

# Fruits of the Fig Tree

## Counsellors' Roles in Assisting Gifted and Talented Adolescents to Address Their Multipotentiality

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### **Abstract**

Multipotentiality in gifted and talented adolescents refers to the fact that these individuals have numerous and diverse abilities and interests that can affect their career choices and decisionmaking. To help these young people achieve their potential, a broad understanding of the nature and effects of multipotentiality is crucial, as is emotional support and advocacy from counsellors—with school guidance counsellors and careers counsellors ideally placed to assist. This article provides information and ideas from relevant academic literature and research to facilitate understanding of the associated concepts, and to introduce suggested interventions for use with multipotential gifted and talented young people. The principal findings from the review of literature suggest the usefulness of specifically targeted counselling that is underpinned by an understanding of the implications of multipotentiality; an holistic, values-based and lifespan approach to career planning; mentoring; experiential learning; and early intervention, coupled with long-term planning and broad academic study. It has also become clear that much more research is required, particularly from New Zealand viewpoints.

**Keywords:** gifted and talented, multipotentiality, counselling interventions, advocacy, New Zealand

Career choice in and of itself may be difficult. It can become more difficult for the gifted and talented who are affected by a trait known as multipotentiality. By means of a review of the literature, this article presents an overview of multipotentiality and how it can affect gifted and talented adolescents. An exploration of this area and the

associated literature was previously published in the *Journal of Counseling and Development* (Rysiew, Shore, & Leeb, 1999) and this review builds on that foundation.

Initially a broad definition of giftedness and talent is developed, along with a definition of multipotentiality. The article then addresses the factors that can make multipotentiality a challenge for gifted and talented adolescents, how they can be adversely affected, behaviours and characteristics that may be evident, and counselling interventions that may be useful. Finally, areas for further research in the New Zealand context are recommended.

Originally it was intended that this review include only literature published after 1999. Due to a paucity of relevant theory and research, it became apparent that this timeframe would need to be extended to incorporate older but still relevant information. This serves to highlight the ongoing need for research in this area. Of the articles included, each author's credibility was confirmed by reviewing citations of their work within the academic community and reviewing their credentials, largely via the academic search engines of Google Scholar and EBSCO Discover Publishing. Where possible, New Zealand sources have taken precedence over international literature.

### **Defining the terminology**

Counsellors are exposed daily to different sets of terminology that can be associated with clients, colleagues, agencies, or even the modalities used in counselling practice. Understanding concepts and terminology can be one of the first steps in gaining an appreciation of the presenting issues and the cultures of the people with whom we work. In this instance, we need to find a workable definition of both gifted and talented *and* of multipotentiality. As R. Moltzen (2011a) has pointed out, there is no simple definition for either "gifted and talented" or "multipotentiality." Being "gifted and talented" is a phrase used to describe someone who does, or has the potential to, excel in a particular area or areas of life (Gallagher, 2008). Areas of giftedness are varied and inclusive, incorporating academic, technical, or mechanical excellence; creative, intuitive, or productive thinking; the fine arts; general intelligence; psychomotor or sporting prowess; advanced leadership and social skills; and/or being culturally, spiritually, or even empathetically extraordinary (R. Moltzen, 2011a; Piechowski, 2002).

When reporting on the academic needs of gifted and talented children to the New Zealand Ministry of Education, Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind, and Kearney (2004) made it clear that reported definitions within our schools may be "broad and multi-categorical" (p. 12) but that giftedness in cultural, spiritual, and

emotional areas remains undersupported. They also noted concern that these definitions often exclude Māori and Pasifika perspectives and values (Riley et al., 2004).

R. Moltzen (2011a) has argued that a major factor that influences settling on a definition is the idea that giftedness is a sociocultural construct and fluid in its nature; therein lies strength through dynamic change and inclusiveness. Peterson (2006) asserted that any definition of the gifted and talented must encompass any and all talents, while at the same time incorporating culture.

There is no comprehensive, accepted definition; however, a starting point is needed. Canadian gifted and talented researcher and advocate Dr Meredith Greene (2006) succinctly and sufficiently explains that “gifted individuals are capable of or demonstrate superior performance” (p. 1) and “this can be demonstrated by a variety of behaviours and in many different domains” (p. 2). Finally, where giftedness is evident, we see an individual for whom their “development and experience...is unique and significantly different from their age-peers” (Elijah & Crawfordsville, 2011, p. 2).

In essence, multipotentiality is the ability of a gifted and talented individual to maintain interests and talents across a number of differing fields (Colangelo, 2002). Multipotentiality therefore includes the “ability to select and develop any number of career options because of a wide variety of interests, aptitudes, and abilities” (Kerr, 1990, p. 1).

In and of itself, multipotentiality does not always present as problematic and in some cases, particularly in the contemporary workplace, may be an asset (Elijah & Crawfordsville, 2011; Kim, 2013; Sajjadi, Rejskind, & Shore, 2001). However, it can cause problems for gifted and talented individuals when it adversely affects their career choice and, as a result, their emotional wellbeing and sense of self (Colangelo, 2002; Greene, 2006; Kerr, 1990; Leung, Conoley, & Scheel, 1994; Peterson, 2001).

Kerr (1990) outlined evidence of multipotentiality in children and young people being seen in overcommitment, lack of completion of projects and goals, a lack of clear preferences in interests, or the inability to allow oneself time to “just be.” However, these concerns may not be obvious in gifted and talented individuals who achieve at a very high level (Kerr, 1990).

In essence, for gifted and talented individuals with multipotentiality, “the problem is how to make a decision, how to choose a path from so many realistic possibilities?” (Colangelo, 2002, p. 377). For a counsellor, the question is how to support this individual so that his or her multipotentiality is experienced as a positive trait, and not as a disadvantage.

### Why focus on multipotentiality?

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath, 1966, p. 80)

Few would argue with the idea that the late Pulitzer Prize-winner Sylvia Plath was an extremely gifted and talented writer. In the above excerpt from *The Bell Jar* she succeeds in drawing a vivid picture of the reality of multipotentiality having a negative impact on her life.

Multipotentiality in gifted and talented adolescents has been associated with anxiety, depression, feeling overwhelmed, and existential dilemmas (Greene, 2002, 2006; Maxwell, 2007; Peterson, 2001, 2006; Silverman, 1993a). These feelings and disorders are largely attributed to needing to make choices when faced with the realisation that “it is not possible to do all that they want to do or are capable of doing” (Reis & Hébert, 2008, p. 279).

Having numerous career options may seem attractive, but the reality remains that more choices tend to increase the complexity of decisionmaking (Greene, 2006; Kerr, 1990). For those with multipotentiality, “vocational choice is often perceived as the giving up of options that one cherishes” (Leung et al., 1994, p. 298). Students may find it difficult and painful to narrow career choices down and they may seem to be on a quest to find an ideal career or something that fits them perfectly (Colangelo, 2002; Greene, 2006; Silverman, 1993a).

A common attribute associated with gifted and talented individuals is perfectionism, and multipotentiality can exacerbate this (Colangelo, 2002; Peterson, 2001). There is a very real fear of failure, or of making a choice that forecloses other options (Greene,

2002, 2006; Kerr, 1990; Silverman, 1993a). Even if all options are somehow attempted and incorporated, there may be a concern that the cost of this lies in becoming second rate at everything and mastering nothing (Silverman, 1993a).

Gifted and talented adolescents may also make these choices under a surfeit of expectations from parents, teachers, and society at large. This pressure can overwhelm their own preferences (Colangelo, 2002; Kerr, 1990; Leung et al., 1994; Peterson, 2001, 2006; Peterson & Moon, 2008). As multipotentiality can make the narrowing down of choices difficult, these adolescents may let expectations and coercion make the choice for them, exacerbating their sense of existential limitation (Colangelo, 2002; Jung, 2012; Peterson, 2001; Webb, 1999). There may also be stress associated with making career choices based on others' expectations to achieve perceived financial success and prestige (Colangelo, 2002; Jung, 2012). For some, there is also a sense of shame associated with the inability to decide (Silverman, 1993a).

As these young people experience more of the world, they are exposed to opportunities previously not considered, and their interests and abilities may broaden even more (Kerr & Soldano, 2003; Kim, 2013). As a result of their multipotentiality, adolescents who had decided upon a course of action may then change their minds, leading to significant financial and emotional costs (Colangelo, 2002; Greene, 2006; Kim, 2013). The costs to the individual can include a sense of prolonging adolescence and parental reliance as the young person continues to be supported financially while pursuing their tertiary education (Colangelo, 2002; Shultz & Delisle, 2002). Individuals attending university may change majors a number of times or may drop out altogether (Elijah & Crawfordsville, 2011; Kerr, 1990; Peterson, 2001). Other gifted young people may find themselves using hyperachievement to mask their internal anxieties, thereby increasing their stress as they attempt to live up to others' expectations (Peterson, 2006). This behaviour links back to Kerr's (1990) assertion that early evidence of multipotentiality can be seen in overcommitment.

In the long term, multipotentialed individuals may experience a number of short-term jobs, unemployment, and *underemployment* as they seek to quiet a sense of not quite fitting in anywhere (Kerr, 1990). They may fall behind their age-peers in career progression and life stages as a result (Colangelo, 2002; Kerr 1990; Shultz & Delisle, 2002).

Despite the difficulties they may encounter, multipotentiality in and of itself does not need to become a problem for young people. With awareness and care, multipotentiality can be effectively managed to the point where it appears to have little

negative impact on their lives (Sajjadi et al., 2001). “Giftedness is a condition causing individuals...to question their being” (Shultz & Delisle, 2002, p. 490). Multipotentiality is simply a facet of this. However, appropriate support can be invaluable in assisting them to manage the challenges they may encounter.

### **Providing effective counselling**

Renzulli (2011) and Milgram (1991) make a case for supporting our gifted and talented children’s social and emotional development. They argue that as a society we have a duty to allow these individuals every opportunity to achieve fulfilment, with the pay-off being the contributions they make to society (Milgram, 1991; Renzulli, 2011).

Renzulli (2011) believes that, with the right support, these individuals become society’s problem-solvers and the short-term costs associated with supporting them are more than repaid in the long term. A way for counsellors to support gifted and talented young people is to understand how they are different from others, and not simply how their needs in the counselling space may differ significantly from those of their age-related peers (Blackett & Hermansson, 2005; Colangelo, 2002; Elijah & Crawfordville, 2011; Gallagher, 2011; Greene, 2002; Kerr, 1990; Leung et al., 1994; Maxwell, 2007; Milgram, 1991; Moon, Kelly, & Feldhusen, 1997; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Moon, 2008; Shultz & Delisle, 2002; Silverman, 1993b; Yoo & Moon, 2006). As Kerr (1990, p. 2) states, “the needs of gifted individuals differ from those of more typical individuals,” and just as differentiated support is provided to young people at the lower end of the abilities spectrum, so too it is needed by those with upper-end abilities (Peterson, 2006).

A number of commentators have recommended that professional development opportunities need to be provided to enable counsellors to understand the traits, issues, and needs of the gifted and talented (Blackett & Hermansson, 2005; Colangelo, 2002; Elijah & Crawfordville, 2011; Gallagher, 2011; Greene, 2002; Kerr, 1990; Milgram, 1991; Moon et al., 1997; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Moon, 2008; Yoo & Moon, 2006). Yoo and Moon (2006) summarise some of these personality characteristics as including “perfectionism, excitability, sensitivity, intensity, a desire for recognition..., nonconformity, questioning of rules or authority, [and] a strong sense of justice and idealism” (p. 53). These particular traits may further exacerbate difficulties arising from multipotentiality or, indeed, may contribute to multipotentiality having a negative rather than positive impact on decisionmaking. An understanding of the complexity of gifted and talented individuals will enable more productive counselling to occur (Blackett & Hermansson, 2005; Colangelo, 2002; Elijah & Crawfordville, 2011;

Gallagher, 2011; Greene, 2002; Kerr, 1990; Leung et al., 1994; Maxwell, 2007; Milgram, 1991; Moon et al., 1997; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Moon, 2008; Shultz & Delisle, 2002; Silverman, 1993b; Yoo & Moon, 2006).

Greene (2002) cites Sytsma and the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented as finding that only 13% of American guidance counsellors polled in a survey offered counselling with a gifted and talented focus. Greene (2002) and Milgram (1991) also mention concern that the reality for time-poor guidance counsellors may preclude their gaining the training they need to provide best practice to the gifted and talented. The pressure school guidance counsellors are under was noted in the recent Education Review Office (ERO) report on guidance and counselling in New Zealand secondary schools (ERO, 2013).

Yoo and Moon (2006) instigated an empirical investigation into the concerns and needs of parents of gifted and talented children using a private counselling service. They found that where specifically targeted services existed, they would be used in preference to schools or agencies that did not offer particular expertise. These researchers and others have recommended that counsellors wanting to provide best practice to gifted and talented students undertake specific training in this area, particularly those who work in schools (Elijah & Crawfordsville, 2011; Greene, 2002; Jung, 2012; Milgram, 1991; Yoo & Moon, 2006). Finally, of further interest from Yoo and Moon's (2006) research is that the parents involved in the study indicated a "high need" for career planning and an understanding of developmental stages as they relate to the gifted (Yoo & Moon, 2006, p. 57).

In summary, the literature strongly suggests that specifically targeted counselling services be offered to the gifted and talented and that counsellors be well equipped to work with them (Blackett & Hermansson, 2005; Colangelo, 2002; Elijah & Crawfordsville, 2011; Greene, 2002; Kerr, 1990; Leung et al., 1994; Maxwell, 2007; Milgram, 1991; Moon et al., 1997; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Moon, 2008; Shultz & Delisle, 2002; Silverman, 1993b; Yoo & Moon, 2006). The importance of recognising the characteristics and needs of young people affected by multipotentiality forms one of the findings of this review in terms of how to best support gifted and talented adolescents.

### **Assumptions and expectations**

In order to best serve the needs of the gifted and talented, it is also useful to understand the assumptions and expectations that surround these individuals, including some of the prejudices and pressures associated with being gifted and talented. In reviewing the

literature it is common to find researchers writing about these false assumptions and expectations in order to raise the awareness of readers.

Although the gifted and talented are represented as either maladjusted or superior (N. Moltzen, 2011), common assumptions evident in the literature are that they can take care of themselves and are not at risk or in need of direction (Kerr & Ghrist-Priebe, 1988; Peterson & Moon, 2008; Silverman, 1993a). These views might lead one to believe that career planning takes care of itself (Kerr, 1990). For example, one assumption is that the gifted and talented are well adjusted (Colangelo, 2002) and emotionally “healthy, self-directed and basically self-sufficient” and so have little need for counselling or special services (Peterson, 2006, p. 43). Others assume that gifted and talented adolescents should be “smart enough to figure it out themselves”, the “it” of course being career choice (Peterson, 2006, p. 44). Like most assumptions, these views are deemed to be misguided and show a lack of understanding of what it is to be gifted and talented, as well as how multipotentiality can have an effect on choices (Colangelo, 2002; Kerr, 1990; N. Moltzen, 2011; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Moon, 2008; Silverman, 1993a).

Assumptions and stereotypes based on high ability also influence expectations of the gifted and talented. In particular, as mentioned earlier, there can be huge pressure to achieve, from their families, communities, and from society in general (Leung et al., 1994; Peterson, 2006). Large expectations are placed on them around “not wasting their gift” or, as Colangelo (2002) translates it, “making a decision that is reasonable to an adult” (p. 376).

The weight of these expectations and assumptions feeds into difficulties that gifted and talented adolescents may experience with multipotentiality (Peterson, 2001). One way in which counsellors can help gifted and talented children who are experiencing challenges with multipotentiality is by acting as an advocate (Greene, 2002, 2006; Kerr, 1990; Kim, 2013; Milgram, 1991; Peterson, 2006; Silverman, 1993b).

### **Advocacy**

School guidance counsellors, careers counsellors and others who have an appreciation of the implications of multipotentiality may be able to advocate in schools to shift the educational focus for these children from subject specialisation based on test scores, to celebrating and encouraging their broad curiosity (Greene, 2002). Greene suggests that the school system tends toward preparing students for university or employment and, as such, encourages specialising in areas of academic strength. She argues that for

students with multipotentiality, it would be more useful to encourage them to retain their broad interests and follow their passions, but that school personnel may need to be educated about multipotentiality to appreciate this (Greene, 2002).

Counsellors are well positioned in the school system to collaborate with others to create opportunities for children (Greene, 2002). As advocates, counsellors can clarify and challenge the assumptions and expectations noted in the previous section, which may be held by teachers, parents, and others in school communities (Milgram, 1991; Silverman, 1993b). School guidance counsellors and careers counsellors can also work as advocates with parents, or arrange for others to do so, to help them understand any perceived fallout from multipotentiality (Greene, 2006; Kerr, 1990; Kim, 2013; Milgram, 1991; Peterson, 2006; Silverman, 1993b). This can include clarifying the effects of expectations, in particular parental pressures to make career choices based on financial gains rather than an individual's values (Milgram, 1991; Silverman, 1993b). Counsellors may also work with parents and young people over such things as finding direction, changes in existing or proposed career or university plans, and related matters (Greene, 2006; Silverman, 1993b).

### **Interventions**

Little definitive guidance is available for counsellors on how best to support the gifted and talented struggling with multipotentiality. There are, however, some suggested strategies that can be explored that relate well to common counselling practice. It is recommended that counsellors be proactive about supporting gifted and talented children and young people in general, and those with multipotentiality in particular (Colangelo, 2002; Peterson, 2006; Silverman, 1993a).

### *Knowledge of self and development*

Educating clients in what it is to be gifted and talented and multipotentialed can give them the words to understand themselves (Colangelo, 2002; Kim, 2013; Milgram, 1991; Moon et al., 1997; Peterson, 2006). Counselling individuals from a developmental focus allows them to prepare for changes and stages, and can help strengthen and resource them to face the challenges they are likely to encounter (Colangelo, 2002; Kerr, 1990; Peterson, 2006; Silverman, 1993a).

The literature suggests it is important that individuals understand career exploration as a lifestyle and see career change as acceptable and normal (Colangelo, 2002; Greene, 2006; Peterson, 2006; Silverman, 1993a). This information should be

communicated as early as possible to normalise the experience, and support should be long term and aspirational (Kerr, 1990; Kim, 2013; Leung et al., 1994; Silverman, 1993a). Facilitating group work is also recommended, providing added strength in numbers with peers who appreciate and can relate to one another's experiences, thereby reducing any sense of isolation (Colangelo, 2002; Greene, 2002; Kim, 2013; Peterson, 2006).

From here, a young person can be encouraged toward self-directed but supported learning regarding career options (Leung et al., 1994). Exposure to biographical works of individuals with inspiring careers or who forged their own paths has also been suggested (Kerr, 1990; Maxwell, 2007; Silverman, 1993b).

### *Modalities*

Two specific modalities are recommended in the literature for use with clients with multipotentiality. One group of commentators advocates for Rogerian methods, or person-centred counselling (Kerr & Soldano, 2003; Peterson & Moon, 2008; Silverman, 1993a). The other focuses on strength-based, social constructivism—effectively, narrative methods (Greene, 2002; Maree, Bester, Lubbe, & Beck, 2001; Maxwell, 2007; Peterson, 2006; White, 2011).

Person-centred counselling techniques and Rogers' principles of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard underpin or appear in nearly any given counselling activity (McLeod, 2011). Peterson and Moon's (2008) review of counselling the gifted and talented found that all of the suggested counselling interventions examined had their foundation in, or incorporated aspects of, person-centred counselling, and person-centred techniques have also been specifically identified as effective for clients with multipotentiality (Kerr & Soldano, 2003; Silverman, 1993a).

Individuals with multipotentiality can be seen as striving to achieve self-actualisation (Rogers, 1959), while struggling with a multitude of ways to be and life-paths to explore (Greene, 2002, 2006; Kerr, 1990; Silverman, 1993a). The person-centred belief that clients are able to find their own answers seems to fit perfectly with helping gifted and talented individuals make multipotentiality work for them rather than against them (Kerr & Soldano, 2003; Silverman, 1993a). The literature encourages counsellors to be curious but well-informed in order to broaden the therapeutic alliance, and to use open-ended questioning to allow the client to make his or her own connections (Kerr & Soldano, 2003).

The second counselling modality recommended in the literature for the gifted and talented with multipotentiality is social constructivism and essentially involves narrative therapy (Greene, 2002; Maree et al., 2001; Maxwell, 2007; Peterson, 2006). Narrative therapy works to externalise problems, deconstruct unhelpful life-stories, and challenge negative social constructions (Greene, 2002; Maree et al., 2001; Maxwell, 2007; Nichols, 2011; Peterson, 2006). Narrative interventions occur largely via the narrative construct itself: curious questioning to uncover unique exceptions, and recruiting support within the wider community (Nichols, 2011).

Working from a strength-based, social-constructivist stance can be useful as it intrinsically empowers clients to find their own solutions (Maxwell, 2007). Strength-based work gives individuals a sense of hope through resilience and affirms their decisions and sense of self (Peterson, 2006). The narrative becomes the life plan for each individual, as opposed to developing a career plan for a future employee, and the goal is not a decision, but rather, empowerment and fulfilment (Maxwell, 2007).

At its heart, the narrative modality externalises and names issues as they arise while challenging societal assumptions (White, 2011). These interventions suggest advocacy, and naming and understanding what it is to be gifted and talented, as well as multipotentiality and its effects (Colangelo, 2002; Kim, 2013; Milgram, 1991; Moon et al., 1997; Peterson, 2006).

However, it is useful to note that from a broader counselling perspective a body of research suggests there is little evidence to support the idea that particular modalities are more effective than others (Cooper, 2008). While Peterson and Moon (2008) recommend more research to ascertain the best modality for use with the gifted and talented, Cooper and McLeod (2010) suggest that the optimal modality will be the one that best suits each individual at any particular time.

### *Values-based and holistic career counselling*

It seems clear that working with clients with multipotentiality requires a values-based, whole-person, collaborative stance (Colangelo, 2002; Greene, 2002, 2006; Kerr, 1990; Kerr & Soldano, 2003; Peterson, 2001, 2006; Peterson & Moon, 2008). The work should be individualised and multidimensional, as “career counselling should be life counselling” (Greene, 2002, p. 2). With a deeper understanding of their values, clients become able to look at what in life gives them meaning and how these values shape them as a person (Colangelo, 2002; Greene, 2002, 2006; Kerr, 1990; Kerr & Soldano, 2003; Peterson, 2001, 2006; Peterson & Moon, 2008). From this stance, more effective and fulfilling career choices may become apparent.

When life themes are seen as key to understanding what future directions may be fulfilling, the focus is moved from choosing a career to determining what careers might satisfy the individual (Peterson, 2001; Silverman, 1993b). Taking a holistic, whole-person focus in counselling assists young people to identify what is important to them in the long term (Colangelo, 2002). Focusing on leisure activities, for example, may serve as a means to facilitate conversations around what the individual finds fulfilling (Colangelo, 2002; Kerr, 1990). Discussing young people's lives can help them identify the values that are intrinsically important to them, and may thereby help clarify what careers may be appropriate (Colangelo, 2002; Kerr, 1990; Silverman, 1993b). Case studies that Peterson (2001) presented of counselling with four gifted and talented individuals end with one of the participants mentioning the satisfaction he experienced in finally "finding his bliss" (p. 35) through a career choice that honestly reflected who he was in his world at that point in time. In short, by working collaboratively with clients to look at what gives meaning to their lives, effective career choices may become apparent. Counsellors will have a number of tools available to facilitate this.

#### *Curriculum planning, mentoring, and experiential learning*

School guidance counsellors and career counsellors may help plan an individual's curriculum, both at high school and also at university for those undertaking higher education (Kerr, 1990), although not all gifted and talented children will want, or need, to attend university to reach their goals (Greene, 2002; Leung et al., 1994). Higher education should be seen as a means to an end by counsellors as well as clients, and an appreciation is needed that choices made in high school may change (Greene, 2006).

Broad, non-specific subject choices are recommended as a way for gifted and talented young people with multipotentiality to be open to changing opportunities (Greene, 2006; Kerr, 1990; R. Moltzen, 2011b; Silverman, 1993a). Where university attendance is likely, the literature suggests that an individual undertake a broad undergraduate degree, and that postgraduate study is a more appropriate time for specialisation (Greene, 2006; Kerr, 1990; R. Moltzen, 2011b; Silverman, 1993a). Self-described "multipotentialite" lecturer and blogger Emilie Wapnick also explains that

*the goal of the adviser might not be to help the student ultimately choose (even if they jump around a bit before choosing). There are happy and successful multipotentialites [sic] out there who never choose, who change careers every few*

*years or have multiple careers at once and make it work very nicely.* (Personal communication, 14 October 2013)

The key concept seems to be not to focus too early or the individual risks foreclosing many other opportunities (R. Moltzen, 2011b). Broad options allow for change and, as Wapnick asserts above, some multipotentialed individuals can thrive when there are no limits placed on their choices.

Counsellors, particularly in schools, can be well placed to facilitate mentoring and opportunities for experiential learning, which Milgram (1991) describes as an effective way to test out a reality. Mentoring allows young people the opportunities to try things out, bounce ideas around safely and get a more realistic picture of what is involved in areas of interest (Clasen & Clasen, 2002; Grassinger, Porath, & Ziegler, 2010; Gray, 2001; Kerr, 1990; Kim, 2013; Milgram, 1991; Peterson, 2006; Silverman, 1993b). Mentoring is a holistic approach that aims to develop and extend each gifted and talented individual's potential (Gray, 2001). Reis and Hébert (2008) have noted that multipotentialed boys in particular engage with mentors as a source of emotional support.

Such experiential learning can inspire fresh, new, and unthought-of ideas and opportunities and allow individuals the experience and space to change their minds or cement tentative plans (Kerr, 1990; Kim, 2013; Silverman, 1993a). It may also allow gifted and talented individuals with multipotentiality to gain a sense of what parts of a career they do or do not want to do and create a career path that others had not envisioned (Silverman, 1993b). Thus, broad curricula and opportunities for real experiences with appropriate people are suggested as an effective way to support adolescents with multipotentiality to explore varied and different possibilities.

### **Current practice in New Zealand**

Reviewing the available literature relating to counselling the gifted and talented in general, and multipotentiality in particular, highlights a notable absence of New Zealand voices. The available research tends to have an educational basis and, although useful, may not provide working therapists with much guidance (R. Moltzen, 2011b). Very little has been published from a New Zealand counselling perspective regarding gifted and talented communities—let alone multipotentiality.

What has been published has maintained a broad focus on counselling the gifted and talented (Blackett & Hermansson, 2005; Gallagher, 2011). The published work of these authors (J. Blackett, 2006; Blackett & Hermansson, 2005; Gallagher, 2011) makes

a useful starting point for New Zealand counsellors working with or interested in gifted and talented children. However, information on multipotentiality tends either to originate from overseas or simply mentions it as an issue among others (R. Blackett, 2011; Blackett & Hermansson, 2005). Certainly the bulk of the information in this review has come out of America or Canada and all of the empirical research found was completed in the Northern Hemisphere.

The role of school guidance counsellors in New Zealand is different from that of their American counterparts, and the reality for New Zealand counsellors seems to be that few training or professional development opportunities are available specifically for those interested in working with the gifted and talented. We can be informed and guided by international research but may need to adjust our practices to be effective in a New Zealand environment. Working with the gifted and talented is an area for research and development as well as for potential growth for counselling as a profession, with particular relevance for school guidance counsellors and careers counsellors working in schools (Jung, 2012).

### **Proposed New Zealand model of intervention**

In preparing this review, the lack of New Zealand research raised questions about how New Zealand counsellors can best work with the gifted and talented and with multipotentiality. This section proposes a model of intervention that can be evaluated in future research, building on recently published New Zealand work.

New Zealand counsellor Gay Gallagher's (2011) article serves as an introduction to working with the gifted and talented. Gallagher (2011), Lyall Christie (as cited in Gallagher, 2011), and fellow Auckland-based counsellor Jackie Calder (personal communication, 14 October 2013) advocate for the use of person-centred sandtray work with gifted and talented children and adolescents as an effective means to engage with a client's inner self. Calder uses the sandtray from a Jungian perspective and believes that "sandplay is a powerful and gentle way to help the client to connect with their inner world" (personal communication, 14 October 2013). One of the developers of the method, Dora Kalff (1991), asserted that the joy of the sandtray is in allowing clients to create a world that reflects their own internal processes, thereby furthering their understanding of themselves.

Working to understand an individual's values and life themes was previously introduced as a useful intervention to address multipotentiality in the gifted and talented (Colangelo, 2002; Greene, 2002, 2006; Kerr, 1990; Kerr & Soldano, 2003;

Peterson, 2001, 2006; Peterson & Moon, 2008). Sandtray work may be an ideal way to facilitate this, as it is known to be effective with adolescents both individually and in groups (Bruneau & Protivnak, 2012; Draper, Ritter, & Willingham, 2003) and research also supports the use of sandtray in career choice generally (Sangganjanavanich & Magnuson, 2011). The sandtray therapy could be directional or non-directional and may be an effective way for counsellors to enable clients to clarify choices and highlight options (Campbell, 2004).

To support the sandtray therapy, a New Zealand-based counselling modality, Massey University's Whakapiripi–Whakamārama–Whakamana/Attend–Respond–Collaborate (WWW/ARC) pluralistic modality (Lang & Gardiner, 2013) could be used. WWW/ARC is a skills-based, pluralistic approach that incorporates culture but also specifically acknowledges New Zealand's biculturalism (Lang & Gardiner, 2013). It facilitates goal setting from a collaborative stance, allowing for deep recognition of the individual's culture, values, and needs (Lang & Gardiner, 2013). The pluralistic nature of the model empowers individuals to find their own way and counsellors to adapt their work to facilitate that (Cooper & McLeod, 2010). Pluralistic work challenges counsellors to employ the most effective counselling techniques for each client, with an awareness that the therapy should constantly evolve, change, and develop as the client does (Cooper & McLeod, 2010). From a purely New Zealand perspective WWW/ARC would enable counsellors to work holistically with clients while meeting cultural obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi (Lang & Gardiner, 2013).

### **Recommendations for further research**

A common theme for further research identified in the literature was the need for empirically supported interventions for working with gifted students' multipotentiality (Colangelo, 2002; Greene, 2002; Kerr & Soldano, 2003; Milgram, 1991; Peterson, 2006). Peterson and Moon (2008) went further in suggesting that empirical research was needed to support all aspects of counselling the gifted and talented and to investigate what modalities may be most appropriate to use. Both are common concerns for counsellors: the need to discover what methods work best and to develop scientific validation of those methods (Cooper, 2008).

Sajjadi et al. (2001) also noted that investigative research needs to be undertaken to inform and facilitate earlier awareness of multipotentiality. Kerr's (1990) ERIC Digest is a useful starting point as it describes evidence of multipotentiality across primary and secondary school years.

Research into how multipotentiality specifically affects different types of learners would also be engaging and useful. This research could include the role of poverty, marginalisation, and culture, providing a richer base of understanding for counsellors to work from. Leung et al. (1994) recommended investigating gender differences, and subsequent information published by Reis and Hébert (2008) provides a brief outline of gender difference in gifted and talented children that could be built upon.

Finally, as discussed previously, the obvious gap in the literature is the lack of New Zealand research for New Zealand counsellors. Although local practitioners can refer to American and Canadian research, our cultural, educational, and policy environments differ (Mahuika, 2007). There is a long way to go to increase the knowledge of teachers working with gifted and talented students, and to provide appropriate professional development for school guidance counsellors and careers counsellors may be even further off (Blackett & Hermansson, 2005; Easter, 2011; Gallagher, 2011; Mahuika, 2007; R. Moltzen, 2011a). And while Peterson and Moon (2008) regret the lack of funding available in America, New Zealand researchers are likely to face similar constraints.

## Conclusion

*I am gone quite mad with the knowledge of accepting the overwhelming number of things I can never know, places I can never go, and people I can never be.*  
(Plath, 2007, p. 153)

Multipotentiality in gifted and talented individuals refers to a trait that allows for a number of career paths and interests to be followed. Where it can become a problem is when choices cannot be made, possibly leading to a number of serious challenges ranging from anxiety to depression to existential dread (Colangelo, 2002; Peterson, 2006).

Counsellors who are able to provide effective support to these clients are in an ideal position to help (Colangelo, 2002). There are a number of recommended interventions that may be helpful, including normalising young people's experiences; clarifying goals using a holistic, values-based approach; mentoring; experiential learning; and planning for a broad, flexible post-high-school education (Silverman, 1993a). Counsellors can also act as advocates for these children within their schools and communities and, in particular, with and for their parents (Greene, 2002). Further research is needed into both the experiences of gifted and talented young people with multipotentiality and the effectiveness of the interventions identified above and others, in order to determine how best to support these very special young people.

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