VICTORIAN PARLIAMENT’S EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE’S INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO THIS SUBMISSION

I am pleased to make a submission to the ETC Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students. In so doing, I provide a brief professional background that contextualizes my comments. I will not comment on all aspects of the terms of reference, but am prepared upon request, to speak before the Inquiry Committee later in the year.

My involvement with the education of gifted and talented students goes back to the commencement of my teaching career in a government primary school in 1970, and it continued through with the completion of my research Masters thesis in 1979 on the attitudes of bright children from working class backgrounds, completed at the University of Melbourne. I qualified as a psychologist in 1976 and my work in schools in this capacity extended for more than 15 years here in Victoria, and in Papua New Guinea. I held senior positions in school and student support through the 1980s and early 1990s in Victorian government education, including almost 18 months between 1993-94, while deputy principal of one of Bendigo’s bigger primary schools.

Commencing at La Trobe University Bendigo in 1996, my teaching portfolio included one or two elective subject on giftedness and gifted education, between 1997 and 2009 (Gifted and Talented Youth and Gifted and Talented Development). Since 2000, together with Pam Lyons, La Trobe University, Bendgio campus, have run an outreach enrichment program for regional and rural youth, the Able Learners Enrichment Program (ALEP). (Appended is a paper presented on that at the New Zealand Department of Education’s sponsored ‘Rising Tides’ Conference in Wellington, August 2006)

We sought support for the ALEP and received funding in 2005, from the Telstra Community Development Foundation. This funding designated for three year period, enabled us to offer the seminar program twice a year, in school holidays, a program which has been very well received by both parents and participant children, some of whom would travelled 3 or 4 hours to attend the Bendigo campus. Tutors in the program have included a mix of community teachers across a wide range of expertise, university teachers, and for several years (2006- 2009) my students taking the subject Gifted and Talented Development). An important aspect of the ALEP has also been parent education. On each of the ALEP days each year, while children were participating in their 2.5 hour workshops, we provided parents with guest speakers on aspects of gifted and talented child development, ways they could optimize the parenting of their children. Parents consistently reported value in this aspect of the ALEP. One of the unique things about the ALEP is that while other universities do offer similar and sometimes more comprehensive enrichment programs (eg the University of NSW), the costs to parents with our program have been very significantly less. It is instructive also that this has been the only program of its type in Victoria, and very importantly, it has been offered to regional and rural youth.

Away from the University, I have worked in a small part time psychology practice in Bendigo and in that capacity I have undertake a number of assessments on very able learners and participated in many discussions with the parents of these children, and also with schools.

Since 2007, I have gradually reduced my time at the University and in 2011, my commitments here are 2 days a week. Changes in course structure and shifting VIT requirements mean that now most of the 230 entry students to the B. ED. course do not have access to any formal study of the emotional, social and
educational needs of the gifted and talented, or of gifted education. One of my current doctoral research students is researching aspects of the gifted education area. However, he is a Saudi Arabian student who will return to his home country on completion of his doctorate.

COMMENTS WITHIN THE REVIEW’S TERMS OF REFERENCE

Victorian policy and practices relating to gifted education need to be seen both in a comparative sense, and in a historical sense. In Victoria, the recognition of providing access to very able students became institutionalized in the establishment of selective schools decades ago. Such policies also need to be understood as a bi-partisan matter with both both the coalition governments and those of the Labor governments in past decades, generating innovations. Thus I remember the cluster group approach of the Cain government in the early 1980s and the later provision of a regional consultant to schools and teachers, these staff being based in most School Support Centres when they were first established in 1988, and similarly, there were some most laudable ideas emerging from the Bright Futures policy of 1996 (e.g the importance of identifying children with usual gifted and talents as a beginning prior to making available appropriate forms of education.)

Internationally, the last three decades in many countries has seen issues relating to gifted education becoming more prominent, as nations now increasingly seek to prepare their youth for a global employment market, where expertise is valued in a competitive marketplace between countries, and where growing and harvesting human talent has emerged as an educational priority in the national interest. In Australia, more systematic identification and better opportunities given to children with unusual potential and talents can be seen in some of the policies of other states. For example, Western Australia, gifted and talented children from their first years of schooling are given opportunities to participate in advanced learning programs within socially supportive cluster school environments. I mention also the work coming out of the 2005 Queensland Department of Education’s Review into the Gifted and Talented and the excellent practice arising from that review of have a support group and the related attendant processes for any child identified as intellectually or scholastically precocious (a similar form and planning and review process with what occurs with student who have disabilities).

A useful starting point for consideration of Australian attitudes and contemporary educational practices towards the gifted and talented still stands with the Howard government’s excellent report, The Education of Gifted Children in 2001. The report revealed the wide-spread contradictory attitudes among the wider Australian citizenry have towards the intellectually gifted and the scholastically talented, the exception to this being exceptional sporting prowess. I have seen much evidence of this attitude in my pre-service Education students, and among practicing teachers. Victoria could learn some much from the AFL’s nurturing and sponsoring of promising young footballers

The issue of ‘labeling’ precious intellectual learners as ‘gifted’ is a controversial one among teachers and parents alike in Australia. Egalitarian sentiments mean that many parents and teachers are uncomfortable with the term, and feel there is something pretentious about using gifted to describe their or a child. Some feel giftedness is a genetic endowment that contributes to unfair treatment and inequity in the wider society. Others feel it is an obsession of some sections of the middle class families to ‘push’ their children to unreasonable achievements Or to provide another example, in those communities where conventional educational values are problematic, calling your child ‘gifted’ would increase the likelihood of increased difficulty for that child with new social challenges and even bullying among his/her age peers.

Furthermore, in our use of contemporary language compounds the problem of identification. About 10 years ago, I sought nominations from schools of gifted children from central Victorian regional and rural schools for a research study, and found that some school principals were reluctant to indentify ‘gifted children’ No longer are children described described as ‘disabled’ or as ‘autistic’ for example. They will now be more
likely to be described instead as ‘a child with a particular disability’ (or challenge), etc. Logically the same can be said to apply with advanced or precocious for age learners. Thus ‘children with unusual gifts and talents’ would be the commensurate form of designation. However, the academic literature and governments still adhere to the term ‘giftedness’ or ‘gifted and talented’. Thus we have a disjuncture between attitudes and the terminologies now used in contemporary Australia around these issues.

In the last decade, we have seen some slow progress in the increase in the number of Select Entry Accelerated Learning (SEAL) schools initially established in the 1990s. The establishment of four new selective schools in the years of the Brumby Labor government, add to the long standing educational provision by Melbourne BHS, and the McRobertson’s Girls High School. However, these are all Melbourne based schools and the issues surrounding gifted and talented educational provision becomes more insistent in regional and rural areas.

In the past 5 years, I had occasion to visit both Box Hill High and the newly established Gustav Nossal College, and the work and the commitment of teaching staff at both these schools, greatly impressed both myself and the La Trobe education students who have accompanied me. In the Loddon Mallee region however, where I live, there are no SEAL schools among the 10 -12 regional schools of the 36 now located across the state, and residual attitudes towards giftedness among the teaching fraternity and among many parents remain strong. Thus, one of the paradoxes of the ALEP we have run at La Trobe Bendigo, has been that the response of parents from government schools has been so strong in valuing the attendance of their children at our program. Parents have been hungry for information, and support and the children have benefited greatly from mixing with intellectual peers. Some have travelled from well outside the Loddon Mallee region.

I offer several suggestions for policy development based on my knowledge and experience of gifted and talented children and the considerable knowledge gaps about the identification and educational provision for them in the teaching from this Experience.

(i) Consistent with a recommendation from the Commonwealth 2001 report *The Education of Gifted Children*, I would suggest that in their four years, all pre-service students be given the opportunity to study the area inclusive of gifted and talented children, their educational needs, and how schools can provide for them. Minimally, this should constitute one semester unit of study. The VIT requirements need to reflect this.

There are many teachers in Victorian schools who have little formal education in this area, and some carry into their teaching the unaltered attendant attitudes, they began their pre-service education training with. As indicated in the Howard Government’s 2001 Inquiry, teachers are often adapt at identifying gifted children from the mainstream dominant culture in the community, but they are much less skilled in identifying gifted children from minority or less advantaged sections of the community, and can thus function unconsciously as agents of denial with respect to the potential or the skills of children with unusual learning capacities. Furthermore, there is among the wider teaching fraternity, a powerful ethos that children should learn to get on well socially with their peer group. This peer group as conceived by many teachers, typically equates to a very narrow age band, and for the gifted and talented can be powerfully restricting and personally destructive scholastically, emotionally and socially.

Gifted children, particularly those who are moderately or extremely gifted (IQ range 130 to 150 +) more than others require exposure to peer groups, not just the classroom-based chronological age peer group but ability and interest groups as well, as a normal and accepted part of everyday school life. They also need exposure to special ability mentors. Thus, if as part of the normal school and wider community programs are such that these things do not occur, the needs of many gifted children go unacknowledged, and teachers may then increasingly respond to the challenging behaviours that go with a child’s unmet educational needs and on-
going state of boredom and lack of challenge. In turn, such children may then come to be regarded by teachers as ‘immature’.

Similarly, it needs to be recognized that gifted children are a very diverse group though they are just a small cohort within the wider population (depending on definitions, from 2 to 10%). There are some also who have a double exceptionality, and usually it is their second exceptionality that brings more attention: for example, it may be a sensory impairment the child has, or the child may have ESL and cultural challenges at school, child, it may be a child with an ASD condition, a child from a socially disadvantaged background, and/or child who exhibits externalizing challenging behaviours. Thus the potential of the child’s giftedness can be masked by these other characteristics.

(ii) In my view, teachers should be provided with increased opportunities to study this area as part of professional development program offerings, and ideally, some should be the recipients of scholarships to study giftedness and gifted education at postgraduate level in universities.

These are just a few thoughts. I have not sought to address all the criteria. However, I would be more than happy to discuss my ideas further during the subsequent Inquiry process.

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TERMS OF REFERENCE

The effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students, with particular consideration of, but not limited to:

Identification of gifted and talented students;

Equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families; and impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students;

The scope, coverage and effectiveness of current policies and programs for students from both metropolitan and regional school communities, school leaders, Teachers and parents and carers to support gifted and talented students;

Opportunities and strategies for enhancing support for gifted and talented students, their parents and carers, teachers and school leaders; and

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

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