Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

A Response from the Victorian Association of Catholic Primary School Principals Inc.

We are pleased to present our response to the following points:

How should the concept of ‘giftedness’ and ‘talented’ be defined?

Members of VACPSP Inc have embarked on research in this area based on the theories of Françoys Gagné (2003). Gagné proposes a distinction between giftedness and talent that is well grounded in research on human abilities (Gross, 1993). Gagne states:

**Gifted students** are those whose potential is distinctly above average in one or more of the following domains of human ability: intellectual, creative, social and physical.

**Talented students** are those whose skills are distinctly above average in one or more areas of human performance.

Or alternately it could be stated that:-

A **talented student** is one who displays exceptional creative ability in areas in which they have been explicitly taught.

A **gifted student** is one who displays exceptional ability in areas in which they have not been explicitly taught.

Generally we agree with research that shows that giftedness isn't often reflected in academic learning and success. Gifted students often have a rich elaborated and differentiated set of ideas re a given topic. They often give unexpected ideas and show deep breadth across these, have a reservoir of knowledge and are able to use this knowledge to further analyse situations. They can have rapid retrieval skills, intrinsic motivation and an inner drive to enquire and are curious in specific domains or subject areas.

They often display stubbornness, are demanding and display fierce persistence when putting forward their ideas. These students are not easily taught externally, for example, in learning conventions such as writing or spelling. They have a level of empathy, maturity and understanding of emotional situation that is more highly ‘tuned’ than other students and have advanced cognition and emotion due to a perceived lack of personal power to do anything about a situation. It is important that they receive acknowledgment of what they know or believe and that they are encouraged to examine what actions they can take. As a result of these behaviours, gifted and talented students can often be perceived as displaying behavioural problems in their schools.
The Key benefits and issues surrounding programs for gifted and talented students, including any gaps identified in current programs:

Providing for gifted students in the classroom is a very important issue for educators. There are many reasons for this, but primarily it is a JUSTICE issue. Sometimes there can be a tendency to teach to the middle and lower groups and high achievers can go undetected. Looking at student reports there is also a tendency to give a high number of Cs, while we know that in any distribution, there are students all along the spectrum or ‘bell curve’.

It is also extremely important to provide relevant programs to these children to avoid them becoming labelled as problematic or precocious and therefore tending to fail rather than succeed.

Regular classroom teachers frequently have inappropriate beliefs about gifted students and how they learn. These stereotypes influence how teachers recognise these students and how they teach them. The stereotypes frequently do not reflect the diversity of giftedness and do not distinguish between different types of giftedness and talent.

Teachers often do not take account of how these students actually learn or operate / present in the classroom, that is, their regular classroom personas.

- Schools should be providing differentiated and personalized learning to ensure all students, including those who are ‘gifted and talented’ are reaching their full potential.

- Engagement of all students in classroom learning activities will happen if they are stimulated through a differentiated curriculum and their learning style is provided for.

- To better differentiate in the classroom, teachers need more effective means to identify students at the top end of our bell curve.

- Teachers need to have more professional discussions about these students and how to best cater for them. This will bring them into the forefront of thinking especially when planning.

- If a school is providing a differentiated curriculum then the negative characteristics often seen with gifted children may not appear (e.g. bad behaviour due to boredom, masking ability to fit in with peers).

- Also if schools are providing differentiated curriculum then there should be an improvement in the gifted and talented students’ academic results.

- Gifted and talented students need to be provided with opportunities to use higher order thinking skills instead of repetition of content knowledge.

- Gifted and Talented students need to be challenged with deeper levels of thinking about the content instead of increased amount of work because they often move through the set work and content more quickly than their peers.

- In order for these changes to occur in a school, all staff must be trained to be aware of gifted students’ behaviours and how to best cater for them in the classroom. Currently this is an area of real need.
Any relevant projects currently underway specific to the education of gifted and talented students:

Catholic Education Office Initiatives
A committee was formed in early 2010 to address gifted education. The chairperson is Dr Susan Nikakis snikakis@ceomelb.catholic.edu.au
This committee comprises of principals, CEO education officers and teachers. VACPSP Inc. has representation on this committee.
Some initiatives so far are:
• Two meetings per term
• Publication of Gifted Handbook (still in draft form but due to be launched in August)
• Seminar on July 19th 2011
• Proposed symposium in early 2012.

Equity of access to programs for all gifted and talented students in Victoria.
Currently many schools cater for their ‘gifted and talented’ students through external parties such as ‘Gateways’ or other extension type activities. The use of these types of programs can add to any student’s extra curricula learning but many students are not able to access these due to the tyranny of distance, i.e. rural and regional schools, or due to the cost of these programs for lower socio-economic groups. What is really needed is the provision of rich learning opportunities within all of our classrooms and schools. Open-ended investigations are beneficial for all students but are particularly suited to meeting the needs of gifted and talented students. They allow gifted students to move beyond the core curriculum and give them opportunities to:
be involved in long term-projects where they can develop goal setting and organisational strategies, pursue an area of passion and develop their own initiative and develop problem-solving skills and their creativity. Teacher education in how to create these rich learning environments is something that must be addressed.

Addressing the issue of underperformance among gifted and talented students;
As previously stated, Gifted students are those whose potential is distinctly above average in one or more of the following domains of human ability: intellectual, creative, social and physical. Often these student do not reach this potential because they are not stimulated or engaged to learn what the’ set curriculum’ or ‘tested curriculum’ is all about. These students display a stubbornness to learn through the domains that they favour and are extremely difficult to engage through ‘normal’ classroom activities. They often display stubbornness, are demanding and show fierce persistence when putting forward their ideas. These students are not easily programmed externally, for example, in learning conventions such as writing or spelling, but they would rather take charge of their own learning. There has been significant research in this area and none of it has really come up with a resolution for this issue, other than the fact that schools and teachers must create learning environments to engage these students, once again highlighting the need for teacher education in this area.
Overcoming negative attitudes and misconceptions surrounding giftedness and talent:

As a society we can celebrate individual differences in athletic, artistic or musical talent, but we are still quite uncomfortable helping our best minds improve themselves. Individuals with mental or physical disabilities receive individual, differentiated services but this is often denied to those who have intellectual talents. Teachers who display significant negative attitudes to gifted students often believe that these students are disrespectful of authority, insensitive to others, elitist, socially isolated, don’t make friends easily, don’t have a good sense of humour, etc.) Once again, on-going education about how these students think and act when learning should help to re-train the minds and attitudes of teachers and other adults who work with these students. It is imperative for our society and for new and creative ideas to emerge that educators understand how to cater for these students within our system.

Mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students:

Professional Development for all practicing and pre-service teachers should be provided in the area of gifted education. Teachers should be exposed to good pedagogy that allows for differentiated learning and it should be mandated that teachers undergo training in the area of gifted and talented learning so that they understand the extreme variables within this student cohort and how they can plan programs in their classes to cater for these students. The CEO currently offers a range of professional development opportunities directed at supporting pedagogical practices as they relate specifically to the engagement of gifted and talented students. These involve action plans that are followed up in the school and classroom environment.

Any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented students:

- Increased opportunities for teacher professional development in the area of gifted and talented education
- Re-modelling of teaching spaces to allow for differentiated learning i.e. team teaching, individualised learning contracts, group work etc
- A need to mandate teacher professional learning in this area to ensure we stop these students from ‘falling through the cracks’ or being under-challenged, bored and therefore failing.
- The marginalisation of gifted and talented students in lower socio-economic groups and in rural and regional areas.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this response. Should you wish to discuss any components of this submission please do not hesitate to contact VACPSP Inc Executive Officer Jennie Douglas via email jdouglas@vacpsp.org.au.

Yours sincerely

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