Searching for a place to belong: A narrative study of parental perspectives of gifted children's learning environments

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Abstract

Gifted children have unique social, emotional and learning needs, which if not met may result in negative effects on their emotional well-being. The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of nine primary school age gifted children within their New Zealand learning environments and to examine how these experiences affected their emotional well-being. A narrative research design was used to generate stories, based on interviews with their parents, of the children's experiences in their learning environments. The overarching theme, present in all the parents' accounts, was that a sense of belonging within the learning environment was vital to the well-being of their children. On the occasions when the children felt that they did not belong within their learning environment their emotional well-being suffered. A sense of belonging was found to occur when the children's social, emotional and learning needs were catered for. Advocacy by the parents and appropriate pedagogy of the classroom teachers were fundamental to ensuring that this sense of belonging was nurtured. Recommendations stemming from this study include the provision for the training of pre-service and in-service teachers in recognising and responding to the needs of gifted children.

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Introduction

The New Zealand Curriculum presents a vision of New Zealand students as "lifelong learners who are confident and creative, connected, and actively involved" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 4). It envisages that the goal of developing these qualities in all learners at New Zealand schools will be achieved through education based on the curriculum, values and competencies which it includes. The Ministry of Education acknowledges that there are some groups of students who may require special provisions in order to experience success within the framework of the New Zealand Curriculum. This includes gifted students. Under NAG 1 iii (c) schools in New Zealand are required to identify gifted students and to ensure that their needs are met (Ministry of Education, 2015b).

Although guidance on meeting these needs is available through, for example, the Te Kete Ipurangi website (Ministry of Education, n.d.-b) and the publication, *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools* (Ministry of Education, 2012a), schools are tasked with developing their own definitions, identification procedures and provisions for gifted students. The quality of identification and provision within in New Zealand schools is uneven, with individual teachers and members of schools' management teams often left to lead gifted education within their school with little other professional support (Riley & Bicknell, 2013) and with many schools lacking school-wide professional development in the area of gifted education (Education Review Office, 2008b). This has resulted in a situation in which the needs of gifted children within New Zealand schools are often unmet (Education Review Office, 2008b).

Among the needs of gifted students identified by the Education Review Office (ERO) (2008b) are those relating to social and emotional well-being. ERO recognises that:

> Being gifted and talented extends beyond the regular school day, and schools play an important part in working with students and their parents and whanau to ensure and support their social and emotional wellbeing, as well as celebrate their achievement and progress (p. 39).

Nevertheless, among the schools surveyed for its most recent 2008 national report into provisions for gifted and talented students, the Education Review Office found that the majority did not recognise the special social and emotional needs of the gifted students and did not foster discussion on holistic well-being between staff and the students' families (Education Review Office, 2008b).

Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of New Zealand learning environments on the social and emotional well-being of gifted primary school age children. At the outset of the study, the focus was to be on negative effects, the causes of these effects and the steps which parents took to support their children through them. However, as the data was collected, through narrative research methods, it became clear that the participants had as much to say on the positive effects which their children had experienced as on the negative effects. Therefore the focus shifted to a more comprehensive view, encompassing both halves of their children's experiences, the positive and the negative. The stories provided by the participants also largely centred on their children's school experiences. Thus, while other learning environments, such as clubs and one day programmes are considered, the emphasis of this study is on school experience.

Organisation of the thesis

The thesis is organised into six chapters. The first has provided a brief introduction to giftedness in New Zealand primary schools and outlined the purpose of the study.

Chapter two is a literature review. It includes definitions of giftedness, the social and emotional aspects of giftedness and the role of teachers in teaching gifted students. An overview of the types of learning environments available to gifted primary school children in New Zealand is also incorporated into this chapter.

Chapter three describes narrative research as a methodology and explains the research design for this study. The roles of the researcher and the participants are explained, as are the data collection and analysis processes.

Chapter four is the heart of the thesis. This chapter contains the stories of the children's experiences at primary school. Each has been restoryed, following a chronological format, from the information provided by the parent participants in their interviews. The stories were co-constructed with the participants through their comments on each draft.

In chapter five the themes which arose from the interviews and the stories are discussed, with reference to relevant literature. While the previous chapter contains the co-constructed stories, this chapter presents the voices of the participants, taken directly from their interviews.

Chapter six concludes the thesis by reflecting on the central theme and the lessons which can be learnt from the experiences of the children featured in this study. Limitations and areas for further research are given.

This literature review focuses on the commonly recognised characteristics which many gifted students exhibit, the role of the teacher in supporting the learning and emotional needs of gifted students and the effect of the environment in which the learning takes place. In considering whether an individual student will thrive in a particular learning situation, the interaction of these factors must be taken into account.

Gifted students

Who are gifted children? There is no single definition of giftedness. Over the past century conceptions of giftedness have broadened from an intelligence based concept in which gifted individuals were thought to be those with an IQ of 130 and above (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008) to a multi-categorical model in which giftedness in many domains is recognised (Moltzen, 2011b). Giftedness occurs in all cultures, ethnicities, socioeconomic groups and in both genders. Concepts of giftedness may vary across these groups (Ministry of Education, 2012a).

As noted in the introduction, schools in New Zealand develop their own definitions of giftedness. Criteria provided by the Ministry of Education (2012a) to assist schools in developing their own definitions of giftedness reflect multi-categorical concepts of giftedness, which may include the areas of intellectual or academic giftedness, creativity, expression through the arts, social or leadership qualities, culture-specific qualities and physical and sporting abilities. Spiritual giftedness may also be recognised (Fraser, 2012). A gifted child is one who has exceptional potential or ability in any or a combination of these areas. The New Zealand Association for Gifted Children suggests that approximately five percent of the population are gifted (New Zealand Association for Gifted Children, 2011a) while more liberal definitions estimate the number of gifted individuals at up to fifteen percent (Ministry of Education, n.d.-a).

For the purposes of this study and in keeping with guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education (2012a) a gifted child is one who demonstrates the potential to perform at a high level when compared to his or her peers of a similar age in any of the areas described above.

Commonly recognised characteristics. Many gifted students bring to learning environments a range of traits, which, if not fully understood and catered for, can make their time in these

environments challenging or unfulfilling (Webb et al., 2005). These traits span learning preferences and social and emotional functioning.

Emotional and psychological well-being. Much of the general literature on gifted children and the information designed for those teaching gifted children contain sections devoted to the psychological and emotional well-being of these children (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008; B. Clark, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2012a; A. Robinson, Shore, & Enersen, 2007). Bevan-Brown and Taylor (2008) identify sensitivity, emotional intensity, perfectionism, high expectations from others, asynchronous development, being out of step with their non-gifted peers and a mismatch between aspects of their ability and cultural values as possible areas of challenge for gifted children.

Safeguarding the emotional well-being of these children is included in the mission statement of several groups who work with them, including Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (2012) and the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children (2011b). There is a recognition that the characteristics which some gifted children exhibit make them emotionally vulnerable.   Indeed, one of the accepted definitions of giftedness, The Columbus Group Definition, states that "the uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counselling in order for them to develop optimally " (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

However, Neihart's (1999) examination of the empirical literature concerning the psychological well-being of the gifted population shows that there is no evidence that intellectually or academically gifted children or adolescents are more prone to depression than their non-gifted peers. Several of the studies, such as that carried out by Parker with mathematically gifted students (as cited in Neihart, 1999), indicate that rates of depression are lower among gifted students than their peers. However, Neihart (1999) notes that studies also suggest that educational fit or placement affects the adjustment of the gifted child. She explains that "intellectual or academically gifted children who are achieving and participate in special education programs for gifted students are at least as well adjusted and perhaps better adjusted than their non-gifted peers" (Neihart, 1999, p. 16). This suggests that gifted students whose needs are being met at school are unlikely to become depressed due to school based factors.   A more recent study by Missett (2013) found that while there may be an increased risk of bipolar disorder among intellectually gifted individuals, intellectual giftedness appears to provide protective factors against depression. Furthermore, school support systems are also among the known protective factors against depression (Missett, 2013). Once again this suggests that gifted students who are supported at school are less likely to

suffer from depression. Finally, Martin, Burns and Schonlau's (2010) review of epidemiologic literature comparing mental disorders among gifted and non-gifted youth found that there was no evidence that gifted adolescents were more likely to suffer from depression than their non-gifted peers. While this age group is older than that being considered in this study, these findings reinforce that fact that the rate of depression does not appear to be higher in among gifted students than among their non-gifted peers.

Webb, Amend, Webb, Goerss, Beljan and Olenchak (2005) explain that :

> there is relatively little inherent in being a gifted child or adult that makes them more prone to depression than others. Most often it is a poor fit between the gifted person and the environment that creates the problems. A lack of understanding and support from teachers, peers or family can precipitate very real problems of various kinds, including depression. (p. 133)

Lovecky (n.d.) also proposes that gifted children are not necessarily more prone to mental health disorders. However, her concern is that the mental health disorders of gifted students are sometimes considered to be an aspect of their giftedness and are not correctly treated.

Perfectionism. Perfectionism is recognised as being one of the key issues affecting gifted children and one that may affect their willingness to take what they perceive as risks with their learning or in social situations (Callard-Szulgit, 2012; Webb et al., 2005).   There are several theories regarding the origins of perfectionism in gifted children. Ablard and Parker (1997) identified a correlation between parents who held high performance goals for their children and dysfunctional perfectionism among this group of children, while parents whose focus was on learning goals were more likely to have non-perfectionistic children or children who exhibited healthy perfectionism. A second theory regarding perfectionism holds that rather than being a product of parental expectations, it is commonly found among gifted students who have been able to succeed easily due to their abilities (Callard-Szulgit, 2012; Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Silverman (1999) suggests that perfectionism among the gifted is inevitable and offers six reasons for this, encompassing a facility for abstraction, asynchrony, close friendships with older children, ability to predict the consequences of actions, a desire to construct a challenging task from one which is not challenging to the child and a desire to add meaning to their lives by doing the best that they can. Regardless of its origins, perfectionism can present a challenge to both students and teachers.

In some students perfectionism is characterised by an unwillingness to take risks with their learning or even attempt new activities due to fear of failure (Fonseca, 2011). This is compounded

by the unusually high expectations which these students sometimes have of themselves and other people, which lead them to see any achievement which is less than perfect as a failure (Adderholdt & Goldberg, 1999; Callard-Szulgit, 2012). Within any learning environment encouragement to persist is vital (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002) and therefore an understanding of these issues by teachers is necessary. Silverman (1999) proposes considering perfectionism as an energy to be channelled in positive directions and provides hints for parents to enable their children to cope with perfectionism. Some of these hints, such as reminding the child not to give up when tasks become difficult and encouraging the child to believe in his or her capacity to reach their high goals, are equally appropriate for teachers to use with gifted children.   Adelson (2007) also provides practical suggestions for teachers working with perfectionistic students. While there is some overlap with Silverman's (1999) suggestions, Adelson (2007) also includes suggestions relating to organisation, learning from others who have used their perfectionism to successfully attain their goals and the creative process in the classroom.

Intensities and overexcitabilities. A well-documented personality characteristic of many gifted children is intensity (Daniels & Piechowski, 2008; Silverman, 2013; Webb et al., 2005). Piechowski (as cited in Silverman, 1993, p. 3) explains that intensity in gifted children "must be understood as a qualitatively distinct characteristic, It is not a matter of degree, but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding – a way of being quiveringly alive." Daniels and Meckstroth (2008) explain that the emotional intensity of their experiences are very high and that few adults who work with these children receive any training in how to support them as they navigate these extremes.

Intensity in the gifted population is frequently associated with Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski's concept of Overexcitability (Daniels & Piechowski, 2008; Lind, 2001; Miller, Falk, & Huang, 2009; Silverman, 2013), which forms part of his Theory of Positive Disintegration (Dabrowski, 1972). Dabrowski (1972) identified five distinct Overexcitabilities:

- Psychomotor overexcitability
- Sensual overexcitability
- Intellectual overexcitability
- Imaginational overexcitability
- Emotional overexcitability

Although Dabrowski's theories were never intended to apply only to gifted individuals (B. Tillier, personal communication, 16 June 2009) 200 gifted individuals were involved in his study and the concept of overexcitabilities has found widespread acceptance within the gifted community.   Lind

(2001) observes that while overexcitabilities are more commonly found among people within the gifted population, not all gifted individuals have overexcitabilities. However, there is some concern among those working in the area of positive disintergration that within the gifted community a "lopsided understanding of Dabrowski" (B.Tiller, personal communication, 16 June 2009) has developed, which focuses only on overexcitabilities without considering the process of positive disintegration (Tillier, 2009).

In the decades since Dabrowski's findings concerning overexcitabilities a great deal of information which brings together overexcitabilities and intensities has been produced for those with an interest in gifted education. This has consisted of material designed to enable gifted individuals to understand their intensity or overexcitability (Daniels & Piechowski, 2008; Piechowski, 2006; Tolan, 1999), practical units of work for teachers to use to help gifted students accept their overexcitabilites (Strickland, n.d.), strategies for teachers to use in the classroom to allow their students with overexcitabilities to better cope with learning within the classroom setting (Lind, 2001) and strategies for parents to use with their children to teach them to manage their intensities (Institute of Advanced Achievement, 2012).

Asynchronous development. The Columbus Group Definition of giftedness (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008) uses asynchronous development as a defining characteristic of giftedness, indicating that the heightened intensity and advanced cognitive abilities of the gifted lead them to experience life differently from their non-gifted peers. Moltzen describes asynchrony as "different components of growth developing at a different rate" (2011b, p. 36). For the gifted child the different rates of development can cause confusion, such as when their cognitive abilities allow them to understand concepts for which they are not emotionally ready (Morelock, 2000). Within the classroom, teachers may perceive the asynchrony in which physical skills or social and emotional skills are developing later than intellectual skills as indicative of deficits in these areas and may categorise the children as immature (Lee, 1999). However, social maturity has also been shown to be a characteristic of some gifted children (Ministry of Education, 2012a; N. M. Robinson, 2000). Asynchronous development may make decisions regarding education, both from academic and social perspectives, difficult. This is particularly the case in the early stages of primary school (Porath, 2011).

Peer relationships. The importance of allowing gifted students to interact and learn with other gifted students has been noted by many authors (Davis, Rimm, & Siegle, 2011; Hollingworth, 1930, 1942). These opportunities provide social support (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008; Davis et al., 2011; Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Taylor, 2004) and the chance to learn at an appropriate level with like-

minded peers (Davis, 2006; Davis et al., 2011; Rogers, 2002; Taylor, 2004). In fact Rogers (2002) notes that there is almost no evidence that full-time, whole class, mixed ability classes have any benefits for gifted students.

At times difficulties may arise between gifted children and their non-gifted peers. This may be because the gifted child is thinking at a more advanced level than his or her peer (Hollingworth, 1930). Therefore adult coaching in how to handle these situations has been recommended (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008).

Learning preferences and characteristics

   Much of what is known about the learning preferences of gifted children stems from the pioneering work of Leta Hollingworth with classes of highly gifted students in New York, beginning in the 1920s. Through working closely with these children over several years, Hollingworth was able to determine their need for acceleration, enrichment, authentic learning experiences and the flexibility to work in their own ways and to work with other gifted children (Beaupeurt, 2007; Hollingworth, 1930, 1942; Klein, 2000).

Speed. Hollingworth observed that some of the gifted children in her classes could master the curriculum in about half the time as their non-gifted peers. She suggested that a programme which allowed rapid progress through school would suit them (Klein, 2000). A range of options for acceleration now exist, including curriculum compacting, acceleration in a single subject and acceleration in all subjects through grade-skipping (Rogers, 2002).   The positive academic outcomes of acceleration are well-documented (Hattie, 2009; Rogers, 1992, 2004; Sousa, 2009; Townsend, 2011; Winebrenner, 2012). However, there is some reluctance to employ acceleration in New Zealand (Hattie, 2009; Townsend, 2011) due to concerns about the social and emotional effects on children who have been accelerated (Townsend, 2011). Although acceleration will not suit or be necessary for every gifted child, there is little to suggest that a well-planned and carefully managed acceleration will have negative social or emotional effects for those who require it (Rogers, 1992; Townsend, 2004). Instead it may increase motivation (Townsend, 2004) and children may find that they have more in common with the older children whom they work with than with the same age peers (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008).

Learning with peers. Hollingworth determined that learning with like-minded peers provided the best environment for the children in her study (Beaupeurt, 2007). In addition to the social and emotional benefits of regular interaction with other gifted children noted above, learning with like-

minded peers allows gifted children to progress at an appropriate pace (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2010) and to explore content at a deep level together (Pierce et al., 2011).   When programmes are designed to reflect the ability of the group, academic benefits are seen (Kulik & Kulik, 1992).

Curriculum content. In order to make time to offer enrichment opportunities, including field trips to factories and museums (Klein, 2000), for the children in her study, Hollingworth devised a curriculum in which the regular subjects of the times were condensed (Beaupeurt, 2007). Enrichment is currently the main form of accommodation for gifted children in New Zealand (Townsend, 2011). Enrichment consisting of more challenging and varied learning than students usually experience has been shown to have positive effects on self-concept (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). However, there is no single definition of enrichment and there is concern that enrichment is not well understood or implemented by teachers (Townsend, 2011). Rogers (2002) cautions that unless enrichment is well-planned to meet the needs of the children for whom it is intended, it is likely to simply be busy work. An approach which blends enrichment and acceleration is recommended by the Ministry of Education (2012a), providing that "enrichment opportunities are coherent, comprehensive, relevant, meaningful, and carefully designed to meeting the learning needs of individual students" (p. 60).

   In addition to enrichment developed within individual schools, a number of highly-regarded curriculum models for gifted children exist, which provide high interest curricula, appropriate challenge, the opportunity for creativity and independence, social and emotional development and metacognitive understanding (Ministry of Education, 2012a). Among these models is the New Zealand based REACH model, which was used in the One Day School Programmes throughout New Zealand and continues to be available for use in the regular classroom (Cathcart, 2005; REACH education consultancy, 2006b).

Learning characteristics and the need for differentiation. Tables and checklists of learning characteristics of gifted children, including those devised by Davis, Rimm and Siegle (2011) and Clark (2008) are widely available. Within the New Zealand context Moltzen (2011a, p. 70) identifies the following learning characteristics as indicators of giftedness:

- Displays a logical and analytical thinking
- Is quick to see patterns and relationships
- Achieves quick mastery of information
- Strives for accurate and valid solutions to problems
- Easily grasps underlying principles
- Likes intellectual challenge

- Jumps stages in learning

- Seeks to redefine problems, pose ideas and formulate hypotheses

- Problem-finds as well as problem solves

- Reasons things out for self

- Formulates and supports ideas with evidence

- Can recall a wide range of knowledge

- Independently seeks to discover the why and how of things

Depending on the forms which their giftedness takes, not all gifted children will display these characteristics. However, for those who do display some of the characteristics listed here or in similar checklists, particularly if they are combined with a desire to work with like-minded peers, accommodations within the school system will be required (Yewchuk, 1998). Therefore the Ministry of Education (2012a) calls on schools to apply the principle of inclusion and to provide differentiated programmes, which meet the learning and the social and emotional needs of gifted children. An environment in which content, process and product are differentiated is recommended in order to ensure that students are learning in a manner which is appropriate for them.

Teachers

   Teacher characteristics.   A positive relationship between a teacher and his or her students is necessary for any student to learn and to feel accepted within that learning environment (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2014). Teachers who are effective at teaching other groups will not necessarily be effective with gifted learners (B. Clark, 2013; David, 2011; A. Robinson, 2014). While there are certainly teachers who enjoy teaching this population and cater well to their needs (Mills, 2003), negative attitudes towards giftedness and a lack of understanding of gifted students have been noted both in international and New Zealand studies (Geake & Gross, 2008; Needham, 2010). Teachers' attitude towards gifted students and teachers' confidence in their ability to cater for these students can affect their ability to provide adequate experiences for the students (David, 2011; Needham, 2010). As Troxclair (2013) explains, a deficit in understanding among teachers of gifted students "shapes their ability to provide for the educational and affective needs of that population"(p. 58).

   During initial teacher training in New Zealand, gifted education is seldom addressed beyond a few readings or lectures for the majority of trainee teachers, although some institutions offer optional semester long papers (Riley & Rawlinson, 2008). This suggests that many of the teachers of

gifted students have had little opportunity for formal training in this area, although for New Zealand teachers who seek out training in gifted education, several programmes exist (Massey University, n.d.; REACH education consultancy, 2006a). Mills (2003) found that limited teacher training in gifted education was available to American teachers of the gifted as part of their regular teacher training. However, the teachers in this study who were effective teachers of the gifted also lacked formal training.

Mills' (2003) study revealed that while training in gifted education and advanced subject knowledge and a passion for the subject were important traits in an effective teacher of gifted students, personality characteristics and cognitive styles of teachers were also important factors. This builds on earlier research suggesting that underachievement among some gifted students could stem from a difference in personality style between them and most of their teachers (Mills & Parker, 1998) and proposes that these students would benefit from being taught by teachers with similar personality and cognitive styles to themselves, or by teachers with an understanding of the students' styles (Mills, 2003).

Several detailed lists of characteristics of teachers who are effective teachers of gifted students have been generated through studies of this population (Hargrove, 2005). In addition to suggesting that these teachers should be intelligent and have an understanding of the needs of gifted students (Davis et al., 2011), these lists have suggested that, among other features, the effective teachers of gifted students should be able to work as facilitators (Story, 1985), should be flexible, have high energy and be open (Renzulli as cited in Rosemarin, 2014) and be non-judgemental and able to make time to interact with students (Silverman as cited in Rosemarin, 2014). Developing his suggestion that a teacher of gifted students should be flexible, Renzulli advocates that in order for his *Enrichment Triad* model to be effective, the teachers involved must be at times "some combination of coach, promoter, manager, mentor, agent, guide and sometimes even colleague" (2012, p. 155). Hultgren and Seeley (as cited in Rosemarin, 2014) go as far as to suggest that effective teachers of gifted students should be gifted individuals themselves.

Studies of teacher preferences of gifted students have revealed that the personal-social characteristics of teachers are important to gifted high school students (Vialle & Quigley, 2002) and gifted primary students (Rosemarin, 2009). In other studies students identified intellectual and content knowledge characteristics as important, while also valuing personal attributes like a sense of humour, enthusiasm, rapport and respect for students (A. Robinson, 2014). Rosemarin (2009) suggests that while academic qualities are important to the students, this value might be viewed as implicit and therefore she advocates that teachers focus on developing their social skills.

Learning environments

  Schools. Although New Zealand schools have been required to implement provisions for their gifted students since 2005, a report by the Education Review Office (Education Review Office, 2008b) found that 35% of the schools did not have good provision for gifted students in any of the areas which were evaluated. The areas were school leadership, defining and identifying giftedness and talent, programmes and provisions for gifted and talented students, schools' reviews of their provisions and promoting positive outcomes for gifted and talented students. The combination of these factors, in the schools where they were effectively implemented, was found to result in successful provision for gifted students. A variety of effective approaches, such as clustering within classrooms and alternative classes running alongside the mainstream programmes, was seen within the case study schools and these were able to run successfully because they aligned with the philosophies and values of the schools (Education Review Office, 2008b)**.**

  However, in 2004 much of the provision in New Zealand schools took the form of " part-time solutions to full time problems" (Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind, & Kearney, 2004, p. 63), rather than a cohesive plan to cater to the ongoing learning and emotional needs of gifted students. In a follow-up to this study Riley and Bicknell (2013) found that, a decade on, part-time enrichment provisions were still favoured over options for acceleration. With most gifted students spending most of their time in the regular classroom (Ministry of Education, 2012a), provisions within this context are key (Winebrenner, 2001). Qualitatively differentiated provisions recommended for use within New Zealand classrooms are varied and include independent inquiry, learning centres, flexible grouping, tiered activities, individualised education plans, an integrated curriculum and distance education (Ministry of Education, 2012a). Nevertheless, Riley et al. (2004) note that within New Zealand schools there is a danger of provisions being presented solely as withdrawal programmes, rather than as the continuum of qualitatively differentiated options advocated by the Ministry of Education (2012a). As already noted, the use of well-planned and resourced acceleration, while supported by international research (Rogers, 1992, 2004) is also less likely to be offered than planned enrichment within New Zealand schools (Riley et al., 2004). Therefore while there is a diverse range of options available to meet the needs of gifted students there is a real possibility, as noted by Cathcart (1996), that those on offer at any given school will not adequately meet the needs of a particular student or be available to that student.

  Mulrine (2007) advocates for the use of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) to create virtual learning environments which students can access in and beyond the classroom as a

way to meet their learning needs. The potential for students to not only learn in these environments, but also to contribute to them and develop their own communities is noted by Besnoy, Housand and Clarke (2009). Drigas and Kokkalia (2014) consider that even in a kindergarten setting, with students aged between 4 and 6, ICT use can be beneficial to gifted students and note that this can be through the use of ICT to display student work within their own setting and by allowing the students to become comfortable in their online interactions with other students by sharing their learning on the internet.

   By 2013 more than 30% of New Zealand schools had made BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) optional or compulsory for students (Crook, 2013) and with this trend towards students having easy access to ICT in their learning environments continuing, the use of virtual learning environments for gifted students becomes a real possibility. However, in order for students to benefit from the use of ICT, teachers must be open to its use and capable users themselves. (Besnoy et al., 2009; Drigas & Kokkalia, 2014).

   Dedicated online learning environments. In New Zealand several online institutions offer online curricula aimed at gifted students, including Te Aro o Te Kura Pounamu – The Correspondence School, Alpha Learning Facility and Gifted Online. Among the students of these institutions are those who live in isolated communities or cannot access suitable provisions in their own locations. No New Zealand based research was found which discussed the effects of these programmes on gifted students. Olszewski-Kubilius and Lee's (2004) study of students who undertook online study through the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University focussed on students who were unable to access appropriate courses through their local schools. The study found that while the students were generally satisfied with their experience of learning in this way, they did not enjoy the lack of face-to-face interaction with their instructors. In a study of 65 gifted American students and 28 teachers, Thomson (2010) found that the student and teacher response to learning online was positive. Several benefits for gifted students were identified by the students, including the opportunity for extended one-to-one e-mail conversations between students and teachers and the flexibility to work at their own pace and on individualised and differentiated material.

   While the problem of bullying of gifted children has been recognised for some time (Hollingworth, 1930), the phenomenon of cyberbullying has become a major issue in recent years with increased access to the internet (Lapidot-Lefler & Dolev-Cohen, 2015). There is a relative lack of research on the extent and consequences of cyberbullying of gifted children in particular (Smith, Dempsey, Jackson, Olenchak, & Gaa, 2012). However, Peterson and Ray (2006) have suggested that the intensities displayed by many gifted individuals render them hypersensitive to being bullied. This

may have implications for the way in which gifted students manage themselves and are supervised in online environments.

One day a week programmes. New Zealand has had programmes offering a one day a week alternative to regular school for gifted primary and intermediate school children since 1996 (Riley et al., 2004). The organisations offering the One Day School and Gifted Kids Programmes, which have existed since 1996 and 2000 respectively, merged in 2014 and now offer MindPlus[1], which aims to bring together like-minded children from different schools and home-schooling environments to learn together one day a week (New Zealand Centre for Gifted Education, n.d.).   Clark's (2009) study of the perceptions of alumni of the Gifted Kids' Programme revealed that the majority felt that attendance at this programme had been a positive experience in terms of the curriculum offered, the opportunity to work with like-minded peers, the amount of challenge and the understanding which it allowed them to have of their own gifts and talents.   In its own review of its curriculum the Gifted Kids programme was shown to be supported by theory and research and to reflect best practice (as cited in Bate, Clark, & Riley, 2012), while research carried out with alumni of the Gifted Kids programme indicates that students benefitted both socially and academically from their time in this programme (Bate et al., 2012).

Summary

Research into the characteristics of gifted children has highlighted the heterogeneous nature of this group and the social, emotional and educational complexities which individuals bring to the learning environment. The ability to incorporate a range of teaching styles, coupled with an understanding of giftedness has been shown to be desirable in teachers of the gifted. However, there is a lack of rigorous training in gifted education for pre-service teachers. A number of different learning environments is available in New Zealand, with the one day a week programmes designed to cater specifically for gifted children being shown to be most effective in tailoring programmes which consistently meet the children's learning and social and emotional needs.

No research was found which considered the impact of learning environments on the well-being of gifted primary school age children in New Zealand, apart from Clark's (2009) study of the alumni of the Gifted Kids Programme, which considered how this programme had affected the students socially. The current study sought to give voice to families of children in a wider range of learning

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[1]   In the stories which follow, most of the participants talk about the One Day School. Some of the children would have attended the One Day School before it merged with Gifted Kids. Others would have attended it in its new form as MindPlus, but still refer to it as the One Day School.

environments as the children's parents reflect on the effect of these environments on the social and emotional well-being of their children.

The questions which drove this research are:

- Which aspects of their children's learning environments do parents believe have affected their children's well-being?
- How have these effects manifested?
- Which measures have parents put in place to support children whose well-being has been affected by their learning environment?
- Have there been ongoing effects for the children and their families as a result of experiences within the learning environment?

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine the ways in which learning environments affected the social and emotional well-being of gifted primary school age children and the responses of their parents to these effects. In order to allow parents to tell of their experiences in as much detail as they wanted to and so that I could acquire rich data, I decided to use narrative research to undertake this study.

This chapter outlines the nature of narrative research and reasons for choosing narrative research for this study. The place of the researcher in narrative research, including the ways in which the researcher and participants interact, and other ethical considerations are discussed. This leads into an outline of the recruitment procedure for participants for this study, the interview process, data analysis and interpretation of themes from the data. This is followed by a series of narratives, based on the interviews, which introduces each child in the study to the reader.

What is narrative research?

Narrative research is an evolving field, with many explanations of how narrative research might be carried out. At its simplest a narrative can be defined as "an account of something" (Sikes & Gale, n.d.). Our daily interactions with others are filled with accounts of something, whether for entertainment, information or relationship maintenance. Therefore narrative or story, with all its vital roles, may be seen as being central to human experience and existence (Sikes & Gale, n.d.).   Bold (2012) explained that narrative provides the opportunity to share the nature and order of events in particular times in history. This sharing allows the audience to develop new understandings based on the narrative of the events (Clandinin, 2006; Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997).

When considering the study of stories for research purposes, Clandinin and Connelly (1996) proposed that stories are the closest that we can come to experience.   Creswell stated of narrative research that "as a method it begins with the experiences as expressed in the lived and told stories of individuals" (2013, p. 71). Therefore, at the heart of narrative

research is the telling of the participants' stories to the researcher as a way to enable the researcher, and ultimately the audience of the research, to understand the participants' experiences. The participants' stories, once told, provide the data to be studied. The data is based on the participants' recollections of past events, present events and his or her plans for the future (Creswell, 2013) and, once analysed by the researcher, the data is organised and presented in a narrative form which is suitable for the audience of the research. Riessman and Speedy (2007, p. 430) argued that it is sequence and consequence which set narrative study apart from other forms of discourse, noting that "events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience". This sequencing and consideration of consequence may refer to the process of the participant when telling his or her story to the researcher. However, it may also refer to the role of the researcher in creating a narrative from the participant's story.

Types of narrative research

   Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2008) noted that there are different types of narrative research, including:

- *event-centred narrative research*, in which the narrator recounts an event which has happened to him or her,
- *experience-centred narrative research,* in which the narrator may recount a particular event, turning point or longer story of living through an experience and may include stories of others as well as the narrator and
- *narrative research which is co-constructed*, perhaps through conversations between the participants and the researcher.

However, Salmon (as cited in Riessman & Speedy, 2007) considered all narrative to be co-constructed, due to the way in which the intended audience influences the choices which the narrators, in this case the research participants, make regarding content and the way in which they express themselves. For this study, experience-centred narrative was appropriate as it allowed the participants to discuss both their own perceptions of what has happened to their children and also the experiences and perceptions which their children, teachers or other people had reported to them. Experience-centred narrative may vary in

length from sections of interviews to hours of stories and may include many types of phenomena, including things that the narrator has only heard about. Experience-centred narrative might also include written items and visual materials, such as photos (Squire et al., 2008).

Why is narrative research appropriate for this study?

Narrative research is suited to research which is being carried out with a small number of participants (Creswell, 2013) and allows the researcher and the audience to see the participants and their stories "close up and big" (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 169). Participants are invited to tell their stories in detail, which may generate rich data for analysis. Ochberg (as cited in Elliott, 2005, p. 135) justified the use of narrative research by observing that "questionnaires limit our informants to narrow menus of pre-selected questions and answers", while "interviews let informants choose the events that matter to them and put their own construction on them". By encouraging the participants themselves to decide which experiences should be discussed and how to construct their descriptions and explanations of the experiences, the participants in narrative inquiry are placed at the centre of the research and their stories unfold in a manner of their choosing. In this way the researcher is able to honour the complex stories of the participants (Leggo, 2004).

Narrative research also allows those reading the research to gain a sense of the experiences of each of the individual participants involved. Readers of narratives are invited to re-imagine the story and connect it to their own lived experiences (Pinnegar, 2006). When considering the possible effects of narrative research on a teaching audience, Bold explained that "understanding how individuals are affected by different contexts, through a narrative approach, is more likely to help teachers provide the most appropriate support for the child's learning" (2012, p. 21). Therefore, it was hoped that by employing narrative research to investigate how learning environments had affected these children, the experiences of the children and their families would be presented in a manner which would be vivid and thought-provoking to those who read them. Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) used the metaphor of ripples to describe the effects of narrative research, noting that while some ripples are gentle, others can rock boats.

The place of the researcher in narrative research

Narrative research is not objective. The beliefs and experiences of the researcher influence what he or she chooses to investigate, the methods through which this is done, the findings which are judged the most suitable or interesting to explore and the way in which these findings are interpreted and communicated (Creswell, 2013; Malterud, 2001). Therefore the researcher must be careful to reflect on how his or her beliefs affect the research process and to ensure that he or she focuses on the meaning which participants hold, rather than the meaning which the researcher brings to the matter being studied (Creswell, 2014). An attitude of reflexivity is required at each stage of the research process (Berger, 2015).

Position of the researcher

In the interests of transparency I must explain the experiences which have brought me to this research. I come to this research as the parent of gifted children who, at various times, have been affected negatively and positively within the learning environments of their schools and even their pre-schools.   I have had the experience of being able to advocate successfully for them and also, when I have not been successful in my advocacy, of having to move them to different learning environments.   I am also a member of the Canterbury Explorers, which is the Canterbury branch of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children. This is a very active group, which offers support to both children and their parents. In talking to other parents in this group I have heard many similar stories of "school not working" and I am aware that appropriate schooling is a cause for concern for many of the parents. Finally, just as I was starting this study I took on the role of Gifted and Talented coordinator in the secondary school where I teach. This placed me in a position where I heard the stories, the successes and the frustrations of the students, their parents and their teachers.

As an English teacher, much of my day-to-day work finds me immersed in stories. This might take the form of teaching my students about the components of a successful story, how to read and analyse a story or how to tell or write a story. Consequently I was comfortable with interpreting and with creating stories. Narrative research allowed me to

ask participants to share their stories, to deepen my understanding of their stories through the questions I asked in the interviews and to re-story or present their experiences, bringing my knowledge of the research on gifted children into the analysis of the stories which participants had shared.

Interactions between the researcher and participants

Clandinin (2013) described narrative research as being a "deeply relational practice" (p. 141) and an experience which changed both the researcher and the participants, while Josselson (2000) observed that within narrative research, the researcher must manage the dual positions of being in a relationship with the participant and being in a professionally responsible role within the scholarly community. While balancing these responsibilities, the researcher must give attention to developing a positive relationship between himself or herself and participants. A participant or participants who would be suitable for the research must be carefully selected and time must be spent building up a rapport with them (Creswell, 2013). Naturally, the degree of trust and rapport which is present in the relationship affects the nature of the material revealed by the participant to the researcher (Josselson, 2000). Therefore this stage of the process, in which rapport is built, is vital, not only because of the importance of treating all participants with respect, but also because it affects the quality of the data collected. Once the relationship has been established, the researcher is able to collect stories in a range of forms such as recorded interviews, conversations and accounts (Creswell, 2013). Riessman (1993) proposed that humans have an impulse to narrate and that their stories are always available to the researcher as long as the researcher understands how to elicit them. During the process of collecting stories, analysing stories and, later, of presenting them to an audience, it is important that the researcher is careful to avoid making judgements about participants' lives, but is instead empathetic, tolerant and responsive to the stories which the participants choose to share (Josselson, 2000).

The collection and analysis of the stories is not a one-sided process. Salmon, in her exchange with Riessman (Salmon & Riessman, 2008), noted that narratives are always co-constructed, with interviewers often very subtly affecting the narrative. This must be kept

in mind by the researcher.   Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher should continue to consult with the participant about his or her understanding and interpretation of the story (Clandinin, 2013). Sensitivity to the participant and his or her story is required throughout this process. As noted above, reflection on how the researcher's own experiences affect how he or she interprets the narrative is also required (Berger, 2015; Craig, You, & Oh, 2012; Creswell, 2013).

Ethical considerations

Since this study was centred round sensitive topics which might be distressing to the participants, approval to go ahead with the research was sought from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC). This was to ensure that the research would be carried out in a manner which minimised the risk of emotional harm to the participants, their children or me. The proposal was submitted to MUHEC in October 2014 and, once minor changes were made, permission to proceed with the research was granted in December 2014 (Approval number 14/89).

In narrative research the researcher must be mindful of the effect of his or her research on the participants and adhere to ethical principles, such as respect for others and the provision of confidentiality and anonymity for the participants (Elliott, 2005; Josselson, 2000; Massey University, 2013). In part, the maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity of participants in this study was achieved through choosing only participants who were not already part of the group of parents with whom I regularly interact.   Pseudonyms were used for the participants and their children. Any details which would identify participants or their children were omitted from this thesis and, in keeping with the suggestions made by Craig and Huber (2007), other details which could potentially have long-term negative consequences for participants were also omitted.   Furthermore, at the start of the interviews parents were asked not to name the teachers or the learning environments which they would be discussing. All of these measures were in keeping with the requirements of MUHEC.

During narrative research, once participants are given the opportunity to tell their stories to a researcher there is the possibility that this will open the way for them to relate

distressing experiences, even when the research has not centred on this type of experience (Elliott, 2005), or sensitive experiences which they have not shared with others (Josselson, 2000). While this can be a positive experience, in that it may be growth-promoting for the participants (Josselson, 2000), it is possible that it could have long term negative effects for the participant or the researcher. At the beginning of the first interviews I discussed the possibility with the participants that some of the topics which they shared might be upsetting to them and suggested sources of support, including the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children and their own General Practitioners.

Ethical considerations reach far beyond confidentiality and the respectful treatment of participants during interviews. The researcher should also endeavour to produce a product which is true to the participants' understanding of the data that they have provided (Clandinin, 2013; Coulter, Michael, & Poynor, 2007; Josselson, 2000) and to the interpretation of the researcher (Craig & Huber, 2007). Clandinin (2013) emphasises the importance of honouring the lives of those who participate, of honouring the relationship between participants and researchers and of honouring each other's knowing. In order to check my understanding of their stories, participants were provided with copies of the transcripts of the interviews, drafts of the stories introducing their children and my interpretations of their stories. They were able to consider these and invited to comment on my understandings, which was part of the process of co-constructing the final form of the narratives.

Inviting the participants

In New Zealand the gifted community is small, but in some parts of the country is comprised of active, tight-knit communities. In Christchurch, for example, 52 families belong to the Canterbury Explorers, which is the Canterbury branch of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children (F.Wakefield, personal communication 27th November 2014). This is a very busy group, which offers theme-based club days for children and social and educational evenings for parents and teachers. As noted above, I know many of the families who belong to the Canterbury Explorers and I am aware of several instances where parents felt that their children had been negatively affected by a particular learning environment or

had noticed a positive effect when moving their children to a different learning environment. However, for reasons of confidentiality and also because I wanted to hear stories which were new and which I had not already considered, it was decided to invite participants who were not known to me. Choosing participants whom I did not know avoided the situation of researching in my own backyard (Glesne& Peshkin, as cited in Creswell, 2014), which can affect the information which a researcher can disclose and the balance of power between participants and the researcher.

The most straight-forward way to access participants was through the various online forums which are available to those with an interest in giftedness and gifted education. This also allowed me to have contact with parents from different locations in New Zealand. In New Zealand there are several such online forums where parents and others seek advice or exchange stories. The New Zealand Association for Gifted Children (NZAGC) provides a moderated forum, linked from the homepage for this organisation.   It is split into topics, including schooling and parenting. Users are able to post anonymously or with their e-mail address included and do not have to be members of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children in order to post on the forum.   Social and emotional topics and schooling topics are frequently discussed on this forum. The Ministry of Education provides a Gifted and Talented mailing list as part of its Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI) online community. The TKI communities, based on subject areas or other learning needs, including a gifted and talented community, provide material on education in New Zealand, which is aimed at teachers and parents. Finally there is Mary's Gifted Contacts, a Facebook page run by Mary St George, a teacher at the New Zealand Centre for Gifted Education.

The owners or moderators of each of these communities were contacted to ask permission to place an advertisement which outlined the research and invited parents to participate. See Appendix A. Participants responded to the advertisements placed on the NZAGC Forum and Mary's Gifted Contacts. For this reason I did not place an advertisement on the TKI mailing list, which is aimed at professionals working with gifted students rather than at parents.

Choosing the participants

Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose participants who are most likely to supply data which is relevant to the research which is being conducted (Oliver, 2006). In order to hear a range of stories, my aim was to choose participants who were from different parts of New Zealand and whose children were at different ages when the parents felt that they had been affected by their learning environment. Nine families in total replied to the advertisements and received information sheets about the research. See Appendix B. One of the respondents explained that her son's difficulties at school started while he was in Australia and he had only recently moved to New Zealand. Since this research was centred in New Zealand I decided not to include her. Another respondent decided not to take part after reading my letter explaining what was involved in the research. This left seven families from around New Zealand who wanted to take part. Two of the families had two children whom they wanted to talk about, giving a total of nine children whose stories would be included.

The interview process

The first round of interviews was conducted in July and August 2015. Participants were interviewed individually via Skype and recorded using Free Video Call Recorder. In five of the interviews it was the mother of the child or children who was interviewed. In the remaining two, the mother and father both participated. Semi-structured interviews were used. This type of interview is commonly used in experience-centred narrative research (Squire, 2013) and allows the researcher to add additional questions during the interview in response to comments made by the participant, in order to follow a particular line of interest (Bold, 2012; Brinkmann, 2013). For the first interviews questions were developed which would enable the participants to paint a picture of their children, how and when they were identified as gifted and how the giftedness manifested. These questions led into questions which explored the effects of the learning environments on the children and the ways in which their families had responded to these effects. See Appendix C for the focussing questions for the first interviews.

Wengraf (2001) observed that a receptive style of interviewing encourages the interviewees to control the way in which they answer the questions which they are invited to consider. Furthermore, sensitive listening is necessary if the researcher is to develop further appropriate, useful questions during the interview (Chase, 2003). Active narrative interviewing of this type may, at times, become similar to conversation and encourage co-construction of the narrative. However, the researcher must be careful to avoid leading questions and also be mindful of the way in which his or her responses to the participant and to the participant's account during the interview may impact on the following stages of the interview. Bold (2012) described the challenge for the researcher of finding a balance between encouraging the participant to talk and allowing the researcher him or herself to engage fully in the discussion on the topics which are at the heart of the research being undertaken.

Thomsen and Brinkmann (2009) explained that it may be difficult for interview participants to recall memories and suggested a number of ways for the interviewer to elicit more specific memories in interviews. These strategies include allowing plenty of time for the interviewee to recall the memory and reassuring him or her that this is normal, formulating questions to include concrete cues rather than more general queries and giving a timeline within questions with events landmarked on it to help the interviewee to remember the time in question. I was careful to do this, particularly in the second interviews when asking for more information about details which had been discussed weeks before during the first interviews.

Until the narrative begins to unfold, the researcher is not sure which direction it is going to take and which questions should be asked (Craig et al., 2012). Thus themes can be generated from the narrative and developed during the first interview or returned to in subsequent interviews (Clandinin, 2013; Squire, 2008). For this reason a second round of interviews was conducted in September and October, once themes from the first interviews had been identified. The second interviews were also used to check and clarify points which were unclear from the first interviews. Questions for these interviews arose directly from the first interviews and were different for each participant. Appendix D includes focussing questions for one of the second interviews.

After the interviews, several of the participants sent e-mails to say that they had been reflecting on some of the things which had been discussed. They used these e-mails to add further details and to include information which they felt was relevant, but which had not been included in the interviews. This information was included in the data analysis and in the presentation of the participants' stories.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed in preparation for analysis.   As the interviews conducted by Skype were video-recorded, notes were also able to be made on the participants' delivery of their stories, including their body language where this was relevant. The inclusion of information on features such as pauses, whispered accounts, emphasised words and sarcasm may enrich our understanding of the data in that they may, for example, emphasise a theme or indicate that the participant is uncomfortable discussing particular events or emotions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Roulston, 2014).

Once the interviews were transcribed, the process of analysis began. This followed the steps advocated by Creswell (2013): coding the data, in which the data is reduced to segments which are named, combining the segments into themes and making contrasts and comparisons between the themes in data tables. This process allowed the themes from the first interviews to be identified and to become the basis for the questions used in the second interviews.

The analysis of the interviews was carried out inductively, with the coding being data-driven; that is with the data being used to generate the codes, rather than codes being decided in advance. As recommended by Pascale (2011) the codes were used to identify patterns, with explanations for the patterns being created. Exceptions in the data were used to refine the theme or were explained. Thus this method of analysis allowed "the systematic examination across and between cases to develop concepts, ideas or theories,"(Pascale, 2011 p.53). Repeated close reading of the transcripts, including time spent in correcting of the transcripts before they were sent to the participants, allowed me to become familiar with the data and the themes which were unique to a given story or which spanned several stories. Rewriting the participants' stories also required me to

determine which aspects of the stories were most relevant to this study. Themes were interpreted with reference to the literature review. Further research was carried out at this point to develop a better understanding of themes which had not been touched upon in the initial literature review.

Presenting the participants' narratives

Once the analysis was completed, the process of presenting or re-storying the participants' stories began. In choosing a form which the stories would take I had to consider both the participants and the audience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).   During the earlier stages of the research process I had been careful to ensure that the participants and their stories were at the centre of the process. As Craig and Huber(2007) explained, narrative inquiry seeks to understand, not to critique, and in doing this the experience of the participant must be central to the narrative research text. Therefore I wanted to ensure that the presentation of the stories was true to the experiences of the participants, which they had shared in the interviews. I was also aware that the presentation of the stories had to be appealing and motivating to the audience or, as Ely (2007) puts it, that the text must "glow with life"(p. 569).

In order to provide the context of each participant's experience for the audience I decided to include a summary of each participant's story, which follows in the next chapter. Themes which had arisen in the analysis are examined in the Results and Discussion section, with anecdotes from the interviews used to focus on themes and to allow the voices of the participants to appear in the study. Anecdotes are valuable for highlighting incidents which stand out, for revealing meaning which may otherwise be elusive and for encouraging the audience of the writing to think deeply by being drawn into a small scene before returning to the rest of the story (Ely, 2007; Ely et al., 1997).

Summary

Narrative research from the perspective of parents was chosen as the most appropriate methodology to use in order to obtain a rich description of the experiences of the children

within their learning environments and how these experiences affected the children. The participants and their stories are at the heart of narrative research. Thus a rapport with participants and a receptive interviewing style should be sought. In addition to treating the participants respectfully, the researcher must be aware of his or her position within the research and practise reflexivity throughout the stages of data collection and co-construction of the narratives. Ideally the re-storying of the participants' experiences will produce narratives which are both true to the participants' experiences and thought-provoking to the audience.

<p style="text-align:center">The Stories</p>

The participants' stories

Several of the participants commented as the interviews were wrapping up or in e-mails after the interviews that they were grateful to be able to tell their stories and glad for their children and for other gifted children that somebody was conducting this kind of research. Chase (2011 p.428) noted that among individuals and groups who were marginalised that there was an "urgency of being heard", a hope that the audience might engage with the story and understand the experiences it described. This urgency of being heard was apparent among some of the participants. The stories which the participants told in their interviews were rich and detailed. However, a condensed version of each participant's story of his or her child's journey through primary or intermediate school is presented here.

Most of the stories share similarities, leading out of the first of the interview questions, such as starting with early signs of giftedness and the transition from pre-school to primary school. However, in the interviews participants focussed on different aspects of their children's times at school, which is reflected in the stories. Megan, Jenna, Samuel and George were all at high school at the time of the interviews, which meant that their parents were able to talk about their time at primary school as a finished story and to reflect on how these experiences had affected their children and themselves over time. The other children, Michael, Simon, Toby, Jack and Zoe were still at primary or intermediate school. In these cases, as the parents told their stories in the interviews, it was clear that they were in the middle of an unfolding experience, with some of the frustrations or successes which they discussed still very fresh. The stories are presented in the order in which the participants were interviewed.

Megan

Megan is eleven years old and lives with her parents and younger brother in a semi-rural location in the South Island. Her mother, Philippa, was interviewed.

As a young child, Megan was an early walker and hit her other milestones early. Megan was unusually sensitive to other people and their feelings. At times, she also said things

which would normally be associated with much older children or with a child from a much earlier time. Philippa described this as being as though Megan was like Anne of Green Gables or Laura Ingalls Wilder. She was exceptionally creative and able to entertain herself for hours. Philippa had experience working with children and decided early on that Megan was quite bright. Although this was not recognised before school started, Megan also has a very slow processing speed, which manifested in her taking a long time to answer questions.

The interests which Megan had as a small child have continued today. She is still extremely creative, is happy with her own company and with making up imaginary worlds. She has also become very academic and enjoys anything where the teacher teaches with passion. She particularly likes subjects where she can express herself creatively, such as design and technology based subjects. Other interests are singing and reading.

As a pre-schooler Megan was very happy in her Montessori pre-school. This was a calm, quiet, child-led environment. However, she was also looking forward to school and was feeling very positive that she would soon be starting. Philippa describes Megan as being challenging at four. This was not challenging in a negative sense, but challenging in that Megan was ready to start school. Philippa was a little worried about Megan starting school as she was her first child, but because Philippa knew that Megan was bright she expected that she would do well. She told the school that Megan was bright, but that she didn't always show it. In the interview Philippa explained that there was not always a product which demonstrated how bright Megan was. Philippa said that she thought that by the time that she started school that Megan was reading and was probably writing too.

Philippa had chosen a school for Megan based mainly on who the New Entrant teacher would be. However, the teacher left before Megan started and was replaced by an older teacher. Philippa explained that this teacher was not up-to-date in her teaching practice and that when Philippa spoke to her she got the sense that the teacher wasn't really listening. During that first year at school Megan became very stressed. She would come home unhappy and would cry at night when she was asleep. Philippa described her as looking as though she was cornered. Philippa did not know what was causing this and hoped that it would pass. When she and Megan's father tried to talk to the teacher about what was going on at school the response which they received was that everything was fine. The teacher was also keen for them to know that she was a capable teacher.

It was on a school trip that Philippa had the chance to observe Megan with the class. On this occasion she felt that Megan was hiding. She was not putting her hand up to ask questions or answer anything. Philippa discovered that because Megan would take a while to think before responding to questions, the teacher had taken to saying, "knock, knock, anybody in?" which had also been taken up by the other children. Philippa got the impression that the teacher thought that Megan needed to pull herself together and that this resulted in Megan hiding more. She also learnt that in addition to not being given enough time to think about and answer questions, Megan was not given enough time to finish her classwork during that first year. Philippa said that sometimes Megan did not even manage to get started. The result of Megan feeling constantly hurried and being surrounded by other students who appeared to be functioning well in the classroom environment was that Megan began to feel bad about herself. Philippa felt that within the school setting Megan was presenting as the opposite of bright, which she knew was not the case. This prompted Philippa to have Megan assessed by an educational psychologist, who identified her as gifted. This was also when her very slow processing speed was identified, which allowed her parents to better understand what was required for her at school.

In subsequent years, school improved for Megan. In Year Two Megan won the school cross country race, which allowed the school community see her succeed at something and to acknowledge her success. This was a real turning point for Megan. Among the other factors which led to an improvement were two teachers who shared the Year Two class. One of the teachers was extremely compassionate and responsive to the needs of the children. Philippa explained in the interview that she thought that this teacher was responsive to all the children, had a strengths-based approach and a real need to take action to help the children. He also engaged with the parents and questioned them about their children. Above all, in his interactions with the students he acknowledged their mana and affirmed them. Within the Māori language and culture, mana refers to the prestige or status which a person possesses.   Philippa gave an example of his going against the policy of the school and digging up part of the new field in order to allow Megan to have a more authentic experience with one of her assignments and to recognise the effort which Megan had put into her work. The teacher who he shared the class with was a strict teacher who was focussed on achievement. Philippa described this as being important because the

teacher would not let the children avoid doing work which they found difficult. Although Megan struggled with Maths at this point, this teacher was absolutely determined to find a way to teach and test Megan that would work. She also had excellent communication with Megan's family.

During her primary school years Megan was also supported by an occupational therapist and, in Year Five, attended a one day a week pull-out programme for gifted children in the area in which she lived. Philippa felt that attending this programme was very helpful for Megan in terms of understanding herself. She also felt that because the school which Megan attended was a faith-based school, that the focus on kindness and helping others was very helpful to Megan, particularly because Megan was so sensitive to other people's feelings. During this time Megan also had swimming lessons with a teacher who "got" her and who acknowledged that she was "very bright, but very slow" and would use strategies to check that Megan had understood what was expected from her in the pool.

While school continued to be successful for Megan, she still struggled with Maths and would become quite distraught about it. Her parents employed an ex-principal to tutor her for about six months. This was a very relaxed type of tutoring, but the key to its success was that the tutor had very high expectations for Megan. She did not rush her for an answer, but she expected that Megan would be able to do the Maths.

Megan has now moved to an academic high school, where she has settled in well and is enjoying success in the classroom and in extra-curricular activities. She is now able to ask teachers for more time when she needs to think about a question.

When Philippa considered the ways that the family had supported Megan during her primary school years, she decided that having lots of open conversations about strengths, weaknesses and strategies for overcoming weaknesses had been important, as had giving Megan lots of examples of times when being fast at something was not important. She also felt that giving Megan plenty of time to be by herself and to play alone outside after school had been very important during primary school, as had encouraging her love of books. Since Megan often did not produce a product which people would be able to acknowledge her for, Philippa found competitions for her to enter from time to time. Megan has won several of these.

Although Megan's early experience at primary school has made Philippa worry about school at times, she feels that overall the experience has been a positive one because it forced the family to take steps to discover what it was that would allow Megan to thrive at school and allowed them to put in place strategies which would support her.

Michael

Michael is eleven years old. He lives with his parents, Amy and Martin, and his brother, Simon, in a semi-rural location in the North Island. Amy and Martin were interviewed together.

Amy described Michael as being quiet and a perfectionist. When he becomes anxious he withdraws into himself and becomes quite down. He is not competitive or driven.   He is very empathetic, caring towards others and sensitive of their needs. His interests have always been very specific and lasted for months before he has moved on to another interest. Currently he is interested in Minecraft and other computer based games.

 Amy and Martin think that there were signs that Michael was gifted as soon as he was born. Amy had had a difficult pregnancy with hyperemesis and believes that because of this Michael never developed a rhythm for sleeping. As a baby he needed little sleep and when he did sleep it was in two hour blocks. A paediatrician who was trying to understand why he slept so little observed him doing a puzzle and told Amy and Martin that his brain didn't switch off. He was eighteen months old. At this stage Amy and Martin knew nothing about giftedness. As a toddler Michael loved books, would fill both his and Amy's library cards up and ask to be read to over and over. When he was about two, Amy and Martin heard him in his bedroom sounding out the words in a Thomas the Tank Engine book. They supported his love of reading and tried to get extra support from their local kindergarten, but found that the staff did not understand.

Michael had a difficult transition to pre-school, because at that stage he was very particular and disliked things such as getting water on his skin. He was also sensitive to changes in routine. As this was his first experience of early childhood education and time spent away from Amy, it took him a full 18 months to achieve a smooth drop off. At one

point he spoke to the teachers about learning to read and was told that he did not do that until he went to school. This shut him down to learning at pre-school and for a long time he would not show anybody there that he could read. When it was time to transition to school, he was allowed to have a six month transition, which was managed by a teacher with similar children of her own and who understood Michael's traits and accepted him just as he was. This was a very successful transition, with Michael, Amy and Martin all feeling supported for the first time. Michael had this teacher for six months.

When he moved to a new class, it was with a teacher who was new to the school and had an important role outside of the classroom. She did not have time to figure out what was needed for Michael, so he coasted along but was not happy. At this stage Amy and Martin discovered that when Michael was not learning or stimulated he would not sleep. In order to encourage him to sleep they increased the amount of stimuli to which he was exposed. Nevertheless because he was not learning much in this class he did not sleep much that year.

The next year he changed teacher again and everything fell apart. Michael would chase Amy down the corridor crying and saying that he did not want to go to school anymore. He was not himself at all and Amy remembers telling somebody that if he was a teenager she would be worried that he was a suicide risk. The advice from the Deputy Principal was to carry on and let Michael grow out of whatever was bothering him. For a long time Amy and Martin did this, until they decided to move him to another school. Eventually Michael was able to explain that in that classroom he was being taught reading at a level substantially lower than he was reading at home. Since he was not allowed to move on, he had decided that he was stupid and was not understanding something that he should be understanding. There was also a confusion with his maths group, with his being shunted from class to class each day because none of the teachers thought that he was in their group. He was enormously distressed about not knowing where he should be and knowing that he would have the same problem each day at school. He did not share this with his parents until he had been at his new school for almost a year.

His new school had had school-wide professional development in gifted education. He was catered for here and happy for Years Four and Five. When he was in Year Six he had a teacher who was new to the school and had not had the training in gifted education. This

teacher gave the children from the gifted cluster projects without any guidance or scaffolding. Anything which they could not do, they were meant to figure out for themselves. Michael would bring home worksheet after worksheet of high school maths with the expectation that because he was gifted he would be able to do them. Amy described Michael as drowning in these worksheets which would come home every day. Martin noted that other children and their parents had the same problem. The teacher did not want to discuss this with the parents. Amy and Martin realised that Michael was becoming unhappy again and was not sleeping. It was a difficult to decision to move Michael as they knew that it would only be for one year since this was his last year of primary school. However, they were worried about his self-image and self-confidence so they moved him.

Within a week of moving to his new school, Michael was beginning to return to his old self. He was sleeping and was happy to talk about school. He told his parents that he was happy and relieved that they had moved him from his previous school. He was aware that they had tried to improve things for him at the school before moving him. At his new school, his teacher focussed on improving his self-esteem and confidence. She recognised his ability to care for other people and nurtured this throughout the year. Amy and Martin are not sure how much academic learning went on during the year, but they were grateful that the focus had been on building Michael up emotionally.

During his primary school years, Amy and Martin supported Michael by advocating for him at all of his primary schools. They also had many conversations with him about what was happening for him at school and how he was feeling. He attended the One Day School for a time. He enjoyed the experience of working with like-minded peers, the interesting subject matter, the chance to be creative and the fact that there was not a focus on writing. Martin also thought that attending the NZAGC conference for two years had been beneficial for Michael.

This year Michael started intermediate school and handled the transition with ease. He is thriving now and enjoying all the interesting things which are happening in his classroom. Amy and Martin believe that this is due in part to the work which his teacher in Year Six did on building up his confidence.

Simon

Simon is Michael's younger brother. He lives with his parents, Amy and Martin, and with Michael in a semi-rural North Island location. Simon is five years old. Amy and Martin were interviewed together.

Since they knew that Michael was gifted, Amy and Martin realised that there was the possibility that Simon was also gifted. When he was about 18 months old he began to interpret symbols, such as the one on signs for toilets, independently. When he started speaking, he played with words extensively and very early. Simon was motivated to learn to read and to understand mathematical concepts, with this also happening early and very quickly. Simon has always been highly sensitive. He is particularly sensitive about people being within his space. As a baby he would become distraught if anybody outside his immediate family, even somebody who he knew well, got into the car when he was in it. He has always been very alert and a real people watcher.

Amy described Simon as being quiet and a perfectionist. He watches others for cues as to how to behave, listens carefully to instructions and is highly anxious. Simon is also very caring. Simon thinks very strategically and is very aware of people's emotional responses. He converses easily with adults who are keen to talk, but watches adults and other children carefully to gauge their interest before interacting with them. He enjoys Minecraft and playing on the Xbox. He varies his activities to take into account what those around him are doing. However, as a pre-schooler his interests were out of sync with his peers. For example, he would take maths games to pre-school, which his peers there did not understand.

At times he was frustrated at pre-school because he felt that the other children did not want to learn. The teachers acknowledged his advanced vocabulary and other areas of advanced development, but were more interested in addressing what they perceived to be social and emotional deficits than in catering to his strengths. When it was time to start school, he was not interested in going. He had wanted to be taught to read properly at pre-school and when this did not happen, he became shut off to the idea that he would be able to learn at school or to follow his interests. He had also had trouble settling at pre-school and because Amy and Martin realised that this would be an issue at school too they asked

for a long transition period. The school insisted on following its usual process, with the result that Simon became terrified of being left there, became angry and went into fight or flight mode. Before Simon had even completed his last visit, the principal told Amy and Martin that Simon was an unruly child and that his misbehaviour might lead to detentions. Amy and Martin tried unsuccessfully to talk to the school about their concerns. They decided that it would be best to stop the transition to school process and to home-school Simon for a while.

Simon was home-schooled for six months before Amy and Martin contacted another school about enrolling him. This school expressed concerns about taking him as he was now perceived as a behaviour problem. Amy and Martin knew that the behaviours which Simon had exhibited in the school setting were a result of his being highly anxious and that these behaviours were absent in environments where he felt safe. They decided that this school would not be a good fit and did not pursue enrolling Simon there. Finally they approached a third school, which they talked to about Simon's learning needs and his anxiety. The principal thought that Simon would be fine within the environment of this school. At the same time as Amy and Martin were negotiating a new school for Simon, he began to attend a programme to develop resilience and help him to manage his anxiety. A lot of time was also spent in Simon's home-schooling programme on recognising emotions and building resilience. Simon's GP also helped his family to get support from child mental health services for his anxiety.

The principal and staff at the third primary school were quite determined that Simon would be fine at the school and would not need a slow transition. They made comments to Amy that issues with a child's behaviour were due to poor parenting and a naughty child. Eventually Amy left Simon with the school for a day. During the day the principal phoned Amy to say that they could not manage Simon without her. Simon had tried to make a space for himself so that he would feel safe within the classroom and in doing so had tipped a chair over. Calling Amy in to help was a turning point for the school. They reluctantly accepted the teacher from the resilience programme and a teacher aide funded by Simon's parents coming in to observe what was happening in the classroom and began to understand that Simon's behaviour stemmed not from anger, but from anxiety. The teacher aide was able to teach the staff what different cues meant so that they could intervene if

something was not right and also taught them the importance of giving clear step by step instructions. Martin thought that these strategies were being used with the whole class and that the class was a bit more settled.

The school also gave Simon some flexibility, with a longer transition period being allowed and Amy being permitted to stay onsite, but not in the classroom for long periods of time and to come back during the day to check in. Knowing that he could leave if he needed to took some pressure off Simon and enabled him to stay for longer periods of time. By the time of the second interview the teacher had set up a system for Simon to go straight home in the morning if he felt that he could not cope with a day at school. The teacher had also begun to prime Simon for any changes in routine and to e-mail Amy and Martin in advance if a big change was coming up. Amy described this teacher as having a strengths-based approach and not focussing on the times when things had gone wrong. The principal, on the other hand, was still struggling to understand that the cause of Simon's behaviour was anxiety rather than naughtiness. He was documenting any incidents in which Simon was involved. However, he had recently decided that he was open to discussing Simon with the child mental health services who had been working with Simon on his anxiety.

Being in a New Entrant class is not ideal for Simon, given his learning needs. At home he reads chapter books, while at school and for homework he is given books with a much lower reading level. He reads them sideways to keep himself interested. The teacher will not move him up in his reading because there are certain things which she would like him to learn in a certain order. This has made Simon feel despondent about his progress. Amy and Martin feel that they have a positive relationship with the teacher, but that they have a long way to go before they are all working as a team for Simon. Amy used the case with the reading to show that she was not always able to get the provisions for Simon which she thought that he needed.

Amy and Martin feel that they have made significant improvements for Simon in terms of his schooling and his ability to be in a classroom setting. By the time of the second interview they decided that he had now settled in quite well.   He had recently found a like-minded peer at school and was enjoying this friendship, where he felt that he could be himself. They believe that after the experience with the teachers at pre-school not acknowledging what Simon wanted to learn and was capable of learning and his bumpy

transition to school that Simon will always be cautious about how his feelings and his learning needs will be responded to. They think that ongoing support with anxiety, particularly around transitions, will be required for Simon. In situations where Simon feels safe and where he is learning at an appropriate level, his anxiety is greatly reduced. Amy and Martin emphasised that for Simon to feel relaxed and to learn he needs to feel valued, respected and that he belongs.

Toby

Toby is 9 years old and lives in a large North Island city with his parents and his older sister. His mother, Lisa, was interviewed.

When Toby was a baby he had severe glue ear and he did not babble or make the usual sounds which are associated with normal development of hearing. When he was eight months old Lisa realised that Toby was completely deaf. He had grommets inserted and immediately his language began to develop at a rapid rate. He formed complex sentences very early. However, because of his hearing impairment, Toby's speech was difficult to understand. From the age of three until four he attended speech therapy every week. When he was about three and a half the speech therapist noticed that Toby was reading the words on the picture cards which she used with him. Lisa was initially doubtful, so the speech therapist covered the pictures to prove that Toby was reading. At this stage he was reading polysyllabic words. By four he was interested in reading chapter books. Reading has continued to be Toby's passion, with Lisa describing him as an obsessive, voracious reader. Toby enjoys long series of books and rereads his favourite series, such as Harry Potter. He plans his reading out for months in advance. At the time of the interviews he had planned to finish his re-reading of the Harry Potter series and to read the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series, the companion books to Harry Potter and the Artemis Fowl series.

Toby's other interests include chess and Minecraft. He also enjoys learning at home and will frequently Google information which he wants to know more about. An example of the type of thing which he enjoys learning about in this way is theories on the origins of the

universe and how other theories compare to the Big Bang theory. Lisa explains that the need to learn is deep seated and desperate in Toby.

When it was time to start primary school, Toby was very excited. He was ready to leave pre-school where he had spent most of his time in the sandpit and had refused to pick up a paintbrush or pencil. Thus he had no pre-writing skills. Lisa informed the school that Toby was a fluent reader, had no pre-writing skills, had a hearing impairment and a speech impairment. When Lisa and Toby arrived at school on his first day they were dismayed to find that the reception class was full and that Toby would be with a teacher who he had never met. The information which Lisa had given the school about Toby had not been passed on to the new teacher. Lisa noted that this new teacher had done a good job with Toby during the term that she taught him, although she felt that he was not being taught reading at an appropriate level. Lisa thought that his reading level at this time was at that of a seven year old, but that Toby was being taught at the level of a five and a half year old. Since Toby read avidly at home, Lisa decided not to broach this with the teacher. When the teacher mentioned that nobody else was reading at the same level as Toby, Lisa suggested moving him to the classroom next door for reading, but this suggestion was rejected. By the end of his first term at school Toby was writing very short stories.

The next year he went into Year One where his teacher moved him to a lower reading level because he couldn't answer her questions during the reading assessments.   Lisa explained, during the interviews, that she thought that Toby was terrified of this teacher and that was why he would not answer the questions. The teacher also told Lisa not to let Toby read Harry Potter as he would have nothing left to read when he was older and said that she thought that Toby was only pretending to read the books his family saw him reading at home. Once again the information about Toby's speech impairment had not been transferred between classes and the teacher raised his speech with Lisa.   During this year Toby developed a school phobia, which Lisa attributes to whatever was going on in the classroom with this teacher. Toby would dry retch on school mornings and ask whether he had to go to school. Thinking that there might be something physically wrong, Lisa consulted a GP who explained that Toby's reaction was a response to his being scared of going to school. Toby was not able to articulate what was going on in the classroom, except to say that he was terrified of the teacher. Lisa talked to the classroom teacher, the team

leader and the principal about the situation. While the team leader was sympathetic, the classroom teacher and the principal both expressed the opinion that this is just how small children behave. The principal advised Lisa to be firm. Lisa noted that during this time Toby's writing deteriorated and that there was a mismatch between the books Toby was reading at home and the 'baby readers' which he was having to read at school and bring home for homework. Part way through the year the teacher left, which saw an improvement in Toby's well-being, although he still found school a bit strange.

Toby and his older sister changed schools at the beginning of the next year. He had a supportive, young teacher for Year Two who assessed his reading at a ten year level, which Lisa felt was fairly accurate. In order to support him the teacher arranged for him to have reading with an older class three times a week and to be in his own class for reading twice a week. However, she consistently forgot to send Toby to the other class, with the result that Toby only had one reading lesson a week. According to the testing Toby's reading plateaued this year, but he was happy at school and at home. Lisa thought that the classroom programme was fairly interesting and that Toby was engaged. She described this as an ordinary year.

In Year Three Toby began wearing hearing aids, which was a very positive experience for his whole family.   School, this year, was a very ordinary place and Lisa believes that this is the year that Toby decided that school wasn't a place where he would learn very much. She thought that he had begun to be disillusioned.

According to Lisa, Toby's teacher in Year Four was fantastic. She "got" Toby. In that year he found his voice as a writer and blossomed. He enjoyed reading at school, was engaged in learning at school and at home and had the sense that he was doing cool things at school. Lisa thinks that this was the first time that Toby enjoyed school. He was happy to talk about what he had been doing at school and happy to go to school.

This year Toby is in Year Five. Very early in the year Toby started to become tense and stressed in the evenings. He was waking often during the night and was teary before bedtime. Lisa wondered if Toby might be having nightmares and tried to talk to him about it. He responded that he did not want to talk about it, which alarmed Lisa. Toby's stress became progressively worse to the point where Lisa could see it starting to build by four pm.

Eventually Toby asked Lisa what a child psychologist did. After Lisa explained to Toby what a child psychologist did, he said that he would like to see one to help sort out the trouble in his head. Once Toby had had a few sessions with the psychologist Lisa talked to her and found out that Toby had been having intrusive, repetitive, scary thoughts about school.

When Lisa has spoken to Toby about school this year he has expressed frustration that he learns nothing at school and has to learn on his own if there is something which he wants to know more about. He has also told her that nobody at school understands him and that he does not feel like he knows who he is. He feels that he does not belong. He has only one good friend at school. When he is angry he tells Lisa that everybody at school, students and teachers, is an idiot. Toby feels this is particularly the case when he has to show teachers how to do things, for example during his ICT class. He expresses disbelief that the teacher cannot do things which Toby does at home. Toby has told Lisa that he cannot see the point in the doing an ICT certificate, along with the rest of the class, to prove what he can do. This has caused Lisa to feel concerned that Toby is positioning himself as a non-conformist. Lisa reports that there has been massive school refusal this year and that sometimes she just keeps him at home because it is not right to continually physically drag him into the classroom. Toby often tells her that he is quitting school and not going back or that there is no point in going there because it is a waste of his time. At the end of the July school holidays, when Toby realised that school was starting the next day he curled up in Lisa's lap and cried for half an hour. Lisa is also concerned that Toby has become reclusive this year and often refuses to go out, even to visit family or to have a milkshake. She feels that he has become anxious about all kinds of things, not just about school. An example of this is food. Toby is now refusing to eat many different kinds of foods. Lisa explains that the family is taking mealtimes slowly and gently and not making a fuss if all Toby eats for several meals in a row is baked beans. Toby also needs somebody to be with him when he goes to sleep, which affects the routines of the other members of the family, particularly his sister.

Lisa describes this year's classroom teacher as being very black and white. She feels that the teacher does not allow the children to own or direct their learning. The teacher has set the learning goals for the children without consultation with them and does not understand Lisa when she asks for academic challenge for Toby. A request for Toby to go to an older class for reading was met with refusal because the teacher had tested Toby at a ten year

reading level. This has alarmed Lisa as this was Toby's reading level three years ago. She believes that the teacher is underestimating the level at which Toby comprehends what he reads because of the way that he responds to her during the reading assessments. In the interviews, Lisa expressed a wish that the teacher would talk to Toby about what he enjoys reading at home so that she could better understand what Toby is capable or reading. Lisa also expressed frustration that the teacher has refused to entertain the idea of introducing different kinds of learning opportunities to stimulate Toby. Lisa feels that Toby has no sense of belonging, being nurtured, valued, accepted or understood in this classroom.

A place where Lisa felt that Toby would say that he belonged is at his sister's dancing lessons where Toby hangs out with other younger brothers of the dancers. Although he does not attend the lessons by choice he enjoys his time there. This is a very unstructured environment where the boys make up games and play on the iPad while their older siblings have their lessons. Lisa says that Toby is happy, sociable and shows appropriate social skills in this environment. This was also the case when Toby belonged to a chess club and to a Minecraft club. Although he was a very good chess player, Toby left chess club when the instructor continually made him play against older children who defeated him. He left the Minecraft club after some kind of upset online. Lisa worries now that because Toby is not challenged and does not feel that he belongs at school that his reaction to challenge in other environments is to refuse to meet it.

Jack

Jack is nine years old. He lives with his parents, Jennifer and Andrew, and his older brother in a North Island city. Jennifer and Andrew were interviewed together.

Jennifer describes Jack as being absolutely direct in the way which he interacts with people, at times lacking in social graces. He also takes things to heart or takes them literally. Andrew gave the example of Jack thinking that if a child told him that he smelled that he would think that it was true, rather than something said as a joke or to annoy him. He has a strong sense of justice. At school this makes him feel frustrated when the whole class is punished for something which a small group of people did. Jack enjoys watching documentaries at home with Andrew and will repeat the same documentary if he feels that

there is more which he can learn from it. He is involved with a number of team sports out of school.

Jack does not like to do things unless he is interested and has a clear understanding of the reasons for doing them. As a five year old, he had no interest in going to school because he thought that he could be doing something more enjoyable at home.   He became bored at school very quickly and within two weeks was asking to return to kindergarten. He disliked the structure of school and even found that lunchtimes were frustrating because the games which the other children played were too simple for him. Particularly frustrating for Jack were the instructions which he was given. Instead of telling him what sort of thing to write about he was given a time limit and a number of words, which he found vague and confusing. Jennifer and Andrew also realised later than the sounds around him, such as the projector or birds outside, were loud and distracting to him.   For his first year of school Jack was considered to be the naughty student who did not do what he was told. He was unable to write as much or as fast the teachers wanted him to, which was due to problems with his fine motor skills but was perceived as naughtiness. The repetition of facts and skills which he had learnt the first time that they were taught also frustrated him.

In Year Two he had a teacher whom he clicked with. He had a lot of fun that year. There were other gifted children in the class, who gelled and enjoyed working together and supporting each other. Jennifer explained that this was the start of Jack finding out who he was.

In the first term of Year Three his teacher identified him as gifted. His parents looked at a checklist of characteristics of gifted children and found that he ticked most of the boxes. Particularly notable was that he needed very little sleep, he asked many questions and was concerned with big issues. They found that learning about giftedness helped them to understand Jack's behaviours better. The teacher who had identified him taught him for both Year Three and Year Four. She was very responsive to his needs. For example, she realised when he was becoming overwhelmed and would send him away to sit somewhere quiet for as long as he needed to. Once she discovered that Maths was his passion, she found ways to weave Maths through the other subjects to keep him engaged. He was part of a cluster of six gifted children who worked together in class and in a range of extension activities. During these years Jack's self-esteem improved. He was willing to engage in the

learning and to share. Jennifer feels that being able to learn with like-minded peers was enormously important to Jack on both social and academic levels.

Jack is now in Year Five. His parents said that his current teacher does not understand or want to understand giftedness. Jack has indicated that he is scared of the teacher and fed up with being yelled at. He feels as if he is always doing things wrong because he is not able to keep up with the writing group which he is in.   Jack has regressed academically because he is not supported in class. He also finds the environment within his current classroom very challenging. He is easily overloaded by sensory stimuli and finds the noise in the classroom and the constantly changing seating plan very stressful. At times during the year Jack has screamed not to go to school. However, at the time of the first interview he was insisting on arriving at school very early so the he could be sure of getting a desk in the classroom. The school has also split up the cluster of gifted children and spread them among the Year Five classes. Jack is missing the support of the rest of the children from the cluster.

Jack's parents have implemented a wide range of strategies to support him. Visiting an occupational therapist revealed that Jack has very flexible joints, which is part of the reason he had difficulties with writing when he started school. He now uses a Chromebook in class and for homework so that he can focus on the content of the work, rather than on forming the letters. In order to build up his self-esteem and resilience he took part in a programme for children outside school, which was helpful. Working with a personal trainer has boosted his self-esteem and his physical skills. His family is also involved with the local branch of the NZAGC and take Jack to the Explorers club days which are held. Jack enjoys the opportunity to be with like-minded peers during these club days. Since Jack is not challenged academically at school, his family have a number of online learning programmes which he is doing at home. Jennifer and Andrew have also advocated for him at school, frequently suggesting to his current teacher ways that he could support Jack. The teacher will attempt to implement most of the suggestions, but has trouble maintaining them for any length of time. Recently the teacher has taken up one of their suggestions and started to e-mail Jack his homework. This has resulted in Jack being able to do all his homework on the Chromebook. Now instead of complaining about the homework he is completing it before it is due in.

Jennifer and Andrew are worried about how bored and anxious Jack has become at school. They see that he is losing his spark and his love of learning, which is greatly concerning to them. When they considered the times that school had worked for Jack, they decided that it was the times when the teacher had understood and accepted Jack and had realised that he did not need the same amount of repetition as the rest of the class. An environment where he is able to feel settled, is able to concentrate and can work with other gifted children has also been beneficial to him.

Jenna

Jenna is fourteen years old. She lives with her parents and younger sister in a large North Island city. Jenna's mother, Emily, was interviewed.

Jenna does not have many hobbies or interests, although she enjoys reading, writing and karate. She has always had a passion for learning new things. Reading and books have always been important to her, even as a very young child when she enjoyed chewing them. She is very sociable, empathetic and makes friends easily. As a young child she was curious and outgoing. She has recently become outgoing again.   However, for a while during her primary school years she was less confident.

Jenna was not at all concerned about starting primary school. She copes well with change if she is prepared for it. Her kindergarten and her parents prepared her for starting school. By the time that it got to morning tea time on her first day she had asked her teacher when the real school work would be beginning. She had been looking forward to learning to read and write and was surprised to find that the morning had been spent colouring and dressing up. Jenna enjoyed being taught by this teacher and continued to enjoy being taught by the teachers whom she had for most of her primary school years.

The problem which arose for Jenna was that she tried to fit in with the other students around her. Since they were not putting their hands up to answer questions in class, Jenna did not put hers up, even when she knew the answer. Emily described this behaviour as hiding. Emily thought that for a long time this behaviour was unconscious, but as the gap between what Jenna could do and what the other children could do widened, the behaviour

became a conscious effort to fit in. She explained that Jenna has a very fast speed of comprehension and could make connections with her learning which were years ahead of the connections which the other children could make. This behaviour was exhausting for Jenna because her natural state was to want to learn and to interact with the teachers. Emily said that during this time Jenna's behaviour at home was awful. At the age of eight she was having tantrums for the first time in her life. When Jenna's parents investigated what was going on at school they discovered that the teachers were greatly underestimating how quickly Jenna worked and sending her back to her desk to complete work which she had already finished.   They were also beginning to become annoyed by the number of questions which Jenna was answering, although at this point she was already holding herself back and not answering everything which she was capable of answering. At about the same time Jenna told Emily that she was tired.   What was making her tired, she told her mother, was pretending that she was "dumb" at school all the time. Another factor in her tiredness was that she was trying to manage the behaviour of other children in her class so that they did not get into trouble and she was allowing bullies to bully her so that they would not upset other children. There was a huge and instant improvement in her behaviour and mood at home when a girl whose behaviour she had been trying to manage left the school.

   By this stage Jenna had been assessed by an educational psychologist because her family was keen for her to attend the One Day School as they had realised that school was not working from an emotional point of view. Jenna was identified as being verbally gifted, with strengths in reading, writing, listening and speaking.   She also had a heightened sense of justice, a fast processing speed and advanced concept formation. Her parents tried to talk to the school about the recommendations in the psychologist's report. The school refused to implement any of the suggestions for ways in which Jenna could be catered for in or beyond the classroom. Emily felt that there was little understanding of giftedness among the teachers. At one point Jenna even dropped from the top to bottom Maths groups. She had scored at Stanine 9 in her PAT Maths assessment, but because she struggled with basic facts her Maths group was changed. About this time Jenna also began to write what Emily described as dark writing, which she continues to write now. Concerned about this, Emily consulted the educational psychologist. After some discussion they decided that this was

simply the type of writing which Jenna did, rather than a reflection of anything that was going on in her life. At times Jenna has been concerned about whether a good person is truly good if she has the types of thoughts which form the basis of this writing.

Overall Jenna achieved well in her primary school years, but had little academic challenge. Her handwriting was untidy which caused the teachers concern, as did the fact that she struggled with basic facts but had been able to do algebra from Year Six. Attending the One Day School was a highlight for Jenna. She enjoyed being able to study one topic in depth. Once Jenna moved to intermediate school more challenging activities were available to her.

The intermediate school had a GATE coordinator who picked up on Jenna's strengths and interests during her first conversation with her. Jenna joined a variety of pull-out programmes including writing, robotics, philosophy and social resilience. Jenna loved the challenging work which was available through these programmes and the chance to work with like-minded peers. In class she was in the discovery maths group, which allowed her to do inquiry based learning. Her classroom teacher had been a GATE teacher and she used these skills to constantly challenge Jenna. She accepted Jenna just as she was. Jenna felt acknowledged and as though she belonged. In her second year of intermediate school she had a different classroom teacher. This teacher was also responsive and Jenna continued to feel challenged and happy. Jenna formed a strong relationship with the librarian who would ask Jenna's opinion on books which she was considering buying for the library. While Jenna was at intermediate she made use of the opportunity to go to the GATE teacher's room if things got too much for her in the classroom. This option was available for all students in the GATE programme. At times Jenna worried about her dark writing and found that this was a safe place to go if she needed to unwind.

Jenna is well settled in Year Ten now, enjoying the challenge of learning Japanese and asking for extra assignments in some of her other subjects when she would like to learn more. She has accepted that she is quite different from most of her peers and has found a like-minded friend who allows her to be herself. Emily wishes that the teachers at Jenna's primary school had been more willing to believe her and to believe Jenna when they approached them about Jenna needing more challenge. She feels that the combination of the GATE programme and the classroom teachers which Jenna had at intermediate

contributed to Jenna regaining her confidence, being happy in her own skin and embracing the fact that she is different from most people whom she encounters.

Thomas

Thomas is fifteen years old and lives with his mother, Laura, in a North Island city. Laura was interviewed.

Thomas has always been a very active, energetic boy. He has also had an enduring interest in music. As a pre-schooler he would make up break dances for his mother. He would also take time to listen to and appreciate a wide variety of complex music, often asking his mother's opinion of a song once it was finished. He took great care with musical instruments, making sure that he was in key and fingering them carefully. As a small child he was very sensitive. He was also very curious and keen to learn.

Before Thomas started school, Laura knew that he was bright. At his first school she picked up a pamphlet which contained characteristics of gifted children. This was when she realised that he was gifted. She said that his interactions with teachers and students at his first school also indicated to her that Thomas was gifted. Thomas had been accelerated a year and would want to be with older children, but would not always know how to. Laura gave the example of his barging into a group of older children in the playground as if to announce that he was there. He would also try to engage the teachers in adult conversation, which the teachers enjoyed outside the classroom as they found him to be empathetic. At six years old, Thomas was assessed by an educational psychologist and found to be gifted.

When it was time for Thomas to start school he was not particularly worried about it. However, he cried every day for about four weeks when he started school. His first teacher was very strict and the lack of flexibility made Thomas feel awful. Sometime during that year Thomas moved into a Year Two class with a teacher who was able to see his talents. He really enjoyed being taught by this teacher and was highly motivated. The next year he moved to a class with a teacher who was very similar to his Year One teacher. He did well academically, but did not have many friends. Laura felt that Thomas did not fit in socially at

this school. While he was sensitive, he was also rather boisterous. Laura thought that this school was better suited to prim little girls and that the other parents thought that Thomas was hyperactive and might be a bad influence on their children. The year that he was in Year Four Laura took him on a trip to Europe. Thomas took everything in, even beginning to learn Danish while they were in Denmark. This experience has continued to influence his hobbies, particularly his interest in the ancient world.   The Year Four teacher was responsive and noticed how stimulated he had been by his time overseas. She instituted a good book so that she would be able to note down all the positive things which Thomas had done each day. She also attempted to put some Maths extension into place. Laura was not sure that this was real extension. She discovered at an interview that the school had no policy regarding gifted children.

In Year Five Thomas moved to a private school where he had a fantastic teacher and a fantastic year. However, in Year Six he had a very strict, inflexible teacher who did not respond well to Thomas. The teacher acknowledged to Laura that Thomas was bored in class, but did nothing to address this. Instead Laura was often called into the school to discuss Thomas' behaviour and Thomas got a string of red cards, which resulted in his having to do detentions.   Since Thomas was very sensitive he took this to heart. He said that being disciplined in this way was a waste of his time and taught him nothing. He saw an educational psychologist at the beginning of the next year. In addition to being gifted he was also diagnosed, by the educational psychologist, as having dysgraphia. His teachers throughout primary school struggled to understand his dysgraphia.   The educational psychologist also explained that he was depressed and recommended that Laura take him to a child mental health specialist.   Laura's GP referred him to a specialist service which had a nine month waiting time for an appointment.   Thomas' depression manifested in his wanting to spend his time lying down, watching television and eating. He was also becoming raucous at school. This culminated in an incident in which he used some expletives to students from another private school. At this point the school asked Laura to remove him.

The school which he moved to did not offer any academic extension, but accepted him just as he was. Laura described this school as being an inclusive and caring place where there was a lot of physical activity and where they worked to improve Thomas' morale. If

there were problems with behaviour the teacher spoke to Thomas, rather than giving him a red card.   At this school he made friends. Within three weeks he was back to his old self and was totally happy. When it was time for his appointment with the child mental health service, they reassessed him and found that there was no sign of depression. The beginning of the next year saw a return to the boredom in class that Thomas had experienced at his first school. Laura decided to move him and found a school with a gifted and talented programme where he was extended and happy. Here the teacher told Laura that she thought that Thomas was a wonderful child and that she was pleased that he had moved to the school. Laura and Thomas agree that his happiest years at primary school were the years when he had friends and that academic challenge, although it was largely absent in his primary school years, was very important.

During his time at primary school Laura supported Thomas in several different ways. She determinedly advocated for him at the schools which he attended and when she felt that he could not cope with another bad day she kept him at home. She was able to tell if he needed to take the next day off because he would be unhappy and obstructive when he got home from school in the afternoon. The schools criticised Laura for doing this, but she was sure that he should not have to go back into what she described an as angry environment. In addition to travelling to Europe, Thomas and Laura would travel to the University on Wheels in Auckland where Thomas had the chance to interact with other gifted students and to learn about interesting subject matter. They were also involved with their local Explorers Club, where Thomas enjoyed the club days and the access to like-minded peers. Laura has also fostered a love of science and of music.   Thomas has been composing music since he was eleven. When Laura reflected on the experience which Thomas went through with his primary schooling she decided that it has been a positive experience because Thomas now knows that she is his rock and that she will support him through anything.

Thomas is in Year Eleven at high school now, where he has good friends but finds the pace and the depth of the learning to be lacking. He is looking forward to the coming years when he hopes that the learning will be more challenging.

George

George is 13 years old. He lives in a small town in the North Island with his parents and two younger sisters. George's mother, Theresa, was interviewed.

George was a very active, hands-on pre-schooler who would climb anything. He was not able to be left unsupervised for a moment because of what he would get up to and even when he was supervised he would need reins to keep him safe when he was out and about. Theresa described George now as a quiet, but not introverted boy, who often listens to music or uses the computer when he isn't reading. Reading is his real passion. He also enjoys doing experiments. George is highly academic, but not sporty. Theresa thought that his high level of maturity was part of the reason why he did not have many friends or really get on socially. She explained that George finds many of the things which his peers do to be pointless. Even as a very young child he was not particularly interested in other children.

George started school in England. When it was time for George to start school, he was not particularly excited, but went because he knew that he would have to. He refused to learn to read before starting school. Theresa said that this is because he was inherently lazy, although she also mentioned that he did not want to make mistakes. Theresa hoped that George would not get bullied at school and that he would not be bored.   She said that since he was only at school for a year and a half in England and that when he moved to New Zealand was placed in a class with peers two years older than him, he did not have a chance to get bored. As a six and a half year old in a Year Four class he was intellectually stretched, but was frustrated by the writing as he did not yet have the physical coordination to easily do the writing which was required.   Although this was frustrating to him, he had an understanding teacher and had no problems at school that year. His family had no idea that he was gifted until his Year Four teacher told them that he was and that he would be putting George forward for the One Day School. It was George's ability in Maths and in reading that led the teacher to believe that he was gifted.

Theresa described this teacher as a very caring teacher who spent a lot of time encouraging and supporting the children. For children who were bored he would provide extension activities which they could go away and do. Theresa said that she thought that one of the strengths of this teacher was that he took time to get to know, understand and

work with individual children and that he did this with all children in his class. Since George was so young he spent two years in Year Four with this teacher so that he would only be one year younger than his peers when he started high school.

In the years when George has not been intellectually stimulated at school, he has felt frustrated and has complained to his parents about not learning anything. Theresa has supported George in a number of ways. She has spent a lot of time e-mailing, talking to and making appointments with teachers. She felt that this has had little effect. She and George's father have also made sure to include George in discussions about schooling.

Throughout his time at school, George has been bullied. Theresa described him as being the child with the "pick on me" sign on his back. Often the bullying has taken the form of what Theresa describes as low level bullying, such as pinching George every time he walks by or the bully blaming George for something which the bully has done.   At times George has spoken to teachers about this, but feels that this has had little effect. George is highly sensitive, takes things to heart and cries easily when he is upset. Theresa felt that the primary school did not understand how sensitive he was or why he would cry easily.

Apart from Year Four, there have been other times when George has been happy at school. He has enjoyed the years when he achieved well as academic achievement is very important to George. He took pleasure in winning the Book Worm prize in his final year at primary school, although he was disappointed not to be the Dux. His time at the One Day School has also been extremely positive for George. He has appreciated the opportunity to just be himself and to study the topics which interest him in depth without a time limit. George has also enjoyed mixing with like-minded peers at the One Day School.

George is now at high school where, at times, he is frustrated by how slow the pace is, by the lack of opportunity to work on things that he enjoys and by the priority which is placed on sport.

Zoe

Zoe is George's nine year old sister. She lives with her parents, George and her older sister in a small North Island town. Her mother, Theresa.

Theresa describes Zoe as being into communication. Her first words, when she was 18 months old, were "it's dark outside now". Since Theresa and her husband knew that George was gifted by this point and that their middle child was also intelligent and very creative, they were not surprised to find that Zoe was a curious communicator from a very young age.

Zoe split her time between two pre-schools. One of them, which was specially chosen because her parents thought that it would suit her, found her to be a delightful child who was happy to do things her own way. The other, which was a very formal pre-school attached to the school which she would attend found her to be disruptive and were glad when it was time for her to start school.

Zoe spent about six months in Year Zero, before moving into Year One. The Year One teacher did not believe in giftedness and thought that giftedness was just children being difficult. Part way through the year Theresa received a page and a half e-mail from the teacher complaining about Zoe. The complaints included Zoe not sitting still, staying on the rug or putting her cardigan on. The teacher also said that Zoe was spitting on people. However, this might have been because Zoe was going through an obsession with poisonous plants at the time and was often concerned that she might have somehow eaten something poisonous. At this age Zoe had a few obsessions of this nature. Theresa said that Zoe also found the style of teaching frustrating and that once, when the teacher had been repeating the material to make sure that the children understood, Zoe told her that she knew more than she did. Zoe had decided that since the teacher kept repeating the same information that that must be all that she knew. The pace in the class was also frustrating for Zoe. She would finish the work which was set quickly and be out of her seat. Theresa described Zoe as "the moving child" because of her need to be active. Zoe's parents met with the teacher and the principal. The principal was sympathetic, but the teacher was not. In frustration they visited their GP to see if there was something wrong with Zoe's diet. The GP told them that Zoe was healthy and highly intelligent.   She suggested that Zoe be assessed by a psychologist. Zoe enjoyed the challenge of the cognitive assessment, which placed her above the 98th percentile. However, the report from the psychologist made no difference to what was happening at school so Zoe's parents decided to move her to a new school.

For the next two years Zoe attended a small rural school with composite classes. She loved this school because she was able to learn at whichever year level she wanted to and was not restricted in the pace that she worked. This school, like the pre-school which had suited Zoe, treated the children as unique individuals and put time into each individual. After two years her parents moved her back to her original school so that she would be in the catchment area for the One Day School. She is currently in Year Four with the teacher who taught her brother, George, for two years and who identified him as gifted. She is enjoying this environment and working well. There have been changes at the school, with a new principal and a better understanding of gifted children.

Zoe is not particularly motivated by achievement. In order to engage with something, she has to want to do it and has to be able to see a reason for doing it. Her grandmother has spent considerable time working on her homework with her this year and helping her to understand the task oriented way that the school is organised. Now that Zoe understands this she is working within this system.

Zoe has also been attending the One Day School this year. Theresa said that since starting this programme and being with the Year Four teacher who understands gifted children, Zoe is much happier. Her parents had been concerned that she was losing her confidence in her abilities and in herself as a learner, but the combination of the time at the One Day School and time with this teacher had restored her confidence. Theresa felt that it was very important for Zoe to be able to express herself, to do things the way that she wanted to and to have a kind teacher who took the time to get to know the students. Although Zoe is sociable, makes friends easily and has friends from both her primary schools, she has enjoyed the chance to work with the children from the One Day School too. Zoe and George have both benefitted from membership of their local Explorers Club, which is a club run for gifted children and their families by the local branch of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children.

Summary

This chapter has presented the parents' stories of the children's time at primary or intermediate school and the effects which these and other learning environments have had

on the children. Although each child's experience was unique, shared themes appear in their stories. Themes which arise in these stories reflect areas which are often discussed in the literature on gifted children and gifted education. These themes reflect the children's need to spend time with like-minded peers, their thirst for learning and learning preferences and their need to be with adults who understand the traits, intensities and sensitivities associated with giftedness. An examination of the themes reveals that they are part of an overarching theme of the need to belong.

Overarching Theme: Results and Discussion

The overarching theme, which was present in all the stories, was the children's need to belong within their school environments. This chapter examines this theme and within it sub-themes, which appeared in individual stories or across stories, are considered. As previously noted, the sub-themes are:

- the children's need for time with like-minded peers,
- the children's thirst for learning and learning preferences,
- the children's need for understanding of traits, intensities and sensitivities associated with giftedness.

Although these themes and the role which they play in promoting or diminishing the students' sense of belonging within their learning environments are considered separately in this section, for most of the students it was a combination of the factors discussed in the themes which influenced their sense of belonging at different points in their primary school years.

In order for the reader to better understand how the families experienced and interpreted these themes, the voices of the participants are used within this chapter. The ways in which the parents supported their children to find a place where they belonged are also considered, as is the role of the children's teachers.

The need to belong: An overarching theme

It felt to me there was a lot of frustration around the school. Frustration around his sense of identity, his sense of belonging that really worried me when he said, "I don't feel like I know who I am and I don't think anyone else knows who I am." I found that, as a mother, pretty yuck. So he has had, this year, massive school refusal.

(Lisa talking about Toby.)

In 1943, American psychologist, Abraham Maslow published his Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), suggesting that in order for a human to move towards self-actualisation,

each need in the hierarchy must be met. Following the basic physiological needs, such as water and food, and the safety needs, such as safety from physical and emotional attack, Maslow placed love and belonging needs.   He proposed that humans have a "hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group"(Maslow, 1943, p. 381). That belonging is a fundamental human need, rather than a want, and that in order to enjoy optimal levels of well-being, humans must be involved in sufficient relationships which show affective concern was later confirmed (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Daly & Baumeister, 2014; J. G. Gere, 2010). When belongingness needs are not met, frustration leading to maladaptive behaviour may occur. Some psychological concerns for which people seek treatment may originate in a lack of a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Belonging within a learning environment

Belonging or feeling accepted at school is acknowledged as being an important precursor for learning within the New Zealand education system (Ministry of Education, 2007, 2012b, 2015a). In fact a well-developed sense of belonging is one of the goals of the participating and contributing key competency, one of the key competencies which underpin learning in New Zealand primary schools (Ministry of Education, 2007). Belonging is also one of the strands of Te Whariki, New Zealand's early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996). The benefits of a sense of belonging within a learning environment are numerous. Students who feel that they belong are more highly motivated, engaged in learning, committed to school (Osterman, 2000), more likely to achieve well, less likely to be disruptive within the classroom setting (Voelkl, 1997) and more likely to feel confident, take risks and explore with their learning (Laevers, 2003).

A sense of belonging within a group of people, such as would be found within a class or a school, is explained by Graves as an understanding that "I know that I have a place in that group that only I can fill, that I can contribute something that is necessary to the group and is valued by other members" (as cited in Petersen, 2011, p. 67). Thus the relationships between the individual and the other group members are central to developing a sense of belonging. As Baumeister and Leary (1995) explain, forming or solidifying social

attachments promotes positive emotions. Petersen (2011), in her study of community within a New Zealand primary school, found that acceptance by both peers and staff was a component of students feeling the sense of belonging described by Graves. This was in keeping with Osterman's (2000) finding that both relationships of students with each other and with their teachers were important for fostering a sense of belonging. For gifted children, having a teacher who understands learning and character traits associated with giftedness may enhance that relationship (Samardzija & Peterson, 2015).

The need to belong: the parents' stories and the recurring theme of belonging

   During the interviews and when analysing the transcripts, it became clear that the participants in this study believed that whether their children felt that they belonged or did not belong within their classes and schools was closely related to the children's overall well-being, opinion of school and achievement at school. Although the idea of belonging was not explicitly addressed in the initial interview questions, time and again the participants brought up the concept and its importance. The parents described belonging in terms of feelings of acceptance, being valued, being acknowledged, being comfortable, having their children's mana valued, having their life essence valued, helping them understand who they were as people and, simply, as belonging.

Belonging as having access to like-minded peers within the learning environment

She wasn't putting her hand up because no one else did. She knew the answer but she wasn't putting her hand up. She pretended to not know this and not know that.

(Emily talking about Jenna.)

   For primary school children, being accepted and approved of by peers is one of the key ways of creating a sense of belonging (Aliyev & Tunc, 2015; Cemalcilar, 2010), yet one of the eight great gripes of gifted kids is that "friends who understand us are few and far between" (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 191) . Most of the participants found that regular access to like-minded peers greatly affected the well-being of their children. Some explained that their children had trouble making friends at school or, in the case of Jack, even joining in

with playground games with non-gifted peers because the games were too easy for them. Some of the children, such as Thomas, sought out older children to play with at school, while others kept to themselves. Zoe, who had no problem making friends, still benefitted from spending time with like-minded peers out of the regular school environment. Some of the factors which influenced whether the children were able to consider their peers at school to be like-minded included interests, maturity and social skills and learning style or a combination of these factors.

Similar Interests. Toby was happy to relax in the company of the other little brothers during his sister's dancing lessons. However, he found that not having access at school to children who shared his interests or depth of knowledge of the subjects which he was passionate about exasperating. This situation is familiar for many gifted children (B. Clark, 2008).

With children he knows and trusts he is happy and silly and he is quite a regular kid. He tries really hard to draw them into his weird little world of the Big Bang and elements and did you know that atomic number of plutonium is …? At times he comes home from school and says, "everyone in my class is an idiot because they have never heard of the periodic table".

(Lisa talking about Toby.)

Amy was delighted when she noticed that Simon was able to relax around a like-minded friend with similar interests.

They have both been tentatively checking each other out and slowly coming to realise that they can just be themselves. It is like watching a fire being kindled. There's so much excitement and relief almost with him able to be himself. It is the same for both of them.

(Amy talking about Simon.)

Amy's comment reveals that Simon had had to hide who he was in order to fit in with the children around them. This was similar to Jenna who, during class, hid what she knew in order to fit in with the rest of the class, a tactic which is reasonably common for gifted girls (Navan, 2009).

Similar levels of maturity. The level of maturity of their non-gifted classmates left some of the children puzzled and discouraged.

He is more mature than others of his age which is why he doesn't have many friends. He doesn't really get on socially… He finds the things that boys his age do trivial and meaningless and stupid.

(Theresa talking about George.)

In Jenna's case, being out-of-synch with her peers led to her parents discovering that she was gifted.

She started having problems at school with feeling like she didn't fit in and feeling like she was very different. She couldn't understand how the other girls around her were very mean.

(Emily talking about Jenna.)

Having an advanced level of maturity, such as was reported by the participants, is a recognised trait among many gifted children (Silverman, n.d.) and can lead to social problems at school if not handled sensitively (B. Clark, 2008).

Similar level or ability in learning. Schools' approaches to clustering the gifted children or allowing children to be subject accelerated varied widely between schools and within schools over time.   Jack experienced two years when all the gifted children in his year group were clustered together, followed by a year when they were split across the classes. His mother, Jennifer explained of the time when he was in a cluster:

We were working in the class with his like-like class peers there. That gave the extra support which was good. That was the start of him finding out who he was really.

(Jennifer talking about Jack.)

Jennifer went on to explain that the teacher understood who needed to learn together and that the children were able to support each other emotionally too.

So that total acceptance within the group of the one that cried a lot or the one that got hurt or the one that always needed a buddy and within that group they knew what each other needed and they would be there for them.

(Jennifer talking about Jack)

Clearly in Jack's case, learning with other gifted children was important not just from an academic standpoint, but also because it allowed him to be with children who understood him and with whom he belonged.

   In contrast, Toby who was reading well beyond his classmates, was not allowed to work in the next room with children who were working at a similar level. Acceleration of this type is not the preferred form of accommodation in New Zealand (Riley & Bicknell, 2013; Townsend, 2011). His mother, Lisa, found the loneliness of the "group of one" upsetting.

I said, "Can you send him next door?" "Oh no. No. I will just work with him one on one". I find that heart breaking. I find that group of one issue just horrible and it has just been a pattern of his schooling.

 (Lisa talking about Toby.)

As already noted, for Jenna, not having anybody in her classroom who could learn as fast as she could or make the connections which she made, led her to hide her ability. Ultimately this led to her becoming tired and unhappy. She told her mother:

"I am tired of being dumb all the time," and I said, "Well, you are not dumb." She said, "No, but I am being dumb at school." So she was exhausted by the time she got home from school every day, so the behaviour was more at home when we started having problems.

(Emily talking about Jenna.)

Support from parents to find like-minded peers. Most of the parents turned to outside organisations such as the One Day School, the Explorers or University on Wheels to help their children find like-minded friends. Here, the parents found that the children were truly able to be themselves and to belong. Jennifer had taken Jack to visit the One Day School just before one of the interviews. She described his reaction:

He was asked to do things that he would have gone, "Oh, I'm not sure," but he was with like-minded peers who supported each other and you could see that they were completely comfortable in the environment. Whereas I think in his class he feels very much that he is different and he just sees them and explains that, "Oh they are just all idiots".

(Jennifer talking about Jack.)

Some parents ensured that there were other opportunities for their children to have satisfying friendships. Philippa found a way to combine Megan's creative interests and promote a friendship:

Megan had a friend who also loved writing so they used to come to my house, the two of them, on a Monday night for an hour and write. They wrote a children's book each.

(Philippa talking about Megan.)

Belonging as being able to learn within the learning environment

He is intellectually fierce. That would be the word. He knows what he wants to learn.... He is exceptionally curious. He's very self-motivated as a learner. Not at school, but at home.

(Lisa talking about Toby.)

Most of the parents identified their children as having a thirst to learn, to create or to imagine. Even Theresa, who considered that George was inherently lazy, acknowledged that he wanted to learn and that he would become frustrated when he was not allowed to learn as much as he wanted to at school. She explained that George found the focus on sports, rather than academics, frustrating. As Lisa's comments on Toby, which opened this section, show, at times there was a contrast between the children's learning at school and out of school. When this occurred it was a cause of frustration to both children and parents. As previously noted, gifted students require programmes which have been differentiated to meet their learning needs (Ministry of Education, 2012a).

Engagement in learning activities in which the learner uses advanced skills to meet a challenge, which is both enjoyable and, with focus, attainable leads a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It has been suggested that this type of learning, which is within the child's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and which leads to flow can counteract a low sense of belonging at school (Hamari et al., 2016). Indeed students who feel that they are achieving at school are more likely to feel positively towards their school (Haapasalo, Välimaa, & Kannas, 2010). In this study, learning at the correct level, learning

at the correct pace and being engaged with content which was stimulating, all contributed to the students' sense of belonging at school.

Learning at the correct level. Reading featured as an area where, at times, children were not being allowed to learn at the correct level. Gifted children often learn to read early (Silverman, n.d.). Lisa and Amy both expressed frustration that their children, who had been reading before starting school were not taught at the level which they were reading at home. Lisa explains the discrepancy between Toby's reading at school and at home:

He had been put back to level next-to-nothing and here was this happy, competent, independent reader at home who would fill up his library bag with chapter books and sit happily reading them being given baby, baby readers to read at school and to bring home.

(Lisa talking about Toby.)

In the case of Michael, Amy's eldest son, being made to read at a level which was lower than his reading level left him confused about his own ability.

He was being taught at a lower level for reading, substantially lower. I didn't realise until he had articulated later that he actually thought he must, these are his words, he thought he was "dumb" because they weren't letting him move on to where he thought he was at.

(Amy talking about Michael.)

Later in his primary school years, Michael also experienced the opposite problem when he was presented with high school level maths without the teaching which was needed to support his progress in the subject.

Worksheet after worksheet of high school maths coming home with the expectation of "You are gifted. You should know how to do this." So there was no assessing, no working out where you are at, where you need to go or where your gaps were as an individual.   It was just across the board. He drowned in it.

(Amy talking Michael.)

These comments show the importance of providing learning opportunities which are at the level which is appropriate for the students and also of understanding that while gifted

children may need to be taught differently from their non-gifted peers, they still need to be taught (Samardzija & Peterson, 2015).

Learning at the correct pace. Many gifted children learn at a fast pace and do not need as much repetition as their non-gifted peers (Moltzen, 2011a). In this study, the amount of repetition in the classrooms left several of the children bored and frustrated. When they looked for other ways to occupy themselves, some would encounter a negative reaction from their teachers. Jenna, who could read and respond much faster than her peers, came to hate School Journals because she had been accused of cheating when she finished her School Journal work ahead of the rest of the class and would be sent back to her desk to keep working on the task she had already completed.   In Jack's case, the constant repetition of the same tests left him scoring below his ability.

They often repeat a lot of things through the course of learning so after the third and fourth times … he got it the first time … so it comes to the fifth and sixth time to do that maths test or the spelling test, he is bored so he doesn't do it and then his results are poor.

(Andrew talking about Jack.)

Jack also explained to his parents that the constant repetition of work in class meant that he felt he was continually doing revision.

   Zoe would find that she could not sit still at her desk doing dictionary work which she had already mastered.

She didn't want to do that because she could already do it. It was extremely boring so she would wander off and do something else. She would get into trouble because she had to do that for fifteen minutes.

(Theresa talking about Zoe.)

 However, Zoe also spent some time at a school where the pace of the learning suited her. This resulted in her improving in mood and confidence.

She loved it because she could learn at whatever year level she wanted to learn while she was at that class and not stuck at learning the same thing and the next step at the same spot where right you can move ahead you can't do anything.

(Theresa talking about Zoe.)

For Toby, the frustration of not being allowed to learn new things when he had mastered skills and content ahead of his peers became extreme. He told his mother, Lisa:

"School is really frustrating; all I learn at school is that if I want to learn I have to do it on my own." When he said that I said, "Oh what a fantastic thing to figure out when you are only nine, Toby, because some people get to their twenties and thirties and don't," and he looked at me said, "That is not the point I am trying to make here."

(Lisa talking about Toby.)

Ultimately, this led to Toby deciding that there was no point in his attending school. He was very clear on his reason why he should not have to attend. He told Lisa:

"It is a waste of my time. I am not going to learn anything. Why should I go there?"

(Lisa talking about Toby.)

For Toby, in particular, it had become clear that school was not fulfilling the role which he thought that it should, that is of providing him with new things to learn once he was ready to move on. He felt that he did not belong there as it had nothing new to offer him. All the children in this situation found not being allowed to move on to new material or skills extremely frustrating.

While some gifted children learn at a fast pace, those with a slow processing speed need longer to think about what they are learning. Megan, who in her first year of school had experienced a teacher making fun of her for not answering quickly enough, was later tutored on what her mother, Philippa, described as high level maths. The key to the success was the tutor allowing Megan to do the maths at her own pace.

She just used to wait until it came and if that took ten minutes, then it took ten minutes. So she didn't do anything miraculous except sit there and teach when the time was right and wait for the answers. … [Megan] admired this lady and this lady had very high expectations and that was a massive key. She expected Megan to be able to do it.

(Philippa talking about Megan.)

Philippa's comments reveal the importance of a teacher understanding that a slow processing speed does not mean that a student should be given easier work. The combination of the tutor's patience and her high expectations was the key to Megan's success with the high level maths. This is in keeping with best practice for twice-exceptional students who require their strengths to be catered for alongside necessary accommodations being made (Idaho Department of Education, 2010).

Learning new and stimulating content. For Jenna, a move to intermediate school with a GATE coordinator who had an excellent understanding of gifted education brought the chance to learn at a much higher level than had been offered to her at primary school and to learn subjects to which she had not previously been exposed. Gifted children, such as Jenna often enjoy learning which involves speculation, novel ideas and intellectual challenge (Moltzen, 2011a). Jenna's mother, Emily spoke of the relief of meeting a teacher who understood Jenna and of having Jenna placed in classes where she could learn things which interested her.

I walked in to the first meeting with the GATE teacher at [intermediate school] and she said, and I don't know if this is what she does for all parents, she said, "I want to tell you what I have recognised in twenty minutes of talking with Jenna," and within five seconds I was bawling. She picked up on everything, absolutely everything. So Jenna went from being just on average for everything to doing philosophy classes, extension science classes, which was enquiry, to the top maths.

(Emily talking about Jenna.)

Support from parents to promote learning. The participants understood their children's drive to learn and made sure that there were time and resources at home for the children to follow their interests. In Simon's case he was home schooled for a time.   Most of the participants also made use of the One Day School, programmes similar to the One Day School or their local branch of the Explorers to provide interesting learning experiences for their children. In each case this was a successful learning environment where the children felt that they belonged. Theresa explained George's enjoyment of the One Day School quite simply as:

They did things that interested him.

(Theresa talking about George.)

Unfortunately, when employing organisations which did not have an understanding of gifted children and gifted education, the results were not always so successful. Toby complained to his mother that the computer classes he was attending were only teaching him things which he already knew. She spoke to one of the tutors about teaching Toby some new material.

When I talked to one of the tutors he said, "Oh yes, but we need to provide the same programme for everyone." That statement really bothered me.

(Lisa talking about Toby.)

Belonging as acceptance of gifted character traits, intensities and sensitivities

So he does cry quite easily. He does get upset and that's always been a thing [that] at schools that they can't understand that he gets so upset so easily. He is very sensitive.

(Theresa talking about George.)

Several of the children had intensities, sensitivities and traits, which made learning or even being in the school environment difficult at times. For some of the children this was related to their reactions to the people or situations which they encountered at school while for others it was the physical environment to which they reacted.

Emotional sensitivity. Emotionally sensitive children, such as Megan, Michael and Jenna, may be very aware of other people's emotions (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). In Jenna's case she sought to protect the other children at her school.

…one of the other things she said to me was, "Mum is it okay if I let bullies bully me?" I said, "No, it's not. Why would you ask? Bullies shouldn't be bullying anybody." She said, "Yeah but if they bully me I know they are just dumb bullies and then they won't bully somebody else".

(Emily talking about Jenna.)

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Allowing the bullies to bully her and managing the behaviour of other children around her so that they would not get into trouble left Jenna exhausted and behaving negatively at home.

Sense of justice. Gifted children often have a strong sense of justice (Silverman, n.d.) and can become concerned by what they perceive as being injustices at school. At times Jack struggled to understand why the whole class was being punished when only a few children had misbehaved or why he was being told to hurry up by the teacher when the instruction itself was interrupting his work and slowing him down. Jenna was confused by the ways that the other students would treat each other.

She has an extremely heightened sense of justice, fairness and justice. So that is where all the emotional friendship things came from because she couldn't understand why girls were so mean to each other. Normal eight year old girls are mean to each other. She would never do that because she would hate it done to herself …

(Emily talking about Jenna.)

Once Jenna was at intermediate school she was part of a social resilience group for the gifted students where they were able to discuss the ways that people behaved in groups.

Physical environment. Gorman-Murray (2011) notes the importance of a positive emotion towards a physical place in developing a sense of belonging.   Feeling comfortable, safe and stimulated within the environment are associated with positive feelings towards school (Cemalcilar, 2010). For some of the children the physical environment and their place within it made them feel uncomfortable, which would have hindered their feeling of belonging. One of Thomas' teachers would sit Thomas with his desk facing the wall so that he was not included in the class. Simon, who was sensitive to new environments and to people entering his environment, found it difficult at first to feel safe within the classroom. Jack had difficulties with the lack of desks and assigned seating within his Modern Learning Environment. The anxiety caused by the seating impacted on his family's morning routine.

We have the panic every day now that we have to be at school by eight o'clock or just after because he won't have a desk.   There are not enough desks in the classroom and if you get there late, tough luck. You sit on the floor.

(Jennifer talking about Jack.)

Jack also found the noise in the classroom affected his concentration, a reaction which may be found in gifted children with sensory sensitivities who feel discomfort from incoming stimuli (D. R. Gere, Capps, Mitchell, & Grubbs, 2009). Even when the children were not making noise, Jack found the ambient noise distracting.

We know he could hear the projector noise or he could hear the birds outside that no one else was hearing.

(Jennifer talking about Jack.)

A refuge. Two of the children, Jenna and Jack, had the experience of having a refuge for gifted children at school. Emily explained:

But on top of the good teacher as well as the GATE teacher, the GATE teacher had put in place for these kids that if they got overwhelmed in class, which I didn't realise was happening with Jenna until she got to Intermediate, they could just walk out of class and into her classroom.

(Emily talking about Jenna.)

In Jack's case, once the cluster of gifted children which he had previously been with was dispersed at the beginning of the next school year, they found their own refuge out of class time.

…for the whole of the first term he was going back to his teacher as [were] all the gifted kids, I hear now. So every morning now she has got this gaggle of kids in her classroom and they come back at morning tea and lunchtime. They just go and spend time with her. "She does math with us." Which is cool. They got told, probably a couple of weeks ago, "You are not allowed to do that. You have to stay here." No reason given.

(Jennifer talking about Jack.)

In addition to stopping the children from meeting together with their previous teacher, a decision which the teacher had not been consulted on, the school cut down the tree where this group of children happened to meet. Jack told his mother that, "they didn't even ask

us", which illustrates the ownership which the children felt they had of the tree and importance of having their own place in the playground where they belonged.

In the cases of both Jenna and Jack, the refuge they experienced was as much about finding a place among people who understood them and who they felt they belonged with as finding a safe physical space to be in.

Support from parents to cater for sensitivities and intensities. The parents supported their children through advocating for them with their teachers and management at their schools and through working with specialists out of school.   Several children, including Megan, Simon, Michael and Thomas, worked with occupational therapists, psychologists or other mental health specialists. Programmes which were designed to develop social skills and resilience were also utilised. Simon's parents also paid for a teacher from the resilience programme, which he attended out of school, to be in his classroom and work with his teacher.

Advocacy took the form of educating teachers about the intensities and sensitivities which the children experienced and providing suggestions for how to provide support within the school environment. Whether or not the advocacy was successful was largely down to the response of the individual teacher. Simon's teacher allowed his family to decide each morning whether the classroom environment would be too overwhelming for him that day. Although Jack's teacher allowed him to use a Chromebook for his writing, he would not let Jack, who struggled with the noise of the classroom, use noise-cancelling earphones when he needed to concentrate because he was worried that Jack would not listen when he needed to. In her first years at school, Megan found that she could not concentrate in the afternoons. In order to support her the teacher was able to move exercise into the afternoons. However, Megan's parents realised that instead of taught exercise, Megan needed completely unstructured play time, which the teacher could not provide within that school programme.

Effects of a lack of belonging on the children's well-being

The role of schools in promoting well-being among their students is well-recognised (Education Review Office, 2015b). As shown in their stories, the way that the well-being of the children in this study was affected by their learning environment varied. A summary of the effects experienced by the children is presented here.

Megan. In her first year of primary school, when she had a teacher who belittled her for her slow processing speed, Megan would return from school unhappy and stressed. Sometimes she would cry in her sleep.

Michael. For a time Michael's unhappiness about school was so severe that his mother thought that, had he been older, he would have been a suicide risk. He was distressed, screamed not to be left at school, began to doubt his ability as a learner and had trouble sleeping.

Simon. Simon's anxiety increased in the school setting because he did not feel safe in that environment. At times he would go into fight or flight mode within the classroom.

Toby. As a younger child, when Toby was with a teacher who terrified him, he experienced physical symptoms due to his fear of going to school. These included dry retching. In more recent times Toby had repetitive negative thoughts about school and requested to work with a psychologist to try to sort this out. He has become stressed in the evenings because of the thought of having to go to school the next day. He is often tearful at bedtime and experiences nightmares. Toby has frequently refused to go to school.

Jack. At times Jack has been so distressed by school that he has screamed not to go there. The Modern Learning Environment which he is currently in is very unsettling to him because of the lack of seating plan. This has caused him to become anxious each morning about whether he will have a desk to sit at that day.

Jenna. Jenna was exhausted by the effort it took to hold herself back and to not answer questions in class and was distressed by teachers not believing that she could work as fast as she did. Her attempts to manage other children's behaviour to protect them and other children in her class also tired her. This led to tantrums at home.

Thomas. A lack of academic challenge, access to like-minded peers and understanding teachers led Thomas to become depressed. His depression was diagnosed by an educational psychologist. He spent his time eating and lying around. Within weeks of changing schools this improved.

George. George was unhappy at school because of the lack of focus on academic learning. At times he became tearful, but accepted that he had to attend school.

Zoe. Zoe was frustrated by the slow pace of learning and the amount of repetition at one of her schools and had begun to question her ability as a learner and to lose her confidence and interest in learning.

All the children, during the periods when they felt that they did not belong at school experienced a marked change in their well-being, which was noted and acted upon by their parents. For each child, when something within their learning environment changed, their well-being improved. Sometimes the changes stemmed from the children themselves, such as when Jenna began to accept that she was different from many of her peers. On other occasions the changes concerned peers, whether, as in Jenna's case, this involved children leaving the school or, in Jack's case, increased access to like-minded peers. However, the usual change which occurred, bringing with it an improvement in well-being, was a move to a different teacher.

The role of the teacher in promoting a sense of belonging

Teachers have been found to be the most important staff in promoting belonging with students (Cemalcilar, 2010) and positive perceptions towards school (Haapasalo et al., 2010). Teacher-student relationships which do not function well affect other areas of school life (Haapasalo et al., 2010). In addition to the relationships which they had with individual students, teachers in this study were found to influence access to like-minded peers, the appropriateness of the learning which was provided and the physical environment of the classroom. In each child's case there had been a teacher who had enabled him or her to belong. For example Toby flourished as a writer when being taught by a teacher who "got him" and whose classroom programme interested him, Jenna appreciated having access to

new subjects and a safe place to unwind which was provided for her by the GATE teacher at intermediate school. Michael had a teacher who recognised and nurtured his ability to care for others in the class, thus allowing him to feel the sense of belonging described by Graves (as cited in Petersen, 2011) in which a person understands his or her uniqueness and value within a group. All the children had also all experienced a teacher who had diminished their sense of belonging in their school communities. For example, Megan's slow processing speed was made fun of by her first teacher and one of Toby's teachers refused to let him have access to more challenging or interesting learning opportunities or to determine for himself what he would learn next.

While many of the decisions about what was appropriate for the students had to be made within the context of the wider systems of the school, some teachers found ways to work independently within these systems. George and Zoe's mother, Theresa, explained that while the teachers at her children's school all had to teach the same way, one would find ways to extend the children if they were bored and would take the time to get to know and cater for each child. Conversely, at one point Lisa had the experience of finding that the team leader within the school was sympathetic and understood what was required for Toby, but that she could not get his teacher to make the changes which she perceived would benefit him. Clearly there is a need for greater understanding of giftedness at both the level of the classroom teacher and school management.

When considering the factors which contributed to a positive or negative period of time at school for their children, all the participants identified the classroom teacher as the primary influence. Philippa and Theresa noted that the teachers who had made a positive difference to their children were teachers who could do that for all children, not just gifted children. Participants also acknowledged that when there were difficulties with certain aspects of school, an understanding teacher could make a difference in the child's overall experience. George, who had been accelerated several years, found tasks involving fine motors skills demanding, but coped because of his teacher.

He got very frustrated because he couldn't do the things like the writing. He just didn't have the physical coordination to do the writing so he did get a bit frustrated. But he had a fantastic teacher so he didn't have any problems then.

(Theresa talking about George.)

Jack sometimes became overwhelmed by all the stimuli in the classroom. At one point he had a teacher who understood this.

She could tell by the look on his face. She'd just say, "You just have some quiet time". He'd sit on the floor by the heater, probably turn himself round so he couldn't see the class and she would just leave him. And he would then say, "I'm okay," and come back, so that's very unique for a teacher to do that because most of them expect, "Get on. Join everybody. What's your problem?" whereas she kept him safe and we know now [he] and all the other kids, like-peers, are really struggling not having that support she gave him.

(Jennifer talking about Jack.)

The accommodation which this teacher put in place allowed Jack to manage his sensitivities and to continue to belong in the class by deciding when he felt ready to return.

Significantly, teachers who took the time to consult both children and their parents were identified as being important. When considering what made a positive experience for Thomas, Laura responded:

Absolutely the teacher. Yeah, the teacher for sure.… Someone who can read him, ask him questions, get his input, definitely, and use my input as well of course. Not talk at me.

(Laura talking about Thomas.)

The idea of a teacher listening to and respecting the parents and the children was echoed by Lisa and by Emily. They identified positive experiences for their children as being dependent on:

A teacher who listens to the child and to me, a teacher who respects a child's autonomy and says actually if you want to go and read that go and read that, that's cool.

(Lisa)

The teachers believing her and believing me.

(Emily talking about Jenna.)

The kind of partnership between parents, teachers and children, described by the participants, is recommended by Bevan-Brown and Taylor (2008) and by Blackett (2011) as a way of enhancing children's experience at school. All of the parents in this study had been proactive and had advocated for their children at school. They knew that they had an understanding of their children and, in several cases, of gifted education which would be useful for helping the teachers to cater for their children. All had had mixed experiences, with some teachers welcoming their involvement and others rejecting it.

Final thoughts on belonging

An Education Review Office (2015a) report on transitioning to school found that the most successful transitions, those in which the children felt that they belonged at school, occurred when the transition was designed to suit the individual child, taking into account the learning and emotional needs of the child and creating a relationship with the child and the child's family. This combination of factors influencing belonging is also reflected in this study. The interplay between access to like-minded peers, appropriate, satisfying learning experiences and having intensities and sensitivities supported had an impact on the sense of belonging which the children felt. The understandings and actions of the teachers and school management were vital in facilitating this sense of belonging. The openness of the staff to listen to the children and their parents influenced their understanding of what was required for the children.

The relationship between factors required for the children to feel that they belong at school and the role of the parents and the school in facilitating the factors is illustrated in Figure 1. This places the learner at the centre of the learning environment, encircled by the factors which the children in this study required in order to have a sense of belonging within their learning environments. The role of parents, teachers and other school staff in ensuring that the factors are met is shown in the outer ring.
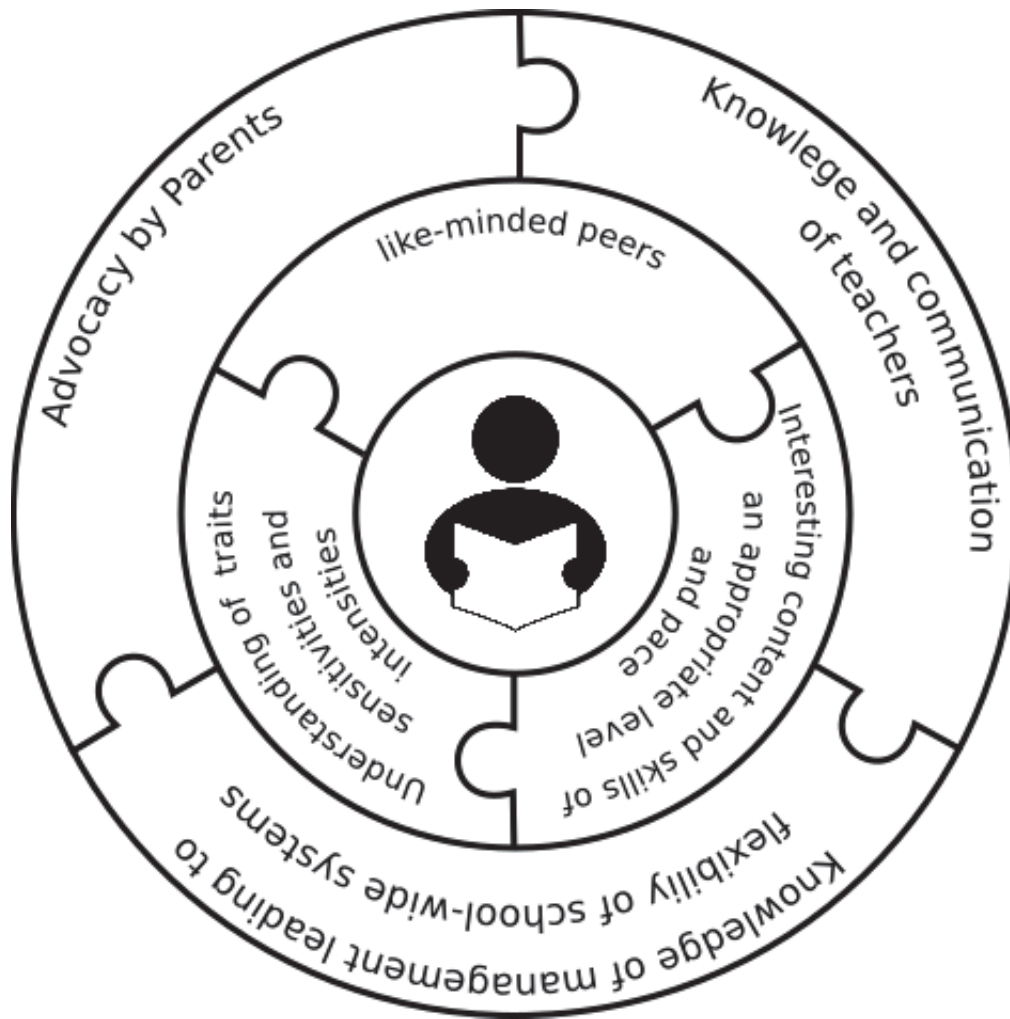
Figure 1: Factors required for a gifted learner[2] to experience belonging at school.

All of the participants articulated the impact which a sense of belonging within the learning environment had on their children's well-being. However, the final thoughts on belonging go to Amy who, when talking about positive school experiences, explained clearly that a sense of belonging was essential to her boys and to Lisa who worried about what a lack of belonging must feel like to Toby.

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[2] Library by Sathish Selladurai is licensed under CC

Being accepted and understood and having his wellbeing … the holistic wellbeing for him. He needs his learning to be at the right levels so that he feels accepted for who he is. It is not just about being stretched. It is about being validated and respected as an individual I guess. That sense of identity and belonging. So for both of them it very much comes down to that feeling of belonging.

(Amy talking first about Michael and then about Michael and Simon.)

I think that he doesn't feel that he belongs at school. He's not got that sense of belonging, of being nurtured or valued or accepted or understood. I think that must be hard in a little brain.

(Lisa talking about Toby.)

Conclusion

The original aim of this study was to use the stories of New Zealand families whose gifted primary school children had been negatively affected within their learning environments to demonstrate some of the causes and solutions for these effects. It was hoped that this information would add to the understanding of the factors which contribute to what may be a psychologically unhealthy learning environment for gifted children and an understanding of the strategies which parents had used to support their children. I believe that the stories presented here and the discussion of their themes have achieved that aim. Moreover, because each family had also experienced occasions when their children were in psychologically healthy learning environments, a comparison between what constituted a healthy and an unhealthy environment for the children was able to be made. Gifted children are not a homogeneous group and therefore the factors which contributed to a healthy or unhealthy environment or a good and bad year or term were different for each child. However, in every case, whether the child was positively or negatively affected hinged on whether the child felt valued or as if he or she belonged in the learning environment.

Factors which influenced whether each child in the study felt that he or she belonged included:

- a teacher with an understanding of the traits, sensitivities and intensities associated with giftedness
- a teacher with the understanding of how gifted children learn and with the capacity to ensure that the child could learn in his or her own way
- a teacher who would listen to and engage with the children and their parents
- flexibility within the school to allow the children regular access to like-minded peers
- flexibility within the school to allow for a physical environment which was comfortable for the individual child.

Recommendations arising from this study

The need for greater understanding of giftedness among New Zealand teachers has long been acknowledged (Education Review Office, 2008a; Riley, 2004). The experiences of the participants of this study reinforce the fact that this need persists. It was interesting to note the variation of understanding within schools and to see that even in a school where schoolwide professional development had been carried out that a new teacher coming in, who had not been party to it, showed limited understanding of giftedness and engaged in practices which were, at times, distressing to the children. This serves as a reminder that schools must ensure that all staff are kept up-to-date with their understanding of giftedness.

Pre-service teachers would also benefit from comprehensive education on giftedness, encompassing both the learning and the social and emotional needs of gifted students. An understanding of the characteristics of gifted children would support beginning teachers to identify gifted students in their own classes.

Parents who find themselves within the gifted community often become very knowledgeable about giftedness in general as well as giftedness as it applies to their own children. Many have much that they could offer their children's teachers, yet the experience of this group of parents was that they often struggled to be heard. This experience limited the extent to which they felt that their insight was valued or that they themselves had a place to belong within the wider community of their children's learning environments. Parent-teacher partnerships within the education system are promoted in New Zealand (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008; Education Review Office, n.d.). This study highlights the effectiveness of these partnerships when they are in place and the difficulties which may occur for children when they are neglected. A widespread adoption of the process for fostering partnerships suggested by Bevan-Brown and Taylor (2008) and Blackett (2011) is recommended.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the small number of participants which it included. However, narrative research focuses on the rich experience of the individual. Narrative research can

be useful if the experiences it presents contribute to the problem solving capacities of a group (Hammersley as cited in Loh, 2013).

Narrative research of this kind also focusses on the participants' memories of events and while memories of this kind are usually reasonably accurate, the interpretations and significance attributed to these events by the participants may change over time (Thomsen & Brinkmann, 2009).

A further limitation is the method by which the interviews were conducted. Families who did not have access to video conferencing software or who did not wish to be interviewed in this way may have been excluded from this study.

My own background as a parent of gifted children, a teacher and gifted coordinator in a school also had the potential to influence my interactions with the participants and my interpretation of the data from their interviews. Therefore I have endeavoured to maintain an attitude of reflexivity (Berger, 2015) throughout this study.

Further research

This study focussed on the stories of a small group of New Zealand families, each of whom experienced different difficulties and successes within their learning environments. Further research, leading directly from the experiences which the participants described could include:

- an examination of the effects of Modern Learning Environments or flexible classroom structures on the well-being of students with sensitivities and intensities
- an investigation of the effects of flexible transition to school and transitions within school programmes of the kind available to children with other special needs
- an examination of the learning of teachers of gifted students who have engaged in a parent-teacher partnership of the one proposed by Bevan-Brown and Taylor (2008)
- a longitudinal study following a cluster of gifted children through primary school and considering how and why their sense of belonging changes over time.

Reflection

When I started this research I was focussed on obtaining a better understanding of the factors leading to negative outcomes for the well-being of gifted children within New Zealand learning environments. As the participants' stories unfolded I began to notice that even the children who had had the most difficult times at school, had also had positive terms or years which had helped them to regain their equilibrium and their sense of self, although often this was not complete or immediate. I came out of the research feeling optimistic about the possibilities for there to be classrooms and schools where gifted children can belong and thrive. However, this will only happen on a widespread basis if there is easily accessible education for teachers, coupled with time and willingness for the education to occur, and a real commitment to parent-teacher partnerships.

I would like to thank the participants of this study, once again, for educating me through their stories which were at times harrowing, at times hilarious and always thought-provoking.

A final thought

The final thought must go to Amy, Simon and Michael's mother, who sums up the relationship between learning and well-being for many gifted children.

It is sort of cyclical because the need for learning feeds into the well-being but the well-being has to be there before you can learn, before you can have a true sense of self.

(Amy)

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Appendices

Appendix A   Advertisement for participants

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MĀTAURANGA

An invitation to participate in research on the effects of schools and other learning environments on the social and emotional well-being of primary school age gifted children.

I am looking for parents of gifted children who would like to take part in this study, which forms the research for my thesis for my Master of Education at Massey University. If you believe that on-going challenges within your child's learning environment when he or she was primary school age (5-13 years) contributed negatively to his or her social and emotional well-being and that this has happened within the last five years, please consider taking part in the study. A learning environment, for the purposes of this study, might be a school or any other environment where a child learns, such as a sports team or a club.

If you choose to participate, you will take part in two interviews in 2015. These will be carried out individually at a time which suits you. Depending on your location, the interviews will be conducted face-to-face or by Skype.

If you are interested in participating or would like to know more, please e-mail me at francesca.hickey.1@uni.massey.ac.nz for more information.

If you have any questions, you can contact me at the above address or contact my supervisors, Associate Professor Tracy Riley at t.l.riley@massey.ac.nz or Dr Vijaya Dharan at v.m.dharan@massey.ac.nz .

Many thanks,

Francesca Hickey

Te Kunenga
ki Pūrehuroa

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Appendix B   Information sheet

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MĀTAURANGA

INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Parents and Caregivers,

My name is Francesca Hickey and I am studying for my Master of Education degree at Massey University. In order to complete this I am undertaking research into the ways in which learning environments affect the social and emotional well-being of gifted primary school children (5-13 years) and the experiences of families whose children have been negatively affected by their learning environments.

What is the Focus of this Research?

Gifted children have unique learning, emotional and social needs, which are not always understood and catered for in learning environments such as schools, private lessons and clubs. I am aiming to better understand some of the factors which negatively affect primary school age gifted children, the ways in which this can affect families and the steps which families might undertake to improve the situation for their children. If you feel that this is your experience, within the past five years, I would be grateful if you would consider participating in this research.

Who will be selected to participate?

Parents of gifted children who feel that their gifted primary school age children have been negatively affected by their learning environments will be recruited through the online forum of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children (NZAGC), the Ministry of Education's TKI Gifted and Talented mailing list and the Facebook group, Mary's Gifted Contacts. I am hoping to have six participants in this study and within this group I would like a variety of participants to reflect parents of male and female children, parents of children who have experienced a range of learning environments at different ages and parents from a variety of geographical locations in New Zealand.   Only parents who are not already known to me will be included in this study.

What will the study involve?

This study will be undertaken using narrative research methods, which means that I will use individual interviews to collect the stories of the participants. I will interview you about your child, your child's experiences at school or another learning environment and your responses to these experiences. The first interview, which I expect to take an hour or less, will take place in July 2015 and will be conducted by Skype or face-to-face.   After that, the interview will be transcribed and analysed before I contact participants to make a time for a second interview sometime during Term Three of 2015. In this interview we will explore some of the themes or issues from the first interview. Participants will have the opportunity to read and comment on my interpretation of their stories. This will help to form the final interpretation. All interviews will be audio recorded. ***Interviews conducted by Skype will also be image recorded.***

What will happen to the recordings of the interviews?

The recordings of the interviews and the transcripts of the interviews will be kept in a password protected folder on my computer. All hard copies of data will be stored in locked cupboards in my home. All raw data will be accessed only by me and my supervisors. The information from the interviews will be analysed and used for my thesis and for any publications arising from the study. All data will be archived for five years and then destroyed by Massey University staff in the Institute of Education.

Participants' anonymity will be maintained by the use of pseudonyms and confidentiality is assured. The names of any schools or other learning environments will also be changed and any information which identifies the participants or the learning environments will be excluded from the thesis and any subsequent presentations and publications. Participants will be e-mailed a summary of the study once it is completed.

What are the Rights of the Participants?

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study no later than 1st August 2015
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

How do I get more Information?

If you have questions, please contact me or one of my supervisors. I can be contacted at francesca.hickey.1@uni.massey.ac.nz or on [contact details]

My supervisors are Associate Professor Tracy Riley and Dr Vijaya Dharan.
Tracy Riley - t.l.riley@massey.ac.nz or 06 3569099 ext. 84408
Vijaya Dharan – v.m.dharan@massey.ac.nz or (06) 356 9099 ext. 84315

"This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 14/89. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Brian Finch, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, telephone 06 350 5799 x 84459, email humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz."

1. Can you tell me a little about (name of child)?

2. How did you become aware that he or she is gifted? How does the giftedness manifest itself?

3. Do you think that giftedness influences his or her hobbies and interests? If so, in what way?

4. How would you perceive the way that he or she interacts with other adults and children?

5. What were (name of child)'s feelings and expectations about starting school (or another learning environment)?

6. Could you share with me your expectations and feelings about him or her starting school (or another learning environment)?

7. Were you aware that your child was gifted before your child started there and, if so, how did this affect your expectations of the school (or another learning environment)?

8. Were there any issues which had a negative impact on your son or daughter when starting or since starting school?

9. How did they affect him or her?

10. How did you and your family support your child and what did you do to address the problem?

11. Was the situation eventually resolved? If so, please tell me how that happened.

12. Do you think there are any ongoing effects for your child, yourself and the rest of your family?

Appendix D   Focussing questions for second interview about Toby

1. You said you feel that (name of child) feels as if he doesn't belong at school. What led you to that conclusion?

2. When he refers to the idiots at school, is that students or teachers or both? What in particular makes him call them that?

3. What was the result of the meeting you'd had with his teacher just before the last interview?

4. You talked about his restricting his eating as the year has gone on. What's happening with that now?