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Responses

Curriculum and assessment

Curriculum that is locked into a rigid set of skills and activities at the same level for every child is clearly inadequate. The Australian Curriculum has been designed a continuum so that students can be taught at their own level. However, assessment is the area that most blocks fluidity here. Each Year 8 student, for example, may perhaps be expected to complete the same assessments as each other in order to allow teachers to write reports and see the child, every child, forward into Year 9. But what if that Year 8 child is already performing at a Year 10 standard in that unit or that subject? An invisible ceiling that is not an indicator of their best has been a serious problem for many gifted and highly able students. Too many of these students lament 'but I always get an A'. If the work is too easy boredom and disengagement may quickly follow. This effects class control and some teachers then fail to identify gifted students who may be in trouble. There is also the issue of aspirations that are not being met. Teachers need to be trained in gifted education to be able to truly identify the range of highly able students they encounter. Disengaged students do not often present easily as 'gifted' even if they are. Teachers need to be engaged in gifted education training at an undergraduate level and beyond. The training modules provided by organisations such as the VAGTC (the Victorian Association for the Education of Gifted and Talented Children) are designed to assist this training in rural and remote areas in particular.

Rating: 7

Teachers and teaching

Obviously teachers must build relationships with their students before real teaching environment occur. This is part of a 'respect' phase, where teachers listen to and observe students' levels of ability and interest. High ability is not always observable in only the students who achieve the highest test scores.

Furthermore, today's ever increasing pace of change needs real creativity from our best minds to be able to come up with innovative solutions to problems that were not even imagined years ago. Unfortunately, traditional schooling provides a model of mixed ability classrooms, where teachers struggle to deliver curriculum differentiation in order to cater for the needs of all their students. In addition to this problem, teaching for creativity is largely considered to fall within the realm of the Creative Arts faculty, not within 'serious' subjects like Maths and Science, and consequently we lose too many our best and brightest creative minds too early.

Our traditional education system, fine for the industrial revolution era, is inadequate for the twenty first century. It was designed to deliver specific bodies of knowledge and skills. Instead we must make space in the curriculum to prioritise the fostering of creative thinking in our students. They will be trying to step into jobs that have not yet been invented. Creative problem solving will be one of

their, and society's, biggest assets. Providing for the needs of highly able students, including teaching for creativity, must be a pedagogical priority. Giving teachers training in 'Gifted Education' will provide strategies that benefit every student. Consider the wisdom of the old saying: 'A rising tide lifts all ships'. Undergraduate training in gifted education is essential for all teachers if we expect our standards to increase.

Rating: 7

Leaders and leadership

Rating: 0

School and Community

Rating: 0

Information and Communication Technology

We all know that ICT is a powerful tool to develop young minds. Teachers are also excited that it creates potential for a more differentiated environment for the diverse range of student abilities and interests in any classroom. For example, it offers an instant environment beyond classroom walls, where students can work with like-minded and like ability peers, in another suburb or even internationally. The potential all students including gifted students is remarkable. 'ICT provides real choice for the learner, multiple ways in which students can acquire content, process ideas, and develop products. With ICT students can explore multiple options for taking in information, choose different paths for making sense of ideas, and express what they learn in many alternative ways.

Even though ICT's relevance for schools is enormous and increasing, educators need to exercise caution. Unless used with care, adequate training and a great deal of understanding of what it can and can't do, ICT can be for some teachers cause significant concern.

ICT's relevance to students with an area of weakness in one domain and strength in another is an important issue. Asynchronicity is a well-known challenge for many students, including gifted students. One hears teachers say: 'He/she can't be gifted, their spelling is terrible.' It seems that some teachers primarily see the weakness in a child instead of acknowledging the strength first in order to then leverage growth in those weaker areas.

ICT has huge relevance here. For example, students for whom literacy is not strong, benefit from being able to express their understandings in a range of multi-media forms. Some high ability Maths or Science students despair that their abilities in English seem to slip steadily downhill as they move through Secondary School.

Rating: 7

Entrepreneurship and schools

Rating: 7

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

Rating for enrolments: 7

Rating for clusters: 5

Rating for distance education: 5

Rating for boarding: 5

Diversity

Diversity is an essential element for teaching and learning more so now than ever. Unless we recognise and celebrate the variety of responses we receive as teachers, gifted students will not be identified accurately. Their position within rural and remote communities will not be valued if whole school gifted education programs are not in place.

Properly trained teachers in this aspect of education are essential.

Teachers who cringe at the term 'gifted' must be trained to value and extend these students as a matter of equity and justice. Each student has the right to 'move ahead' in their education each day not just stagnate until university perhaps. Disengagement and disorder may follow. Teachers need to be trained to at least provide activities that use higher order thinking skill, not 'more of the same'. This is the same for rural and remote areas and teachers must be trained to understand that gifted students in some cultures, including indigenous cultures, may present differently. Understanding how giftedness is valued and represents itself will be essential.

Rating: 7

Transitioning beyond school

Gifted students need to be allowed to progress 'beyond' school grades at an early age if required. Acceleration, if done carefully, does far more good than harm when appropriate for gifted students or highly able students. Too many teachers are not cognisant of this to the detriment of gifted students. They should read/listen to the vast majority of researchers who have data to prove this, rather than become a naysayer reliant on anecdote or very limited data. Universities are becoming increasingly welcome to younger age entrants, or entrants specialising in one area of talent.

Rating: 7

Additional Comments

To expand on the ICT answer:

ICT has other advantages for gifted students, some of whom need to be pushed to the point of failure requiring challenges that perhaps a regular teacher in a mixed ability classroom cannot provide. The challenge might be to research a topic within a deadline, or produce a multi-media presentation with a team. Access to, and ability to use a range of ICT resources would be required. Real or virtual mentors would need to also be available. The scope and depth of such a task can increase as needed for all students. Many schools are already using interactive on-line maths programs that commonly allow students to progress at their own pace.

However, it is important to remember that the answer is not sitting a student in front of new technology and walking away. In Australia in the 70's and 80's, the new video machine technology was hotly contested as teachers struggled to get 'time' in the video room for their classes. It did not take long for the novelty to wear off, and for students to realise when the technology was being used as a baby-sitter and time filler. The same is happening today for students who are becoming bored with the class being 'on screen' or 'on line'.

Geographic isolation is a significant challenge for students, including gifted students that ICT can also assist with. Bringing like minds together with access to cutting edge knowledge is critical for their development.

It is also important to acknowledge the isolation that gifted students, or any student who 'does not fit in' can feel even in a school in the heart of a major city. ICT can be their lifeline to find and work with other students like them.

It should also be accepted that acceleration of some gifted students has significant advantages, but some schools claim that it is too difficult to organise. ICT programs that offer advanced level work, rapid pace and interactive feedback can support this.

Students today can access many ways to express and organise information: word processors, spreadsheets, databases, search engines, data mining, image processing, animation, digital audio, digital video, 3-D computer graphics, visualisation, and hypermedia authoring software are just a few. By tapping into the 'creativity enhancing' aspect of these resources, students can find new ways to design their own games and presentations, build their own working teams and analyse the skills of others on line.

Questions about Australia's highest academic students' declining PISA results between 2000 and 2009 are important because there has been a decline at the top end in reading and mathematics. Are we now so focused on making sure that the lower end students move upwards? Providing better ICT in rural and regional areas without essential teacher training in gifted education may be only the same downward path being repeated.