Exploring discursive images of giftedness utilising a Foucauldian lens

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The purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions of teachers of infants and toddlers who are positioned as ‘exemplary’ gifted educationalists by the gifted and early childhood communities of Aotearoa New Zealand. In investigating how these teachers perceive giftedness, notions of ‘exemplary’ gifted education in early childhood was explored. Data was gathered from 44 survey respondents and 5 nominated participants. Survey respondents responded in an online survey. Nominated participants completed a questionnaire and interview. Utilising a Foucauldian lens, ‘giftedness’ is explored as a discursive construct. The discourse analysis I applied was concerned with perceptions of truth held by the participants within the study. As this research was conducted as part of a Master of Education, ethical consent was sought and granted by the University of Canterbury ethics committee.

This research is of significant relevance to the Early Childhood Convention audience. The Ministry of Education have identified students with special learning needs (including gifted learners) as “Priority Learners”. Gifted education is a highly contested domain, with varying conceptions held by individuals within educational theory and practice. Unsettling the construct of ‘giftedness’ will enable the audience to query normative positions and investigate the power relationships implicit within these discursive norms.

The paper will outline the tensions demonstrated by the participants and survey respondents with the term ‘gifted’ and draw correlations with dominant discursive constructions of ‘giftedness’ promoted within educational and wider society. These findings have implications for early childhood educators’ practice in their critique of dominant discourses within educational practice. As there is little policy documentation regarding giftedness and gifted education, despite the promotion of this group by the Ministry of Education as ‘priority learners’, this investigation into discursive images of ‘giftedness’ could hold implications for future policy formation.