

outside

the

box

The  
Thinking  
Ahead  
Journey



I am often asked how I came to be doing the work I do with gifted children and how *Thinking Ahead* grew and evolved over time. The work I do isn't exactly something you find in the Career Guide, even today.

## The short answer is through gifted children

I started my working life as an early childhood teacher in the early 1980's in a country town in the Mid West region. In hindsight the developmental focus that was part of my early teaching practice working with 4 and 5 year olds paved the way neatly to being comfortable with differences between the development of individual children. There are some children from those early years who still stand out in my mind. At the time I was not familiar with the concept of gifted students or the idea that my classes probably included them amongst the wide variety. In the days of half time Pre-Primary teachers were responsible for 2 class groups of 27 students for 4 half day sessions per week. In hindsight most of the ones who stand out were probably gifted children with all of their individual quirks. I now also suspect some of them probably also had learning difficulties, just to complicate things.

## Starting on the Gifted Journey

I took a break from teaching just before our first daughter was born in 1990. It was at that point that my education in giftedness really began.

Our daughter was interested in the world, had a mischievous glint her eye at times and raced through the early milestones, sitting and crawling early and walking unassisted just after 10 months of age.

Despite my early childhood teaching background and all the early development we studied, I remember phoning my mother to ask her is it was 'normal' for a 14 month old baby to be stacking 8 blocks into a vertical tower. My mother probably smiled a knowing smile but she responded by posting me copies of some sheets outlining developmental milestone that formed part of a course she was teaching. Somewhere I still have them. The answer was 'no'.....

When our daughter was 18 months old we spent a few months travelling overseas. By this time she was speaking in sentences, chatting away with anyone who would talk back to such a tiny tot, even engaging an elderly lady sitting next to us on the plane in conversation. The Child Health Nurse has simply said "I thought so" and nodded when I answered her questions about our daughter's language development. Looking back it would have been handy if she had given me some more information at that point, but from what I hear from parents, that still isn't happening.



By the time our second daughter arrived a few months after her sister had turned 2, we had become a little more comfortable with the pace of development, and thought we had a handle on this parenting thing.

We were about to get our **next lesson in giftedness.**

### ***No two are the same.***

Our second daughter was different to the first not only in looks (OK, they both had curly hair but that is about it) but in her alertness and intensity. She slept well at night but only napped in the daytime from a very early age. So long as we provided constantly changing visual stimulation, she was a happy little thing.



did.

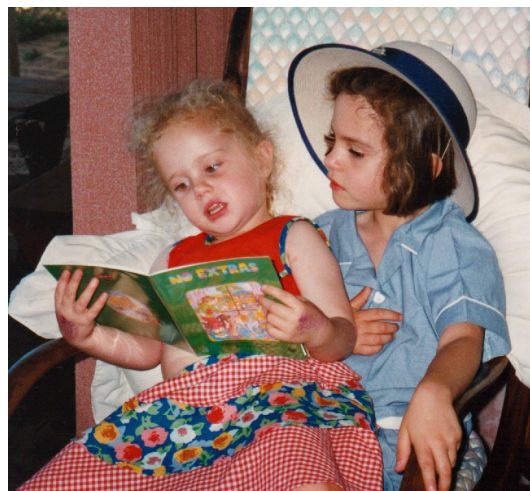
She reached physical milestones a few weeks after her sister had and when she walked, she just stood up and walked the length of the room.

Her language development was different too. Although she understood everything that was going on, her articulation was not as precise as her sister's had been and although she had a reasonable vocabulary (certainly for her age), she didn't bother joining words together. In frustration one day when she was about 22 months old, I insisted she respond 'More, please' before I gave her what she wanted..... and to my surprise she

What amazed us was the pace with which her language developed from there. Almost the next day it was "Up me pick". Within a couple of weeks she was speaking in long sentences. It was almost as if she had been waiting for permission, or perhaps to be sure she could do it (as she probably had with walking on her own) before she showed anyone. It turned out to be a characteristic trait that we have seen many times since.

She quickly outstripped her older sister physically and was leading her into mischief. She was the one to drag a chair to climb up to reach things and she insisted she could do everything her sister did.

She discarded the trainer wheels on her bike months just a few months after her sister had. When her sister learned to read and had access to school reading books, she boldly asked the teacher if she too could take home a reading book ..... (she must have batted her long eyelashes because the teacher said 'yes')



## Encountering school

Of course by this time we had had our first encounters with the school system. Our oldest daughter's birthday was just a few days before the cut off for her year group and so was the youngest in her class. We had decided not to send her to 4 Year Old Kindy. She was very young (just having turned 3) and after all, I was a Kindy teacher, so I thought we would be fine.

However, by the middle of Term 3 I had made the call to the local school to see if there was a place available. I had simply exhausted all the ideas I had to keep her engaged. We had visited museums, galleries, the beach, the park and grandparents both in Geraldton and in Perth, we had been creating things, playing word games and reading endless stories.....until it became obvious that she needed input from the wider world.

On her first afternoon she hung her bag, put her fruit in the bowl, parked herself on the mat and waved me goodbye. She was clearly ready to go! The teacher filled me in later on how she had coped. Apparently she had organised a group of children to play a game of "Homes and Hospitals" in the sandpit and by the end of the first afternoon she already knew the names of nearly half the group.



Things continued well the next year with the same teacher for Pre-Primary. By the end of that year, not yet having turned 5, she was grabbing the crayon to write any words she knew on her paintings, was using phonetic spelling to write us notes and messages, was sounding out simple words and enjoying reading lots and lots of stories. I didn't appreciate it at the time quite how much she was already reading. Despite being so young she was already moving beyond the year group.

The following year she started Year 1 as one of the foundation students at a newly established school. I clearly remember feeling a little uneasy after a conversation with the Head of the Junior School who had commented on my daughter's late birthday. I had indicated that I hoped that she would judge my child on what she could do, not her birthday. That was perhaps my first inkling of what was to come.

I expected the teachers to 'see' the child I saw, to know what to do with her. Time has since added some perspective. I was an early childhood teacher and I knew about child development, yet I had been taken by surprise by my daughter's progress. I had no specific knowledge of gifted children at that time, nor it turned out, did any of the teachers my daughter would encounter on her school journey.

We were very fortunate that the classes were small and multi aged by philosophy rather than convenience, largely reducing the grade based barriers within each class. And she had a wonderful teacher those first few years who had gifted children herself as it transpired.



By the time our younger daughter began school she was well known to the staff having been coming and going with her sister. Still feeling there was no difference in age between them, the younger had followed the older into class any time my attention was diverted. Asking for a reading book was not her only trick, she also took any chance she could to finish off puzzles left by the older children and a few other things as well.

I remember my embarrassment at the Chair of the School Board's comment "She's a precocious little thing, isn't she?" as our youngest chatted away to her while waiting for an assembly to start. I dashed off to find a dictionary to work out whether it was a compliment or not! I had already become the cautious parent of gifted children, not wanting to make a fuss, but wanting to make sure my children had a chance to continue to progress as they needed.

As our girls' school journey continued, the challenges increased. With one it was keeping things sufficiently challenging, with the other it was trying to work out why the early interest in reading wasn't really translating into progress. In keeping on top of what was going on, I did *a lot* of reading. I had quite a lot of meetings with teachers, not all of which were productive.

## **The Next Lesson - *Don't count on the teachers having the knowledge they need***

At about this time it occurred to me as I listened to a teacher telling me that the IQ test results in front of us were clearly wrong because it was not what she saw in class, that I actually knew more about giftedness than the teachers did. They were the ones though making the decisions which would affect not only my child, but our whole family as a result.

## **The Next Lesson – *Don't wait for others to do something***

As our oldest in particular outgrew her peer group socially I began to think about what we could do living in the country, to provide some more opportunities. The girls had participated in workshops during the holidays in Perth a few times and loved mixing with other gifted kids, even when the content of the workshop wasn't of particular interest.

I was also still working out how to impart the much needed knowledge to the teachers without being a nuisance. I was flipping through a magazine from GERRIC (Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre) at UNSW when I came across information about the Certificate of Gifted Education. I enrolled for the following year and made the required trips to Sydney 3 times the coming year for week long blocks of classes. It turned out I was the only person from WA that year.



Towards the end of 2001 I had a plan. I registered *Thinking Ahead*, contacted schools to enlist their support for disseminating info and started planning workshops for gifted children.

During 2002 I held workshops for gifted 10 – 12 year olds every second weekend during term time, with extra workshops for 8 and 9 years olds

being added in the second half of the year. A core group of kids came regularly, some of them travelling from small towns nearby for the opportunity to mix with like minds.

I also attended my first gifted conference and didn't know a soul! I was amazed by the variety of topics the presentations covered and have attended at least one gifted conference every year since then. There is still so much to learn!

In **2003** our family relocated to Perth and our girls found a larger peer group in their new school which eased some of the problems. We were still struggling to identify exactly what it was that was making learning in some areas such a challenge for our younger daughter, but the laptop program at her new school removed some of the pressure of getting her ideas down on paper and opened up the world of technology and all the possibilities.

*Thinking Ahead* started running workshops in Perth during the July school holidays and 107 children attended the first program. Holiday programs have run at least twice a year since the first program in 2003 in a number of different venues and covering a wide range of topics. Just over 1300 different children have attended one or more workshops in the last 8 years.

Many children don't know many, or sometimes any, other children when they come to these workshops. Very often they are used to being guarded in their interactions so it is a special moment when they realise they are amongst like minds and the dynamic in the class completely changes. Sometimes parents report that they don't get a word in edge ways all the way home as their child recounts details of the workshop and the other children, a stark contrast to their child's response of 'nothing' when asked about what happened on a school day. One of my most favourite moments in all the years of the holiday workshops was watching a young girl come hurtling down the corridor to throw her arms around someone she had met last time, but hadn't seen since. Parents were completely forgotten as they made up for lost time.

Still mindful of the need to reach teachers and provide them with information and strategies for teaching gifted students, the first *Making a Difference* conference was organised in **2004** and attended by 160 Western Australian teachers from across all education sectors. A parent seminar was also held in the evening so they also had a chance to access information. Later in the year a series of workshops for teachers focussing on Differentiation strategies also ran. In 2004 there was also a new logo and changes to the website meant that registrations for workshops and events could be completed online, saving a huge amount of work.

Things continued to evolve with *Making a Difference* conferences held again in **2005** and **2006** as well as an Early Childhood conference and seminars on visual spatial learners and differentiation. Speakers were sourced from around Australia and even overseas when that opportunity arose.



I also went back to do more study, working towards my MEd (Gifted and Talented) externally through University of New England in NSW. I felt there was still so much to learn.

And I began to work with families. Parents often stopped by asking questions while their children attended holiday workshops and the consultation side of things evolved as a natural extension of these discussions.

In **2006** I attended my first international gifted conference, the Wallace International Research Symposium which is held every second year at the Belin Blank Centre at the University of Iowa. The days were long, beginning with the conference breakfast at 8am and closing after supper at 10pm at night but my brain was buzzing and my notebooks full.

There were a small group of Australians there and my family still remember the message I sent saying it was like a 'walking bibliography'. Everyone whose work I had ever read in the field seemed to be there and they were all eager to talk to you about what you were doing and what was happening in the field where you came from. I wasn't quite sure how to describe myself. I was a student, but I was also a parent, and I organised opportunities for gifted kids and families, and ran a consultancy. That made me fairly unusual! No one hat quite fitted, but I was happy to explain as best I could as I shared lunch with Nancy Robinson, dinner with Nick Colangelo, breakfast the next day with Joyce Van Tassel-Baska plus the countless others I spoke to and listened to their insights about the field of gifted education in return.

By **2007** what had started as a chance for my kids to mix with like minds had become almost a full time job. The number of families I had worked with had doubled in 2006 and then again the following year. I had completed my Masters by now and began to plan to visit some schools for the gifted in the USA when I travelled to the Wallace Symposium in **2008**.

I was also able to travel to conferences interstate and to attend my first Asia Pacific Conference and gain valuable insights into the differences between the way Eastern and Western cultures look at giftedness.

The following year in addition to the ongoing holiday programs and consultations, I travelled to a conference in New Zealand where I was able to visit schools in their cluster program and learn about opportunities offered there by private organisations which are hosted in schools and attended by their students. I had been speaking at conferences in Australia at local, interstate and national conferences for a number of year but attending the **2009** World Conference in Vancouver I made my first international presentation.

In 2008 I had visited the Centre for Talent Development at Northwestern University on the outskirts of Chicago and as a result of the relationship developed from that visit I was able to offer the *EXPLORE* test in Australia in 2009 and subsequent years. This is a test designed for US high school entry (13 – 14 year olds) which is offered to gifted students in Year 4, 5 and 6 as an Above Level Test and Talent Search. My daughter had taken this test many years previously and we had found it particularly useful in showing just how little she was challenged by the curriculum available to her and were able to negotiate subject accelerations in several subjects for her based on her results.

**2010** saw *Thinking Ahead* move to an office which provided a private place for consultations and much better separation of home and work life for me. It also paved the way to having another consultant commence working with families as this remains a major part of the work load. Several in term programs were also offered for the first time in 2010 with weekly coaching sessions for the Future Problem Solving Program running from February until August and towards the end of the year The Philosophy Club ran its first few sessions.

**2011** has provided a new set of challenges. I have had to step back from some aspects of the business to give myself a chance to attend to some health issues but this has also

provided an opportunity to restructure things and give some other people the chance to enhance what they are able to offer.

## The Bigger Picture

While it has been wonderful travelling to conferences near and far and each has added new insights to my knowledge, living with gifted children has provided me with valuable experience and insights I could not have gathered in other ways.

There is no doubt that life with gifted children is not like life for most people. Living with and understanding the intensity of these children, their thirst to know and understand, feeling their pain when they have outgrown their peers socially, negotiating with teachers about just how far they need to be extended, the difficulties of finding reading material that is challenging enough but still appropriate, or even keeping up the supply of reading material, are not the experiences of most families. Nor is the challenge of gradually getting to the bottom of the difficulties and needs of a twice exceptional child and rebuilding self esteem along with confidence in the strategies that work *for them* (but which aren't the ways other kids learn). Life with gifted children is a roller coaster and it is bumpy ride at times.



## It's been a privilege

All of this would just be our life lived and our personal experiences however if I had not also had the privilege of working directly with the families of more than 300 gifted children since 2005, of hearing *their* stories and sharing their journeys. I have been privileged to see into the lives of so many families and I have learned from every one. Working with families I have had the opportunity to help them understand their child and make plans that will allow them to develop their potential. I have seen common threads amongst the many

reports parents may have accumulated about their child's weaknesses and develop a course of action. I have been fortunate to be able to notice patterns of scores on IQ tests which seem to correlate with a pattern of behaviour, or a need for intervention or start untangling the complexities of gifted children who are not thriving.

I have talked to so many about friendship and the emotional needs of gifted children, of why their child gravitates to older children, what IQ tests measure and whether acceleration would be an appropriate strategy in their particular case. There have been many discussions about giftedness amongst siblings and how different two gifted children can be. I have helped parents build not only their knowledge but also their advocacy skills and confidence in negotiating for their child's needs. The reports I have written have helped many negotiate acceleration or changes in the opportunities for their child. I have some wonderful emails about the difference that made in the lives of not just the children but their whole families.

Some families I have seen just the once, others I hear from more often. Sometimes things go well for a while, then another road bump appears and parents seek help fine tuning the next stage. Some families I have worked with over a long period of time.

## **Gifted Families**

Giftedness doesn't happen in isolation. Gifted children almost always have gifted parents. For some the discussion in our consultation is the first time they have appreciated that fact. Some have been moved to tears, grieving for lost opportunities, some have been incensed that they were considered 'difficult' or 'dumb' when in fact a learning difficulty may have been masking their giftedness. Some have passed it off, claiming 'it must come from dad' or grandma or someone else in the family, but have emailed me later with more questions.

Seeing so many families, I have also been able to observe subtle differences in the ways families approach giftedness and in their willingness to interact with the school to bring about change. My suspicion is that their own school experiences as well as their personality plays a part here.

## **Has anything changed?**

In my work with so many families I have heard many stories. Some issues continue to come up repeatedly, the same road blocks and myth-conceptions are raised as fact making it more difficult for parents (or teachers) to work out what is needed and sometimes I feel that despite all the success stories, little real change has happened.

But then I hear about another success story, of a child transformed by some changes at home or at school, the joy of finding a like mind or a teacher who understands them. And then I know that is progress, even if it is only one family at a time

## How far has the initial urge to provide something for my gifted children reached?

As at the start of 2011:

I have worked individually with a little more than 300 gifted children and their families

Just over 1,300 different children have attended *Thinking Ahead* holiday workshops, many attending regularly over the years. The students who attended the first workshops I organised have now finished high school.

There are almost 1,400 people on my data base including parents and teachers and newsletters are sent to just over 1,100 people each month and that number continues to grow

What started as a way for gifted children to get together with like minds has potentially impacted on the lives of approx 4000 people and indirectly on many, many more through the teachers who have attended courses, seminars and PD and who have looked differently at their students as a result.....

I am quite sure that our journey would have been different if we had relied on what was available, if we had sought traditional solutions from 'inside the box'. Many parents tell me that their journey also would be different.

## How can this help you?

If you are new to the gifted journey, you are probably wondering where to start. One parent emailed me not long ago telling me her 'head hurt' from all the things that she needed to make sense of or address. It can feel overwhelming and terribly urgent but it is important to believe you will be able to manage the task. You were your child's first teacher and those first years were a time of rapid learning.

Through *Thinking Ahead* you can access information and resources, you can find people who can help you understand the information you have and to recognise fact from myths about giftedness. You will also be able to find others who understand your journey and opportunities for your children to interact with like minds of a range of ages.

There is no doubt it will be a journey, but it has the potential to be fulfilling for you all.

## Timeline – The Evolution of *Thinking Ahead*

- 2001 *Thinking Ahead* is born. The name is registered, a logo developed, a venue sought and the support of local schools enlisted.
- 2002 kshops are held every 2 weeks for 10-12 yr olds starting Term 1, for 8-9 yr olds from Term 3. Some children travelled from country towns to attend. Derrin commenced CoGE and attended the first of many gifted conferences
- 2003 Our family relocate to the city. The first city based holiday programs run in July with 107 children attending. Workshops are offered for 3 levels, with a mix and match program and no formal identification requirements. The first mass mail out to more than 1000 schools in WA occurs
- 2004 Holiday workshops move to a new venue. The [www.thinkingahead.com.au](http://www.thinkingahead.com.au) domain name is secured and the Holiday workshop program is available online. The first *Making a Difference* conference attracts 160 people. A parent seminar and a series of differentiation workshops run plus PD in several schools.
- 2005 Holiday workshops continue, levels are renamed to Kilobytes, Megabytes and Gigabytes. New logo, brochure, website plus online registrations and payments available. Another *Making a Difference* conference plus Early Childhood, Differentiation and Visual Spatial conferences and seminars run during the year, plus training for the Jason Expedition for teachers. Family consultations for education planning and advocacy begin this year. The first edition of the WA Resource Book is printed. Derrin begins study for her M Ed (Gifted and Talented) externally.
- 2006 Holiday workshops rotate between 2 venues, a third *Making a Difference* conference is run plus various seminars. Family consultations double. PD in schools continues, an adolescent program is planned, Derrin attends the Wallace Symposium in the USA (the only person from WA)
- 2007 Holiday workshops and PD continue, another *Making a Difference* conference is held, an adolescent camp is planned (but doesn't run). Consultations double again. It is almost a full time job now. The WA Resource Book is updated and reprinted. Derrin completes her MEd (Gifted and Talented).
- 2008 Holiday programs and PD continue, the number of family consultations continues to grow rapidly. Derrin attends the Wallace Symposium again and visits 3 gifted schools in USA, as well as attending national and international conferences in Hobart and Singapore. An Office Assistant is employed for a few hours each week.
- 2009 Consultation demand continues to grow. Holiday workshops and PD with schools continue. Derrin attends a conference in NZ and World Gifted Conference in Vancouver and organise seminars for parents. 51 students sit the EXPLORE test in an arrangement with Centre for Talent Development in the USA. The *Thinking Ahead* blog is launched in August.
- 2010 *Thinking Ahead* moves into an office. Future Problem Solving coaching commences, EXPLORE test is offered again, the Holiday workshops and PD continue. Demand for consultations continues to grow. A Philosophy Club begins in Term 4. The WA Resource Book for Parents and Teachers is completely revamped and expanded and printed in A5 format at the end of the year. An additional consultant takes on some consultations.
- 2011 Holiday workshops are offered in January and the EXPLORE test in April. The newsletter takes on a new format. *Thinking Ahead* now has a Facebook profile. In May some restructuring becomes necessary and there are some changes to *Thinking Ahead*. Consultations and holiday programs are now looked after by others. The new website is launched and new resources are added during the year.

**By early 2011 I have worked individually with more than 300 gifted children and their families in consultations.**

**Just over 1,300 different children have come through the holiday workshops, many coming regularly over the years**

**There are more than 1400 people on my data base and newsletters go out to 1,100 people each month.**

**I have potentially impacted on the lives of approx 4000 people and indirectly on many, many more through the teachers who have attended courses, seminars and PD and who have looked differently at their students as a result.....**