

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 25 July 2011

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Ms P. Slattery, Director, WiseOnes Australia Pty Ltd

Ms P. Truscott, Education Manager, Access Re-Ed Services Pty Ltd and WiseOnes Australia Pty Ltd licensee, and

Ms M. Karantzas, Education Manager, WiseOnes Australia Pty Ltd licensee.

The CHAIR — We welcome Pat Slattery, director of WiseOnes Australia; and WiseOnes Australia licensees Pat Truscott; and Myra Karantzas to this public hearing of the Education and Training Committee's inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students. All the evidence taken at this hearing today is protected by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that members of Parliament receive during their time in the Parliament, but any comments you make outside of the hearing may not be afforded the same sort of privilege. Feel free to say whatever you wish in here.

Hansard staff are recording today's proceedings. You will receive a proof version of the transcript. If there are any errors, you will have an opportunity to correct those. I will just point out that we have half an hour in total, because there are a number of witnesses to go. We have your submission. If we do not have time to get through the PowerPoint presentation, we do not have to worry about that. The PowerPoint information will still be taken as part of your evidence. You do not have to say every word in the PowerPoint presentation; I suggest you point out some things that have not necessarily been covered, or just one or two key points, because the best thing we can do for you is to ask the questions that we have. We have all read your submission, and that will allow us to flesh out some of the information a bit further to get a better understanding at the very end of all this. Over to you. If things do drag a bit, forgive me if I chop you off, because we have to get to the questions.

Overheads shown.

Ms SLATTERY — First of all, I would like to point out that Pat is one of our leaders — both Pat and Myra. Pat has been with us since 1999, and Myra started at the start of this year. Between them, they care for more than a couple of hundred kids.

Our focus is primary level. Our expertise is not in the secondary level, although Myra was part of a leadership group in a secondary college. Pat and I were school principals in the Catholic system. We are both rebels in a way, because we were prepared to do divergent things to help all the children, not just some of the children.

I have made this up, and you will have seen it. Down the bottom are two key words, and they are 'pain' and 'empathy'. When you do not feel as though you belong anywhere, it is very lonely. I have experienced that and so have most gifted people, particularly if you live out from the city where there are far fewer of you. I was a poor country kid. I deal with kids in poor country schools. I live in that area, and I brought my children up in that area. It is not the same: if you went to a city school — and I have seen where some of you went to school — it is not like that. I have grandchildren who are in wealthier areas, and it is much easier for them. I have had grandchildren in rural areas, and there is nothing for them. I have had grandchildren at religious schools where there is nothing and I have had grandchildren in government schools where there has been nothing. Pat can tell you that the attitude of some teachers towards the gifted children is horrible. We cry sometimes at what happens to them in public in the school; it is not pleasant. We have empathy for them, and they have high levels of empathy and are probably hurt more than average children would be.

You asked us about identification issues. Professor Maureen Neihart is speaking at the VAGTC conference in September this year. I think she is possibly speaking about what she spoke about in Sydney last year, the six different types of giftedness, of which only two are identifiable by schoolteachers. One of those is underachieving: they will not take risks because they like having all the As. We are very keen to identify the children who are not identified by teachers and who are very different.

The provision of resources in schools — I am talking about primary schools all the time — depends a lot on money, but other things are in it too, like the level of books that publishers will allow in school libraries. They give the authors a list of words, none of which would apply to a gifted level of reading, so the school library books are not appropriate. For other resources, how many primary schools have proper microscopes for grade 2s? None. We take our own. We have to provide the microscopes and things for the six-year-olds who are very advanced. Provision in primary schools is poor for those children. I do not know how you could make it any different except by being very divergent. Money has to do with it, and politics has to do with it. The Senate Select Committee inquiry in 2001 was under a Liberal-National Party government. This inquiry is under a Liberal-Nationals party government. I do not think that any side of politics cares any less for the children.

What I do think is that there is a different way of looking at provision. One way is that the government should provide equally for everybody and care for those most needy. The other way is a more entrepreneurial kind of system that allows other people outside of the bureaucracy to do things to create the wealth to make it go around

to everybody. It is not that we are arguing anything differently; it is just perhaps a belief system about the way you do it. It is not so much about what you do really. I am very pleased about this — and I know which parties you all belong to — because it is an opportunity to make sure that whatever comes in lasts. I became a teacher in 1960, and that was after I had worked for five years for Commonwealth Serum Laboratories and CSIRO.

I was an accelerated learner four times, so I was too young to go into teachers college or university when I left year 12. It has not changed for the gifted child. It did not change for me, and it has not changed for my children, who are in their 40s, and my grandchildren, one of whom is at university, another of whom is at TAFE, and the rest of whom range in age right down to two preps who started this year. I have a lot of experience of the practicality of it — you know, that human experience of it — and I call myself a generalist, not a specialist.

We have these leaders, whose photos you have seen. One only signed up last Thursday. All of us have divergent interests and belief systems. I do not have a clue what the others' politics are, but we do care about the children and we are people who were gifted ourselves. We have had all sorts of varying experiences. We do not have a bureaucratic model. Every single teacher with WiseOnes owns their own business; we do not believe in employees. We believe people need to be responsible, and the people we choose are people with the wisdom to bring these children to, if you like, fullness of life, wholeness, as people. We are not talking academic performance as the major factor; we are talking about personal happiness in being who you really are.

The CHAIR — Can I suggest that we leave it at that point? You have given us the key points and have elaborated a bit. We have all the presentation material. We will go into the questions, then at the very end if there is anything that we have missed and we still have some time, we will be able to cover that off before we go.

Ms SLATTERY — Fine.

The CHAIR — I want to go straight into the terminology. Many submissions that the committee has received suggest there are negative perceptions associated with the terms 'gifted' and 'talented'. Suggestions of alternatives include 'children of high intellectual potential' and 'high-ability students'. Do you think there is a problem in terms of the terminology that is being used; and what terminology should be used for gifted and talented students in Victoria?

Ms SLATTERY — We have been specifically asked not to use the word 'gifted' at some schools. We tend to use 'fast learners', because basically that is what happens: all that is happening is that they are learning at 140 per cent the rate of average. That is what the research shows. They are eight in the head by the time they start school, and most of the other children are six, so there is a big difference right from the very start of primary school, and 'fast learners' fits what is happening.

The CHAIR — In terms of identification, can you provide some more details about methods that WiseOnes uses to identify giftedness in children?

Ms SLATTERY — Right. Do you remember that we are dealing with young children?

The CHAIR — Yes, absolutely.

Ms SLATTERY — And some of them cannot read?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms SLATTERY — Myra and I live in very multicultural areas. For one child that I tested it was his first day here from China. He did not know any English at all. He scored 100 per cent and was accelerated that day. It was his first day at the school, and the school was really good that way. But we test for potential, not for performance, because there are the six different kinds of kids there. Four of those will not let you see that they are gifted. You have to tell by the misbehaviour, or by the divergence, or by the smart-alecky answers, or in some other way, unless you test. We use the Raven's coloured matrices to help the no. 5, because I have a son — so I know about Irlen syndrome — who left school at the end of year 9 unable to read, write, do maths or anything else. He is now a millionaire businessman because he got these purple-coloured lenses that help him to read management books. So we are very keen to pick up those disabled able children, as I call them. Some people call them twice exceptional.

Also there is a lot of peer pressure in some cultural groups not to stick your head up, that it is the group that matters, so we want to be able to identify them. The Raven's coloured matrices test looks like jigsaw puzzles. It is great fun. The children really enjoy it, so they are relaxed. We do them one by one because we do not believe bulk testing young gifted children works. They can drift off and gaze around, so we have to say to them, 'Give yourself a shake'. We are trying to find all of them, whereas if you are judging on performance you are only going to find those who are good at reading or good at something, and then there are the against-authority ones, and we wonder when they are going to show out, because the teacher represents authority. I did go to a school once where a particular boy had not only blocked up all the school toilets but had messed up the principal's notebook computer and the computer of the office staff, so nothing was working in the school when I was there.

That is what we want from identification. We never test in the first half of the prep year because their brains are still changing between 5 and 6. We test basically when they are 6, so late prep and year 1. We believe it has to be done before year 2 because we see year 2s who are totally messed up in the head already by not being recognised and not having their needs met.

The CHAIR — Just on that, do you think early childhood professionals should have a role in the identification of gifted children?

Ms SLATTERY — It would be wonderful if before they came to school all of them could be identified. One of the horrible things that happens is that parents are told these children are socially immature. Just this week I had a parent tell me the kindergarten teacher insisted that their child repeat kinder, but the parent took divergent action and put them in another program. But that is because people do not know what 'gifted' means, what the actuality of it is. It is a label that sounds like 'smart alec', or 'lucky', 'born with a silver spoon in your mouth' or something, and they do not really understand it at all, which is why we put emphasis on teacher education, but it should start with preschool as well.

The CHAIR — At the earliest year possible.

Ms SLATTERY — They are called socially immature all the time, and it is only because they are out of sync. They do not know where they fit. How do you find out?

Ms TIERNEY — Your submission states WiseOnes teachers are taught how to overcome resentment and negative attitudes in schools. What kinds of strategies do your teachers use to deal with negative perceptions of giftedness in schools?

Ms TRUSCOTT — I have been going to schools as a manager for the last 10 years, working with about 12 to 13 schools, and it is amazing how different they are, even though I am within two council areas, you might say, which are side by side. The principal is pivotal. If the principal understands, then things happen. Then the second most important person, I would say, would be the G and T (gifted and talented) coordinator, who also has to have a passion for education, who needs to have gifted education and understand what that means, and be passionate for learning and challenge for all children in the school, but especially for the gifted children.

Ms SLATTERY — We always say to our new people, like Michelle who just signed up this week, 'Do not go near a school until you have done your training. Do not think you have a friend here and there and that you can go and approach that principal, because it will not work'. So they have to do psychological training, business training, gifted and talented training, and they are provided with learning videos — Myra did a great job — and that is gone over and over again until it is really in there. At the first school we went to we started our presentation for a school leadership group and within about 15 minutes the principal said, 'Just what we need', because that principal had a gifted daughter. That makes all the difference.

You saw the diagrams on the fourth page of our presentation. How does a brain that looks like the diagram on the left understand what is going on in a brain that looks like the diagram on the right? The fast learner can understand a slow learner, but it is very difficult if you are not gifted to understand what could possibly even happen — even your imagination does not extend to what can happen if you have that complexity of brain. So if the principal is gifted — was a gifted child — they accept the program because they see the need for it; if they are not, they do not.

Ms TIERNEY — Do you provide programs in rural and regional areas of Victoria? What can be done to increase access to gifted education programs for gifted students in rural and regional Victoria?

Ms SLATTERY — We had a go in the Ballarat area, and we notice that the lady who was going to do it there has made a submission. We went around schools. There was not enough interest, and they thought there were not enough gifted children to offer it in the schools, even though I know that there are. The idea of it was kind of very flat altogether. We have run them out in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, and we have someone in Brisbane at the moment looking at it.

We have thought that we should now use virtual classrooms. I have mentioned Elluminate. Elluminate got taken over last week by a group called Blackboard, and I do not think that the Elluminate-Blackboard amalgamation will be very useful for the time being until they work out who does what, but I found another one called eLecta Live. I have a suspicion it might be a Microsoft thing at the heart, but it looks as though it will work. The idea, and I am looking at it as my project for the second half of this year, is that one of us can be sitting at home in our office with eight children — we normally have eight because it is a really good interactive number for gifted children — and we can share our screen with those children. We can have videos, we can have PowerPoint presentations, we can have photos, we can have documents and we can email their work sheets or whatever guidelines we are sending them. It is all happening at once, and they can make friends in all sorts of places. I did actually run it about 10 years ago or something like that without the video and Skype with a child on Bathurst Island, so it can be done.

Ms MILLER — The evidence received by the committee suggests that giftedness occurs in all groups but that some children are less likely to be identified as gifted — for example, indigenous children and those from culturally diverse and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Are children from disadvantaged backgrounds proportionally represented in WiseOnes programs? What do you think can be done to improve access to gifted education for these children?

Ms SLATTERY — They are not proportionally represented at all, and that is why we give a scholarship from our own income, not from what the parents pay. Part of what I expect of our leaders is that they will give a scholarship to someone on the education maintenance allowance who has not enrolled in the program but has been identified or who may not have even put in for a tryout because of their circumstances, and we encourage the principals to look for those children. We cannot do any more, because we are not charging enough. We are non-profit — very non-profit — so the scholarships are a significant thing for us to give.

Ms MILLER — Would scholarships be the thing to improve access to gifted programs?

Ms SLATTERY — It gives access to one child per school who would not otherwise have it. We cannot do any more than that. I have approached the Bendigo Bank three times since the start of last year, and I have been in and told the local manager I am totally pissed off with them funding the AFL and not gifted education in the western, Dandenong and Cranbourne areas, and we are getting somewhere. It has reached the highest level. I have even offered to call it the Bendigo Bank WiseOnes Program if they want, if they will come at it. It is \$25 000 a school to cover 32 children every week. That is a lot of money.

The government could pay for it, but you will notice that I have not asked for that, or even suggested it, because in my lifetime of education — and it is a long one — every time it has come it has gone again, and you are expected to run the same programs with nothing. It does not last. You get a change of government, and it does not last. You get a change of idea, your priorities change in the school, you get a slight change of staff and all of a sudden somebody — or two or three — comes in who does not believe in it and it goes down the priority list and away it goes.

The research shows — and Pat and I go to the world gifted conferences — that they are damaged by it. Also there is no statistical support for individual learning plans. They are not statistically effective. There are only two things that are statistically effective: one is acceleration, which is effective emotionally and socially as well as intellectually and academically; and the other is withdrawal programs, like WiseOnes or G.A.T.E.WAYS. However, G.A.T.E.WAYS is a different sort of thing because it is based on academic interest, whereas ours is teaching the child how to fail and how to get up again and how to deal with people who have a different sense of humour to you and all those sorts of things.

Ms MILLER — You recommended mentoring for gifted students. How would a best practice mentoring program work, and what support would this program need from government, schools and members of the community?

Ms SLATTERY — The person to talk to about mentoring is Christine Ireland of the VAGTC. We went to a professional development thing she did a couple of months ago at Nossal High School. She was very good. We had gone to learn, and we realised we were doing it all the time in WiseOnes, because it is about the person. However, mentoring in the secondary sense is about the person having to be a match in the academic excellence field of the child, because it is more of an academic mentoring kind of thing, which I think does work well in secondary schools.

Ms MILLER — What about primary, because that is what we — —

Ms SLATTERY — Primary mentoring is a really different thing because the child has to trust you enormously, and they do trust our teachers. They cry if I change the teacher at a school when someone moves interstate or something. Mentoring a primary school child is a very personal relationship, and primary school teachers are different to secondary school teachers because of that very intimate relationship, which counts against gifted children too because teachers think of ‘my class’ and ‘my group’ and they are not very keen on them going out. I think the idea of going out in your excellence area works well, and I have timetabled all the maths, all the English and all the science at the one time and put children in ability groupings of where they are up to so that they have different groups for every topic. That works well. You saw that the mastery learning worked fantastically.

Ms MILLER — In terms of specific support, could you give us an example as to how a government could support a mentoring program in the primary environment? Is there anything that comes to mind?

Ms SLATTERY — It is really difficult in the primary environment.

Ms MILLER — Would it be more appropriate in a secondary school?

Ms SLATTERY — I think mentoring would be really good right from the beginning. I know one principal of a secondary school when I was teaching invited me to come and fix up the year 7s and 8s, and we started home room teachers and mentoring of children by their class teacher, and that worked well.

The CHAIR — We might look at teacher education because that sort of carries on from that in some of the support around teacher education.

Mr CRISP — Both in your evidence today and in your submission you have stated that some teachers are not capable of providing education to gifted and talented students. Why?

Ms SLATTERY — In the 1950s I think it was we were very short of teachers because we had a lot of immigration, and we imported teachers from overseas and lowered the standard for teachers to go into teacher training. I do not think we have lifted them enough. A person has to be able to learn reasonably quickly if they are dealing with children who are in the fastest learning stage of their life. I think we do need to have a higher entry level, and I do think we need some teachers to be encouraged in the gifted education field.

Absolutely every teacher in WiseOnes was certain that gifted education had to be made a compulsory part of teacher education in the first two years, not towards the end and not optional. We know that some teachers will find it not very comprehensible, but how are they going to deal with it otherwise if they do not have some language even to talk about it? I have been to schools and done a lot of staff meetings. At one college I asked 45 prep to year 12 teachers, ‘Has anybody here got any qualifications in gifted education at all?’. One teacher put her hand up, so I asked, ‘What have you got?’. She said, ‘We had a book display from Hawker Brownlow’. That was it!

Ms TRUSCOTT — I think we sell teachers short by not permanently putting into teacher training an understanding of gifted education very early, not at postgrad level — it is mostly postgrad. How can we accuse people of not knowing and not doing if in fact we have not given them those tools very early and made sure that they understand that it is quite a normal thing for 10 to 15 per cent of the children they will see in front of them?

I had a little girl about this size and she had a brain on her! She was wonderful. She tested very well. She was the highest scoring child in the whole school. I said to the teacher, ‘Oh, isn’t she is stunning?’, and she said to me, ‘Her? All she does is talk, talk, talk’. I had already gone through and worked with this school. I looked at her and then the penny dropped, I think, and she said, ‘Oh!’.

Ms SLATTERY — There is good stuff out in the schools. A teacher development program was put out by GERRIC, which is based at the University of New South Wales. Dr Miraca Gross is the centre director. The program is in all schools in Australia. It is sitting on the shelf. The teachers do not know that there is a policy. The parents do not know that there is a policy. You saw the research. Even yesterday I got another parent feedback form coming in; so we have got a lot of them. They do not know there is a policy. The teachers do not know. I have to do a staff meeting tomorrow because the teachers do not know that the Raven's coloured matrices is listed on the department's website as a scanning tool for teachers. The kids came back after testing and said, 'Oh, it was puzzles'. They said, 'Well, that can't be measuring giftedness'.

The CHAIR — How do the parents find out about you and the programs that you offer?

Ms SLATTERY — They find out about us because we approach the schools. We have a standard offer of a free tryout. We do everything for free except the teaching part, because we have contract teachers who work for us. We send this home and it gives them a chance to have a free tryout. We will test any child in the school. Down in Cranbourne I ran 172 tests and most of them were not, but that is okay. That is the only way we find out. A letter goes home that says, 'We have a chance of having this program at the school', and the school is not committed until we have performed the testing. So we will have done days of free work before the school commits, and that is when the numbers come back. Then they are offered an enrolment form in a topic, which can be a science one or not a science one — we alternate — and then they enrol. Then we look for the scholarship child.

The CHAIR — Myra, did you want to add anything just in general about what we have spoken about today?

Ms KARANTZAS — In general I am passionate about how the gifted are perceived, and this may touch on teachers' perceptions and how they deal with things in schools. In my experience many years ago you had your lower achieving students almost stigmatised, shunned and looked at as being dummies if they got any additional assistance or were dealt with differently than the norm in the classroom. I found that stigma and stereotype is more closely attached to the other end of the scale now with our gifted children. I think once it was okay for the lower achievers to be seen to have integration aides, which I am certainly not disputing. There should be more of that. Once it was okay and there was some government funding to allow for that. It was like the government was giving its stamp of approval and saying, 'It is okay to give them that assistance'. At the other end of the scale it is still seen as an elitist thing; it is the tall poppy syndrome. There is no authoritative stamp of approval. It is also still misunderstood that it is okay to assist and we should assist these children at the other end of the scale as well in some capacity.

Ms SLATTERY — There are three good providers in gifted education already outside the system. I am sure all of them are presenting here. They are very keen, conscientious people, but the government is not allowed to give a stamp of approval to any of us, no matter what we are doing.

The CHAIR — On that note, we have come to the end of our time. I want to thank you very much, firstly, for the submissions you have presented to us and the contribution you have made here today. I am sorry that we could not allow any longer, but you have to appreciate that we have a number of witnesses to get through. We appreciate the contributions you have made, and we will certainly take all the information you have given us on board. Thank you once again for coming.

Ms SLATTERY — Let there be a successful outcome for all the children.

The CHAIR — We are all looking for it. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.