Meanings ascribed to the concept of "giftedness": Implications for counselling with young people

Melanie Wong

Abstract

This article focuses on social constructions of giftedness and on what these perceptions and understandings mean for helping professionals, most notably counsellors, working with gifted young people. It also looks at the apparent impacts of these perceptions and understandings on the mental and emotional wellbeing of young people who are identified as gifted. The article is informed by findings from a doctoral research project (Wong, 2018), a study that drew on the professional and personal experiences of members of a Facebook group dedicated to the exploration of different constructions of giftedness. Two key conclusions were reached: first, that the "gifted mind" is often described in ways, such as sensitive or intense, which might not immediately be recognised or acknowledged as characteristics of giftedness; second, that unhelpful constructions of giftedness appear to have an impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of gifted individuals. The implications of these findings suggest the need for counsellors and other helping professionals to have greater awareness of the meanings attributed to individual giftedness and to establish a safe space in which to work effectively with gifted young people, their families and whānau.

Keywords: gifted young people, mental and emotional needs, counselling, intensity and sensitivity

The attention directed towards gifted children and adolescents (hereafter referred to as young people) has been dominantly influenced by educational and psychological perspectives (Ogurlu, Sevgi-Yalın, & Yavuz-Birben, 2018). Wood and Peterson (2017) state that while educational policy and practices require educational and helping professionals to meet the discrete learning needs and interests of gifted young people, the same cannot always be said regarding the mental and emotional wellbeing of these individuals. Relatedly, Blackett and Hermansson (2005) claimed that the extent to which counselling in Aotearoa New Zealand is used to support this form of wellbeing among gifted young people needed researching. My personal and professional experiences motivated me to explore this area. My own child, identified as highly gifted, is not a top student at school. She thinks a lot and can often inhabit a world of extremes. She has a sensitivity and intensity that can manifest in caring and a strong concern for politics, homelessness and sea creatures. However, she is often misunderstood. The guidance counsellor at school once suggested I consider taking her to a mental health unit for youth because the school considered my daughter's upset over a friendship a concern. A psychotherapist told my child that she might need to be on medication because of her behavioural responses to anxiety. My daughter does not like the helping professions; they see her as "problematic"; she believes.

As a mother, frustrated over these negative perceptions of her, I had to find a way to support her and as she loves diving, I helped her pursue that interest. She gained advanced diving certification when she was 13 years old, having done deep dives and shark dives. For her, diving is stress-free and an activity that allows her to meet different sea creatures. Her

sensitivity and intensity will always be a part of her, but she is slowly learning different techniques to build up resilience.

Through my professional experiences of working with gifted people, I know that instances of self-harming and suicidal thoughts tend to be high among gifted young people. One of the factors contributing to these instances is lack of understanding about learning, and the mental and emotional needs of gifted people by counsellors and others. In an article I co-wrote for *Tall Poppies* (a magazine published by the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children) titled "Suicide in New Zealand: What does it mean for gifted youth?" (Wong & Lino, 2016), we argued that many people are unaware that gifted people have needs that most other people do not have. There is a need for others, among them counsellors, psychotherapists and educators, we wrote, to "understand what is behind a person's social and emotional needs … what we think is a good solution for one person may not necessarily work as well for another" (p. 13).

In keeping with my thinking Steven Pfeiffer, who has been providing counselling and psychotherapy for gifted young clients for more than 20 years, explains in his book *Serving the Gifted* (Pfeiffer, 2013) that many gifted young people have high energy levels and they think and process events, emotions, experiences and information differently from the majority of other people. That difference can result in behaviour which disturbs the normal routines of others, such as those found in classrooms. Consequently, those "others", including educators and helping professionals, can easily misunderstand gifted young people's mental and emotional needs. In response to Blackett and Hermansson's (2005) call for research and Pfeiffer's (2013) concerns, my doctoral research explored in what ways a group of individuals concerned with the parenting and support of these young people interpreted their giftedness.

This article presents some findings from this study and posits that constructions which relate to counsellors' experiences of working with gifted young people may be associated with limitations in counselling awareness that could adversely influence their mental and emotional wellbeing. It has four sections, the first provides background information relevant to the research, including social constructions of giftedness. The second describes the methods used to conduct this research and includes reference to any ethical considerations. The third section presents the research findings relating to constructions of giftedness. It also highlights how important it is that those in the helping professions, including counsellors, become aware of these constructions when working to support the wellbeing of gifted young people. The fourth section presents brief conclusions and some implications for counselling-based research and practice.

Background

Government's obligations towards young people in Aotearoa New Zealand

Over the past several decades, the New Zealand government has developed legislated obligations directed towards the holistic wellbeing of all children. In ratifying the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), the government demonstrated its commitment to the social and educational principles espoused in the convention. The convention defines a child as anyone between the ages of zero (new-born) and 18. Article 29 is particularly relevant to this study as it stresses the importance of developing "the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (United Nations, 1989, p. 9). In 2015, the New Zealand government reaffirmed its obligations under this article in its report titled *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Fifth Periodic Report by the Government of New Zealand 2015* in which it stated that its role is to ensure "students' identities, languages, abilities and talents are recognised" (New Zealand Government, 2015, p.

16). The *Vulnerable Children Act, 2014* also emphasises the government's responsibility for "improving their [children's] physical and mental health and their cultural and emotional well-being" (New Zealand Government, 2014, p. 13). Thus, in theory, the government's obligations under this convention and its legislation work to ensure the holistic wellbeing of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Social constructions of "giftedness"

Before presenting social constructions of giftedness, a brief explanation of what is meant by social construction, or constructivism, as it is more commonly known, is in order. This term, first coined several decades ago by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and then amplified by Burr (2015), captures the notion that individuals interacting with one another in society construct versions of reality that, over time and through habituation and acceptance, are established as valid (true) representations of reality. As Pettenger (2007) says, social constructionists insist that truth is created, not discovered. Social construction does not, however, produce one fixed definition of a sphere of "reality", because different groups of people from different cultures or in different social settings or situations tend to produce different constructions of reality. In addition, previously unquestioned certainties (constructions) of reality can change over time. A differential social phenomenon also applies to academics who draw on and deploy social constructionist approaches to their work (Burr, 2015).

It is not surprising, then, that the literature on giftedness provides different definitions of giftedness and different ways to conceptualise it. Yet no one definition is sufficient to explain the dynamic concept of giftedness (Harrison, 2016; Moltzen, 2011; Sternberg, Jarvin & Grigorenko, 2011). However, these definitions often reflect how societies and cultures value giftedness as well as the views of the people who define it. According to Moltzen (2011), constructions of the word "gifted" have evolved as people's understanding of the concept have developed through research conducted within various disciplines (e.g., psychology or education). Consequently, research literature and popular media use many different words to ascribe meaning to giftedness. Examples include "gifted and talented", "intelligent", "able", "superior abilities", "talented", and "people with exceptional abilities"; these terms are often used interchangeably.

Constructions of what constitutes giftedness have also changed over time and continue to be debated. The many definitions and meanings accorded to giftedness tend to be culturally and temporally bound. In this view, a person identified as gifted in one culture may not be such in another, and the characteristics and behaviours identifying a person as gifted in the past may not be seen in the same light today, or tomorrow. Some constructions of giftedness are more influential than others, and some commonly pertain to certain groups of people. Some constructions are interconnected, while some contradict one another. As discussed in this article, all constructions of giftedness have one or more consequences in terms of how counsellors, educationalists and other helping professionals might respond to and work with gifted young people.

Giftedness in counselling

Broadly speaking, counselling seeks to listen to and understand clients' problems without judgement and form connections within the counselling relationship that enhance the ability to work together to develop strategies that help the client deal effectively with life's challenges. Lotta, Kruger, and Kerr (2008, p. 531) claim that few counsellors are trained to work with gifted students: "… these students are … seldom discussed in counselling training programs, despite evidence that these students are at risk for negative academic and social-emotional outcomes." In a similar vein, Blackett and Hermansson (2005) argue that researchers and counsellors in Aotearoa New Zealand need to explicitly address giftedness, yet since their research there still appears to be a dearth of research and commentary on this matter in this

country—and internationally. In my view, this suggests that academics and health professionals are still paying little heed to giftedness among young people (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Pfeiffer, 2013; Prober, 2016; Webb et al., 2016). A related claim by Mendaglio (2002) also continues to have currency. He claims that many health professionals (i.e., psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and counsellors) typically assume that they can use the same counselling approaches with clients who are gifted as they do when working with those clients not identified as gifted. As discussed in this article (Mendaglio, 2002), counsellors and affiliated health professionals need to build into their practice an understanding that people who are gifted may deal with mental and emotional concerns differently than other people. However, even with this understanding, practice will still be influenced by each practitioner's construction of giftedness.

Research study

Methodological underpinnings

The aim of this current study was to explore its participants' constructions of giftedness, or, more specifically, the different associations, interpretations, and understandings of giftedness that they had developed through their social interactions with others (Borland, 2003). The study embraced a qualitative, humanistic methodology and used an interpretive research paradigm to investigate social constructions of giftedness and posited some possible implications of these for counselling practice.

Ronald, Jackson, Darlene, Drummond, and Sakile (2007) describe qualitative research as an approach that aims to understand other people's experiences. Adherence to humanistic research principles supports this qualitative approach because they give primacy to human meaning and actions in research, thus enabling researchers to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences and knowledge (Kelly, 1969; Wertz, 2001). For McLeod (2003, p. 36) a qualitative approach to collecting data allows researchers "to gather personal and experiential material", which tallies with the approach of the study documented in this article. The qualitative approach also aligns with the study's interpretive research paradigm because the paradigm is one that looks at how people interpret, give meanings to, and understand the world around them (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Data collection process

Data was collected from members of a closed Facebook group discussion. The purpose of setting up a Facebook group was to gather information from participants in a way that gave them the flexibility to contribute to the group whenever they could. As Ackland (2013) and Hansen (2011) point out, because postings on social media sites are not restricted by time and location, members of a group can contribute to those sites whenever and from wherever they want or can. The author of this article (hereafter, the researcher) was the only administrator of the Facebook group.

To ensure that each participant met the criteria for participation, the researcher emphasised that members of the Facebook group would need to be either engaged in supporting gifted young people in an educative or clinical role, and/or nurturing them as a parent, and be willing to explore notions of giftedness. Some of the eventual members of the group discovered this particular social media site by using their Facebook search engine; others found it by searching friends' and colleagues' lists. Once part of the group, many members forwarded the Facebook link to other people they thought should be members or let them know of it through other online networks.

Most of the participants who actively posted on the Facebook page were parents of gifted children and a few were teachers. By the time the data collection process was completed, the Facebook group had 173 members. Another benefit of using social media as part of a data-

collection process was that social media sites can generate rich data from diverse people (Alshaikh, Ramzan, Rawaf, & Majeed, 2014). While many of the members of the Facebook group were living in Aotearoa New Zealand, a good number resided in other countries that included the United States, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, and India.

The researcher posted a new discussion topic on the Facebook site every week for four months, and participants were invited to specifically address their interpretations of giftedness, what their gifted young person did, and how that person had settled at school. The discussion topics also focused on government support for gifted young people as well as the relationships between and among these young people and their families and whānau, and within their educational settings. The role of the researcher as administrator was to ensure participants' comments and discussion remained "on track" with respect to the specified questions, and that all discussions were conducted in a professional and ethical manner.

After completion of the data collection, the researcher systematically coded the postings of each participant's Facebook comments and discussion and five major themes emerged from the subsequent data analysis. Potential relationships across the themes were also explored. Effort was made to ensure the researcher recorded the data accurately and that transcripts were therefore a true reflection of participants' comments. To maximise the validity of the research findings, the researcher, before coding each transcript, sent it to its respective participant so they could check, comment on, and amend any part of the transcript that they thought did not accurately capture their discussion.

Ethical considerations

To ensure the research was conducted in an ethical manner, potential ethical problems were carefully considered, and mitigating procedures put in place at every stage of the research process. All ethical requirements for the research were set by the university overseeing the researcher's doctoral work. The university's human ethics committee confirmed that the proposed research would meet their criteria of justice, safety, truthfulness, respect, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, with the latter assured through the use of pseudonyms in all publications arising out of the research. The researcher posted detailed information about the research on the Facebook site's front page, as well as directions on how to consent to participate in the study. This information strictly followed the ethics committee's principles and guidelines. A participant signalled their wish to participate by posting a message on the Facebook page. Each participant was then informed they could request a hard copy of the information letter and the consent form, which the researcher sent to them as attachments to an email.

All data was stored in an encrypted electronic database. However, because everyone in the group could see one another's postings, the statement inviting suitable people to join the group included an explicit stating of privacy rules. It advised that the group administrator (the researcher) had the right to remove members and/or any harmful postings. The statement also made clear that by joining the group, each member would be giving their informed agreement to respect the rules and the administrator's rights. Furthermore, as part of the commitment to ethical principles and values, the invitation to join the Facebook page and the research itself was designed to ensure that no participant would be offended by the process or feel excluded because of their gender or cultural or religious background. A strong intention of this research was to include participants from a broad range of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds, and gender identities. The researcher also encouraged participants to access the final project report in order to support their practice and to advocate for gifted young people.

Findings and discussion

> *Giftedness can be a curse ... Gifted kids most definitely need help, too, just like those with special needs.* (Sarah)

1. Constructions of giftedness influence identification of and responses to giftedness

A good many of the members of the Facebook group agreed that some constructions of giftedness lead to people focusing on the meaning of the construction and how it applies to the gifted young person, rather than focusing on the gifted young person in his or her entirety. In other words, they constructed a concept of what constitutes a gifted person. As Belle noted, "So when we see those behaviours, we can say, 'Well, there's a possibility this [young person] … might be gifted'." Delaune (2015) advises that, within the educational sphere, the meaning ascribed to "gifted" has historically referred to young people deemed of high intelligence and/or of high achievement in some aspect of learning or activity. Many education and health professionals, for example, typically rely on patterns of behaviour to determine if a young person is gifted or not. Although someone might believe, on the basis of his or her construction of giftedness, that a young person is gifted they might not necessarily see that giftedness as a positive factor and fail to consider the young person in their entirety and/or in a more holistic way. The different assumptions and expectations underpinning notions of giftedness can thus be accompanied by different constructions, which may or may not be pleasant for the person who is gifted.

Several researchers, among them Gould (1996), Jolly, Matthews, and Ritchotte (2014), O'Connor (2012), and Pfeiffer (2009), have identified some of the negative consequences of constructions of giftedness. The Ministry of Education (n.d.) exemplifies one such construction, and implies a negative association, when it claims that society often sees gifted young people as "privileged" because of the assumption they can achieve with only minimal effort. As Delta, another participant, states, "People often assume that gifted children don't need any help or support … they can teach themselves." If a gifted person struggles in some way, or he or she needs more help in some areas, they may not be seen as gifted. Giftedness can thus become a mental and emotional challenge for gifted young people when they feel misunderstood.

About 80 per cent of the Facebook parents gave accounts of people not understanding their gifted child and said that this lack of understanding had a negative effect on their child's wellbeing. Neda, for example, said that "because of some [people's] attitudes", she was almost embarrassed to tell other people that her son was gifted: "It certainly hasn't been an easy road. What does it [the gifted label] mean …? Stress, heartache and worry."

Blackett and Webb (2011) and Chellapan (2012) point out that parents of gifted children can also find managing the learning needs and behaviours of their child difficult. Another of the Facebook parents, Ra, said she did not want her son to be called gifted because he and his family would then be subjected to "unnecessary expectations". Ra did not describe her son's experience of being gifted, but her conversations certainly reflected teachers' constructions of giftedness that caused her discomfort. In a related vein, about 90 per cent of the parents confirmed that they wanted helping professionals, such as educators, counsellors and psychotherapists, to view their children and their needs holistically rather than focusing on just one or two aspects of who they are.

Some parents expressed frustration that the mental and emotional needs of their gifted young people were frequently unmet not only by these professionals, but also by society in general. Others advised that lack of acknowledgement of young people's giftedness in schools was due to a tendency among teachers to focus primarily on children's weaknesses, and

especially on those children not achieving standardised benchmarks. These teachers, parents said, paid little attention to their children's strengths and giftedness.

Many of the parents in the Facebook group also said they struggled to know how best to support and advocate for their children at school. They hoped that helping professionals would not only have effective strategies for working with gifted young people in educational and other spheres of life, but could also provide parents with strategies that would help them support and advocate for their children. Beth, the parent of a gifted child, commented that without such support, "Many gifted kids give up [at school], frustrated and feeling stupid or overwhelmed …"

While the Facebook stories collectively signalled a need for helping professionals to gain greater awareness of constructions of giftedness and its consequences, such recognition, according to some parents, was only forthcoming and led to appropriate mental and emotional support for a gifted young person when another professional physically came on board. Rose said that on their own "Psych [psychological] reports are no use … too many pages to read. They [in this case, teachers] ignore them." However, she recounted, when she brought in her "own professional" for her son, namely his occupational therapist, that such a move "suddenly buys you credibility at the school", which led to her son receiving the support he needed. The teachers had seen his behaviour as that of a troublesome rather than a gifted student and treated him accordingly, which left him distressed and frustrated. The teachers wrote out all the behaviours they had observed in her son, or, as Rose put it, all that they had seen as "wrong" in him, after which "the health nurse at the school (the beauty of a decile 1 school) and the GP both forwarded [this information] on and got him assessed". While this posting did not refer directly to counselling work, it does signal that the needs of gifted young people relate to more than just their educational and academic performance. Recognition of the need to provide gifted young people with mental and emotional support has been gaining ground over the last two decades in several countries, such as the United States and Australia (see, for example, Borland, 2003; Harrison, 2016; Pfeiffer, 2013).

2. Being misunderstood may have negative mental and emotional consequences

As discussed above, constructions of giftedness can be associated with adverse mental and emotional consequences for young people. Nat said that because her son's school had not recognised his effort as that of a gifted child, he knew "exactly what was expected" in terms of average achievement and would go no further than that, "not because he does not make the greater connections, but because there is no appreciation of the effort". Parents also alluded to the socially constructed notion that gifted individuals can succeed with minimal effort, and that because success is taken for granted there is no need to acknowledge the work that they put in to get there. As Zoe posted on Facebook:

> *It [the expectation] doesn't give justice to the person but has the possibility of being misunderstood or interpreted [by certain constructions of giftedness] in a way that is different to who it refers to, potentially opening that person up for judgement and the expectations of others.*

Cross (2003) claims that being misunderstood is an ongoing pervasive problem for gifted individuals, especially when others assume that all gifted young people of the same age have the same needs across all areas of learning. What Cross says aligns with the earlier comment from Mendaglio (2002) that many counsellors assume clients who are gifted have the same needs as all their other clients. This supposition was one that Amelia had experienced, albeit in a school context. She said her child's teachers saw her daughter's needs one-dimensionally: "One can be gifted and struggling at the same time … That is so the case with my [teenager], now doing Year 11." As Sutherland (2012) confirms, gifted children do struggle mentally and emotionally with different aspects of their learning and life in general. However, as evidenced

by some of the data collected from the research here, if gifted young people's mental and emotional needs are not sufficiently addressed, they risk becoming misinterpreted and marginalised (see also, Webb et al, 2016).

A further concern highlighted in the present research study relates to how gifted young people can internalise other people's negative responses that originate from different constructions of giftedness. Sarah said, "My daughter has been DISTROYED [sic] by school … it's taking ages to get my girl back." During another posted conversation, Ami said that "My girl is so clever at avoiding things … she now unfortunately has anxiety and depression issues …" As these youngsters begin to define themselves according to people's interpretations, they may develop low self-esteem, become reluctant to take up challenges, lose interest in learning, and even face other difficulties, such as being bullied (Mallory & Kerns, 1988). Even though many constructions of giftedness subvert gifted children's emotional needs, education and health professionals may fail to appreciate their negative consequences and thus have little idea of how to respond to such constructions.

3. The characteristics of sensitivity and intensity should also inform constructions of giftedness

Some of the Facebook members mentioned that constructions of giftedness need to accommodate the notions of sensitivity and intensity. Hayley said of her son: "He just turned 7; he is always so worried about child slavery, [which] is a little too much for his little head to comprehend." This example shows that gifted young people can exhibit sensitivity to something they come across on television, social media, and in school, but do not have the life experiences needed to understand and rationalise their concerns. Katie, a teacher of gifted young people, said,

> It's difficult to have such an innocent child worry about such lofty problems of the world. I teach gifted kids and have had 3- and 4-year olds worry about pollution and litter. It can be daunting—it sounds like [they've] got lots [of aspects that need] to be understood and supported.

According to Moon (2004) and Pfeiffer (2009), gifted individuals tend to take intense interest in their areas of giftedness, and they typically process ideas differently from other people; a situation that can not only heighten the intensity, but also sensitivity. Prober (2016, p. 7) describes the gifted mind as one that is "likely to think a lot and very quickly, on more than one track at a time, sometimes in random directions". This differentiated thinking means gifted young people's reasoning about something can be uncomfortable for others, but still be very important for those youngsters. Sensitivity and intensity can also manifest in caring and a strong concern for somebody or something (e.g., the environment), a heightened sense of moral responsibility and outright passion. Strong emotions manifest in a wide range of feelings and behaviours that others do not always understand, let alone know how best to respond. Others may view these behaviours as disturbing and challenging when measured against accepted societal standards, yet it is through such behaviours that many gifted young people connect with the world.

Counsellors are trained to identify human behaviours and behavioural patterns and can tailor different strategies to support their clients. Daniels and Piechowski (2009, p. 88) maintain, however, that most clinicians receive no training regarding the characteristic behaviours and needs of gifted individuals and/or how the behavioural presentations of gifted individuals may differ from others. This lack of basic information about giftedness is problematic and increases the likelihood of misdiagnosis of gifted individuals.

Daniels and Piechowski's words strongly suggest that counsellors and helping professionals need to understand the behaviours exhibited by gifted young people. As such, counsellors must consider how valid those constructions are for each of their clients and to have at hand a range

of provisions that meet the actual needs of those clients (Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2010; Kennedy, 2018).

Also, as giftedness is often accompanied by sensitivity and intensity, counsellors need to appreciate that these characteristics can amplify depressive and extreme behaviours among gifted people. Consequently, unless giftedness is appropriately recognised and the needs of gifted people met when they are young, they may present with trauma or painful and unresolved issues later in life. As adults they may need greater comfort and encouragement to address those issues and develop ongoing resilience. Facebook group member Jackie alluded to this matter when she said:

> *I would like all … to know about gifted children. The intensity and sensitivity of gifted children and their development need understanding and support, along with teaching them how to struggle to achieve, otherwise they are deprived of the joy of mastering something that has required effort and perseverance. Also, they may not have the skills or confidence to tackle something challenging when it comes along.*

Moselle, a gifted person as well as the mother of a gifted child, claimed on Facebook that society does not support diversity, and that it was this lack which led to her long-term mental health problems:

> *[The] system does not support diversity, at all … Because I didn't experience this [support rather than the] 'social school of conformity', I did not fit into society, and felt alienated, which left me severely depressed.*

Many factors contribute to people experiencing mental and emotional health issues, yet giftedness appears to be rarely recognised as a factor associated with mental and emotional needs. Perhaps, if Moselle's mental and emotional needs had been identified and responded to when she was younger, her eventual mental health problems might have been averted or ameliorated. Daniels and Piechowski (2009, p. 109) state that "most gifted adults have repeatedly felt misunderstood by others", a claim which again supports the argument that it is crucial for practitioners, such as counsellors and teachers, to understand the needs of gifted young people.

4. Counsellors and other practitioners need to work closely with the parents of gifted young people

The research findings also made clear the need for helping professionals to understand and work with the parents and whānau of gifted young people. In the researcher's personal and professional experience, when parents first discover their child is gifted, they often feel overwhelmed by the concern of raising a child who is different from others and whose learning, mental health, and emotional needs are not the same as most of their peers. While many parents of gifted young people respond to that realisation by searching out support resources and acting as advocates for their child, other parents may choose to ignore the fact that their child is gifted. Whatever reaction parents have, findings from this research confirm that parents and their parenting matter. How they engage with and nurture their gifted child may have a significant impact on that child's mental welfare and emotional development.

When practitioners, counsellors especially, engage with gifted young people's developmental processes they need to secure an understanding of the structure and dynamics of their families. They also simultaneously need to respect, to the greatest degree practicable, the boundaries between their role and the parents' role with respect to these young people. Difficulties within a family may in some way render the young person with little or even no control over what happens to them, which will further impinge on their wellbeing. Forming positive and sustained relationships with parents and whānau can strengthen the counselling

process by clarifying for them what their child needs in order to sustain that child's healthy, holistic development.

5. Parents' feelings also need to be acknowledged

As reflected in the research findings, parents of gifted children can also exhibit sensitive and intensive behaviours and characteristics, yet helping professionals may neglect to acknowledge those feelings. Karen, another mother of a gifted child, said, "I find initial contact, questions, requests (from me to the school) are met with a defensive response until I prove that I am not 'that mother'", i.e., the kind of mother who pushes for special treatment for her child. Karen's comment illustrates the tension that can arise between schools and parents of gifted children. Parents may ask the school how it is catering, or intends to cater, for their child's needs and can then be labelled as parents who erroneously think their child is gifted or as parents who want their child to receive special provision not given to other children in the class. Equally, some parents may fail to openly acknowledge or address the needs of their gifted child because of fear of being misunderstood in this way. Those of us working as counsellors and in other helping professions need to recognise and acknowledge the complex feelings that parents of gifted young people often have, and we need to pay even more heed to these feelings if parents come to us because they are concerned about difficulties their children are experiencing (Wood & Peterson, 2017). Acknowledging parents' feelings also has the potential advantage of strengthening not only their parenting skills, but also the relationship between parents and the young person.

Implications of the research findings

For counsellors

While the research presented in this article provides evidence that the individual needs of gifted young people requires close attention from counsellors, its participants did not specifically mention what counsellors and other practitioners should or could do when working with gifted young people. Whereas gifted adults generally attend counselling when they recognise and accept that it may be necessary, it is others (family doctor, health professional, family members, friends, etc.) who generally recognise that gifted youngsters may benefit from counselling. Such recognition is usually signalled by patterns of behaviour in the young person that are deemed problems for that person and/or others, or that contravene social norms. Gifted young people may know that they think and act differently from their peers, but if they are confused and conflicted about why they are different they may eventually see their giftedness and/or themselves as "the problem". This is where counselling can help.

Counsellors also have a role to play when parents express concern (as did the participants in this research) that if society in general, and educational and health practitioners in particular, do not understand their gifted child, then that child's mental and emotional needs may not be met. Counsellors can help address this concern by taking responsibility for gaining a strong understanding of what giftedness is and how it manifests, and by raising awareness of the type of support gifted young people and their whānau typically need.

At present, counsellors who want to explore giftedness or gifted children more deeply can do so only through educational or psychological platforms, or by referencing personal experiences of giftedness. The stories that the members of the Facebook group told are drawn from authentic experiences and these, in turn, indicate that gifted young people need understanding and support not only from counsellors, but also other helping professionals, such as teachers, and from society in general. And, although the members of the Facebook group made for a relatively small self-selected sample, their experiences very likely represent those of many other people elsewhere in the world. Therefore, it is important that those of us who are counsellors can accurately identify the mental and emotional characteristics and needs of

the gifted young people in our care. We must emphasise strengths-based approaches and intervention that enhance the ability of society, educational institutions, counsellors, and other health and helping professionals to respond appropriately and holistically to the needs of these young people.

For professional development

Much of the data from the research indicates the need for counsellors to receive professional development concerning giftedness, particularly how the characteristics of giftedness relate to the social, emotional, health and wellbeing of those identified as gifted. Professional development on working with parents and whānau of gifted young people would also be helpful. Counsellors working with gifted children might also consider engaging with family and whānau, as family dynamics and parenting style also mediate the mental and emotional needs of gifted young people. Getting to know a family's structure and behavioural patterns is likely to suggest more effective facilitation of interventions and counselling processes. Finally, as counsellors we need to recognise that parents of gifted children may also be gifted themselves but may not realise it or resist acknowledging that they are because of previous adverse personal experiences in their formative years. Thus, we might also want to consider the constructions of giftedness and the mental and emotional wellbeing of parents and whānau whenever we work with gifted young people.

For research

A primary implication of the findings for future research is the need to hear from counsellors directly. Future research could explore how counsellors talk about their experiences of working with gifted children and their whānau and could ask them to describe the perspectives on giftedness they develop during that work. Attention could also be paid to how these conversations might contribute to societal and educational images of gifted young people. Seeking out their stories and experiences gifted youngsters in this regard would be very valuable. Research questions could focus on what gifted young people think about giftedness, its impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing, and how they think the constructions of giftedness that they carry serve to influence the images they have of themselves. These constructions might also give insight into how gifted young people think other people create meanings of giftedness. Some youngsters might only be able to identify the consequences of being constructed as gifted over time, with the cumulative effects only becoming apparent as they get older.

References

Ackland, R. (2013). *Web social science: Concepts, data and tools for social scientists in the digital age*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Alshaikh, F., Ramzan, F., Rawaf, S., & Majeed, A. (2014). Social network sites as a mode to collect health data: A systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet research*, *16*(7), e171. doi:10.2196/jmir.3050

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Blackett, J., & Hermansson, G. (2005). Guidance and counselling of the gifted and talented in New Zealand. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, *27*(2), 277–287. doi:10.1007/s10447-005-3186-2

Blackett, R., & Webb, J. T. (2011). The social-emotional dimension of giftedness: The SENG support model. *Australasian Journal of Gifted Education*, *20*(1), 5–13.

Borland, J. H. (Ed.). (2003). *Rethinking gifted education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Burr, V. (2015). *Social constructionism* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Chellapan, L. (2012). *If you talk, you are just talking. If I talk, is that bragging? Perspectives of parents with young gifted children in New Zealand*. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. Retrieved from https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10092/7672/thesis_fulltext.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Cross, T. L. (2003). Rethinking gifted education: A phenomenological critique of the politics and assumptions of the empirical-analytic mode of inquiry. In J. H. Borland (Ed.), *Rethinking gifted education* (pp. 72–79). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Daniels, S., & Piechowski, M. M. (2009). *Living with intensity: Emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Delaune, A. M. (2015). *Gifted education for infants and toddlers in Aotearoa New Zealand: An insight into exemplary practice*. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. Retrieved from https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/11352

Gould, S. J. (1996). *The mismeasure of man*. New York, NY: Norton.

Hansen, D. L. (2011). Exploring social media relationships. *On the Horizon*, *19*(1), 43–51. doi:10.1108/10748121111107726

Harrison, C. (2016). *Gifted and talented: Inclusion and exclusion*. Deakin West, VIC, Australia: Early Childhood Australia.

Ishak, N. M., & Abu Bakar, A. Y. (2010). Counseling for gifted students: Implication for a differentiated approach. *The International Journal of Learning: Annual Review*, *17*(6), 377–392. doi:10.18848/1447-9494/CGP/v17i06/47102

Jolly, J. L., Matthews, M. S., & Ritchotte, J. A. (2014). What's wrong with giftedness? Parents' perceptions of the gifted label. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *24*(4), 372. doi:10.1080/09620214.2014.990225

Kelly, G. A. (1969). Humanistic methodology in psychological research. *Journal of Human Psychology*, *9*(1), 53–65. doi.org/10.1177/002216786900900103

Kennedy, K. (2018). Counseling gifted students: School-based considerations and strategies. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, *10*(3), 361–367. doi:10.26822/iejee.2018336194

Lotta, C. C., Kruger, E. A., & Kerr, B. A. (2008). Counselling the gifted and talented. In L. K. C. Hardin & C. Yeh (Eds.), *Handbook of school counselling* (pp. 531–561): New York, NY: Routledge.

Mallory, B. L., & Kerns, G. M. (1988). Consequences of categorical labeling of preschool children. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, *8*(3), 39–50. doi:10.1177/027112148800800304

McLeod, J. (2003). *Doing counselling research* (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage.

Mendaglio, S. (2002). Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration: Some implications for teachers of gifted students. *AGATE*, *15*(2), 14–22.

Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *Gifted learners: Tukuna kia rere*. Wellington, New Zealand: Retrieved from https://gifted.tki.org.nz/further-support/gifted-aotearoa-project/

Moltzen, R. (Ed.). (2011). *Gifted and talented: New Zealand perspectives*. Auckland, New Zealand: Pearson.

Moon, S. M. (2004). *Social/emotional issues, underachievement, and counseling of gifted and talented students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

New Zealand Government. (2014). Vulnerable Children's Act 2014. Retrieved from http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2014/0040/latest/whole.html

New Zealand Government. (2015). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Fifth periodic report by the Government of New Zealand (2015)*. Wellington, Author: Retrieved from https://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/monitoring/uncroc/uncroc-report-for-public-consultation.pdf

O'Connor, J. (2012). Is it good to be gifted? The social construction of the gifted child. *Children & Society*, *26*(4), 293–303. doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2010.00341

Ogurlu, Ü., Sevgi-Yalın, H., & Yavuz-Birben, F. (2018). The relationship between social-emotional learning ability and perceived social support in gifted students. *Gifted Education International*, *34*(1), 76–95. doi:10.1177/0261429416657221

Pettenger, M. E. (2007). *The social construction of climate change: Power, knowledge, norms, discourses*. Burlington, VT, & Aldershot, England: Ashgate.

Pfeiffer, S. I. (2009). The gifted: Clinical challenges for child psychiatry. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *48*(8), 787–790. doi:10.1097/CHI.0b013e3181aa039d

Pfeiffer, S. I. (2013). *Serving the gifted: Evidence-based clinical and psychoeducational practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Prober, P. (2016). *Your rainforest mind: A guide to the well-being of gifted adults and youth*. Olympia, WA: GHFF Press.

Ronald, L., Jackson, I., Darlene, K., Drummond, C., & Sakile, C. (2007). What is qualitative research? *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, 8*(1), 21–28. http://doi: 10.1080/17459430701617879

Schwartz-Shea, P., & Yanow, D. (2012). *Interpretive research design: Concepts and processes*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Sternberg, R. J., Jarvin, L., & Grigorenko, E. L. (2011). *Explorations in giftedness*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Sutherland, M. B. (2012). *Gifted & talented in the early years: Practical activities for children aged 3 to 6* (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage Publications.

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author. Retrieved from http://sithi.org/admin/upload/law/Convention%20on%20the%20Rights%20of%20the%20Child.ENG.pdf

Webb, J. T., Amend, E. R., Beljan, P., Webb, N. E., Kuzujanakis, M., Olenchhak, F. R., & Goerss, J. (2016). *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnoses of gifted children and adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCCD, Asperger's, Depression, and other disorders*. Tucson, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Wong, M. & Lino, A. (2016). Suicide in New Zealand: What does it mean for gifted youth? Tall Poppies *magazine of The New Zealand Association for Gifted Children, 41*(2), 12–13.

Wong, M. (2018). *New interpretations of giftedness in early years: Looking through the lens of social constructionism*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. Retrieved from https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/16352

Wood, S. M. P., & Peterson, J. S. P. (2017). *Counseling gifted students: A guide for school counselors*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.

Wertz, F. J. (2001). Humanistic psychology and the qualitative research tradition. In K. J. Schneider, J. F. T. Bugental, & J. F. Pierson (Eds.), *The handbook of humanistic psychology: Leading edges in theory, research, and practice* (231–245). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.