de cet article est d'examiner les tensions et contradictions qui semblent exister entre éducateurs travaillant dans les champs de l'éducation de la petite enfance et de l'éducation des enfants doués. Des dimensions susceptibles d'incompréhension relativement à l'éducation des jeunes enfants doués y sont discutées : l'identification des jeunes enfants doués, la socialisation des jeunes enfants doués, le recours à des stratégies de l'éducation des enfants doués appropriées au contexte préscolaire, le recours aux approches

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actuelles en éducation de la petite enfance pour satisfaire les besoins des jeunes enfants doués, et la socialisation des jeunes enfants potentiellement doués en contexte scolaire. Des recommandations sont faites eu égard à la façon dont les éducateurs des deux champs pourraient collaborer pour tenir adéquatement compte des caractéristiques propres aux jeunes enfants doués.

Resumen A pesar de que existen buenos programas de inclusión social y anti-discriminatorios en la primera infancia, las necesidades de los niños dotados en ámbitos preescolares parecen haber sido desatendidas. El propósito de este trabajo es examinar las tensiones y contradicciones que existen entre los educadores especializados en la primera infancia y los especializados en la educación de niños dotados. Este trabajo se focaliza en áreas en las que pueden producirse malentendidos respecto de la educación de niños dotados en la primera infancia: la identificación y etiquetamiento de estos niños, la aplicación de enfoques actuales sobre la primera infancia para satisfacer sus necesidades, y la socialización de los niños dotados en el ámbito educacional. El trabajo ofrece recomendaciones acerca de cómo los educadores de ambos campos podrían colaborar con mayor eficacia para atender apropiadamente las singulares características de estos niños.

Keywords Gifted education · Early childhood · Preschool

The needs of gifted preschoolers have been largely overlooked by educators working in the fields of gifted education and early childhood. In fact, some argue that the area of giftedness in early childhood is one of the most neglected areas in education (Barbour and Shaklee 1998; Chamberlin et al. 2007; Jolly and Kettler 2008; Koshy and Robinson 2006; Robinson 2000, 2008). Given that the period from birth to 5 years of age is viewed as crucial in the development of children's intellect, self-esteem and social functioning (Shore 1996), it is perplexing that so little attention has been paid to the needs of young gifted children. Robinson (2008) has attributed this lack of interest to a combination of factors: children attending a variety of non-parental early childhood education and care settings (e.g., day care or preschool) with educators untrained in gifted education, educators' beliefs that abilities at this age cannot be identified reliably, and an assumption that the formal school system will cater for young gifted children.

There are numerous definitions of giftedness (Sternberg and Davidson 2005) and their diversity can give rise to confusion. In some definitions a child's current level of achievement is the focus (e.g., Renzulli 1978), whereas in others it is the potential to perform at a level significantly beyond that of chronological-aged peers that is emphasised (e.g., Gagné 2003; Harrison 2003; Tannenbaum 1997). In his Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent, Gagné (2003) stated that the term *giftedness* refers to spontaneous untrained abilities (potential) that place the individual in the top 10% of same-age peers in that particular domain. Through a developmental process of formal and informal learning, these abilities or gifts may

be transformed into *talents* or systematically trained abilities (achievement). Gagné proposed that both the characteristics of the individual (interpersonal traits such as motivation and temperament) and the environment were important catalysts in the process of talent development.

For educators in the field of early childhood, definitions that rely on standardised testing, such as those used historically to determine placement in school programs for the gifted, are unlikely to be helpful due to the unreliability of a child's scores in the early years (Robinson 2000). Definitions that draw attention to the asynchronous development of young gifted children, and emphasise potential over performance, may be more usefully operationalised by early childhood educators.

While it is acknowledged that there is a range of domains in which a child may manifest giftedness, the focus in this paper is on the intellectually gifted child in prior-to-school settings. For the purposes of this paper, Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (2003) has been adopted as it incorporates environmental aspects and early learning experiences that, it will be argued, are pivotal in the development of talent and the prevention of underachievement.

There is an extensive literature around the identification of young gifted children (Robinson 2008). Research into the traits associated with characteristics of young potentially gifted children has suggested that they are likely to demonstrate some of the following cognitive behaviours: fast pace of learning, exceptional memory (quick and accurate recall), extended concentration span, ability to understand complex concepts, heightened observational ability, curiosity, and an advanced sense of humour (Freeman 1985; Harrison 2003; Lewis and Michalson 1985; Sankar-DeLeeuw 1997; Silverman nd; White 1985). Silverman (nd) has suggested that not only is giftedness associated with advanced cognitive behaviours, but there may be affective traits that are displayed by gifted children including heightened sensitivity, early concern with moral issues and ability to empathise, perfectionism, social maturity, and aesthetic appreciation. When the behaviours and characteristics of children remarkably exceed expected development for their chronological age they may be considered gifted.

Two arguments are frequently cited to justify educational programming for the gifted (Schwartz 1994). The first is that all children deserve to have their individual needs met and therefore, as a matter of equity, we should not ignore the unique needs of the gifted (Borland 1989). Reinforcement for this argument comes from the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child: "[The child] shall be given an education which will… enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities" (Office of the High Commission for Human Rights 1959, p. 2).

The second justification cited is that gifted children are an important national resource and we should pay special attention to developing their abilities as an investment in our own future (Colangelo et al. 2004). Interestingly, funding and support for the early childhood sector in Australia has also been based on this second "national resources" argument. Governments view early childhood initiatives as important because they are seen as a way of supporting parents in the workforce, securing an educated workforce for the future, and as a means to reduce future spending on welfare and the criminal justice system (Arthur et al. 2008).

Those working in the early childhood field have been less comfortable with the idea that the purpose of early childhood education is purely economic, believing that it is just as important to value the benefits that quality early childhood care and education bring to individual children and their families in the present (Arthur et al. 2008). Similarly, Grant and Piechowski (1999) have called for gifted education to become more child-centred and to value children for their inherent worth rather than for their accomplishments. In a similar way to those in the movement to reconceptualise early childhood (e.g., Cannella 1997), Grant and Piechowski (1999) critiqued current definitions of giftedness that focus on talent development, suggesting that children need to find their own path to self-actualisation rather than being moulded to fit adult perceptions of success.

The focus on social inclusion and an anti-bias approach in early childhood (Dau 2001) has emphasised the needs of children experiencing disadvantage due to disability, language barriers, and socio-economic status. It appears that giftedness has been viewed as an advantage, with only the positive aspects being acknowledged, and no account taken of the research that has demonstrated that young gifted children whose needs are not met in the early childhood context may become bored, experience an early disenchantment with education, or seek to gain educators' attention in inappropriate ways (Clark 2002; Lewis and Louis 1991; Roedell 1985; Wolfle 1989). Unrealised potential has both a cost to the individual and to society as a whole. The provision of appropriate services to gifted children has been seen as important in developing a healthy self-concept (Gross 1993), preventing underachievement (Whitmore 1986), and enhancing motivation to learn (Wolfle 1989).

Barbour (1992) outlined the possible areas of intersection between the fields of gifted education and early childhood education, focusing on the importance of early intervention, integrated curriculum, the need to involve parents and caregivers in early education, and the need for methods of assessment that are developmentally appropriate. Despite this call for collaboration between those working in both fields, limited interest has been shown by early childhood educators in catering for gifted children (Porter 2005; Stile 1996), and little research has been conducted by those in gifted education regarding young gifted children in prior-to-school settings (Jolly and Kettler 2008; Robinson 2000, 2008). Why, 17 years after Barbour's (1992) paper was published, does it appear that little progress has been made in acknowledging the needs of young gifted children?

Building on Barbour's (1992) general observations of the differences and similarities between the two fields, and her suggestion that collaboration is needed, this paper addresses possible causes of the tensions and contradictions that may have led to the needs of young gifted children being overlooked in prior-to-school settings, with particular reference to current early childhood practices in Britain, the USA, and Australia where the majority of research into young gifted children has been conducted. Suggestions are given for ways in which educators working in the fields of early childhood and gifted education might collaborate, using the strengths of each discipline to develop fruitful linkages between the two fields in the interests of young gifted children.

Tensions and Contradictions

Misunderstandings between those working in the fields of early childhood education and gifted education appear to remain in a number of areas in relation to meeting the needs of young gifted children. These concerns lie in the areas of (a) the identification of young gifted children, (b) the labelling of young gifted children, (c) the application of appropriate gifted education strategies in the early childhood context, (d) the application of current early childhood approaches to meeting the needs of young gifted children, and (e) the socialisation of young potentially gifted children in the educational setting. In each section the current understandings in the field of gifted education are presented and suggestions about the possible tensions that may exist for early childhood educators are offered.

The Identification of Young Gifted Children

Potential areas for tension and misunderstandings in the identification of young gifted children revolve around three central issues. The first issue is whether identification at such a young age is appropriate or necessary. Second, concerns exist about the reliance of those in gifted education on formalised testing and the validity of the use of such instruments with young children. The third issue involves the reliability of parents as identifiers of young gifted children.

Early identification is important in that it can assist parents and educators in understanding better the behaviours of young gifted children. While educators may be familiar with the positive traits displayed by gifted children, they tend to be less aware of negative behaviours that gifted children may display (Diezmann and Watters 1997; Hall 1983). Without an understanding of these characteristics and how they may be expressed, teachers may regard gifted children's behaviour as irrational and immature and use interventions that will not address the fundamental issue that caused the behaviour. For example, young gifted children may react to a lack of appropriate intellectual stimulation with aggressive frustration that can be misinterpreted as behavioural difficulties (Mares 1991).

Scholars in gifted education acknowledge that formal assessment of young gifted children, using measures such as IQ tests, can be problematic (Hodge and Kemp 2000; Robinson and Robinson 1992; Roedell et al. 1980). The attention span of young children may make them difficult to assess and means that underestimates of ability are more likely to occur due to test fatigue (Silverman 1998). The potential unreliability of scores in the early years highlights the importance of not relying on a single test result to define giftedness or to determine placement in a gifted program. However, formalised testing should not be entirely discarded as it is useful in providing additional information about the child's abilities as compared to same-age peers (Gross 1999; Robinson and Robinson 1992). This is particularly important in cases where a child is suspected of having a dual diagnosis (e.g., gifted and dyslexic) or where evidence is required for early entry to school (Feldhusen et al. 1986).

Parent nomination of gifted children in the early years has been shown to be reliable and effective (Louis and Lewis 1992; Roedell et al. 1980; Silverman 1998;

Silverman et al. 1986). However, despite a focus on the importance of the family in early childhood education, some early childhood educators remain sceptical about parents' abilities to correctly identify young gifted children (Wellisch 1997). Gross (1986) has suggested that, despite a widely held but false perception that all middle-class parents believe their child is gifted, gifted children are found in every social stratum and in every cultural group, and parent perceptions are usually accurate.

Multicriteria identification, taking into account the observations of parents and educators as well as test results, is considered to be best practice in gifted education (Robinson et al. 2007). It is also more effective in identifying children from culturally diverse backgrounds who may not emerge as gifted in testing practices that are biased towards the majority culture (Richert 2003). Hodge and Kemp (2002) have suggested the use of observation in an invitational environment as a naturalistic way in which young gifted children might be identified. Children are observed taking part in activities designed specifically to allow them to demonstrate their advanced abilities.

The Labelling of Young Gifted Children

In general, early childhood educators appear to be uncomfortable with any type of labelling of children, especially that based on formalised testing (Harrison 2003; National Association for the Education of Young Children 2008; Sankar-DeLeeuw 1999). Many early childhood professionals believe that formal testing can mask children's level of learning by focusing on deficits and that more can be gained from the educational methods of observing and conversing with children to learn about their strengths and needs (Arthur et al. 2008). This focus on informal testing and observation matches, in part, the views of many in gifted education (e.g., Harrison 2005; Porter 2005; Wright and Borland 1993) who acknowledge as essential the use of methods by which the child is observed in an authentic environment and make use of the information that parents can provide about their child. There are, however, limitations to this approach in that it relies on the skill of the observer. Unless educators have training in recognising the positive and negative characteristics of gifted children, they tend to identify only those who fit the positive stereotypes of gifted children (Hall 1983), overlooking gifted children with challenging or non-conformist behaviours. Furthermore, our expectations of children's capacities can be a powerful predictor of their achievements and if children are only exposed to low level tasks and never presented with more challenging materials, they may not demonstrate their advanced development (Whitmore 1982). There have been cases of gifted children modifying their behaviour and abilities to meet the expectations of a prior-to-school setting and producing, for example, "age-appropriate" drawings at preschool while drawing with more skill and detail at home (Harrison 2005).

Research into the effects of labelling on gifted children and their families has produced varied findings with some researchers reporting children labelled as gifted to be less well adjusted and more anxious, especially if incorrectly labelled as gifted by parents (Freeman 2000). Others such as Porter (2005) and Mares (1991) have pointed out that anxiety and lack of social adjustment may have been present

regardless of the application of the label and have further argued, that when the label is used to determine appropriate programming, the outcomes for children and families are positive. Freeman (2000) acknowledged that there is no evidence to support the view that gifted children as a group are less emotionally stable than children of average ability.

The Application of Appropriate Gifted Education Strategies in the Early Childhood Context

Early childhood professionals' apparently ambivalent attitude toward gifted education may well spring from two sources of confusion: a perception that gifted education is equated with acceleration, and concerns about hothousing and early exposure to academic learning. Acceleration is an educational response to the cognitive characteristics of gifted children, including their ability to learn and process knowledge at a greater pace and with greater depth and complexity than their age peers (Feldhusen and Feldhusen 1998). Hothousing, on the other hand, is "the process of inducing infants to acquire knowledge that is typically acquired at a later developmental level" (Sigel 1987, p. 212) and typically relies on rote learning with no real depth of understanding. The purpose of acceleration in the context of gifted education is not to push gifted children to achieve more than they are capable of achieving nor to give them an advantage over children of average ability. Acceleration aims to allow gifted children to progress at the rate at which they are able to learn, and at a level appropriate to their intellectual development (Colangelo et al. 2004; Feldhusen and Feldhusen 1998).

Even within the early childhood field, Elkind (1986, 1988, 2007), frequently cited as a critic of a strong academic focus in early childhood education, nevertheless viewed the acceleration of intellectually gifted students as appropriate:

> Promotion of intellectually gifted children is another way of attaining the goal we have been arguing for at the early childhood level, namely, developmentally appropriate curriculum… [it] is simply another way of attempting to match the curriculum to the child's abilities, not to accelerate those abilities. (1988, p. 2)

There has been little research specifically targeting the educational strategies that might be of benefit to young gifted children in prior-to-school settings. For school-aged gifted students, there is evidence of the intellectual, social and emotional benefits of educational practices including enrichment (Renzulli and Reis 1994), acceleration (Rogers 1992), ability grouping (Kulik 1992; Rogers 1991), and social and emotional support (Robinson et al. 2002; Silverman 1993).

Academic acceleration in the form of early entry to school has been found to be an effective intervention with positive academic and social outcomes for young gifted children (Diezmann et al. 2001; Rankin and Vialle 1996; Robinson 2004; Rogers 1992) provided that established guidelines are followed, such as careful consideration of the child's characteristics and abilities and selection of the receiving teacher. Some educators have suggested that a year in a responsive preschool environment followed by entry directly into the second year of formal schooling is another

accelerative option well suited to gifted young children (Saunders and Espeland 1991). However, as yet no research has fully investigated the benefits of this option. While early entry to school may be appropriate for some gifted preschoolers, finding ways to cater for gifted children by using the inherent flexibility of the early childhood environment remains a priority (Falls 2006; Lewis 1984).

Enrichment can be defined as "the provision of broader, deeper or more varied educational experiences" (Porter 2005, p. 148). Traditionally this has been a strength of early childhood educators who, as part of the emergent curriculum approach, observe and build on the interests of the children in their care. Implementing enrichment strategies is therefore unlikely to be problematic in an early childhood context.

Ability grouping, where children of similar intellectual ability are grouped together for instruction, is rarely found in prior-to-school settings with the exception of specialised programs for gifted preschoolers, such as the Hollingworth Preschool in New York. The social inclusionist agenda of current early childhood practice has meant that many educators feel uncomfortable about grouping children of similar ability. This is despite the fact that it is common practice to group children chronologically in preschools and day care centres on the basis of their similar developmental stages. Researchers in gifted education have argued that gifted children, even young gifted children, need to have opportunities to mix with other children of like-ability in order to develop healthy self-concept (Harrison 2004). Opportunities for young gifted children to work together for a period of the day have been suggested as a potentially responsive intervention (Porter 2005).

The Application of Current Early Childhood Approaches to Meeting the Needs of Young Gifted Children

It is apparent that some early childhood professionals feel a conflict between the dominant philosophy of early childhood education and their beliefs about the special needs of gifted children. Falls (2006) concluded that early childhood educators in the Australian context found it difficult to reconcile their use of special provisions for gifted students that focused on more "school-like" activities within the current approach of emergent curriculum and child-centred approaches to early childhood learning. The educators in Falls' study were concerned that using formalised academic activities, while enthusiastically received by the children, might lead to children becoming bored when they started school. Falls also found that early childhood educators were concerned about the amount of one-on-one time needed to engage effectively with young gifted children. While educators liked working with young gifted children and felt an obligation to do something for them, there was an overwhelming feeling that to do so was difficult in the context of the competing needs of other children.

Surveys of early childhood provisions (e.g., Stile 1996) have revealed that there have been few programs for gifted children in preschool and kindergarten settings. The programs that do exist appear to be based mainly in private, user-pays institutions, which further exacerbates equity issues if young gifted children come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Programs that have published descriptions of early childhood provision for young gifted children (e.g., Gould et al. 2003; Grant 2004; Hodge and Kemp 2002; Meador 1996; Morelock and Morrison 1999; Snowden and Christian 1998; Walker et al. 1999) have used the principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) as recommended by the American National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; Bredekamp and Copple 1997). Other educators have reported using an integrated thematic approach (Gould et al. 2001) or the Montessori approach to education (Phillips 1997; Tittle 1984) with young gifted children. The work of the educators of the Reggio Emilia region of Italy has been suggested as being suited to young gifted children because of its open-ended nature (Barbour and Shaklee 1998; Hertzog 2001). Similarly, emergent curriculum (Jones and Nimmo 1994) and the project approach (Katz and Chard 2000) are potentially beneficial approaches for young gifted children (Harrison 2005). While instances in which these methods have been used to design programs for gifted children are described in detail and positive outcomes for the children are often outlined in case study or anecdotal form, none of these publications reports empirical evaluation of the programs' effectiveness for young gifted children (Koshy and Robinson 2006).

Effective implementation of the current dominant educational approach focuses on meeting the needs of all children through a recognition and affirmation of individual differences and interests. Its effective implementation relies heavily on the expertise of the individual professional (Coates et al. 2008; Hertzog et al. 1999) and a willingness to validate the gifted child (Harrison 2005). Even with a focus on a diverse and rich child-centred curriculum, there remain aspects of giftedness (as of delayed development) that simply cannot be met by a focus on individual needs. These include the gifted child's need to interact with like-minds, which Harrison (2005) has termed a need for *connection* and has considered important for developing a healthy self-concept.

Harrison (2005) has argued for giftedness to be viewed as an anti-bias issue and has urged early childhood professionals to question the ways in which they work with young gifted children. Harrison further claimed that inclusivity and affirmation of gifted children in the early childhood setting might mean providing additional and more advanced resources, assisting children to develop independent research skills and providing an environment that is responsive to their social and emotional needs.

The Socialisation of Young Gifted Children in the Educational Setting

Early childhood educators place a great emphasis on the development of social skills (Sankar-DeLeeuw 1999) and learning through social play (Arthur et al. 2008). This can be problematic for those young gifted children who do not interact with their same-age peers because of a lack of intellectual connection. An understanding of the characteristics of gifted children can, however, place a different perspective on these behaviours. Harrison (2003) suggested that gifted children with unusual interests may appear socially isolated if they can find no like-minded peer with whom to share their passions. In addition, their advanced cognitive skills may make the play of children of average ability seem to them crude and unsophisticated. They

may therefore withdraw from socialising with children of their chronological age (Harrison 2003), thereby experiencing intense loneliness, isolation and under-achievement (Harrison 2003, 2005; Whitmore 1986).

Young gifted children may gravitate more towards interaction with the educator or older children than with same-age peers (Clark 2002; Dalzell 1998; Harrison and Tegel 1999; Silverman nd). If a perceived lack of social skills and a preference for solitary play (Wellisch 1997) and the company of adults are used as reasons to encourage parents to delay a child's entry to school beyond usual entry age or to discourage early entry (Diezmann et al. 2001; Rankin and Vialle 1996), this could mistakenly work against the needs of young gifted children.

Good social adjustment for gifted children can occur when there is a supportive and appropriate environment (Roedell 1985). Early childhood provisions that encourage social development, that is, the development of the individual as an accepted member of a social group, are appropriate for gifted children (Harrison 2003). This is in contrast to socialisation (conforming to social norms) which may result in gifted children hiding their abilities to fit in with the peer group (Roedell 1989). Gross (1998) suggested that children who are forced to modify their behaviour to conform to a peer group of lesser ability are at risk of experiencing frustration both intellectually and emotionally.

Recommendations for Collaboration

There are many opportunities for educators in the fields of gifted education and early childhood education to work together in ways that fit with the traditions and beliefs of each field. According to Gagné's (2003) model, a child's environment is thought to be a critical catalyst in the development of giftedness (potential) into talent (achievement). Prior-to-school settings, including the home, preschool and childcare centres, have an important role in providing a nurturing and enriching environment in which the talents of young gifted children can begin to develop.

There are a number of reasons why early childhood environments are potentially the most responsive of all educational settings for young gifted children (Harrison 2005; Porter 2005). The child-focused and naturalistic nature of most approaches to prior-to-school early childhood education is better equipped than schools to cater for individualised programming since there is no prescribed curriculum (Harrison 2003; Porter 2005). This allows educators to follow the interests of the gifted child, interests that can often be unusual and esoteric (Cohen 1998). The use in the early childhood sector of naturalistic and authentic observation of children's interests and abilities should allow early childhood educators to identify and respond more easily to young gifted children than school teachers, who are less likely to routinely use observation of individual children as a basis for educational planning (Harrison 2005; Porter 2005). Training in recognising both the positive and negative behaviours that young gifted children can display would help to strengthen the ability of early childhood educators to identify and respond to these children (Hansen and Feldhusen 1994).

An additional advantage of prior-to-school settings in catering for the needs of young gifted children is that there is a narrower span of mental ages and abilities in a prior-to-school setting than would be found in a regular school classroom (Porter 2005). For example, a moderately gifted 3-year-old child with an IQ of 130 (top 2% among same-age peers) is approximately 1 year ahead cognitively of her chronological peers. This difference increases with age, meaning that by the time the same child is 6 the difference is closer to 2 years, and at age 9 the difference will have increased to around 3 years (Gross 2000). One study of Australian grade 3 students found a 5-year achievement gap between children in the top and bottom 10% of the year in literacy skills (Australian Council for Educational Research 1997). Educators in prior-to-school settings are less likely to need to cater to this wide spread of abilities due to the younger age of the children in their care (Porter 2005).

Play and discovery learning, along with the encouragement of creativity, interdependence and autonomy, are highly valued by early childhood professionals (Harrison 2005; Harrison and Tegel 1999), giving those working in the prior-to-school environment the potential to be very responsive to the characteristics of young gifted children. Programming for young gifted children should focus on their strengths and interests, as well as providing enrichment through exposure to challenging ideas and concepts (Maker 1986). Wolfle (1989) has stressed that a developmentally appropriate response to the needs of young gifted children should not merely be a "watered-down kindergarten program" (p. 42). Provisions for gifted preschoolers should be based on the cognitive and affective characteristics that they possess (Maker 1986). Porter (2005) suggested that the challenge lies in "how to advance children's skills beyond [school] entry level without imposing on such young children the structured, academic teaching that characterises the schooling of their older counterparts" (p. 119). Providing opportunities for young gifted children to spend some time with like-minded or older children by removing the traditional age barriers between groups in centres and preschools may also assist with social and emotional development (Porter 2005).

Educators in the early childhood field have long recognised the importance of the family context in catering for the needs of young children (Harrison 2005). Likewise, those working in gifted education understand that the family environment can be a positive catalyst in the development and nurturing of talent (Gagné 2003). Families are an important source of information in the process of identifying young gifted children as they can often provide examples of advanced behaviours and have observed their children in a variety of settings and situations (Hodge and Kemp 2000). Finding ways to engage and collaborate with parents to enhance and support the prior-to-school experience for gifted children may assist in providing some of the additional support that these children require.

There needs to be a better understanding between those working in the fields of early childhood education and gifted education and an acceptance of the diversity of provisions and philosophies within each field. This range of programming options and philosophies should be viewed as a strength rather than as a divisive issue. Since gifted children themselves manifest a complex variety of intellectual, social and emotional traits, our responses to their learning characteristics through a

diversity of play-based methods, both accelerative and enriching, should be encouraged. Parents and educators need to work together to find the optimal prior-to-school match for individual children from the options available.

There is a need for training of early childhood educators about gifted children, at both the pre-service and in-service levels. Research has demonstrated that educators with training in gifted education are significantly better at identifying children with intellectual promise than those who have not undertaken training (Hansen and Feldhusen 1994). This training should address ways in which giftedness can be integrated into the anti-bias and social inclusion agendas of early childhood education (Harrison 2005), thereby building on the strengths that exist in this field.

The ideal prior-to-school setting for young gifted children would include the following elements:

1. A well-articulated, multicriteria identification plan that combines the observational skills of early childhood professionals (trained in recognising the characteristics of young gifted children) with information provided by parents. The identification process should use naturalistic activities that allow all children to demonstrate their strengths, interests, and abilities so that those children with exceptional abilities compared with their chronological-aged peers can be recognised. Access to relevant and culturally sensitive standardised testing should be available as a supplementary option when required.
2. A thoughtful and well-planned curriculum that builds on the unique learning characteristics of young gifted children, incorporating play and elements of accelerated content and lateral enrichment based on the interests and strengths of each child.
3. Opportunities for young gifted children to experience connection either by grouping gifted children for some part of the day or allowing gifted children to interact with older children. In centre-based care, this may entail dismantling structures and routines that prevent young children from mixing with older children or assisting parents to find other gifted children in the community.
4. An environment that provides acceptance and validation of the abilities and skills that a young gifted child brings to the early childhood context.

Conclusion

Despite calls for those in the fields of gifted education and early childhood education to work together, it appears that barriers still impede successful collaboration. These barriers are not insurmountable, but they require understanding, education and thoughtful interaction between educators in both fields. The intention of this paper is to begin that conversation by highlighting where potential difficulties lie and how solutions can be found.

Early childhood educators' focus on individual differences and meeting the needs of all children through curriculum that is based on their interests already provides the potential to cater for young gifted preschoolers. An additional awareness of the traits and characteristics, both intellectual and socio-affective, positive and negative,

of gifted children is needed. Regardless of the curricula adopted, all young gifted children need opportunities to mix with children of similar ability and to experience connection with like-minded peers (Harrison 2005). A failure to provide this can result in negative self-concept and the concealment of abilities.

There is an exciting opportunity for those in the fields of gifted education and early childhood education to work collaboratively to create an environment that caters effectively for the unique characteristics of young potentially gifted children. This collaboration could be better promoted if early childhood educators received training about gifted children at the pre-service and in-service levels. The strengths, traditions and research bases of each field have the potential to contribute to creating a place where young gifted children are welcomed, valued and celebrated as well as nurtured intellectually.

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