Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Submission by James Mulcahy
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This submission seeks to address issues arising from criteria (a): the effectiveness of current policies and programs

Background

I have been involved in the setting up, delivery, organisation and supervision of gifted and talented programs in schools for the past 12 years. At my current school (student population about 500) we run a weekly withdrawn program for identified gifted students.

Identification of gifted students

Having observed gifted education programs in schools that have struggled to survive due to poor identification processes it is paramount that there are clearly define, transparent processes to identify gifted students.

At my current school we use clinical intelligence quotient assessment which is administered by an educational psychologist who is contracted by the school to carry out a range of assessments. Students who qualify for the program must achieve at the 95th percentile or above. Parents of students who sat the test are invited to meet with the educational psychologist to discuss the outcomes.

While there may be different views on at which point a student should be included in an academically based gifted program having an independent testing tool administered by a person with recognised expertise eliminates ambiguity.

Once students are formally identified in this way it becomes an essential feature of their school profile which teachers are expected to provide for. How well they are provided for varies from class to class, school to school. Many would agree that provision for gifted students is inadequate and needs to be addressed, just as we have sought to address the needs of other disadvantaged students (e.g. autism, intellectual disability).

Staffing of the program
In my experience accessing suitably qualified staff to provide guidance or delivery of a gifted program has been impossible. We select staff that have an interest in gifted education and send them to the periodic professional development courses that are held mainly in Melbourne.

Purpose and content of the program

It is clear from the research that many gifted students significantly underachieve. Through participation in a gifted program, students at Lucknow Primary School interact through challenging tasks that are aimed to give them a sense of identity, perspective and pride in what they can do.

Gifted students need reassurance and support for them to continue achieving at their optimum. In the mainstream classroom they often develop a sense of isolation due to their increasing awareness of difference. This is at a time in their lives when children very much want to belong and ‘standing out’ can be the source of ongoing discomfort and embarrassment.

Gifted students meet each week for 45 minutes in small groups to participate in a range of challenges and tasks that stretch their lateral thinking.

In terms of meeting the academic needs of gifted students the program we provide is clearly inadequate. The classroom is the child’s epicentre of learning and if they are not being sufficiently challenged it is potentially a great loss to the student and to society.

What can be done?

Students in regional Victoria are doubly disadvantaged due to the scarcity of available services and resources.

I will focus on what I believe could benefit gifted students in East Gippsland and the committee may choose to extrapolate this to other parts of the State.

In terms of financial outlay I believe it would be comparatively inexpensive to address the needs of gifted students.

While some students will benefit from year level or subject advancement this does suit all gifted students. There needs to be greater breadth and depth of provision in the mainstream classroom. The simple answer to this is that teachers should provide for this need. In my experience capable teachers are doing everything they can which is still not enough. This is often due to a lack of sufficient knowledge and understanding of the requirements to provide adequately for gifted students.

Through the use of readily available technologies it would not be difficult to establish a network for gifted students and their teachers led by personnel with strong skills in this area. The network could initially operate in selected schools where students could come together for learning events and teaching staff have regular guidance from those who are knowledgeable in gifted education. With the technologies now available to schools there is no reason why this service could not be extended to every classroom. However I would begin by building up a momentum with a core group of teachers across schools and this group act as a catalyst for further implementation. The role of school leadership is essential for effective implementation for, without this, the initiative could quickly wither.
Formally screening of students for giftedness is essential. Funding for this could be provided as part of or complementary to current student services provision. This is something we now do at Lucknow PS which is topped up by school funds.

In my experience this does not open up a floodgate as parents in the main have a well grounded understanding of difference in learning capacity in their children and quite accurately identify gifted tendencies.

Currently there is no encouragement for schools to provide for gifted students other than through the general expectation that all students needs be catered for. In reality schools that are providing in some way for gifted students are financially disadvantaged. Some well placed relatively inexpensive funding would go a long way to addressing disadvantage of these students who potentially could make a significant contribution to Australian society.

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