Submission to the Parliamentary Enquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students.

Submitted by Dr Danuta Chessor

Identification of Gifted and Talented Students

Giftedness corresponds to competence and potential which is above age peers in one or more domains of ability which include intellectual, creative and sensori-motor.

Talent refers to performance which is distinctly above age peers in one or more fields of human performance.

Giftedness and talent should not be used to describe all children but rather should be used to refer to exceptionality which indicates a level of ability or performance which is achieved by a small population.

Intellectual giftedness can be identified by individual tests of cognitive potential where students perform in the top 5-10 percent of their age cohort.

Creative giftedness needs to be assessed by potential or performance which is at the top 5-10% of the age cohort or beyond the ability of the age cohort generally as measured by artistic talent, musical or dramatic talent.

Sensori-motor giftedness needs to be assessed by potential or performance which is at the top 5-10% of the age cohort or beyond the ability of the age cohort generally as measured by sporting prowess in many fields.

Portfolios of talent or achievement as evidence of ability can be compiled to demonstrate giftedness. These portfolios need to be flexible to accommodate the various domains of giftedness.

Equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students

The point that is vital here is that gifted children are born into families from all SES and cultural backgrounds. The transformation of potential to talent as Gagne would say is dependant to an extent on environmental and family factors facilitating the translation of potential to competence and performance.

It is the responsibility of all schools to be aware of the potential for giftedness in students to the extent that the school environment can provide a milieu for the development of potential to talent. This transformation can occur in all schools. What is vitally needed is the training of teachers in gifted education so that they can be advocates for children with potential and know how to help develop this potential in an area of expertise or more globally. If all teachers had some training in gifted education in their pre service learning, this would improve the prospects for gifted children in our schools.

Special schools, special groupings of children or mainstream education is the choice for all students. To assume that one environment will meet the needs of all gifted children is naive. There are some children who need the competition and stimulation of like minded children to develop their talents.
and potential. Equally, the competitive and restricted social atmosphere of selective groupings can be a very damaging outcome for self-esteem for some gifted children. Please refer to a research study conducted by Chessor & Whitton (2005 & 2008) looking at the effects of grouping gifted primary school children on their self-concept and achievement as well as parent’s perception of their gifted children’s self-concept and achievement when they were grouped together in a special gifted and talented class. (in Appendix)

Catering for gifted children in the mainstream setting can be very satisfying and can promote growth of gifted children (Chessor, 2009). For many children who are settled in their school and who have good social interactions within their peer group, but who need to have greater stimulation and opportunity to grow their talents, this can happen most effectively within their mainstream setting where they have opportunity to integrate aspects of the curriculum and progress at a more individual level of ability. These children are then offered opportunity to advance at their level of potential but remain in a highly successful social setting.

**The impact on learning, development and well-being**

This is a case of “one size does not fill all”. As stated above some children will thrive in a special grouping or school for gifted and talented children. In this situation, the social interaction with like minded children, the more appropriate level of work and the stimulation of other intellectually, creatively or sportingly talented children will allow some children to grow their potential and will facilitate their well-being. For some children their self-esteem will plummet and they will find it difficult to thrive in this milieu. Therefore, all gifted children should not automatically be assigned to special groups or schools as the only option. There are some children who will thrive and have their potential grow by remaining in a mainstream school but with specific provision for differentiating the curriculum, or provision of integrating the curriculum or allowing them to pursue an area of talent with support within the mainstream setting (Chessor, 2009).

Children thrive when they are able to have a sense of belonging, to feel included and to be accepted with the talents and abilities that they have. As educators, we need to find the best placement for the child to grow and develop surrounding them with a supportive environment.

**Support for Gifted and Talented students**

As stated above, when there can be multiple solutions for students to develop their potential then the best outcomes will be achieved. Firstly, there needs to be education of teachers in curriculum differentiation, nature of gifted children and multiple provisions for all children really. This is a vital component of any policy for gifted children.

Gifted children can be catered for in their mainstream schools very successfully with differentiation of curriculum, with integrating curriculum or with provision for meeting with other gifted children either within their school, regionally or on a wider basis via the web. These types of supports indicate to the child that the school is interested in meeting their needs and is prepared to make reasonable adjustments to the curriculum to meet their needs while at the same time offering them some opportunities to interact with other gifted children from their district or region for special events.
Parents are as variable as teachers and there will be many parents who are able to cater for their gifted child quite well by meeting their needs and providing structure and support for them. All parents benefit from some professional programs offered by schools or organizations such as the Gifted and Talented Association. These opportunities allow parents to gain skills, insights and also to informally meet with other parents of gifted children. These opportunities are invaluable for parental education and support. Having a regular structured program for parents to meet each school term for example would be a very worthwhile opportunity. At these meetings the structure could involve some professional development and then an opportunity for sharing and informal meeting of other parents over a ‘cup of tea’.

Similarly, teachers, especially those who have had no professional training in gifted education can feel quite threatened or inadequate when working with gifted children or a gifted child. Often cited is criticism of gifted children because of the lag of social or emotional development compared to their academic development. Teachers can, with support, really enhance the social/emotional development of gifted children if they understand how to go about this. Empowering teachers to celebrate a gifted child’s gifts but to not be afraid to help them develop in areas that need more work is of vital importance. Cluster group meetings, professional sessions by experts and opportunity to gain experience in meeting with other teachers working with gifted children can provide an excellent opportunity to air concerns and to gain greater understanding. These meetings need to be scheduled as an in-service opportunity perhaps each term so that all teachers eventually can benefit from these professional associations.

**Opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted students**

Within the community there can be opportunities for gifted children as individuals or in small groups to be mentored by experts in children’s areas of interest. Many retired or semi-retired people are more than willing to work with a small group of children in a mentoring capacity. Obviously this requires all the mandatory police checks and child protection safeguards to be in place but it can offer a very rich experience to particular children.

Collaborations of schools into clusters and then providing gifted children within this cluster opportunity to explore their talents or ‘show off’ their abilities is a wonderful way of celebrating ability and talent. This requires organization on a district level perhaps to have a person to organize the activity for various clusters to get together to share with one another either a show of talent, a display of particular effort or a collaborative adventure such as a maths challenge, a writing workshop, a day with an author or a sporting or musical event.

Business and industry can be co-opted to sponsor some of these events in order to support the efforts of gifted children in their community.

Finally, many gifted children under perform and become disillusioned with school and opportunities that schools can offer them. This is a great disappointment because for some gifted children who are not catered for, their potential is never realised. This is a loss for them and for society. Educating the gifted is about equity not elitism. All children deserve to be catered for educationally. Gifted children have the right to be catered for educationally. Educators need to lose their ambivalence about catering for gifted children and find some clear direction for helping these children to reach their potential.