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INCLUSION

The successful inclusion of
pregnant and mothering students
in New Zealand schools

GIFTED AND TALENTED

Connecting like-minded learners
through flexible grouping

Pasifika Transformers—more than
meets the eye

“Let’s all hold hands and cross the
line together!”: Competition and
gifted learners



Connecting like-minded learners through flexible grouping

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KEY POINTS

- Having opportunities to spend time with like-minded peers is important to the wellbeing and academic advancement of gifted students.
- Gifted like-minded peers share common thinking processes (that are different from the norm) and may have similar outcomes of their thinking, but like-mindedness is best determined by how one thinks.
- Grouping practices vary across settings, and gifted students' enjoyment of learning and working in groups may be context, activity, and membership dependent.
- Gifted students desire choice, control, and challenge through grouping.
- All grouping patterns have value when they are used flexibly to provide different experiences and different outcomes for students.

Gifted students are often grouped by ability, across a continuum of inclusive education provisions, in order to facilitate learning with like-minded peers. The literature on like-mindedness is limited; research investigating preferences for how students and teachers perceive like-minded groupings is also limited. This article reports the results of interviews with four gifted students, their parents and teachers, specifically seeking to understand grouping preferences. The students' preferences for working in groups were context, activity, and membership dependent. Students also reported wanting choice, control, and challenge in their groupings. The students demonstrated the need for flexible grouping as a means of facilitating academic and social development.

Introduction

Success for all groups of learners may be gauged through their presence, participation, and achievement in our schools, when “[all] students’ identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognised and affirmed” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9). We know gifted students are present in our schools; placement in regular, mixed-ability classrooms is preferred (Moltzen, 2011). *Presence* means more than simply being at school or in the classroom. Presence means schools are prepared to offer appropriate learning opportunities to gifted students—but what are these? Gifted students should be given opportunities for developing self-understanding in inclusive learning environments, alongside like-minded peers. This is because gifted students benefit from learning with peers of similar ability, regardless of age, stage or other differences (Bicknell, 2014; Bicknell & Riley, 2012; Chin & Harrington, 2009; Cutler, Riley, MacIntyre & Bicknell, 2010; Grant, 2011; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2009; Kearney, 2014; Kronborg, 2008; La Praik & Wyver, 2007; Riley & Moltzen, 2010).

Gifted students are best served by a continuum of provisions—from grouping by ability in their regular classroom, to school-based programmes and out-of-school, community-based programmes (Ministry of Education, 2012). Each provision within the continuum should be used generously (not as one size fits all solutions) and flexibly (not one solution all the time), so as to afford gifted students opportunities for participation in school, fostering like-minded

peer relationships. Participation means belonging and being an active, valued member of the academic, physical, social, and cultural life of a school. This is a whole-of-school responsibility requiring strong leadership built on solid understandings of evidence-based practices that adhere to the Ministry of Education’s (2012) principles and legal requirements for gifted and talented education.

This article examines the inclusive nature of bringing like-minded, gifted learners together, and how this can serve to enhance wellbeing, increase participation, and raise levels of achievement. Flexible grouping—within and across classrooms, schools, and communities—is highlighted as a means to achieve these outcomes. Because being in like-minded peer groups might mean dislocation from same-age peers, not only socially, emotionally, creatively, or cognitively, but also physically, we wanted to better understand the perspectives of gifted students, their teachers, and parents, whose voices have not always been sought in research studies. Using open-ended interviews, the research reported in this article sought to answer three questions:

- What does the term “like-minded peers” mean?
- What opportunities allow for engagement with like-minded peers?
- How does engagement with like-minded peers impact academic, social, and emotional development?

The second question is explored in depth by analysing existing policies, practices, and research from the literature in relation to the perspectives of a group of gifted students, their parents, and teachers.

To be gifted and like-minded

For our research purposes, like-minded peers were defined as “other children who learn, think and feel as you do”. There is a vast literature on how gifted children learn, think, and feel, specifically their shared characteristics in relation to their abilities and qualities. The students in this study were in a one-day-a-week programme, Gifted Kids,¹ and shared some learning characteristics and dispositions to learn (e.g., tendencies to persist, ask questions, or take a leading role in collaborative activities). The students selected for Gifted Kids possessed at least one curriculum strength (e.g., mathematics, written or oral language, reading, writing, science, computing). Their talents were frequently very different, but the students generally possessed the ability to “think” in greater depth and complexity than their age peers. Sometimes, other qualities and abilities, such as leadership, creativity, care for the environment or the wellbeing of others, made them stand out from their peers. This concept of giftedness aligns with the Ministry of Education’s (2012) multicategorical and multicultural approach, acknowledging potential and performance, as well as an array of different abilities and qualities.

Researchers in gifted education have a long history of investigating grouping options, including benefits, limitations, perceptions, and implementation. Our study on one hand traverses “grouping” by exploring like-mindedness, and, on the other hand, shifts away from the larger body of research on grouping to a much more narrow focus on like-mindedness. Exploring what the notion of like-mindedness means revealed very little in the literature. Yet, we know, anecdotally and through our experiences, that like-minded peers are sought by gifted learners through different connections and relationships based on common interests, preferences, or values. These relationships may evolve online, face-to-face, or a blend of both, through school experiences, extra-curricular activities, community-based programmes, or cultural opportunities. While peers are often thought of as those who are of a similar age or year level within school, like-minded peers cut across ages and lock-step stages of schooling. Like-minded peers are not limited to within-school, and can include adult-child relationships. Thus, it is quite common for gifted children to have different peer groups for different purposes and find their like-minded peers amongst those (Siegle, 2013).

In the presence of like minds

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(Education Review Office, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2012). Meeting, learning, and socialising with gifted like-minded peers can be accomplished through accelerated and enriched programmes, most often by grouping, or clustering, students inside and outside their regular classroom and school (Biddick, 2009; Riley & Bicknell, 2013). Although specialist programmes are foremost meant to foster high achievement in gifted and talented students, they contribute equally to individual wellbeing and social emotional development by providing necessary opportunities to mingle with like-minded peers and potential friends, a very human notion, resulting from the need to belong (Cross, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2012).

This need to belong can be a real struggle for gifted learners because often social norms and expectations of their age peers do not align with their unique interests, motivations, and ways of learning. Pressures to conform can relate to subject-specific acceptability, gender, age, and cultural norms (Handel, Vialle & Ziegler, 2013; Lovett, 2011; Jung, Barnett, Gross, & McCormick, 2011). Gifted students may feel they must choose between social acceptance and academic goals, which Gross (1989) calls a “Forced Choice Dilemma”. To participate in activities which are not accepted as the norm, or to participate or achieve in a way that is not considered socially acceptable, may result in peer group exclusion, teasing and bullying (Adams-Byers, Squiller Whitsell & Moon, 2004; Peterson & Ray, 2006; Handel et al., 2013). This pressure can result in subject avoidance, underachievement, and reduced freedom to follow interests and strengths.

However, interactions between like-minded learners result in opportunities for strengthening the connections between self-concept, motivation, and achievement, which in turn enhance wellbeing and increase achievement (Wolf & Chessor, 2011). Having the opportunity to connect with like-minded others, where similar approaches to learning occur, alleviates the need to choose between acceptance, learning, and achievement, aiding students in being true to themselves, their interests, and their goals. Bringing like-minded learners together has a number of positive benefits for which extend beyond student wellbeing to impact directly

on learning and academic success. Specific to socio-affective needs, advantages of spending time with like-minded others include:

- increased opportunities for connectedness
- improved chances of being understood and accepted
- better prospects of forming high-quality friendships
- more suitable occasions to practice socio-affective skills
- the comfort of “feeling normal” (Adams-Byers et al., 2004, p. 15).

Relating more directly to academic development, spending time with like-minded peers is shown to afford opportunities for engaging with those who think and learn in complementary ways, sharing values and interests, and challenging one another. It also provides a more acceptable context within which to ask questions (Adams-Byers et al., 2004), receive constructive criticism (Chin & Harrington, 2009; Handel et al., 2013), set relevant mastery and performance goals, and strive for and celebrate success.

Additionally, better work habits, and higher levels of connectedness and commitment to school are fostered through shared motivation and energy to learn (Barber & Woodford Wasson, 2014; Chin & Harrington, 2009; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Matthews & Kitchen, 2007; Neihart, 2007; Riley & Moltzen, 2010). Like-mindedness cultivates learning and growth, as peers:

- share mutual dispositions to explore with depth and complexity (Sanderson & Greenberger, 2010)
- ask questions, share ideas and achieve without fear of peer rejection or ridicule (Adams-Byers et al., 2004)
- engage in high-level discourse (Netz, 2014)
- work at a pace commensurate to their abilities (Burney, 2008)
- feel challenged and inspired (Sanderson & Greenberger, 2010).

Gifted and talented students have the opportunity to learn *how* to learn, take risks and develop resiliency when learning with like-minded peers.

Challenge from early on is also necessary to develop skills such as self-regulation, which Burney (2008) states are closely tied to achievement and underachievement. Being challenged by peers is fundamental to developing resilience, and being able to norm-reference one's own abilities against others who are similarly or more able, aids in developing a balanced view of self and abilities. The big fish little pond effect (Marsh, 1987; Marsh & Parker, 1984) is a theory proposed which relates to high achievers having a lack of opportunities to compare themselves with others who are similarly or more capable. Grouping like-minded learners provides a more pertinent setting for this comparison to occur, and it enables different peer relationships for different purposes.

Participating with like minds

This small-scale qualitative study was situated at a state intermediate school (Years 7–8 of 13 school years) in a suburb of a large urban centre that hosted a Gifted Kids classroom. Gifted Kids was a withdrawal one-day-a-week class, chosen for this research for its clearly articulated definition of and criteria for giftedness. This is important in undertaking research in New Zealand where each school is tasked with creating, adapting or adopting its own definition and identification.

At the time of this study, the Gifted Kids entry selection process was multidimensional, involving subjective and objective data collection, with group and individual assessment components, and information gathering from a range of sources. Importantly, the entry process sought to identify students who would benefit from the specially designed curriculum, *Te Whakawhanake Pūmanawa: Developing Talent*. Emphasis was placed on students interacting with like-minded peers to experience talent development, abstract and complex thinking skills, and a conceptual curriculum through the exploration and support of their personal, social, and emotional development. The curriculum was predicated on bicultural values and concepts, striving for partnerships between gifted students, their families, communities, and schools.

Bringing like-minds together was fundamental to the Gifted Kids curriculum and enabled students with opportunities to develop an understanding of themselves as gifted individuals, exploring and developing their strengths and interests (Bate, Clark, & Riley, 2012). Research on the programme showed positive effects on students academically, socially, and emotionally (Bate & Clark, 2013). While earlier studies did not look specifically at grouping, from the gifted students' perspectives, it was shown to be “a critical factor in successful learning for them” (Bate & Clark, 2013, p. 52).

Four gifted Year 8 (aged 12–13) students (James, Rex, Matt, and Sally), their specialist teacher, Maggie, their regular classroom teacher, and a parent, were involved in the study.² This project had full approval from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, and adhered to important ethical processes and principles. All participants, including the students with their parents, gave informed consent to participate in the research. Two of the researchers were in professional roles in Gifted Kids and, to manage any conflicts of interest or power relationships, they were not involved in the data collection.

Using a semistructured interview approach, all participants were asked to explain what like-minded peers meant to them, to describe their opportunities for

engagement with like-minded peers, and to discuss the impact of like-minded peers on their social, emotional, and academic development. Each individual interview was transcribed, and read and reread to familiarise ourselves with the data. Then, using inductive thematic analysis, we employed a process influenced by Braun and Clarke (2006), whereby two researchers identified common themes and patterns between and across the interview data from the students, their teachers, and parents. Bringing these independent views together, we debated and discussed those we felt were indeed most common and relevant to the research questions, checking and rechecking our analyses. This approach enables a rich description, primarily using the voices of the gifted students, triangulated with their parents' and teachers' perspectives. For this article, we report the voices of students and teachers.

Being (with) like minds

The students, their parents and teachers, were asked to describe what the term *like-minded* meant to them. All participants described like-minded using a derivative of the word *think*. There were subtle, but important, differences between sharing common thinking processes (that were different from the norm) and having similar outcomes of their thinking, with a tendency towards the former. Like-mindedness was, thus, *how* one thinks, or as Rex explained, "It is someone who thinks not exactly the same, but in a similar process."

How one thinks relates to how one learns, and the students in this study expressed a preference for learning independently, in one-on-one pairings or in small groups of like-minded peers; a preference research shows to be influenced by whether students are working with mixed ability or like-minded peers (French, Walker, & Shore, 2011). To varying extents, different grouping strategies were adopted within the students' schools and the one-day-a-week programme. Maggie, the gifted specialist teacher, expressed the importance of "getting a group, a critical mass together in one room for a prolonged period of time" and she felt strongly that while the regular classroom offered some opportunities for learning with

others of like-minds, it was "half an hour here, half an hour there, maybe on a Thursday, maybe not on Tuesday".

Grouping practices varied across settings, and the students' enjoyment of learning and working in groups was context, activity, and membership dependent. In other words, grouping was flexible, and the students in this study demonstrated the need for this flexibility. For example, over a third of Sally's regular classroom members had been identified by the school, or Gifted Kids, or both, as gifted and were cluster grouped. Cluster grouping places the top five to eight academically gifted students at one level in a classroom together with a teacher suited to meeting their needs (Biddick, 2009; Gentry, 1999; Rogers, 2002). The remainder of the class is of mixed ability, but this creates a "mass" of like-minded peers in an inclusive classroom. Sally's teacher, Kelly, explained that students are then further grouped by ability in her classroom according to assessment scores, as well as her own teacher judgment.

Importantly, Sally was able to flexibly move in and out of different groupings based on her academic and social needs. Sally was in the top groups for most subjects, but had been moved out of the maths top group owing to social stress. In the Gifted Kids programme, Sally was in the middle group. As the Gifted Kids teacher, Maggie, explained, "She was used to being the top of the heap ... used to achieving really highly but also used to taking a lot of flak from her non-gifted peers about that." Being academically out of sync with peers has social ramifications for some gifted learners, so it is not surprising that the students in this study indicated a preference for one another's company, as like-minded peers and friends.

James preferred working with his like-minded peers—two other students in his classroom who were in the one-day-a-week programme. James explained that if Rex and Daniel (another gifted boy) were not in his group, "It wouldn't be very good." Interestingly, James's teacher, Tammy, explained that Rex and James were not in the same ability groups in her classroom where grouping was determined based on test scores and overall teacher judgment, which meant that in mathematics James was in a lower group than Rex. If James was placed in a mixed-ability group, he indicated that he didn't mind being the leader, but that in his experience, other kids wouldn't necessarily follow him.

Rex preferred sharing group leadership: "I don't like it when there is one person with the control or no-one in control." If the group was mixed ability, and included some higher ability students like him, Rex was "okay with it", but he preferred working in a high-ability group

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“because that means I have something to learn.” Rex, who his teacher Maggie described as “prodigiously gifted”, preferred learning in the one-day-a-week programme and a Saturday school he attended (which grouped on ability, across ages, for acceleration).

Rex did not tolerate or enjoy working with those of lower abilities, mainly because in those situations he felt his peers either expected him to do all the work or they overestimated their abilities, allowing him to do none of the work. Rex felt that there were very few peers at school with whom he could get along; as he expressed, “there is not a lot of people who think in the way that I do”. Rex really did not enjoy working with groups of people, “especially if the teacher places me in groups”. He preferred either to select his own groups of people he knew he got along well with, or to work on a challenging solo activity. His teacher did allow him to work independently when he finished work early, but remained insistent that Rex needed to conform and learn to work with others, within rules and bounds.

Sally explained that her preference for grouping in the regular classroom “depends on the activity”, but her engagement in learning is reliant on much more. Sally confessed that she “mucks around” in her regular classroom environment: the activity and level of challenge made a difference. As she explained, group activities needed to be “challenging enough for me to like it, but easy enough for me to not give up”. Sally’s teacher, Kelly, confirmed that Sally and her peers loved challenges. When working in mixed-ability groups, Sally had little tolerance for those who might be struggling. She described one of the “weird boys” as someone who “doesn’t really grasp concepts of anything like the teachers says”.

Matt also preferred the one-day-a-week programme for grouping because “we all think the same with more complex ideas, and we have big conversations”. However, unlike Sally and Rex, Matt enjoyed working in mixed-ability groups and saw it as a “good challenge ... trying to bring everyone together”. Although this statement infers leadership in the group, when asked about his preference—to lead or to follow—Matt indicated he was content in either role. What Matt wanted was competition with like-minded peers, and he especially seemed to enjoy this in the regular classroom: “Yeah it’s good, when we can play against each other”.

The students described wanting challenge in group learning activities, choice in group membership, and control of their peer groupings for learning. Working in mixed-ability groups was a challenge that most did not enjoy, demonstrating little tolerance for learners of lesser ability, regardless of their role as a leader or a

follower in the group. Only Matt indicated tolerance for mixed-ability groups, but, interestingly, he was also the only student who also expressed a preference for competition with like-minded peers (across or within groups). The students in this study demonstrate that all grouping patterns have value when they provide different experiences and different outcomes for students.

Flexibly grouping like minds

Flexible grouping within inclusive classrooms is not a new idea, but has its roots in the traditional one-room schoolhouse (Riley, 2011). There has been a renewed interest in flexibly grouping learners in different combinations for different purposes—within, between, and across classrooms and settings—as educators come to see the value and need for differentiation within inclusive classrooms (Riley, 2011). Students may be formally or informally placed in ability groups, cooperative-learning groups, interest groups, mentoring one-on-one situations, student-led and teacher-led groups, student dyads, individual learning arrangements and/or learning circles in response to their learning needs, preferences, and outcomes.

Groups may be teacher-selected, student-selected, ad hoc, or random, depending upon the planned learning outcomes and activities alongside real or perceived student readiness, interests, and skills. Groups, therefore, may be heterogeneous or homogeneous, but as the students in our study have shown, gifted learners tend to prefer homogeneous groups—of like-minds and abilities, rather than age or school year—when it comes to grouping for learning. In inclusive classrooms, “students can and should be grouped for different purposes based on their strengths, interests, needs, and learning preferences” (Riley, 2009, p. 650). Students’ predilections should be part of decision-making around grouping. No student is in the same group all the time, because, “flexible grouping is about learning: *grouping for learning*” (Riley, 2011, p. xx).

Within-class, flexible grouping works well if the teacher is able to accommodate, recognise and respond to the various learning differences within the class, including those typical of the gifted (Bate & Clark, 2013; Gallagher, Smith & Merrotsy, 2011). Flexible grouping can be used in any setting and, as shown in this study, can be eased by cluster grouping (Biddick, 2009; Gentry, 1999; Rogers, 2002). Other schoolwide grouping strategies include:

- *Enrichment clusters*: weekly blocks of time for groups of students with common interests, but not necessarily the same age or level, to work together with a facilitator to create a product, service, or performance (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2003).

- *Cross-age grouping or multi-age classrooms*: students are grouped into classrooms not strictly by age, but by their abilities in specific curricular areas (Rogers, 2002).
- *Looping*: students are placed with the same teacher for 2 or more years (Grant, 1997; Tomlinson & Allan, 2000), developing long-term partnerships in learning.
- *Mentorships*: individual students or groups of students are coupled with mentors who provide external expertise and passion (Heacox, 2002).
- *Weekly planning*: teams of teachers develop short- and long-term differentiated goals using frameworks such as Bloom's taxonomy or Gardner's multiple intelligences in isolation or in tandem (Heacox, 2002; Smutny, Walker & Meckstroth, 1997). Heacox's (2002) content catalysts, processes, and product (CCPP) toolkit is another easy tool for planning learning experiences.

Providing structure and support on a schoolwide basis will better ensure differentiated learning for gifted and talented students in inclusive classrooms. Bringing like-minded learners together is also an opportunity for regular classroom teachers to learn about students from their behaviours and work in a different context, providing further insights into strengths, difficulties, interests and qualities which might not otherwise be observed (Riley & Moltzen, 2010). Schoolwide approaches are cost-effective for schools, as these can draw from their own pool of staff and resources. Gifted students have increased opportunities of meeting and working with like-minded, possibly gifted, peers with similar interests, regardless of age or year level, fostering increased achievement (Biddick, 2009; Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011).

It is important that teachers are able to facilitate a responsive and differentiated learning environment as well as having received training in gifted education (Biddick, 2009). Grouping—of any type—should involve an educator who is knowledgeable and experienced in identifying the diverse array of characteristics and learning needs of gifted and talented learners which may otherwise go unrecognised and unsupported (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kearney, 2014; Lassig, 2009; Matthews & Kitchen, 2007; Wood & Zundans-Fraser, 2013). Hansen and Feldhusen (1994) found that teachers trained in gifted education have a better and more complex understanding of the needs of their students in general and, of course, the gifted. Their teaching is more fine-tuned to all aspects of social emotional development, contexts, higher order and creative thinking skills of their students, which enable them to recognise and respond, creating a more positive learning environment (Cross, 2012).

Conclusion

This study provides insights into the ways in which four students engaged with like-minded peers, and the value

placed upon it. Our conclusions must be considered against the backdrop of the limitations: a small-scale, qualitative study with intermediate-aged gifted students in one Gifted Kids classroom. In some ways, the study raised more questions for the research team than answers, particularly in relation to the generalisability of the results. As we move forward, the team plans to follow the transition of these four learners into their secondary schooling to see how changes in provisions in high school impact their like-minded learning and socialising opportunities. We also plan to explore perceptions of like-mindedness with more gifted students, their parents, and teachers across New Zealand. It is important we test our ideas regarding flexible grouping as an effective solution for bringing together like-minded peers.

To be effective, flexible grouping requires teachers and students to be able to flow in and out of different working patterns throughout the day, week, or term, within and across lessons, curriculum areas, and activities. This is learner dependent, and some gifted learners will not cope as well as others with different learners, especially those of differing ability levels. But, this does not create conflict with philosophies that call for heterogeneity or mixed-ability groups, because, as the students in our study voiced, the gifted and talented are not all the same, but rather a group of individuals with a wide range of abilities, skills, interests, strengths, and weaknesses. Flexible grouping means that gifted and talented students are not always in the same group with the same peers, but *all* learners are given opportunities to learn with like-minded peers.

Inclusive educational settings are the most likely places for socialising and finding like-minded peers, simply because of the amount of time students spend there. Sadly, these are also places where peer alienation and rejection can emerge for reasons of not fitting in by virtue of being socially different, over-competent, or intellectually intense. A flexible grouping approach can provide the challenge and differentiation in thinking and learning needed by gifted students (Harrison, 2005), while also offering opportunities to meet and connect with peers who simply think the same and have similar interests—like-minded peers.

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Notes

1. In 2015, Gifted Kids was replaced by MindPlus, a programme of the New Zealand Centre for Gifted Education.
2. Pseudonyms have been given to participants and all efforts have been made to anonymise the data.

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