Submission to the Parliament of Victoria
Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

I am a parent of gifted children, and in 2000 our family made the decision to withdraw them from the school system and they have been educated at home ever since. The simple reason for this is that the trauma involved in being a gifted child in school means that school does them more harm than good.

I am by no means the only parent to make this decision. In my current voluntary role with the Home Education Network, each week I am contacted by families in crisis with school issues. Many of the children are gifted and their parents wind up withdrawing them from school. One might ask how a parent could take such an audacious step. Won't gifted children need the special programs and teaching expertise available in school? How could a parent be qualified to educate them? Don't gifted children have trouble socialising anyway, and won't home education make that worse?

This submission will explain how parents come to such a decision.

School Provision
Firstly, let’s look at those “special programs” in schools.

There are 36SEAL schools which compact the normal year 7-10 curriculum into three years. However, there is no guarantee that gifted students, especially under-achieving ones, will get into these schools even if they live near enough to attend one. Compacting the normal curriculum does not constitute adequate provision on its own.

Some regular schools run gifted classes but although the gifted children are together they must still slog through the set curriculum. Some schools have “pull-out programs” where gifted students gather once a week to study something more interesting or advanced but this is a set topic which the students may not even be interested in and is in addition to their class work.

Most gifted children are stuck in a regular age-for-grade classroom taught by a teacher with little training in gifted education. Even for a compassionate teacher, being expected to “whip something up” for an individual child is well-nigh impossible. Many students are offered more advanced work if they finish their regular work. This must seem a strange reward – more work for finishing!

In reality, most ‘gifted programs’ are extra work in one form or another.
School Problems
At the same time, school is very stressful for a gifted child. He is essentially more advanced in some area than his age-mates. Whilst this does not make him better than anyone else, it does make it difficult for him to make friends. He feels his difference but may not understand it– he just knows that the other kids don’t like him for some reason and suspects that there is “something wrong” with him. He hears the words “weird”, “nerd” and “geek”. Ostracism and relentless bullying are very common school experiences amongst gifted children. Sadly, some teachers are also very hostile to gifted children, seeming to take the child’s prior knowledge of a subject as a personal insult and they subsequently make the lives of gifted children in their so-called ‘care’ a misery. Maslow wrote that the basic human needs must be met before humans can rise to the higher levels. Safety is a basic need and, in school, many gifted children are unsafe and stressed. This blocks their ability to learn.

The parents of a gifted child must constantly advocate for him at school, trying to arrange appropriate provision to alleviate his plight. The child knows that all these meetings are about himself and infers again that there is “something wrong” with him. Many parents don’t tell their child they are gifted for fear of giving them a “big head” but he observes the constant meetings, whispered conversations and furtive glances. Ostracized by other children and shut out from adult conversation, he feels alone and odd. Giftedness runs in families so his siblings are his most natural companions but are separated from him and he is often actively discouraged from associating with them. Family disunity results.

Many gifted children have asynchronous development. They may be physically six years old, capable of maths at a twelve year old level and have a reading age of a nine year old. Emotional intensity and sensitivity are also gifted traits and, coupled with asynchronous behaviour, result in unbearable pressure and the child may whine like a toddler. Ironically, although they often behave older than they are, when they act younger than their age, they draw the most attention to themselves and are then labelled “socially immature” and may even be required to repeat a grade. Their asynchronous abilities may also create difficulties if their motor skills are several years behind their verbal and cognitive skills. The six-year-old gifted child is therefore out of place in a grade one classroom but, if shifted to a class where the academic content is appropriate, may be way out of his depth physically. For example his handwriting may be totally inadequate to keep up with the work. Teachers often focus on what the child is “bad” at, which can cause the child to feel as though they are “no good at anything”.

Gifted children tend to see ‘the big picture’ and this also makes school difficult for them. Asked to do a project on Romans, for example, they will read a stack of books but the task of processing all that information and reproducing it as a poster with a little bit of information and a few pictures is just too hard. They start their project over and over again and can never produce something they feel is truly definitive on the subject. Despite having a better knowledge of the topic than anyone else in the grade, they end up handing in a hastily scribbled page because they ran out of time and gave up on producing the perfect piece of work they envisaged. They begin failing as a result.
Nor is life easy for high-achieving gifted students who may come under a lot of pressure to continue performing. They can also suffer from frustration, boredom, depression and/or behaviour problems. Many lose their early love of learning, some are misdiagnosed with ADD or ADHD.

Those who know they are gifted can end up with an attitude problem - they come to expect that something should be done for them and wait resentfully and with increasing cynicism for that to happen. Those who don’t know they are gifted assume there is something wrong with them.

Quite apart from the stress of school, it takes up so much of their time, and many gifted school children are also enrolled in a hectic round of extra-curricular activities in an attempt to meet needs which are not being met during school hours.

A Personal Perspective
So how does all this manifest itself on an individual level? Here is our family's experience.

The school which my children attended was, I still believe, the best available school for gifted children in our region. Yet despite this and the efforts of a dedicated principal and one talented teacher, my eldest son suffered for much of his four years at school and my second son's experience was far from positive.

James entered school excited about learning and left it in a state of misery close to depression. He started school reading novels and was bewildered by the reading readiness activities. He had always liked playing with numbers at home and, when he began school, we were told his Maths was at Grade Four level. He wanted to work with fractions and was presented with the numbers from one to ten. At the same time the school-yard was all confusion and fear.

James school experience had begun the way it would continue. There was a constant problem of inadequate provision, sometimes no provision at all and there were continual problems with bullying (ranging from exclusion and verbal abuse to being chased around the yard with a lump of wood studded with protruding nails). Some hostile teachers appeared to believe he was the product of a pushy parent and took it out on him. In Grade Prep he visited Grade Four once a week for Maths. He didn’t actually learn anything new there but enjoyed the experience both playing around with Maths and interacting with older children. It was the highlight of his school week but was cancelled when other parents complained their children felt inadequate sitting next to a five-year-old who could do the work so easily. James was disappointed and confused when this provision was withdrawn and he was sent back to Grade Prep to glue glitter on a poster of the number four.

Skipping from Grade Prep to Grade Two the following year, he was excited and hopeful of more challenging work. Instead the level of the work was barely different and he
struggled with the physical demands of producing more written work without any intellectual challenge or incentive. There was also an attitude that, once he had been grade-skipped, he had been ‘dealt with’ and no further provision was necessary.

James spent almost four years in that school whilst I believed that the professionals must know more about the learning needs of gifted children than I did. As well as grade-skipping and occasional admission to higher grades for some classes, provisions included being given more advanced work in the regular classroom, and pull-out gifted programs. At the same time he struggled with handwriting and surviving bullying; his life was miserable and he lost his love of learning and delight in Maths. He didn’t believe that he was good at anything, quite the opposite in fact. The most effective provision was when he was placed in a multi-age Grade 3-5 classroom at the age of seven but politics at the school meant the one teacher committed to it was under attack and went off on extended leave. The multi-age class was scrapped the following year. Above all, his school experience left James with a feeling of being "weird" or “dumb” and never being accepted by the other children near his own age with whom he was shackled.

In the meantime I spent hours at the school every day working in the classroom and in meetings trying to work through the problems. I also read everything I could lay my hands on about giftedness and attended conferences and seminars and became more and more dejected as I realised the experts offered little help. At conferences, a lot of time was devoted to the definition of giftedness (on which the experts disagreed) and how to identify gifted children. I was in a support group for parents of gifted children and became the president of it. I was reluctant to even use the word ‘gifted’ and yet I ended up giving talks to teachers about giftedness. I believed that if I could just find the right words, then they would understand and, in understanding, they would be moved to help. Some teachers did understand and tried to help but the system always worked against them and against James.

It took me a long time to suspect that there was something radically wrong with a school system in which children with a hunger for knowledge feel weird. When my second son, Matthew, commenced school, I was hopeful that, given his different and more sociable personality, he would fare better. Matthew skipped Grade Prep and went confidently into Grade One. He too could read well when he started school – he packed Enid Blyton’s *The Magic Faraway Tree* in his bag for reading time on the first day of school. He experienced no problems socially but the lack of challenge in the work rendered grade-skipping worthless and he found school very unstimulating. My husband and I had agonised over the decision to grade skip each of the boys. After extensive reading, we had decided that grade-skipping was their best option but had the feeling we were transgressing social laws in proceeding. In practice we found that it made little concrete difference to the content/complexity of the work they received. While his teacher reported Matthew to be a "model student", his behaviour at home deteriorated rapidly. He was taking out his boredom and frustration on us. His school experience was different but not at all positive and finally convinced me that the system was at fault and not the children.
In the interest of our children’s mental and emotional well-being we therefore made yet another radical decision and withdrew the two school-age children from the system. Our third son has never attended school at all. The process of undoing the damage done at school took time but resulted in much happier, more co-operative children who regained their natural love of learning. I feel it is a sad indictment on the school system that two children who were so keen to learn had to leave school in order to be secure and happy in a supportive learning environment. My husband and I are conservative people. We would never have come to home education except through desperation. I guess some of us just have to learn things the hard way.

When I told the teachers that I was going to home educate, they looked at me with that sad, wise look that older people give you when they know that you are doing the wrong thing and that you won’t take their advice. None of them asked about my qualifications, none of them doubted the children could learn at home. They all knew the children had learnt more at home than at school. “But socially, socially…” they said and shook their heads sadly. Withdrawing them from school was the most audacious, radical leap of faith I had ever made. And I was right.

Home education has relieved our whole family of a huge burden of stress and worry. James isn’t weird after all. School is. He just likes to learn in his own way and at his own pace. And socially? Socially the children had the most to lose by remaining in the system and the most to gain by leaving it. Home education has transformed James from a frightened, brow-beaten and withdrawn child who thought there was something wrong with him into a well-adjusted young adult who has thrived for ten years in a self-directed learning environment and has now moved on to university where he is undertaking a science degree and will be a life-long learner. His two younger brothers too have benefited from the cross-age learning and socialisation common in the home education community.

My children are different to most children but there was nothing wrong with them after all, only with the school system that tried to process them like square pegs in a round hole.

In educating the children at home, I threw away the curriculum and have followed their interests and passions. The world became our classroom with regular visits to museums, exhibitions, and public lectures. This has resulted in a comprehensive and well-rounded education.

Recommendations

It is with some degree of resignation that I make this submission as I am not optimistic of effective changes to the school system. I was also involved in a parents’ gifted support group during the years of the Victorian Working Party and the Bright Futures Policy in 1995/6. In 2001 I made a submission to the federal Senate Inquiry into the
Education of Gifted and Talented Children. When the recommendations of the committee were published they closely mirrored the earlier 1988 report – both to little effect. I find it quite disheartening that a generation of gifted children has grown up and still governments hold inquiries and issue recommendations without much change to the plight of gifted children in school.

I now tell parents of gifted children that if they would like their children to be happy in a learning environment, not to send them to school. However, I recognise that many parents are unable or unwilling to make such a move and therefore, on behalf of parents of gifted children still in school (most of who will be too stressed to make submissions of their own) I recommend that:

- Schools be encouraged to depart from the curriculum and encourage children’s own interests.
- Radical grade-skipping be countenanced and support mechanisms be put in place for grade-skipped children.
- More training in giftedness be given to existing teachers and teachers in training.
- Time-tables to support vertical streaming be introduced. This is a simple provision that would benefit students at both ends of the spectrum and make teachers’ work easier.
- Home education be recognised as a valid and necessary provision.

If adequate provision is not made for gifted students in school, we can expect to see them continue to leave – some go into home education and some teenagers simply drop out. If Victoria values its gifted students, it must take action to help them reach their potential. Please take effective action before another generation of gifted children grow up in misery.

Yours sincerely

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