

1985.6. The Education of Gifted and Talented Children

Submitted 12 December 1985 to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, Parliament of Australia. Published: *Victorian Humanist*, Feb. 1986: 4 – 7. We wish to make submissions on the following points of reference: (a), (f), (g), (h), (i), (j) and (k) of the above enquiry.

(a) Consider whether special provisions need to be made for gifted and talented children

Our Society believes that appropriate provisions should be made for the gifted and talented. We would like to see a wide range of talents fostered rather than confine such efforts to the traditional academic subjects and conservative art forms. Accordingly, we are in favour of a broader concept of giftedness, such as: "Giftedness is the potential for becoming a critically acclaimed performer or exemplary producer in spheres of activity that enhance the moral, physical, emotional, social, intellectual or aesthetic life of humanity" (Tannenbaum), or: "in areas that have consistently made an outstanding contribution to human civilisation" (Goldberg et al).

Such definitions of talent preclude the use of an I.Q. test as the sole criterion. Nor can the parental or teacher assessment be free, from subjectivity, value judgements or bias. It is therefore essential to investigate effective methods of assessment of apparent or potential talents. In addition, research into effective means of fostering and enhancing talents should be undertaken on an ongoing basis to meet the changing needs and expectations of society. The implementation of programs to that effect would require additional teaching and class management skills.

Thus we see the main provisions required as: 1. Establishing effective methods of assessing talents and giftedness in a wide area of endeavours.

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I.V.F. → Contempt of Intoxication and Criminal Responsibility. → Victorian Law Reform Commission.

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2. Ongoing research into effective means of fostering talents and giftedness. 3. Additional teachers and teaching skills. **(f) Consider the desirability or otherwise of integrating special provision for gifted and talented children into mainstream education.** We believe very strongly that the gifted and talented should be accommodated in the mainstream education and not in segregated schools or classrooms. Such segregation would be detrimental to both groups, the average and the talented, in terms of their self image and their concept of societal values. Experts agree that there are marked differences in learning styles among the gifted and talented. These students also vary in their temperamental suitability for various programs which foster talent (e.g. enrichment or acceleration), their task commitment and motivation. Given these variables, it would be very difficult to obtain a homogeneous group by any method of assessment. On the subject of "Accommodating Programs to Individual Differences", Prof. Miriam L. Goldberg states that a teaching program, to be judged appropriate, must be sufficiently flexible to allow for differences in interests, motivations and learning styles among the talented. In discussing learning styles, Dr E. J. Braggett refers to research which shows that students are capable of identifying their own learning styles with accuracy and, as a result, teachers may develop a personalised learning environment best suited to each student in the class, providing for individual differences and optimising the learning of each person. Among the methods by which the outstanding students can have their abilities enhanced, cross-age or peer tutoring has special appeal. Its use, where practicable, would encourage co-operation and sharing instead of competition, and develop a sense of responsibility and social involvement. Thus we see the need to run integrated, mixed ability classes on a very flexible system that allows each pupil to achieve at their own level of competence. In achieving this, the critical factor is the teacher's sensitivity to the students' needs.

(g) Consider whether the pursuit of excellence in mainstream education is consistent with providing for the educational needs of all children The pursuit of excellence is strongly influenced by the way an individual perceives the worth of the activity he or she pursues, or by the way the community values the activity. Schools should not aim to impart a particular body of knowledge but to provide the necessary resources and encouragement to enable all students to exploit their talents to the full. Within a flexible teaching system and with appropriate additional resources and encouragement, the pursuit of excellence in mainstream education is consistent with the provision of educational needs for all children ("Frameworks", the new Victorian curriculum, appears to offer such flexibility). **(h) Determine whether additional resources are needed and whether these may be justified**

Additional teachers, to manage smaller classes than at present, is one of the essential resources.

Another is the need for research into ways of educating pupils to meet the problems of rapid advancement in technology and other areas. Reliance on programs and methods that were adequate in past years may not ensure success in the future.

We believe the provision of such additional resources is well justified. Their cost could be met by redirecting funding from church and private schools. **(i) Investigate the need for special provision for gifted and talented children from special populations, for example, Aborigines and, migrants**

The Commonwealth School Commission's discussion document "Education of Gifted and Talented Children from Populations with Special Needs" (Canberra, July 1985) identifies six such groups: the disabled, the isolated (geographically), those of non-English speaking background, girls, Aborigines

and, those of low socio-economic status. These groups present complex problems both in the identification of the gifted and talented and in, the supply of effective teaching programs. Our reading on this subject convinces us that for girls, a selective, stereotyping educational experience is still entrenched in many schools. In this the teachers play a major role. In such [a] climate all girls have much lower expectations and chances of achieving their full potential. We believe efforts should be directed towards changing these attitudes.

The physically disabled pupils are being encouraged, by examples of achievers such as Helen Keller, Alan Marshall, Toulouse Lautrec, Franklin Roosevelt etc. Such and similar methods of encouragement should be given to all groups which suffer from collective low self-esteem, particularly those of low socio-economic status. Manifest achievement of some would encourage others to greater efforts and break the cycle of poverty and low expectations.

Specialised counselling would be required to deal with Aborigines and migrants to overcome the often profound cultural differences. **(j) Advise on the preparation of teachers to meet that needs of the gifted and talented children**

We believe that the purpose of education is to impart learning ability and mechanisms, encourage enquiry, critical assessment and the acquisition of knowledge. Thus we do not see the teacher as an instructor and the "giver" of all knowledge, but as a skilled and sensitive educator able to assess the needs and potential of each pupil and implement the appropriate learning program for that child. With this perception of their role, teachers need to acquire skills in assessing learning styles, in motivating, encouraging and assisting to learn. **(k) Investigate appropriate educational approaches to the education of gifted and talented children.**

A variety of programs such as enrichment, acceleration, peer-tutoring etc, are being used in many schools. As stated in section (a), an ongoing research into effective educational methods is indicated. We wish to add that in our efforts to develop talents/giftedness to the full we should not neglect the overall development of the child, e.g. the need to relate to other people, tolerance for others, social responsibility etc.

Schooling is instrumental in shaping one's individual and social identity. In fostering talents and giftedness we must not imply that they are the only valuable human attributes. **IN SUMMARY:** We believe that talent and giftedness should be nurtured and encouraged.

We strongly advocate the integration of the gifted and talented children into mainstream education in a way which avoids such labelling. We believe that in a well equipped, small class attention can be focussed on the educational needs of the individual child — gifted and all other children.

We wish to stress our concern that resources not be diverted from the "other end of the scale" i.e. from those lacking basic skills and from the disadvantaged. It is particularly important to break the nexus between low socio-economic status and low self-image as this results in low achievement. We point out that costs and efforts involved in this task are an investment in the adequacy of these future citizens.

References:

1. M. L. Goldberg. Issues in the Education of Gifted and Talented Children in Australia and the United States, p 43. para 2. C.S.C. 2. Curriculum for Gifted and Talented Children. National Seminar, Brisbane, May 1983: p. 16, para 3. C.S.C.
3. Goldberg: p. 42, para 7. 4. Education of Gifted and Talented Children from Populations with Special Needs. Discussion documents; E. J. Braggett. July 1985. C.S.C. _____