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Ms Kerry Riseley, Executive Officer
Parliament House
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Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented Students

I applaud the initiative of the Education and Training Committee in calling for submissions in what I consider personally and professionally to be a vitally important educational issue for Australia.

The structure of my submission reflects only my areas of expertise and as such does not attempt to address all the areas of interest to the Committee.

I would be pleased to elaborate further, if required, in person or by other electronic means.

Regards,

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SUBMISSION

Personal and Professional Background

*Exceptional Children* is a psychological consultancy specialising in the cognitive and educational assessment of children and adolescents. As one of only a handful of Psychologists with higher degree qualifications in giftedness I find that I assess many children who meet this criteria. I also assess in the area of intellectual disability, learning difficulties and dual diagnosis, that is, children who may be gifted but may also have another special need such as a learning difficulty or an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

In 2004, I won the Tender to supply the then Victorian **DE&T** with copy and reference material for its Website. At that time I conducted a world-wide literature search (Australian emphasis) with the aim to provide information suitable for teachers and parents about intellectually gifted children. The ultimate goal was that Victoria wanted to offer ‘best practice’ in the Gifted area, in terms of relevance and latest research findings. The information was all evidence-based. I supplied DE&T with 4 CD Roms covering their terms of reference:

- Definitions of gifted and high potential students
- Cultural and social implications
- Assessment and reporting - identification and ongoing assessment for gifted and high potential students
- Learning and teaching strategies for gifted and high potential students

Hundreds of pages of copy were supplied, including detailed articles which were to be made available to teachers seeking more information than was available on the website.

Some of this copy still exists today on the current Website. Most has been removed and the site now lacks sense or cohesion. No background articles were ever made available; no one seems to know anything about the CDs or the material on them. No one, it appears, cares either. This became clear in a recent contact with a senior person in the Department - the Department’s own literature search into “gifted” children had not even identified that the Department had any material at all. They seemed quite surprised.

For the last ten years I have also held the role of Chairperson of the CHIP Foundation, Victoria’s oldest independent advisory service specialising in meeting the needs of Children of **High Intellectual Potential**.

My background of Special Education in schools over many years means that of particular interest to me is how the child’s needs might be met by the mainstream school environment that most children operate within.
My interest in this area arose through my own children being assessed as intellectually gifted over 20 years ago. Fortunately many things have changed in that time; unfortunately not enough has changed.

This is the third submission I have made over some years; the other two being as part of the Senate Select Committee’s enquiries into the education of gifted and talented children (1988 and 2001).

I concede that the interest has grown in intellectually gifted children; unfortunately accurate knowledge and identification of these children has not kept pace. I have completed both a Diploma of Education and postgraduate qualifications as a psychologist and in no course of study was I required – indeed even offered – a unit on the exceptionality of gifted children. Hearing impaired, yes. Down’s Syndrome, yes. Assessment of low intellectual functioning, yes. High functioning, intellectually gifted, no. As one Senior Psychology Lecturer, in a post grad course, informed me, after all what did it matter if the child were 130 IQ or 160 IQ? As a parent, a teacher and a psychologist I know it does matter.

Without apology I enjoy working with intellectually gifted children. I am, I believe, a good diagnostician in the area. I have skills and training few psychologists have. Unfortunately it has become fashionable to add ‘gifted’ to one’s ‘bag’ of skills – even if untrained in it. This is no less true for psychologists. Firstly, I am concerned in reading the reports of fellow psychologists that many children are labelled ADD, ADHD and Asperger’s Syndrome without consideration that certain traits and behaviours also characterise and separate the gifted. Again, one cannot blame my colleagues who are not trained to look for the ‘gifted needle in the educational haystack’.

I was called to speak personally to the 2001 Senate Enquiry and I raised this as an issue of concern. In many ways I was perhaps ahead of my time. This ‘mis-diagnosis’ has become more concerning to me as it continues to occur all too frequently, ten years on.

Psychologists often deal with assessments at the lower end of the educational spectrum – these children are put forward far more for assessment than are the gifted. Even where teachers believe that a student is ‘gifted’ it has been my experience that the greater majority of children referred to me by teachers for assessment have been at the ‘able’ level of ability, about the 115 – 120. Teachers it seems are still not good identifiers of gifted children, especially if the children are underachievers, failing academically or non-compliant in a classroom.

Almost ten years ago, when I was a doctoral research student I experienced on-going difficulty with finding universities interested in this area of study and who were able to supply appropriately qualified supervisors. Some five universities Australia-wide expressed varying degrees of interest in my area but could not supply appropriate Supervisors. My sample of fifty intellectually gifted students with an average IQ of 142 (125 – 200 range) was, to the best of my knowledge the largest group of gifted students in Australia under study.
However, whilst the area of ‘gifted’ was considered ‘interesting’ and the sample ‘unique’ it never proved interesting or unique enough to attract a University Scholarship. Through reports I have heard of other students interested in higher education / research in the area who still experience this difficulty – things have not changed a great deal.

In summary, my concerns about the education of gifted and talented students are

- Schools and personnel must offer parents more than rhetoric. Staff and schools must be trained in the preliminary identification of intellectually gifted students and in meeting their special educational requirements.

- Psychologists must be trained in formal identification procedures. They need to acquire knowledge through either under- or post-graduate training about giftedness. By their very nature many intellectually gifted children respond in beyond-the-ordinary ways on assessment procedures.

- Gifted behaviour and social interactions seem increasingly to attract misdiagnoses of ADD, ADHD and Asperger’s Syndrome. Psychologists unaware of traits of intellectually gifted children sometimes misinterpret these children’s often unique interactions.

- There is a lack of research and a lack of research funding. A lack of appropriate supervisors makes research difficult.

- There must be mandated educational programs for children identified as intellectually gifted and formally assessed by a registered psychologist. These children need Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) written by people who know how to write them.

- Clear and unambiguous protocols and guidelines for acceleration, early entry to school and university, compacting etc must be provided. States will not act without mandated protocols from the Commonwealth.

To the best of my knowledge no Commonwealth Government since 1988 has made a clear policy statement on the special educational requirements of intellectually gifted children.

At a State Level in Victoria, Bright Futures (1999) which was subtitled “A guide for strategic action to support gifted students 2000 – 2005,” did not live much past 2002 to see its vision, and no document stands today in its place.

As mentioned, no graduating teacher or psychologist is obliged to study any unit on intellectual giftedness. An intellectually gifted child might be considered as one in twenty children. Whether they are recognised or not, one will meet gifted children in one’s classroom more often than hearing-impaired children, as an example. Many, if not
most teachers, I believe, are ill-prepared to identify and then meet the needs of these children.

The means of identifying gifted and talented children

Although there appears to be more interest in intellectual giftedness, it is disappointing that policy and protocols for accurate identification and educational provision have not been formalised. Early entry, acceleration and compacting are still relatively rare in schools in Victoria and there seems to be a great deal of misinformation about the appropriateness of any or all of these options in meeting gifted children’s needs.

Through lack of understanding gifted children are considered as homogenous. Parents of disabled children emphasis their unique and individual needs and are offended and angered by ignorance in professionals. Parents of gifted children are faced with comments such as “we have many children like your child,” even statistically, this is naïve.

There is a dire need for in-service training to aid with understanding the difference between achievement testing and tests of intellectual functioning, and more broadly the who and what of intellectually gifted children.

Opportunities to programs for ‘gifted and talented’ students

Some school-based ‘ad hoc’ extension or pullout ‘programs’ operate in many Independent and Catholic / Religious schools but all too few State schools. These are really not programs but rather ‘provisions’. Unlike an English or a Maths Program, these ‘gifted programs’ cease if a teacher leaves; if funds become scarce, or, when there is too much else happening in the curriculum.

The expansion of the SEAL program in State High Schools is to be applauded; but all too little is offered at a Primary level.

Early access to university appears very limited. My discussions with University staff would lead me to suggest that the administrators are keen to dissuade ‘under-age’ students from attending.

In an ideal world of gifted education...

My wish would be the Victoria take the lead in the education of gifted and talented children. Whilst much of the work would require changes at a Commonwealth level, Victoria could provide the catalyst for real – and meaningful – change in the education of these ‘special needs’ children.
We need to

- Have the Commonwealth and states work collaboratively in promoting research into the area of giftedness. Victoria could become the leader in providing some seed funding for this research.

- Support the development of a national policy on early entry and acceleration for gifted children in schools. At the very least Victoria must have a policy statement in this area.

- Mandate pre-service training for teachers in the area of giftedness. Professional development for current teachers is needed in differentiation of the curriculum.

- In the training of Early Childhood/Kindergarten personnel, both University and TAFE training must include a compulsory unit in the identification of gifted children.

- Work with bodies such as the Australian Psychological Society to identify appropriate training in giftedness and that such training be nationally recognised as a minimum requirement to publicise psychological services in the ‘gifted’ area.

- Facilitate pathways for ‘under-age’ gifted children to enter University.

- Mandate that schools must offer a differentiated curriculum through the development of Individual Education Programs for children assessed as over 130 IQ on a individual, recognised test of intellectual functioning.