

Let's work together to advance the acceptance and needs of the gifted children in Australia.

An opinion piece by Dr Natalie Rimlinger, Footsteps Psychology.

Since joining the psychology profession, I've noticed a trend not just in my industry, but in those related to my practice. We tend to focus on human deficits. There's more emphasis on what a person can't do or on what they don't have. It's human nature though, isn't it? We often look at the bad things rather than focus on the good.

As professionals, such as psychologists, counsellors, teachers and so on, we're trained to fix what is 'wrong' with the person or help them fill gaps in their lives. I'm sure you can relate to this. Our training is based on finding out 'what is wrong' and helping our clients find solutions to their 'issues'.

And there's nothing wrong with this training. It's worked for many, many years and is effective.

But what many people in these professions struggle with, is how to deal with people who have too many strengths, such as gifted individuals. This small percentage of the population present with their issues, often being misunderstood or mislabelled.

This creates frustration for parents who spend precious time and copious amounts of money on diagnoses that may not fit their child. Parents also face the daily struggles of advocating for their children and needing to constantly try and explain to both educators and psychologists what their gifted child is experiencing. Where do these parents find a safe, non-judgemental place to get professional support?

And for the gifted adult who may not have been recognised with this immense ability at an early age, they often struggle with 'fitting in' with the rest of the world.

The one thing we all crave is acceptance.

Can you imagine what it's like for a gifted individual to seek help, desperately wanting to fit in with the world and be accepted, only to be further misunderstood? Being gifted truly impacts your life and sense of self.

The answer to why this trend continues is scarily simple.

Most teachers and psychologists are not taught about gifted individuals. It's not a compulsory area of study, and it's one, I believe, needs more promotion to encourage professionals to learn what it means to be gifted.

There are some universities in Australia, such as the University of NSW, that have classes and courses that address the specific needs of gifted children in education. Some teaching courses also have the option of taking classes to discuss the needs of gifted children. But these are electives and tend not to focus purely on gifted children but bundle them with other forms of special needs.

Professional development days are run for teachers, however again, these are voluntary and are usually only attended by teachers who already have a professional, or personal, interest in the area.

I never heard the word 'gifted' used in any class throughout my psychology training.

Unless it was me saying the word, I never heard 'gifted' being said by any of my lecturers throughout my entire training over a 15-year timeframe. And I'm not talking years and years ago (as you may be expecting!) as I finished my study in 2016. This is happening in my field of psychology right now.

I will never forget the one lecturer who emphasised, 'understand a child's cognitive capacity before trying to interpret behaviour'. This perked my interest. But then nothing further.

Where is the scientific evidence of how gifted individuals should 'look' on our standard measures of behaviour or psychopathology beyond an IQ test?

A quick example of how dire this situation is in psychology.

While presenting at my university last year, I asked whether anyone in the room (30 students and lecturers) had ever been taught about gifted individuals.

There was silence. It was the scary type of silence where there wasn't even a mutter.

Professional development for Australian psychologists in the field of gifted individuals is almost non-existent, and most of the available conferences are aimed at the educational side of being gifted.

If you've got a moment, check out the Australian Psychological Society's 'Find a psychologist' website and you'll find you can't even choose 'gifted' as an issue to search from. You'll find academic performance, school issues, learning difficulties and other educational issues, but no checkbox for being gifted. It's clear we 'lump' them in with other issues rather than addressing their unique needs.

So, how do we change a problem that's existed for so long?

Did you know that loads of research has been done into what a gifted individual needs at both an educational, social and emotional level but it's rarely acted upon? Sad isn't it?

Perhaps I'm a bit of a dreamer, but I'm going to aim for the stars and offer a solution. I believe that the special needs of the gifted individual must be recognised at a legislative level nationally.

Laws legitimise. Having the field legitimised may go some way to having the humans involved in this, the gifted adults and children, more readily accepted as being different. Not 'better' and certainly not 'broken' – but different.

I'd love to see our upcoming psychologists being taught about these differences within the gifted population. This, of course, will need to be mandated by those who specify what is taught in our psychology courses.

Psychologists have devised tests to place a person's intelligence somewhere along a Bell Curve so that we can understand their cognitive potential. They've also found relationships between where people are on the curve and some behaviours.

Due to this relationship, there are several behaviour checklists and diagnoses where we need to know if a client has low IQ. So, there is an understanding, at least at the left side of the curve, that IQ may have a relationship with some behaviour.

But this connection hasn't been investigated at the right side of the curve. Because of this, nothing is taught about the individuals who fit on the higher end of the scale – because very few of us have ever asked the question if differences might be seen at that end too!

Moving forward for the greater good of gifted individuals.

We need to appeal to the academics to partner with psychologists so that gifted is not purely focussed on education. We need researchers to urgently investigate the validity of commonly used psychological measures to see whether the gifted population are comparable to a 'normal' population. Through my research, I have data that strongly suggests they're not.

Over the years, there have been multiple tests run that reveal you should not use the 'standard' IQ tests if a person presents with reportedly low IQ, such as those with an intellectual disability. New 'norms' have been formulated for the profession to better compare individuals who are on this lower end of the scale.

But little has been done for the higher end of the scale. I'd love to see re-norming of measures of behaviour especially (if necessary!) for gifted individuals, so they're able to be compared with those on their level. Perhaps gifted individuals are different in ways beyond their IQ.

A similar undertaking must happen in the education sector. Make gifted education a compulsory subject. Make sure all our teachers have an adequate understanding of how to recognise a gifted child and what they need, rather than labelling them as 'disruptive' when they question teachings or 'uninterested in study' which is often the case.

Several recommendations dating back to the 1988 Senate Enquiry into gifted education said similar things. But 30 years on and nothing much has changed.

If the needs of this population are mandated to be taught at a university level for teachers and psychologists, more people would be exposed to the field and hopefully become interested.

We desperately need this new blood and new ideas.

In a perfect world, there would be cross-discipline studies conducted looking at the educational and social and emotional needs of gifted individuals, and the interaction between these factors. This would need to be done in a holistic way rather than one field cheering louder than another.

I may not live long enough to see my Utopian world where education and psychology academics work together for the benefit of gifted individuals and their families, but I continue to hope that a conversation can at least be held. And I want to see all parties involved – parents, teachers, psychologists and universities – so that outcomes for gifted children in the future are better than those of previous generations.

About Dr Natalie Rimlinger

This rebellious, underachieving high school dropout found her purpose later in life, choosing to study psychology with a mission to help those like her – the gifted. It was only when her daughter was diagnosed as being highly gifted that Natalie also agreed to be tested. She was floored when she received the results, but also relieved. She finally understood why she rebelled and questioned

everything during her teen years. Natalie knows firsthand how hard it is to be misunderstood from being gifted and is working to help others in similar situations.