

EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

AEU submission to a Victorian
Parliamentary Inquiry

AEU Victorian Branch

Submission paper

July 2011



Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

AEU (VIC) SUBMISSION

Introduction

The AEU recognises that there are many people whose performance in different areas of human activity can be consistently and repeatedly remarkable. The potential for remarkable performance is spread throughout society, and its manifestation is dependent upon complex systems of development, encouragement and opportunity throughout peoples' lives. All people should have access to such development, encouragement and opportunity - the nature of which varies according to individuals' needs, circumstances and aspirations.

Education systems have a responsibility to ensure the full extension of all students through an education which is rich and challenging in both the formal and informal curriculum. This requires an understanding of the individual needs of students and the implementation of programs to meet those needs. No student should spend their time at school unmotivated, unengaged, learning little or bored by what they see as 'busy work'. Students should not, for example, be impeded in their development through the imposition of an artificial year-level achievement norm. Nor should they be seen as having fixed levels of abilities as this is also educationally counter-productive. Students have different capabilities, learn at different rates and develop their capacities and talents in each curriculum area in different ways. The responsibility of an education system is to recognise this reality and then translate it into classroom practice, school organisation and adequate and equitable resourcing policies.

The pedagogical principle which should inform all teaching and learning is that talent can grow over time, whether students are struggling or 'gifted'. Having a growth mind-set rather than a fixed-intelligence mind-set enlarges the opportunities for students of all abilities to develop their 'natural' aptitudes. This dynamic view of giftedness encourages students to apply themselves and work hard to improve, receiving positive feedback for their learning development rather than for their 'natural' ability.

The full extension of all students should take place primarily through increased individual attention in the normal classroom. The emphasis should be upon facilitating the capacity of teachers and schools to cater for the full range of needs and abilities of the individual students in their classes and schools. The

State Government and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should enable such facilitation through:

- decreasing class sizes to improve the opportunity for individualised attention;
- ensuring that teachers have the time within their teaching allotment to provide support and learning extension for the full range of students;
- improving the resourcing of school libraries and ICT provision, which encourages more individualised teaching and learning;
- ensuring that the online learning potential of the Ultranet is realised through technical support and improvement, and professional development (including coaching) for all school staff;
- more education support staff to work with teachers;
- properly resourced, sustained and targeted professional development to increase the capacity of teachers to identify and meet the diverse needs of the students they teach;
- the use of genuinely diagnostic testing (rather than non-diagnostic mass standardised testing such as NAPLAN) to inform appropriate individualised/personalised programs;
- the inclusion in teacher education courses of a range of strategies for identifying and catering for all abilities with appropriate elements covering the special needs of various categories of students.

Catering for the needs of individual students is not only achieved through individualised teaching and learning methods. Many group activities can allow for participation at a range of levels and be both valuable academic and social learning experiences for all. With few exceptions, the most effective way of maximising the potential of all students, both individually and collectively, is in a heterogeneous learning environment. This has both academic and social benefits for all children and for society as a whole. The participation of high achieving, very creative or highly motivated students in regular classes provides all students with the benefits of learning from and sharing in their enthusiasms and achievements. All students have much to learn from a peer group which is diverse in cultural and socio-economic background, achievements, interests and aspirations. Polarisation between “excellence” and “equity” are false. The simultaneous pursuit of both in concert is mutually advantageous.

While the primary role of catering for talented and high achieving students should be properly resourced comprehensive primary and secondary schools, the AEU believes that the capacity of the public system of education should also be used to enhance this provision. The system should use its resources to cater for the needs of students of high intellectual capacity and/or outstanding talent in specific areas of the curriculum such as music, sport, languages, technology etc by providing resources and programs to fully realise and extend their potential. These students and their parents should not feel obliged to enrol in private schools to access such programs. At the same time, the more creative ideas and enrichment activities developed for “the gifted and talented” should also be used to motivate and extend the learning of underperforming students – some of whom may share the characteristics of students already placed in the ‘gifted’ category. In a pedagogical sense, all children should be taught as “gifted”, not just students classified as such.

Definition and Identification of Giftedness

There are complex definitional problems involved in the use of the term “gifted”. It is unclear whether the term is a reference to performance or innate potential. There is ongoing debate in the literature about the different theories of intelligence which are used to identify and define children as ‘gifted’. Various authorities in this area question evidence of a correlation between different abilities and the existence of a general intelligence factor. Theorists such as Howard Gardner and Robert Sternberg propose different models of intelligence to the standard theory.

Another difficulty with the concept of ‘the gifted’ is cut-off point issues – 2% or 5% or 20% of the population? We note that the Chair of the Victorian Parliament’s Education and Training Committee, David Southwick, has stated that “between 3% and 15% of the population is considered to be gifted” (Media Release,23/3/11). Given the present student population in Victorian government schools and an assumption that it will contain a representative sample of ‘gifted’ children, the gap between 3% (16,200 students) and 15% (81,000 students) would have major implications for any proposed programs for students defined as ‘gifted’. The sheer numbers of students involved in this sort of definition reinforces the AEU position that pedagogy, curriculum and assessment in the normal classroom must be the focus of provision for their needs.

There are attempts in the advocacy literature in this area to make distinctions within the broad gifted and talented definition - the ‘profoundly gifted’, the ‘highly gifted’, the ‘gifted’, the ‘bright’ and the ‘talented’. Each term is related to estimations of the proportion of the population which may fit into a particular category, the extent to which mainstream programs are meeting their needs and the different sorts of strategies which should be used for each group.

Working out how to slot students into the ‘gifted and talented’ category, or sub-categories, through ‘objective’ evaluations is hard enough and controversial enough for academically ‘gifted’ students (eg controversy over the validity of using cut-off scores on IQ tests and similar assessment tasks) but becomes even more complex and open to question when measuring ‘giftedness’ in other domains, including spatial understanding, music, or art.

The reality is that students are ranged along a continuum of capacity in the various areas defined by theories of intelligence. There are practical and theoretical problems in creating hard and fast divisions in this continuum by classifying some children as gifted or talented, and, by inference, the remainder as not gifted or not talented. The measurement and selection of such students for special program support is imprecise, and often done on the basis of arbitrary quotas through cut-off scores rather than clearly differentiated abilities. As a result, there are negative learning impacts on those students who just miss the cut off line and therefore fall outside of the “special” category.

Recent research from the United States, published by the American Psychological Association (*The Development of Giftedness and Talent Across the Life Span*: <http://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4318051.aspx>) raises questions about whether ‘giftedness’ is innate and immutable or more fluid, and explores

such issues as the degree to which it can be developed and even taught, evidence for its emergence in adulthood and whether it can be 'lost'. Links are made between various factors which contribute to the definition and identification of 'gifted' people such as genetic inheritance, environmental effects, a passion for one or more areas of study and application/ hard work.

Questions about definition and identification relate back to their purposes. If the purpose is to diagnose reasons for a student's academic underperformance, poor motivation, disinterest or disengagement so that a more appropriate learning plan can be developed, definitional precision is not the major issue. The need for precise definitions relates more to access to specifically resourced differentiated educational programs above and beyond those normally provided by regular classroom programs. In this case the definitional issue disguises what is really a question of resource limitations.

Effectiveness of current policies and programs for the 'Gifted'

Current programs which may have some relationship to students defined as 'gifted' include the four government selective schools, SEAL streams within mainstream schools, schools specialising in specific curriculum areas such as music, school links to university programs, access to VCE programs in Years 9 and 10, whole school policies about 'gifted and talented' students, cross age grouping of students, extension and enrichment components within the curriculum of individual schools, faculties and classrooms and the use of personalised/differentiated individual learning plans in normal classrooms.

An assessment of the relative value and effectiveness of each of these strategies depends upon what weighting is given to the various issues involved. Selective schools for example, benefit a significant proportion of the students who are enrolled in them through the academic environment created by separating out and grouping academically high performing students. At the same time, researchers such as Richard Teese and Stephen Lamb from Melbourne University have identified the negative effects on student cohorts in mainstream schools in the public sector when these 'selected' students, who act as academic models for others, are removed from them. A combination of private school recruitment, selective schools and SEAL schools can skew the enrolment of mainstream public secondary schools to the disadvantage of those students who remain in them.

The effectiveness of provision for gifted and talented students within normal classrooms in mainstream public schools depends upon enabling factors such as appropriate resourcing and support for teachers. Developing and implementing differentiated/personalised learning programs is time-consuming and complex, requiring a whole school approach and system-wide policy consistency and resourcing. If these conditions are met, the movement towards a "personalisation" of learning offers a productive way forward for these students, particularly if up to 15% of the student population is involved. Personalisation of learning entails having uniformly high expectations of participation, fulfilment and success for all students. Personalised lessons have

been described as “stretching for everyone” with “ambitious objectives, challenging personal targets, rapid intervention to keep pupils on trajectory, vigorous assessment to check and maintain progress and clear plans to support those who do not or cannot maintain trajectory.”

The growing literature on the personalisation of learning fits in with much that has been written about strategies for nurturing the abilities of gifted and talented students. The common idea is that educational programs should be designed to enable students to engage actively in the management and design of their own learning. Key components include: learning how to learn, formative assessment that engages the learner, curriculum choice providing students with guided opportunities to develop individual learning pathways, students and teachers in consort making informed decisions about which teaching and learning strategies to use and when, the creative and systematic use of information and communication technology (ICT) including online learning environments such as the Ultranet, mentoring and support to ensure students have a one-to-one mentoring relationship with an adult and benefit from peer support and the development and use of networks and partnerships with other individuals or organisations that contribute to effective learning.

Equity of access to educational choices for gifted students and their families

One of the dilemmas in the identification of gifted and talented students, and their access to support programs, is the extent to which students from the major areas of disadvantage are equitably included. This applies particularly to students in public schools as this sector has the vast majority of low income (77%), Indigenous (86%), disability (80%), provincial (72%) and remote/very remote area (83%) students. There is evidence that students from high socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds are more likely to be identified as gifted and talented due to the educational background, cultural capital and assertiveness of the families involved.

The high correlation between a student’s socioeconomic (SES) background and their performance on external educational achievement tests has been well established. An analysis of Australia’s 2009 international PISA test performance in literacy, numeracy and science clearly illustrates this:

“The 2009 PISA report examined average achievement for each socioeconomic quartile and found that there was a difference in scores between students in the highest and lowest socioeconomic quartile that equated to almost three full years of schooling”. [ACER, *Disadvantage in Australian Schools*, ACER eNews, 12/2010 <http://www.acer.edu.au/enews/2010/12/disadvantage-in-australian-schools>]

The Victorian Auditor-General’s report covering literacy and numeracy achievement in Victorian government schools over the period 1998 – 2007 also looked at the effects of SES background on student achievement. It concluded that the achievement gap between students from schools categorised as high

and low SES within the public school system, represented 15 months of learning at Year 9. This gap had not narrowed over the period of the audit for either literacy or numeracy. [Victorian Auditor-General, Literacy and Numeracy Achievement, February 2009, p.4 http://download.audit.vic.gov.au/files/Full_Report_Literacy_and_Numeracy_Achievements.pdf]

The under-identification of students who may be gifted and talented is far more likely to occur amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds because of the established link between disadvantage and lowered educational achievement. Identifying and catering for potentially gifted and talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds therefore should involve systematic and system-wide measures to improve the educational outcomes of all students from these backgrounds. Given the nature of the student population in the public sector (see above) these measures and the accompanying resources should be concentrated in government schools.

The educational challenge facing those government schools where there is a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds has been documented in the responses of principals in the AEU's State of Our Schools annual survey of all government schools in Victoria and in submissions to the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling. The two quotes below illustrate the difficult educational environment for students, teachers and principals in such schools.

"As many as 25 to 50 percent of our students don't have access to a 'current' computer or the internet so the school needs to provide maximum access. The AEDI (Australian Early Development Index) for our school indicates that many students come to school already disadvantaged by a lack of social, experiential, and linguistic skills, which we must work to redress in order to get them to the expected benchmarks at the end of each year. Generational poverty is very much alive within our school community."

[State of Our Schools survey response: government primary school principal]

"A greater breadth of welfare programs must be developed at our College to cater for the clearly identified needs of our diverse student populations. Children dealing with broken homes, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, depression, anxiety, children who are primary carers for their parents and the myriad of other mental and social problems that face teenagers of all backgrounds."

[Submission to Schools Funding Review; government secondary school]

An equitable approach to meeting the needs of gifted and talented students should address the wider issues of improving educational opportunities for all students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Otherwise the potential of many students will never be identified, or realised, because of their disadvantage.

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