Thank you for allowing me an opportunity to contribute to your inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students. I am contributing from a personal perspective, as the parent of two highly gifted children. My son is currently 13 and in secondary school, my daughter is 10 and at primary school. Much of my contribution takes the form of retelling our own personal journey, in the hope that this window into one family’s experiences can give you an insight into how the system currently works – or doesn’t! – for academically gifted children.

Parts A & B

Identification of gifted children is an area where the current system shows large gaps. Teachers are the ones who have the most opportunity to observe students in an academic environment, and yet there is very little content in their training to enable them to recognise gifted children.

Unfortunately it has become clear to me that most teachers, in fact, are more likely to call a child who is “bright” or “clever” gifted, and miss the actual gifted child right beside them. This is because too often the perception is that a gifted child is the perfect student – answers all the questions, writes neatly, is engaged in classroom discussions and so on. In reality, many highly gifted students are almost the opposite – frequently their handwriting is messy, and worse, they’re so bored by what’s presented to them in class that they don’t bother completing work or being involved.

My son at a young age is a great example of this. He was originally identified by his kindergarten teacher as potentially autistic, as he was blatantly uninterested in what was going on in the classroom and spent most of his time dreamily staring out the window. Testing soon showed that he was highly gifted and was in fact probably completely bored and unstimulated by the classroom activities.

A few years later I was again approached, this time by a school teacher, who was concerned that he had an auditory processing disorder, as he almost never participated in the classroom, rarely completed work and mostly appearing to be in another world mentally. He was tested again, same results – highly gifted and was in fact probably completely bored.

At that point he was in a local private school, and they had a gifted support program and did manage to make some progress with him at that point. Unfortunately due to financial reasons in grade 4 he was moved to a local primary school. I did extensive research to determine which local school was most able to cater for him, and briefed them extensively on his abilities.

Halfway through grade 4, he was routinely bullied, often physically, wasn’t participating in class and was beginning to show suicidal tendencies. He
stopped completing any work for fear of teasing, and was rapidly going backwards.

At this point the school decided to use “their” psychologist to test him. This was a total disaster as it was clear that she was used to testing kids at the other end of the scale, and had no idea how to cope with a highly gifted child. For example, when asking “what’s similar about water and milk” my son answered – hydrogen atoms. She marked it as wrong (she wanted him to say liquids, obviously!) and in fact after a few more questions decided he was being a smart arse.

The end result was that she said her testing was inconclusive as the results were so extreme. She refused to accept that her personal input was the cause of this disparity, despite the evidence that testing areas with no personal judgement required by her were the ones he scored right off the top of the scale, and any tests where she had input he scored at the bottom of the scale.

The end result of this was that the school refused to accept the earlier reports by the private educational psychologist, and in the words of the Vice Principal “he just has to get over it and get on with things. We see no evidence in the classroom of above average ability – in fact, he appears below average”.

Early in grade 5 it became clear that he was sinking into depression, and had completely shut down at school, refusing to complete any work at all. At that point I moved him to a primary school a 40 minute drive away, as other friends with gifted children recommended it and it was something of a magnet school for gifted children, even if that was not an official function of the school.

In year 7 was entered into the SEAL programme at Box Hill High School, and he’s now halfway through his second year there. It’s almost impossible to describe the difference in him now. He is so happy, confident and relaxed, it’s hard to imagine he’s the same boy from early in grade 5. His last primary school started the transformation, albeit with some bumps, but being amongst a cohort of like minded children working at an accelerated pace has changed his life completely.

My daughter also has issues with identification at school. She does attend the “magnet” school and has done since grade 2, however due to her brother’s experiences she is extremely wary of showing what she is capable of. In fact the school has stated a number of times that they don’t believe she is gifted at all, and refuses to give her access to extension or advanced programmes.

As a result I had her tested privately late in grade 4, with the result that she was identified as highly gifted. I am now trying to overcome the school’s resistance and obtain access to more advanced opportunities for her, but am still struggling against the opinion of staff that she’s not that gifted.

It has become very clear to me throughout this process that identifying gifted children is not something that occurs regularly in our primary schools. Even
when it’s suspected, not every potentially gifted child then has access to qualified, experienced professionals to formally be identified. Fortunately I had the financial resources to access a private educational psychologist, but not everybody has the knowledge of where to find such a person, or the resources to pay them.

It’s also clear that accelerated programmes such as SEAL are available far too late in the process. While it has done wonders for my son since he started high school, he clearly would have been much better off if a similar environment had been made available to him in primary school. My daughter lost interest in school a few years ago, and despite being in a primary school which works at a higher level than most, is still disengaged and struggling to find friends of a similar ilk to herself.

It’s not just the acceleration of SEAL that is of benefit – it’s the access to a like minded peer group and staff who are trained and familiar with the way gifted children function and learn.

Although I have no personal experience with select entry schools, these are even worse, as they begin in Year 9. By that time children are so far down the educational path that the damage that is done may well be irreversible. Disengaged, unchallenged, often targeted by other students, and lacking the necessary learning skills required for higher level studies as they’ve never needed them. When they finally reach a level where they ARE challenged, bad habits are too entrenched, and they’re more likely to drop out than change.

So in summary, a number of things are clear to me, based on my experiences with my own children:

- Early identification is vital. This requires teachers to have the necessary skills to identify potentially gifted children, and also for the children to have access to professionals with appropriate skills and experience to formally assess them

- Gifted kids need access to appropriate educational choices. The public school system does offer some excellent choices – but they’re far too late in the educational process. More needs to be done for children in the primary school years. There is also little or no professional development on the subject of gifted children in many schools, and rarely are any programmes put in place to offer these children extension or acceleration on an ongoing and regular basis.

- Emotional support may well be more important than academic assistance. It’s often the case that gifted children have extreme emotional sensitivity as well, making them a common target for bullies, particularly those that are jealous of their academic abilities. Schools seem very keen to promote and reward sporting ability, but this is an area where many gifted kids fail to shine. This often leaves gifted kids feeling isolated and with low self esteem. If they are the only gifted
child in their peer group, it can be hard to understand why they seem so different to other kids, and this can also damage their self image. Linking likeminded kids together and encouraging them to value their abilities is crucial.

Part C

I have already touched on the necessity of improving support to gifted students, but it’s also true that parents need to be supported as well.

Ever since my son was 2 years old I have belonged to a local group for parents of gifted children, and at times the wisdom and support of that group has been my lifeline to sanity. Most of them had already been through something similar to whatever I was experiencing, and even if they hadn’t, they could suggest solutions or resources I could access for assistance.

I was lucky to find them so early, and it would be good if parents of children suspected or identified as being gifted could be linked in to available resources. Having a gifted child can be a very isolating experience, as it’s not something you can tell other parents about. It’s all right to say that little Johnny kicked a goal at footy on Saturday, but if you say little Johnny won a prize in an academic competition it’s seen as boasting.

The end result is that parents are forced to go underground about their child’s giftedness, and may in fact prefer to ignore it or even actively discourage the child’s academic interests. I know that initially I didn’t want my son to be gifted, and even though logically I knew he was, I still tried to pretend it wasn’t true. Definitely a consequence of my own negative experiences of being highly gifted at school!

At least I live in a metropolitan area and so have access to resources such as the parent’s group. Parents in regional areas would find it a lot more difficult and isolating. Finding a way to link these parents in to both professional resources and a support network is vital.

I certainly had no input from any school in terms of resources or support, probably because they weren’t aware of any. I found all these things for myself by asking questions of other gifted parents or via the internet.

Part D

While it would require effort and coordination, there is certainly a massive need for improved educational offerings for gifted children, particularly at the primary school end of the scale.

Setting up primary schools based on a similar concept to the SEAL programme would be wonderful. This already occurs to some extent on an informal basis, but would benefit enormously from being recognised and promoted that way. Currently most families have little choice other than to
attend their local primary school, and would find it extremely difficult to
discover which schools are informal magnet schools for gifted children.

It’s also very much the case that schools take their tone from their principal,
which means that a school which does a lot for gifted children may change
completely when the principal changes. Giving schools more formal status as
magnet schools for gifted kids would allow for continuity and security.

It would also allow teachers with a particular interest in gifted education or
with relevant experience to work at those schools. The magnet schools could
act as training centres for teachers at other local schools, allowing them to
work for a set period with gifted children en masse and improve their ability to
spot potentially gifted children at their own school.

I see these schools as becoming hubs for extended learning in their area.
Perhaps groups of children could visit for special activities, eg robotics
classes. Or children at the magnet school could mentor children at other
schools in the area in a particular field of common interest.

While some may say that removing the highly gifted children from local
primary schools would bring standards down at those schools, I don’t agree.
In my experience highly gifted children are like fish out of water at a standard
primary school, rarely finding likeminded peers and often being the target of
bullying. As this results in unhappy children, I find it hard to believe they
contribute a great deal to the school.

Extra work is required by the classroom teacher to keep a gifted child
motivated and challenged, otherwise the child may express their boredom by
being disruptive or zoning out, neither of which are productive.

The hardest part of this setup would be ensuring that children who are chosen
to attend the magnet school are genuinely gifted. Coaching and tutoring for
tests is now common, and for the system to work properly selection needs to
be based on IQ testing, not academic results. However it would be necessary
to do this in a way that allows for language difficulties for children whose
primary language may not be English.

On a more extended scale, by creating a system whereby gifted children at
both primary and secondary levels can be brought together into selected
schools, the opportunity to then liaise with outside establishments is massively
simplified. Higher education facilities, businesses or industry groups with an
interest in developing the abilities of children in specific areas have one
contact point to develop collaborative learning programmes.

Again, the magnet school could then become a hub, so that for example a
business might develop a robotics programme at the school, and it could be
run in a way that children from surrounding schools could also participate. In
that way children from the whole region could benefit, without the business
needing to deal with all the schools individually.
University students or professors could form links with schools at both primary and secondary levels to foster interest and participation in their own disciplines. If there’s a highly gifted child at the school with a passion for a particular subject, then there could be processes in place making it easier for them to link in with others in the community with a similar interest.

This style of collaboration already exists in a limited form with some of the SEAL schools, but there is huge potential to develop it further, particularly at a primary school level.

Conclusion

While my experiences as a parent of highly gifted children have not been overwhelmingly positive, I believe that it is possible to make huge, positive changes in the existing system without the need for massive expenditure or alterations.

There are two main requirements:

1. The willingness to accept that gifted children ARE different to regular kids. It’s not enough to think that because they’re clever they’ll breeze through school and can be ignored as a result. They need extra support and consideration, as do kids at the other end of the ability spectrum.

2. The willingness to make decisions which many people will grumble about as being elitist. It never ceases to amaze me how people will support the idea of nurturing kids with musical or sporting talent, but when it comes to academic ability all of a sudden it’s elitist to want to single them out to nurture their academic ability.

It’s often been said that children are our future, and the reality is that gifted children have the potential to be the intellectual leaders in many fields as they grow into adulthood. We need to nurture them from a young age, and give them access to appropriate educational stimulation and a supportive environment, not just for the sake of the children themselves, but so that Victoria as a whole can benefit from their abilities.

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