Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Enquiry into Gifted Education

I write as the parent of a very highly intellectually gifted student who is now 12 years old. My experience is that she and others of her intellectual calibre are not catered for at all in the current education system in this state.

Our Story

When I began to see that my daughter was, as a baby and toddler, revealing an intellectual capacity far above average, I felt I had no cause to worry about her educational future as I was sure that things must have changed profoundly since I was a school student in the 60s and 70s. As a similarly gifted child I was very poorly served both in the state and private systems in Victoria. I imagined however that the banners and advertisements one tends to see about schools these days that claim that the educational needs of ALL students will be met by them must be true!

My daughter had begun to teach herself to read just after she turned two years old and was reading very fluently by the age of four. She could count backwards from 99 to 1 by the age of 2 years and 5 months. (These are just some examples.) Notwithstanding this, I enrolled her in the local pre-school at the standard age and even paid for the “privilege”. While my daughter enjoyed running around with the other children in the playground, she was not however given activities appropriate to her developmental stage and capacity to learn. For example, the teacher held sessions where she read aloud to the children from books which were of a lower reading standard than those my daughter could then read by herself. The jigsaw puzzles provided were of the 6 to 12 piece kind although my daughter had been doing 200 and 300 piece puzzles at 3 years old!

Despite these experiences I then still believed that all schools must and would cater for all students. In about August of the pre-school year, I rang the principal of the closest primary school, explained our situation, and made an appointment to see her. However when I did see her she repeatedly refused to engage with my very specific reason for my visit – that being to determine what provisions the school would make for my special-needs child – and merely brushed me off, showing me the play equipment and library and so on. I then visited the principal of the second closest primary school. He had had some recent past experience of trying to cater for a gifted child in another school and therefore some real appreciation of where I was coming from, but told me that the school had nothing to offer unfortunately. From what they said, both principals would have just placed my daughter in the prep class merely on the basis of her age, almost totally ignoring her real educational needs.

I then found out that there was a gifted education co-ordinator for each geographical region in Victoria and rang our one. He told me that there was no gifted education funding (beyond that which allowed him to attend gifted education conferences with other such co-ordinators). I asked him if he could recommend a primary school within about 15 kilometres from our home that might be at least a little better than the others in being able to cater for my child. He said no, they were all about the same, no better than the two I had visited.
I next discovered that the education department actually had a gifted unit, albeit by then with a staff of only one. I rang her and asked her what might be the best option, and she basically summed up by saying that parents of gifted children tended to turn out to be very resourceful!

In the meantime I spent hundreds of hours researching all the options and also other people’s experiences in this realm. Although at that stage I had absolutely no idea what I would do to home educate my child, the other alternatives were so absolutely appalling, that I decided to give it a go.

My daughter had been eagerly anticipating starting school, where she thought she would be able to engage in really intensive interesting learning. When I told her there’d be no school, she cried bitterly. But when I then talked to her about what prep year would have consisted of in the kinds of schools that are available, she began to cheer up and see my point. She soon understood that the teachers at school would (though perhaps unwittingly) have tried to mould and repress her natural limitless hunger for learning to fit in with predetermined age-grade expectations.

Well, in her “prep” year my daughter read hundreds of books, both fiction and non-, worked her way in a happy and relaxed manner through the maths textbooks for years 3, 4, 5 and 6 and started the year 7 one, and began learning French, as well as pursuing many other intellectual activities. She still had countless hours per week of time to just play and goof around. She graduated to reading mostly “young adult” books at the age of 6 and to reading mostly adult books at 8 or 9.

Imagine how bored and frustrated and unhappy she would have been hanging around with same-age children while they learnt the alphabet and started to grapple with reading and simple arithmetic! But that’s what the education system was proposing for her!

When she sat for the GERRIC Australian Primary Talent Search exams in 2007, my daughter gained the highest composite score in the whole of Australia for her year level (coming top in science, maths and English), and she was awarded a place at the week-long camp in Sydney for the highest achievers. She had a wonderful time, finally able to mix with some similar-aged intellectual peers and engage in really interesting group activities. (I had to pay $750 for her to attend, AND 2007 turned out to be the last year of the ten years that the program ran for, being forced to close due to lack of funding! The other 99.9%+ of children get to mix with their intellectual peers all the time.)

My daughter was also the youngest ever student to gain a perfect score in the major national science competition (at the age of 9 doing a Year 7-8 level paper), represented Victoria in the premier national geography competition in 2010 (as an 11 year old having topped an under-16 exam, the youngest national finalist ever), and has been awarded numerous other prizes, distinctions and awards in maths, science, computing, geography, languages and music. She is surely one of the highest achieving most accomplished students in the state, but has access to no public funding, short of being able to borrow books from the local library (where there’s a shortage of serious educational books), and my being able to claim the $750 educational expenses on my tax – the latter being available to all parents of students at school on top of their publicly funded education.
Thus far, I have managed to provide my daughter with an excellent home-based education – and she wholeheartedly agrees - but in doing so have had to ignore the need for a financially secure old age and have done without many material things which many Victorians would take for granted. In one way or another I spend a huge proportion of my rather meagre income on education, and am able to work a good deal less than would otherwise be possible.

Common Misconceptions

A very common misconception is that those children with extremely high innate intelligence don’t have educational needs and this has frequently been used to justify not addressing the education of gifted children. This is not true – giftedness is merely potential that needs an appropriate education to be fully realised. Trying to apply an educational program that has in fact been designed for a radically different kind of person (the ‘average kid’) is totally inappropriate – it is as misguided as expecting to see your ‘average kid’ thrive and grow at Special School.

Another bogus claim often used to justify not doing anything in this arena is that treating people equally means treating everyone in exactly the same manner. While the majority seem readily able to accept that children at the other end of the intellectual spectrum have a legitimate claim to have their “different” needs met with appropriate offerings, many seem to have surprising difficulties applying the same principles to the very highly intelligent. And it is for everyone’s benefit, for the benefit of society as a whole, that each individual’s needs should be met (or at least seriously addressed in a way that makes this likely or even possible).

Another misconception often held by school teachers and others is that a child who displays intellectual superiority at the age of, say, 4 or 5 is merely an “early developer” and is only exhibiting a temporary state of advancement. Despite the fact that all serious research into giftedness proves otherwise, they believe that “things will even out” by about school year three and the child will be suitably catered for under the standard regime from then on. My experience is that the whole developmental pace and trajectory is entirely different for the highly gifted child and that the “gap” will in fact widen with the passing years! After all, such a child, will continue to learn at a faster rate than their average-intellect age mates AND have a bigger corpus of prior learning on which to build further skills and knowledge.

A further falsehood still being perpetuated is that if a gifted child is gaining great scores in tests and assignments while having to put hardly any effort at all into doing so, they are “doing well” at school. What it really means is that a ceiling effect is at work. The child is not being given appropriate education, and most importantly the child is never been given the experience – at the developmentally critical stage in her/his life - of having to work hard, juggle tasks, and on occasion make sacrifices to achieve goals. This lack is very very difficult to make up for in adult life!

When the topic of gifted education arises in conversation, people with a bit more knowledge than average will often mention the SEAL program as evidence that the Victorian government is doing something in this arena. While I am certain that this program (open, I gather, to about the top 5%) is enormously beneficial to many very much above average and also to many gifted students (normally defined as the most intelligent 2%), it only caters for compacting 4 years of secondary school into 3,
and is very geographically limited in its availability. My daughter would require something like a 6 year “acceleration” (as expressed in terms of the standard age-grade expectations) AND the nearest SEAL school to us is about 90 minutes away by road!

While I agree with most gifted education commentators in that training in the identification and different needs of high intellect children should be given to ALL teachers, it must be noted that the average teacher working for even 40 years with 25 students per year will encounter on average only 20 even mildly gifted children during their working life (one every 2nd year), the profoundly gifted child (around 1 in 10000 perhaps) will therefore be likely to crop up once in a 400 year career (i.e. never for nearly all teachers). I would argue that it’s not really possible to meet the needs of these very high end cases in a school setting. Staff/student ratios would make it prohibitive and catering to the needs of a 1 in 10000 child would take away unfair amounts of time from the other students in a class. However strong consideration should be given to funding the education of these children at least the same rate as that allocated on a per capita basis to schools. It is grossly unfair that there are both no public (or privately run and partially publicly funded) facilities AND no funding for the home education that is the only alternative in these circumstances.

What Might Be Done

The potential lobby group for gifted education needs is small by definition – only 2% of children are defined as gifted and it is only this segment of the student population that is likely to find life at school underfulfilling to a significant extent. For children such as mine – almost certainly in the top 0.1% - the potential lobby group is miniscule. But a childhood is short and most such parents’ efforts are put into doing one’s best for that child neglected by the system, rather than into lobbying for systematic improvement that may take decades to come to fruition. This is of course only natural, but is a huge factor in the perpetuation of the lack of facilities, support and funding for gifted children.

Over the past eight and a half years, I’ve often considered arranging an interview with my local MP to protest the lack of funding for my child’s education, but I’ve been frankly too busy undertaking it on top of home-educating my special-needs child and all of the rest of the tasks of just sheer living and surviving to do it.

I would be more than happy to talk to the parliamentary enquiry committee face-to-face. It’s quite difficult to say everything that might be useful in a short submission. I’d even be delighted to serve on an ongoing committee that might be formed as a result of the parliamentary enquiry’s findings.