



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Summary

Educational equity does not mean educational sameness; rather, it respects individual difference in ability, readiness and willingness to learn, and recognises the value and potential of each individual student. Gifted students are among the most overlooked and underfunded special needs group in all education settings. The lack of provision of an appropriate education, including acceleration, to many gifted students induces chronic underachievement, mental health problems, dropping out or home-schooling.

It is in Australia's interests to close the research-practice gap in the provision of evidence-based interventions, including academic acceleration, to support gifted children in achieving results commensurate with their potential. Governmental inquiries in 2012 and 2001 have outlined clear recommendations for low-cost ways to reduce gifted underachievement, yet little or no action has been taken.

We do not need another inquiry to solve this problem. We need action now based on the recommendations of previous inquiries. We need a national policy on gifted education. Reversing gifted underachievement will quickly and inexpensively improve results and help bring Australia in-line with provisions afforded to gifted learners in the PISA top performing nations.

** Reference list available for main text

Main submission

This submission is intended to contribute to improved outcomes for cohort of students considered academically advanced ('gifted'), and in particular, gifted underachievers from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Key Points:

- Provision of education should be equitable: meaning, provision of an education appropriate to individual student's needs(1)

- 1 in 50 students are gifted – approximately 400 000 children in Australian schools(2)
- Gifted underachievement is common
- The more highly gifted the child, often the more severe the underachievement
- Gifted children come from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds(2)
- Approximately 1 in 14 gifted children are “Twice-Exceptional”: gifted with a concomitant learning disability such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD/ADD or Dyslexia. They are often over-represented among gifted underachievers
- Overwhelmingly, the literature points to acceleration being a cost-neutral, appropriate solution for improving outcomes for gifted learners in all schools(3,4,5,6,7)
- There remains a large research-practice gap in gifted education in Australia, perhaps the largest gap existing in any area of education
- It costs little to improve results and outcomes of gifted learners
- Gifted learners remain the lowest funded special needs group
- Gifted school students have suffered the largest declines in achievement in recent years
- Despite a 2001 Senate committee recommending a national gifted education strategy 2001, there is no national policy on the education of gifted students(8)
- Most gifted home-schoolers choose home education due to lack of accommodations or acceleration in schools(9)
- Gifted children are over-represented among school drop-outs(2)
- Gifted underachievement can be addressed through proper application of acceleration: closing the research-practice gap(4,5,6,7)
- Teachers trained in gifted education are better at identifying gifted underachievers, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (2,3,4,5,6,7)
- Few university teaching programs include teaching gifted education
- There is little or no provision for gifted students in government primary schools, especially before Year 3 (2)
- PISA high-performing countries, such as Singapore, have national policies on gifted education, extensive provisions for gifted children, streaming

according to ability, selective primary and high schools, and support acceleration up to 4 grades(10)

- Singapore recognises that provisioning for gifted learners makes socio-economic sense, viewing it as providing an equitable education according to need, rather than considering it elitist. They are “committed to nurturing gifted individuals to their full potential for the fulfilment of self and the betterment of society”(10)
- PISA high-performing countries such as South Korea and Singapore select high quality candidates from the top 5% of graduates to undertake teacher training(11)
- The recommendations in the 2012 report from the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Gifted Education provides a blueprint for an education system that effectively caters for the full diversity of gifted students, enabling them to flourish academically, socially and emotionally(2)

Governmental Reviews of Gifted Education in Australia

The 2012 Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry was preceded by two previous national reviews of the education of gifted children. The Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children published its report in 1988.(1,2) This was followed by the report of the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee in 2001.⁸ Both reports found that the needs of many gifted students were not being met and that educational provisions in Australia were not enabling gifted students to realise their potential.

In her introduction to the 2001 report, the Committee’s Chair noted that little progress had been made between 1988 and 2001 in terms of improving education for gifted and talented students.⁸ Although some advancements have been made since 2001, notably the development of policies on gifted and talented students in some states and territories, the 2012 Inquiry revealed considerable stakeholder frustration at the continued failure to implement the recommendations in the 2001 report.(8)

Equity in Education

It is generally agreed that provision of education should be equitable.(1) The 2001 Senate Inquiry into gifted education stated that, “Equity and excellence are not in conflict. The education system should aim for both equity for all and excellence for those who are able.”(8)

Educational equity does not mean educational sameness; rather, equity respects individual differences in readiness, ability and willingness to learn, and recognises the potential of each individual student. Inequity arises when educators ignore

individual differences in their students, and attempt to deliver the same education (same curriculum at the same pace) to diverse groups of students.

One of the important dimensions of equity in education is fairness, which means ensuring that personal and social circumstances are not an obstacle to achieving educational potential.(8) It means that each child learns something new on most school days and can achieve to their ability. While we traditionally think of intellectually disadvantaged students as facing obstacles to achieving their educational potential, the gifted present an unlikely group who are frequently failing to reach their individual potential, thereby demonstrating they are not receiving an equitable education appropriate to their ability.

Most contributors to the 2012 Parliamentary Inquiry into Gifted Education in Victoria agreed that as students with special needs, gifted students require particular provisions in order to ensure that they have equitable access to education.(2)

“A number of contributors highlighted that specialised provisions for gifted and talented students are needed to meet the aspirations of equitable education set out in the Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians discussed in chapter one. While the Declaration does not specifically mention gifted and talented students, it espouses equity in Australian schooling, including promoting a culture of excellence in all schools and personalising learning to ensure that the potential of each student is reached.”(2)

The purpose of identifying and assisting gifted underachievers is not to create elitist programs, but rather to help plan equitable and effective educational programs that improve overall outcomes. The 2001 Parliamentary Inquiry report concluded that there is a problem with education of gifted children in Australia. It was agreed that these children have special needs in the education system; for many their needs are not being met; and many suffer underachievement, boredom, frustration and psychological distress as a result. It was also recognised that gifted children come from all socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural groups and that those in the latter groups are the most at risk.(8)

Gifted vs. Bright High-Achievers

Gifted students are frequently confused with bright high-achievers and it is important to recognise the distinction between them. “In considering gifted students, it is important to recognise that students who are high academic achievers are not necessarily gifted.”(2)

While IQ tests change over time, bright students generally have IQ scores under 120 on standardised tests, learn rapidly, achieve highly and are generally content to remain with their chronological peers, perhaps acting as role models to other

students during class time. Most moderately gifted students have IQ scores of 130 (98th percentile) or above(13), and traits such as high reasoning ability, creativity, novel ideas, curiosity, questions authority, intensity, sensitivity, mature judgement for age, concerned with justice and fairness, early or avid reading and perfectionism.(2)

The highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted generally have IQ scores over 145 (99.9th percentile) and above, and are usually as different from the moderately gifted as the mild and moderately gifted are from the norm.

The gap between potential and performance often widens as the degree of giftedness increases, mostly due to inadequate educational response to their needs. Many moderately gifted children can work 1-3 grades above their chronological peers and many highly gifted+ children are able and willing to work several grades above. Few gifted Australian children are given this opportunity and therefore do not reach their potential.

While a case may be made to retain gifted students in inclusive classrooms, an effective, evidence-based, low-cost solution to meeting their special needs, while considering the outcomes of all students, is acceleration.(3,4,5,6,7)

The 20 forms of acceleration are detailed in the report: A Nation Empowered.(6,7)

Perhaps the best-known form of acceleration is whole-grade or specific-subject acceleration, known as “grade-skipping”. Despite the persistence of myths within the teaching profession, there is no empirical research evidence to support the notion that separation from age-/grade-level peers is associated with difficulties in adjustment or achievement. (6,7,14,15) Furthermore, Australian longitudinal research into the intellectual, academic, and psychosocial benefits of acceleration for gifted children reveals that in most cases where outcomes were poor, there was either no, or insufficient, acceleration. Generally, when a child is accelerated to the top of their potential, rather than retained at the bottom, academic, social and emotional outcomes improve.(16)

Some evidence shows that streaming children according to ability, especially early in the educational process, weakens outcomes for all, hence a reticence to stream young, high-ability children into special classes or schools. While some research shows this may increase the outcomes for some other children, we have known since the 1930s that it weakens the outcomes for gifted students.(17)

The ACT Government Education and Training Directorate quoted the National Association for Gifted Children: “Myth: Mixed ability groups enable gifted students to model or help students of lower ability and this is highly beneficial to all students. Fact: In reality, average or below average students do not look to the gifted students in the class as role models. They are more likely to model their behaviour on those who have similar capabilities and are coping well in school. Seeing a student at a

similar performance level succeed motivates students because it adds to their own sense of ability. Watching or relying on someone with high-level capabilities does little to increase a struggling student's sense of self-confidence. Similarly, gifted students benefit from classroom interactions with peers at similar performance levels."(18)

It is well understood in special needs education that teaching the child to the top of their potential makes sense. To place or retain an average or intellectually delayed child in a class below their ability would be inappropriate and perhaps even cruel. Too often gifted learners have their full potential ignored, are retained in a classroom years below their ability and are expected to engage and perform at the highest level despite intellectually languishing. Retention in an age-based, lock-step curriculum with age peers is frequently the cause of underachievement. Of special mention are Twice-Exceptional learners who are gifted with a concomitant learning disability such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Dyslexia, ADHD/ADD etc. who are often retained in a grade inappropriately low, determined according to their relative weakness (disability), rather than their strengths/gifts.

Gifted underachievers are students who have a large difference between potential and performance: their gifts are not effectively developed into talents.(18)

"Just as not all high achievers are gifted, not all gifted students achieve highly. While there is limited data on the number of gifted students who underachieve, research suggests that somewhere between 10% and 50% of all gifted school students fail to perform at the levels of which they are capable. A significant number of gifted students leave school before completing Year 12. Again there is no clear data on how many gifted students drop out of secondary education, with estimates ranging from 10% to 40%." (2)

Underachievement may also be present among gifted students who seemingly perform well at school, with teachers sometimes failing to recognise that these students have the capacity to complete work at much higher levels than the work assigned.(2)

Gifted underachievers exist in all communities and may be found within culturally diverse populations, communities with a low socio-economic status, and individuals with a concomitant learning difficulty such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Dyslexia or ADD/ADHD.(18)

The 2015 Australian Mensa Gifted Children's Survey (of Mensa child members who have IQ of 130 or greater) found that these students are more than 10 times more likely to be home-schooled than the general population (11% of Mensa child members compared to 0.38% of the general population).(9)

The biggest influence in their decision to home-school, was lack of flexibility offered within the educational environment, followed by teacher awareness of giftedness.

Flexibility usually relates to lack of acceleration (whole-grade or specific-subject). As one parent said, "As a home-schooling household, we are able to accelerate 4-6 years ahead".(9)

Most of these parents home-school out of perceived necessity, rather than due to a philosophical ethos. This is usually a result of poor school experiences, and inadequate recognition of the advanced learning needs of the child, especially incorporating the 20 forms of acceleration. This means some of Australia's brightest students are not counted in NAPLAN results or other measures of Australia's educational outcomes. If schools offered more to gifted students, many parents would willingly return their children to school.

Identification of Gifted Underachievers

"The difficulty identifying gifted students is intensified by the fact that these students are not necessarily high achievers: they may live in an area where teachers and parents are not looking for gifted students such as a low socioeconomic or rural and regional area; they may have disengaged from education; or they may deliberately mask their abilities in order to fit in with their peers."(2)

To identify the gifted underachiever, we must measure the difference between a student's giftedness (ability) and a student's performance. Performance can be assessed using standardised tests. Schools and psychologists need to ensure age, literacy level, cultural background and other characteristics are considered when selecting the test(s). Resulting differences be used to confirm underachievement. Gifted individuals who have a learning difficulty may also underperform in tests or other usually reliable measures. Careful observation by teachers with an understanding of gifted education, and parents, is a necessary component for determining giftedness.(18)

Following are case studies of current students:

Male, 11-yrs, Y7 Independent Private School, Sydney (2017)

Our son was accelerated from Year 4 to Year 6. He is 11-years-old and finishing Year 7. It took us five years of advocating at his school to achieve whole-grade acceleration. Despite two independent IQ tests confirming giftedness at >99.9%, our son spent most of his primary years without friends, underachieving and deeply unhappy. Standardised achievement testing (WIAT and PAT) highlighted relative weaknesses in spelling, handwriting and written expression and the focus on these weaknesses instead of his considerable strengths delayed the decision to accelerate. Many times, we considered moving schools or home-schooling. The decision to finally accelerate came as a surprise at the end of an extremely difficult year, and was likely due to staff support from the school counsellor and the Assistant Principal who'd undergone a summer program at GERRIC (UNSW) in Gifted Education.

Whole-grade acceleration has been a game-changer for our son. The improvement in his emotional demeanour and engagement with schoolwork has been profound. Our son made friends, was accepted easily into the older cohort and won a main role in the Junior School Musical. The challenge of high school has been even better. He is in the top extension classes for Maths and English and now truly enjoys going to school. Being motivated has also helped him improve quickly in weaker areas such as writing. Our son's current whole-grade acceleration has made a stark difference to his happiness, attitude and motivation, and it has certainly been the key to keeping him engaged at school.

Male, 10-yrs, Y5 Opportunity Class, Sydney (2017)

My just turned 10-year-old son was home-schooled from May 2014, to Feb 2017. He is profoundly gifted (IQ >99.99%), and his original school was unable to cater to his needs, resulting in the development of anxiety disorder. He also has Dysgraphia (Disorder of Written Expression).

Last year, age 8, he attended a local high-school for their Y8 extension maths course. The school's policy on gifted and acceleration, along with the attitudes of principal and teachers alike, were paramount in making this a brilliant experience, and a keystone in improving my son's mental health.

Through their progressive stance, and belief in 'anything's possible', we saw a significant reduction in my son's anxiety, and a large regain in his love of learning. He was also accepted by children closer to his mental age, which in turn boosted his self-esteem and confidence. Academically, he kept pace with the class, often surpassing expectations, but the biggest gains we saw due to such a radical acceleration, were improvements to his general behaviour and maturity, as well as a huge reduction in negative mental image and anxiety.

This year, he is thriving in the Y5 Opportunity Class (a one-year acceleration), and dual enrolled in Y9 5.3 mathematics, coming top of that class last semester.

Recommendations

Drawing from the recommendations outlined in the 1988, 2001 and 2012 Inquiries, is recommended that the Federal Government, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, undertake:

Establishment of a national policy on gifted education that requires state and territory education departments to establish units responsible for the implementation of changes to gifted education.

Responsibilities of such units could include:

- (a) Develop a model school policy for the education of gifted students.
- (b) Require schools to develop and implement school policies for gifted education.

- (c) Leading the development of guidelines on the implementation of the 20 forms of acceleration (recommendations 19 and 30 of the VIC Inquiry).
- (d) Appointing Advocates/Advisors with qualifications and experience in gifted education to provide advice to schools and advocate for gifted underachievers to help them access appropriate educational provisions, including acceleration, within their local school district.

Advocates/Advisors could:

- i. Work with state-based gifted associations and Mensa to encourage gifted home-schoolers back to school by advocating for them to access appropriate educational provisions, including acceleration, within their local school district
- ii. Provision of a copy of the Iowa Acceleration Scale (IAS) to schools the Advocate/Advisor is working with. The IAS is the gold-standard tool for use by school teams and parents to guide objective, defensible whole-grade acceleration for students in Years K-8.(19)
- iii. Supply of sample Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to help schools plan curriculum delivery accelerated students.
- iv. Providing, promoting and supporting increased learning opportunities in gifted education for pre-service and in-service teachers and early childhood educators (see recommendations 38, 39, 40, 41, 43, 44, 45 and 52 of the VIC Inquiry).(2)