

Australian Aboriginal peoples and giftedness: A diverse issue in need of a diverse response

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Abstract

For over thirty years sporadic research has attempted to address the underrepresentation of Aboriginal students in gifted programs. What emerges from the literature is the need for cultural understanding, flexibility and sensitivity when dealing with definitional issues of giftedness, and cultural inclusivity when designing talent development programs that respond to the particular needs of gifted learners from Aboriginal backgrounds. This article will explore these issues and highlight the need for schools to value the funds of knowledge Aboriginal students bring to their classrooms, which in turn will allow for more appropriate identification protocols and programs to be put in place for these students.

Key words: giftedness, Aboriginal, underrepresentation, cultural inclusivity

Introduction

While giftedness occurs across all cultures, religions and socio-economic groups, research has identified Aboriginal students as underrepresented in gifted and talented programs in Australian schools (Braggett, 1985; Chaffey, 2011; Harslett, 1996; Merrotsy, 2011; Vialle, 2011). As the dates of these references suggest this underrepresentation has been an ongoing issue for some time. Chandler (2011, p. 2), an Aboriginal academic, has articulated the problem:

The biggest challenge of all is that not all cultural groups or racial groups have the same opportunities to fulfil their real potential. The oldest living civilisations on this planet are Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal people lie behind non-Aboriginal people in this country by a massive amount. With all the good work and all good intentions that have been put in the space of Aboriginal education, we are no better than we were decades ago.

Chandler warns that “our young ... first nation people ... need to be given our attention so they can realise their talents and gifts like all children” (p. 4). It is about valuing different knowledge systems and it is about dispelling myths such as “Aboriginal people do not value school or academic achievement – wrong! ... Aboriginal kids want to learn just as much as any other kid. What we need to do, however, is respect their knowledge systems” (p. 4).

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While the research into Aboriginal conceptions of giftedness is limited, the findings have important implications for Australian schools. Chandler reflects on how knowledge is valued in schools, particularly the knowledge held by Aboriginal children and how this knowledge has implications for classroom practice. He makes the point that “from an Aboriginal perspective, giftedness is a measure of your knowledge of your ancestry, your land, your kin, and your respect as a leader or a gifted person of any kind [and] comes [with] an enormous responsibility” (Chandler, 2011, p. 3). If teachers are to provide “culturally responsive pedagogy” (Hogg, 2011, p. 673) we must identify and value the funds of knowledge these students bring with them into our classrooms.

When contextualising Aboriginal understandings of giftedness it is important to remember that before white occupation “Australia was made up of hundreds of countries and thousands of language groups” (Chandler, 2011, p. 1) and within each of those cultural groups, as with all cultural groups, giftedness was and continues to be perceived differently through these many cultural lenses (Christie 2010; Gibson, 1997; Harslett, 1996). Research by Harslett suggests that not only are there differences in the perceptions of giftedness across different cultural groups, but also generational differences in understandings of giftedness between younger and older people within a single cultural group. This review will examine the research on the diversity of Aboriginal peoples, cultural understandings of giftedness, identification and cultural perspectives, talent development and culture, and successful gifted programs for Aboriginal students.

The diversity of Aboriginal peoples

Australia’s First Peoples (National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, 2016) are a varied group who identify themselves ‘through their land areas, relationships with others and their language and stories’ (Australian Government, 2015). Indigenous Australians are often classified by government sources as either ‘Urban’ or ‘Remote’ with these characterisations moving beyond a simplistic description of physical location to include reference to cultural evolution, and adaptations related to post colonisation histories and experiences (Behrendt, 2006). There are currently approximately 60 Indigenous languages and dialects in use across Australia that reflect diverse and “unique” bodies of cultural knowledge, built around interaction with the environment associated with each relevant language group (Australian Government, 2015). According to Gibson and Vialle (2007), “the majority of Aboriginal people speak as their first language either Aboriginal English, a dialect of English, or one of three Kriols, the Aboriginal term for the Creole languages that have evolved following English settlement of Australia” (p.

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197). According to Behrendt, there are also Indigenous Australians dispersed across urban and remote locations who have lost their language, but retain their culture and cultural identity. It has also been noted by researchers such as Christie (2010) and Gibson and Vialle that certain similarities can be found across different Aboriginal cultures, regardless of their location. Supporting this point, Chandler (2011) identifies commonalities such as a deep affinity with the land, with kin, and a responsibility to one's community. However, while some shared understandings may exist, other research suggests a more cautious approach, recommending the concept of giftedness should be considered at a local level, honouring the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and communities.

Cultural understandings of giftedness

Giftedness is a social construct (Bevan-Brown, 2011) with definitions continuing to evolve since the French government commissioned the first Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests in 1904. Dai and Chen (2013) trace the historical paradigmatic shifts in the gifted-related literature, noting a gradual and general broadening from Terman's 1925 original conception of the construct as being a fixed intellectual trait, to something more malleable and dynamic, open to expression across a range of domains. Today, neuroscience continues to add to our understanding of the brain and modern psychology also recognises multidimensional views of intelligence (Ngara & Porath, 2007). However, an important aspect of understanding giftedness often overlooked in the literature is the cultural perspective, which varies according to a cultural group's worldviews. Munro (2011) highlights how "cultures differ in how they construct intelligence" and how "they value the thinking strategies used to solve problems" (p. 25).

For over thirty years debate into how best to accommodate cultural variance in recognising and responding to giftedness has periodically surfaced. In 1985 Braggett advocated for a 'distinct cultural view' of minority cultures to be considered in the identification process. Kirschenbaum (1988) suggested the need for a broad definition of giftedness to be agreed on, which would be flexible enough to be applied across different cultural populations. Callahan and McIntire (1994) asserted that definitions of giftedness should be developed specific to 'locale', and should aim to reflect "both the current literature and the philosophy of the community" (p. 36). Cramond (2004) asked whether it is necessary to have a "complete and universally agreeable definition" in view of the "principles of the cultural and temporal relativity of the construct of giftedness" (p. 15). As Munro (2011, p. 24) explains:

Gifted knowing and thinking are manifested in different forms in different cultural groups. The aptitudes, attributes, and characteristics associated with gifted

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knowledge are culturally embedded and cultures differ in the ways of knowing and thinking they recognise and value. To identify gifted potential, the sociocultural context needs to be taken into account.

Research into Aboriginal conceptions of giftedness

As stated, a small number of studies have researched Aboriginal conceptions of giftedness. Comparing these studies demonstrates the inherent limitations of any attempts to apply a generalised version of an Australian Aboriginal worldview with regards to giftedness, as illustrated in the findings of Harslett (1996) and Christie (2010). Harslett reported the results of a study conducted in Western Australia with a convenience sample of 177 Aboriginal participants. The participants were from the same region and were characterised as rural non-traditional, and as such were considered by the researcher to be a cultural sharing group. Harslett not only found that “the concept of giftedness was compatible with Aboriginal culture”, but also that the Aboriginal participants viewed giftedness “to be the consequence of some form of interaction with, or force within, the environment” (p. 102). On the other hand, Christie’s 2010 study with a focus group of elders from the Yolngu community in the Northern Territory reported that “people are born with their gifts and talents, derived from their embodiment of ancestral connections” (p. 38). Discrepancies such as these have implications for how giftedness is defined and support Callahan and McIntire’s (1994) belief that local variations in relation to Aboriginal culture need to be considered when working with Aboriginal people and the gifted construct.

Gibson (1997) encountered problems associated with applying a universal definition in her investigation of the views of urban Aboriginal people from the Darling Downs area of Queensland, and those held by Aboriginal teachers across the wider Queensland region. Gibson employed a mixed-methods study to canvas the views of 11 Aboriginal parents, and 72 Aboriginal teachers in an effort to “ascertain the appropriateness of Frasier’s multicultural construct of giftedness for use in the identification of gifted Aboriginal children” (p. 7). Frasier’s findings from her five-year study of six minority groups (1992, cited in Gibson, 1997) stated that ten generally valued traits could be used to identify giftedness. When Gibson applied Frasier’s model she found that “urban Aboriginal people in this research appeared to hold a multi-faceted conception of giftedness” (Gibson, 1997, p. iii). The participants viewed exceptional ability as existing in areas such as “sports, leadership, creativity, communication, motivation, insight or intuitiveness, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills” (p. 247). Gibson found Frasier’s model

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“somewhat effective” but it was limited in that it failed to acknowledge the significant role leadership played in the participants’ understanding of exceptionality.

Harslett’s (1996) research with rural non-traditional Aboriginal participants in Western Australia found that not only were perceptions of giftedness influenced by the environment but also there was a difference in the traits valued by the adults and by the children. The adult participants in that study identified traits conforming to Gagné’s (1985) Creative (labelled by Harslett as Artistic) and Sensorimotor Domains as reflective of a gifted individual, whereas the children highlighted traits akin with Gagné’s Intellectual and Socioaffective (labelled by Harslett as Socio-emotional) Domains as indicating exceptionality. It is acknowledged that the date of Harslett’s work referenced Gagné’s earliest model of giftedness, which has since undergone considerable revision. However, importantly for this review Harslett’s study suggests that a gap may exist between the views of adults and youth within a cultural sharing group with regards to what is valued and considered an indicator of giftedness. Harslett posits that this discrepancy is likely as a result of a pattern of increasing participation of Aboriginal children in western education, combined with the adults’ valuing of economic activities such as art.

In addition, gifted behaviours can be interpreted differently across communities. In Christie’s 2010 study the Yolngu elders revealed that they identify giftedness in children by noting whether they “be retiring and given to quiet respectfulness ... [to have] a tendency to sit quietly with their role models ... and [to] listen to the old people”. He also noted that the Yolngu people could consider children as gifted if they “be listening with a peaceful spirit ... taking part in his own future” and “helpful ... learning as they go without questioning the old people, for fear of interrupting the attainment of *gakal*” (Christie, 2010, online). The elders acknowledged that these traits often contradict the ‘balanda’ (white people) expectation of giftedness where gifted students might otherwise demonstrate inquisitiveness by asking questions and verbally demonstrating their critical thinking. In contrast, Merrotsy’s (2007) Groote Eylandt and Bickerton Island study reported that “contrary to received wisdom on Aboriginal education, when trust is established Aboriginal children are very inquisitive and will ask questions, will look an adult in the eye, and enjoy individual autonomy when it is encouraged and supported”.

Gibson and Vialle’s (2007) literature review acknowledged the difficulties of constructing a single view of giftedness within the diversity of Aboriginal cultures. They discussed Christie’s (1987) four unifying cultural factors to present a notion of Aboriginal giftedness that included “characteristics that distinguish the Aboriginal world view” (Gibson & Vialle, 2007, p. 3) such as a co-existence with nature, social continuity, importance of

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relationship, and knowledge being derived from observation. Gibson and Vialle state that these commonalities might be used to propose an Aboriginal conception of giftedness expressed as a list of “intellectual strengths [that] typify the diverse indigenous groups in Australia” (2007, p. 25).

Chandler (2011) stated that while there is “no such thing as *an* Aboriginal perspective because of the numerous nations and language groups” and that “what is valued as giftedness in Aboriginal culture is a little different to what is known as giftedness in Australian non-Aboriginal culture” (p. 3), he summarised similar issues identified by Christie, Gibson and Vialle:

That from an Aboriginal perspective, giftedness is a measure of your knowledge of your ancestry, your land, your kin, and your respect for your community and elders. That is what giftedness is. And with being identified as a leader or a gifted person of any kind, comes an enormous responsibility. You are expected to care for certain family groups, you’re expected to care for certain totems, and for your natural environment. This is a big weight on anyone’s shoulders. (Chandler, 2011, p. 3)

“Learning both sides”

Chandler (2011) discussed how Aboriginal peoples “value mainstream non-Aboriginal education and schooling as much as their own” (p. 4). In 2007, Merrotsy highlighted the importance of “learn(ing) both sides” in his research of Indigenous conceptions of giftedness on Groote Eylandt and Bickerton Island. These parents wanted “their children to learn and do well” (2007, online). This view also came through Christie’s (2010) study in which the elders supported their children “learning both sides” and desired a cooperative approach where “we need to join up with the school education people, and help to raise those children up, so they will later lead their own people, later, when we here are all passed away” (2010, online). Christie reported that the Yolgnu elders desired educators of their young people to work in concert with the Yolngu people, to identify, foster and support students who demonstrate Yolngu-valued traits of giftedness, notably leadership.

This spirit of cooperation with minority cultural groups was proposed thirty years ago by George and George (1986) who asserted that the identification of gifted minority children should involve the community and recognise “those skills which the cultural community may deem important” (p. 136). In 1994 Callahan and McIntire appealed for locally derived definitions of giftedness, and again in 2005 Cooper stated “a partnership involving the school and the Indigenous community” was needed for effective talent development to be realised (p. 114).

Funds of knowledge

Appreciating cultural understandings such as how a community envisages giftedness can allow educators to build appropriate support for gifted Aboriginal students in their schools. These understandings can illuminate and possibly alter implicit deficit theories that may be unconsciously held by educators. Hogg (2010) defines deficit theorising where students from minority groups underachieve at school because of perceived deficiencies in the students or their families or their cultures. As Hogg states (2010, p. 666):

Implicit in deficit theorization is the notion that poor student achievement is unrelated to schooling. A teacher's deficit mindset may be hidden from the holder, due to lack of consciousness of closely held attitudes and beliefs, and understanding of how these may create obstacles to student achievement.

An example of implicit deficit theory was demonstrated in Taylor's 1998 doctoral thesis investigating underrepresentation of Aboriginal and other minority groups in state gifted programs including selective schools and classes. The study reported "education personnel from the majority of schools participating in the research frequently commented informally that there were no gifted or talented students in this targeted group" (cited in Vasileska, 2004, p. 11). Ogbu (1994) states that different minority groups achieve differently within dominant cultures, some more successfully than others, and that it is the 'relationship' between the minority culture and the dominant culture that is problematic, requiring "understanding in order to enhance success of intervention and other efforts" (p. 360). As Chandler states (2011, p. 4):

Indigenous knowledges are part of respecting and acknowledging what Aboriginal kids bring to the classroom, their knowledge of their natural environment, their knowledge of their family, their knowledge of their culture, their knowledge of language, their approaches to learning. These all need to be valued if we want to really, seriously narrow the gap.

Identification and cultural perspectives

Borland (2004) recognised that embedding and containing the concept of giftedness within a dominant culture's understandings, and relying on Western assessment tools for identification, will exclude "certain groups outside the White middle-class and upper-middle-class mainstream" (p. 15) from being identified as gifted. While this perspective is American, similar issues have been identified within the Australian context. Chaffey (2011) highlighted how for Aboriginal students "most identification methods (are) unreliable for these children as they actually underachieve on normally reliable quantitative identification methods" (p. 96).

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Merrotsy (2011) identified “performance inhibitors” that interplay to prevent Aboriginal learners from achieving in educational settings of the dominant culture. That is, Aboriginal students are particularly at risk of low self-efficacy, and the forced-choice dilemma with which many gifted learners grapple is exacerbated by aspects of the Aboriginal cultural experience. Jung, Barnett, Gross and McCormick (2011) support this finding, stating that culture acts to “mediate the experience of the forced-choice dilemma” (p. 184).

Understanding how to effectively identify highly able students from marginalised groups within a dominant culture has been a research focus across the globe for many years. For example McCluskey (2012), working with marginalised groups in Canada, stated that it is “possible for teachers and other caregivers to reach out more effectively to the many vulnerable children and youth who, if engaged, have so much to offer” (p. 2). Bousnakis, Burns, Donnan, Hopper, Mugavero and Rogers (2012) also stated “Indigenous students may not be identified when standardised tests or intelligence tests are the main forms of identification and this can result in their performance being artificially lowered” (p. 46). Lidz (1997) identified dynamic testing as a short-term way of ‘establishing the learning potential of an individual through a pretest-intervention-posttest administrative format’ (p. 281). Chaffey, Bailey and Vine (2003, 2015) successfully used dynamic testing and assessment to identify high academic potential in Aboriginal children in northern New South Wales. The authors of this study also noted the importance of addressing socio-emotional preventers of success, such as the “forced choice dilemma”, expectation, self-efficacy and cultural factors, when designing a metacognitive intervention to be used in a dynamic testing process (pp. 45–46). This tool reportedly had equal success in other settings with Aboriginal children such as Alexandria Park Community School in inner Sydney. So effective identification methods do exist, but their success is dependent on their being administered by “trained personnel” who can account for socio-emotional factors and avoid inadvertent reinforcement of “deficit views” (p. 53).

Other models have also been offered. Munro (2011) suggests that Situation Judgment Problem Solving tests (SJPS) account for cultural plurality to an extent that makes them an effective predictor of giftedness in minority groups, and may be of particular relevance to Australian Aboriginal peoples. Munro argues that SJPS allows tasks to be oriented within the existing culture, and this identification model could accommodate the social and cultural problem solving that is demonstrated by gifted Aboriginal peoples.

Talent development and culture

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The Australian Curriculum currently recognises Gagné’s (2008) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) providing a national definition of giftedness and talent (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2015). In this model, gifts are described as the potential to perform in the top 10% in a range of domains, as determined by experts in the field. Talents, on the other hand are considered the realisation of gifts, again with performance at a level equating to the top 10% of achievement. Talent development is presented as a “dynamic relationship between high potential and high performance” (Merrotsy, Cornish, Smith, & Smith 2008, p. 39). Gagné’s DMGT is important in relation to Aboriginal cultural perspectives of giftedness on a number of fronts. The domains of giftedness described in the DMGT (Gagné, 2008) provide categories in which naturally occurring human exceptionality may occur, and therefore how giftedness across these domains might be identified. Additionally, the model provides both a developmental pathway and catalysts for enabling the move from high potential to high performance. The developmental process subsequently shapes how gifted provision may be delivered to learners who have been identified as gifted.

Gagné (2008) identifies cultural influences, within the ‘Milieu’ section of Environmental catalysts, as impacting on the development of high achievement. Milieu includes “a diversity of environmental influences, from physical ones (e.g., climate, rural vs. urban living) to social or cultural ones. Economic issues (e.g., family wealth) also belong to this sub-component” (p. 4). If activities are seen as a separate sub-component of *milieu*, and designed from the perspective of the dominant culture with little regard for cultural or socio-economic factors, then there will be few appropriate talent development programs that “reverse ... underachievement in gifted Aboriginal children” (Merrotsy, 2011, p. 95). Schwab (2001) notes that successful programs are the ones that are “visibly and continually promoting respect for Indigenous culture” (p. 3). It is possible, then, that a better understanding of Aboriginal conceptions of giftedness, and a conscious blurring of the distinction between culture and provision in Gagné’s model, could potentially be used to design more effective provision for talent development, specifically targeting access, activities and format, for gifted Aboriginal students.

Successful programs

A cultural approach to gifted education has proven a successful way of supporting gifted Aboriginal students, as the following three examples demonstrate. The Aboriginal Summer Schools for Excellence in Technology and Science (ASSETS) program contains a cultural development component that “includes workshops on Aboriginal culture, language and heritage, and interactions with elders and role models” (Merrotsy, 2011, p. 96). This program actively

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links Aboriginal giftedness with leadership, and the cultural curriculum is designed to support “personal growth and the development of leadership skills” (Merrotsy, 2011, p. 96). Aldous, Barnes and Clark (2008) assert that the program’s strength grew from its ‘holistic’ nature, and its active attempt to promote Aboriginality across all aspects of course delivery. Such measures enabled participants to engage with scientific sub-cultures in a way that was “culturally supportive” (p. 39). The authors state (Aldous, Barnes and Clark, (2008, p. 39) that the positive student engagement achieved was a direct result of:

- The constant presence of Indigenous mentors throughout the academic component of the program;
- The delivery by an Indigenous academic, of a science unit;
- Program sessions related to Indigenous culture and anthropology;
- The use of culturally-appropriate accommodation at Wiltja;
- Running in parallel, a leadership program involving Indigenous role models during evening activities at Wiltja; and
- Relating a science unit to an environmental project at the Living Kaurna Centre.

The second program was the Wii Gaay project which ran in the New England region of New South Wales from 2002 to 2008, incorporating local ‘community involvement’ at all stages of the program design and delivery (Merrotsy, 2011, p. 83). This included planning and implementing Chaffey’s Coolibah Dynamic Assessment protocols using culturally appropriate assessment to identify high academic potential in gifted Aboriginal students. The program was “set completely within the children’s cultural context” (p. 83). This project achieved measurable gains in attendance, engagement and attitudes to learning over a two-year period. Merrotsy does not indicate if local conceptions of giftedness were considered in the identification process, or in the design of talent development provision, but local community involvement is heralded as the cornerstone of the program’s success.

The third program is the Myimbarr Learning Centre founded by Indigenous elders and Paul Chandler in Wollongong. Students from fourteen schools are transported by bus from home and taken to the cultural centre, an Aboriginal space where they work half the time on extending their school curricula for an hour with university mentors, followed by an hour of Aboriginal knowledge, language and activities run by elders of the community. Since attending this program a number of Aboriginal students previously not identified as gifted and talented, have since been identified.

Conclusion

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Talent is not the prerogative of any racial or ethnic group, any social class, or any residential area. It may lie untapped in some situations under some conditions, but no population has either a monopoly or an absence of giftedness. (Passow, 1986, cited in Vasilevska, 2004, p. 11)

Aboriginal underrepresentation in programs for the gifted has been linked to the tendency for identification and provision to focus on traits of giftedness valued by the dominant culture (Cooper, 2005). The few studies exploring the traits valued by Aboriginal Australians' understandings of human exceptionality suggest the diversity of the many cultural groups within this population means generalisations about a shared Aboriginal worldview is problematic. In addition to discrepancies of understandings between different cultural groups, differences of definitions can also exist between generations within a single cultural sharing group.

The implications for schools are that developing localised definitions of giftedness that support the specific learning needs of their Indigenous students requires consultation with elders, parents and the students themselves, while valuing and honouring the funds of knowledge these students bring with them to school. As Chandler (2011, p. 4) explained:

What is regarded as giftedness from a western knowledge system and an Aboriginal knowledge system are quite different. The reality is, we are working in one Australia, and the best way to work together is to respect each other's knowledge systems and schooling systems.

To ignore, or worse, disrespect Aboriginal knowledge systems has implications for high potential Aboriginal students. As Kostenko and Merrotsy (2009) state, "if high learning ability goes unrecognised, educational opportunities and experiences necessary for optimal development will probably not be provided. This, for many students, may result in underachievement, boredom, frustration, and psychological distress" (p. 48). Schools have a legal and moral responsibility to provide a positive learning environment and experiences for all students. Valuing student voice and identity, their families and communities, will enable an appropriate and culturally sensitive concept of giftedness to emerge and be supported. When teachers and schools appreciate and value the cultural funds of knowledge that students bring with them into the classroom (Hobbs, 2010), opportunities for these students will be realised. As Chaffey (2011, p. 98) warned:

Gifted education has the potential to contribute greatly to the emergence of equitable educational outcomes for all Indigenous students. However, I suggest it will be difficult to shift the current lamentable position if a gifted cohort does not emerge. The

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expectations of schools, teachers, Indigenous communities and the students themselves toward educational outcomes can be positively influenced. Without this the best of plans may be in vain.

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