Dear Ms. Gillard,

I am writing to you concerning the lack of teaching of gifted education in teaching courses at universities across Australia.

Gifted, or bright, children are being discriminated against within the Australian education system. The current university teaching courses do not provide adequate instruction to new teachers on gifted children, how to identify them, how to cater for them and on gifted education in general. This has amazingly severe ramifications for many gifted children in Australia and I believe this needs to be corrected.

In 2001 the Senate conducted an inquiry into gifted education in Australia, including the instruction of teachers in regards to gifted education. Chaired by Senator Jacinta Collins, ‘The Education of Gifted and Talented Children’ was a follow-up of the 1988 report on gifted education. The 2001 inquiry makes 20 recommendations aimed at enhancing the quality of gifted education in Australia, which serve to further back up what I have to say.

Gifted children are generally divided into five groups: mildly gifted (IQ 115-129); moderately gifted (130-144); highly gifted (145-159); exceptionally gifted (160-179); and profoundly gifted (180+). The average IQ is 100. This makes it very clear that a student of IQ 150 is not going to think the same as a student of IQ 105, nor will the student of IQ 150 perform as well in the same environment. Sometimes they will, and in these cases the question of which student is gifted is blatantly obvious to a teacher; other times the student may be in the middle of the class and the teacher may have no clue.

As such my primary concern is that teachers do not understand what giftedness is and how to identify a gifted child. Statistically a teacher will have a gifted child in every class, although as shown before some may be more gifted than others. According to the Senate inquiry ‘…[teachers] need training to identify giftedness, and to differentiate the curriculum suitably…’. Being identified as gifted and having the course adapted to suit their individual needs makes an astronomical difference to a gifted child’s education. I was finally identified as gifted in Grade 5. My teacher, whilst realising I was above average, had no idea I was exceptionally gifted. Had my primary school teachers understood my academic capabilities earlier in my school life my education could have been adapted to suit my individualised learning needs and made my education much easier on me and my parents, who have had to fight almost every step of the way.

The Senate inquiry noted that ‘exposure to gifted education issues is important to dispel misconceptions and negative attitudes that arise from lack of training and lack of confidence. All submissions from all types of interest groups agreed that teacher training is fundamental, and is not being done well enough at present. Many submissions noted that most newly graduated teachers have little or no training in techniques of teaching gifted children.’ Compare this situation to that of special needs children. Teaching courses have compulsory units of training in disabilities. Children on the top end of the educational scale are so often ignored in favour of the children on the bottom end, who in the teacher’s eyes have ‘more pressing’ educational needs. As the inquiry noted, more
instruction in university teaching courses on gifted education would significantly help to dispel many of these common myths about giftedness and improve the attitude towards gifted education.

I should briefly outline some of the aforementioned ‘myths’ surrounding giftedness that block the advancement of gifted education. Many teachers are lead to believe that gifted children don’t need help as they’re ‘smart enough’ to do well on their own. This is not true as giftedness is only potential. Just as any future tennis great needs training with a coach to fulfil their potential, so do gifted children. An outcry is often raised over the idea that ‘catering to gifted children is elitism’. Does that mean that catering to special needs children is elitism? If so, why is doing the same for gifted children so ‘wrong’? There is also the prevailing belief that gifted children are socially inept and if they are unable to make friends with children of their own age, they shall be no more successful with older students. This is patently untrue as I am currently in Year 12 in Victoria aged only 15, whilst the vast majority of my friends and classmates are 18. Gifted children relate to people with a similar mental age, not chronological age. It is also said that gifted children are good at everything they do. Again, this is not true. I freely admit to being able do nothing more than not embarrass myself when it comes to sport. The idea that gifted children are good at everything does not cater for the ‘2E’ children (twice exceptional) – children who are academically gifted but have a learning disability, such as dyslexia.

The main source from which this problem arises is the current state of the teaching courses in Australian universities. The 2001 Senate inquiry: ‘According to the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC), “the considerable majority of teachers currently employed in Australian schools would have had no instruction, or at best less than one hour of instruction, in their preservice training, on how to identify and respond to gifted and talented students.”’ Whilst one hour is better than nothing, to a person who knows nothing about giftedness one hour is about enough time to explain in very general terms what giftedness is and what the varying degrees of giftedness mean. No time is allowed to dispel all the rumours that fly around or do anything significant in terms of learning how to cater for gifted students.

I am now in a specialised accelerated high school class for gifted children in the region. In our junior high school years substitute teachers would come into the classroom, expecting us to be perfect little angels, and express deep disappointment when we acted like normal teenagers and played around. Again, this is yet another myth about giftedness – that gifted children are mini-Einsteins and model students, studying every hour of the day and night and behaving perfectly. This is no more true than any other of the myths about giftedness. If this ‘angel’ is the popular conception of a gifted child then it is no surprise that the majority of gifted children are remaining unidentified, simply because the teacher does not know the first thing about gifted education.

There desperately needs to be an overhaul in the way gifted education is covered in university teaching courses. A standardised ‘focus unit’ or special area of study on gifted children needs to be incorporated into all university curriculums, as has been done for
special needs children. There are several key points that need to be made. First of all, prospective teachers need to be taught what giftedness is – that there exist children with a propensity and often a prodigious ability for learning. The varying levels of giftedness need to be explained, and the myths surrounding it should be dispelled. Basic principles for identifying gifted children need to be imparted. Teachers should be given an idea of how gifted children learn, and strategies for accommodating gifted children in the normal classroom should be discussed, along with other ways of differentiating the curriculum to cater for students. The application and theory of acceleration should also be covered as a point of interest, should the teacher ever teach an accelerated student or feel that they have a student who requires it. Finally, teachers need to be shown that there are resources that can help if they find themselves teaching a gifted child, such as GERRIC (Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre), based in New South Wales, or CHIP (Children of High Intellectual Potential) in Melbourne. Having a gifted student is not the end of the world; it is a challenge within their teaching career, and there are people who can help them to deal with the experience.

In conclusion, I would like to take a direct quote from the Senate enquiry of 2001, Chapter 4.12. ‘Encouraging postgraduate specialisation in gifted education is important for several reasons. It makes it more likely that in-school gifted education co-ordinators will be appropriately qualified. Submissions noted the bad effects when co-ordinators are untrained and unsupported in the school. At a higher level the same applies to regional or head office curriculum support or counselling services. Postgraduate training is necessary to provide the future academics needed to teach undergraduates.’

Yours sincerely,

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Age 15
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(Written in 2008)