"Nerd alert! Nerd alert!" Gifted and talented adolescents searching for a 'fit' in the world of school.

Louise Tapper

University of Canterbury

Outline of presentation

* Giftedness as a concept in 2014
* About my research
* What did the students say about being gifted and talented in the socio-cultural milieu of New Zealand schools?
* Adolescent identity development and being gifted
* Some New Zealand profiles of gifted adolescents

???What does it mean - gifted and talented???
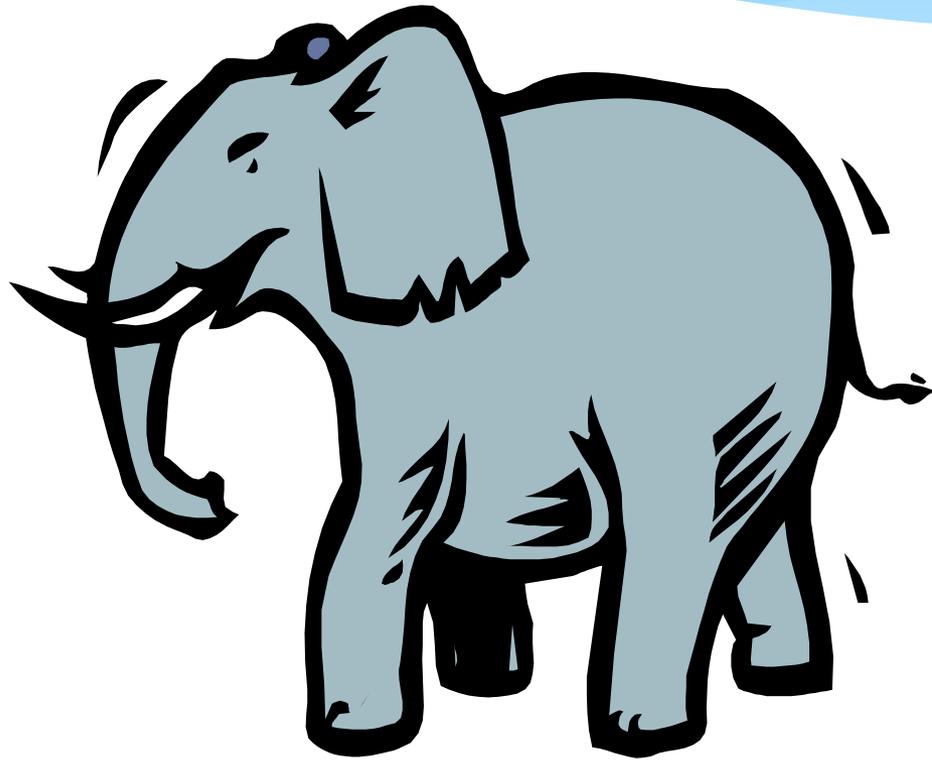
Current trends in conceptualising giftedness
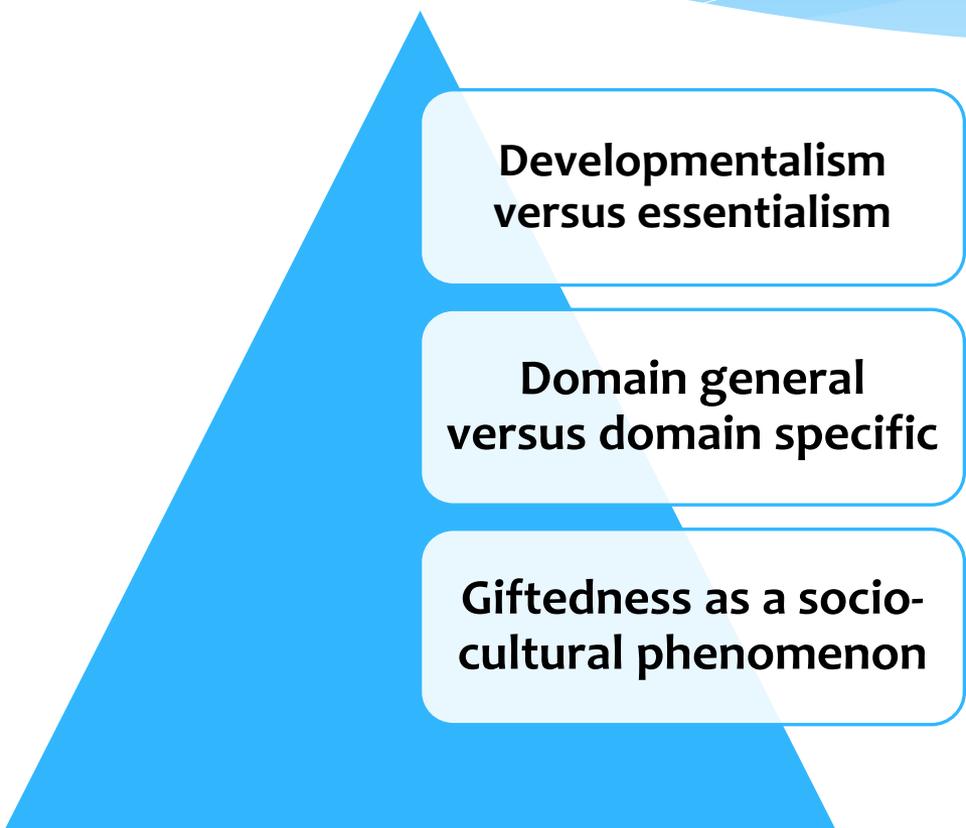
Developmentalism versus essentialism

Domain general versus domain specific

Giftedness as a socio-cultural phenomenon

A New Zealand concept of giftedness and talent

Broad and inclusive

Multi-categorical; recognises different domains of giftedness

Developmentalist approach – fluid nature of giftedness

Apparent across all societal groups

Reflects differing values of particular cultures

My Research Questions

* *What is it like to be gifted and talented in the cultural milieu of the New Zealand school?*

* *What are the understandings that gifted and talented students, their parents and teachers have about the achievement and underachievement of gifted and talented learners in New Zealand schools?*

Phenomenology

Does not ask:

* How often does a learner do this?
* How long?
* How many?

Instead it asks:

* What is the essence of this experience for this learner so that I can better understand what it is actually like for them?

"The theoretical practice of phenomenological research stands in the service of the mundane practice of pedagogy: it is the ministering of thoughtfulness." (van Manen, 1990)
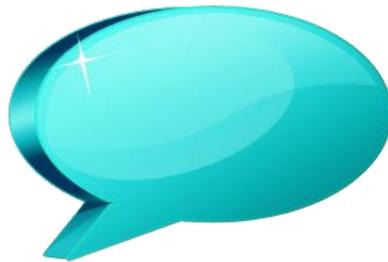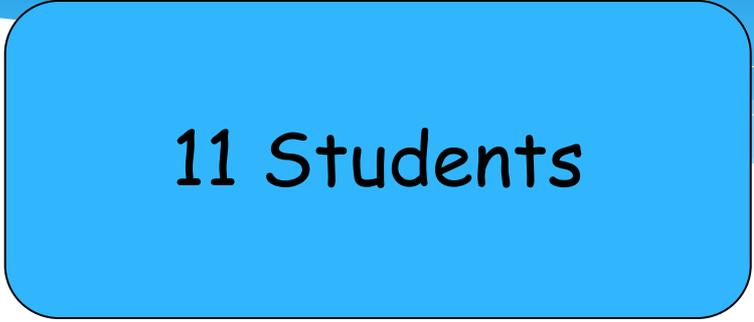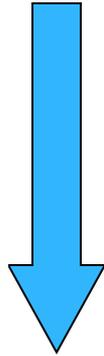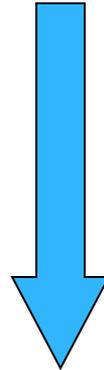
Findings based around three main themes

Culture and context matter

Complexities of identities

The enigma of potential

What the students said:
About what giftedness means

* "Higher than average people."

* "That notch above average."

* "Talent only goes so far. You always have to do some work and you have to work hard."

The "luck discourse"

* **Gifted students are 'blessed' (lucky); they will succeed anyway.**

* **Gifted students don't need to work hard to achieve.**

* **Therefore, if you are gifted you don't need extra attention or support.**

Lived experiences

* "Hm, bright-ish, but not - I don't think I'm terrifically bright, no. Everyone's got to work hard at things.
* *But you're not willing to sort of go further than that and say 'I'm a really able student'.*
* No, I wouldn't do that I don't think. No, I don't think I feel comfortable talking like that or I don't want to be like that.
* *Why don't you want to be like that? What do you feel it shows?*
* Hm, being up yourself or something, I don't know. I don't think that's me, really." (Lewis)

Lived experiences

* **"Like wherever you go there's always going to be someone that's got like Tall Poppy Syndrome and they wanna let either someone else down because they're smart." (Hubert Cumberdale)**

An understanding of broad social values

* "Yeah, its society in general sort of, you learn like, the society we live in sort of says to people: keep, try and make everyone feel the same, and try and make everyone feel like they're special in their own way, but – so don't talk about how you're better than someone. And maybe that's why we all find it so hard to say … I don't know, people generally put themselves down all the time." (Kurt)

What the students understand:

About being gifted and talented in New Zealand schools

Preferred values are modesty and self-deprecation.

Downplay being smart if you want to maintain any kind of group social status.

Broad New Zealand socio-cultural understandings

* **Tall Poppy Syndrome**

* **The "intellectual cringe"??**
   (Austin and Hastwell, 2010)

* **Anti-arrogance discourse**

Adolescent identity development and being gifted

* **<u>All</u> adolescents searching for "Who am I?' and "What am I going to be?"**

* **Search for identity can be exacerbated by being gifted and talented**

* **HMS – *"an intense awareness of behaviours, thinking and emotions of self and others"***
  (Mendaglio, 2003)

Where do I 'fit'?

"And at high school I guess you know it's the **fitting in**, like the identity, you want to be like everybody else, and there's a few that will rise out of that and it won't worry them one way or the other whether they're the 'in' crowd or the 'out' crowd." **(Parent of Autumn Ashes)**

Gifted and talented adolescent identity profiles

- Two faces of conformist identity
- 1) 'Fitting in' socially is most important; may 'code switch' in effort to fit in with peers
- 2) Works to conform to school or society's expectations

- Selective consumer
- Strong belief in own agency
- Stands up for principles; early protester/activist
- Rebels against acceptance of blame for not doing well

Conformist Identity

Rebel Identity

Nerd Identity

All-rounder Identity

- Reclaims the negative discourse as a positive one
- Strength of groupism found within the 'other' group

- A preferred New Zealand adolescent identity
- Successfully merges academic abilities with sporting, cultural and social competencies

(Tapper, 2014)

The Conformist Identity

Fitting in socially is paramount.

Doesn't want to stand out; wants to be 'normal'. The strength of **'groupism'.**

Changes behaviours in order to conform with the group fit = **code switching**. *"The process of deliberately changing behaviours to accommodate the expectations of an environment"* (Neihart, 2006).

Forced choice dilemma for highly able learners (Gross, 1989) – a Conformist Identity chooses mediocrity.

Conformist Identity – boys "Rugby boys"

"…he's, he, um is not seen as one of the cool guys, and I think that's the thing that obviously most teenagers wanna be, accepted." **(Parent of Kurt)**

"Oh yeah, these guys were pretty horrid, at rugby. And I don't know if the whole – you know, what the other people are like, but these half a dozen boys who were at rugby, that was the only person they took the mickey out of, all day. Yeah. Oh God "Kurt won't know" "oh yeah here we go, Kurt's going to get the ball – don't touch it, Kurt." He couldn't hear them. And then when he ran, they were all imitating the way he ran."

Rugby boys

"I think it's part of that whole boys' school testosterone, New Zealand culture rugby playing mindset and Jura High School is unfortunately – I mean most boys' schools are – it's rugby, the, it's a big culture at it. And I think that was part of Kurt wanting to try and be accepted as 'one of the lads.' But there's also been a significant drop-off. Kurt doesn't hang out with friends anymore – like cos he doesn't get many texts anymore, the phone doesn't ring anymore, and on the weekend he's not, doesn't go out with anyone. He's just round home." (Parent of Kurt)

Conformist Identity – girls "Bubbleheads"

Girls **code switch** too – adjust their behaviour – to conform with feminine gender stereotypes.

"I sit here, and I have like little bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead, bubblehead all around me and I'm, like, right in the middle. And I get all the gossip and I get the notes and the cell phones, like, being lent and thrown across my head. The girl sitting across from me always asked to borrow my stuff and she never remembers my name. It's a bit bad." (Autumn Ashes)

Another kind of Conformist Identity

* **Conform to fit in with expectations of school hierarchy or expectations of other adults (parents, teachers, coaches, tutors).**

* **High achievers who strive to fit in with accepted culture of school or group as it conforms to adults' values.**
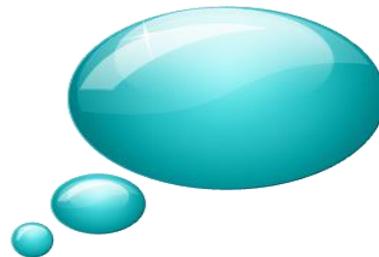
"I really want to do really well"

"All the tests that we're doing, are gonna matter at the end of the year and if I can do well now, it's going to help me at the end of the year. Like, when we sit all the big exams for the year." (April)

"They want us to have a really good work ethic, which lots of us do, um like I'll come home, have a break, do homework, do music, do more homework, go to bed."

The Rebel Identity

Some degree of non-conformism towards expectations of adults

Selective consumer (Delisle and Galbraith, 2002)

Grades and extrinsic rewards not always valued by these adolescents – the non-Dux??

Will stand up for their principles – the early protester/activist??

The Rebel Identity

"It's not their driving force in life to get 7 out of 10; their interest is in other areas." **(Bruce Wayne's parent)**

"I really can't be bothered at the moment; I've got, you know, social stuff going on and I'm just distracted." **(Autumn Ashes)**

"But I saw him, that no one else had asked him to do it, but he started picking things up. Like, you know, self-conscious, but the fact that there was rubbish there and he didn't care whether all his mates were going on but he did it. Very few boys will do that of their own accord really and that struck me." **(Teacher of Lewis)**

# The Nerd Identity

Reclaims the negative discourse as a positive one – 'reclaim the nerd'.

Strength of 'groupism' that they are looking for is found within this 'other' group - *"big little community of little weird kids."*

A Nerd Identity re-positions the 'popular' group as negative.

Elements of the Conformist Identity - are high achievers but interests more eclectic or alternative.
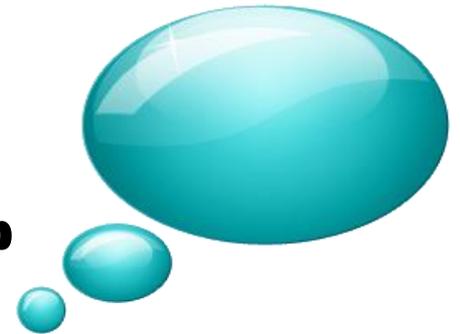
Autumn's story

"We got a relieving teacher and everything just turned to custard and I got majorly picked on. I remember, um, some other teacher had organised us to do a little recorder thing, and I was doing an extra part or something and then the day of the thing … I tried to go into the classroom at lunchtime to practise, and a girl who'd always hated me because I was smart and better than her at things, like music, um, she actually slammed my finger in the door, when I tried to come in, and it was really hard to play the recorder at the concert and I was really, really annoyed. Yeah. It, it's – and I will never forget the names of those people. I think when I'm you know, 60, 90, I will still be able to say that I – M C hated me at primary school. J D bullied me at primary school, I'd still be able to say the names. Like they're just names you never forget. My mum forgot his name and I haven't, it kind of sticks."

The Nerd Identity – reclaiming the nerd

"Like – but I try not to care what others think because I've always kind of been the weird kid, but now I fit in with all the other weird kids. M calls us the misfits, it's like our little friendship group where all the – you know, we've got the little wee nerdy Doctor Who fans and we've got all the little guys and their Rubik's Cubes and we've got people with weird interests in things like Shakespeare – we're all similar in little ways and we all have, you know, like some of us have got similar music taste and stuff. But M calls us the misfits just because we're all so weird, like, we're all – managed to become this big, like, community of little weird kids." (Autumn Ashes)

All-rounder Identity

The "have-it-all" student (Roeser et al, 2008)

Successfully merges competencies in academic, sporting, cultural and social fields.

Achieves highly across a variety of areas and still remains popular with peers.

The All-rounder

"I think that people see him as you know ah a boy with a ball in many different, different things. And he's not someone who's labelled as other boys could be because they are sort of more one-dimensional, which he isn't at all, ah which is great to see and he's a great swimmer as well, so he's got to Athletics finals, swimming finals. He's – I mean, you know, the perfect all-rounder." (Teacher of Lewis)

"I don't think anybody has ever called him a nerd, possibly because he's one of those people who seems to be an all-rounder."(Parent of Bruce Wayne).

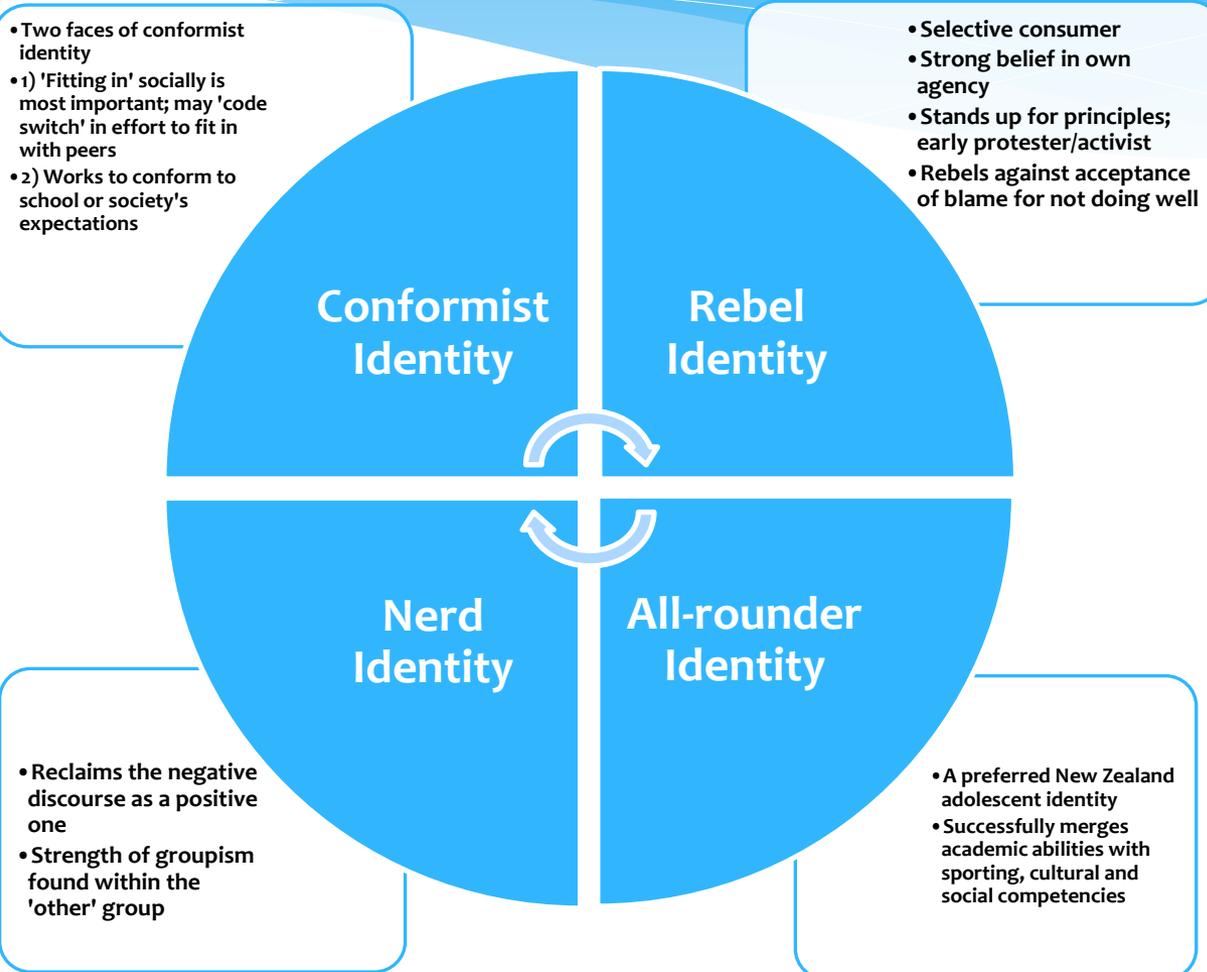# All-rounder identity preferred

Gifted and talented students are given messages from significant adults in their lives that the All-rounder identity is the preferred goal.

Some students will perceive that their identities as academically able adolescents in schools are less valued than the prized All-rounder.

Some may work to change their behaviours to re-invent themselves as the All-rounder.

Gifted and talented adolescent identity profiles

- Two faces of conformist identity
- 1) 'Fitting in' socially is most important; may 'code switch' in effort to fit in with peers
- 2) Works to conform to school or society's expectations

- Selective consumer
- Strong belief in own agency
- Stands up for principles; early protester/activist
- Rebels against acceptance of blame for not doing well

Conformist Identity

Rebel Identity

Nerd Identity

All-rounder Identity

- Reclaims the negative discourse as a positive one
- Strength of groupism found within the 'other' group

- A preferred New Zealand adolescent identity
- Successfully merges academic abilities with sporting, cultural and social competencies

'Fitting in' in the New Zealand school

You can be bright, but not too bright so that you stand out; you can be an academic achiever, but you should be sporty and social as well; you can be smart and study hard, but you also need to be ready to party when your friends demand it; if you are a bright boy you had better be a bit macho, too, if you want to avoid the 'dreaded nerd' label; you can be a smart girl, but you need to know how to be 'popular' too

develop an All-rounder identity.

Messages for educators and other professionals ?

* Process of identity construction for gifted and talented adolescents is an ever-evolving and individualistic one.

* An understanding of specific identity dilemmas facing these students can help to influence pedagogical practice.

* Social life and the search for 'who they are' probably more important than any extension programme at school!

References

* Austin, R., & Hastwell, A. (2010). *Max your marks*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
* Cohen, L. M., Ambrose, D., & Powell, W. (2000). Conceptual foundations and theoretical lenses for the diversity of giftedness and talent. In K. A. Heller, F. J. Monks, R. J. Sternberg & R. F. Subotnik (Eds.), *International handbook of giftedness and talent* (2nd ed., pp. 331-344). Oxford: Elsevier Science
* Dai, D. Y. (2010). *The nature and nurture of giftedness: a new framework for understanding gifted education*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
* Ellsworth, J. (1998). Adolescence and gifted: Addressing existential dread. Retrieved from www.sengifted.org
* Gross, M. U. M. (1989). The pursuit of excellence or the search for intimacy? The forced-choice dilemma of gifted youth. *Roeper Review, 11,* 189-194.
* Kaufman, S. B., & Sternberg, R. J. (2008). Conceptions of giftedness. In S. I. Pfeiffer (Ed.), *Handbook of giftedness in children; Psycho-educational theory, research and best practices* (pp. 71-92). New York: Springer

References

* Mendaglio, S. (2003). Heightened multifaceted sensitivity of gifted students: Implications for counseling. *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, XIV*(2), 72-82.

* Monceaux, D. A., & Jewell, P. (2007). Social influences on the underachievement of gifted male adolescents. *The Australasian Journal of Gifted Education, 16*(1), 30-41.

* Phillipson, S. N., & McCann, M. (2007). Meta-theoretical conceptions of giftedness. In S. Phillipson & M. McCann (Eds.), *Conceptions of giftedness: Socio-cultural perspectives* (pp. 477-494). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

* Roeser, R., Galloway, M., Casey-Cannon, S., Watson, C., & Tan, L. (2008). Identity representations in patterns of school achievement and well-being among early adolescent girls. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 28*(1), 115-152.

* Tapper, L. (2014). *'Being in the world of school'. A phenomenological exploration of experiences for gifted and talented adolescents.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

* van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, Ontario: State University of New York Press.

Acknowledging support from

The Professional Association for Gifted Education

giftednz

Poipoia a tatou tamariki ihumanea
Nurture our gifted children

Our goals

◎ To advocate for equitable educational opportunities for gifted and talented students.

◎ To enhance the profile of gifted and talented education in New Zealand.

◎ To create a professional community for networking, supporting and learning.

◎ To encourage the pursuit and sharing of best practice in gifted and talented education.

◎ To provide liaison with international organisations and other national associations for gifted and talented education.

www.giftednz.org.nz