The Australian College of Educators

Submission to:
Parliamentary Inquiry into the education of Gifted and Talented Students
Victorian Parliament

The Australian College of Educators (ACE) is well placed to assist the Inquiry in its deliberations. The College has a long history as a professional association and is the oldest association in the country that represents educators across the nation. ACE members are drawn from both the government and non-government sectors of schooling and across all levels of education from early childhood through tertiary. It is the professional voice for educators. As a self-funding body, the College is clearly focussed on providing the best outcomes in education for young people and operates free of agendas that do not relate to good education. We see this inquiry as an opportunity in Australia's history to build broad consensus around a new set of arrangements for the development of young people in our care. The arrangements should be informed by a clear educational rationale that provides a solid basis for setting goals, parameters and priorities now and into the future. ACE appreciates the invitation to place a submission to this inquiry.

Overview of our submission
Currently, schooling is largely the responsibility of State government rather than Federal. With the advent of the Australian National Curriculum there is an opportunity to develop a state policy that complements any national policy on gifted education. All states in Australia now have a policy or at least a strategy relating to the education of gifted students. (Victoria does not have a policy as such. They did have the Bright Futures policy until 1999 but then the Labor government scrapped that and developed a ‘strategy’).on the education of gifted students. In this submission, ACE takes the view that the effectiveness of the Inquiry is contingent upon clear definition of terms and concepts based on current best practice; the apolitical identification of the issues faced and the adoption of appropriate principles and values
that guide any outcomes. It is also important that any work completed complement developments on a national level and relate to initiatives and operations across all sectors: Government, Catholic and Independent. A consciousness to produce outcomes that result in programs that are sustainable beyond electoral cycles and political whim would also be highly desirable.

The Inquiry’s success will be judged in the education community by the extent to which it engaged those in the community who hold knowledge in this area. The identification of key stakeholders is something with which ACE is happy to assist.

Submissions to the Inquiry were asked to respond to the following prompts. At this stage, responses are deliberately broad and are meant to seed further investigations on the part of the ETC Inquiry.

1. **How the concepts of giftedness and talent should be defined**

ACE acknowledges current definitions of giftedness and talent as adopted by Gagne (2003) (on the DEECD website)\(^1\) and Zeigler and Heller (2000)\(^2\). Though a child may be born with a gift, it is more than unfortunate if a child is not given the opportunities to develop that gift i.e. develop the gift as a talent. There is also an increasing focus on the importance of excellent performance as an indicator of high ability. It is in the appropriate identification of students and the provision of talent development opportunities that schools and educational organisations are crucial. Evidence from neuroscience also strongly supports the essential need for the provision of appropriate opportunities that challenge and develop young people. Neuroscientists such as Prof Graeme Jackson\(^3\) have also clearly identified the role of motivation in learning and there is an opportunity to develop this further in existing frameworks such as the VELS thinking skills. Currently little weight is given to those students who themselves initiate the thinking rather than just respond to ‘thinking’ stimuli.

Whatever definition of giftedness and talent is adopted, it must be one that is able to be used and operated upon in a schools/institutional setting. Teachers must be able to identify relevant students using this ‘working’ definition of giftedness. It is also the case that student needs are best addressed by appropriate training of teachers and program development that relate to the provision of truly differentiated programs. Teachers need to be able to associate a **clear set of behaviours and outcomes** with the classification of certain students as gifted, using the approved definition. Teachers/schools need to be able to identify what giftedness ‘looks like’. Likewise, the focus on excellence in performance/achievement is appropriate, whatever definition is used. There may be an opportunity to do this by enriching the existing VELS framework. Such programs would encompass differentiated curriculum, pedagogy and assessment across the whole spectrum of achievement. The education

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\(^1\) DEECD  
accessed 19 May 2011


\(^3\) Director, Brain Research Institute, Melbourne
of the gifted and talented should be seen as an appropriate education for a cohort of students that can benefit from such a truly differentiated program.

If one considers a spectrum of ability, then whether gifted students form a discrete group or not needs to be part of the thinking.

Consideration also needs to be given to the nature and type of giftedness a school is best placed to support. A range of cultural and experiential settings needs to be part of the thinking. For example, do we know what giftedness looks like in Indigenous communities? ESL communities? Rural communities?

2. The key benefits and issues surrounding programs for gifted and talented students, including any gaps identified in current programs

The overarching issue is that in many schools there is a lack of awareness of the benefits and issues associated with gifted and talented students!

Programs currently seem to be of 3 types in Victoria: whole school (eg selective schools), part school (eg SEAL programs in schools) or withdrawal models (many independent schools). Attention needs to be given to the **nature of programs** provided in schools. Evidence suggests that grouping of highly able students is certainly beneficial and these students need to be given opportunities to be genuinely challenged. There is much research that indicates the success of programs that develop talent in all students in all areas (sporting, artistic, technical). Evidence and sample programs may be found in the work of Vialle and Rogers^4^, Plunkett^5^ Van Tassel-Baska^6^ as well as many others.

Currently, there is limited communication between sectors with regards to sharing of information relating to identification, programs for and teacher training relating to the gifted and talented. An effective mechanism to share information does not exist across sectors and even within sectors (especially the independent sector).

It also appears to be the case that knowledge held by sector and school leaders about information relating to the education of gifted and talented is minimal. There is clear evidence that without the support and understanding of school/system leaders, true and effective change will be unlikely. With the development of the AITSL National Professional Standards for Teachers & Principals an opportunity exists to cement such aspects into the system.

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^4^ Rogers, K B & Vialle W: Educating the Gifted learner, David Barlow Publishing, Australia, , 2009


Issues relate primarily to appropriate identification, assessment, teacher training and provision of programs. There are identifiable issues in relation to adequately preparing pre-service teachers for the complexities associated with teaching highly able students in mainstream settings. Plunkett et al have found that educating pre-service teachers (and also experienced teachers) specifically in relation to gifted education does make a difference in terms of understanding the needs of this cohort of students and also knowing what sort of strategies are appropriate.

In any programs that are suggested, however, some thought will need to be given to the student’s own sense of self in the world. Are there opportunities to explore this through programs such as children’s philosophy, the IB MYP Approaches to Learning or the IB DP Theory of Knowledge programs? Programs should ideally provide students with the tools to understand themselves and the practical capability for the schools to administer such programs. Such work may be approached both within and across subject disciplines.

As a result of community dissatisfaction, we are seeing a rise in areas such as home schooling, which is not ideal and a poor reflection of our educational facilities and operations.

Funding is often directed at certain portions of the spectrum, and needs to be better differentiated with regards to funding across the spectrum of ability.

3. Any relevant projects currently underway specific to the education of gifted and talented students

Dr Margaret Plunkett and Dr Leonie Kronborg from Monash University and Dr John Munro from the University Of Melbourne Graduate School Of Education have done research in this area. Current projects include:

1. An evaluation of the changes in attitudes of students who undertake an elective in gifted education offered to undergraduate (and some graduate) teachers. Research suggests that attitudes impact on practice and that it is important for teachers to have positive attitudes. These attitudes are influenced by a greater understanding of the specific characteristics and learning needs of highly able students. So far about 300 students have completed the unit and initial findings show statistically significant changes in a positive direction in relation to gifted students.

2. A project with the staff at Nossal High School - the new select entry secondary school in Berwick. Results indicate that although teachers at the school are very motivated to help their highly able students meet their potential - the vast majority of teachers were not aware of how to go about doing this. PD has been provided by John Munro, Leonie Kronberg and Margaret Plunkett, however, the teachers are still finding it difficult.

It appears that research supports the idea that isolated PD sessions are not sufficient for teachers to really learn how to cater for gifted students in their classrooms. Specific education dedicated to giftedness is required - the last Senate Inquiry in 2001 advocated for every pre-service teacher to complete at least one semester of study in gifted education.
Clearly more research needs to be done on the children themselves. Further, on discussion with key educators, there is a great need to learn more about

- How to truly differentiate a unit of work
- Projects/work that allows students to learn at appropriately sophisticated knowledge levels
- Building ‘self knowledge’ of self as learner
- Gifted Academically Learning Disabled (GALD) students.
- Preferred models through which gifted students best learn (whole school, part school, withdrawal)

4. **Equity of access to programs for all gifted and talented students in Victoria**

An analysis of the difference in nature, abundance and access to programs within the 3 sectors (Gov, Catholic and Independent) needs to be undertaken. A preliminary examination indicates some provision in the government system and Catholic but a somewhat ad hoc approach in the independent sector. Information to families and the broader community is also highly variable in quality and availability and often dependent on a few ‘champions’.

Gifted and talented students need to be made aware of programs that exist to match their knowledge. Currently, access to knowledge of such programs is somewhat random in that not all schools are aware of programs that may exist outside their own school that could accommodate such students and may be in the students’ best interest. Even if a staff member is aware of appropriate programs, there is variability in knowledge of how to best access such programs. Better communication between tertiary institutions (universities, elite arts and sports organisations) and schools to allow a more fluid movement of students needs to be explored more thoroughly.

There is also a difference between different disciplines. For example, well known destinations for extremely talented musicians are general knowledge, but this is not the case for a budding physicist. An extremely talented sportsperson’s career is often dependent on who their coach is and what contacts they might have.

Many schools cite the availability of International Baccalaureate programs (especially the Diploma Programme) as something that caters for gifted and talented. While there is some merit in this, very few detailed analyses of this interpretation have been undertaken. Currently no government schools actively offer the IB Diploma in Victoria, although we understand discussions are underway.

In any discussions of equity, consideration should be given to the idea that equity AND excellence need to flourish in a wise society⁷. There is some evidence to suggest that more resources are directed into programs for children that fall behind and this imbalance may need to be reconsidered. Many view the availability of programs for the gifted and talented as an unnecessary luxury, whereas others would

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⁷ Mart N & Micheletti J; why gifted Students Need Trained Teachers; Gifted Education Press Quarterly Spring 2011, Vol 25, No 2
argue they are as morally required as programs addressing the needs of the struggling student.

5. **Addressing the issue of underperformance among gifted and talented students**

Underperformance is clearly linked to the lack of appropriate identification of relevant students which, in turn, is linked to the concomitant area of teacher training. There is still much evidence to suggest that many teachers incorrectly label highly able students as trouble makers because they may not comply with expected norms. One model that could be used here is the Betts and Neihart matrix which lists categories as The Successful, The Creative, The Underground, The At-Risk, The Multi-exceptional and The Autonomous Learner.  

Structured reflective assessment opportunities for students to express what they know may be one solution here. Some consideration will need to be given to the nature of assessment in our schools. The possibility of universally adopting better criterion referenced assessment or value added assessment and so called ‘authentic’ learning measures alongside/instead of norm referenced assessment may need to be explored.

Currently there is nothing on the VCAA website re the assessment of gifted students. This is clearly an area that requires more research.

6. **Overcoming negative attitudes and misconceptions surrounding giftedness and talent**

Negative attitudes often result from misconceptions. Effective awareness and education programs for staff and families are one solution. Emphasis on the spectrum of performance is one way to ameliorate some of the negative attitudes in this area. Many educators are not cognisant of the notion that even within the gifted population, there is a spectrum of abilities and personality types. Literature exists on issues associated with how best to minimise concerns resulting from the identification and schooling of gifted and talented.

7. **Mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students**

Currently very little training in teacher education courses involves a gifted and talented component. Often exposure consists of a guest lecture or two. Though teachers may undertake postgraduate training in this area, their daily duties may relate to areas where their expertise may not be shared effectively. Likewise there is limited research into longterm impact on practice after completing gifted education studies, though anecdotal evidence of the value exists. We know that changes in teacher

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practice are associated with long term projects and programs. This has implications for the education of the gifted.

There is still much work to be done on exactly how students learn and there is certainly room for much more differentiation within regular classrooms in Victoria.

8. **any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented students**

Knowledge relating to the education of the gifted and talented should be part of offerings across all states, and the ETC Inquiry is urged to share deliberations both across states and sectors. There is an opportunity to enrich all current state curricula so that the full ability continuum of students is accounted for.

We also need to monitor the emphasis on testing to ensure maximum opportunities for identifying gifted and talented may be derived from the results. Testing should/could also be used to develop benchmarking for high achievement.

ACE members have noticed the withdrawal of students often labelled as gifted from schools for home schooling.

It is interesting to note that within the independent sector there is no formal framework for the identification and management of those students at the top end of the performance spectrum.

Adequate time and energy will need to be provided to allow appropriate assessment of the resourcing required to finance the Inquiry recommendations.

**In conclusion:**

ACE would recommend that any revision of identification, teacher training, program policies and practices
- include identification criteria that are clear, unambiguous and practicable in their application
- be available to and required of all sectors of education - government, Catholic and independent
- be part of a processes and programs that can apply nationally, through working with key bodies such as ACARA, AITSL
- form part of a ‘continuum of appreciation’ that encompasses children with qualities of all types (gifted, talented, low ability, socio-emotional and cultural).
- include high achievement targets for gifted children – especially in relation to benchmarking
- result in changes in undergraduate and post graduate education courses with increased emphasis given to courses relating to gifted and talented students
- be part of Leadership programs for aspiring and current leaders of Sectors and Schools.
- be subject of increased research, particularly in relation to:
  - How to truly differentiate a unit of work
o Projects/work that allows students to learn at appropriately sophisticated knowledge levels
o Building ‘self knowledge’ of self as learner
o Gifted Academically Learning Disabled (GALD) students.
o Preferred models through which gifted students best learn (whole school, part school, withdrawal)

- include in-depth discussion with groups active in this area, including groups such as ACE, VAGTC/AAGTC, Krongold Centre.

Signed by:

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Acknowledgements
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