The problem in life is not in receiving answers. The problem is in identifying your current questions. Once you get the question right, the answers always come.

The NSW State Government and the NSW Department of School Education, released mandatory policies in relation to the educational provision for gifted and talented students in April 1991 and in November 1991 respectively. The Government paper was entitled the NSW Government Strategy for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students. The NSW Department of School Education subsequently released its mandatory
policy Implementation Strategies for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students  The definitions of both documents and policies, as might be expected, were identical. :

Gifted students are those with the potential to exhibit superior performance across a range of areas of endeavour.

Talented students are those with the potential to exhibit superior performance in one area of endeavour.

To place this particular study in context, it should be stated initially that there have been very few studies undertaken in gifted education in the Australian context, in relation to young children in junior primary classrooms. In the Early Childhood field, little research exists in relation to the educational provision for gifted and talented students, either nationally or internationally, to inform this study.


The importance of the early years of the child is now internationally acknowledged as the time of the most rapid learning and development. It is the responsibility of all early childhood educators to honour the importance of the early years, by providing for the care and education of all children. (my emphasis)(Duffie 1991:10)

In spite of this, current practice in NSW government schools, makes optional educational provision for students who are gifted and /or talented at the 5th and 6th grade level and only using the segregated model, or later with entry to Selective High Schools. Almost all of the 'gifted' camps in NSW are for children of primary school age, with emphasis on the older students. Any programs that exist for younger children are run on an individual or group basis, often at the instigation of a single teacher or concerned parent, and vary dramatically between educational settings. There is also dramatic difference depending on the philosophical leanings of the provider, the premise on which the program was founded, and the time and resources allocated to the program.

Within this context, this study was launched to explore how teachers of young children were constructing their theories of giftedness and talent, and the implications of those theories for the identificaiton of, and provision for, young children.
Criteria for selection of sites.
There were a number of considerations for the selection of sites for this case study. In order to conduct this study of the construction of giftedness by teachers, access to teachers in early childhood settings (i.e. working with children between the ages of four years and six months and eight years and eleven months) had to be provided. Certain selection criteria were therefore established for the schools and the teachers who participated in the study.

Original contact was made through the regional consultants in the three systems, State, Catholic and Independent. Each consultant was approached to nominate a school which espoused excellent practice in relation to educational provision for young children who were gifted/talented, and who expressed an interest in being involved in an ongoing research project. Initially, two schools, one from the Catholic system and one from the State system, were selected to take part in a pilot study conducted in 1994 and then the same process was used again to identify three other schools to participate in the study.

Each of the selected schools has a strong affiliation with the education of talent and giftedness in children and has in place clear policy guidelines. Both the executive and the teachers of the individual schools have expressed enthusiasm and a willingness to be involved in the ongoing research.

A number of schools met this criteria, but the final three schools were selected because they are actively involved in defining and redefining programs in relation to gifted education. 1 school was selected from across each of the three systems in NSW- State, Catholic and Independent. This distinction between the systems was made, because each system has approached the policymaking and decision making in different ways, from different perspectives, and from differing governing principles. While there is an overriding State policy in this area, and while governed by this, each school has interpreted the State policy in line with other mandatory social, religious, or economic policies that influence the responses of their school to this concern. This delineation is necessary due to school organisational procedures which may be nontraditional in their nature.

Another differentiation was the enrolment policies of each school within its system. Each school has a different social context in relation to school population. State schools have a mandate to provide education to all children who wish to enrol. Independent and Catholic schools have much stricter and more diverse enrolment screening procedures resulting in different clientele in each setting.
One school setting was researched per term, (one school per term for three terms) allowing for the last term in the research cycle to consolidate, revisit and clarify. This helped to eliminate the fear of withdrawal by the teachers, as their ongoing intensive commitment was only for the duration of one term, with the fourth term of the year for the follow up visits. This was also an attempt not to overburden already committed teachers, as it did not require that they be maintained in their particular educational setting for the entire year. For follow up interviews, the teachers could, if necessary, be accessed for the final visit outside their original educational setting.

Criteria for selection of teachers
Within each of the selected schools three or four teachers were then invited to take part in the study. The participants were teaching either Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd or 3rd grade and/ or children within the four to eight year range. This age range is declarative as it is the designated early childhood framework established in NSW by such recognised bodies as Early Childhood Education Council, and the Department of School Education.

Individual teachers participating in the study had expressed an interest in gifted education and had been nominated by executive or school personnel as interested in, and already practicing in, this area. Each of the teachers had the permission of the Principal to be involved and had completed some form of in-service, or training in gifted education. This criteria was added as a result of the pilot study in which teachers were required to have expressed an interest in, but not necessarily studied in, the area of gifted education. The pilot study demonstrated how teachers were constructing their theories, but not specifically in the area of gifted education, as they had little prerequisite knowledge or experience in the required area.

Some of the participant teachers had already completed, or were currently completing, a course of study in the area of gifted education, to achieve both personal and professional goals. Perceptions of exemplary practice were discussed, requiring participants to have given some preliminary thought to the issues and concerns in gifted education. In addition many of the teachers had formulated and trialed programs either for individuals or groups of students who were identified as gifted and/or talented using quite diverse identification criteria.

Rationale
Educators generally agree that no process is more fundamentally important in one's thinking about education than the teaching and learning process. This process, some say, of teaching and learning lies at the very heart of education and the more one knows about this
process, the better one will be able to influence its growth and direction (Solás 1992). There have been many studies in which the focus has been either firstly, on the personal characteristics of teachers' and students, or secondly, on the behaviour of teachers and students. However a third approach described in the literature, is to inquire about this process directly from those with the most involvement: that is to actively involve those participants in the act of revealing their beliefs, while maintaining the integrity of the educators (Clandinin & Connelly 1988).

Contemporary educationalists are continually urging that recognition be given to the perspectives of the people principally engaged in classroom interaction because 'what teachers and students do is directed in no small measure by what they think' (Wittrock 1986, 1987). It is therefore important to facilitate their articulation of their thoughts on their own terms, and in their chosen vernacular as they are the only witness to their own thinking. Studies by a number of researchers have successfully documented attempts to discover something about teacher thinking, from the perspectives of the teachers themselves (Clarke & Peterson 1986, Halkes & Olson 1984, Verloop 1988), and these were used as a guide to investigate teacher thinking about giftedness.

Constructivist research, focuses on how participants create knowledge by relating their past experiences and personal purposes to the subjects they are studying (Schon 1987, Ely 1991). It concentrates on the individual's construction of a theory, concept or attitude. A constructionist view of a profession leads us to see its practitioners as 'worldmakers whose armamentarium gives them frames with which to envisage coherence and tools with which to impose. their images on situations of their practice' (Schon 1987:218).

In studying how knowledge is culturally created, the focus is on the social construction of meaning. If researchers are working on the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed, then it could be argued that present and future actions and behaviours are influenced by significant past cultural constructions. It could also be argued that, using these assumptions, the professional practitioner is just 'like the artist, a maker of things (Schon 1987:218).

It must be stated here that for the purpose of this study the term 'belief' is an inclusive term following the principles offered by Rokeach (1980) who states that values are the most centrally and powerfully held beliefs and therefore are the most difficult to change. The interviews with the participant teachers did inevitably raise other aspects of belief such as judgements, perceptions, predispositions, biases, and values in relation to talent and giftedness, and were at times used interchangeably by the participants.
THE STUDY
This study was informed by twelve teachers across a range of three schools from three geographically different early years of schooling settings across the State, Independent and Catholic systems of NSW. The participants were teaching classes that ranged from Kindergarten to Grade 3, with children's ages from four years six months, to nine years one month.

The main methods of data gathering throughout this research was interview (with all interviews being audiorecorded) and teacher journals, supported by classroom observation. The teachers' journals were commenced during the initial interview schedule of one school term, but were maintained for another three terms as a record of subsequent reflection and growth. A final interview and journal discussion took place within twelve months of the initial interview.

The key aim of the research was to investigate the construction of teachers thinking in relation to their understanding of, and identification of, giftedness in young children and the implications that these theories had for their practices in their classroom. This study therefore was a case study of teachers' contruction of their theories of giftedness, with resultant implications for their classroom practice. The role of the researcher was to encourage the participants to make explicit their beliefs about giftedness, and the implications of that understanding, for the identification of the young gifted children within their classes.

While there was only a small number of teachers in the study, this was compensated for by the intensive mode of, and the variety of, methods of data gathering techniques which were used to collect in depth data, and to triangulate the data.

Case study.
Therefore, one such research method that successfully incorporated the criteria of the research was the case study. This method has found increased popularity in recent years, especially in the fields of contemporary social science and, more specifically, in educational research (Wiersma 1986) The case study in this research was the construction of teachers' theories of giftedness, while teaching young children in early years of schooling classrooms. While wider popularity and success of this method is also marked by an equally diverse range of techniques employed in the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, it was imperative that observation and interview remained the heart of this study.
The purpose of the observation and the interview was to probe deeply the questions posed in relation to the construction of giftedness, and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the perspectives of the concept (Le Compte et al 1992). Similarities and differences were also noted between teachers' espoused theory and existing models and theories, and between espoused theory and practice. One very commonly cited reason was the conflict and frustration teachers experienced between personal commitment and 'administrivia'.

While there are two types of observation related to a case study, participant and non-participant observation, (Cohen and Manion 1989) the preferred style for this study was participant observation. The rationale for this particular type of observation was that in many cases the view of the participants who are on the inside looking out, is somewhat different from the view of the observer who is on the outside looking in (Gay 1990).

One very critical aspect of participant observation relates to the idea of contextualisation: the observer must understand the context in which the individuals are thinking and reacting, in order to understand the behaviour. In many cases the participant observer attempts to assume the role of the individuals under study and to actually experience their thoughts, feelings and actions. (Wiersma 1986). In this study, the researcher needed to encourage the participants to make explicit their beliefs about giftedness, and the implications of that understanding, for the identification of, and the provision for, the young gifted children within their classes... This certainly raised to their consciousnes oftentimes very strong feelings and reactions, sometimes of anger, resentment, frustration, guilt, concern, joy and sadness, and the researchers role was to encourage the participants to identify and articulate that particular incident or experience in relation to how it was used in the construction of their theory. The researcher in this study, has extensive experience in education at many levels and felt extremely comfortable in making relevant and accurate observations, but was all too frequently amazed at the honesty, integrity, and dedication of the participants. The researcher attempted to act as a positive reinforcer and hopefully reflected confirmation to all participants, throughout the entire process.

The teachers themselves acknowledged that the process involved in the research, had forced them to question and evaluate their own beliefs and attitudes in relation to giftedness. Some of these beliefs had been gained through their personal life experiences, and some had been gained during their professional life as teachers of young children. Whatever their present beliefs and attitudes, it was relatively certain that these had been gained on the basis of evaluative responding, that is to say that the
teachers had formed these attitudes towards giftedness on the basis that they had responded evaluatively to an entity on an affective, behavioural or cognitive level and thus added to their knowledge and experience (Eagley & Chaiken 1993). The research did in fact, highlight quite clearly the teachers' own perceptions of self in relation to their own professional understanding and the implications that these beliefs held for their teaching practices in relation to gifted education.

Another critical factor was that the observer must have the option of interpreting events and this interpretation is critical to the results. It is therefore imperative for the researcher to declare personal and professional assumptions with clarity and with honesty.

Lofland and Lofland (1984) describe it in these words:

Classical participant observation.......always involves the interweaving of looking and listening....of watching and asking.....and some of that listening and asking may approach, or be identical, to intensive interviewing. Conversely, intensive interview studies may involve repeated and prolonged contact between researchers and informants,......with considerable mutual involvement in personal lives......a characteristic often considered a hallmark of participant observation.(p13)

It is a very strong belief of this researcher that observation studies are superior to experiments and surveys when data on non verbal behaviours are being collected (Clandinin and Connelly 1988). While a selection of the teacher's verbal statements can be taped and transcribed, the nonverbal behaviours, facial expressions, interchanges with the students, body language, tone and tenor of the voice, silences, can also be recorded most effectively with observation (Ely 1984). Even though teacher's verbalise appropriate words, oftentimes, 'the tenor and tone of the voice convey a different message to the listener' (Cohen and Manion 1989).

Ongoing and/or repetitive teacher behaviour was able to be noted as it occurred, and the researcher was able to make appropriate notes about the most salient features (Ely et al 1991). The rationale for this procedure was the belief that if teacher behaviours are repeated, then they must impact on the behaviour, attitude and performance of the student (Eagly & Chaiken 1993). Students receiving continuing messages soon internalise them and while some of these messages were positive and supportive, some could perhaps be perceived to be negative and debilitating in nature (Eby 1992). This awareness became even more relevant when dealing with children whose abilities and perceptiveness were highly accelerated (Delisle 1992).
Because the case study was conducted over time, the relationship between interviewer and participant became much less formal and much more open as the participants began to feel more comfortable with the interviewer, and more confident about revealing their own truths. The risk-taking increased and they felt more able to freely verbalise their feelings and beliefs. This naturalistic setting was much more conducive to confirming and expanding their feelings and beliefs as it gave the participants time and space to reflect (Guba and Lincoln 1983). As Chelsea put it 'I almost need you to come ....it make me get out of the rat -race and re-energise and take stock.....it has given me time to really think,......I don't think I really did think before'.

Irena's words were: 'It gave me time to think..to take time to actually think about the problems for myself, rather than reacting impulsively all the time.....I know am working on the pro-active rather than the re-active state of mind.'

Anita put it this way: 'I always automatically accepted the views of others....I thought that they were more experienced and therefore more knowledgeable than me. Now I dont accept quite as readily, because some of them aren't knowlegeable about today's stuff.....today's kids. Mind you, this has got me into a bit of trouble with some of them.....but it's OK now.....now I can take it.'

Another critical factor was the belief that case study observations are less reactive and more proactive than other types of data-gathering methods (Guba et al 1983). The interviews were deliberately constructed to avoid confrontation and build trust, but also to incorporate challenges to their established thinking. Silences were used frequently, after which the teachers often answered their own questions. One example was with Pauline: "Lots of quick kids ask a lot of questions which I find points as an indicator to them being gifted......they want to know why. It drives me insane sometimes but they want to keep on going. Why is that so?....(Pause)...Its curiosity to begin with and then a real surge for knowledge. Its deeper. A high level of thinking trying to understand something at a more complex level......now you've got me doing it too. (Laughs).

This process was always conducted gently, but was always to focus or refocus on the pertinent question. As Margaret Le Compte says in her Handbook of Qualitative Research:

The interviewee feels more ownership of the material, the time and the authority and less threatened by invasion or intrusion (LeCompte et al 1992).
Interview

Qualitative research, and in particular, case study, provides a great many opportunities to interact with, and talk with, the participants (Ely 1991). This study was constructed to be no exception to that rule. The schedule of 'talking' was anticipated to be an extremely rich source of data because the interview is at the heart of ethnographic research. Margot Ely puts it this way...the interview seeks the words of the people we are studying...so we can understand their situations with increasing clarity' (p58). Penny, who teaches a class of intellectually gifted children commented: 'There was an incident the other day in the playground. There were some children who were involved in flicking paper up to the toilet roof...and I found out it was two students in my class and I was really shocked, because emotionally, I didn't think they would be on such a low level of behaviour as that. I was so shocked...why would you want to do such a babyish thing?'

An interview may be described as a 'purposeful conversation between two people...that is directed by one in order to get information' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p 135). To quote again from Margot Ely: the major purpose of the interview is to learn to see the world from the eyes of the person being interviewed, to strive to come closer to understanding the participants' meanings, to learn from them as informants and to discover how they organise their behaviour (Ely 1991, p58).

The key is that the person interviewed is a full partner in the endeavour and often provides the surprising and useful directions not allowed by other more researcher - centred interviews. The tasks of the interviewer in participant observation include providing focus, observing, giving direction, being sensitive to clues given by participants, probing, questioning, listening, amalgamating statements, and generally being as involved as possible. ....the interviews are interwoven dances of questions and answers in which the researcher follows as well as leads (Ely, 1984, p4-5).

Pauline: We're known for putting on extremely funny skits. It probably comes from me being a bit wacky too. But we dressed up as Madonna and Dolly Parton and all sorts of stuff, like crazy commercials.....that's another signal isn't it? Their sense of humour, they create a flair....a very zany sense of humour and a creative way of looking at things.

Interviewer: They see the funny side of things that we don't see?

Pauline: They are so witty..they can play on words and situations that they come up with.
Interviewer: They can remember long spiels?

Pauline: Like a string of Monty Python or John Clease. They don't just remember it, they act it out. We do a lot of drama....we use a video machine...depending on the subject area or the key learning area. But they really do that very well.

Oral feedback, for the purpose of clarification, triangulation and verification was made throughout the interview schedule, with such questions as '...You previously made a reference to....would you care to expand that? Last week you mentioned .....have you had any more thoughts on that?' Constant attempts were made throughout the study, to ensure that the teachers' original understandings were being maintained, by consistent questioning throughout the interview seeking clarificaton, and by feedback on their transcripts both orally and in the written form, throughout the study. This occurred once at the end of the first phase of data collection, the intensive term-long phase, and once at the end of the revisit, which occurred up to two or three terms subsequent to the intensive mode of the study. Participants review comments, clarifications and additions were noted and discussed.

It always remained the prerogative of the participants to initiate a contact interview at any time, if the participant believed that the information pending was vital and needed to be attended to immediately. This option was not exercised by any participant. When questioned on this, the most common reason was given as lack of time due to 'administrivia'. Krissy stated: I was always saying in the staffroom...if only Janice could have heard that......she'd have been dancing on the ceiling...but by the time I got to the end of the day I was too tired and I never remembered ..except at 2 a.m. in the morning..

Throughout the entire study, the researcher did not intentionally criticise individual purpose or practice but rather attempted to view the phenomena from a number of perspectives with the intention of illuminating current concerns in relation to identification of, and provision for, young gifted children. The participants were continually reassured that there was no element of 'wrongness' or 'rightness' to their responses, and as time progressed, and the relationship strengthened, the answers became more reflective,. and appeared to be more open and more forthcoming.

This paper has attempted to outline only one segment of a much larger project, - the methodology used to collect the data- and has not attempted to discuss results. This will be the essence of another paper, at another time and place.
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