

**Submission**  
**to the**  
**Australian Department of Education**  
**Teacher Education Expert Panel**

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## **Summary**

This experiential submission posits that, for a Panel whose Discussion Paper claims to focus on certain diversity groups, it is odd that one of the numerically larger diversity groups has been completely ignored: **gifted students**. The submission canvasses several aspects of gifted education which ITE students should be taught at university: who are gifted students, where are they found, what do they need at school, what is currently happening in Australia with respect to gifted education, why ITE in gifted education is important for students on the one hand and for Australia on the other, and what Australia can expect if gifted students' educational needs continue to be ignored as a result of lack of appropriate teacher training.

## **1. Context**

This submission is made in response to the call for submissions by the Australian Department of Education Teacher Education Expert Panel (**Panel**) <https://www.education.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review/consultations/teacher-education-expert-panel-discussion-paper-submissions>

I note the Panel's advice that submissions will be accepted until 21 April 2023.

***Author's familiarity with the population of educators and parents whose views are reported here***

Since 2015 I have been an Honorary Visiting Fellow at the School of Education at the University of New South Wales ('**UNSW**'), but I make this submission in my **personal capacity**, and I note that it has not been endorsed by, and does not necessarily reflect the views of, UNSW.

Since 2008 I have made over 130 presentations for teachers and parents at education conferences, universities and schools on five continents on a wide variety of education-related topics.

In this context, I have also liaised informally with numerous primary and secondary teachers, educational leaders, bureaucrats and 4<sup>th</sup>-year ITE students who approach me after my talks. Many of these people email me years after the event to report confidentially what is going on in their schools and education departments, and to ask me what they can do about it.

I have long been active in voluntary associations and organisations focusing on various aspects of education, many of whose members have been or are practising teachers or parents.

This submission presents an aggregation of my everyday experiences over the past two decades in volunteering and lecturing in this field, and the experiences of many hundreds of teachers, education leaders and bureaucrats, as confidentially reported to me by educators themselves, and as passed on to me by parents citing what they have been told by their child's teachers.

I have permission from these educators and parents to relay their concerns, as long as I always do that in a de-identified way. Indeed in many cases, teachers have not only granted their permission, but have also vociferously pleaded with me to reveal what they have told me, since they are not 'allowed' to do that under their professional codes of conduct.

The examples which I have drawn on in this submission stem largely from my work in NSW and Queensland - the two jurisdictions in which I live, and where I have the most experience in liaising with teachers and parents. However, they are representative of my more limited experience in supporting teachers and parents in other Australian jurisdictions as well. This is not an issue confined to, or emblematic of, two eastern States alone.

I include the biographical information above to explain the genesis of my familiarity with this population – not as an assertion that my claims herein

reflect the views of any of the voluntary associations with whom I work, or that I in any way have authority to speak on their behalf.

**I am not a qualified teacher.** Accordingly, I am not a member of a teachers' union. My only teaching experience is at the university level. Neither I personally, nor my (now adult) children, have ever been adversely affected by the situation described in this submission.

### **Confidentiality**

This is **NOT** a **confidential** submission, and I expressly grant permission for it to be published on the Panel's website and/or circulated to anyone whom the Panel believes might wish to see it.

## **2. Narrowing the scope of this submission**

This submission will be confined to the Discussion Paper's first area for reform:

1. Strengthening initial teacher education programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates

Of course, it is acknowledged that there are many domains of giftedness (eg, intellectual, creative, physical), but this submission focuses on ITE relating to children who are *intellectually* gifted, as this is the population which gifted education advocates have identified as being the most needy.

## **3. Diverse learners with 'diverse learning needs' – did the Panel consider gifted learners?**

The Panel's Discussion Paper begins by listing 'several key areas'. One of these is 'supporting diverse learners'.

Yet throughout the Paper, the categories of diverse learners addressed include First Nations, CALD, disability and disadvantaged, but nowhere is there mention of the population of students who are the subject of this submission: **gifted students**.

We are told in the Discussion Paper (para 4, p 21) that ITE students need to learn about diversity through the federal Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and its subordinate legislation, the Disability Standards for Education 2005. Both of the foregoing relate only to students with

disability (but not other diversity groups) and are enforceable in Australia. We are told also that that legislation is underpinned by international agreements such as UN conventions, which are not enshrined in Australian domestic law and are hence unenforceable here.

Why are students in ITE expected to learn about the needs of students with disability and other diverse groups, but not also about the approximately 10% of students whom they will encounter in their classrooms who are intellectually gifted (some of whom will have disability and other characteristics of diversity groups)?

Why are students in ITE expected to learn about unenforceable international agreements, but not about the intellectually gifted students in their classrooms who will every day be demanding their expertise?

Of course gifted students are no more important or worthy than students in all other diversity groups, but surely they are at least *as* deserving of attention in an inquiry of this nature.

**Following is a summary of what I submit ITE students should be taught during their undergraduate university courses.**

#### **4. Who are gifted students?**

**ITE students should be taught at least the following about gifted students:**

Gifted children have high intellectual ability in relation to their age peers. As a group, they have significantly greater aptitude for all, or some, aspects of academic learning than might be considered typical in light of their age and background.

They are capable of exceptionally high academic achievement given challenging learning experiences and appropriate support from well-trained teachers. The development of their potential is the shared responsibility of governments, educators, families and communities. However, parents cannot 'make their child gifted' or 'force' their child to be gifted by means of tutoring, hoarding or bribery.

Many (but not all) gifted children demonstrate a range of natural abilities and characteristics from an early age. These can, but do not necessarily, include: boundless curiosity, advanced reading and comprehension skills, innovative facility with numbers, uncanny abstract reasoning, thriving on complexity, exceptional memory, and ability to appreciate many points of view.

There is no incontrovertible evidence that gifted children, as a group, experience more social-emotional challenges than children who are not gifted. Of course, SOME gifted children do, but then SOME gifted children are blond (ie, hair colour is not an evidence-informed characteristic of giftedness). As a group, gifted children are not more intense, sensitive, or sickly than non-gifted children.

Although some gifted children claim to love being top of the class and dux of the school, many more are academically ambitious simply because they love learning – for the sake of learning – not to ‘beat’ others. When they opt for a selective high school, gifted children usually do so in the hope of meeting other students of like mind with whom they can share their intellectual interests and passions. And later, in senior secondary, gifted students are likely to be aiming for a high ATAR, again not to ‘beat’ others in their classes, but rather to increase the chances of being accepted into their preferred course at uni.

## 5. Where are gifted students found in Australia?

**ITE students should be taught at least the following about where they can expect to encounter gifted students:**

Gifted children are found across all socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and religious groups and communities, independent of factors such as gender, indigenous heritage, geographical isolation, ethnicity, native language, poorly educated parents, and non-intellectual disability. They are probably sitting – some would say hiding - in almost every mixed-ability classroom in Australia. We can expect that in each mainstream classroom of 30 students, at least 3 will be gifted students - whether they have already been identified as such or not, and whether they have been admitted to a gifted stream or not.

There is no evidence behind the oft-repeated erroneous assertion that gifted students are found only or principally in high-SES ‘leafy’ suburbs, in private schools, and amongst certain recently arrived migrant groups or heavily tutored cohorts.

However, it *is* true that our education system’s failure to adequately respond to the needs of gifted students is most detrimental to those marginalised children from **backgrounds of disadvantage** because they are the least likely to enjoy support mechanisms and expensive extra-curricular activities outside of school.

Some ITE graduates assert that they plan to teach in a low-SES school or area, and thus will never meet a gifted student. They are misguided –

they surely will meet many gifted students, though those students may not have been identified or 'labelled' as such. And those ITE graduates will need to have benefited from training and acquired expertise to identify and support such students in the classroom.

## **6. What do gifted students need at school?**

### **ITE students should be taught at least the following about what gifted students need at school:**

It is by now a cliché to assert that every child is entitled to equity of access to the opportunities that education can provide for them to learn, achieve, and thrive. Every student deserves educational experiences that help them develop their potential in ways that stimulate creativity in the context of an education that meets their needs and enhances their futures.

Gifted students are no different. They have their own legitimate claim on our sense of fairness and equity, our policy priorities, and our taxpayer dollars. Because of high intellectual ability or high academic achievement, gifted students have specific and sometimes unusual educational needs, and may require something more than can be offered in the average classroom designed for the average student, or delivered by teachers untrained in gifted education.

To provide the most appropriate educational experience for gifted students, schools must offer high-quality programs and services for those who would most benefit from them.

Through benign neglect, longstanding prejudices, or outright hostility, gifted students are often not afforded such opportunities. Without supportive educational opportunities, gifted children may underachieve, disengage, drop out and experience mental health needs, personal and social difficulties and generally diminished wellbeing. But the latter are invariably caused by the mismatch between the child and the curriculum which leads to the underachievement – not by the giftedness per se.

The personal and academic cost to underachieving students can be enormous. Repeated academic failure or academic under-performance and disengagement over many years can see the child's resilience meter stuck on zero, with the result that their school underachievement may solidify into an entrenched pattern, even after leaving school.

On the other hand, when gifted students are valued, understood, supported and nurtured by well-trained and well-intentioned teachers at school, most go on to be healthy and happy contributors to society.

## ***Can gifted learners always 'teach themselves' without trained teachers?***

Too many in education are unfortunately influenced by myths and misconceptions concerning gifted children. One such myth is that gifted children can always teach themselves without adult guidance and encouragement, and that accordingly teachers do not need special training in gifted education.

Though some gifted learners are indeed sometimes able to learn independently, it does not follow that they *should* be left to always learn in this way, disconnected from teachers and unscrutinised by any formative assessment. In fact, the significant role played by skilled coaches as a crucial catalyst in the process of talent development means that for gifted learners, a trusting relationship with an adult is particularly significant.

We do not expect gifted young tennis players to improve without coaching, or gifted young pianists to flourish without a music teacher. Why then would a gifted young mathematician or writer be left to cope on their own, simply because adults perceive them to be 'already going too fast' or 'already ahead of the others'?

Academic learning isn't that different from sports or music or anything else in life: if we want to get better at something, more time on task under excellent tutelage is an essential part of the equation.

While regular mixed-ability classes may be more or less appropriate for the majority of the student population, gifted children learn best when they are routinely and rigorously challenged. They need equitable identification in the first instance. Equally important however is investing the energy to provide access to a suitably robust curriculum, appropriately trained teachers, and diverse programming practices which match gifted students' level of readiness to learn.

### ***Acceleration***

In some cases, gifted children need to be moved ahead where the material to be mastered is more complex and difficult (and hence probably more interesting to the child). This is called 'acceleration'. Contrary to a commonly believed myth, academic acceleration has no negative long-term effects on the psychological wellbeing of accelerated children. <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2020/08/03/academic-acceleration-has-no-negative-long-term-effects-on-the-psychological-well-being-of-gifted-youth/#:~:text=A%20new%20longitudinal%20study%20published,or%20a%20combination%20of%20advanced>

Acceleration is an academic intervention that allows students to progress through an educational program at a rate that is faster, or at an age that is younger, than typical. It can be implemented in at least twenty forms, with the most common being whole grade skipping and receiving higher-level instruction in a single subject. It is one of the most-studied intervention strategies in all of education, with overwhelming evidence of positive effects on student achievement.

### **An introduction to acceleration strategies needs to be taught to ITE students.**

#### ***Grouping***

In other cases, in order to flourish academically, gifted students need to be grouped, sometimes or always, with others of like mind and similar intellectual ability, not necessarily those of similar age. This is called 'ability grouping' or preferably 'grouping by readiness to learn' – sometimes called 'readiness grouping'.

Research has shown that grouping is positive for gifted students, but is not detrimental to their peers. There are few negative effects for medium- and low-achieving students. Indeed, some formerly 'B' students have reported that, once all the annoying 'A' students are removed from the class cohort, "I finally get a fair shot at being the dux."

For gifted children, flourishing academically, socially and emotionally is supported by fostering a sense of belonging alongside like minds. For some gifted, the problem is not so much the low level of the curriculum or the enforced slow pace of learning, as the feeling of never truly belonging anywhere, not being a part of what is going on at school. No child appreciates the privilege of acceptance more sharply than those without it:

"If the girls are always talking about clothes and movie stars, and the boys are always talking about basketball and cars, where can I fit in? Even my teachers are usually too busy to talk with me about my areas of academic interest, and occasionally when they do, they tend to look past me to ensure that others in the classroom are not throwing things or otherwise behaving dangerously."

### **An introduction to grouping strategies needs to be taught to ITE students.**

It is ironic that many of our education system's supports and extra programs and extra funding are devoted to promoting opportunities to foster the learning of *all* students - except those students who are most capable of it.



Yet, we know that acceleration and ability grouping produce generally positive outcomes. When well-designed and carefully implemented by well trained teachers, these interventions have long proven to boost the achievement of gifted students. Sadly, far too many schools don't offer these interventions, or don't employ teachers with skills to implement them well.

## 7. Including gifted education in ITE

Teachers typically enrol for teaching degrees and enter the profession because they want to make a difference, and because they value education. They are generally well intentioned, and want to do the very best they can for all of their students.

For schools to identify and cater for the needs of gifted students, however, principals, school executive teaching staff and classroom teachers need more than good intentions. They need skills developed through initial teacher education (**'ITE'**) and continuous in-service professional development (**'PD'**).

The vast majority of teachers do the very best they can for most children, most of the time. When they don't, it is not because they are ill-intentioned, but rather because they simply don't know what to do - they have simply never been trained to do all the mysterious things which are suddenly being expected of them.

Too many teachers are failing to identify gifted students because they have not, during their ITE, been exposed to the knowledge, research findings, academic literature, psychoeducational interventions and pedagogy required to identify, understand, stimulate, teach, engage and extend gifted students.

Parents frequently assume that teachers have a broad knowledge of gifted education, acquired during their ITE and afterwards through school-based PD. Most teachers, however, have received *no* exposure to information about gifted students' needs during their undergraduate or ongoing studies.

Some teachers may have heard brief mention of gifted students in elective subjects at university (such as courses on 'diversity' or 'inclusion'). Almost all tertiary institutions now have *compulsory* courses in special education (or similar) in their ITE courses.

## ***Schools' preoccupation with struggling students***

Many schools seem to be now preoccupied with low-achieving children, and all the school's extra programs and supports tend to be aimed at improving the learning of weak pupils who may be struggling with basic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Such schools understandably invest their resources in boosting their lower achievers. They're also most inclined to judge teachers by their success in doing that, and accordingly, least inclined to have much energy, time or money for students already well above the proficiency bar.

All ITE providers believe that everyone training to be a teacher should be well prepared to identify and respond to children with *disability*, or children whose capacity to learn is otherwise less than that which characterises the majority of their classmates. *Not* to provide such training, these universities argue, would be to send newly-qualified teachers into schools without the skills they need to ensure that children with disability are able to develop, to the fullest, such abilities and skills as they *do* possess.

That argument, however, is not mirrored when it comes to gifted students: every year new teachers enter classrooms without the slightest notion of what to do with students in their classroom in the top 10% of intellectual ability.

### ***Current situation***

The majority of universities and teacher training institutions in Australia do not currently offer a mandatory stand-alone undergraduate unit in gifted education.

GERRIC at the University of New South Wales is one of a very few who do.

If teachers do not graduate from their university education courses with knowledge about gifted students, a comprehensive understanding of how they learn, and an ability to differentiate the curriculum to provide appropriately challenging learning experiences for them, when, where and how are they expected to develop that expertise? Further, very few teachers have undertaken *postgraduate* courses in gifted education.

Yet those teachers who have in fact undertaken undergraduate or postgraduate courses in gifted education tend to be very knowledgeable and passionate about identifying, teaching and supporting gifted students. Australian research has clearly shown the benefits for gifted students of being taught by teachers who have participated in formal training in gifted education. There are demonstrated links between training in gifted education and teachers' positive attitudes towards gifted students and

teachers, eschewing the fallacious assumptions and myths about gifted students which still prevail in most educational circles.

### ***What about on-the-job training instead?***

Some hold that there is so much new material for education students to learn at university, lecturers simply have no time to bother with a 'frill' such as gifted education in the undergraduate years. They point out further that new teachers have enough to master in the early years, just teaching to the 'middle' – never mind the shiny high achievers or the gifted. They do, however, concede that all teachers need to have participated in university courses in how to respond to the needs of students with *disability*, while at the same time arguing that teachers needn't have received equivalent training in *gifted* education.

Some suggest that, after a teacher has been qualified and working for a while, and has come to terms with the basics of classroom teaching, then (if they are interested) they can always complete some form of PD in gifted education later on – or they can, without explicit training, simply pick up whatever they need to know about gifted students 'on the job'.

However, if we accept that position, what happens to all the gifted children in those teachers' classes while the teacher is gradually coming up to speed in the basics and is invariably still teaching just to the 'middle'? No other profession is expected to do what they have not been expressly trained to do. We don't allow our serving Qantas pilots to learn how to land airplanes full of passengers 'on the job'. Why should it be different for our teaching profession?

And Australia would never allow medical doctors to practise without expansive training, or to refuse to master the intricacies of approximately 10% of the possible diseases and disorders which they are likely to encounter. Yet we appear to expect teachers to begin practice without training in the needs of 10% of their students.

## **8. Context and history**

Two bi-partisan federal Senate Select Committee inquiries into gifted education, held in 1988 and in 2001, found that there is inadequate support for, and recognition of, gifted children in Australian schools. They concluded that gifted students are the most educationally disadvantaged population in Australia.

Together with numerous other recommendations, the earlier report included the statement: "The Committee recommends to teacher training institutions that **pre-service training courses include sufficient**

**information about gifted children to make student teachers aware of the needs of those children and the special identification techniques and teaching strategies which the student teachers will have to use with the gifted on graduation.”** [emphasis mine]

Despite key recommendations in both Senate Select Committee Reports, there has generally been very limited teacher exposure to gifted education, via pre-service, postgraduate or PD courses.

Notwithstanding the notional or perfunctory inclusion of gifted students in [unenforceable] education policies within every state and territory of Australia, gifted students are not usually referenced and not included at all at the federal level.

There are at least 400,000 gifted students in Australian schools, but Australia lacks a national, cohesive and co-ordinated approach to gifted education.

Gifted learners are not mentioned in any key Australian government, department or agency documents governing education. Neither are they mentioned in the AITSL Standards. No other minority population or diversity group suffers from this invisibility.

For example, in the 2021 federal Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (**the forerunner to the current Panel**), at least 7 public submissions were focussed on ITE about gifted education for student teachers. Yet the final report contained exactly one off-hand mention of gifted students in a list of ‘other concerns’ raised by stakeholders. None of the 7 submissions’ recommendations was included or commented upon, even in a negative way. Ignoring the arguments of gifted education proponents is worse than thoughtfully refuting them.

The percentage of students achieving in the top bands in international competitions has declined significantly in recent years. We need both national and state leadership to help arrest this decline.

The lack of comprehensive national priorities in gifted education means that Australia has declining academic results, disconnected students, and a society immersed in the evidence-free belief that ‘giftedness is elitist’ or that ‘gifted students will always be just fine on their own, without support or coaching’. No one believes that in the case of a gifted tennis player or a gifted violinist.

In 2019, New South Wales introduced a new policy on educating gifted students in State schools. The policy and its supporting documents contain advice on the kinds of in-service training which

practising teachers, can, if they wish, pursue to learn about gifted students and their educational needs.

New South Wales is to be commended for introducing this policy. It was drafted after a comprehensive literature review and extensive stakeholder consultation. Its implementation is to be contrasted with Queensland, which in July 2021 summarily removed its gifted policy from its Education Queensland website without notification or fanfare.

Nevertheless, the PD training in New South Wales is optional and not mandated. Accordingly, teachers who have never been exposed to gifted education during their ITE may not be inclined to sign up in order to yet again learn about something totally new.

## **9. Too many 'frills' and not enough academic substance covered in ITE**

Teachers report to me that they originally chose teaching because they wanted to teach reading and math and science to children who were ready and eager to learn.

Teachers are told now that school is no longer about academic progress, or educating the next generation of Australia's leaders, thinkers, vaccine hunters and poets.

Rather, school now is all about 'wellbeing'.

Schools are making decisions to put academic instruction on hold, or to decrease the portion of academic instruction during the school week, so that they can engage in more activities specifically focused on student wellbeing (sometimes called social-emotional learning). The risk in taking this approach is that students may fall further behind academically.

Surely there is no conflict between academic success and wellbeing. The two are complimentary. Academic achievement breeds self-confidence and motivation (hence 'wellbeing'), while wellbeing underpins the perseverance required to continue to achieve academic success.

Yet teachers complain to me that a large portion of what they are taught during ITE relates to topics which are not focussed on teaching academic subjects. Similarly, they assert that the majority of PD topics they are being offered relate more to 'wellbeing' or 'frills' rather than academics.

Here is a list of tasks and topics which teachers claim they have been told to now prioritise above the teaching of 'mere' academic subjects (in ransom order):

- consent education
- driver education
- pedestrian safety
- train safety
- drug education
- dealing with bullies
- trauma informed practice
- media literacy
- financial literacy
- restorative justice
- buddy programs
- teacher welfare
- NCCD
- preparing for NAPLAN
- policy compliance training
- growing vegetables and herbs, and planting seeds
- sleep hygiene
- healthy eating (for students and for teachers)
- animal cruelty
- supporting parents recovering from trauma
- public transport etiquette
- the new NSW Disability Strategy
- the new NSW inclusive education policy
- the new NSW behaviour policy
- the new NSW suspensions policy
- the new NSW restrictive practices policy
- how to deliver remote learning
- cyber safety
- bushfire safety
- flood safety
- bicycle safety
- beach and water safety
- chemical safety
- electricity safety
- evils of plastic straws and takeaway food containers
- planning for and responding to disasters
- administration of medicines
- wellbeing and mental health considerations for both students and teachers
- gender fluidity
- coaching children on how their parents should vote in the 'Voice' referendum

- engaging fathers in their children's learning
- individualised instruction
- personalised instruction
- targeted interventions (used to be called remediation)
- snake bites
- elementary first aid
- anaphylaxis
- family planning
- ableism
- pandemic coughing and sneezing etiquette
- mask-wearing etiquette
- asbestos avoidance
- positioning, operation and cleaning of classroom air filters and purifiers
- non-binary genders
- climate change (or climate emergency)
- something called 'indispensable skills for planetary survival'
- reporting domestic violence
- child protection
- differentiation
- UDL
- RtI
- MTSS
- neurodiversity
- mindset
- Aboriginal cultural training
- anti-racism
- counselling Aboriginal students who are perpetrating violence on each other
- playground supervision
- car pickup supervision
- teachers Code of Conduct, and not speaking out about anything in public
- teaching anxiety reducing skills
- nutrition
- obesity
- smoking
- vaping
- safe alcohol use
- safe partying
- personal hygiene
- menstrual hygiene
- email etiquette
- controlling student behaviour without touching
- women in leadership
- 'cultural competency'
- healthy ways to deal with workload intensification

- spotting the signs of radicalisation in classrooms
- how to manage students' friendships
- caring for pets
- table manners, how to set a table and how to use cutlery at a table.

Of course, not every teacher at every Year level is being asked to teach, or to do PD on, each and every one of these topics. However, I had been receiving so many "You'll never guess what I've been told to do PD on NOW!!" complaints, I began to record them. The above list is the result (so far).

Teachers complain that they are forced to spend less of their classroom time on teaching reading, science and math, and more time dealing with the confusing array of disparate topics listed above. Teachers note that they are progressively being told to add more and more tasks and duties, and to accomplish these on the dining room table on Sunday mornings.

They note that schools are no longer schools. They have become principally agents of social and political change and [largely unsuccessful...] providers of mental health support.

Regardless of what they are being taught in ITE, teachers are increasingly being asked to assume the role of unofficial, school-based quasi-parents and carers. Whether they want to or not, teachers are now expected to cover in their classrooms all sorts of topics which used to be the exclusive province of families. They are told that this is necessary in the interests of 'equity', because so many children come from 'disadvantaged' homes where such topics are not raised or taught or even considered. Yes, that's true perhaps, but why is that a teacher's problem? And was it not always thus?

There are simply some things that are outside a teacher's control.

Of course, no one denies that there are inequities in society. But **why are schools and untrained teachers being asked to find the solution to all of society's problems?**

Schools did not invent or cause all of society's ills and inequities. Why must schools be called upon to unilaterally fix them? Who decides which problems are worth making schools the scapegoats for in this way - and which problems are not? Teachers? Education departments? Perhaps academics who themselves were 25 years younger the last time they set foot in a school classroom? Or have never been trained as teachers at all?

And teachers are painfully aware that members of other professions would be more skilled, and have better success, at addressing the myriad



of the non-academic and non-pedagogical issues and tasks in the list above.

Teachers wonder how they are meant to address the needs of an ever-increasing number of students with serious mental health concerns – conditions which sometimes result in disordered and disruptive behaviour in the classroom. While always very sympathetic to the needs of these students, teachers wonder what they can realistically do in their classrooms with no training, all the while still teaching the mandated curriculum to the rest of the class. Why are there no school psychologists to assist? [Students' mental health is a big issue for schools – but teachers should only be part of the solution \(theconversation.com\)](http://theconversation.com)

Similarly, teachers wonder why they must be required to single-handedly meet the needs of an ever-increasing number of students with complex and serious disabilities (and sometimes the disruptive and dangerous behaviours occasioned by the concomitants of those disabilities) – students who are progressively being transferred into mainstream from special schools, sometimes forcibly against their parents' wishes.

This initiative is called 'full inclusion' and is allegedly required by UN instruments which Australia may have signed up to, but which are not enshrined in Australian domestic law and are hence unenforceable.

Yet there is an education department policy on inclusion in both NSW and Queensland. The policies are meant to be implemented largely by teachers whose ITE experiences would have never included any mention of the ideology of inclusion.

The constant emphasis on wellbeing at the expense of academics does not augur well for education in general, and especially not for gifted education.

## **10. What happens in our classrooms as a result of insufficient ITE in gifted education?**

In addition to the points made above about the consequences of gifted students not having their needs met at school, two additional serious consequences are currently on the agenda for families with gifted students.

### ***10.1 Dropout amongst gifted students whose needs are not being met by their teachers at school***

After 20 years of advocacy for gifted learners, I am tired of hearing stories of a child with an IQ in the 99.7 percentile wanting to drop out of school, when that child knows more about insects and rockets and Marxism and Oliver Cromwell and magic realism than I will ever know – or care to know. How sad that a gifted child's journey through school has to finish up in such an educational cul-de-sac.

Every intellectually gifted child who decides to drop out of school for whatever reason is a tragedy. Australia has arguably lost one more potential contributor to our next generation of leaders.

Who will be left to study physics and other so-called 'hard' or advanced subjects in senior secondary if too many of the students for whom such subjects are designed (ie, gifted students) have already dropped those subjects – or have dropped out altogether – by Year 12: [HSC students ditch difficult subjects in search of band 6 results \(smh.com.au\)](https://www.smh.com.au/news/education/hsc-students-ditch-difficult-subjects-in-search-of-band-6-results-20210615-p5n1qz.html)

**Further, by not providing the appropriate understanding and assistance when gifted students are little, are we determining in advance that for the next 60 years they have a greater chance of draining the welfare system than contributing to the taxation one?**

What will be the long-term implications for Australia of gifted students dropping out and not proceeding to tertiary education? Strategically (and some would say 'selfishly'), it is in Australia's own self-interest to support gifted education and foster the development of gifted students so that they may enhance the future cultural, material and economic well-being of Australia. Our next generation vaccines and submarines may depend on it. We need to ensure that our gifted students do not drop out.

### ***10.2 Trend towards home schooling amongst gifted students when teachers at school clearly have no clue how to teach them***

Home schooling has grown in significant numbers in all Australian states and territories in recent years. From 2017 to 2021, rates of home schooling in NSW doubled – page 4 here:

<https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/c2212e83-c476-4da6-89b5-dd12b8ce8e9a/home-schooling-data-reports-relating-to-2021.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=>

Since the unforeseen inception of remote home learning during COVID lockdown, gifted education advocates are currently hearing anecdotally that more and more gifted students, having now returned to face-to-face

classes at school, are beginning to beg their parents to allow them to quit school or to start home schooling. During COVID remote learning, many gifted students were able to complete all their assigned learning tasks by around 10 am every day, having the rest of the day at home to work independently on areas of particular interest, or to pursue extracurricular activities – or alas, to play video games.

Similarly, the COVID remote home learning experience served to reveal to parents of gifted children just how little their children were truly learning at school, how low were teachers' expectations, how simplified was the mandated curriculum, how totally inappropriate were the materials being sent home for their children to complete, and how quickly, effortlessly and dismissively their children could compete all their assigned work.

Parents began to form the view that their children must be wasting most of their time at school each day. Some began to wonder why they got out of bed to drive children to school day after day.

Remote learning also gave parents a forced insight into what home schooling might be like, allowing some to conclude, "It actually wouldn't be all that hard. And he seems so much happier at home."

Accordingly, lately when a gifted child asks to drop out or to home school, such parents are starting to enthusiastically acquiesce.

Said one child: "After COVID remote learning, I realise that I don't want to go back to school because I am just wasting my time there - and I always have been. I am just waiting for other kids to catch up. All I do most days is watch the teacher look after other kids. She doesn't really teach them anything. She just takes care of them, and watches them to make sure they don't hurt each other or throw stuff around. Even if I ask her a question, she still looks over my shoulder at other kids while she speaks to me. I am not very important. The kids who have meltdowns and throw things are more important and get way more attention."

Surely ITE students need to be taught strategies to ensure that gifted students form the view that school is a place worth attending.

## **11. Why is ITE in gifted education important for gifted students?**

Our education systems are increasingly recognising that an emphasis on addressing the needs of *all* students is related to educational equity, and that all the aspirational claims made with respect to inclusion of students

with disability apply equally to other diversity groups, including gifted students.

All children are entitled to have their learning needs met in school, whether they have learning delays, special needs, or are ready for a more advanced curriculum than their chronological-age peers.

One of the mantras of the full inclusion ideology proponent is 'All means all'. Surely gifted students represent a subset of 'all'. **'All' is a small word, but its circumference is (or should be) wide enough to include students who are gifted.** Gifted children deserve the same consideration as their neurotypical peers.

### ***Right to learn***

Similarly, all children have the **right to learn something new at school every day**. Many gifted students are not enhancing their skills or learning anything at school day after day, not because they are incapable of learning, but rather because they have learned it all many years ago. To them the mandated curriculum is redundant, repetitive, boring and slow.

Human rights documents tell us that children have a 'right to education', but what is a right to education? Is it the right to be enrolled and show up day after day at a building called 'School' and sit quietly and watch as adults for 13 years teach other students what the gifted child learned long ago? Or is it rather a right to learn something new every day?

Gifted children are generally denied educational justice if they fail to receive an education that adequately challenges them. It is imperative that gifted students experience at least one year's growth for every year spent at school, regardless of their advanced point of entry into the mandated curriculum. They must not be viewed as an educational annoyance, a childhood oddity, or an emblem of privilege. They must come to see school as a place where their prior learning is recognised, and where new learning is enthusiastically cherished.

One little boy said to his teacher at the end of virtually every day: "I don't feel I've learned anything here today, Miss. Could you please tell me something that I've learned because, when she picks me up today, my mum will want to know."

Forcing gifted students to always tread water in mainstream mixed-ability Classrooms merely results in students who are bored, frustrated, disengaged, peerless and largely ignored. Gifted students are those whose potential and achievement are most significantly blunted by bad policy.

Gifted students who are given the same coursework repeatedly will usually succeed with it, but will experience no growth for their time spent on the tasks. Over time, gifted students become discouraged, and they may underachieve by rushing through work, doing the bare minimum, or refusing to do their work altogether.

This negatively affects their whole education: a clever, creative mind ignored and left bored and unchallenged will eventually find ways to pass the time. This is where teachers and parents may start to notice an unmotivated attitude and even behaviour problems. "I simply can't bear to watch her teach this same material one more time. What to do? I know! I'll push the kid next door off his chair. That ought to get me out of here for a while for a detention. Being punished is better than being in here."

### ***Right to struggle***

Incarcerating gifted children in mixed-ability classroom with non-challenging work deprives them of the opportunity to ever learn to **struggle**. The mandated curriculum is just too 'easy' and can be mastered in a flash. They may be able to put off homework until the last minute and still complete it on time because the material takes no effort to master.

As gifted students progress through school, however, and the work gradually becomes less familiar, a student who has never been adequately challenged suddenly finds themselves in a situation where they need to allocate extra time to work through difficult assignments. They begin to wonder: "Maybe I'm not gifted after all. Otherwise, I wouldn't have to TRY to do this new work."

When students appreciate that errors in their own or their peers' work promote greater clarity and understanding, they come to appreciate that small failures can be a source of valuable information and an impetus for growth. With this insight, they become increasingly confident about grappling with ever more difficult concepts and problems, and they develop habits and attitudes that will help them to tackle the inevitable vicissitudes of life later on with courage and optimism. Perhaps most importantly in the school context, they become less hesitant about asking when they need help.

There is no justification for denying gifted students access to the struggles inherent in rigorous academic learning. Lessons and assignments cannot build resilience if they are simplistic and below Year level. Assignments and assessments must stretch students and demand a deep level of engagement. Otherwise, nothing is learned. The gifted child comes to believe, "School is easy and always will be."

An education that fails to challenge a gifted student has implications for motivation and learning and wellbeing. Gifted children who lack motivation or interest in school because they are given only educational opportunities challenging enough for 'average' learners are less likely to flourish, because flourishing is linked to eagerness to learn. Educational attainment or success in school is directly linked to the level of motivation children experience vis-a-vis the sorts of educational tasks and projects they are expected to complete.

An education that fails to challenge the gifted – or worse, which engenders boredom – is no education at all because the main benefit that schools allegedly provide is learning. If there is no new learning, the gifted student comes to think of school as a form of neglect.

## **12. Why is ITE in gifted education important for Australia?**

When clever children thrive, we all benefit.

If we care about having successful Australians tomorrow, we need successful students today. If we offer this population of students a mediocre education today, we condemn ourselves to a mediocre future tomorrow.

Maximizing the potential of Australia's gifted learners, thereby enhancing this pool of young talent, is essential, not only in the interests of those students themselves, but also for their families *and* for the country as a whole.

Intellectually gifted children are those who have the greatest potential to become Australia's next generation of leaders and innovators, and ultimately the greatest potential to contribute to the economic and social welfare of the nation, and to enrich us in multi-faceted ways.

The gifted portion of today's school population will produce tomorrow's outstanding inventors, vaccine hunters, mathematicians, engineers, submarine designers, airline pilots, poets, judges, and creative business executives. They constitute the engine which will trigger society's progress. Meeting their needs at school now is undeniably central to building the future economic prosperity of Australia.

In an age where knowledge creation and innovation are of paramount importance, gifted children are the nation's greatest resource, and

neglecting their needs will risk leaving our nation behind in an increasingly competitive global market.

If we squander this resource, if we fail to provide our teachers with the knowledge which they need to nourish our brightest minds, and if we sacrifice the education of gifted students at the altar of struggling ones, we will make the Australians of tomorrow pay for the neglect of sound policy and planning by the politicians of today.

Demand for top talent in the corporate world and elsewhere is exploding while the supply is threatened, as the education system allows exceptional potential to shrivel up, and as other nations do more to retain their own outstanding performers. Australia needs to add a new strand to educational reform: not just giving a helping hand to underachieving or average performers, but also identifying and nurturing our intellectual so-called 'superstars'.

If Australians treated gifted education as if their future depended on it [it does...], we would ensure that our gifted education programs expand the reservoir of people who will contribute to creative innovations in the arts and sciences and to all areas of human endeavour designed to make the world a better place.

The problem, of course, is not that Australia has a shortage of clever children. Rather it's that such children generally aren't getting the education they need to develop their potential, thereby allowing other countries to forge ahead.

Prime Minister Albanese, in his victory speech on the night of the 21 May 2022 election, gave the following undertaking:

"No one left behind because we should always look after the disadvantaged and the vulnerable. But also **no one held back**, because we should always support aspiration and opportunity. That is what my government will do.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-22/anthony-albanese-acceptance-speech-full-transcript/101088736>

Surely, neglecting to support aspiration and opportunity in educational settings by not providing gifted students with the education which they need and deserve constitutes the epitome of 'holding back'.

### 13. Gifted children grown up

Consider all the Australians who are every day working round the clock in labs and staring down microscopes, searching for a more effective COVID vaccine or an instant COVID nasal screening test or a universal COVID treatment or a COVID cure?

They are gifted children grown up of course – gifted children who, for whatever reason, managed to stay in school and score the ATAR which they needed to study medicine or medical science at university. Gifted children who, for whatever reason, resisted the temptation to drop out or give up.

Australia needs these gifted adults now more than ever.

**And teachers need to have been properly trained during their ITE to meet the needs which these gifted adults had while they were still in school.**

### 14. Further information and contributions

I am grateful for the opportunity to make this submission, and I am happy to appear and give oral testimony at any public or private hearings, or to participate in any focus groups which are to be held in Brisbane or Sydney or online, and to answer supplementary questions with respect to this submission.