INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

Terms of Reference:

The effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students, with particular consideration of, but not limited to:

Identification of gifted and talented students.

Our school refers to the Select Entry and Accelerated Learning Guidelines (2007) and the student learning/programs/gifted links on the DEECD Website (2010) for identification of gifted and talented students. Both sources advocate using a ‘combination of selection tools’ when selecting students for any gifted program; both Objective (quantifiably measured) information and subjective (personally observed) measures are considered. Researchers have overwhelmingly agreed over a number of years that a range of selection procedures are necessary in order to effectively identify gifted and talented students. Shore, Cornell and Robinson (1991) advised to “base identification on multiple criteria”. The use of a range of procedures is even more important when selecting students for accelerated programs such as the SEAL program (Plunkett & Kronborg 2004). We need to be able to identify gifted students who are achieving, as well as, gifted students who have the potential to achieve.

In grade 6 many of our future year 7 students apply for our Select Entry and Accelerated Learning (SEAL) Program. Initially these students are identified via primary/secondary school nominations and/or parent nominations. Teacher nominations are in the form of a common written checklist, including positive and negative behaviours. Parent nominations are also in written form; the format is the same for each applicant and includes opportunities to give examples of ‘gifted behaviours’. The teacher and parent nomination forms were sourced from Gross, Miraca. et al. (2005) Gifted and talented education professional development package for teachers [Online/CD Rom]. All applicants are given the same copy of the pre-selection test information and the same practice questions (DEECD 2008). All applicants sit the same Selection Test at the same time of day; 80-90% students also do this test on the same day. An information session is held specifically for the SEAL program, this is well advertised. All families receive the
same information package containing course information, application, parent and teacher checklists. On-demand data from both primary and secondary teachers is also used to assist with the identification of SEAL applicants, as well as gifted students in the mainstream classes. Teachers in all classes, including the SEAL teachers, are asked to create a ‘class profile’ using all available data. All SEAL applicants sit a Higher Abilities Selection Test (HAST) compiled and marked by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The HAST is an ability/aptitude test. It tests reasoning ability and not learned knowledge (ACER 2008). The results from the HAST plus information from teachers and families are all used to short list SEAL applicants for interviews. Objectivity is further improved in interviews by ensuring that all applicants in one cohort are asked the same questions and detailed notes are kept (Plunkett & Kronborg, 2004. Gross et al, 2005). Final selection into the SEAL class is made after considering all of the available information. This process will be evaluated each year in terms of its accuracy in identifying gifted students. A similar combination of selection tools is used in our region (Hume) it is uncertain if this combination of selection tools are consistently used across the state.

An area in which the identification could be improved is through further education in gifted education for all primary and secondary students. In 2002 the Senate Select Committee reported that: “Teachers need appropriate training to identify giftedness…. Exposure to gifted education issues is important to dispel misconceptions and negative attitudes that arise from lack of training and lack of confidence”. Without training it is alleged that teachers “cannot accurately differentiate between ‘potential’, ‘performance’ and ‘compliance’”. In particular, untrained teachers tend to favour well-behaved children of the dominant culture. They tend not to recognise the giftedness of badly behaved children, underachievers and disadvantaged minority groups” (p82). Further to that a submission from the Australian Secondary Schools Principals Association to the Senate Select Committee stated that “The negative issues associated with discussion about gifted students in the school environment (elitism for example) would be much less a problem if teachers were informed fully and trained well in the implications of teaching the gifted child” (2002). In terms of our selection we allow students to apply for our SEAL Program even though they may not have been recommended by their current teacher.
The HAST is externally marked; results are given for each component as a raw and a standardised score. Students are also given an overall percentile ranking and a stanine score. Individual scores are considered as well as the total standardised score. The reference group population is Australian students who previously sat the test as part of a selection process for either a Scholarship or Gifted and Talented Program. ACER (2008) recommends that school reports, interviews, age, family circumstances etc. are also taken into account.

**Equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families.**

In 2002 the Senate Committee stated that “Adequate provision for gifted children in the public education system is essential so that provisions will be accessible to lower socio-economic groups....All children should have access to a broad curriculum.” Costs for entering our SEAL Program or having access to ‘above level’ curriculum in mainstream classes are no different to costs incurred by any other student in the school. Students living in outlying rural areas have access to school buses.

All results from our applicants are viewed alongside information from the student’s current school and family with consideration and allowances for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or who may have ‘underperformed’ on tests for other reasons. A number of successful SEAL applicants come from small rural schools.

**Impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students.**

Miraca Gross’s study (2004) of exceptionally gifted children found that as early as grade 1 or 2 these students became uncomfortable with how they were regarded, by their peers and their teachers. Depending on how important peer acceptance is to these students they may adopt a whole range of strategies to mask their abilities. The ‘forced choice dilemma’ could be a problem for academically gifted students, particularly at secondary school where acceptance by one’s peers is a high priority. In these situations a student may have to choose between realising their gifts and social acceptance. Students may go ‘underground’, display ‘challenging behaviours’ or worse ‘dropout’. 
Written feedback received each year from SEAL students, parents and teachers (including 2011) consistently lists that the opportunity to work with like-minded peers, find social acceptance, to work at a pace that is commensurate with their abilities is both stimulating and enjoyable. Parents report that their child has displayed increased levels of motivation and a keen desire to be at school. A high percentage of our gifted students are active participants in extra-curricular activities such as the music program, school production, talent quest, language exchanges, world challenge, debating team, writing group, science and engineering challenge. Similarly they are also involved in leadership positions such as prefects, form captains and peer educators.

The scope, coverage and effectiveness of current policies and programs for students from both metropolitan and regional school communities, school leaders, teachers and parents and carers to support gifted and talented students.

Assuming that the current policies are implemented then they are quite effective. The SEAL Program in our rural region has been able to provide for gifted students who are within travelling distance of the school. Each of the SEAL schools in our region are quite well placed and do not draw on the same cohort. In the past few years we have received regular support from the Senior Project Officer – Curriculum for the Hume Region. This assistance has been excellent in terms of regular regional SEAL meetings, individual advice to schools and assisting with organising and providing some funding for the professional development for the SEAL teachers in the three Hume Region Schools. It is uncertain if there is this level of support is consistent across the state.

In 2002 Senate Select Committee found that “there is considerable educational justification for ability grouping of the gifted”. The Committee found that ability grouping of the gifted within comprehensive schools was considered more favourably than within fully selective schools. Our evaluations to date would confirm the Committee’s views as many of our SEAL families state that their child (or children) in the SEAL Program are absolutely thriving. Also as the SEAL Program is part of a mainstream school it provides an opportunity for gifted students in our mainstream classes to have access to teachers experienced in differentiating the curriculum for
gifted students. In the senior classes SEAL students mix in with mainstream students and this provides an opportunity to ‘raise the bar’ in these classes.

In the evaluation of SEAL Programs in Victorian Government schools in 2004 (Plunkett & Kronborg) it was found that these programs appear to have been “highly beneficial in engaging students with high academic potential in accelerated learning from Years 7-10. This is a recognised period of increased risk for student disengagement”. When asked about the effect that the SEAL program had had on the school, one of the coordinators said, (the SEAL program) “totally changed the culture of the school in terms of atmosphere (and) acceptance of individual differences”. There is now a culture of achievement throughout all school activities and outside the classroom. The expectations of all students have been raised. A culture of success is pervasive throughout the whole school”. And another coordinator stated that (the SEAL program) “encourages pedagogy with a focus on developing activities designed to promote powerful thinking. There is a ‘flow on’ effect into mainstream classrooms”. Another interesting issue raised by a number of SEAL coordinator’s is that “parents who would have bypassed the school for the private system have not only chosen the SEAL program for their own child but are now advocates of the school and the SEAL program to others” (Plunkett & Kronborg, 2004). Our experiences and feedback confirm these findings.

For many teachers, the opportunity to work in SEAL classes has provided the chance to fully focus on curriculum differentiation. Some of these ideas can be modified and used in mainstream classes and, as a result can benefit all students (Plunkett & Kronborg, 2004). Teachers within the SEAL program at Wangaratta High School have also expressed similar opportunities and benefits.

In our rural area there is minimal support in the community for gifted students and their families. There is a regional parent network for gifted students but this not something that has come out of our school. It is independently run by a local network of parents of gifted students. This network shares resources and has speakers with knowledge in the area of gifted students attend their meetings.
Opportunities and strategies for enhancing support for gifted and talented students, their parents and carers, teachers and school leaders.

The most effective way to enhance support for gifted and talented students, their parents/carers, teachers and school leaders is through education. Priority needs to be given to professional development for teachers specifically looking at the characteristics of gifted students, tools for identifying gifted students, time dedicated to curriculum differentiation using recommended curriculum models, as well as, evaluation and documentation of programs. Further to this schools need to acknowledge that underperforming gifted students are ‘students at risk’ in their strategic planning. All schools need to develop policies that specifically address the needs of their gifted students.

It has also been argued that the teaching skills needed to handle gifted children will benefit all children (Senate Select Committee, 2002). Submissions in the Senate Select Committee (2002) argued that “inadequate training is an important cause of negative attitudes among teachers. Ill-equipped teachers are liable to feel professionally inadequate and resentful”. More recent studies have looked at teacher training and the effects it can have on the accurate identification of gifted students and the quality of the gifted programs on offer. Research into SEAL schools in Victoria found that the SEAL schools with the highest mean Equivalent National Tertiary Rank (ENTER) also had the highest number of teachers completing postgraduate studies in education with a “gifted focus, educational studies or postgraduate studies in gifted education courses”. These schools also had the highest VCE results for all non-SEAL students (in SEAL schools) (Plunkett & Kronborg, 2002). While the effectiveness of a school should not be judged by ENTER scores alone, the data is very encouraging for both SEAL and non-SEAL students. It would appear that teacher training goes further than just improving the identification process.

Wherever possible, teachers teaching in a gifted program should be chosen because of their enthusiasm and interest in the program (Plunkett & Kronborg, 2004). Ideally they will have a commitment to professional development in the area of gifted education and become advocates for gifted and talented students and for the program. However, teachers need time release from school to further their education in this area. Education should include Identifying
gifted students, characteristics of gifted students, curriculum differentiation and the emotional/social needs of the gifted student.

**Opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community, business and industry.**

The opportunities for improved educational offerings should involve a coordinated approach to gifted programs in schools. A number of metropolitan SEAL schools have reported that they lose a substantial percentage of the SEAL class to the Select Entry Schools and this has been exacerbated by the Policy of introducing more Select Entry Schools. It makes no sense that a government would undermine already successful gifted programs, particularly in light of the positive findings in the Monash University Research into SEAL schools (Plunkett & Kronborg, 2004).

Access to post-graduate study should also be a government priority. Through the SEAL schools network we have also received professional development once a term in Melbourne where we have had access to university level lecturers who have provided up to date professional development in gifted education. I would strongly encourage that this continue and if anything be extended to two consecutive days at the beginning/end of year for more extensive opportunities to develop curriculum and evaluate our programs. If time is an issue maybe the consecutive days could be held in term 4, after seniors have left and possibly instead of the term 3 day. This would be particularly beneficial for rural coordinators as we do not have easy access to mid-week/after hours PD.

Regions could also coordinate access to local university contacts, professionals and other individuals/organisations that may be able to act as mentors or compliment our gifted programs.
Wangaratta High School

Current practices of Wangaratta High School regarding programs offered to gifted and talented students. What programs you currently provide to gifted and talented students?

Wangaratta High School offers a Select Entry and Accelerated Learning (SEAL) Program for gifted and talented students from years 7-9. There are approximately 25 students in each SEAL class at years 7, 8 & 9 and 200 students in total at each year level 7, 8 & 9. Team teaching also provides an opportunity to cluster group students in mainstream classes and provide a differentiated curriculum. The SEAL Program involves extension and acceleration during years 7-9 in English, Maths, Science, Humanities and Language (the SEAL language is ‘set’ each year and currently alternates between Italian and German). The SEAL curriculum is differentiated using June Maker’s Model: Differentiating content, process, product and learning environment.

The inclusion of a SEAL Program aims to engage high achieving students from their first day at secondary schooling to prevent underachievement, give students the chance to work with like-minded peers and provide the opportunity for gifted students to develop good work habits. At the end of their third year of secondary schooling SEAL students choose whether they accelerate into VCE units or pursue year 10 subjects. The pathways chosen depend on the interests and strengths of the students.

All gifted and talented students in years 10-12 are offered accelerated VCE subjects and, in some cases, these students will choose to study a University Enhancement subject(s) in their final year of schooling. Given that we are a rural school, we anticipate that most (but not all) of our SEAL students will choose to do a three year VCE. SEAL schools across Victoria indicated 32% of programs offered accelerated learning in all subjects and 68% of programs offered accelerated learning in some subjects (Plunkett & Kronborg, 2004).

Your experiences of students participating in these programs.

The feedback is very positive from the vast majority of the students taking part in the SEAL Program. Feedback from parents includes comments such as my child has “found the curriculum challenging and motivating”, their “self esteem has improved”, they “have made lots of friends”, “we have been looking for a program like this for years” and “it has restored our faith in state
education”. Comments from students in the SEAL Program include ‘I learnt more in my first few weeks in SEAL than I had for the last few years at primary school’, it is great to work with students of a similar level, I have made lots of friends, ‘it just feels normal’. Areas of concern revolve around accelerated pathways at the end of the third year at secondary schooling – ‘year 9’. The program has only been running for four and a half years so these pathways are still being developed and will always depend on the interests of each student. Many SEAL students also request that there be more opportunities to mix with mainstream classes and that they be allowed to choose their language rather than having it ‘set’ (mainstream students can currently choose between Italian, German or Japanese).

Your views about how the concepts of ‘giftedness’ and ‘talent’ should be defined.
Françoy Gagné’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) is by far the most inclusive definition of giftedness and talent. It recognises underachievers, gives a detailed continuum from gift through to talent and includes the different domains in which a gift may be displayed as well as the fields in which the talent may be realised.
Mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students.

As already discussed at length under the previous heading “Opportunities and strategies for enhancing support...” in this document; teacher training is a essential for teachers to be able to accurately identify gifted students and develop appropriately differentiated curriculum for gifted students. Post-graduate studies are most beneficial. Time release to develop sound curriculum is a must for a successful program. It is not something that can be done in a one hour meeting after school. It requires a good half day or preferably consecutive full days immersing and developing appropriate curriculum. Gifted education coordinators also need time release to support the specific welfare needs of gifted students. Schools desperately need financial support to allow this to happen, as a SEAL school we receive no additional funding to structure our program or support our gifted students.

Financial support is also needed, particularly in a rural area, to allow us to run small class sizes for subjects that appeal to our gifted students such as English Literature, LOTE and Specialist Maths. In rural areas we do not have easy access to other government schools to run shared classes. Our two government secondary schools in town were merged a few years ago.

Any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented student.

The SEAL Program has been great for our school. It began when the only two state secondary schools in town were forced to merge. It is a Program that differentiates our school from the other private schools in the region. It has meant that we have been able to attract students that would not have otherwise come to our school. Some of our families would have otherwise sent their children to board at private schools in the city. All of our teachers in the SEAL Program have received some professional development in differentiating the curriculum for gifted students. All of these teachers also teach mainstream classes and their experience and knowledge in differentiating the curriculum for gifted students can be used to differentiate the curriculum in mixed ability classes. Many SEAL students accelerate into VCE classes or join mixed ability groups in year 10; this provides opportunity for a ‘flow over’ effect whereby the strong work ethic of these students is carried over into non-SEAL classes. Gifted young people are a
‘national resource’; it is in everyone’s best interest that their needs are met and that there is access to these programs for all students not just those who can afford a private school education.

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References:


