

The Role of RTLB in Gifted Education

By Amanda Hurley

I am a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) in Tukituki Cluster 23 in Hawke's Bay, a role I began in 2021 after many years working in the classroom as a primary school teacher. In 2024, I decided to pursue a Master of Specialist Teaching (Learning and Behaviour) through Massey University, focusing on a professional inquiry titled 'The Role of RTLB in Gifted Education'. I would like to share this journey and my findings in this three-part series:

Part 1 - Highlights my inquiry process and initial findings, with a focus on quantitative data.

Part 2 - Examines themes that emerged from the data, with a focus on qualitative data.

Part 3 - Explores the implications for RTLB.

Part 1

Research Question

While completing my Postgraduate Diploma in Specialist Teaching in 2022/23, I developed an interest in gifted education. I began to consider the role RTLB have in ensuring equitable support for gifted learners in our schools, and this reflection led me to formulate the following question for investigation:

'What can we learn from the voices of the gifted, alongside the literature, to inform our understanding of the role and responsibility RTLB have in supporting schools to ensure gifted learners are identified and have their learning support needs met?'

Voices of the Gifted

I sought the voices of Mensa New Zealand members on their educational experiences as a focal point for my inquiry. With there being no clear definition of giftedness that applies in all contexts, schools in New Zealand are encouraged to work with their community to decide on a school-based definition (Ministry of Education, n.d.). There is, however, recognition that children who have high iq (130+ on the WISC) are usually considered gifted (Ministry of Education, 2012). Mensa members meet this criteria through equivalency, having "attained a score within the upper two percent of the population on an approved IQ test that has been properly administered and supervised" (Mensa New Zealand, n.d.).

Research Method

I conducted an anonymous survey of members aged 16 and over, with a considered focus on capturing the perspectives of gifted adults. I was particularly interested in their insights into the educational strategies which either supported or hindered their development as children and young adults, the short and long term impacts of these across their lives, and the lessons that can be drawn from to help inform RTLB practice. The survey was designed to collect information on members' educational experiences at

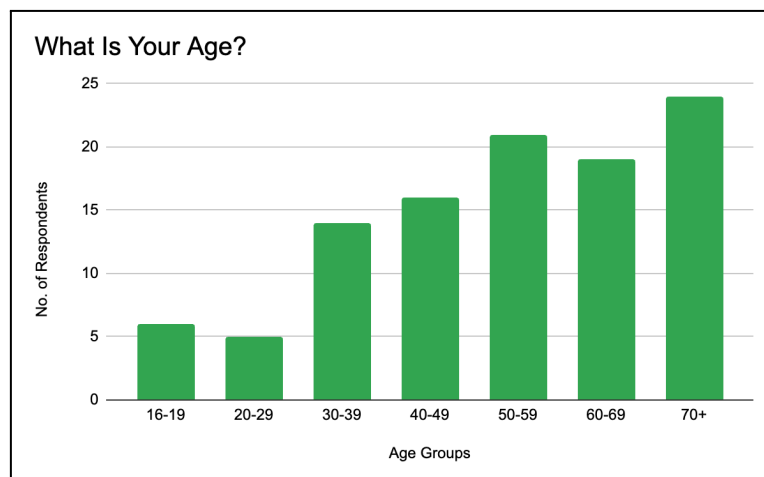
the primary (including intermediate) and secondary levels and contained a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions.

I was granted permission to advertise my survey in the national Mensa magazine and on a private members-only social media page, and there was an initial return of 38 responses. In July, I presented a summary of the survey findings to a group of members at a national Mensa gathering for discussion and feedback. Following this, there was a request to email the survey directly to all members. Doing so resulted in an additional 67 responses, for a total of 105. With a total membership of 488 individuals aged 16 years and over as of July 2024, this meant the overall response rate was 21.5%.

I will now share and explore the demographics and quantitative data from these 105 responses in the remainder of Part 1.

Exploring the Figures

Of the respondents, 59 (56%) were male and 46 (44%) were female, and represented a wide range of age groups as shown in the graph below:



There was a balance between those who had been identified as gifted at school with 45 (43%) indicating that they had been identified, and 47 (45%) indicating that they were not identified. 13 respondents (12%) were unsure, and for the purpose of my inquiry I included this group with those who were not identified as gifted. The most common methods by which respondents were identified as gifted included academic achievement, standardised assessments (including IQ testing), and teacher recommendation.

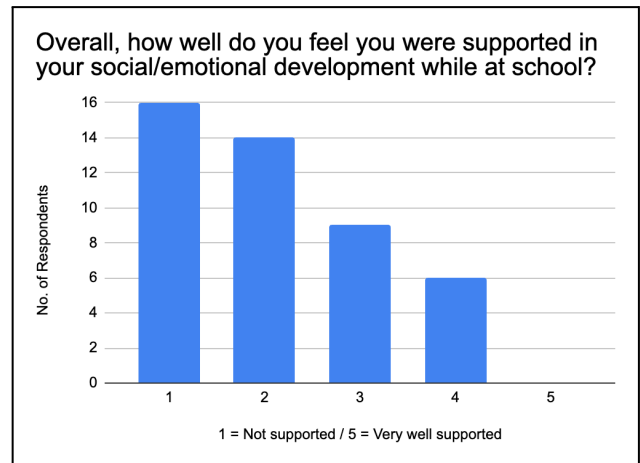
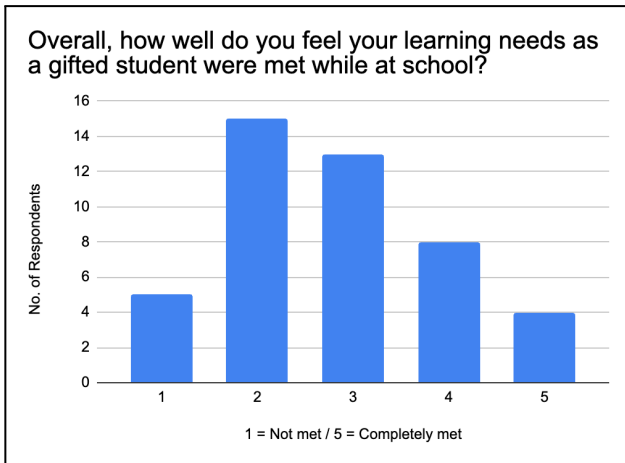
Learning and Social/Emotional Development

I was interested in exploring how well members felt their learning needs were met at school, as well as how well they felt they were supported in their social and emotional development. I asked two questions to elicit this information. The questions included in the survey were:

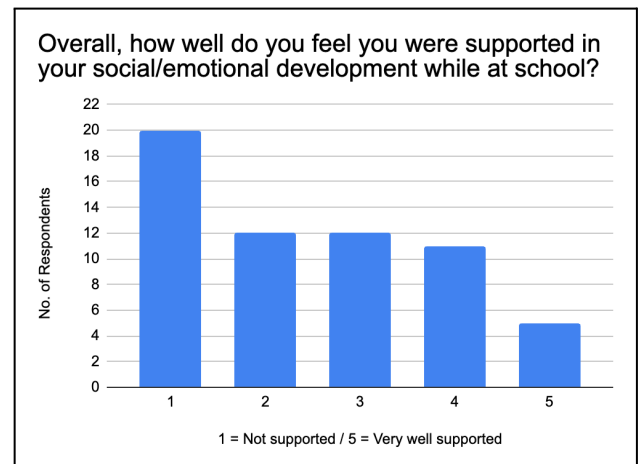
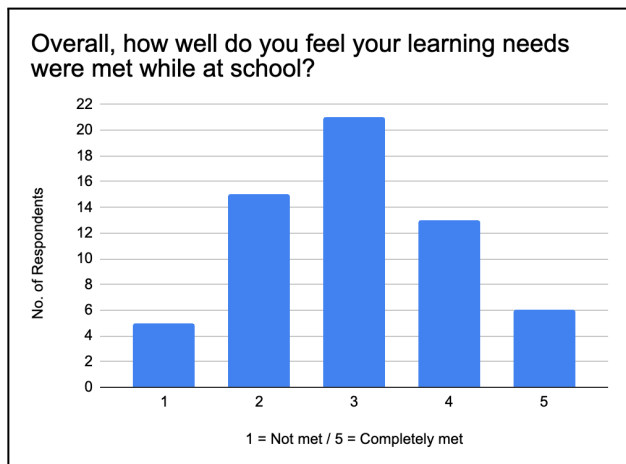
- Overall, how well do you feel your learning needs were met at school? *Rating options ranged from 1 (needs not met) to 5 (needs completely met)*

- Overall, how well do you feel you were supported in your social and emotional development while at school? *Rating options ranged from 1 (not supported) to 5 (very well supported)*

The following two graphs represent the responses from those who **were** identified as gifted:



Similarly, the following two graphs represent the responses from those who **were not** identified as gifted or who were **unsure**:



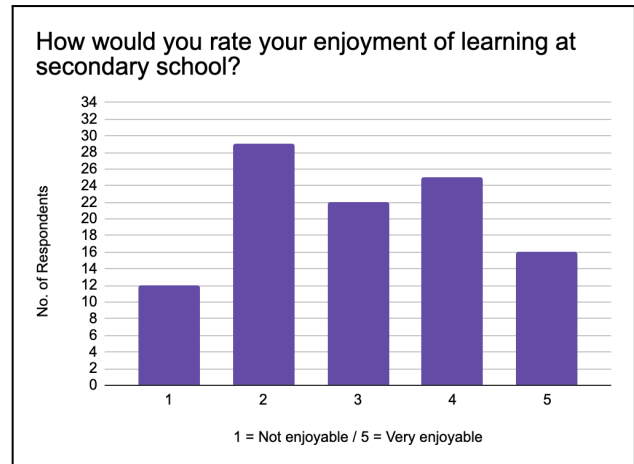
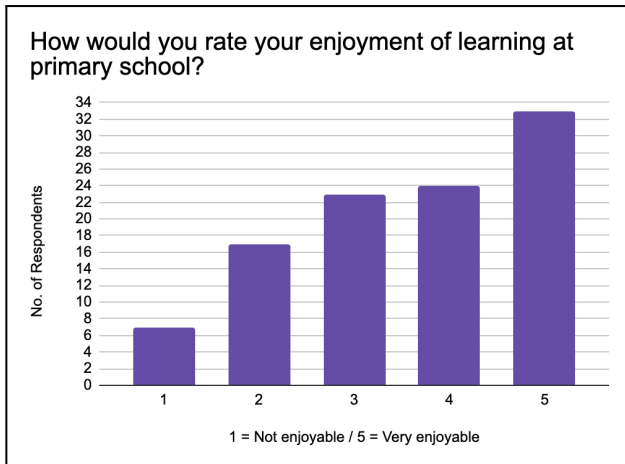
Across both groups, 26% of respondents indicated that their learning needs were well met, choosing a rating of 4 or 5. In contrast, 38% chose a rating of 1 or 2, indicating that their learning needs were not met. A large proportion of respondents required significantly more support in their social and emotional development than what they received - almost 60% chose a rating of 1 or 2, indicating that they did not feel supported in their social and emotional development. Notably, only 5% of respondents felt that they were 'very well supported' in this area.

Enjoyment of Learning

As well as asking Mensa members about how well they felt their learning needs were met, I was also interested in exploring how enjoyable their learning at school was for them overall at both the primary and secondary levels. I included the following questions in the survey:

- How would you rate your enjoyment of learning at primary school? *Rating options ranged from 1 (not enjoyable) to 5 (very enjoyable)*
- How would you rate your enjoyment of learning at secondary school? *Rating options ranged from 1 (not enjoyable) to 5 (very enjoyable)*

The following two graphs represent the responses across all members, including those who were identified as gifted, those who were not, and those who were unsure:



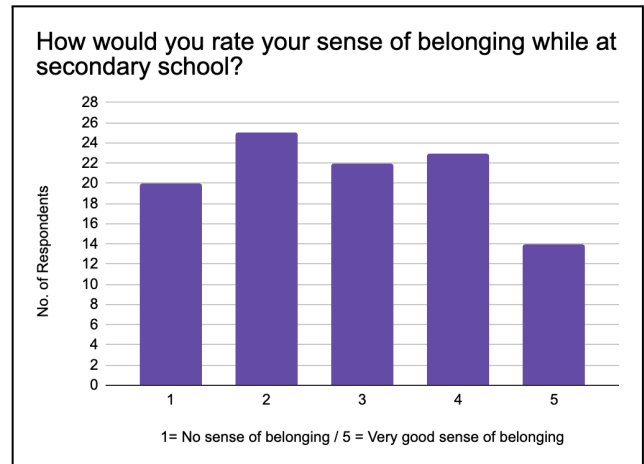
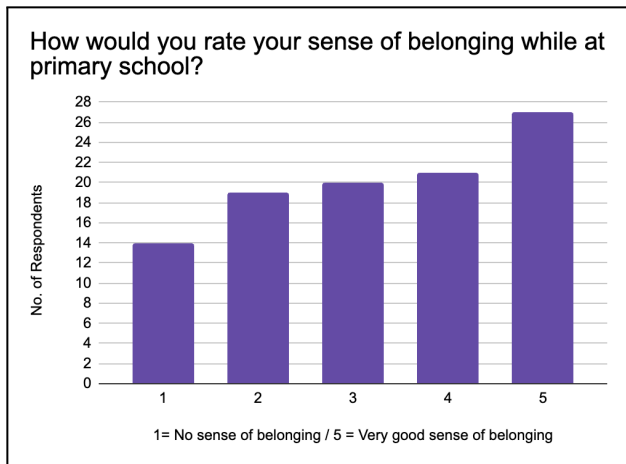
More than half of respondents (55%) indicated that learning was enjoyable for them at primary school through choosing a rating of 4 or 5. This dropped to 39% at secondary school. Interestingly, while less than a quarter of respondents (23%) chose a rating of 1 or 2 to indicate that learning was not enjoyable at primary school, this increased for secondary school to 39%.

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging for children and young people is an essential component for promotion of school attendance, and active engagement and progress in learning (Ministry of Education, 2022). As such, I included the following two questions in the survey, again looking to consider any difference in ratings given between primary and secondary school levels:

- How would you rate your sense of belonging while at primary school? *Rating options ranged from 1 (no sense of belonging) to 5 (very good sense of belonging)*
- How would you rate your sense of belonging while at secondary school? *Rating options ranged from 1 (no sense of belonging) to 5 (very good sense of belonging)*

The following two graphs represent the responses across all members:



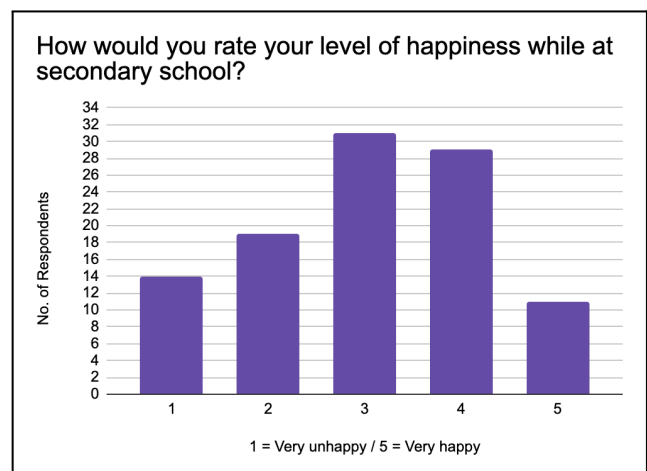
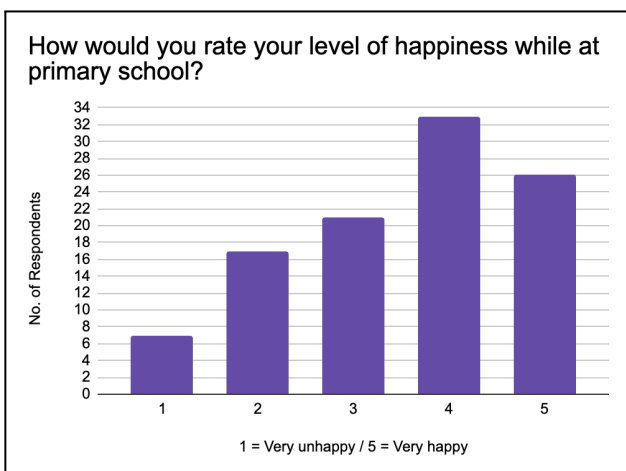
Almost half of respondents (48%) indicated that they felt a good sense of belonging at primary school through choosing a rating of 4 or 5. This reduced to 36% at secondary school. Notably, 43% of respondents selected a rating of 1 or 2 for secondary school, indicating that they did not feel a sense of belonging in this context, while for primary school this was lower at 32%.

Happiness

In further consideration of the wellbeing of gifted learners, I sought information about Mensa members' overall happiness during their school years. Following a similar approach to the two categories mentioned earlier, I posed the following two questions:

- How would you rate your level of happiness while at primary school? *Rating options ranged from 1 (very unhappy) to 5 (very happy)*
- How would you rate your level of happiness while at secondary school? *Rating options ranged from 1 (very unhappy) to 5 (very happy)*

The following two graphs represent the responses across all members:



As is evident, 'fun' emerged as the most frequently selected word for primary school. This diminished significantly for secondary school, where 'boredom' became the most prominent. It is also interesting to note the word 'lonely' appeared relatively often in responses for both primary and secondary school.

Conclusion

The findings show that many Mensa NZ members had positive school experiences that supported both their academic learning and their social and emotional development. However, a significant percentage reported not receiving the support they needed, with particular concern around inadequate support for social and emotional development.

With approximately one-quarter of respondents indicating that they experienced unhappiness and a lack of enjoyment in learning at primary school, and with this rising to approximately one-third at secondary school, a critical need is identified for the awareness and understanding of gifted learners and capability of their teachers to meet their needs. Additionally, with nearly a third of respondents indicating that they lacked a sense of belonging at primary school, and with this increasing to 43% at secondary school, a significant risk to the wellbeing of gifted learners is also highlighted.

With overall experiences of primary school shown to be more positive than those of secondary school, and with "bored" emerging as the most frequently used term by members to describe their secondary school experience, this also indicates that the transition between these levels is a critical point for consideration.

Next: Part 2 - Examines themes that emerged from the data, with a focus on qualitative data.



Part 2

Exploring Personal Perspectives

In addition to the questions explored in Part 1, the survey of Mensa NZ members also included a variety of open-ended questions designed to gain deeper insights into their personal experiences of school. The following are examples of the questions included:

- Please describe any approaches to teaching and/or learning that worked especially well to engage and challenge you as a learner at primary (secondary) school.
- Looking back, if you had had the power to change one or two things about primary (secondary) school to improve your experience, what would they have been?
- Did you participate in any gifted programmes? If yes, please briefly describe what this involved and any benefits this may have had for you.
- Did you have a particular teacher who was significant to you during your school years? If so, please share how they impacted you.

- Please briefly explain any influence your school experiences may have had in shaping your future educational and career decisions.
- Based on your experiences, what would you most like today's educators to know about gifted learners to help inform their practice?

Themes That Emerged

In analysing the responses to the questions, I used a coding approach: as I reviewed the comments, I assigned specific codes to them and then organised these codes into broader themes. This process revealed seven key themes:

- The link between giftedness and other forms of neurodivergence
- Barriers to educational equity for gifted learners
- Considerations regarding effective school systems
- The significance of learner agency
- The importance of relationships
- Supports for social and emotional wellbeing
- The necessity of providing guidance around pathways for future success

These are explored in more detail throughout the remainder of Part 2, and I have included direct quotes from the survey to illustrate key points.

Theme 1: Giftedness and Neurodiversity

Many Mensa NZ members wrote about wishing they had known about their giftedness during their school years, emphasising the impact this knowledge could have had. They frequently described feeling different without understanding the underlying reasons why, which often led them to view this difference in a negative light:

"I would have known I was gifted and that I would always see the world differently from most people and that is OK - instead of wondering what was wrong with me."

"My experience is that I knew I was different because I had a different way of thinking about things, but my experiences/feedback made me think that it was because I was stupid - no one ever told me any different. Life is very different when you believe in yourself, when you think you might be smart - you start taking on challenges and succeeding, and everything changes."

Additionally, many members also pointed out the link between giftedness and other forms of neurodivergence and the importance of considering this when working with children and young people:

"Once a gifted individual has been identified, I think considering neurodivergence is a very logical next step and could greatly improve the experiences of a lot of gifted learners. Male or female."

Theme 2: Barriers to Educational Equity

The responses revealed that members frequently encountered inadequate support from teachers and schools in addressing their learning needs, resulting in boredom, frustration, and disengagement:

“My main issue was that it felt like teachers needed to focus on getting students across the line, rather than focus on helping those at the top excel.”

“Much of my own school experience was of painful boredom; the equivalent of being able to do high school Maths but having to participate in “learning” 1 + 1. To combat the boredom I used to silently count my teeth with my tongue or play with my long hair. The other thing I did was to be “sick” a lot so that I could instead stay home and read our encyclopaedias.”

Tall Poppy Syndrome was also highlighted as a significant barrier to educational equity for many, and one that is considered an ongoing issue:

“Sometimes the advanced kids are even ‘put down’ or made to feel like they shouldn't be striving for excellence.”

“We can do a lot better than expected if encouraged, and not cut down by peers and teachers and the system.”

Theme 3: School Systems

The importance of identification of giftedness was strongly emphasised by many members. There was recognition that this process can be complex and multi-faceted, requiring teachers to be observant, knowledgeable, and skilled in identifying diverse signs of giftedness:

“I think the most useful things for me that still apply were early recognition that I had something special that other kids didn't have, and encouragement to shine in the areas I enjoyed the most.”

“I didn't stand out as being gifted in the normal school curriculum. I was a high achiever in some areas, but not gifted. It would have taken a particularly perceptive teacher to recognise giftedness in me.”

Several approaches which positively impacted educational experiences and were common across members included streaming, acceleration, and individualised programs, highlighting the need to ensure learning is carefully considered in terms of teaching approach, content and level:

“Don't underestimate how much students can learn and do. Provide opportunities to excel, both in school and outside of school. Tailor learning to ability. Don't just focus on everyone meeting a set of average expectations, provide further dedicated support to talented students.”

Theme 4: Learner Agency

Many members expressed the significance of having a voice in their education. Being heard, having their thoughts and ideas respected and valued, and feeling a sense of agency over their own learning were all essential for promoting positive outcomes:

“Trust the kids sometimes. I begged to go up a year and they WOULD. NOT. LET. ME. If they had I think I actually would have stayed engaged and finished school and not completely fallen off the rails mentally.”

“Collaboration between gifted students and talented educators is essential for optimal outcomes. Fostering such collaboration is key to unlocking the full potential of gifted individuals and ensuring the best results for both students and the community.”

A strong appreciation for opportunities that facilitated self-directed learning, allowing them to pursue their individual interests and strengths in ways that suited them, was also expressed:

“I/we got very self motivated to do our projects, it wasn't just handed to us by adults. This has served me well through life and I became a high-tech development engineer with my own company.”

Theme 5: Relationships

Having good relationships with teachers and feeling seen was frequently identified by members as contributing to a positive school experience. Many shared that individual connection with teachers was important as it fostered a sense of connection and belonging within the school context:

“One on one time with the teacher helped me a lot. There were only a handful of teachers willing to do this though because I'm "smart", so I was left alone most of the time. But when I got my own attention it helped me feel more at place in school.”

There were also many references to the benefits of working with ‘like-minded’ peers, including those who were working at the same level or who had the same interests. For those who had no or limited opportunities for this, they often expressed that they wished this could have been different:

“I was at the gifted programme once a week and it definitely helped me not to feel so weird.”

“I would have liked to mix occasionally with other gifted kids of all ages, so that I had the sense of tribe, of belonging somewhere.”

Several members also indicated that stronger home-school partnerships, with better understanding and communication between both, along with provisions of information, advice, and support for their parents would have been beneficial:

“Educating parents on how to properly support and guide their children is crucial, as this impact is often more significant than school education, especially in the early years.”

Theme 6: Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Many members reported experiencing significant social and emotional challenges during their school years, including feelings of isolation, difference, low self-confidence, bullying, and difficulties with social interactions. Additionally, they expressed concerns about the lack of adequate support in addressing these issues and the long-term effects of this on their lives:

"I didn't feel understood and I didn't feel that anyone knew me. I had emotional issues and felt isolated and separate and these feelings were not addressed. I felt separated socially. I was often overwhelmed by my feelings at being in the world."

"I grew to hate society through a lot of bad experiences at school which were unresolved and developed depression and social anxiety as a result. Now I don't take part in society for the most part."

The critical importance of teachers having a clear understanding of giftedness and being aware of the unique challenges that gifted learners often encounter was also emphasised:

"Learn to recognise and understand giftedness. It is not just about learning fast, it's also about the emotional sensitivities which can make life challenging."

"High academic results are not the full story, these learners may need support in navigating other aspects of their lives and are often unnoticed as they are coping well with the academic programme."

Theme 7: Supporting Pathways for Future Success

A considerable number of members wrote that their school experiences had led to them dropping out of secondary school, while others felt deterred from pursuing further education. Many also commented that they had been adversely affected by a lack of career guidance, highlighting the importance of preparing students for life beyond school:

"School drove me away from formal education. Made me assume I would struggle as much at university as I had at high school, so I steered clear of anything requiring a degree."

"I dropped out at the end of 6th form and never attended university. I didn't (and still don't...) know what I wanted to do. I'm lucky enough to work for a large company that allows me some autonomy and presents me with challenging work. I wonder where I could have got to if I had been pushed/recognized more at school, and directed towards further education."

In contrast, others wrote about the positive influence teachers and schools had on their future through recognising and acknowledging their strengths, along with providing encouragement and support:

"I had a teacher recognise my mathematical ability. I am proud to now have my PhD in mathematics education - it shaped a lifelong interest."

“The encouragement I received throughout school allowed me to qualify for and ultimately complete the degree of my choice. If I hadn't received that encouragement, I may well have grown bored in school and ended up dropping out or getting in with the wrong crowd.”

And finally, as summed up by one member:

“Give us the feedback about our abilities; don't dumb it down or try to hide it; show us how we can have a future.”

Conclusion

The survey responses provide valuable insights into the personal experiences of Mensa NZ members during their school years. The seven key themes that emerged - Giftedness and Neurodiversity, Barriers to Educational Equity, School Systems, Learner Agency, Relationships, Social and Emotional Wellbeing, and Supporting Future Pathways for Success - highlight many of the challenges faced by gifted learners. These themes also show the importance of the provision of appropriate support for gifted ākongā, and how critical this support is in determining positive long-term outcomes.

Next: Part 3 - Exploring the implications for RTLB.



Part 3

Implications for RTLB

In Parts 1 and 2 of this series, I shared the responses and themes that emerged from my survey of Mensa NZ members. In Part 3, I will bring this together alongside literature to consider the implications for RTLB practice.

Relevant Policies and Strategies

The *RTLB Professional Practice Toolkit* (Ministry of Education, 2020) states that RTLB “work alongside schools and kura to provide learning support when it is needed” (p.4) and “help mokopuna fulfil their learning potential when barriers they face exceed the support from general classroom education and related resources” (p.4). As explored in the survey responses, many Mensa NZ members experienced a range of barriers to learning at a level appropriate for them in the school context, often finding that the content being taught and the teaching methods did not align with their learning needs.

The *Learning Support Delivery Model* (Ministry of Education, n.d.) is one of several policies from the Ministry of Education that RTLB are obligated to support through their practice. As stated in the *RTLB Professional Practice Toolkit*, this model “organises learning support to best meet the needs of all mokopuna with learning support needs within a local community, including those who are neurodiverse, gifted, and at risk of disengaging from education” (p.10). The specific emphasis on gifted learners here indicates that these ākongā are within the scope of practice for RTLB.

Another strategy of significance is the *Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025* (Ministry of Education, 2019), which identifies gifted learners as Priority 5: 'Meeting the Needs of Gifted Children and Young People.' The importance of addressing the learning needs of gifted ākonga is underscored by the statement: "If their needs are not recognised and supported, gifted children may not progress to their potential, which may impact their identity and social and emotional wellbeing" (p.35). Additionally, the national *Attendance and Engagement Strategy* (Ministry of Education, 2022) states that "Ākonga with unmet learning support needs are more likely to have low attendance and engagement in education" (p.9).

Defining the Role of RTLB

The *Neurodiversity in Education Project [formerly the New Zealand Centre for Gifted Education]* (2024-a) elaborates on the serious consequences of inadequate support for gifted learners, noting that "Gifted kids who are not recognised and supported at school are at real risk of underachieving, misbehaving through boredom and frustration, and disengaging. If they are not helped to understand themselves and their needs, they may mask their abilities and qualities to avoid feeling different. Not being able to be their true selves can undermine their mauri and their mental health." The survey responses also reflected the severity of these consequences, including over the longer term, for many Mensa NZ members.

As such, RTLB have an essential role in supporting schools to ensure that the needs of gifted learners are appropriately met. The RTLB Professional Practice Toolkit states that "The RTLB service is a critical component of the network of learning support provision" (p.6). An important aspect of this role is advocacy; Wiskow et al. (2011) notes that "various individuals connected to the school environment play a vital role in advocacy for gifted children and programs" (p.23) and that "these individuals should use their influence and play an active role in accomplishing the shared goal of increased services and attention for gifted children" (p.23).

To effectively support schools, it is important for RTLB to understand the needs of gifted learners and how these can be met in the school context. The resource *Gifted and Talented Students - Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools* (Ministry of Education, 2012) provides valuable insights into how schools can support gifted students through five key components: the concepts of giftedness, characteristics, identification, provision, and ongoing self-review.

Implementing the appropriate support for gifted learners often presents significant challenges for schools. The *Neurodiversity in Education Project* (2024-b) notes that "few schools have teachers or leaders experienced in gifted education." This is where RTLB can make a meaningful difference: as New Zealand gifted specialist and advocate Dr. Rosemary Cathcart (2002) states, RTLB "are in a position to help demystify giftedness and to bring about equity of opportunity for the gifted child in our midst" (p.11).

Implications: A Summary Document of RTLB Role and Responsibilities in Gifted Education

Based on the survey responses and relevant literature, and in consultation with a small sense-making group of RTLB, I have developed this document to outline the role and responsibilities RTLB have in gifted education. The points have been organised around the six teaching professional standards (Teaching

Council of New Zealand, 2017), highlighting the knowledge and practical actions that RTLB can implement to effectively support gifted learners and schools.

'The Role of RTLB in Gifted Education' - Guidelines for RTLB

	Knowledge and Understanding / Actions for RTLB
Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To have an understanding of overarching Māori concepts of giftedness. ● To recognise that these concepts will vary between iwi. ● To work in partnership with local iwi to explore local Māori perspectives on giftedness in order to inform understanding of this for our region.
Professional learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To recognise that gifted learners come under the umbrella of learning support, and as such within our scope of practice as RTLB. ● To have an awareness of the nature of giftedness and the many domains and perspectives that this term can encompass, including the understanding that different cultural groups and communities have their own specific perspectives on what defines giftedness. ● To recognise that as RTLB we need to have an understanding of the cultural makeup of the schools we work in, particularly our liaison schools, in order to enhance our awareness of the perspectives on giftedness within these communities ● To understand why support for gifted learners is crucial, including recognising the potential short and long-term impacts of unmet support needs. ● To be aware of the diverse ways in which gifted learners may present within the school context, especially if their area of giftedness is not immediately evident. ● To understand that there is a link between giftedness and an increased likelihood of additional neurodivergent diagnoses (e.g. autism, ADHD, dyslexia).
Professional relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To utilise the connection with Learning Support Coordinators and/or Sencos as the starting point for exploring and developing gifted education policies and strategies within schools. ● To facilitate collaboration and identify areas where specialised support for gifted learners is needed. ● To facilitate collaboration between teachers, parents, and other professionals to ensure that gifted learners receive holistic support that addresses their academic, social, and emotional needs. ● To have knowledge of relevant agencies and specialists we can collaborate with to enhance our own professional knowledge, and to connect schools and teachers with as needed. ● To understand the importance of schools and teachers being equipped with strategies for establishing and maintaining strong relationships with gifted learners and their whānau.

Learning-focussed culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To advocate for the inclusion of gifted learners' needs in school policies and practices, promoting educational equity by acknowledging that their learning support needs are just as important as those of students with other needs. ● To be aware of barriers to learning engagement and progress, as well as social/emotional wellbeing, that gifted learners often face in schools (e.g. Tall Poppy Syndrome). ● To address myths and grow positive mindsets about giftedness within schools in order to actively discourage these barriers and promote a safe environment for gifted learners. ● To consider the importance of effective transitions for gifted learners and to provide support for this where needed. ● To recognise and raise awareness of the importance of discussing and planning pathways beyond school through future-focussed conversations.
Design for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To have knowledge of key documents and resources, including identification tools and evidence-based practices, that promote effective educational engagement, academic progress, and the social-emotional development of gifted learners. ● To have the capability to support the development of policies for gifted learners, along with an understanding of effective system-wide approaches and implementation. ● To have knowledge of the ways in which gifted learners can be identified, including through screening checklists, standardised assessments, and nominations from teachers, whānau, and peers, and that once a learner has been identified as gifted, other areas of neurodivergence may also need to be considered. ● To be aware of the need of gifted learners to connect with 'like minds' and have an understanding of ways in which this can be facilitated.
Teaching	<p><i>In addition to the points in 'Learning-focussed culture' and 'Design for learning':</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To recognise the importance and significance of learner agency for gifted learners and how this can be effectively facilitated in the classroom/school context. ● To have the capability to organise and/or lead professional development opportunities for schools and teachers, in order to develop their understanding and capability to support gifted learners.

If you would like to access a PDF of this document, please follow this link: ['The Role of RTLB in Gifted Education' - Guidelines for RTLB](#)

Conclusion

The policies and strategies relevant to RTLB practice discussed in Part 3, along with the additional literature explored, emphasise the learning support needs of gifted children and young people. When viewed alongside the survey findings, the critical role RTLB have in ensuring appropriate support for them in our schools is clearly evident. In response to this, the document above, *'The Role of RTLB in Gifted Education' - Guidelines for RTLB*, outlines the knowledge and skills RTLB need in order to be able to undertake this effectively. Overall, my hope is that this inquiry will enhance awareness and understanding among RTLB about the vital responsibility we have in supporting our schools nationwide to address the unique needs of gifted learners.

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- Dr Rosemary Cathcart, for taking the time to share her knowledge and wisdom with our RTLB sense-making group, and for supporting us in our practice through offering continued connection and collaboration.



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