Ms Kerryn Riseley, Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE  3002

30th May, 2011

Dear Ms Riseley

My submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students is attached.

Included is an outline of my work in this area which I hope will serve as a rationale for why I believe I can make a contribution to the Inquiry.

Thank you for the opportunity to make the submission.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Dr Glenison Alsop
Psychologist and Counsellor
Dr Glenison Alsop, May 2011

Background to submission

I have worked in the area of high-potential (intellectually ‘gifted’ students) since 1986 and was involved in the establishment of the CHIP Foundation (Children of High Intellectual Potential) and CHIP Unit at the University of Melbourne with Professor K Brian Start

Currently I am a Director of the CHIP Foundation

My doctoral dissertation which was an analysis of the experiences of families of high-ability children – using theoretical frameworks from disabilities – was the first in the area to be completed in Australia (PhD awarded December, 1994)

I have published two peer-reviewed and single author articles in the international journal Roeper Review

While the CHIP Unit existed at the University of Melbourne I was a sessional lecturer at Masters level. I have also supervised PhD theses

As a Psychologist I have extensive experience in testing and analysis of scores and of behavioural/response characteristics of intellectually ‘gifted’ examinees

I continue to teach Mathematics in extracurricular programs and continue therefore to be involved with learning characteristics of children

I am a consultant to the Far North Queensland Gifted Education Project which has established identification protocols and services throughout the Far North Queensland Region

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Current Identification practices: How these affect teachers

1. There are no recommended procedures or protocols for identification

2. One of the problems lies with the definition of ‘gifted’. If this can be narrowed to a specific category of *intellectual ‘giftedness’* [or CHIP] it would be easier to involve teachers in an assessment procedure
   
   (I would like to add that identification has formed the first phase of the Far North Queensland Gifted Project. Training of teachers in the process of assessment and identification has meant that schools have begun to ‘own’ the needs of their student)

3. Teachers are unaware of tests and of the use of instruments that they could be trained to administer and interpret – as has been done in Far North Queensland

4. As a former lecturer and now testing Psychologist I am especially aware of how difficult it is for teachers to understand the assessment/identification process (intelligence testing)
   
   a. Teachers often have no understanding of the behavioural characteristics of CHIP/intellectually ‘gifted’ which they can confuse with poor behaviour, Aspergers, ADHD, over-emotionality and immaturity
   
   b. They have no exposure to information regarding the use of IQ tests in preservice training
   
   c. Teachers often cannot link what a Psychologist will report [on the basis of assessment] with what they have experienced of a student
   
   d. Psychologists themselves do not ‘explain’ test outcomes that make sense to teachers. The WISC-IV is especially difficult as the subtests do not calibrate with classroom skills. The Stanford Binet 5 has a structure that is more representative but the test is not well supported by Psychologists and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
   
   e. The term ‘gifted’ often conveys to a teacher a stereotype of high achievement and classroom presentation that can be far from the reality
   
   f. The term ‘gifted’ often carries a negative connotation for teachers especially when they have had an experience of parents *accusing* them of not teaching a child appropriately – and sadly, frustrated parents do indeed blame teachers

The issue of teacher training is the single most important factor in changing how the most able students are taught. It is essentially however that teachers are provided with information and understanding that adds to their sense of professionalism and expertise

As it is parents can alienate and intimidate teachers. The children often can present with considerable difficulties that require a positive home-school working relationship. In particular parents themselves often contribute to the problematic presentation of a child in classroom – susceptible as they are to internet misinformation and disinformation.

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Identification of 'talent'

In my view the difficulty of establishing meaningful educational options for Children of High Intellectual Potential (CHIP)/intellectually 'gifted' lies in the insistence of combining intellectual ability with other more broadly defined manifestations of intelligence.

We need to focus initially on what a classroom does. Above all the school should be a place for instruction in literacy and numeracy and the development of appropriate achievement behaviour.

It is possible to establish a child's learning/cognitive potential. Psychology has a long history of development of IQ tests. The structure of intelligence enables achievement - albeit that of a brain surgeon or of a florist.

If that intelligence can be taught adequately the other attributes and specific abilities can flourish.

The Gagne 'model' I find cumbersome. I prefer the Tannenbaum 'sea star' as the framework for the fulfilment of potential - the five points of General Ability (g intelligence), Specific Aptitudes, Nonintellective Factors (behavioural/temperament), Environmental Factors, Chance
Current Identification practices: How these affect parents

Parents become frustrated, despairing and angry when what seems to be the fault of the education system in not addressing the learning needs of their children.

It is difficult for a parent to comprehend why a teacher cannot simply teach a student work that is of an appropriate level of challenge. Nor do they realise that teachers have had no training in identification and in the learning behaviours of high-ability students.

1. A particular problem lies in the structure of classrooms in which differences of ability are not taking into account. Children are grouped according to age with cognitive abilities not necessarily a variable. Or a school in its wisdom tries to ensure that ‘able’ children are allocated to all teachers and compounding thereby the difficulty faced by teachers. They have to prepare and teach skills and activities across a range of abilities that research has identified as being equivalent to a six-year range of mental age (and that excludes the lower and upper 3% of abilities).

When a teacher does ability group there are constraints associated with:

2. The level of curriculum they must adhere to (differentiating the curriculum inevitably takes it to a higher Year-level of instruction, otherwise all that is being provided is ‘busy work’)

3. The time involved in preparation of learning materials across the six year mental age range existing in any normally distributed classroom

4. The allocation of specific time for teacher-learner interaction in the classroom so that CHILP/intellectually gifted can experience genuine learning

The problems of undifferentiated instruction and the grouping of students for most effective teaching are especially vexed in the Primary Schools. The core subjects of literacy and numeracy tend not to be taught in a structured and explicit way so that students can experience a sense of personal mastery as they integrate tasks they find challenging. For example, writing a daily journal is one of the most complained about activities! Similarly Mathematics requires highly structured teaching, of for example, operations so that the more advanced students can indeed move into challenging skills levels. Without these they are ‘kept busy’ planning shopping or overseas trips when all they want to do is learn about Algebra!

Secondary Schools are becoming more aware of individual differences in learning. SEAL programs and selective High Schools have made a significant contribution to meeting their needs.

Parents of Primary School age however remain underserved.

Yet learning behaviour, attitudes, response to challenge and to rigour are essential components of the education of children up to 10 years.

Becoming more threatening for parents is the reliance on electronic games/activities they witness as a child ‘escapes’ from reality, the boredom of classrooms and of social exclusion.

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Current Identification practices: How these affect children (CHIP)

All students need to develop learning behaviour

All students need exposure to the [learning] experiences of problem-solving and of failure

All students need like-minds so that they can better understand their own abilities

All students need friends and those with whom they feel comfortable, share interests, jokes, a common ‘language’, a common sense of achievement based on what one can and cannot do

Learning and adaptive development

The vulnerability of high-potential students lies in the lack of understanding of their learning characteristics which in turn impacts on their adaptive development:

Parents can attribute skills to them that they do not [yet] have and there is a tendency to ‘pressure cooking’ activities to meet expectations

Teachers can fall for the stereotype that ‘they learn anyway’ and do not allocate the time to teach them

Other children can exclude them as they seem ‘weird’

They can become avoidant of anything they cannot do instantly and do not develop the focus necessary for effective learning

Without appropriate educational experiences that take into account adaptive development these students are highly susceptible to underachievement – as a function both of the educational and wider home/social contexts

Underachievement

Underachievement among CHIP/intellectually gifted is undoubtedly a function of under-teaching. The implications of not being taught at an appropriate level are more than simply boredom in class.

Without appropriate academic challenge high-potential students can become arrogant and self-absorbed, believing they are ‘better’ than others. This is a situation that is likely to evolve when they are placed with others who do not learn as well as they do. When grouped with children of similar learning ability they share the experience of knowing and not knowing, of a more normalised acquisition of skills that are challenging and engaging.

High-potential students need also to engage with other activities in which cognitive abilities are not the criteria for success. Sports are especially significant as many CHIP cannot master these skills easily.

As a function of their frustration parents can contribute to underachievement by giving tacit approval to noncompliance in the classroom.

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