

Education of Gifted Children – Our Experience and Perspective as Parents

Parenting a Gifted Child

A family friend, who is also a child psychologist, once said when describing our gifted son that “he’s normal, he’s just not mainstream”. This apt description is forever with us. It helps remind us that he is a normal healthy, active, child capable of doing and enjoying things as every child should. It also describes the difficulties we face. People see a physically normal, highly intelligent child but don’t see the needs that come with the intellect. They don’t see the intellectual, emotional and often financial strain that accompanies the constant demand for stimulation; the intensity of the child and everything they do; or the invisible barriers that society puts in front of gifted children. As parents we are often made to feel embarrassed that we are asking more support for our ‘normal’ child, or that our son’s needs leave us exhausted.

Background and Identification of Giftedness

Our 6 year old son has always been intelligent, articulate and eager to learn. As is often the case we, being his parents, were the first to recognise that his abilities were beyond that of other children his age. By his 4th birthday he was reading Mr Men books and other similar stories independently, and was soon reading to other the other kids at childcare and Kindergarten. Later that year we discovered that he had memorised all the final scores for AFL games that season, not just for his beloved Richmond Tigers but for all teams. He also appeared to have an inbuilt GPS, and wherever we went he could tell us what had been in a particular location the last time he had been there, who he had been there with and what they were wearing. The extraordinary language, memory and visual-spatial skills have been a constant theme ever since. We also have a 3 year old son who is exhibiting the same traits.

Carers and teachers at childcare and Kindergarten went out of their way to keep our son stimulated, and carers and friends suggested a cognitive assessment to determine the true extent of his abilities. We were reluctant to go through this process, as we thought he was just bright and didn’t want him to feel that he was different to other kids. Towards the end of 4 year old Kinder however, our son became distracted and bored. We realised that a cognitive assessment prior to starting prep may be the best way to determine his level of capability, and any other information that could help both us and his teachers positively channel his abilities.

Our son underwent a cognitive assessment just prior to turning 5 and starting prep. According to the results of the Stanford Binet (version 5) test he is moderately gifted with both verbal and non-verbal IQ results in the 99th centile. His results were a welcome confirmation of his advanced capabilities, but were far beyond what even we had suspected as parents. It was proof that our son was definitely not ‘mainstream’ and that we were going to have to address potential issues with regards to his education. Our younger son is too young to undergo formal assessment yet, but any issues regarding education of gifted children are undoubtedly going to apply to him as well.

Gifted Children in the Victorian Public School System – A Personal Experience

Our 6 year old son is currently in Grade 1 at our local public primary school. It is a small school and has both the benefits and shortcomings of a small school community. Our experience here has been mixed, with issues arising more from a systemic lack of support or framework for education of gifted children, rather than reduced student numbers. The following account outlines our particular experience in a Victorian public school, but it no doubt echoes that of many other parents of gifted children with similar stories of their own.

Prior to our son's enrolment at the school, several discussions took place with the principal to determine how the school would deal with his academic abilities. During these discussions the following points were made to us:

- The school had had previous gifted children and could provide appropriate extension work
- The school psychologist would be contacted regarding a cognitive assessment and follow-up
- The school motto was highlighted "Children are given wings...high flyers learn to soar".
- The requirement for Individual Learning Plans for "students working above/below their designated level by 12 months or more" was highlighted in the school handbook. This plan was to be drawn up "at the beginning of each term during a parent support group meeting" defining term goals.
- The school had a literacy coach available for both support and extension work

As a result of these discussions, we felt that our son's needs could be met at the school and he was subsequently enrolled. Since then we have found that in practice, the school (and the system) is not equipped to cater for gifted children, and the following matters have caused us some concern:

- There is no school policy or charter in place to address the needs of gifted children.
- The public school process leading to cognitive assessment would not be initiated until during the school year and could take months. We decided to have our son assessed privately prior to commencing his prep year.
- No Individual Learning Plan was put in place for our son despite providing results of the cognitive assessment to the school at the beginning of his prep year. This plan is now being 'formulated' but has not yet been finalised or implemented (Term 2, Grade 1).
- Extension work for our son is currently put into place in an *ad hoc* fashion and he is often put in a 'leadership' position in his particular areas of talent (this really means that he is used as an extra resource for other children). Provision of extension work depends very much on the willingness of each teacher to acknowledge that there is a need for this.

There has also been an apparent move by the school to remove any obvious references to giftedness in recent years.

- The school changed its motto, removing any reference to "high flyers"
- The school handbook no longer contains reference to Individual Learning Plans. "Personalised Learning" now refers to student-centred learning with an emphasis on monitoring and assessment of all students via new technology i.e. Ultranet.

Having said all this, our school has something positive that for us outweighs many of the negative aspects; a Japanese language immersion programme. By sheer luck and geography, our son attends one of only 12 Victorian public primary schools that run language immersion programmes.

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingresources/lote/programs.htm>

As part of this programme all non-core subjects at the school i.e. art, drama, music and physical education, are conducted entirely in Japanese. For a child like our son, with a particular talent in language, this 'challenge' has been a blessing. Since the beginning of prep he has been absorbing the language, both written and spoken. He also has the opportunity to practice not only in the classroom, but in the playground with children from the local Japanese community who attend this school primarily because of the programme.

Many studies have now shown that learning a second language has long-term cognitive benefits for children, and a bilingual programme such as the one at our son's school is an amazing opportunity for all participating children. We believe that the bilingual programme should be promoted in its own right and would like to see this opportunity available at more schools than it is presently. As an adjunct to other gifted education programmes, or used within a more structured curriculum for gifted children, a language immersion programme would be ideal as it provides fantastic opportunities for extension work.

Victorian Education and Training Committee Inquiry

As parents of at least one gifted child, we welcome the current inquiry into gifted and talented education in Victoria and look forward to the final report. The scope of the inquiry is very broad, encompassing identification of giftedness; coverage and effectiveness of current policies and programmes for gifted children; support for teachers and parents; and the well being of gifted children. While it is important that all of these areas are investigated as part of the inquiry, one fundamental issue that has been overlooked, from our point of view, is recognition.

The first step to addressing any issue is to actually recognise that there is a problem that needs addressing. Identification of giftedness is only one form of recognition and this inquiry should consider recognition of all aspects of giftedness and gifted education. In particular:

1. Gifted children should be recognised and valued for their intellectual gifts
2. Gifted children should be recognised as having special classroom needs
3. The needs of gifted children should be recognised in school and government policy
4. The need for professional development and support for teachers of gifted children should be recognised and provided

1. Gifted children should be recognised and valued for their intellectual gifts.

This might sound obvious but academically gifted children possess amazing intellectual gifts. Such children process, interpret and experience things in ways that are different to the rest of us. They can be sensitive and intense, and yet are extremely fast learners and have the ability to truly 'think outside the square'. Such academic potential should be exalted and nurtured in the same way that it would be in other domains, such as sport and music. Unfortunately, highly intelligent individuals are seldom recognised by our society or by the media. VCE students scoring perfect ENTER scores, and Australians receiving Nobel prizes in academic pursuits are among the rare occasions when high intellect is publically lauded.

As many academically gifted children discover, there is a cultural stigma associated with superior intellect and the 'tall poppy' syndrome is commonly encountered. The following perceptions or misconceptions frequently result in gifted children being ostracised or bullied by peers, and overlooked by teachers:

- That they (or their parents) are being elitist or showing off by wanting extension work or special programmes
- That every child is gifted at something so these particular children do not deserve special attention
- That they are smart enough not to need any help, and are left to their own devices
- That they are in the 'too hard' basket, and similarly left to their own devices, or placed in front of a computer and directed to 'interactive' learning websites. Even within our own extended family we have primary school teachers who have told us they would not want our son in their own class because of the extra work that would be required to challenge and stimulate him.

2. Gifted children should be recognised as having special classroom needs.

Dealing with the educational needs of gifted children is not a matter of simply allowing them to work at their own pace in their current grade. Gifted students may actually be highly dependent on their teacher as they require structured and challenging work to meet their specific academic needs.

Children at risk in the education system

Children 'at risk' in the education system are those who have an increased chance of leaving the system early i.e. dropping out of school. This occurs when there is a significant 'mismatch' between their circumstances and needs. Part of a review by the Australian Law Reform Commission identifies the children considered "to be at risk of dropping out of education" with recommendations for implementation of programmes to prevent this.

<http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/10-children-education/children-risk-education-system>

The focus here is on children that are generally accepted to be disadvantaged or have 'special needs' i.e. children with disabilities, indigenous children, and children from low socio-economic groups. Gifted children however, are not considered in this review.

Gifted children are widely acknowledged to be among the greatest underachievers, as they become bored and frustrated with school. Lack of recognition, lack of engagement in the classroom, a mismatch between the curriculum and the need for a challenging education, and even bullying are reasons for gifted children underperforming, and eventually leaving school. These issues are not currently recognised or addressed by the Victorian education system.

Individual Learning Plans

Individual Learning Plans are routinely implemented for children with 'special needs' to ensure that they are engaged in the classroom curriculum. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority currently provides a range of support materials to assist teachers to incorporate the Victorian Essential Learning Standards into their teaching and learning programmes including "students with disabilities guidelines".

<http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/support/disability/index.html>

While there is no doubting the needs of students with disabilities and learning difficulties, gifted children are also children with special needs. There is however, no equivalent information provided to assist teachers with engaging gifted children in the classroom curriculum, nor any distinct requirement to try. We have encountered considerable (passive) resistance to getting an Individual Learning Plan put into place for our son. It is now six terms into his education and we are still waiting. In our experience gifted children are not seen as children with special needs by the education system or the general community, nor are they considered to be at risk in the education system.

Incidentally, the document already submitted by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services to the current inquiry supports the development of Individual Learning Plans for gifted and talented learners (in the 98th centile and above).

3. The needs of gifted children should be recognised in school and government policy.

Schools

As stated previously there is no school policy or charter regarding education of gifted children at our son's primary school. This is based on the premise that all children are taught so as to extend them to their full potential. The reality is that with children of high intellect, the extent of their full potential is harder to ascertain and the learning pathways to get them there are less defined.

There are some public primary schools that recognise gifted children either with a school policy e.g. the Gifted and Talented Students Policy at Camelot Rise Primary School in Glen Waverley; or through active parent/teacher groups e.g. Parents Supporting Intellectual Potential at Serpell Primary School, Templestowe. These schools are overwhelmingly in the minority and their pro-active positions appear to be largely a result of strong parental advocacy.

Government

The NSW Association for Gifted and Talented Children has collated information regarding gifted education policies from all Australian states and territories.

<http://nswagtc.org.au/information/gifted-education-policies.html>

In every state or territory except Victoria there is a definite policy regarding the education of gifted and talented children in their school system. Some states also provide information and guidelines for teachers and parents regarding identification, acceleration, and curriculum modification plus links to relevant documentation and supporting materials.

e.g. New South Wales

<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/gats/index.htm>

and Queensland.

<http://education.qld.gov.au/publication/production/reports/pdfs/giftedandtalfrk.pdf>

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provides some information for parents and teachers of gifted children, but there is no actual policy statement regarding gifted education.

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/gifted/forparents/schooling.htm>

Information for parents in this website includes “schooling options for your child” to be considered “in partnership with your school”. Options including early school entry, single subject acceleration, curriculum compacting, telescoping, select entry programmes etc are defined here, but there are no guidelines or references for implementation.

While select entry accelerated learning (SEAL) programmes are available at various schools throughout Victoria, these are predominantly at the secondary school level, or available at private schools. Gifted children occur at all ages and in all socio-economic and cultural groups. They do not just occur at secondary school age or in families that can afford the private schooling option. The other options outlined by the DEECD need to be well structured so that all schools are not only obligated, but able to implement curriculum modifications appropriately for gifted children of primary school age.

4. The need for professional development and support for teachers of gifted children should be recognised and provided.

Teachers are expected to deal with children possessing a range of abilities and learning styles in their classroom. These must be difficult to accommodate within a defined curriculum and daunting for any teacher to cope with. Despite the presence of educational support staff and a literacy coach (previously described as being for support and extension) at our son’s school, we have been advised that these resources are not really available to our son or his teacher.

Teacher training

While it would be ideal for all teachers to receive some kind of instruction regarding identification of giftedness and curriculum differentiation during their training, this is not currently the case. The DEECD website currently advertises a professional learning day for coordinators of gifted and select entry accelerated learning programmes, but the date for this professional development course was November 2009. Resources and training for teaching gifted children should be made available to all teachers, not just programme coordinators, and on an ongoing basis with up to date material.

Access to specialist teacher training is also important. A comprehensive gifted education policy requiring schools and teachers to address curriculum differentiation, in turn promotes and sustains a focus on postgraduate teacher training. The following, based on information available via the internet, describes the current status of gifted education training at Victorian universities:

- Monash University offers one unit in gifted education as part of their Bachelor of Education, or a Graduate Diploma of Education with a specialisation in Gifted Education.

<http://www.monash.edu.au/pubs/handbooks/courses/3210.html>

- The University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education has an Exceptional Learning Unit but a number of their postgraduate courses have been restructured from 2010, with the emphasis now on qualifications at the Masters level.

<http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/futurestudents/courses/graduate/programs/gifted/index.html>

- La Trobe University runs an Able Learners' Enrichment Program for gifted children from its Bendigo campus, and advertises "opportunities for tertiary study in gifted education" but does not list any available courses.

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/giftedchildren/index.html>

- Deakin University offers a Graduate Certificate or Masters in Special Educational Needs but the description of this course does not appear to include gifted education.

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/education/courses/postgrad/special-ed/index.php>

A number of specialised postgraduate courses are also available on-line through interstate universities.

Resources available for teachers

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne "provides support for schools in programming, to meet the needs of gifted students in Catholic schools. Educational consultation, support and access to resources are available to assist Student Services staff in the Regional Offices in identifying gifted students, assessing specific needs and in making appropriate programming recommendations to practitioners." A similar central resource available for teachers and parents in the Victorian public school system would be highly desirable.

<http://web.ceomelb.catholic.edu.au/index.php?sectionid=99>

In addition to adequate training and departmental support, on-site resources such as access to educational support staff and literacy coaches with a broader scope than just remedial work would be a valuable asset for teachers with gifted children in their class.

The results of the current inquiry are not due until January 2012. More time will then be required to restructure and/or implement programmes that will ultimately be subject to budget constraints. It is therefore going to be some time before any improvements to gifted education in Victoria are evident to the students concerned, particularly at the primary school level. We believe that the first steps should include appropriate recognition of academically gifted children, and the issues faced by them and others involved in their education.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.