

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Southbank — 15 August 2011

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Witnesses

Genevieve, School Captain, year 12 dance student,
Mati, President, Student Representative Council, year 12 music student,
Bella, member, Student Representative Council, year 11 dance student,
Amanda, year 10 music student,
Nicola, year 9 dance student, and
Robbie, year 8 music student, Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School.

The CHAIR — We might start and firstly welcome you to our hearing with regards to gifted and talented students. We're very privileged to be at your school today. This might seem a bit overwhelming but relax, Okay. We're here to learn and to listen. Certainly Mati and Genevieve know how that works. Just so I can explain to you that this is a parliamentary hearing and we're here to find out more about how we can support gifted and talented students in pursuing their careers and pathways and so what we will do is we have a series of questions we will ask you. We are recording everything in Hansard so it is like parliament and everything you say today is covered under what we call parliamentary privilege. So you can say whatever you like but the parliamentary privilege, which is what members of parliament also have, is only afforded to what you say in the room, not outside of the room. Certainly the evidence that you give today will certainly be very helpful in how we can plan for the future. Thanks for coming. Another important element is in the actual evidence itself you will only be identified by your first names. We won't be including full names or identifying you in other ways. Because we have the number that we have if we could just have your first name when you give an answer to something. Feel free at anytime to give input. I might try to keep things moving if we get stuck on something as well. I might kick it off by asking, firstly, how did you find out about the program being offered here? Was it your primary school that informed you or did you find out about the Victorian College of the Arts through another means? Maybe just quickly go around.

MATI — Personally I had a friend who auditioned here, another trumpet player as well. He was a year above me. I wouldn't have known of the school if it wasn't for him. Because of him auditioning and saying it was a wonderful place I decided to do it myself. I actually didn't really even know about it before. My parents did know about it and were thinking of pointing me in that direction but I found out about it myself.

GENEVIEVE — I was from Tasmania so I was isolated from the whole arts community here. It is a bit more off track. The advertising in dance magazines and word of mouth from people who had come over from the mainland and from professionals and from the reputation of the school in the arts community.

BELLA — My former dance teacher had been to the university, VCA, and she had heard about this school and recommended that I audition and when I was 9 I did a workshop, a VCASS workshop — I'm not sure what it was — and from that moment on I was set on this is what I wanted to do and I auditioned for year 7 in 2006.

AMANDA — I heard it from a friend actually who knew someone who auditioned who was a trumpet player and she recommended that I try out and she moved off to Italy and then things passed by and I needed something more so I thought I'd try out and so I'm here.

NICOLA — Two of my former dance teachers went to the Victorian College of the Arts and one of them also taught here and they recommended that I should audition and if it wasn't for them I would never have heard of this school.

ROBBIE — I heard about it from some friends that I sort of played in a band with a little bit, just jamming. They were both going to try out and I thought it was a really good idea and so we did. All of us ended up here.

Ms TIERNEY — What are the biggest differences here, compared to your previous schools? That is the first one. The second one is were your previous schools aware of your abilities in music or dance and if so were they supportive of that? The third one is what would your options have been if you'd not been successful in gaining a place here, would you still have pursued dance or music studies at such a high level?

MATI — My previous school had a really good program for people starting music at year 7 but I had already been doing music for several years. They knew that I had a higher standard so they did cater a little bit because they did have those music facilities but in general they didn't have much. They recommended I go for this when my friend, who was also in the same school, went. And the last part of the question?

Ms TIERNEY — If you didn't get in.

MATI — If I didn't get in it would encourage me to do this more. I'm very glad I did get in.

GENEVIEVE — For me, personally, I was in a Tassie isolated community. There is no school remotely like this. There is even no full-time training. So for me there wasn't the available training, not only at my educational school but outside — external training. I auditioned as sort of the only option. I had to move here — it wasn't available where I was. So my school wouldn't have been able to provide the same level of physical training because they didn't have the facilities and also it didn't have mentors from the profession that have that same high ability of being able to mentor us at the level that is provided here. If I didn't get in I would have had to try another career and bypass dance. A lot of the other institutions in Melbourne that aren't government-funded are very expensive so it wouldn't have financially have been an option.

BELLA — What was the first question again?

Ms TIERNEY — How does this compare to your previous school?

BELLA — Because I got in in year 7 I haven't actually been to a high school. My old school was a prep to high school. It was very small. I come from a country town in north-east Victoria. So they obviously couldn't facilitate my dance at all. They were very supportive and they often got me to do performances at the assemblies, which was quite embarrassing. My dance school often pushed me to apply for bigger places. I started out in the same town where I went to school and then they said, "Why don't you move on to Myrtleford?", which is a slightly bigger town, and from there I moved on to Albury and from there to Melbourne. I guess if I'd stayed in Bright then the same as Genevieve, I wouldn't have been able to...

Ms TIERNEY — Are you the only two that don't come from Melbourne? Anyone else not come from Melbourne?

GENEVIEVE — No, but in the school there are a high percentage of students that are not from Victoria. There are very few schools at the same level of this thought Australia. It is widely a national provider, especially for people in more remote areas that are isolated from this kind of thing.

Ms TIERNEY — How do you financially support yourselves and how do you live while living here?

GENEVIEVE — Parents. There isn't boarding support from the school. There is financial support for extreme circumstances but it's up to our parents to accommodate us here and live with us and provide food and emotional support and things like that.

BELLA — I'm quite lucky my parents said they would make a move for me whether it was from Bright to Albury, which is an hour-and-a-half, or to Melbourne because I was in the Australian Ballet School interstate program and they said that if I didn't get into VCASS maybe they wouldn't move to Melbourne but they'd move wherever possible that I could continue my training. So I'm very lucky in that regard.

The CHAIR — We might...

Mr ELASMAR — What is the best thing about being a student at this school? The second part is, how has the specialist program at this school benefited your development and performance in your dance or music study?

ROBBIE — The best thing for me about being a student at this school is not only the facilities that you get but the teachers. My teacher is a lecturer at the VCA and he is an amazing guitarist. You get access to people like that that you wouldn't in other places in the music program. What was the second part?

Mr ELASMAR — Dance or music, which one are you doing?

ROBBIE — I'm music. It's just the access to people and other people who are, sort of, like the same thing. It pushes you on to try different things.

NICOLA — I like being around so many other people that also share the same passion for your field. So for me in dance, if I was back at just my local dance school I wouldn't be getting the same kind of training I do here, especially getting it five days a week and sometimes if you do extra curriculum Saturdays — and the teachers they're so helpful. The long hours are hard but it's worth it.

AMANDA — I do really enjoy the school. It has some really good options for you and they do set you up well for your future. I find that my teachers, and especially my vocal teacher — it is good to listen to her and her experiences because she does all these things and I go — and she's heading in the direction I want to head in. It is good to have all that feedback. But this school is really good. As Robbie and Nicola said, everyone is very supportive and helpful. They are all here to help you achieve what you want.

Mr ELASMAR — Can you tell us about your experience of the audition process for entry into this school and how much preparation did you do for the audition?

ROBBIE — I heard about it about a year before I came here. I had lessons but it was like six people in a half-hour class so you only got five minutes with the teacher. So I changed lessons to a one-on-one lessons for about an hour and I took up piano and theory lessons and that's sort of why because of the audition process — there's a musicianship test that you have to undergo and I would know nothing about that. So I sort of changed my approach for about a year and started thinking more about what I was doing to try to get in.

MATI — That musicianship test does not determine whether you get in or not but just for placement in the school to put you in which class because we have different classes depending on your ability and what you have done before. It does not affect whether or not the student gets into the school. Just thought I'd clarify that.

GENEVIEVE — Do you want another audition comment? I had really no idea what to expect from the school or the audition process. I did about two hours training a week as opposed to up to four hours a day here. I wasn't really very dead set in knowing how to prepare so I turned up to the audition and just did my best and was fortunate to get in. I was very unaware of what to prepare for but found that out through the process.

BELLA — I wanted to add, the question before about what do you like the best, I like the balance between academic and your specialist area, which is probably the reason that my family was so supportive in making the move here because that's always been important in my family to have those options and one of the best things for me about VCASS is if I don't make it in dance I still have my academic studies and I will have an ATAR at the end of next year and will be able to move on to something else.

The CHAIR — I just want to continue that theme, the results here academically are quite strong as well as obviously the specialist results; why do you think students do so well in this particular environment?

MATI — I think there is a clear link between doing the arts — it's good for your brain really. We're engaged all the time with like-minded people.

GENEVIEVE — Two main points also, because often in other schools that are education — academics is their sole thing, the sciences and maths that attract the higher scores and a lot of focus of academic energy. Here, because we all share a common talent and predisposition for art, we are able to really facilitate that into a core such as VCE. As a dancer this year I am doing VET dance and VCE dance and the academic and dance staff are both putting as much energy as they can into that to consider it into our enter score. So the dancers are all, say, able to get 49 and 48 for their dance subjects because it is what we are specialising in. We get very high enter scores which may lead us on to a science career or something but we are able to use our specialist skills to link into that. Just the work ethic that we're sort of challenged with every day to meet an expectation — we have the expectation to be this disciplined in one area and it shows and feeds into other areas of our life including the academic.

MATI — We know how much effort it takes to be good at something because we have been striving at it.

BELLA — Also the constant reminder from our teachers and staff that work here. I mean we have career sessions — I'm not sure any younger than year 10.

AMANDA — No.

BELLA — 10, 11 and 12 and they say, "If your specialist area is not going to be an option what will you do?" So you are always being supported and reminded about different options you might have and different areas that you could eventually go into.

GENEVIEVE — Adding to that there is very high encouragement to maintain our academic progress. It is not accepted to completely disregard one side of the school and focus on your specialist. It is really encouraged that you need to maintain both to have a healthy position and to keep your position in the school.

Ms MILLER — My question is about what is the biggest challenge. You have answered that in terms of the expectation; what happens if you don't meet that expectation?

GENEVIEVE — I haven't really experienced it myself but it's not accepted by the school. It's an expectation we all have to maintain that. Obviously within our own limitations of our academic ability and competency in those areas it is considered but we are expected to maintain the effort and focus and determination to be doing our best in both areas.

MATI — I think also with specialist our expectation comes with the improvement that we get. It is not like we all want to meet a certain standard. There is a range of standards in each year level but it is the personal improvement and how much effort you put in to improve, that is where the expectation is and that is where it is set high. It is not like we all have to pass the exam.

Ms MILLER — Because you are all like-minded, you are encouraging each other irrespective of your levels?

AMANDA — Healthy competition.

MATI — Yes.

BELLA — Because there are other schools dedicating all their time and finish earlier and go home and have more time than us to dedicate to the academic studies. We are spending so much time on dance and sometimes it is difficult to find the time to focus.

Ms MILLER — How did you find the transition from your previous school to this school? Obviously the workload is something that is different; how did you make the change?

GENEVIEVE — With the normal high school education, because at that time we were still trying to personally excel with this specialist field externally from school, so we would be training after school — anyway, you would finish your school day at 3 and have dance training in addition to that until late in the night. The number of hours is probably similar but it is having it so well structured and so well mentored. We have teachers who have seen this same progress that you're sort of striving for with a whole big group of people and they're able to do it.

Ms TIERNEY — It obviously takes a lot of hard work and a lot of time for practising as well in your fields; what is the most difficult thing about having this gift or talent that you've got?

MATI — Difficult? It's a gift!

BELLA — I think keeping pushing the boundaries as much as you can. If you are pushing the boundaries, you're improving as much as you can. We are all at quite a high level — everyone here is at obviously a higher level than most people in the state but there's so much further to go and because we are at that

higher level it is really about finding the ways that you can improve and reaching — not just settling, “I’m at VCASS, I must be good. Surely I’ll be all right.” It is not like that at all. It is really about getting the most you can out of the school and becoming not just a really good dancer but the best dancer you can be or the best musician you can be once you have left the school.

GENEVIEVE — Within the school our mentors have a really good way of excelling each person individually. So one person might have a higher level of skill than others but we’re all very much pushed in our own way to reach our own levels of improvement and not settling for a standard that we think is, “Right, well, I’m great now.”

The CHAIR — Do you all have mentors and who are they? Are they other students or teachers?

GENEVIEVE — Dance teachers. We have our dance classes each day and I guess there is a teacher for each — we have a contemporary teacher and classical teacher and jazz teacher as well as the VET studies teacher. So we have specialist teachers within the dance field and academic is completely separate.

BELLA — It is appropriate that Genevieve calls them mentors because there is almost no teacher — it is very rare — I can’t even think of one teacher that I would feel uncomfortable about approaching and asking for mentorship. I can’t think of anyone I wouldn’t feel comfortable approaching.

MATI — With the music side of things, it is a little different. I completely agree with what you guys just said but we also have our instrumental teachers that give us our weekly lessons on our instrument, the thing we are passionate about. Very much they are usually a big driver and mentor in what we do. That said they work with the school a lot — the school really supports everything they say and so everyone’s approachable and is a mentor. I really feel that way about the school.

GENEVIEVE — Also your peers too because there are different levels within a class. Especially older levels for the younger ones, they are seeing students who are about to — the school does provide a close linkage between graduation and meshing with the professionals — we have professionals coming in and working with us. It is a smooth transition. For the younger students they are seeing close to professionals in their year 12s and seeing how their careers are starting and seeing how their trend is developing. In that way they are a mentor to them in how they should be developing.

ROBBIE — I agree with that. In the music side of things there is a bunch of ensembles that is open for the school to join. I am in the big band with Mati and a lot of other people. Inside that band there is a huge range of different skill levels and other guitar players who are really advanced with their stuff and year 7s and 8s like me who are just giving it as much of a go as you can. It does encourage you to work and get to that sort of standard so you can play in the band well.

GENEVIEVE — I think that is something that is really unique about the school, there are so many people at an elite level always around you and getting their achievements. If we were in our usual education program you just wouldn’t have that same comparison around you. It is just having such a high density of talent and same ideals.

BELLA — I might even say that where we came from we were a lot better in comparison than where we are now. It is really good to be around people that make you want to improve.

MATI — Like you are a star in the situation.

Mr ELASMAR — Talking about the hard work do you feel there is a lot of pressure to fulfil your potential and how do you cope with it?

GENEVIEVE — Not so much pressure to fulfil our potential but from our teachers there is a high expectation so it is either you are here to work hard and work to your potential and to strive for these high expectations but it is also there is a very big understanding with all the staff and with all the separate programs we are all under a lot of pressure so there is not that, “We will do this until you crack, until you fail all your academic exams. They make sure they monitor the balance — that everyone has a good

balance in their life and their prospects and their view of their specialist subject is within reason and justifiable.

BELLA — It is more like they think, “We think you are capable of achieving this so we will support you and expect that you achieve this but if you don’t we are here to help you find ways to...”

MATI — It is more about ways of expecting you to give it your absolute best shot and what you personally can give it as opposed to feeling you have to fulfil some sort of potential. You don’t know how much potential you have until you give it your best shot.

GENEVIEVE — Realising that being at the school is an opportunity too. If we don’t want to be a dancer or academic in this school you are expected to be working hard and expected to be working towards some sort of goal. If you are entering at year 7 and say from that moment, “I don’t want to do this specialist anymore, I will just chill for the ride because I only do half of the academic here”, it is not accepted. We are expected to appreciate the opportunity we have been given.

ROBBIE — Most kids do because most people that come here really do have to work hard to get it. There are a few people who come here and it isn’t the place for them and some people leave because they’re just not as motivated as other people in their specialist field but most of the people that come here really do want to do well and really want to try and excel in what they’re doing.

MATI — The school always encourages you to pursue what you want to do and what you want to excel in. It’s never got the, “We’re doing dance and music and if you stay in you do everything. If you want to be a doctor more than you want to do your dance or music we will look for other pathways.”

Ms MILLER — In terms of mainstream education, is there anything you could suggest to improve people like yourself who are in that environment as opposed to this environment? So that you are getting what you need?

GENEVIEVE — I think really researching and exploring what is available, not expecting it to come to you. From a community that is so isolated I have really had to research, look on the mainland, talk to people, look for the education and look for the opportunities. So I think really, sort of, finding the opportunities as opposed from waiting for your school to present these programs on a plate sort of compromising it and finding ways to access that training and that knowledge and things like that.

MATI — I wouldn’t have figured out about the school at all apart from friends. It would be really good if these opportunities were more — not transparent but I didn’t know about it — perhaps more expressed.

Ms MILLER — In terms of going to a mainstream school, what could you suggest to actually improve people like yourself in that environment without coming to this kind of specialist school?

BELLA — Very difficult.

GENEVIEVE — You could improve but to get a comparative level of training it is very difficult to do on your own, especially in dance without the facilities, they are not available. Not outside this sort of program.

MATI — I think encouraging that hard work brings solid results is a big thing. Especially just for the people of our generation — we get a lot of instant gratification from the internet which gives us things immediately. People forget you need to work hard to be good at something. That is not something we see at our school because we work hard to achieve what we can but in another institution you might not see that as much. It might not be as much of a value as it once was.

Ms MILLER — When talking about generational things, as young people, do you think as a generalisation that people are not prepared to work hard or do you think they understand, “If I work hard then I can achieve” outside the gifted and talented?

GENEVIEVE — I think that there's some community outside this school and the arts community — there is a lot of shock at, "Gosh, you work that hard?" It is seen as such a bigger workload than in reality it feels to us. We do work hard but do have lives. We are happy and normal and not dying of exhaustion. This level of work does not kill you.

BELLA — I have been here since year 7 and it has been built up quite gently my hours to what they are now. It does not seem that different but it is very different to what I was doing in year 7 because they have increased it very gradually and so you don't notice as much that the workload is as big because you are much more prepared for it. They don't just throw you in and say, "This is how it is." You are definitely eased into it.

The CHAIR — Just in terms of you getting to where you are at the moment, what part of it do you think is having a natural gift as opposed to maybe starting early and all of the hard work and commitment to get you here? You started at 5?

GENEVIEVE — 5.

The CHAIR — And then you probably have similar sorts of stories of working hard. Do you think — what percentage of that is around having a gift to begin with or do you think it is more about that striving for something, having that practice, starting early and all that sort of stuff?

AMANDA — I think it's mixed really because I know that with me my parents always pushed me and always did things. They put me in theatre groups. I used to be all outgoing in primary school and didn't really care — "This is me and this is whatever." I started when I was 7 when I was singing and stuff and to build up and to think that you do have potential and to realise you have potential and for someone to say you have potential, that's a big, "Oh, okay." You hear it and you go, "Okay, okay. I can sing, okay."

MATI — Potential means nothing unless you are going to work with it.

AMANDA — If you don't work and you don't want that goal or want whatever it's not going to be achievable for you.

BELLA — It is definitely driven by passion.

ROBBIE — Yes.

BELLA — Most people here, the people that do well are the people that — everyone does well and everyone improves and it is because they are driven by passion.

MATI — I think part of the thing is there is a natural affinity to different things but as we've all just said it really boils down to what you will do with it. I don't think anyone is born a professional. It just doesn't happen.

ROBBIE — I don't think there are many people who pick up an instrument or start dancing and are instantly good at it. It is more if you really enjoy something then you will work hard at it.

MATI — If you love something and you are not particularly good at it you will get good at it if you enjoy it and you persist.

ROBBIE — It does not seem like hard work. It is something you wanted to do.

MATI — You have an affinity for it because you enjoy it.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. You have been very helpful in certainly providing us with some really valuable information. On behalf of the committee we want to wish you all the best in your success and we look forward to seeing you excel in whatever you are destined to do. I'm sure we will see great things ahead for all of you.

Witnesses withdrew.