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"Are You Going to Be the One to Understand Me?"
Insights into Gifted Students

Gay Gallagher

Abstract

School counsellors have a key role in providing a safe physical and emotional environment for all students. A counsellor's role in pastoral care includes understanding students who may have special needs because they are gifted and talented. This article draws on literature as well as counsellors' experiences in working with gifted clients to address questions such as:

- ***How do counsellors know who is gifted and talented?***
- ***What special "needs" do gifted clients have?***
- ***How can people who have no specific training in this area effectively counsel gifted and talented students?***

Keywords: school counsellors, gifted students, giftedness, special needs, sandplay

In their pastoral care role, school counsellors have an important part to play in helping schools provide a safe physical and emotional environment for all students (Education Review Office, 2000; Ministry of Education, 1993). Since 2005, this pastoral care role has required a special focus on the group of students who are labelled *gifted and talented* as, for the first time in New Zealand's educational history, the school National Administration Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2005) identified gifted and talented students among those *who have special needs*. Schools are now mandated to show how they identify and provide for the needs of this group of students. With possibly 10% of all students being gifted (Gagné, 2003), counsellors in all schools are very likely to encounter gifted young students in the course of their work. This raises an important question: what knowledge and understanding do counsellors need to develop to help them to work effectively with these gifted students?

This article begins by addressing the following key questions:

- How do counsellors recognise the special needs of the gifted and talented students?
- How can people who have no specific training in this area effectively counsel gifted and talented students?

Who Are the "Gifted and Talented" Students in Schools?

In most staffrooms, raising the question "Who is gifted?" would generally stimulate heated debate, with many perceptions and prejudices evident. Even internationally, several definitions of giftedness continue to create rigorous debate. The greatest difficulty facing both teachers and counsellors is that there is no single universal definition of *gifted*, and neither profession has courses in their training to assist them in recognising and understanding this group of "special need" clients (Wood, 2010). Asking counsellors or teachers with little or no training to distinguish the needs of gifted students may therefore present them with a significant challenge.

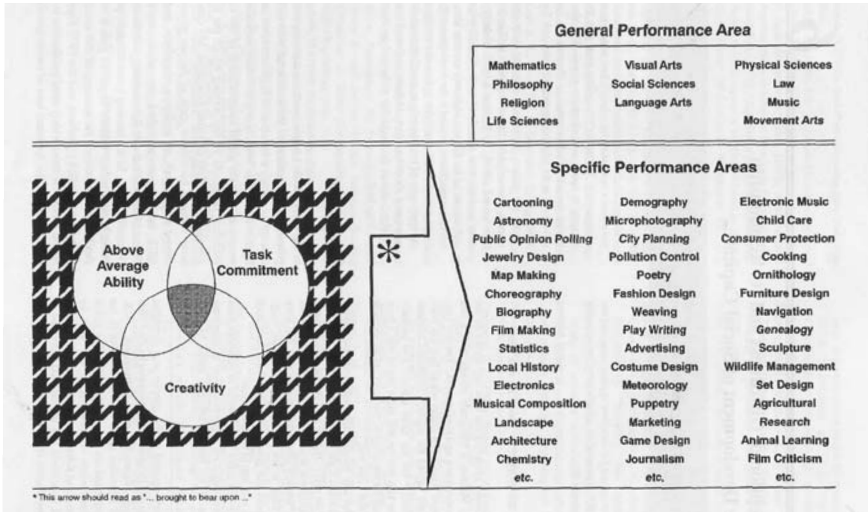
Models of Giftedness

As a starting point, it may be useful to discuss some of the models of giftedness underpinning New Zealand Ministry of Education documents. The Ministry has adopted a broad and multifaceted definition in its official documents that favours the international models of giftedness developed by Joseph Renzulli (2003) and Françoys Gagné (2003; 2008), while being cognisant also of unique Māori perspectives on giftedness. The New Zealand definition recognises a wide range of students as being gifted, acknowledging exceptional abilities, which include not only high intelligence but also general intellectual abilities, academic aptitude, creative abilities, leadership ability, physical abilities, and abilities in the visual and performing arts (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 12). The New Zealand perspective also accepts that concepts of giftedness and talent are shaped by the beliefs, values, attitudes, and customs of cultural groups, varying from culture to culture and changing over time. Considering the Māori view of giftedness involves, among other things, taking account of spiritual, aesthetic, musical, linguistic, and leadership abilities, and even service to others.

Renzulli's Three-ring Model of Giftedness

Renzulli's (2003) model encompasses three elements: above-average intelligence, a high level of task commitment, and creativity. He proposed that these traits may be demonstrated in general or specific performance areas.

Figure 1: Renzulli's Three-ring Definition of Giftedness



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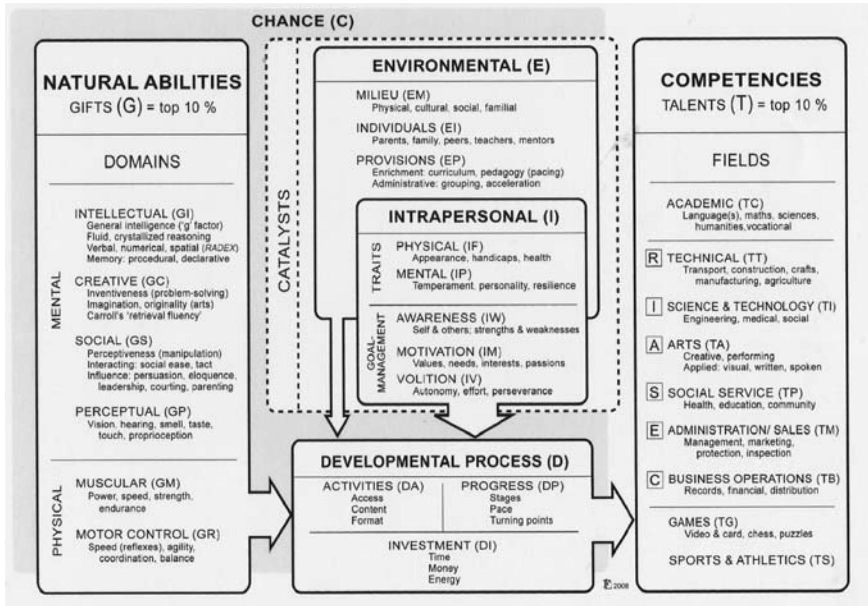
In addition, Renzulli acknowledged the importance of such attributes as optimism, courage, passion, sensitivity to others, curiosity, and a sense of purpose and destiny, all of which he saw as contributing to a wisdom in the use of abilities. In the visual model shown in Fig. 1, these important elements are depicted by the houndstooth background.

Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent

In contrast to Renzulli's model, Françoys Gagné's concept differentiates between the two terms, "gifted" and "talented." Giftedness relates more to natural ability, including mental and physical domains, while talent is recognised by outstanding achievements and competency in a variety of fields—e.g., academic, technical, artistic, interpersonal, and athletic. For teachers, these domains can be loosely related to the Multiple Intelligence theory developed by Howard Gardner (1983) which, while not a theory of giftedness, challenges the concept of a single intelligence.

Gagné acknowledges two significant aspects that help distinguish gifted students from their peers: the pace at which they can learn new material in their ability domain, and the ease with which they can master new skills, concepts, and understanding. His view of *talent* is that of excellent and outstanding performance, only achieved by a small

Figure 2: Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent



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group of people competent in any field. Because such talent generally requires considerable time to develop fully, this is usually recognised in adults.

In his model, Gagné nominates catalysts such as motivation, personality traits, or education that can mediate the transition from giftedness to talent. These catalysts may be intrapersonal, including general health, or such factors as self-awareness, volition, motivation, or personality. However, the catalysts may also be environmental, including surroundings, people, school programmes, and life events. Underpinning this model is the importance of chance factors that can affect students' development at many points in the model. Both Renzulli's and Gagné's models illustrate the complexity of understanding the diverse factors impacting on gifted and talented students.

Using the Models of Giftedness to Assist Understanding

Gifted students are no longer viewed simply as extraordinary and efficient learners, but as complex personalities with exceptional sensitivities and recurrent vulnerabilities

(Colangelo, 2003b, p. 371). Counsellors can use their awareness of these concepts of giftedness to provide them with additional insights into their clients' needs when helping them explore the presenting issues and concerns that are common to young people. They can be cognisant of and sensitive to the cultural nuances and interpretations of giftedness, and thus be more aware of ways in which they could validate individual students. Counsellors can also recognise the unique needs of their gifted students, particularly their differences because of their ability, and the challenges they are likely to face in relationships with others *because* they are gifted.

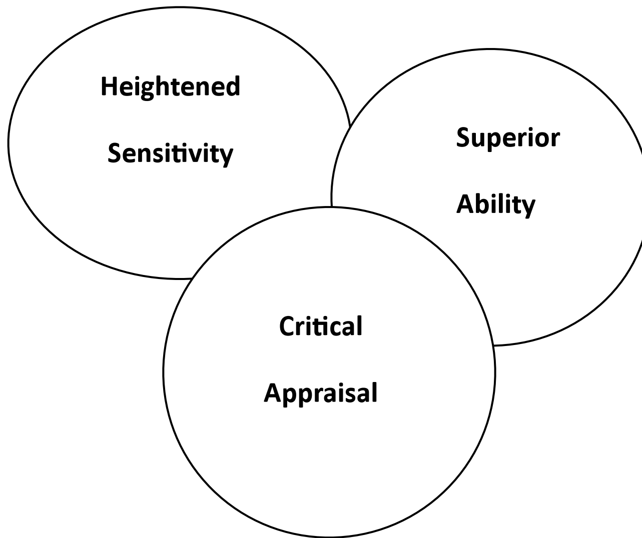
Being mindful of Renzulli's model, counsellors can pay attention to the students' self-awareness as gifted students, their self-concept, and their acceptance of their giftedness and unique attributes. Such a focus would be fundamental for gifted students (Peterson, 2008). Counsellors may assist students to comprehend their personal motivation (and sometimes de-motivation) and commitment to their learning as key areas for attention. Students may not comprehend why their passion and fascination for a particular subject or their ability to work at a complex and abstract level may set them apart from their age-group peers. Such understanding would be valuable for gifted clients.

Gagné's model offers considerable scope for counsellors to work with gifted clients in understanding themselves as gifted individuals, as well as their volition and motivations, and aspects of their personalities that influence their lives and learning. His work highlights the possibility of exploring other areas such as understanding the individuals' expectations of themselves, and the expectations of others, their stressors, perfectionism, and the impact of external catalysts and life events. However, while it is enlightening to study concepts of giftedness, models of counselling gifted students provide insights into the intensity associated with these students that these two models of giftedness do not highlight.

Mendaglio's Models for Counselling Gifted and Talented Students

Gifted students will present with very different profiles depending on their inherent giftedness, their personal characteristics, external influences, and the context from which they come to the counselling room. One model presented by Canadian Sel Mendaglio (2003), who has specialised in counselling gifted students, is particularly useful. Supporting the work of Renzulli and Gagné, Mendaglio recognises that giftedness involves having superior ability and critical awareness, but he also highlights heightened sensitivities, believing that all three aspects can impact on the functioning and wellbeing of gifted students.

Figure 3: Mendaglio: Key Aspects of Giftedness



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Superior ability. Superior ability over many domains provides gifted students with such multipotentiality and diverse talents that they can achieve at a high level in several different fields (Colangelo, 2003a). Possessing such a range of abilities in itself can lead to stress and anguish over multiple possibilities and career choices. Having interaction with intellectual peers is not always possible in schools, where high ability can also be a factor that excludes students from normal interaction with peers, leading to a sense of isolation. Isolation and being misunderstood can contribute to high levels of sadness for some of these students (Vialle, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2007). Young people with high abilities may need opportunities to explore the effects of their ability on their lives, and develop an appreciation of what it means to be "gifted."

Furthermore, high ability in one domain is not automatically replicated in others. A student may feel the effects of asynchronous development (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Silverman, 2000). Strong in one field, the student may be average or have difficulty in another, experiencing a sense of frustration or lack of self-efficacy in this area. They may not understand their asynchrony, which may result in their questioning their ability.

Some students may well experience "double exceptionality" (Montgomery, 2003): they may be different from the peer group not only because they are gifted, but also because they may have other special needs such as dyslexia, or visual or hearing impairment. It is not uncommon for dual-exceptionality students to be at risk of underachievement and frustration at the barriers they face.

High ability does not automatically equate to sound organisational skills, effective time management, or study skills (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Lack of these skills can lead teachers and parents on the one hand to question whether the student is actually gifted, or on the other, to generate unrealistic expectations that may result in unnecessary or harmful pressure. While high-achieving students need validation of their ability and affirmation for their uniqueness (Mahoney, Martin, & Martin, 2003), they may need support with personal organisation and basic skills.

Critical appraisal. The second component in Mendaglio's model, critical appraisal, although valued in the tertiary environment, may result in younger students being seen as negative or as challenging inappropriately the decisions and opinions of others. They may feel the sanction and disapproval from others more intensely (Jackson & Moyle, 2009). Given their natural precocity, as well as their ability to understand advanced and abstract concepts and to think divergently, they may find themselves challenging or questioning views or decisions, which can be misinterpreted as challenging teachers themselves.

With their awareness of complex issues in the world, gifted students can often comment on the futility and injustices they see around them. Gifted students may well feel misunderstood, or have few in their age-peer group who have similar cognitive abilities, thoughts, and feelings. Students themselves may feel down or depressed when others do not view the world in ways similar to them or respond empathically to their ideas about global problems. Such intense reactions on the part of a gifted student would be viewed as heightened sensitivity.

Heightened sensitivities. The third facet of Mendaglio's model, the heightened sensitivities or "overexcitabilities" so intensely felt by gifted students, was originally identified in the work of Dabrowski in one or more of five areas: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginational, and emotional (Pryrt, 2008; Silverman, 2000). Consistent with more recent writings by Michael Piechowski, the translator of Dabrowski's original work (1966, as cited in Daniels & Piechowski, 2009), the word "intensity" rather than "overexcitability" is used here as it is more easily understood by counsellors and teachers.

Expression of *psychomotor intensity* may be seen in a surplus of energy, rapid speech, and intense physical activity, or in impulsive actions, acting out, or nervous habits. “Heightened excitability of the nerves that control muscles combines with the capacity to sustain the excited state” (Piechowski, 2006, p. 38). Individuals with heightened intense personal energy may be those who enjoy physical movement, demonstrating a profile which adds up to an “enhanced capacity for being active and energetic” (Piechowski). However, such intensity may be the cause of many inappropriate classroom behaviours if a student is required to sit still or be inactive for long periods of time.

Enhanced *sensory intensity* may be evident in reactions to music, sensitivity to colour and smells, or in such behaviours as overeating and seeking the limelight. The response may be a positive one embracing sheer enjoyment, pleasure, and delight, or a strongly reactive one, which may provide a vehicle for expression of emotional tension. Piechowski (2006) describes this as “sensory aliveness” (p. 45), which is often aligned with emotional intensity and intellectual intensity. Once again, it is the intensity of their sensory experience that may well disturb gifted students, alienating them from others or making them vulnerable to the comments of other students.

Intellectual intensity can encompass many aspects of the students’ worlds. It may include intense curiosity, concentration, and avid and obsessive reading, or very detailed observation and planning. It may include tenacity in problem-solving or a driving search for truth and understanding, related to perfectionism in some students. Intellectual intensity, however, may also be experienced with more introspection and reflection, more self-analysis, and more metacognition (awareness and regulation of one’s own thoughts). Driven to make sense and meaning of their worlds, students with intellectual liveliness may show their intensity through synthesising material and making connections between ideas and knowledge. Such intensity may not be appreciated by their peer group or teachers.

Imaginational intensity can include delight in language and metaphor, fantasy, and visualisation, with ventures into the magical, the creation of imaginary worlds, and dramatisation. The mundane and tedious may be tolerated poorly by individuals whose imaginational intensity is strong. Imaginational intensity can be the very asset that drives creativity and originality of thought, two attributes that are valued in most models of giftedness. It may, however, involve dreams and fantasy, which on the one hand can be viewed as creative, but on the other can be perceived as fabrications and lies. For some students, their imaginational intensity may cause them difficulties, particularly with others whose worlds are intensely factual and real.

Alongside imaginational intensity is *emotional intensity*, which may encompass many areas: the extremes of emotional responses; strong somatic manifestation of tension; strong memory of emotions; feeling ecstasy or reacting strongly to fears and anxieties; experiencing concern about death, and low moods and depression. It may also be marked by positive self-image, strong attachments, and sensitivity to others. While the intensity can be energising and motivating, at times it can create exclusion from others (Jackson & Moyle, 2009). Such exclusion may be difficult for gifted students to understand and handle. For students with such emotional intensity, however, solitude or meditation can at times be important in allowing them time to develop self-understanding (Piechowski, 2006).

The manifestation of these heightened sensitivities can be confused with other presentations, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Bi-Polar (Manic Depression), Asperger's or Autism, or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (Mahoney, 1995). With incorrect diagnosis, the students may well be referred for behavioural management programmes or possible medication.

Because of the possible misdiagnosis and incorrect interpretation of the behaviours evident in classrooms, it is important for counsellors to be aware of the characteristics and traits of their gifted students (Jackson & Moyle, 2009). Incorrect assumptions may result in very inappropriate interventions, with outside agencies such as the Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs) having limited access to the complete picture of the students. Misidentification can also result in incorrect placement in educational programmes. Incorrect or inappropriate placement or curriculum, or lack of learning challenges, can lead to significant stress for gifted students (Gentry, 2006; Moon, 2007; Peterson, 2008). These stressors in turn may lead to underachievement or the development of social and emotional difficulties.

The impact of "intensity" on gifted students. Mendaglio maintains that it is *because* of their superior intelligence that gifted students experience their world with a stronger lens and heightened sensitivities. Silverman (2000) also recognises the impact of the intellectual and personality factors of gifted students.

> *All their experiences are filtered through these lenses [intellectual and personality characteristics]. They can be clear, right, undistorted reflections…or they can be like one-way mirrors in which the child sees out but others cannot see in.* (p. 51)

Such intensity is not always viewed as a gift (Peterson, 2008), but can be a source of considerable negative response from adults. It is very important therefore for counsellors

to have a sound knowledge of traits of giftedness as well as possible psychiatric presentations. Counsellors need to understand that the anxiety felt by many intense, gifted individuals is in fact often created by the lack of understanding from others and limited meaningful encounters in their experiences (Jackson & Moyle, 2009).

Implications for Counsellor Development and Effectiveness

> *Giftedness is like a geode with multi-faceted crystals inside. The exterior is ordinary, not greatly distinguishable from other rocks. We are aware of course that a geologist might find a geode easily distinguishable.* (Thomas, Ray, & Moon, 2007, p. 70).

Many writers in this field believe that counsellors need specialist training to work with gifted students. Mahoney (1995) suggested that it was "naïve to assume that conventional approaches to counselling would suffice" when working with gifted clients. Because of the advanced cognitive abilities of gifted students and the intensity of their feelings towards themselves and others in ways that set them apart from other students, they may require "specialist understanding" (Colangelo, 2003b, p. 373). Peterson (2008) advocated for specialist counselling services. Such expectations would require counsellors to have expert knowledge in giftedness, according to Wood (2010, p. 43), "a nonnegotiable requirement in serving the gifted student." In the New Zealand context, this would not be likely at this time, given the limited opportunities available for teachers and counsellors to focus on such in-depth study.

Counselling qualifications do not require courses in gifted education. Furthermore, there is little research to guide the facilitation of counselling processes with gifted students (Peterson, 2008). Silverman's (2000) work, *Counseling the Gifted and Talented*, was one of the earlier texts of particular value. *The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know?* (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002) provided considerable insights into the needs of gifted and talented students. A more recent work, *Models of Counseling Gifted Children, Adolescents and Young Adults*, edited by Mendaglio and Peterson (2007), has been a substantive contribution to this field.

An established world leader in the field of counselling gifted students, Silverman (2000) maintained that the principal goal of counselling such students is to respond to their unique needs. However, to be an effective advocate, counsellors must also have an understanding of the gifted population and an appropriate rationale for the way in which they might deal with gifted clients. On the basis of her work, Moon (2007) believes that the therapeutic relationship develops more effectively when there is an

underlying understanding and appreciation of giftedness. It is generally assumed that counsellors should be familiar with those "unique needs" and have understandings of gifted clients, as well as the knowledge of approaches that may be appropriate.

Recent research by Wood (2010) revealed that while many students valued the time with their counsellors, half of the gifted students "experienced having their concerns dismissed or being misunderstood" (p. 52). Many students felt their counsellors did not appreciate their intense love of learning, their strong motivation, or the concept of asynchrony, and they did not believe their counsellors understood them. Such a report hardly augurs well for the development of positive relationships in which counsellors value the uniqueness of gifted clients. One possible barrier to the development of a positive therapeutic relationship is counsellor attitude and bias concerning giftedness. It would be important for counsellors to examine and challenge their own beliefs and attitudes around concepts of giftedness before working with gifted students (Peterson, 2006).

Responding to any client's unique needs is fundamental to all counselling. The core conditions of person-centred therapy—empathy, unconditional positive regard, and active listening (Raskin & Rogers, 2005)—are vital for gifted students, as they are for any other clients. Unconditional positive regard is fundamental for these students. It is important that gifted clients feel that their counsellor connects with them and understands them and their intense energy.

Lyall Christie, an experienced children's counsellor, believes that the personal connection is a vital component in counselling for gifted students (Personal communication, 2010). Parents bring their young children to her for counselling because of their behaviours, which include acting out, temper tantrums, stubbornness or non-compliance, at home and sometimes in school. The students' responses to their environments may signal their urgent need for understanding of their ability and the intense experiencing of their worlds.

> *Highly gifted children have a real need for someone to understand them. "Are you going to be the person to understand me?"* (L. Christie, personal communication, April, 2010)

Gifted students need their counsellors to understand the nature of their giftedness and the difficulties they may be facing in defining and developing their identity. They may be seeking help in portraying their needs to other adults in their world. These adults are often unaware of the students' concerns and unhappiness. The work of

Peterson, Duncan, and Canady (2009) and Vialle, Heaven, and Ciarrochi (2007) highlighted that parents and teachers may be unaware of the factors that are concerning students at school. While gifted students appear to return to and maintain academic achievement after stressful life events, it is the school-related stressors and challenges that can impact on their wellbeing. School counsellors, therefore, are well positioned to offer support.

Although most gifted students present with positive profiles, the worldviews of some gifted students may include negative aspects: their self-doubt, disabling perfectionism, and sense of failure (Neumeister, 2004; Stoeber, Kempe, & Keogh, 2008), their stress and anxiety, the relentless self-criticism they may experience, or feeling different as they cope with many stigmas and stereotypes. They may need support with understanding their motivation, their intense passion for learning, their drive for excellence, and their need for stimulation (Wood, 2010). They may need counsellors' help to understand their exceptionality, their superior ability, their outstanding talents, or their heightened intensities. These aspects may set them apart from their peer group and contribute to the risk factors associated with being gifted.

Respectful listening is vital in establishing connection. Fundamental to all effective counselling, listening attentively to clients requires unconditional positive regard, a lack of prejudice, and limited interpretation free from preconceived notions (Piechowski, 2006). Gifted students find that adults do not always listen to them, their ideas and their feelings. Often, gifted students have learned to adopt a mask. From a young age, many gifted students learn that they are different from their peers, and they therefore develop strategies to "dumb down" their ability in front of their peers, or develop alternative identities so they can be more socially accepted (Silverman, 1998). If the mask has been long established, it may be difficult for gifted students to slough off that mask and accept themselves, their interests, and their differences. In fact, the choices faced by gifted students may be conflicting for them: many may feel the need to compromise their intellectual pursuits and standards to conform to a strong peer culture. Such forced choices may influence their identity development and encourage a false identity that not only affects their emotional development but can also lead to underachievement. The counsellor's role is to ensure that a student's mask may be sidelined—at least in the counselling sessions—in order that underlying issues can be heard and addressed.

Underlying an effective relationship is trust. Christie explains it as a telepathic response, with students intuiting that the counsellor understands them and shows a deep

respect for them, enabling a feeling of relief: "Ah, you do understand. I feel safe here. I can trust you with my inner being" (L. Christie, personal communication, April, 2010).

For gifted students, moving from the cognitive to the emotional realm will be challenging, and the inherent trust in the relationship, along with the counsellor's understanding of their giftedness, will be fundamental to moving forward. The intellect is not necessarily able on its own to "engineer emotional or spiritual healing" (Pearson & Wilson, 2001, p. 29).

Although there is little empirical evidence of the use of sandtray therapy with gifted students, such a modality may prove particularly beneficial for them. A significant value of sandtray work lies in its ability to move from strongly intellectual and rational thinking to feeling and examining the emotional intensity, as it touches deeply to the core of the personality (McNally, 2001).

> *Oftentimes with gifted children, they are very much in their heads and sandtray allows them to go into their emotions…it helps with their emotional intensity which sometimes overwhelms them.* (L. Christie, personal communication, April, 2010)

Sandtray work as a hands-on, established therapeutic approach provides a safe space for children to express and explore their feelings, fears, hopes, issues, and impulses. According to Jungian philosophy, sandplay therapy activates the conscious and unconscious minds to work on the deep order of psychic change to assist the individual to reach an internal equilibrium, a process referred to as the "transcendent function" (Turner, 2005, p. 9). Changes in individuals occur over time as the psyche makes sense of experiences and emotions, thus integrating their internal and external worlds. Such ongoing development is pertinent for gifted students because, while using the sandtray, they engage in self-discovery, express their tensions, and are enabled to recognise the directions in their lives (Pearson & Wilson, 2001). This process helps them integrate their world and clarify their identity as gifted individuals.

Sandtray work is often appealing to gifted students as they engage in the use of the figurines to develop elaborate metaphors. It may assist them to discover their imaginative play and creativity, allowing them to "reclaim their abilities" (Pearson & Wilson, 2001, p. 8).

> *It gives them a sense of themselves, it gives them a sense of self-exploration, and because I come from such a strong Jungian background, it gives the psyche, the unconscious, a chance to self-regulate. I think because oftentimes they are told they*

are naughty, or stupid, they have had to push down many of their gifts and talents. Sandtray gives them the opportunity in a free and sheltered space to explore a lot of what they have had to push down. (L. Christie, personal communication, April, 2010)

In Christie's and my own experience, there are several indicators of ability and giftedness evident in the sandtray work. With the choice of figurines, gifted students may require more time as they investigate the precise features or give attention to individual pieces. In the construction of the sandtray, there is often an intense focus. There may be silent work, or the construction of a tray may be accompanied by elaborate commentary as the work progresses. Heightened intensity and energy are evident in the complexity of the stories that accompany the completed sandtrays. The trays may show the creativity of the student, and may often incorporate elements of spirituality. On completion of their trays, students' intellectual intensity and ability can be evident in their elaborate, detailed, and complex explanations, which draw on an advanced language and in-depth general knowledge. The succinct tray titles often indicate their abstract thinking and ability to encapsulate the total concept of the trays.

A benefit for a gifted student comes when a counsellor recognises their ability and heightened intensities, and can advocate for them with parents or teachers. The insights gained in counselling can allow the counsellor to open communication lines and support students by affirming their ability, rather than focusing on the antisocial or negative behaviours that often cloud the judgement of parents and teachers.

Conclusion

Advanced cognitive abilities, and the intensity of their feelings towards themselves or others, are likely to result in gifted students needing help to understand themselves and the ways in which their worldview may set them apart from other people (Peterson, 2008). Although many gifted children may wish to resolve their concerns and difficulties independently, there is evidence that they respond positively to counselling (Peterson). Unfortunately, in busy schools, gifted students do not always have access to help and counselling focused on development of self-awareness and understanding, and the needs of this group can remain unheard and unaddressed. Although not all counsellors will be experts with specialised knowledge of gifted students, it is possible for all counsellors to develop their awareness of the characteristics of gifted students and assist them to understand and celebrate their giftedness.

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