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Play Patterns and Behaviours of Young Children who are Gifted in an Early  
Childhood Setting.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis begins to address a gap in early childhood research in New Zealand by exploring how young children who are gifted play in an early childhood setting. In this study, data were generated from two young gifted children and five teachers, in one early childhood centre in the North Island of New Zealand. The children, both boys, were nominated by teachers as being intellectually and affectively gifted. A qualitative approach using case study methodology was utilised in order to describe, explain and understand (Yin, 1994) their play patterns and behaviours. Methods chosen were observation, interviews and document analysis.

Findings showed that these children had advanced knowledge and language, were perfectionists and could experience frustration during play. They were found to be highly imaginative children with an interest in abstract or conceptual thinking and ideas. Co-incidentally, both were ambidextrous. The children were highly curious with a love of learning, but boredom could be experienced. They exhibited a heightened interpersonal awareness and advanced sense of humour during play.

Five play preferences were identified. These children enjoyed open-ended play, pretend play, solitary play and rules-oriented play. They also preferred their play not to be disrupted by noise, centre routines and transitions. Their interactions during play were explored. They preferred to interact with the teacher during play and they were observed ignoring or repelling their peers. When they did engage socially, dominance, leadership and competition were elements of that play.

This study has implications for early childhood teachers. Firstly, there is a need to understand the phenomenon of giftedness. Secondly there is the need to notice the characteristics of giftedness during play and recognise them as such. Finally, there is the need to respond by offering additional play support. The writer suggests that as early childhood teachers are a significant element of the gifted child's curriculum, that teachers can co-construct learning in meaningful ways which cater for the ease and speed of learning (Gagne, 2004) of the gifted child.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis begins to address a gap both in current early childhood research in New Zealand and the dearth of current literature globally concerning young children who are gifted and their play. It was my intention to discover the play experiences of these children in an early childhood setting, which may in turn suggest curriculum implications for early childhood teachers. The curricular experiences of this group of children (which includes play) entice curiosity for me. This thesis aims to provide a voice for young children who are gifted and provide a medium through which to advocate for curriculum support in order to enrich their learning.

International literature informed the intended research. Findings may relate directly to early childhood teaching practice regarding supporting the play of these children and assisting them to utilise their learning capacity to the full during play.

The motives of this thesis are thus two-fold. Firstly to investigate the play patterns and behaviours of young children who are gifted and secondly, to suggest the curriculum support these children may require during play in an early childhood setting. An understanding of the meaning of the play patterns and behaviours identified will have outcomes that are directly related to teaching practice.

I recently conducted a small research investigation (Murphy, 2004a), in which four teachers from one early childhood centre in the North Island of New Zealand were interviewed. The focus of that investigation was the teachers' perceptions of how young children who are gifted have differing play patterns and behaviours to their peers (not gifted). The emerging themes of most interest to me from the data generated, implicated aspects of curricular interest. These themes involved choosing adults as play partners, interest in generating new games, pushing the boundaries of equipment use and a love of fantasy games or those experiences which call for high use of the child's imagination. From this preliminary research, I focused an interest within the area of play. Taking a case study approach to this investigation encapsulates the idea of being able to take a rich in-depth analysis of certain situations and this has appealed to me in this instance.

How do young children who are gifted experience the curriculum in New Zealand early childhood settings? This broad question cannot be answered in this one thesis alone, so I have focused research attention on play experiences. Using case study methodology as a research approach, demonstrated my desire to gain an understanding of this group of children and to answer questions about their play in an attempt to understand them and their needs as individuals. The examination of the play of individual children facilitated an in-depth analysis of their experiences within a limited time frame (Bell, 1999).

The identified topic is affirmed at the end of this chapter and the research questions, which provided the general focus of this investigation, are stated. A literature review is presented in chapter two. The review consists of concepts underlying the definitions of giftedness, presents a menu of definitions of giftedness and states how giftedness is defined for the purposes of this research. In addition, play theories, definitions of play, intersubjectivity and play in regard to young children who are gifted are explored. This review provided me with the impetus to learn more about giftedness and to develop a greater sense of inquiry concerning the play experiences of these children in an early childhood setting. In chapter three, methodology is reviewed, methods used are explored, descriptions of the sample and a description of the early childhood setting and its programme are provided. Ethical considerations are emphasised and respected. The findings are presented in chapter four, highlighting emerging themes that surfaced from the data generated (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Examples directly linked to the analysed data, are indented within that chapter. Chapter five then discusses the findings in relation to the questions, linking to the literature reviewed, other literature and the data generated. Finally, a conclusion is drawn in chapter six, which questions whether the aims of this thesis have been realised, explores implications for teachers, policy implications, acknowledges the limitations of the research and suggests possibilities for future research.

In short, the principle aim of this research was to present a fresh lens into the play patterns and behaviours of young children who are gifted in an early childhood setting. The overall aim was to find out:

- How do young children who are gifted play in an early childhood setting?

It was hoped that this lens would in turn, answer the following research questions:

- What characteristics of giftedness are evident in young children's play?
- Do these children demonstrate particular play preferences?
- What interactions with teachers and other children can be observed during play?

I acknowledge the limitations of the research, that only one early childhood setting was involved and that both children were boys. However, it is hoped that the research will provide a sound foundational platform for future investigations and may initiate further future research interest amongst the early childhood research sector.

The following chapter now presents a review of the literature relevant to the research questions.