Response to the Inquiry into Education
Of Gifted and Talented Students

*Giftedness is a natural ability that requires the appropriate environment and supporting conditions to develop fully into a talent (Lassig, 2010, p.32).*

This response into the ‘inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students’ is based on current research and anecdotal information gathered at two Bendigo based meetings. The first meeting took place at the Bendigo Senior Secondary College BSSC, with Assistant Principal, Linda Lyons, VCE and Special Programs Manager, Paul Seery and Applied Learning Co-ordinator, Jennifer Moloney plus student representatives Patrick Clark, Oscar Giggins and Lara Pyne. There were also representatives from the Bendigo Catholic College, being Therese Lynch and Sarah Cody, plus retired Catholic College teacher Barry Thompson. Also, in attending were the Executive Officer of the Goldfield’s Local Learning and Employment Network GLLEN, Ann Brosnan and Partnership Broker Chris Coughlan, and the writer of this report. The second meeting was with the principal of Bendigo’s Kennington Primary School Glenda Miller, in conversation with Ann Brosnan and the writer of this report.

It has been recognised in Australia, as far back as 1977, that gifted and talented students are among the most educationally disadvantaged in Australian classrooms (Braggett, 1985).

If priorities for resources must be determined among educationally disadvantaged groups, it could be argued that gifted children are currently among the most disadvantaged of these groups (Commonwealth of Australia, 1988, p.5).

[And] by virtue of geographical location, gifted and talented children in regional and rural areas typically experience inequitable access opportunities to appropriate intellectual and cultural experiences (Faulkner, 2006. p.3).

In 1995 the Victorian Government initiated an ‘outcomes based curriculum model’, introduced the Learning Assessment Profile, colloquially known as the ‘LAP Test’ (which tested all years three and five students), and formulated its first gifted education policy, the *Bright Futures* policy. Through the *Bright Futures Policy*, the government sought to “recognise, identify and support gifted students” (Galitis, 2008, p.5). Hence, the Curriculum Standards Framework (CFS) “was designed as the skeletal structure upon which to create a curriculum for individual learning needs” (BoS, cited in Galitis, p.4). The CFS in terms of being a vehicle for delivering the Bright Futures gifted policy, theoretically, “allow[ed] students to progress vertically at their optimum individual pace, irrespective of age or year levels” (DSE, cited in Galitis, p.6).

But the reality was ‘lock-step’ education not vertical streaming.

Victorian state schools were organised heterogeneously where students classified according to age rather than ability were promoted within a lock-step structure and teachers taught to the level of the average student, despite the [Directorate of School Education] DSE
recognising that age groupings might not be the most appropriate approach for addressing the learning needs of gifted students (ibid, p.6)

Thus, historically the responsibility to provide for all students at an age appropriate educational level, fell upon the individual teacher’s ability and expertise. But with the introduction of ‘inclusive education for all’, teachers now have a broader student base, which may include student’s with cognitive and physical disabilities, plus those of gifted and talented status. This new more ‘egalitarian’ educational system, once again relies upon the individual teacher’s expertise and willingness to provide a differentiated curriculum, and individual learning pathways, to suit the diverse learning styles of a mixed ability class. Though, most recently the efforts to increase literacy and numeracy to the lower end of the academic spectrum, and the introduction of the NAPLAN testing regime, has pushed the plight of the gifted and talented student further out of view.

Braggatt reinforces this concern by stating that:

While it may be argued that gifted education is itself an equity issue, this has not always been accepted by politicians or educators in Australia. It is often asserted, for example, that students with special abilities do not require assistance beyond that provided by the comprehensive primary or secondary school and that additional provision is tantamount to unwarranted privilege (Braggatt and Moltzen, 2000. p.780).

The words ‘elitism’ and ‘privilege’ resonate continuously in public debate about the provision of gifted and talented children’s education. except in sport where exceptionality is revered and this is particularly strong in regional and rural areas.

According to Faulkner (2006) of La Trobe University’s Bendigo campus, "[a] recent study in regional Victoria ... found considerable reluctance among both teachers and parents to identify children attending school in small towns as gifted or talented" (p.3). And in “another study in central Victoria, which involved interviewing the principals of rural schools about their school policy and education provision for gifted children, found that in most schools there was minimal or no provision in both these areas” (Chamber, 2004 as cited in Faulkner, p.4).

There has also been political rhetoric in Australia about fostering knowledge and creativity for the ‘knowledge economy’. While there have been major economic developments in industry, there is limited translation from policy to practice in education. In order to fuel Australia’s competitiveness in the globalised economy, we need to nurture our ‘brightest and best’ students to become future leaders in the workforce (Lassig, p.33).

The purpose of this paper is to advocate on behalf of Bendigo educationalists, in their efforts to redress the perceive inequity of quality educational choices for regional and rural students, particularly those in Bendigo and its surround townships.
The effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students

1. Identification of gifted and talented students.

*Gifted students face similar issues that trouble special education; lack of understanding, lack of professional support and lack of funding.*

Universally it has been acknowledged that identification of gifted children should start as early as possible. Silverman (2007) suggests that "giftedness can be observed in the first three years by rapid progression through the developmental milestones" (para. 2). While "children and adults can be assessed at any age, the ideal age for testing is between 5 and 8 years" (para. 4).

Australia largely uses the Gagné model of gifted and talented students, which emphasises the outstanding potential of a student that is the student who is gifted but not yet talented.

Gagné defines giftedness as the possession of natural abilities or aptitudes at levels significantly beyond what might be expected for one’s age, in any domain of human ability. A student might be gifted in any one of the cognitive, creative, socio-affective or sensori-motor domains - or in several, or in all.

[He] argues that we should not use the terms 'giftedness' and 'talent' synonymously. Rather, he suggests that we should use these terms selectively to identify two different stages in a highly able student’s journey from high potential to high performance (Gross, 2004 Module 1, p.4).

Gagné subdivides giftedness into mildly gifted (IQ. 115-129), moderately gifted (IQ. 130-144), highly gifted (IQ. 145-159), exceptionally gifted (IQ. 160-179) and the profoundly gifted (IQ. 180+). His *Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent* suggests that natural ability is based on the student’s intelligence, creativity, socio-affectiveness and sensori-motor abilities. Through the development process of formal and informal learning and practice, the student systematically develops skills which position their talent in the top 10%. These stages are mediated by chance, intrapersonal abilities and environmental facts. The intrapersonal skills relate to the student’s temperament, personal traits, maturity and motivation. The environmental factors are the sort of family they were born into, in regard to economics, race, religion, education and geographic location. Concomitant with this is the school they are sent to and the teachers they encountered. Notwithstanding, according to Gayné, chance plays a great role in positioning the gifted and talented student into positive or negative life situations. (Ibid, p.9)

Faulkner (2010) lists the characteristics, thus the identification markers of gifted and talented student as:

- Early achievement of developmental milestones, e.g. early language development, walking and talking.
- Unusually alert as a baby.
- Can often read and do simple arithmetic before school.
- Love of learning.
- Have an exceptional memory.
- Have advanced play skills and concepts.
- Have advanced concepts of friendships.
- Prefers to play with older children or adults.
- Large and advanced vocabulary for their age.
- Very curious.
- Able to put ideas together creatively.
- Have an unusual depth of knowledge in their topic(s) of interest.
- Once at school can learn new material faster and with less repetition than their age peers.
- Academically require more depth and complexity in their curriculum.
- Vivid imagination.
- Advanced sense of humour.
- Ask frequent and complex questions.
- Perfectionist.
- Emotionally sensitive and intense (p.1).

Though, Silverman would extrapolate Faulkner's last characteristic of 'emotionally sensitive and intense', to that of 'introversion'. Silverman suggests that 75% of highly gifted students are introverted. "Introversion correlates with introspection, reflection, the ability to inhibit aggression, deep sensitivity, moral development, high academic achievement, scholarly contributions, leadership in academic and aesthetic fields in adult life" (para.15).


- Type 1. The high achiever.
  High achievers are not generally risk takers, so they are liked by teachers and socialise well.
- Type 2. The challenger.
  These students are usually creative but often frustrated so they challenge authority.
- Type 3. The underground student.
  These students, often female, hide their talent/s to fit in and be socially acceptable.
- Type 4. The dropout.
  These students will have a long history of underachievement, of 'dumbing down'.
- Type 5. The double labelled student.
  These students will have a physical, emotional or intellectual disability that is seen as the main 'problem'. Their giftedness is covered over by the disability.
- Type 6. The autonomous learner.
  These students are self motivated and self directed learners
  (Gross, Extension Module 1, p.42).

Despite these aforementioned characteristics and profiles of gifted and talented learners, the reality is that for every description there are multitudes of variations. To quote Galitis, all gifted and talented students “are wedged between the power of formal school rhetoric and educational policy and personal belief” (2008, p.1).
2. Equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families.

Out of concern for equity, students with special needs due to learning difficulties or disabilities are provided with specialist educational provisions to support their development. Although gifted students are another group with special needs, equity is viewed as conflicting with excellence, and so the special educational needs of those who possess gifts and talents are often ignored (Lassig, p.32).

The general consensus, from the two aforementioned meetings, was that there is no current equity in gifted and talented student’s educational choices in either Bendigo or its surrounding areas.

There is no Select Entry Accelerated Learning School (SEAL), no Advanced Learning Program for High Achievers (ALPHA), or an International Baccalaureate School nor a Specialised School, in Bendigo.

La Trobe University, Bendigo campus runs three single day workshops per year through its Able Learners’ Enrichment Program, though this program was not mentioned in either of the meetings, so its success and/or value is unquantifiable. Similarly, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and Melbourne University provide a mentor program for secondary students via email and other interactive technologies, but this too was not discussed at these meetings. So this program remains an enigma with regard to this report.

Bendigo Senior Secondary College (BSSC), a separate senior college for years 11 and 12, appears to be working well in regard to high academic achieving students. There was no testing or acknowledgement of ‘gifted and talented students’ per se, though BSSC runs an ‘A++’ program for advanced academic performance. BSSC also works in conjunction with local schools in the provision of ‘accelerated learning programs’ for year’s 7-10 students.

Notwithstanding, the main concern of all those who attended the meeting at BSSC and the subsequent meeting with the principal of Kennington Primary School, was that ‘detection’ of gifted and talented students needed to start in pre-school and/or the early years of primary school. There are no statistics available about how many unrecognised or disengaged gifted and talented students do not reached years 11 and 12. There is anecdotal evidence that there is a high degree of absenteeism amongst gifted and talented students.

The 1988 Senate Select Committee report heard evidence suggesting that half of all gifted children underachieve at school.

The Victorian Affiliated Network of Gifted Support Groups estimates that 75 per cent of gifted students are underachievers and as many as 40 per cent leave school before the end of year 12. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001,p.14).

As already stated, regional and rural locations limit the availability of intellectual and cultural experiences for these students. But, along with inequitable access opportunities comes social exclusion. “[C]hildren living outside capital cities face a much higher risk of social exclusion than
those living within the capital cities” (Harding, McNamara, Tanton, Daly and Yap. as cited in Faulkner p.3). Though, social exclusion is not limited to gifted and talented student; students with disabilities, physical and cognitive, students with on-going medical conditions, poverty, family dysfunction, new migrants, refugees and our own Indigenous students suffer social exclusion in one form or another.

In Australia the ‘tyranny is distance’ is a reality. The further away from a capital city the more disparate are the social, medical, educational, housing and employment opportunities.

Though, the equity access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families is not always geographic. There can be philosophic and/or educational inequitites. The 2001 Senate Report found that “the negative attitudes and mistaken beliefs about gifted children appear to be widespread” and that “untrained teachers are more likely to identify as gifted children of the dominant culture and less likely to notice giftedness among minority or underprivileged groups” (Commonwealth of Australia, p. xiv).

Gifted and talented students in this region need to be recognised as early as possible and nurtured through primary and secondary school in order that they too can successfully pass through the primary, secondary educational system to go on to post secondary education. Though, Silverman suggests, that even within the broad parameters of the acknowledgement of ‘gifted and talented’ students, gender is still another issue that needs to be considered.

Gifted girls and gifted boys have different coping mechanisms and are likely to face different problems. Gifted girls hide their abilities and learn to blend in with other children. In elementary [primary] school they direct their mental energies into developing social relationships; in junior high school they are valued for their appearance and sociability rather than their intelligence. Gifted boys are easier to spot, but they are often considered ‘immature’ and may be held back in school if they cannot socialise with children their own age with whom they have no common interest (para. 8).

“Social and peer pressure, rigid and inflexible school environments, and teacher indifference appear to contribute to underachievement, nonconformity, poor-attendance and low-esteem among potentially gifted children” (Watters and Diezmann, as cited in Commonwealth of Australia, 2.17 p. 13).

3. Impact of the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students.

The recent survey [2001] of Gifted and Talented Children’s Association (GATCA) parents produced the following social/emotional problems that parents are dealing with on a daily basis. All parents see this as a direct result of having no adequate school provision for their children: Depression, Underachievement, Extreme sensitivity, Stress, Aggression, Being Bullied, Social Isolation, Perfectionism, Uneven development, Mental confusion, Frustration, Self hurt, Poor self esteem, Psychosomatic symptoms such as stomach aches and migraines, Sleep disorders, including nightmares. (Commonwealth of Australia. 2.9, p.12)
The impact of not perceiving that a child is gifted can have potential lifelong consequences on that child.

Gifted children are asynchronous. Their development tends to be uneven, and they often feel out-of-sync with age peers and with aged based school expectations. They are emotionally intense and have greater awareness of the perils of the world. They may not have the emotional resources to match their cognitive awareness. They are at risk of abuse in environments that do not respect their differences (Silverman, para.9).

Conversely, the child who is acknowledged to be gifted and talented and has their achievements celebrated, can experience personal highs in academic, creative and sporting achievements and thus develop substantial emotional satisfaction and personal stability. Although, acknowledgement of giftedness and talent must take into account a diversity of students; from the gifted, to the gifted with learning disabilities, to the gifted with physical disabilities, to gifted underachievers; while taking into account diverse cultural backgrounds (particularly Aboriginal culture), socio-economic disadvantaged, and issues of and surrounding gender and geographic isolation.

Braggett suggested the following different objectives relating to different target groups:

1. To enrich the lives of all students through experiences not gained at home (broadening and enriching).
2. To discover the individual gifts of all students and to cultivate them.
3. To develop and satisfy the abilities of students with high specialised abilities.
4. To develop further the abilities of high performers (the all-rounders) (Commonwealth of Australia, 3.2, p.37).

The greatest impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students, is adequate teacher training.

In a rather scathing conclusion to her paper Gifted Education, Professional Development and the Contemporary Landscape of Teachers’ Work: Challenges and Choices, (2008) Galitis writes:

My research shows that despite the best intentions of many teachers, the Bright Futures policy and its associated [Professional Development] PD, had very little impact upon the contemporary landscape of teachers' work beyond adding to their awareness of another category of students, “the gifted” (p.12).

There is a great need for pre-service, in-service and postgraduate education in the field of gifted and talented education. Unless our new teachers and those already in the system understand the needs and abilities of these students, we are undervaluing a future national human resource.

“The effective teacher of the gifted does not teach but rather facilitates learning and teachers can be trained specifically in the skills necessary to facilitate learning for the gifted student” (Rowley, 2003, p.36).

Hansen and Feldhusen (1994) listed the desired characteristics that were repeatedly identified in those who were perceived as 'excellent' teachers of the gifted and they were:
flexibility, enthusiasm, self-confidence, high intelligence (innate aptitudes);
appreciation of giftedness, broadly cultured background (acquired competencies);
ability to foster higher-level thinking and problem solving (learned skills);
and,
capacity to meet personal and social needs of gifted students (a mix of learned skills and innate aptitudes) (ibid, p. 37).

All gifted and talented students need a learning environment that fosters wellbeing and learning outcomes consistent with their abilities. The learning environment should provide educational pathways and appropriately challenging enrichment, extension and acceleration experiences.

Opportunities and strategies for enhancing support for gifted and talented students, their parent and carers, teachers and school leaders.

The three students who participated in the first meeting at BSSC, were all high achievers and enjoyed life and learning at BSSC yet, they suggested that it was their supportive, educated, home environments that enabled and encouraged them to ‘survive’ local primary and middle school educational experiences in Bendigo.

Parental attitudes:

Garn, Matthews and Jolly (2010) in their article ‘Parental Influences on the Academic Motivation of Gifted Students: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective’ suggest that:

Internal personality characteristics and the social environment (i.e. classroom, school, family) shape academic motivation for all students including those of high intellectual ability (p. 263).

SDT [Self Determination Theory] theorists suggest that developing self-determined forms of motivation is based on the ability of social environments to support three basic human needs: (a) autonomy-desire to self-regulate behaviour; (b) competence- desire to interact effectively with the environment; and (c) relatedness-desire to feel a reciprocal connection to others (p.264).

Autonomy-supportive parents value giving their children choices, encourage their children to solve their problems, reduce pressure and controls, and are able to take their child’s perspective. ... Controlling parents, in contrast, value obedience, solve problems for their children, always take the lead during interactions, and parent from their own perspective (p.265).

However, “parents reported the difficulties of broaching the subject with unsympathetic schools or teachers: Many [parents] ... find that public perception of the term gifted means that the children and parents are ostracised, seen as ‘having tickets on themselves’, and parents are seen as ‘pushy’ parents who have ‘hot housed’ their children” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2.80 p.3).
Teacher’s Attitudes:

Lassig in her article, ‘Teachers’ Attitudes Towards the Gifted’ states:

The classroom teacher significantly affects the development of gifted students. This notion is consistent with Gayné Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent, emphasising the role of significant people in the growth of gifts into talents. Given the relationship between attitudes and behaviour, improving teachers’ behaviour and pedagogy requires improving teachers’ attitudes towards gifted children and their education. As gifted and talented education reforms and training permeate more schools to create a school culture that prioritises gifted education, teacher’s attitudes, skills and ability to recognise and meet the needs of gifted children should be further enhanced. Best practice in gifted education that enables gifted students to develop their full potential can benefit society as well as the individual (p.40)

Braggett stressed the need for teachers to provide an environment in which giftedness can show itself:

Importantly for many, it is the regular classroom teacher who develops practices that nurture the individual gifts and talents of children, encourages the growth of abilities, and gradually detects (through normal teaching programs) the emergence of individual talents. In this sense, the initial identification of talent is not based on standardised testing but rather on the cultivation of individual abilities, the development of skills and strategies, the encouragement and development of confidence and self esteem, and the provision of resources and differentiated programs when children’s individual abilities begin to emerge. After this occurs, the teacher may be further assisted by recourse to standardised testing procedures (Commonwealth of Australia, p.8).

But anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers prefer the ‘average student’, a student who is compliant, polite, sociable, engaging and does not require special input or compensatory educational help.

Inclusive Education:

An inclusive school is where all staff, students and their families are valued and respected. An inclusive school is where the educational needs and aspirations of all students are met. Hence, Loreman (2007) writes that:

[i]n order for inclusion to be successful educators need to work towards an educational climate and set of practices which include the adoption of positive attitudes; supportive policy and leadership; school and classroom processes grounded in research-based practice; flexible curriculum and pedagogy; community involvement; meaningful reflection, and; necessary training and resources(p.22).

Thus, an inclusive education is about a student-centred educational system that bases itself on the unique qualities of each and every student, taking into perspective their own strengths, abilities and interests, their own individual stories and their own distinctive personalities.
Within the parameters of inclusive education parents now have a greater input into their child’s education. It is now acknowledged that parents are their child’s best ‘expert’ and advocate. So a positive relationship between the parent and the school/teacher is of vital importance in the positive outcomes for the child concerned.

The development of an inclusive, student-centred approach to assessment, curriculum and pedagogy is vital and is achievable through the development of inclusive student-centred educational policy and practices.

Curriculum Differentiation:

Gifted and talented students need a differentiated curriculum. Using the Victorian Essential Learning Standards VELS, a student who is working at a level two levels above average, is potentially a gifted and talented student and requires advanced classroom work. Gifted and talented students work at a faster pace than the ‘average’ student, so acceleration through the curriculum is required to avert boredom and frustration. “The curriculum needs to be concept based and include complex, abstract ideas so that interests and abilities are challenged and extended” (DECS, 2010, p.5).

“Appropriate placement and curriculum will influence a gifted and talented learner’s motivation, engagement, and social and emotional well-being. Most gifted and talented learners will be taught in mainstream classes using a differentiated curriculum. Provisions for gifted and talented learners need to include opportunities for enrichment, extension and acceleration within and beyond the classroom”.

Enrichment:- cluster grouping for like-minded peers; co-curricular programs, and community programs.

Extension:- compacted curriculum to enable in depth study of a particular subject; development of critical, creative and high order thinking, to cater for the intellectual as well as the socio-emotional needs of the student.

Acceleration:- early and flexible entry into all levels of education; placement in vertical or composite classes; flexible timetabling to allow for subject acceleration; year-level acceleration; early tertiary entry (ibid, p.6).

There is also a need for an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for gifted and talented students, as there is for special education students. In the case of the gifted and talented student the IEP takes into account the need for enrichment, extension and acceleration. The IEP is developed through consultation with the educator, the student (if applicable) the parent or carer and relevant professionals, school councillor or psychologist, at least once a year.

Gifted and Learning Disabled (GLD)

“Gifted and talented learners may have specific disabilities which prevent them from performing to their potential for example, autism, dyslexia, ADD/ADHD, physical, emotional or behavioural
disability. Gifted and talented disabled students may display strong abilities in some areas and strong weaknesses in others which may make identification of their abilities more difficult. A differentiated curriculum is essential for the well being of these students (ibid, p.7)

All gifted and talented children and students need a learning environment that fosters wellbeing and learning outcomes consistent with their abilities. The learning environment should provide educational pathways and appropriately challenging enrichment, extension and acceleration experiences.

Schools need to develop specific policies for gifted and talented students, including effective and positive communications between school and homes, individual education plans (IEP), educational and career pathways, enrichment, extension and acceleration curriculum alternatives and most importantly professional development for staff.

**Opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community and industry.**

The federal and state governments have put into place many worthwhile opportunities and strategies for enhancing support of gifted and talented students, their parents and carers, teachers and school leaders. Though, from the very fact that this paper has been written in response to a state government’s ‘inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students’, it is obvious that despite the best intentions certain initiatives have not worked as well as would have been expected.

The Bendigo region as an entity, incorporating state and local government service providers, has a major role in implementing further initiatives in regard to future gifted and talented educational services within the region. There is need to provide:

- A senior regional officer for the education of gifted and talented students.
- A regional committee to co-ordinate school provisions for gifted and talented students.
- The establishment of regional committees and networks to enable gifted students to work across campuses, with outside agencies and mentors.
- Staff development for principals, teachers and other relevant school personnel stressing the importance of early detection of gifted and talented children/students.
- The collection, analysis and evaluation of data to report on the outcomes of regional gifted educational programs including accelerated progression.
- The establishment of enrichment programs with local community and industry groups.

**Conclusion:**

Bendigo can be seen as a micro-world in comparison to the macro-world of Melbourne. Many of the social, economic, housing and educational issues currently being discussed across the breadth of Melbourne are being discussed in Bendigo. Bendigo is a growing metropolis with a broadening gap between the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the employed and the unemployed, the housed and the homeless.
Gifted and talented children and adolescent’s education is just one pressing issue among many. But for this minority of students it is of vital importance. These students are our potential future leaders, creators, inventors, artists, musician and sports people. Australia was once referred to as the ‘clever country’. We need to regain that ‘moniker’, thus we have an obligation to the future. Without proper advanced educational and cultural opportunities, potentially gifted and talented students will not be achieve their potential, and statistics suggest that many will not finish high school. We have been aware of the disadvantage in gifted and talented student’s education since the 1970s, yet little has been achieved and one has to wonder how many potentially gifted and talented students have fallen through the proverbial ‘crack’.

This current ‘inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students’ is of crucial importance to all Victorian regional and rural educators, students and parents. Communities need the resources to encourage and retain their ‘brightest and best’ students, to advance regional and rural Victoria, and in particularly Bendigo as the pre-eminent central Victorian city.

Dr. Karen Ward
Bendigo 29.05.2011

References:


www.latrobe.edu.au/giftedchildren/charateristics.html


