



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

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Submitting as a: Academic person on institution
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Summary

In my role as a university lecturer in initial teacher education and postgraduate gifted education courses, I am appreciative of the opportunity to contribute ideas to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools. By aligning the needs of gifted students with the provision of high quality education for all students, my intention is to emphasise that inclusive educational philosophy and practice must include all students. All educational environments must be places where all students are learning all of the time.

Gifted students represent about 10% of the student population (Gagné, 2018) in all contexts. But natural ability can only be realised through appropriate educational provisions delivered by teachers who understand giftedness and are skilled in the delivery of gifted education. Evidence from international tests and NAPLAN results suggest that our most able students are not achieving to their level of capability (Masters, 2015), suggesting that they are not receiving their educational entitlement. Therefore a higher priority needs to be placed on gifted education in teacher education and school provisions to ensure that gifted students are understood and nurtured. The needs of ALL students should be met through educational provisions which reflect high quality curriculum, differentiated to provide appropriate challenge for diverse learners, supported by policies and legislation that mandate professional standards for teachers, and guarantee provisions and resources for diverse learners in schools. This submission considers best practice for all students, with an emphasis on the 'gifted dimension' of curriculum, assessment and achievement; teaching and learning; and leadership. I am also available to discuss any issues with the Review Panel, should further clarification or evidence be required. (References cited can be provided if required, but were not included because of limited word count.)

Main submission

Learning:

What should educational success for Australian students & schools look like?

Educational success is achieved when all learners are able to learn, achieve academic success relative to their ability and experience positive development and well-being for all of their time at school. If learning is conceptualised as a continuum from novice to expert in each discipline, then successful learning can be measured by the degree of progress a student has made along that continuum within the reporting timeframe. Measuring progress rather than achievement against a set of year level standards, is far more likely to help students work towards achieving their 'personal best' in learning (Martin, 2011). When students' well-being becomes a key educational goal, attending to their positive intellectual, emotional, social, physical and spiritual growth and development is foundational to success. The curriculum is the vehicle for the development of the individual's capabilities and dispositions that will lead not only to academic success but also to personal fulfilment.

To be a successful learner, students need to learn about the learning process and themselves as learners. They need to be curious and develop positive dispositions towards learning. They need to learn about learning - understand the concepts of cognitive load, learning strategies, memory and retrieval skills, metacognition and critical reflection skills. They need to learn and understand their own strengths and weaknesses as a learner and apply strategies as appropriate to assist the learning process. If students understand that they need to be active in the learning process, understand the process of learning and believe that they can be successful learners, they can apply this mindset and knowledge of how to learn to every area of learning and task both at school and beyond. This has a positive impact on their self-efficacy and identity as a learner.

Within each area of learning, students need to be taught the key ideas, principles and skills of the discipline by the teacher, through the provision of rigorous content that is differentiated to provide appropriate levels of challenge for students across the full range of abilities. Learning the structure of knowledge within a discipline and the overarching concepts will assist deep, transferable learning and understanding. When the teacher frames significant learning and skills as a continuum of learning from novice to expert within a discipline, and students can enter that continuum at a level appropriate to their current development, both the students and the teacher can see where they need to go next and form teaching and learning goals that can help students to continue to progress towards mastery and expertise.

Year level achievement standards are often presented as a ceiling to learning rather than a benchmark along the learning continuum. For gifted students, achieving their personal best may represent achieving at a standard several years beyond their age peers. For gifted and talented students, who typically have knowledge and skills that are more advanced than their age peers, and can learn at a faster rate and at a deeper level of complexity than their age peers, it is essential that teachers

differentiate the curriculum and allow the gifted students to accelerate beyond the year level curriculum where appropriate. It is essential that gifted students learn the processes of self-regulation and determination so that they understand how to negotiate and manage their learning. The tragedy is that so many gifted students lose their love of learning through boredom and lack of interest when presented with tasks that are too easy, or when they are expected to regurgitate information they already know. Braggett (1997) found that most gifted students underachieved in schools because they were held to year level expectations in a lock-step curriculum model.

What can we do to improve & how can we support on-going improvement over time?

Quality in teaching and the development of expertise can be achieved through rigorous professional learning that begins with the initial teacher education degree and continues through a range of targeted in-school, community and university professional learning opportunities. Teachers typically choose to be teachers because of their desire to make a difference to their students, but without the necessary professional development, modelling and mentoring they may not learn how to apply best-evidence theories and pedagogy for teaching diverse students.

Teachers need to have strong knowledge of the discipline they teach in order to understand the significant ideas and have depth of knowledge and skills to draw on when designing and implementing the curriculum.

Teachers need to be experts in learning and assessment as the key to identifying students' entry points into the learning continuum, their progress along the continuum and their achievement of standards that mark the learning milestones. Teachers need to know how to analyse a learning task and map the learning progressions from novice to expert. They also need to understand how assessment data can be analysed to provide useful information about where on the continuum each student is and therefore what it is that their next learning goal should be. To do this, teachers need to be experts in the principles, language and application of assessment that can accurately identify each student's knowledge, skills and understandings mapped to the learning objectives/goals. When teachers know how to ask the right questions in the right way at the right time, then assessment data will provide rich information to assist them in identifying students' learning needs and designing appropriately challenging and supportive learning experiences.

Teachers need to use assessment information as one of the forms of knowledge about their students and how they learn (AITSL, 2011 - APST standard 1). Knowledge of their students' interests, abilities, disabilities, level of readiness to learn and preferences for learning should determine the design and implementation of learning experiences. The importance of building respectful relationships with

students, and understanding the affective needs of children and adolescents, accompanies effective teaching and builds knowledge of the students, but also insights into what is important and relevant to them and what motivates and engages them in learning.

Henderson and Jarvis (2016) outlined the gifted dimension of the APST in order to elaborate on what it means to know gifted students and how they learn. For gifted and talented students, pre-assessment and off-level testing at the start of a unit of work may provide evidence to justify acceleration. With NAPLAN data indicating that there are many classrooms where students' literacy and numeracy skills are spread over a six to eight year ability range (Masters, 2015), teachers cannot expect all students to have the same starting point, nor reach the same end point at the conclusion of the unit. Therefore, they need to be aware of how to cater for diverse needs through differentiating the curriculum to provide appropriate challenge for all students and the opportunity for all students to achieve their learning goals and feel successful as learners.

Professional learning about gifted education is essential if teachers are to be able to understand, identify, and provide for gifted students. This would include knowledge about intelligence, creativity and giftedness, skills in higher order thinking and problem-solving, and the ability to differentiate the curriculum in addition to catering for gifted students' social and emotional development and sensitivities. McCann (2001) claimed that a teacher who has developed this expertise is a more effective teacher for all students, and Renzulli's (1998) research concluded that "the rising tide lifts all ships". When all teachers understand that they are teachers of gifted students, and that gifted students need to be taught (they won't necessarily succeed on their own) and are entitled to make progress, then gifted education becomes part of inclusive classroom practice, rather than a separate "add-on" to a school's provision.

Two Senate inquiries into the education of gifted students (1988, 2001) both recommended that initial teacher education (ITE) courses include compulsory topics in gifted education, but currently only three universities (all in NSW) make this provision. Gifted education should form part of all ITE courses and be a requirement for course accreditation and teacher registration in each state and territory. In addition, the online gifted education modules that were developed in 2004-5 (with funding following the 2001 inquiry) that provide on-going professional learning support for teachers in schools need to be revised and brought into line with current educational policies and directions. Funding would be well spent in utilising the best of what we know about professional learning in an online environment, and research evidence from the last 12 years to develop the best possible on-line resource for teachers' continuing professional learning about gifted education.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements and how might they be overcome?

Teachers may be more confident about their knowledge of the content of the curriculum than about their knowledge of their students – their students' interests, abilities, disabilities and learning preferences. Their need to be 'in control' rather than flexible and adaptable to meeting students' needs may present a barrier to teaching that inhibits students' progress. When teachers have deep content knowledge, combined with a knowledge of their students, they have the ability to adjust the scope and sequence in designing differentiated units of work and therefore can be more confident about taking a student-centred approach.

A barrier to learning at an appropriate level of challenge is the fragmentation of the curriculum into year level achievement standards in each discipline. Although the Australian Curriculum presents as a continuum of learning from F-10, this flexible design to facilitate learning is not always understood by teachers who may be more focused on teaching year level content and skills. Developing learning progressions and using appropriate assessment as a means of identifying diverse students' entry points and learning goals will help teachers to shift from a content-focused approach to a student-centred approach to learning. Putting students' needs first provides a perspective for teachers to find the significance and meaning for the student in the content, rather than focusing on the content and expecting students to achieve or not, depending on their individual motivation and ability.

When gifted students are denied more advanced content and skills, which they need in order to learn and progress beyond what they have already mastered, they lose interest, may fill in their time being disruptive and often underachieve and disengage from school. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (AITSL, 2011) stipulate the expectation that all teachers need to differentiate the curriculum across the full range of abilities (standard 1.5). This supports the case for the design of learning that caters for diverse students' different levels of readiness. However, the barrier to its implementation is that there is no legislation to safeguard all students' educational entitlement. The APSTs remain aspirational rather than realistic in defining best practice and providing some reassurance to the community that there are professional standards that fulfil expectations and guarantee teacher quality.

The APSTs also specifically mention students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds (standard 1.3), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (standard 1.4), and students with disability (standard 1.6), but fails to specifically mention gifted students. This can lead to a perception that this group of students does not warrant special provision. The APSTs should be revised to include a specific standard that relates to gifted students. This would align the APSTs more

closely with the Australian Curriculum (ACARA) which specifically mentions gifted students in their student diversity advice.

Teacher education courses and in-service professional learning should include mandated gifted education topics that provide teachers with the understanding, knowledge and skills to be effective teachers of gifted students, who represent about 10% of all students (Gagné, 2018). At least a semester topic/course in gifted education as part of all initial teacher education courses was a recommendation of the Senate Inquiry into the Education of gifted children (Collins, 2001). Another recommendation was that giftedness was recognised as a special educational need, and if the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) was amended to include this definition, the special educational needs of gifted students would be protected by legislation. Making appropriate provisions to enable gifted students to make continuous academic progression would then be an obligation rather than a low priority of schools and teachers. Despite the research evidence that acceleration (as appropriate) is a positive impact on student achievement (Assouline et al., 2015; Hattie, 2009) negative attitudes and school policies that prevent acceleration are dominant. The only way to overcome this barrier to gifted students' progress is through the provision of education and policies, supported by the legislation, that counteract the resistance. Funding for research into the needs of gifted students, the effectiveness of a range of provisions for gifted students in the Australian context and a review of current and best practices would provide the impetus for evidence-led practice in schools.

Leadership:

How might leadership support great teaching and drive the agenda?

Teaching can also be framed as a continuum of knowledge, skills and understanding from novice to expert. One could argue that their initial teacher education course provides the novice teacher with the preparatory education to commence their practice, and that on-going professional learning applied to their practice will continue their development towards mastery. The APST (AITSL, 2011) provide a framework for that learning progression, highlighting the key elements teachers need to develop. But, just as students need teachers to provide key ideas and skills, so too beginning and developing teachers need mentors and leaders to drive their learning and development towards high-quality teaching expertise. Mentors can help beginning teachers to provide models of effective teaching, guide their design of curriculum units and direct their implementation of high quality, differentiated curriculum in inclusive educational contexts.

For teachers to differentiate the curriculum and to accelerate gifted students as necessary, school leaders need to support teachers to know how to differentiate. Leaders also need to make clear to staff that differentiation is a non-negotiable in

the design and implementation of high quality curriculum units. School leaders are also able to ensure that the professional learning, mentor teachers and resources are provided to support differentiation and acceleration for gifted students. They can help to develop strategic plans that incorporate improved outcomes for all students, including the highly able students. Principals and school leaders who support gifted education are essential to the success of school programs for gifted students.

Sector leaders also need to be driving the gifted education agenda. When state/territory and national educational bodies specifically include gifted students and gifted education in their documents and priorities when they talk about inclusive education, they provide important leadership that maintains a focus on all students' needs and ensure that gifted students' needs are recognised.

What can we do to improve & how can we support on-going improvement over time?

School leaders require professional learning about leadership, and need to be experts in curriculum, teaching and learning in order to provide quality leadership and support to teachers.

Leaders need to establish and maintain a school climate of learning, where professional learning is part of teachers' work, and the whole school focus is on learning and improvement, both for teachers and students.

Leaders also need to be advocates for the needs of all students, including the gifted students. They need to have undertaken professional development in gifted education and be positive in their attitudes towards giftedness, and knowledgeable about provisions for gifted students.

Leaders are able to evaluate school-wide provisions and gather evidence that specific provisions make a difference for students' outcomes.

Funding to provide scholarships for school leaders to undertake postgraduate studies in leadership for gifted education would provide the necessary education and credentials for school leaders to have a positive impact on gifted policy and programs in schools.

Leadership positions in educational sectors should be provided to represent the needs of gifted students across all schools and educational centres. AITSL and ACARA, as two key leaders in education at the national level should have funded positions for qualified gifted education personnel to ensure that the needs of gifted students are given an equitable consideration in all policies, documents and resources.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

The lack of time in the school week and the teaching year is the biggest barrier to implementing professional learning and mentoring that results in changed teaching practices that ultimately improves student outcomes.

Time could be found by dedicating two or three weeks of the year (beyond the 40 teaching weeks) to planning and school-based professional learning focusing on specific learning targets identified by the school leaders and staff as essential to whole school improvement.

The other barrier to leadership for gifted education is the lack of priority given to gifted education and the needs of gifted students within schools. When principals and school leaders understand the concept of giftedness, the characteristics and learning needs of gifted students and are familiar with gifted methodology, they are more likely to see the benefits of gifted education to whole school improvement. McCann (2001) found that when teachers receive professional learning about gifted education, and use higher order thinking, differentiated curriculum and open-ended learning tasks, all students benefit, but the gifted students thrive. By prioritising professional learning about gifted education in their schools, and making teachers accountable for applying gifted education methodology in their classrooms, school leaders can drive the agenda.

However, the creation of leadership positions in schools with specific responsibility for gifted students, programming, teacher support and professional learning about giftedness is essential to ensure that a leader, qualified in gifted education, can show teachers how to make the necessary adjustments for gifted students, advocate for gifted students in policy and related issues, and hold teachers and school personnel responsible for the delivery of gifted education. Funding for the creation of leadership positions with a gifted education focus would provide impetus for successful gifted provisions to be part of every school's strategic plan and identity as a school that aspires to successful outcomes for ALL students (including the gifted).