

**THE BEST FIT:
LEADING A GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAMME
AT SECONDARY LEVEL.**

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of a sustainable programme for gifted and talented students in a large co-educational, New Zealand state secondary school. The programme has been underpinned by intensive, school-wide professional development and facilitated by School Support Services advisers. It draws from a large talent pool that recognises multi-category areas of giftedness, is informed by sound theory and is constantly evolving. Specific policies have been written to ensure theory becomes good practice and learning supersedes all other school functions. Creative timetabling allows for the best fit for all students including our gifted and talented students.

THE BEST FIT: LEADING A GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAMME IN A LARGE STATE SECONDARY SCHOOL.

Otumoetai College is a state-funded, co-educational secondary school in Tauranga with a current roll of 1889 students. The philosophical ethos of the college up until the late 1990s was one primarily concerned with the implementation of learning programmes in mixed ability groupings intended to raise the performance of low achieving students. While new national assessment initiatives dominated teacher time, pedagogy had all but disappeared from teacher discussions. However, with the millennium rapidly approaching, some staff became increasingly vocal in expressing their concern about whether the college was fulfilling its responsibility in fostering learning opportunities for all students. What was needed was a major overhaul of the way learning was viewed in the college; an overhaul that would give teachers permission to explore how students learn and one that would allow for sustainable change with integrity in all classrooms. The consequent provision of professional development that created opportunities for staff to engage in teacher talk about learning, rather than assessment, has ensured the establishment of enriched learning environments for all students while galvanising the commitment of an increasing number of staff in providing tailored programmes that cater for the learning needs of the gifted and talented students within our community of learners.

Over the previous decade the college had placed a significant focus upon behaviour management and the learning needs of low achieving students. In 1999 the Learning Support Centre took the initiative and dropped Support from its title highlighting a broadening understanding of its role which would now include providing for gifted and talented students while also sharpening the college's educational vision. From the outset it was determined that if the college was serious in its commitment to catering for the learning needs of its gifted and talented students then change needed to be implemented within all classrooms. There was no sustainability in merely assembling gifted and talented students and allowing them to be "gifted only on Friday afternoons" nor was there any future in merely providing teachers with ready-made lessons that accommodated gifted learners. Instead what was needed was a commitment to a professional development programme that promoted teacher understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of gifted education while also creating opportunities for teachers to develop their own programmes based upon international research. Within this environment members of the newly named Learning Centre and staff representatives undertook an extensive exploration of the available literature in the field of gifted and talented education resulting in several participants attending in 2001 the Teaching and Learning Symposium hosted by Hamilton Boys' High School and the National Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) conference in Auckland. A significant paradigm shift by a small number of staff provided the momentum to drive forward. Their vision was fully supported by senior management to the extent that the following year a staff member was awarded a scholarship to Colorado to study the work of George Betts and the Autonomous Learner Model. In light of these professional development opportunities it became evident that there existed the need for high ability classes to be introduced and subsequently in 2002 following initial teacher training, enrichment classes were introduced representing 15-20% of the total talent pool (Renzulli, 1985) at both Year 9 and 10 across the subject areas of English, Mathematics, Science, Social Sciences, Music and Technology.

The Ministry of Education's 2003 rejection of the college's application to undertake a five-year professional development programme for teachers in order to ensure the sustainability of gifted and talented programmes became an important catalyst in strengthening the college's commitment to its own professional development programme. The decision of management was to proceed independently. This determination resulted in the establishment of both a gifted and talented focus group and a literacy focus group to

oversee development in these identified critical areas. Additional developments throughout 2003-4 included the establishment of a Learning Register that identifies the learning needs of a wide range of students including gifted and talented students and those “twice exceptional” (Betts, 1985 p.33.) There was also the development of cross curricular focus groups that targeted boys’ achievement and Maori achievement. Furthermore, the development of the school-wide commitment to improving task design enabled 24 staff to attend GATE workshops facilitated by School Support Services, thereby ensuring ongoing training opportunities for teachers of enrichment classes. This practice continues today with all teachers of enrichment classes being required to undertake full training in this area while also accessing further support from the Learning Centre. This cross-curricular approach, while continuing to develop the staff talent pool, has also proved instrumental in promoting collegiality and teacher talk about learning. Continuing to develop the staff talent pool has been the philosophy behind producing the model that has driven the college’s subsequent professional development programme, most notably in 2006 with the establishment of cross curricular focus groups that explored the nature of the post modern learner and the need for a differentiated approach to teacher planning and classroom practice.

At the heart of Otumoetai College’s commitment to its educational vision of meeting the learning needs of all students is its refusal to compromise. In any large state funded secondary school there exist a number of constraints that must be recognised and addressed but these cannot be permitted to prevent pedagogical discussions from occurring or from implementing practices grounded in recent research. At this time there were many external pressures such as the new national curriculum and assessment regime along with various Ministry initiatives. The college chose to buy in to those initiatives that focused on learning. Gifted and Talented education and Literacy were selected. Despite the large roll with its accompanying timetable demands and initial staff conservatism, the approach to learning continued as a school-wide drive for BETTER LEARNING FOR ALL (School Goal 2004/2005) that incorporates task design and differentiation within the language of learning.

Despite the doubters and detractors college management working with the Learning Centre drove forward its own professional development programme for all teachers of enrichment classes in English, Mathematics, Social Sciences, Science, Music, Technology and Elite Sports in addition to the GATE workshops and frequent visits from School Support Services. This afforded these teachers the opportunity to learn for themselves and in so doing strengthened individual commitment to the concept of a learning continuum and differentiated task design. It also ensured that over the two year time period those supporting the new school philosophy presented an informed and united voice. The taxonomies of Bloom (1956), Kaplan (1986), and Williams’ Cognitive-Affective Interaction Model (1996) were introduced in conjunction with explorations of Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983) with the intention of providing our gifted and talented learners higher order thinking opportunities within an environment that encourages choice, fosters risk taking, provides challenge and develops opportunities for creativity. Teacher understandings of acceleration, underachievement and perfectionism, along with the specific emotional needs of high achievers were also addressed in order to maintain an holistic approach towards meeting the needs of our gifted and talented learners.

The role of School Support Services has been pivotal to the evolution and sustainability of the programme. Through off-site courses and on-site provision the Adviser – Gifted became the vehicle for increasing teacher understandings, for guidance in policy writing and for reviewing classroom practices. For two years the Adviser provided on-site, in-depth professional development for all teachers of enrichment classes. In addition, the Adviser worked closely with each department providing either whole-day or half-day subject specific PD. It is clear that the input of the Adviser has been critical to the establishment of gifted and talented education within Otumoetai College and that this input has led to the embedding of staff understandings that ensure the integrity of the programme and its sustainability for future years.

The timetable philosophy of providing the best structure for learning drove the construction of a new internal framework. The cry that it was all “too hard” was never accepted. The new framework allows all Year 9 students to sample every subject in the required curriculum areas. There is no established hierarchy of subjects, and subjects share as even a division of time as possible. In Year 10 the new timetable structure recognises the provision of optional six month courses, by keeping as many subject options open for as long as possible while at the same time allowing for an element of choice. The division of time between subjects remains as even as possible. Year 9 and 10 groups of 400-450 students are divided into three clusters of 130-150 students based on an even spread of ability. Each cluster then moves through the Year 9 and 10 programme as a single entity and is divided by each Faculty Leader according to individual test scores, aptitudes and recommendations in each subject. The four or five form classes in each cluster are for administrative purposes only. Such an approach gives ownership to each Faculty with the flexibility of allowing for a student to be changed in one subject but remain in other classes. The responsibility is given to each faculty to divide the cluster into either one enrichment class and three mixed ability groups or into four ranked ability or mixed ability groups. Consultation with the Learning Centre is essential for careful placement. Enrichment classes are instructed to the curriculum level that corresponds to their ability. In 2005, and again in 2006, Year Ten Mathematics includes one accelerated enrichment class that completes the level 6 Mathematics curriculum in order to advance to curriculum level 7 in Year 11 being assessed to level 2 of the National Qualification Framework (NQF). In Year 10 there is no assessment to the NQF external achievement standards with the intention of encouraging creative teaching that is not bound by an external assessment regime.

The writing of the school’s GATE policy (ratified late 2003) was the result of 11 drafts. The length of time taken in fine-tuning this document is indicative of the paradigm shifts both in understanding of the specific needs of gifted and talented learners as well as the acquisition of new knowledge by Board members, parent representatives and an increasing number of staff. The GATE policy recognises the Ministry of Education’s (2000) definition of gifted and talented and adopts both a broad and inclusive understanding of giftedness in developing its programmes throughout the school. The document is underpinned by the theories of Renzulli and Reis (1985) and Betts (1985). Renzulli and Reis’ (1985) concept of gifted learners draws from a talent pool that recognises the “interaction between three basic clusters of human traits: above average ability, a high level of task commitment and a high level of creativity” (Ministry of Education: Gifted and Talented Learners p.14). Betts’ (1985) Autonomous Learner Model aims at giving students “the content, process and product know-how that enables them to take responsibility for developing, implementing and evaluating their own learning” (Ministry of Education: Gifted and Talented Learners, p.51). The goal of this model is “to facilitate and develop the total learner.” (Betts and Kercher, 1999, p. 34)

Formalising a gifted and talented policy exposed a need for learning-centred leadership and became the catalyst for moving on and writing further policies that specifically relate to learning. Policy writing served to inform and involve the Board in the ethos of the new pedagogy and enshrine the vision for all concerned. A literacy policy was written to focus staff on raising literacy standards and also cementing the language of learning across the school. A policy relating to Otumoetai College students' access to Correspondence School Programmes and outside providers ensured availability of subjects not taught at the College. It also ensured the provision of an extra subject as well as providing a pathway to a subject at a level higher than the other subjects being studied when the timetable could not accommodate. An Individual Programme Policy was written to ensure that no blocks were put in the way of any student's individual programme. Often this may mean a gap of one subject on a student's timetable to enable time spent in the Learning Centre for consolidation of subject material with skilled support staff. Understanding of the learning process continued to grow as the policies were written and ultimately the writing of a Learning Policy encapsulated the place of learning within Otumoetai College. The GATE, Literacy, Correspondence School and Individual Programme policies became appendices to the Learning Policy which recognized the college's conceptualised learning framework, its learning continuum and its commitment to the implementation of best pedagogical practice in classrooms. The policy commits to professional development and gives special emphasis to the development of profound learning, to meaning, authenticity, creativity and interdependence. It seeks to ground staff actions in sound pedagogy and to ensure that meaningful learning remains super-ordinate to curriculum assessment and behavioural management.

Identification of students for the gifted and talented programme began as a data-gathering process and as understanding increased, the process has expanded into a multi-faceted approach. McAlpine (1996, p. 63) describes identification as a mediation between "the responsive environment approach and the formal data gathering approach." While Otumoetai College is secure in the integrity of data that is gathered on each cohort, it recognises that there is ongoing work to be done in regard to establishing a responsive environment that relies on a team approach to identification and is "unobtrusive and naturally embedded into sound everyday learning and teaching." (McAlpine, 1996, p. 67). Extensive information from contributing schools is placed alongside Centre for Educational Measurement (CEM) data and enables Deans and Faculty Leaders to rank students according to cognitive ability. Consultation with contributing schools forms an integral part of this process as does the request for parent input. Early in the school year Progress and Achievement Testing confirms class placement. While initial testing regimes provide baseline data for each student it is acknowledged that key factors of parent, student and teacher input need to play a greater part in the process in order to find "the best fit" for students with high abilities. As McAlpine (1996, p.67) points out "unobtrusive identification based on challenging learning" along with "open communication between parents, caregivers, students, teachers ..." and "a team approach" encourage a climate of awareness that is "constantly on the alert for the emergence of special abilities."

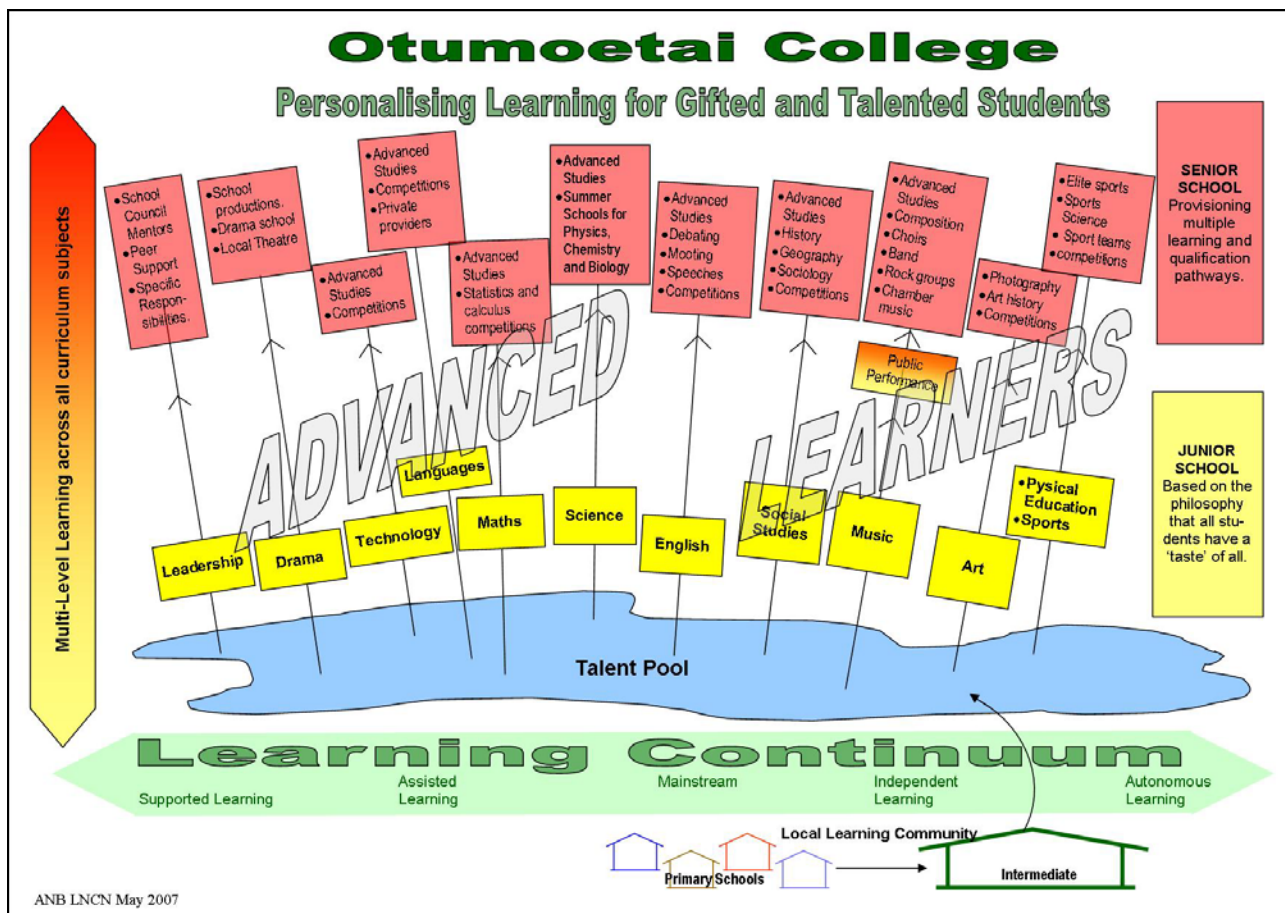
Individual faculties in liaison with information provided by the Learning Centre are responsible for identifying students that demonstrate the potential of task commitment, above average ability and creativity (Renzulli and Reis, 1985) and placing them in specific subject classes that practise both curriculum compaction and differentiation within a higher cognitive framework. At Years 9 and 10 identified students are placed in enrichment classes across each of the subject areas of English, Mathematics, Science, Social Science, Music and Technology. The label of enrichment, which was first used in the school in 2002, is now viewed as somewhat misleading as enrichment is often interpreted as meaning "just more work, sometimes more of the same work." (Clark, 1988, p.202) The title enrichment was a consensus decision and reflected staff understandings at that

time. It did however serve to encapsulate the desire for broad cognitive development rather than subject acceleration at the expense of understanding. Townsend (2000) explains that 'acceleration refers to instruction which matches the readiness and needs of the gifted child most closely with the curriculum' (p. 290). Accordingly acceleration is implemented in the college in a number of its many guises throughout the school including subject-specific acceleration, selected New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA) acceleration, curriculum compacting, differentiation and individualised curriculum. Staff now understand enrichment to be the right of every student, and interpret it as broad based educational experiences that are not necessarily at a more rapid pace or at a higher level. This understanding led staff to consider a change in terminology to better describe the programme. In 2007 three Year 9 classes will be called Advanced Learners 1, 2 and 3.

Southern and Jones (1991) document the fact that a variety of acceleration options generate increased learner efficiency and effectiveness as students learn better in an environment that recognises their ability. By placing students in an accelerated environment, it is reasoned that they will benefit from the interaction with peers who share like-minded intellectual interests. Townsend's (2000) summary of the advantages of acceleration reveal similar intellectual benefits of increased academic motivation, a greater variety of school goals, a decrease in behavioural problems and notably, an escape from boredom and intellectual frustration.

Evidence of these acceleration options within the enrichment band are seen in all faculty areas. The philosophy in English enrichment classes focuses on broadening students' analytical skills through challenging texts and the self-selection of literature. Recognising that effective curriculum delivery requires more than advanced content alone to cater for the learning needs of gifted students, the department has invested considerable time in the development of assignments that promote greater choice and encourage creativity including 'Hooked on Books' at Year 9 which incorporates Bloom's Taxonomy and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences and 'Novel Thinking' at Year 10, a thematic unit based upon Williams' Cognitive-Affective Interaction Model that encourages students to explore the relationship held between literature and its role in society. The introduction of these differentiated models provides students with the opportunity to engage in higher-order thinking while allowing students to take ownership in the selection of product outcomes. Two examples of facilitated research tasks in Year 9 Social Studies are based around the theme of Chocolate where students have the choice of analyzing the geography, economics, sociology or history behind this resource, and the geography of the Lord of the Rings where students create their own tour through Middle Earth in order to destroy the ring. Students are required to analyse landscapes in order to problem solve and overcome various challenges encountered along the way. In the Technology Faculty gifted students are selected for their potential to evaluate solutions to client based problems before choosing the direction of their own project outcomes. Te Reo allows for advanced language studies to National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) internal standards. Year 9 enrichment Music classes are comprised of students with previous musical expertise in theory and performance. Because of this, emphasis is placed on solo and group performance, composition and skill building in both aural and score reading. Students are required to pick up a second/third instrument to develop their melodic, harmonic and rhythmic understanding and are encouraged to take part in various college musical groups. The pathway to Year 10 Music allows some students to be assessed in solo performance and/or composition to NCEA internal standards. In the Mathematics Faculty, the Year 9 and 10 enrichment course aims to broaden the learning experiences of students through participation in a variety of problem solving tasks that reflect areas of individual interest. Student understanding is further enhanced through the writing of detailed instructions for complex co-ordinate pictures of their choice as well as through the

narration of video they have compiled to demonstrate geometric concepts. Acceleration is an option for those who display giftedness in the field of Mathematics.



While each department continues to accommodate the learning needs of all students including gifted and talented through quality task design, there is now genuine concern that the needs of our most able students are not being met. In 2005 the Advanced Learners' Group was established in recognition of the additional cognitive and affective needs of our most academically gifted students. Following the Autonomous Learner Model (ALM) developed by Betts (1992) students are introduced to the five dimensions required for the development of the autonomous learner: orientation, individual development, enrichment activities, seminars and participation in an in-depth study investigation. The programme provides an opportunity for like-minded students to meet regularly and engage in activities that demand higher order thinking skills while fostering an appreciation of the important roles that persistence, determination and task commitment play in the pursuit of successful and independent life-long learners. While the 2005 pilot was limited to only 24 Year 9 and 10 students, the 2006 programme included 40 students who continue to research areas of passion and foster links with the community. In addition to developing the critical, creative and caring thinking skills first introduced in 2005, the 2006 programme allowed for individual mentoring and the continuation of exploration into avenues of passion along with interaction with like-minded peers both at school and in the community. 2007 sees the implementation of the Advanced Learners' Programme in three Year 9 classes where approach, pace, content and environment will differ significantly from that of other Year 9 classes.

While something akin to a pedagogical revolution has begun in the college there remains a great deal to do to ensure that the cognitive and affective needs of each of our gifted and talented students are fully met. In recognising the importance of differentiated

programming that enables all learners to engage in high-order thinking exercises, individual faculties have become increasingly committed to their gifted and talented learners. As Barbara Clark (1988) reminds us “All kids deserve to learn something new every day, including the gifted.” (p. 202) With this in mind, management has increased its commitment to the college’s gifted community by allowing for the provision of additional staff hours in the Learning Centre in 2007 to oversee the implementation of individual programmes which personalise learning for all identified gifted students. Otumoetai College recognises that it has a professional responsibility to provide each and every one of its students including its gifted and talented with learning programmes that “best fit” both their cognitive and affective needs. Staff understanding of effective pedagogy remains the only assured way to guarantee this desired outcome.

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