

# Above the standard

The national standards should be used to identify gifted students, suggests JENNY HORSLEY



**THIS PAST NEW ZEALAND** winter, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to escape the vagaries of Wellington's weather to the warmer, more predictable climate of Mount Washington, in Maryland, USA. Through the generosity of a Fulbright-Cognition Education Research Trust Scholar Award I travelled to the United States and spent 15 weeks researching provisions for students of high-academic ability, through the work of the Center for Talented Youth (CTY) at Johns Hopkins University. When compared with the work of this august group of CTY academics, New Zealand's foray into researching and making provision for the country's most able students, seems somewhat less developed, and across levels appears to be both inconsistent and disparate.

Central to the identification of individuals of high academic ability, is the CTY Talent Search that uses "above-level" testing (using above average level aptitude tests) to identify, assess, and make provision for students with exceptional abilities in either or both of the areas of mathematical and verbal reasoning.

Julian Stanley, the founder of CTY and the Study of Exceptional Talent (SET) made clear that his intention of providing for high ability students was to augment and complement school-based instruction, not to replace or invade it. Even though these provisions are out of school opportunities, there is a lesson to be gained from examining the CTY model that could be implemented in New Zealand primary schools to assist in identifying and making provision for this country's most academically able students.

The CTY use the American examination system to encourage and celebrate academic excellence. Those students who score in the 97th percentile or above in their regular school testing are nominated by their teacher or parents for inclusion in the annual CTY Talent Search. The Talent Search uses SAT tests, which are pre-college (university) entry reasoning tests, more traditionally taken by high-school students aiming to gain entry to a college. The Talent Search students taking the SATs are several years younger – most often – in Grade 7. The CTY offers these students – and on occasion, their families – a range of evidence-based programmes that have been shown to make a sustained and positive difference to academic and social outcomes. Importantly, CTY join with other institutions to support traditionally under-represented students of high ability

or potential. These students have shown that targeted academic support enables them to make academic gains commensurate with the levels required for acceptance into competitive colleges.

The Qualifications Authority (NZQA) has acknowledged and recognised that we have within New Zealand a 'top' cohort of students who gain NZQA Scholarship. In the NCEA we also identify the most able students through Merit and Excellence endorsements, with these groups in 2008 comprising four to six per cent for Excellence and within the range of range 17-23 per cent for Merit across the three levels.

This recognition of our most able secondary students, suggests an omission in the templates that are part of the new national standards in primary schools. Whereas there are two levels below 'at standard', there is only one level 'above standard'. Minister of Education Anne Tolley suggests: "national standards are all about identifying children who need extra help in reading, writing and maths and making sure they get the support they need to make progress."

Yet the fact that these standards will be introduced into all New Zealand primary schools suggests an opportunity to identify those students are performing not only above, but well above the perceived standard. This would assist teachers – and parents – to identify and making provision for those students of high-academic ability.

The 2008 Education Review Office (ERO) report into schools' provision for gifted and talented learners recommended that the Ministry of Education consider how best to: "Encourage schools to develop improved assessment strategies consistent with the New Zealand Curriculum, to demonstrate the range of abilities' and the achievement of gifted and talented students."

The information surrounding the new standards makes it clear that these standards are aimed at identifying those students at risk of failure. However, it does seem that the government may have missed an obvious opportunity to integrate the use of assessment information to identify those students who are more than 'above' the national standard, who clearly require a curriculum that meets their needs rather than their age. This may well be a simple oversight and is certainly something that could easily be adjusted to make provision for these students.

Using the national template to identify students of high academic ability, will assist teachers to provide, as suggested by ERO:

- challenging and differentiated programmes for gifted and talented learners in the regular classroom;
- appropriate feedback and support for gifted and talented students to achieve in and make progress with their gifted or talents.

*Whereas there are two levels below 'at standard', there is only one level 'above standard'. Minister of Education Anne Tolley suggests: "national standards are all about identifying children who need extra help in reading, writing and maths and making sure they get the support they need to make progress."*

Perhaps the greatest outcome of my time at Johns Hopkins CTY is my increased conviction in the importance of available, appropriate academic provisions for students of high academic ability. The NZQA and the secondary sector are acknowledging 'top' achievement and designing curricula to make clear how it can be attained. Students working across other levels of the New Zealand curriculum also deserve these opportunities to excel and have this attainment recognised though appropriate academic provisions.

With just a little adjustment, this ought to be possible for those students in Years 1-8 where the new national standards are being implemented. Acknowledging those New Zealand students performing well above the national standards – across all years – will be a positive move towards the establishment of a cohesive national approach to identifying and meeting the needs of New Zealand's most academically able students.

Jenny Horsley is a lecturer in the School of Educational Psychology and Pedagogy at Victoria University.