

8th February 2013

Ms Celine Ogg

Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to make a submission to the House of Representatives and Senate inquiries regarding the Australian Education Bill of 2012. My submission deals with gifted education and I hope what I have to say will be taken into consideration. I am thirteen, but I am concerned with this matter as it will directly affect my own education. I have not sent my submission from the email address provided, but rather from my mother's email account. She has emailed her consent that my work be published.

I have signed this letter as a cover-note to my submission, and provided my name and contact details for return correspondence. Although my name is not included on my submission, I am not opposed to being credited for my submission on the internet, although I would wish for my address and contact details to be withheld.

Yours sincerely,

Celine Ogg

The Australian Education Bill of 2012 brings to light a number of concepts which for some time have needed to be addressed.

It directly addresses the educational disadvantages arising from students having a disability, being an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Islander, having a low socioeconomic status, not being proficient in English as a result of the ethnic background or immigration status of a student or a student's family, the size of a student's school, or the location of a student's school.

These groups of students are truly disadvantaged and they definitely must be given due attention if their educations are to be improved.

I do not wish to dispute that fact.

However, I do wish to draw attention to what I consider a serious deficiency in this Education Bill.

This deficiency relates to the matter of gifted education.

As a recognised gifted student, the matter of gifted education affects me and so, naturally, I take an interest in current affairs which might relate to it. The primary reason I read this bill was in the hope it would take an active position to encourage – indeed, to enforce – gifted education in Australian schools.

In the second reading of the Australian Education Bill of 2012, the statement was made: "This is not just about disadvantaged kids, not just about gifted kids, it's about all kids."

The Australian Education Bill 2012 is clearly not just about gifted kids, as the above quote contains the first mention of gifted students in the entire second reading.

The first mention of gifted education in the entire second reading – and it is, essentially, to disregard the importance of this matter.

What's more, that quote – containing the first mention of us, the gifted students – is taken from the second reading's last page.

Gifted education may have been consciously omitted from the bill. More likely, it may have simply been overlooked in the difficulty of including with correct turns of phrase all of the other groups of students whose problems needed to be addressed. Either way, the absolute neglect of gifted education in the supposedly definitive bill only serves to show the negligence of our current education system when it comes to the matter of gifted students.

There is no widespread action within the DET that is specifically against gifted education. That is not the message I intend to convey. Indeed, in this day and age, most education policies recognise gifted education and include it as a necessary attribute of the up-to-standard school. However, in reality, it doesn't always work this way.

Excuses are made: "It's 'elitism' to treat gifted students like they actually are cleverer than the others," I have known people to say. Others reason, "If the student is gifted, then they're not disadvantaged and therefore don't have special needs."

Even those who on principle support gifted education may nonetheless claim not to have enough expertise to handle the “challenge” of teaching gifted students. They foresee issues arising: the amount of extra work to do; a lack of time or money.

In the average classroom, the gifted student – whether recognised as gifted or not – will be condemned to literally mind-numbing boredom, as well as utter frustration and neglect. This could be due to their teacher not knowing or caring for gifted education. Conversely, it could be due to the other students in the class behaving or performing badly enough for a teacher to be forced to devote time to them, rather than to the gifted students, regardless of the teacher’s wishes. For whatever reason, most schools in Australia – particularly those which are not within cities or socioeconomically secure areas – do not have gifted education schemes which are adequate enough to provide the necessary extension for bright kids.

Of course, there are many people campaigning to make things better for gifted students in our country. There are organisations devoted to this; teachers, parents and communities that are trying their utmost to invoke a much-needed change to the system.

With no enforcement of gifted education, chance often seems to dictate whether an intelligent student will have access to extension or not.

Some gifted students are fortunate enough to be enrolled in a school which actually has an active and effective gifted education programs. Others live in regions where the only available schools have principals who are “for personal reasons” hugely opposed to these programs, and make it difficult for gifted students and their families to be heard within the school community.

With schools not providing enough education for gifted students, this is often left to the students’ parents.

Gifted students’ parents and guardians are often not aware of the fact that a school is not extending their child, as gifted students often consciously downplay their intelligence to remain socially accepted in discriminative communities. Therefore, many intelligent students aren’t recognised as gifted and never choose to show their capability. Because of the desperation that some students feel when it comes to social acceptance, even a well-meaning parent could be completely unaware of just how curtailed their child is when at school.

Parents are may be unaware that there are G&T conventions to which the intelligent child may be taken. A family could, due to geographical location, an unalterable schedule or a financial situation, be unable to send gifted children to these events.

However, whilst blame could be laid upon unmotivated parents, they shouldn’t need to take full responsibility for extending their gifted children. With the systems of government and education that this country has today, the students’ schools are supposed to be doing just that already.

Certainly, not all gifted students suffer from these issues.

There are schools which run classes for academic extension. There are schools that take their students to G&T conventions and where writers’ conferences are candidates for class excursions.

There are a multitude of individual teachers who, with their own time and money, develop genuinely extending and thought-provoking activities for their more gifted students.

There are organisations set up all over the country, which are attempting to deal with this problem. Their members – an assortment of teachers, the families of gifted students, and gifted students who graduated and wish to improve things for the younger generation – are campaigning to change things. They set up the G&T conventions and courses; they go around to the principals of different schools with proposals for gifted students’ extension.

These people exist, and they do try their utmost to invoke the much-needed change that our education system must at some point see. Nonetheless, there is a lot of work to be put into this field if gifted students' needs are to be met sufficiently all over the country.

The matter of the education and support of gifted students is one of an importance that cannot be put into words for me as for all of the many thousands of people who are involved with the gifted students' community today.

Bearing that in mind, it should be understandable that when I came across the second reading of the new Education Bill, I expected it to say a great deal more on the subject.

Even if schools are too often unreceptive of gifted education programs, there is normally at least some small quantity of, for want of a better word, blather from the DET on how, in the ideal world that is always about to be created, gifted students will have many opportunities for the extension they want.

In this bill, there wasn't even that.

"Identifying the needs of every child and delivering what he or she needs." That is what the bill promises.

Gifted children *need* gifted education. That is an undisputable fact.

It would be reassuring for me to be able to believe it when it is claimed that all of our needs will be met.

However, the first and only mention of gifted students in the second reading of this bill is on the very last page, where it is – helpfully – stated that the bill is "not just about gifted kids". The first mention of gifted education is, as I have said, to discount its importance and its singularity; and it's even on the last page.

Consider this from my perspective. Consider it from the perspective of a student who readily admits to having been bored to tears – not just figuratively – by the sheer, horrific incompetency of this country's standards when it comes to gifted education.

The omission of gifted education from the bill becomes almost offensive when the implications of this neglect sink in. This bill is supposed to ensure that the needs of every student will be seen to, but when we, the gifted kids, were mentioned – only once, at the very end – our needs were simply and entirely omitted.

This may be seen as an emotional submission. It is.

Gifted education is important. It *is* an emotional subject matter, because it is highly personal. Everyone is, as a person, heavily influenced by their experiences at a school age; gifted students are to be included in this. Incompetent gifted education and support systems create not only intellectual "death by boredom", but also extreme social tension that can lead, like other forms of uncensored bullying, to depression. Even without eliciting depression, the treatment of gifted students by their non-gifted "peers" can have devastating effects on the self-esteem, confidence, and life-satisfaction that a neglected gifted student will have for the rest of his or her life. I would like to think I have made it clear just how influential this matter is even without my expounding upon the intellectual and socioeconomic potential that a neglected student may never have the opportunity to reach.

It is true that gifted education has been subject to a lot of debate, in the government and in the media. Whatever the prevailing opinion might be, it remains of the highest importance to a massive community of people.

There are so many reasons to pay attention to gifted students and their social and educational needs.

Yet we're still being neglected.

I feel that I am speaking on behalf of many – if not all – gifted students in this country when I say that the state of gifted education today is nowhere near where it could be if it were only given more support and, in particular, more

enforcement. It is because gifted education is so personal and so emotional that I have a sense of duty to all of those who are involved in gifted education to draw attention to this deficiency in the bill.

There are the teachers who've put in all of those hours of unpaid work to find things to do to extend us. There are the parents who pull us out of conventional school to drive us to writers' festivals programming courses in the city. There are the people who give the talks at the conventions, the people who run the courses, and the people behind the scenes who organise it all to make it happen.

There are all of my fellows, the other students who have been forced to sit in a classroom and write out times tables, while fully aware that they could be doing so much more; who have either been abandoned to social trauma due to remaining outwardly intelligent, or who have hidden themselves for years in fear of being exiled.

If all of these people were to be counted, how many would there be?

How can our potential be reached if giftedness is so often unrecognised, and so often disregarded?

How could we have equity without paying attention to *every* minority?

How could we even have quality learning environments, if our society's subconscious response to giftedness is to ignore it?

I am writing on behalf of all of us – on behalf of everyone involved in the gifted students' community.

I am one student, at a relatively gifted-child-friendly high school in Australian suburbia.

I am not in a position of political authority, but I care about gifted education. So I write.

The problems with our education system can be fixed. If ignored, this issue will only worsen with time; and the Australian Education Bill of 2012 presents an opportunity.

It would not be costly, elitist, or even overly difficult to provide for the needs of the gifted and talented in this country. Not even much radical thought is needed: there are dozens upon dozens of organisations, in Australia and around the world, which have been presenting models of gifted education schemes to schools and governments for decades.

What's more, one of the objectives of the Bill is to raise Australian standards in English, Maths and Science to within the top five in the world. If that is a serious goal, then attention should be given to those students who actually do raise the bar.

There is, in short, no valid excuse by which the "not just about gifted kids" deficiency can be explained away.

Therefore, as a member of the gifted students' community, and on behalf of it, I request that this deficiency be addressed.

As a thirteen-year-old student, I might not be in a position of political authority, but the Australian government certainly ought to be.

The Australian Education Bill of 2012 is an opportunity.

Take an active position to encourage and to enforce gifted education in Australian schools, while this opportunity is present.