Submission to Inquiry into the Education of Gifted And Talented Students

by Jennifer Grant, Gifted Education Specialist, WiseOnes Teacher

This submission takes the form of comments and questions from gifted children at 4 primary schools in suburban Melbourne. A commentary is provided.

“I just want to learn everything!” Aimee, 6 (highly gifted)

“Me too! “ Kate, 8

And at a different school this poignant comment:

“I really love learning new stuff, but I don't often get a chance to do that at school.” Jess, 9

And yet another school:

“How does a lithe liana know how to coil? How does it do it? How does it know the direction to go and then move?” Aiden, 6

These questions were asked while studying Dorothea Mackellar's poem, My Country, in WiseOnes. I couldn't satisfactorily answer them despite having studied botany at University. Aiden's year 1 teacher has never had a question from him she couldn't answer – a clear indication that he is being under-challenged in his classroom. I get at least one set of tricky questions from him most lessons. It's wonderful!

“Can I stay with you at lunchtime/ recess/ all morning/ all day!” From many students, frequently over the years.

“The lesson can't be over already. It only seemed like a few minutes!” Commented on most lessons when students are asked to pack up.
I am a teacher who works with small groups of gifted children with WiseOnes at 4 different primary schools. Each term I teach about 100 gifted students for one hour each week. The groups are small - between 6 and 8 students. Parents pay for this differentiated instruction. I have been doing this job for 7 years.

Access to the program is not equitable since it is not available in all schools, and parents pay a fee to have their children included. While some children attend each term, others attend alternate terms to a sibling, and yet others attend only sporadically for financial reasons. Some children assessed as eligible during prep never enrol and we never know the reason. Girls seem to be under represented at some schools and levels.

I resisted working in such a situation for several years, but eventually realised that even though access would not be equitable, I would be helping those gifted students able to attend.

I thought it would be valuable to ask for the children's input to this submission. I showed each group of children the letter from The Parliament of Victoria inviting me to make a submission to the inquiry. A brief lesson on government followed and a quick summary of the purpose of the inquiry. Then I asked for their help.

These are some of the responses.

Pseudonyms are used.

“So you're going to write a persuasive piece to the Government about how to make school better for us. You'll tell Mr. Baillieu our ideas and then he'll make things better for gifted kids in all schools? That's a really good idea.” Aimee, 6

It seems that even in year 2 students have been practising for the NAPLAN persuasive writing. Aimee certainly displays understanding way beyond her years here.
Dion, 10. “I think I've got this straight. These ideas we give you, will go to Ted Baillieu, he'll then make schools better for us. Right? And then that would mean you wouldn't need to come to teach us? I wouldn't like that, I want you to keep coming.”

My response? “Dion, in an ideal situation I (or someone with training in gifted education like me) would be here at school everyday to teach you and help other teachers.”

Dion “That's ok then, I was worried if we gave the government too many good ideas the school wouldn't need you.”

and

“I don't like the Liberals. So I won't comment” Zeb, 8, who changed his mind when I explained he would be helping gifted kids – not the Liberal government.

I asked each small group of students “What is school like for fast learning kids like you?“

At first students were slow to comment at what school is really like for them. Comments were guarded and vaguely neutral. Then things got going.

Almost all the comments addressed the issue of enforced underachievement, by lack of adequate programming in the regular classroom.

“I thought school was for learning, not staying at your level. That's what it's often like in class for me. “ Jon, 9

“School is supposed to be for learning; not being bored to death. I feel tired, well - exhausted
“and listless really when I’m given work way below the level I need. It's like my brain shuts down.” Daniel, 9

“When I was in grade 3 my report put my level for ICT as year 7, now I'm in grade 6 and it's only barely moved into year 8 level. I think that's because our ICT teacher (who was really good and taught us lots of things) left the school and we don't have those lessons any more. They were great and I really learnt a lot.” Matt, 11

“If the teacher wants to know if we can spell certain words why doesn't she give us a test? If we know them (or most of them ) surely it doesn't make sense to have to learn them over the coming week. We should be learning to spell words we don't already know.” Kodi, 9

Kodi instinctively knows pretesting before teaching a unit is vital for gifted students. Not only for spelling but maths, integrated units and everything else. Using the results of the test students can then commence learning at the right level. Kodi's school does not use pretesting.

“We spend a lot of time waiting in class. Waiting for the teacher to slowly explain (again) maths to kids who still don't know it. I think it would be a really good idea if those children (who don't know that maths) are put into a special group, with a teacher to explain it to them. That way the teacher could teach us something. We don't very often get taught anything in maths. I wish we did.” Matt, 11

Perhaps it's Matt and his gifted classmates who need the special teaching to reach their potential. They have a right to instruction at school at their level. They should be learning every day, like other students.

Even little Aiden, (of the lithe liana quote above) perceives he is being short-changed by not getting his fair share of his teacher's time.
“I want more time with my teacher. She’s a really good teacher, but I don't get to spend much
time with her teaching me something. I really like it when she does.” Aiden, 6

“I hate it when I finish my maths (which was so easy the answers just popped into my head
without having to think about it) and I'm then given another almost identical sheet. My mum
hates it too, and it happened all the time at my last school and was the reason I left. At home I've
got a book of really tricky maths problems. I think it's for years 7, 8 and 9. I have to think about
the questions. Some of them are so hard it might take a couple of weeks of thinking to work out a
single problem. It's a great book.” Daniel, 9

Daniel, who is in year 4, then went on to explain to me the derivation of how to calculate the
circumference of a circle, followed rapidly by an excited description of the difference between
distance travelled and displacement in physics. Daniel has a powerful drive and need to learn and is
accelerating himself. Acceleration is not pushing gifted children, it is providing them with learning
at the correct level - they pull their parents and teachers along!

“I think the teacher should come prepared with a variety of interesting things for us to do when
we finish our work. She knows we'll finish early. I really like reading but we shouldn't just be
told to go on with silent reading all the time!” Caitlyn, 9

Caitlyn is right: her teacher should always come prepared with far more interesting work than she
anticipates the student might get through, since gifted students learn rapidly. Perhaps gifted students
wouldn't finish early all the time if the work was at an appropriately challenging level.

“The maths sheets in the top group are really easy for me. When we finish there are always
extension activities to go on with. But those are too easy too.” Ash, 7

A bright student is in the top group. A gifted student is often beyond it. Possibly by years! Gifted
children learn this distinction very early. Teachers frequently take much longer!

“I don't like it when we all do the same maths sheet.” Jake, 8
“Reading groups need to be way harder. I'm in the top group but it's still too easy.” Georgie, 7

“Some teachers do give us different, more challenging work, but others don't bother. I know it's a lot of work for them to do that. So I can understand if they don't.” Matt, 11

Matt does need different work at the right level for him. Yes, it may be extra work for the teacher, but it is a gifted child's right to get an appropriately pitched and paced education. Clustering gifted students together in a single class provides a critical mass for differentiating the curriculum.

“I love it when I've finished my work and am allowed to read. I always finish really early. Well I love it until I run out of books. I've already read all those in the classroom, and I can only borrow 2 each week from the library so I run out quite often actually.” Alison, 9 (May, 2011)

What will it be like for Alison as the year progresses? Gifted children are often voracious readers. They need access to reading material that is appropriate in level and quantity. Alison loves reading, but perhaps if her work in class was more appropriately pitched she wouldn't have already exhausted the classroom reading resources in May.

Daniel finds himself in a similar predicament in the same classroom.

“I often get the chance to read in class because I finish my work early. I've read all the books in the room which interest me, and I don't always have something from home to read. I get through books pretty quickly and they're expensive. Mum won't let me buy books from my own money in the bank.” Daniel, 9

Let's be realistic, with the price of books and the rate Daniel gets through them he'd have spent all his money and be back in the same situation in just a couple of weeks.
“I love maths; it's fun and easy. Well actually, I'd like it better if it was a bit harder.” Maddi, 7

“I need much better maths.” Aida, 7 (Exceptionally mathematically gifted)

Gifted children love learning. They love a challenge. These wonderful young gifted girls have so much potential – let's hope they are able to reach it with appropriately pitched maths teaching soon.

“When we were in grade 3 the top literacy group studied chapter books over a few weeks, while less capable readers studied shorter, easier books. It worked well. Now, we're in grade 6 everyone studies the same book in literacy and it's way too easy for me. It doesn't make sense. It's strange, but things have got worse at school for me as I've got older.” Matt, 11

It sounds like things were good in year 3 for Matt. Perhaps his current teacher believes students have evened out by grade 6? That doesn't make sense at all to me either. Gifted students still need a differentiated curriculum and always will. Matt was lucky in that he has experienced appropriate literacy grouping. Many gifted kids never do.

“I don't like sitting next to a badly behaved student to act as a role model, they really annoy me and continually distract me from my work, but it seems all us bright kids have to do that.” Matt, 11

Gifted students shouldn't be role models for others. Nor should they be teaching assistants. They are at school to learn.

“I hate it when I have to act as a teacher for someone who's behind, while the rest of the class is doing something really fun like a game. The student doesn't want to learn and then I'm in
“It seems like we (gifted kids) can't put a foot out of line. We're expected to be role models. We're not allowed to make mistakes like everyone else.” Alison, 9

Yes, gifted kids are often expected to be perfect in every way. Teachers may recognise them as gifted but then focus on a perceived deficiency or weakness. For example, gifted students may be perceived as having social or emotional problems or needing to learn to get on better with their age peers, or improve their ball skills or handwriting.

After all the above things they could see needed improvement....I asked them

**What is good about school for fast learning kids like you?**

The general consensus seems to be specialist lessons are much enjoyed and valued by gifted kids.

“PE lessons with Mr …… . He explains it very clearly and we learn new skills. I like learning new things.” Bec, 9

“LOTE because I love learning all the new vocabulary in Indonesian. But I wish we learnt more.” Jake, 9

“Specialist lessons like art, pe, music, lote, library, ict are good. They should be spread out over the week so we're not stuck in the classroom some days. Jess, 9, and many others

And in the regular classroom:

“I like to be challenged in class.”
“I like work at the right level for me.”

“I like a choice”

“I like 5 minute maths because we all work at our own level until we master it. Some questions at my level are really hard. It's good”

“I like extension maths groups with the grade 5/6s.” Daniel, 9

“I like Mathletics. I can work at a high level which is right for me.”

And on WiseOnes lessons, which students generally run to get to:

“I love WiseOnes because I learn lots of new things about the world.” Polly, 8

“WiseOnes is just right. We learn really interesting things and it's fun.” Mark, 7

“WiseOnes is like vegetables concealed in a pie. You're learning and it's fun.” Jack, 10

“I enjoy WiseOnes because I actually learn things and am challenged. Because we learn about important things I can then knowledgeably join in conversations with my parents.” Sam, 11

And some quotes from parents, who often report the extension program I run with their children is the only positive thing they hear about school all week. Sometimes it is the only day they want to go to school. Sometimes students will be brought to school sick or injured to attend the program and then are taken immediately home after because they insist they must attend.

“Thank you for taking Alison into your class last week; assuming that as she has never missed a term she would be participating in this one. I would love to include Alison again this term as she thoroughly enjoys the lessons and I can see she takes a lot from them (although sometimes becoming more knowledgeable than her parents!)

Thank you again for all your advice and support and for running such a wonderful program.
WiseOnes continues to be the highlight of Aimee's week – thankyou!

And finally, another gem from little Aiden: “I would like 5 minutes longer recess and lunchtime and a spiderweb in the year one playground (since preps have one and years 3 and 4, and 5 and 6, and it's only years 1 and 2 who don't.) So it isn't at all fair.

Gifted children have a heightened sense of justice.

They know when they aren't getting a good deal out of school.

I would welcome the chance to speak to you about this submission should you need clarification or further information.

Jennifer Grant