HAVING A LITTLE LINGUISTIC FUN WITH THE VIEU

I would first like to express my sincere gratitude to the VIEU for their very clear and definitive submission. I would then like to explain why I choose the word "fun". Because the only other response I can express is utter depression. My personal response of choice to disaster is to laugh about it - so, the world is ending! Let's party!

The idea of a linguistic analysis is to find out which "gang" you belong to. The various different gifted gangs in education have particular sets of descriptors that they use to identify who (the "object") they are talking about, exactly the same as in a narrative, eg "Mr Brown". When people are talking about gifted children in an education setting, they will use a particular title or descriptor. These descriptors change from gang to gang.

The important point about this process is that it reveals the underlying belief structures and values of the author, including their prejudices, misconceptions and hatreds. You don't have to read any of the other parts of the document to "get the picture".

In this system of linguistic analysis the first descriptor mentioned is the most important to explain the author's point of view - who it is they are looking at. There will then be a body of words that describes the object in full or merely justifies the author's choice of viewpoint before the next descriptor is used, usually a different phrase or word that is analogous to the first descriptor, eg "he".

Applying this formula to the submission by the VIEU:

1. Disregard 1.1 "Gifted and Talented" as it is the title of the Inquiry.
2. Disregard 1.2 "gifted and talented" as it refers to the Terms of Reference.
3. Take 1.4 "learners" as the primary descriptor and the rest of 1.4 as justification for the viewpoint, eg simplistic, piecemeal, bandaid, faddish, unsustainable and one-off.
4. Take the next descriptor, "student" in the last sentence in 1.4 and you have the VIEU's position accurately and clearly defined.

The VIEU belongs to the anti-gifted gang. That is they don't talk about gifted at all; other than to rubbish the concept, denigrate any special provision and generally talk about "all students" as having "individual needs", while never providing individual curriculum,
teaching methods, classrooms, timetables, learning pathways or assessment for any student.

Just to be sure that this linguistic assessment is fair, skim through each paragraph and find the descriptors, eg 2.1 "children and young people"; 2.2 "student", "best readers"; 2.3 "students"; 2.4 "all students"; etc.

There is NO reference to gifted.

To emphasise this point all references to gifted are put in parentheses, eg 3.1 and 3.2, to define a term used by others. The reference in 4.1 is, in fact a linguistic error and I am sure that the VIEU would agree that it should be in parentheses.

**WHAT IS WRONG WITH SCHOOL**

The really funny thing (remember funny = crying) about 4.1 is that this paragraph clearly defines what is wrong with schools in the area of provision for gifted students, while clearly explaining the teacher's "approaches to programming" for "gifted and talented". I don't think that was the VIEU's intention at all because they are still using the descriptor "students".

1. They use the term "approaches to programming" and "differentiated curriculum approaches" not "curriculum" and "differentiated curriculum". They talk about "student assessment"; "the next level of performance or learning outcome"; "effective" (in terms of outcomes) but NEVER alternative assessment, different curriculum or alternative outcomes. The gifted student still does exactly the same curriculum; the same tasks/homework/assignments; the same assessments in the same class at the same rate, in the same way as every other student in the class.

Only if gifted students have gone through this process and "achieved the learning objectives", are they allowed to move onto the "next level of a course". The problem is the "course" is not suitable, relevant or appropriate for gifted students because it is the same as that given to ALL students. Gifted students have to "prove" they can do "this" work, and do it neatly, clearly and well (no matter how inappropriate it is) before they get more of the same!

2. The VIEU states: "Differentiated learning is however very time and resource intensive because it relies on highly effective and ongoing assessment and program development." Without going into the semantics of this statement, there is only one thing they should have added - "so we don't do it." Providing for gifted students is only difficult if you are still trying to be a teacher instead of a facilitator. Accept the fact that they are more intelligent than you are and use that intelligence. Differentiated curriculum for gifted students is very simple in actual fact. Immerse the student in their area of passion and let them fly. Build into their study the framework that they need in an integrated subject model and let the student design and implement their own course, including their own assessment;
have to be more intelligent than children because they are older and more educated!?)

3. The VIEU states that there are "accelerated programs" in schools. I would ask where? The structure of school is that a student sits in a class and "learns" with that class. There is no structure to allow a gifted student to work through the curriculum at their own pace, separate to the class and no structure to allow the student to move onto the next level of work either. The other integrated problem is that the class curriculum and the next level are both unsuitable for gifted students.

4. What the VIEU calls "enhancement programs" are in fact more like what the gifted students should be doing all the time, except for the fact that they are written and presented by teachers who don't know what giftedness is.

**TALENT DEVELOPMENT**

In 4.2 the VIEU is complaining about "market pressure". This is something that I really don't understand. This document is being written by PRIVATE school teachers! I would have thought that responding to market pressure was their core business but instead they are objecting. What are they objecting to? Talent development in a particular subject area!

They also don't want to do acceleration because, according to them, "it is most often not appropriate to do this because the child needs to stay with their age cohort for emotional/social development reasons." Nothing could be further from the truth.

As giftedness is a genetic condition that produces both high intelligence and advanced development, most gifted children should be accelerated (grade skipped) by a year to provide for their emotional/social development. Some highly gifted children will need to be accelerated by three or four years so that they are growing up with and interacting with children more alike in development. Please remember, gifted children are never like other children and no matter what age level you place them with in a normal school and they will never grow up with their peers.

I heartily agree with the VIEU's comments in 4.3. There is no point in developing ILP's (or IEP's) for gifted students. The teachers don't have any idea of how to do this. Please note the VIEU is still not actually talking about gifted students. They are talking about students who have pushy parents who think they are "gifted in a particular area". Parents of gifted children don't use this term.

I particularly like 4.4. There are "some" (lots of) PRIVATE schools who are using State and Federal money targeted for students with "Special Needs" to set up their "enhancement" programs.
What does this mean? It means that teacher selected students are withdrawn from class for one or two sessions a week to attend a class for "special" students where they can do "special" activities. Who are these special students? They are those with intellectual disability who have no funding allocated; those with learning difficulties; those with behaviour problems; those with talent in particular subject areas and sometimes the gifted. Needless to say, this does not necessarily provide for the needs of any of these students but all the classroom teacher has to do is make sure the kids have fun and produce lovely projects to been seen as "successful". The classroom teacher allocated to run the program is most unlikely to have training in gifted education.

The VIEU has not indicated any of their schools who might be used as an exemplar or as a model for gifted provision. They have not suggested that education for gifted is being provided in any private school. They are actually discussing provision for all students and are declaring loud and clear that education for individual needs is not happening - and that includes learning difficulties students and gifted students along with everyone else.

THE NECESSARY APPROACHES

In 5.1 under the heading of "Necessary Approaches", the VIEU states, "schools need to be resourced and enabled to offer alternatives to grade-based, one size fits all approaches to school curriculum and classroom teaching."

As I stated at the Melbourne hearing of the Senate Inquiry in 2001, you don't need funding to provide for gifted students, you need a change of attitude. Extra funding will not necessarily change a teacher's view about giftedness but training and strong leadership by the Parliament and the State Education Department will.

The problem with school is that the model of aged-based, year long groups, who sit in a room with desks, blackboard (or whiteboard) and a teacher at the front is a model that is based on archaic institutional practices and has very little to do with learning. The teachers themselves went to school under that model, they went to University under that model and they go back into schools under that model. They have no other experience. In order to envision an alternative you have to first admit that there is something very wrong with school. I am quite happy to envision an alternative model that looks more like the Fitzroy Community School or the local community Library than a regular classroom. As with all good education, unless you set up a model and show teachers how to do it, no amount of book learning and theoretical practice will help them change what they do.

The VIEU believes that they can't provide for individual needs without extra allocated planning time, paid professional development and extra general funding. I say, what's wrong with choosing to do extra study/in-service training and paying for it yourself? What's wrong with arranging gifted education training at your school along with Epipen training? What's wrong with using Raven's Progressive Matrices to find
all the gifted students in your school and clustering them in one grade (in primary school) with a teacher who is interested in teaching them? What's wrong with borrowing a copy of the computer program that lets you do vertical timetabling? What's wrong with accelerating gifted students? What's wrong with having multiple level composite classes and moving up a grade or two as is needed, NOT at the end of each year? What's wrong with kids in primary school having classes at the local high school? What's wrong with gifted students doing correspondence classes, adult education or University studies at any level? What's wrong with clustering gifted students from different schools at different levels in a group in the local community hall? What's wrong with hiring specialist teachers to teach these students? The answer? There is nothing wrong with any of these ideas, so long as they help gifted students to survive school. The problem is that no teachers want to do any of them. But the gifted students do. Ruby has said it very clearly. She says:

I find school boring because I already know most things that are meant to be taught to me. I find that hard because most other people are at the expected level and we are always doing things that I have done in my earlier years at school. I want to learn, but I hardly ever get to.

Being me is hard. It is hard because it's hard to learn with the rate we're going ...

In some subjects, school is fun. But in others it is not very fun. The effectiveness of extension group is not enough. Some solutions are: maths projects, learning about percentages%, extension homework, harder books to read.

Students should be given better education.

...

Other solutions would be harder projects, harder themes, and way harder maths. Maybe learning about y’s x’s and z’s.
What I would like to happen is that I can learn at the level I am at. Not the level of other kids my age.

Ruby is asking you to give her the opportunity to learn. She is only eight but she has great ideas and simple solutions, all very easy to provide for her. Why isn't it being done? Why is there no secondary school for her to go to? Because teachers don't like gifted students and choose not to do anything.

The most awful part of Ruby's letter? "BEING ME IS HARD." The education system is telling Ruby she has to be someone else and she has no right to be herself.

This is what you are teaching gifted children from the tender age of four!
CONCLUSION

The VIEU states that the "underpinning policy driver" must be the status quo - to "ensure that all students achieve their best". They don't add the caveat "at the regular curriculum, in the regular class and in the regular time". Teachers believe in the education system. They believe that the system is "good".

This belief system is due in part to the misunderstanding and ignorance that leads them to define giftedness as being good at schoolwork (a high academic achiever) and partly because teachers in general do not like gifted students and don't want to do anything.

The "underpinning policy driver" must change the status quo and must challenge teachers to change their behaviour and their belief systems.

1. It starts with a definition of giftedness that clearly explains that this is a genetic condition that produces high intelligence and advanced development; that occurs across all socio-economic groups in even proportions and can be identified from birth by means other than IQ tests. IQ tests remain a good tool (given their limitations) for identifying older gifted students but high academic achievement and teacher nomination should NOT be used to find them. All references to "and talented" must be deleted in any discussion or any document concerning giftedness. The Gagné Model of Giftedness and Talent needs to be modified to reflect this. I am sure that Gagné won't mind you changing the word "talents" in his model to "exemplary performance", or "high achievement".

2. Because this condition has vast psychological and developmental issues, giftedness must be placed in the legal group of "special needs".

As the Senate Inquiry (2001) stated:

Peak education policy documents such as the Adelaide Declaration or State/Territory equivalents, where they refer to special needs or individual differences, should make it clear that ‘special needs’ includes giftedness.

Recommendation 3 (paragraph 2.90)

and

The Commonwealth should amend the guidelines for targeted programs for schools to confirm that the disadvantage suffered by gifted children whose needs are not met is within the meaning of ‘educational disadvantage’.

Recommendation 19 (paragraph 5.13)
3. As the Commonwealth government has not chosen to complete any of the recommendations of the Senate Report, other than to provide an on-line teacher training course and to organise one-off meetings for parents in rural areas, the Victorian State Government needs to take up the responsibility of providing for its gifted students by implementing those recommendations.

I have included a copy of the Senate Report Recommendations for you to consider.

4. I have also included a copy of the Pyramid Model to explain how and what to do for provision for gifted students. This model was recommended by the Working Party for Program Provision in 1995 but was mysteriously omitted in the final documents. We want this model to be used as the State Education Department model for provision.

5. The one thing that you must do now is to open a "Special School" for gifted students to provide for those students who are being damaged by their school experiences. We are not interested in flash buildings or fancy computers or "enrichment" courses; we just want somewhere our children can go where they are safe and happy.

We just need a room or a house somewhere and permission to do anything that is needed and we will do the rest. This is what is needed right now. It is a "crisis intervention" or "emergency response" strategy, not policy and program development.

Things were bad in 1995 and nothing was done that changed schools. Things were still bad in 2001 and still nothing was done that changed schools. Our children have started to have children of their own who are required to go to school. Where can we send them? We know the system is going to hurt them. Whatever policy you come up with in the years to come will not help our children today. The VIEU has finally admitted what we have always known - we can't trust schools to take care of our children.

We know what to do for our children, but we need your help and permission to do it. If you don't want to help, that's fine with us, but you then will have to exempt our children from attending your schools.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

Rhonda Collins

For and on behalf of more than 900 gifted families across Victoria.