RESPONSE TO VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO GIFTED EDUCATION

Dear Committee members

The AAEGT welcomes the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students and thanks the committee for the opportunity to make a submission. As can be seen by the attached Information Statement, AAEGT is a voluntary organisation committed to the education and welfare of gifted and talented learners. Our responses to your questions follow.

What programs do we currently provide to gifted and talented students?
AAEGT is an umbrella organisation for state and territory associations, which offer extra-curricular workshops for children and lectures/seminars for their parents and teachers. AAEGT does not directly provide programs to gifted and talented students but sometimes provides financial support to the state associations. AAEGT in conjunction with the state and territory associations coordinates and implements a biennial national conference. In addition, in the alternate years AAEGT with a state or territory association provides workshops for parents and students.

Our experiences and issues surrounding these programs (including for example responding to negative attitudes towards giftedness)
The biennial conference is generally well received and attended. Financial support for the conferences is always a concern with state education departments generally reluctant to provide sponsorship. It is often only at the last hour that some education departments come through with some funding. These conferences provide up to date research and practices in an Australian context and are a valuable resource for teachers, academics and other professional and community organisations involved in gifted education.

AAEGT has developed documents which address some of the issues related to gifted education particularly negative attitudes and myths about these children (see attachments). These students are often the last ones to receive access to appropriate educational programs and students who are academically gifted and also have learning disabilities are not considered at all when it comes to providing an educational program to meet their needs. Parents are often advocates for their children and if it were not for them would often not receive any specialist services. The wider community generally still has the perception that these children have been gifted with intelligence and therefore do not need any additional services or recognition.
The Experiences of Students
A consistent and outstanding benefit of programs provided for young gifted people is the connection with others of like ability. Many young gifted people are isolated from others with 'like-minds' and spend large times in their childhood conforming to their peer group, addressing the drive to belong. When attending an activity with other gifted young people, there is a tangible sense of community—a joy of sharing language, ideas, love of learning and information. Meeting with others challenges one's view of self by opening the mind to how others think and explore their world. Deep friendships that continue beyond the program emerge as young people feel a fit that is often not found in their daily lives.

As well, programs provide opportunities around social skills — learning to compromise, address culturally different approaches to work, share ideas, lead and be led and communicate thinking to others. In a mainstream setting gifted learners may not meet someone who challenges their theory, or corrects their errors, and so they develop an inaccurate perspective of their individual ability. In a program aimed at gifted individuals, such experiences allow them to learn, in a supported way, the important social skills of getting along with others, and sharing their insights with the possibility of constructive critique. Such skills are lifelong and serve to provide background for later work and civic activity. Young gifted people working with other young gifted people learn about risk taking, different viewpoints, evaluation of ideas and are challenged when others provide new information and concepts.

For gifted young people to enter the world outside their school environment they need to have skills at working alongside others, showing compassion and understanding and a capacity to communicate their thinking and reflect on their impact on those around them. Programs provide rehearsal opportunities for these important skills, with others who think at the same pace and experience life in the same intense way.

Programs for gifted young people take knowledge to a higher level and allow opportunity to learn new, different and advanced content in a positive learning environment. They are designed to allow for individual pacing of content and material, and often provide access to mentors, experts and high level thinkers who can introduce new ways of looking at material to young people. Participants benefit intellectually and extend their learning and knowledge beyond the scope of the core curriculum in their school setting. The environment of such a program allows for open ended, extended learning, in any way the student takes it – the freedom to learn empowers young gifted children to confidently take on new challenges and material.

Programs provide for holistic development of gifted young people by offering an integrated, specifically designed set of activities to challenge thinking, communication and knowledge. The benefits of such experience spin off into the daily life of a gifted child, who will often refer to one experience as being catalytic in their aspiration to achieve highly and successfully.

Definitions of Giftedness and Talent
A clear definition of the difference between giftedness and talent is essential to support the development of programs at all levels of education and learning. Using the Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (Gagné 1985; 2007; 2008) the concepts can be clearly defined as being separate but connected entities. The model provides a clear way of explaining the differences and is utilised in education systems and sectors across Australia. Giftedness is potential, and talented performance is the product of this potential in concert with the environment, the individual and a process over time. Those with potential may or may not experience a process that allows them to demonstrate their capacity to perform at the highest levels of human endeavour in any field. The AAEGT utilises this model to support the development of understanding within the community.
Giftedness is potential and falls into one of four domains of human activity (Gagné, 1985). The domains include creativity, intellectual, physical and the socio affective ability. Potential is observed when a child demonstrates a capacity to respond beyond the expected range of ability in any one domain, in an untrained or undirected way. Giftedness can be noticed when a child is young although it may also not be recognised until later when the child demonstrates unexpected capacity to respond to experience. There are a number of consistent behaviours across all domains that serve to flag possible giftedness. These may include the speed of learning new material, language facility, memory and an intuitive creative response to problems and situations.

Gagné (2007) clearly defines talented performance as a result of the ‘choreography’ of a range of catalysts in a child’s life, including initial giftedness. The developmental process that is key to talented performance includes a synthesis of practice, coaching, maturation and learning. Over time the giftedness (potential) may become focussed in a specific area of human endeavour and is recognised as talented performance. This may include leadership, visual arts, writing, problem solving, strategy, design, languages, sport among others. A number of catalysts impact on the developmental process. Catalysts may encourage or discourage the development of talent. The environment of the individual, including home life, geographical location, school, community, region or relationships, provides different opportunities for meeting with other individuals, mentors, teachers and experts. The intrapersonal capacity of the individual filters the environmental impacts but also directly affects the development process. Self-esteem, motivation, persistence, volition, learning skills, resilience and confidence are highly idiosyncratic and change the experience of life of any gifted individual. A young person in a highly stimulating environment, with considerable potential to perform at a high level may find themselves lacking confidence and motivation to capitalise on the opportunities offered in the environment, and thus unable to achieve their potential. Conversely a gifted child in a poorer environment with high levels of resilience and volition may well seek out the opportunities within their environment that others don’t recognise.

**Mechanisms to Improve the Capacity of Teachers**

As indicated in the attached chapter (Vialle & Rogers, in press), there is evidence that teachers are willing to support gifted students but lack the skills to do so. The AAEGT believes that the following mechanisms are essential to ensure that teachers are able to meet the needs of this 10% or so of the school population. This is especially critical in schools that serve students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

1. Compulsory unit on gifted learners in all preservice teacher education programs.
2. All schools need to identify a teacher to act as a coordinator for gifted students.
3. Coordinators in schools should be supported to complete a specialist qualification in gifted education.
4. Teachers should be encouraged to attend state and national conferences on the education of gifted students.

**Broader Implications for School Communities**

The AAEGT believes that it is every child’s right to have an education that matches his or her needs. Gifted students, like all other students, have learning needs that are different from each other and from other students. Among the needs that we see as paramount are:

1. The opportunity to spend at least some of their time on a regular basis with like-minded peers.
2. The opportunity to move through curriculum at their own pace. This may mean acceleration of content in some circumstances but the opportunity to take more time to pursue topics in depth in others.
3. A curriculum that challenges, extends and develops higher-order thinking and engages their curiosity and motivation.
4. Social-emotional support.
5. A safe learning environment that accepts and celebrates academic prowess (one form of giftedness) in the same way it celebrates sporting prowess (another form of giftedness).

It is essential that schools adopt a schoolwide policy that systematically provides a raft of strategies to identify, support and educate gifted learners. While many enrichment and extra-curricular activities complement gifted education practices, gifted students need support and differentiated programs on a daily basis. The program needs to be matched to the needs of the learner if it is to be successful.

We are happy to respond to any other queries from the Committee.

Yours sincerely

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