

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

Conduct of the inquiry

1.1 The Senate referred this inquiry to the Committee on 12 October 2000. It follows up a 1988 report by the Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children.¹ The current inquiry was prompted by continuing concerns about whether the education system adequately acknowledges and responds to the special needs of intellectually gifted children.

1.2 The terms of reference are:

(a) a review of developments in the education of gifted and talented children since the 1988 report of the Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children;

(b) consideration of whether current policies and programs for gifted and talented children are suitable and sufficient to meet their special educational needs, including, but not limited to:

- (i) the means of identifying gifted and talented children,
- (ii) whether access to gifted and talented programs is provided equitably, and
- (iii) investigation of the links between attainment and socio-economic distribution; and

(c) consideration of what the proper role of the Commonwealth should be in supporting the education of gifted and talented children.

1.3 The recommendations of the 1988 report and the Government's response are reprinted at APPENDIX 5.

1.4 The Committee advertised the inquiry in selected newspapers and wrote to many peak organisations and individuals soliciting submissions. The Committee received 279 primary submissions (see APPENDIX 1) and heard 88 witnesses representing 41 of the submissions at 6 hearings (see APPENDIX 2). During the inquiry the Committee visited Box Hill High School (Melbourne), Parap Primary School (Darwin) and the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information

1 Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children, *The Education of Gifted and Talented Children*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1988. Tabled in the Senate 18 May 1988. Government response, *Senate Hansard*, 25 May 1989, p.2724

Centre at the University of New South Wales. The Committee thanks all those who made submissions and gave evidence, and the hosts of the Committee's site visits.

Overview of submissions

1.5 The three main sources of submissions were:

- management authorities and peak bodies (public, Catholic and independent);
- professionals: teachers and schools; teachers' professional associations; teachers' unions; university academics and education faculties;
- parents and other interested individuals, including gifted education associations and support groups; parents generally through parents and citizens associations; and individuals.

1.6 Cutting across these categories are the interests represented. Some special interests mentioned in submissions were those of children with socio-economic disadvantage, ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, rural and isolated students, and the profoundly gifted – who are far fewer than the moderately gifted and, it was argued, have different needs.

1.7 Submissions may also be divided into those with a core interest in gifted education and those for whom gifted education must compete for attention with other concerns. The first group includes interested academics and teachers, gifted support groups, and parents of gifted children. The second group includes education authorities, teacher unions, and parents and citizens groups. The first group argued strongly for higher priority and funding to meet the needs of gifted children. The second group acknowledged and accepted the need, but tempered their responses by pointing out that there are competing priorities and budget limitations. They were more likely to put the need in context of the need for more enriched education for all children.

1.8 Significantly, all submissions – even from those who do not cast themselves in the role of defending gifted children – accept that there is a problem. The problem, in brief, is that children of high intellectual ability have special needs in the education system; for many their needs are not being met; and many suffer underachievement, boredom, frustration and psychological distress as a result.

1.9 Submissions held a range of opinions on what interventions are most appropriate. There are many possible interventions, most of which can be seen somewhere in Australia. Possibilities range on two axes: curriculum design and organisational structure. Curriculum design involves enrichment and extension activities, as well as adapting the curriculum qualitatively to accommodate what are arguably the different mental processes of gifted children. Submissions stressed that the curriculum needs to be differentiated for gifted children regardless of the organisational structure. Organisational structures range from fully selective schools to accelerated class groups in otherwise comprehensive schools, to various forms of ability grouping, occasional withdrawal or individual acceleration, to meeting the

needs of gifted children in the mainstream comprehensive classroom. These are considered in chapter 3.

1.10 In this inquiry the options for organisational structure were the main focus of disagreement in submissions and evidence. Some submitters dislike selective schools and ability grouping. They believe that gifted children should be handled in the mainstream comprehensive (mixed ability) classroom. They stress the need to give teachers better training and better curriculum resources so they can do so. Teacher unions and parents and citizens groups were mostly in this camp.

1.11 Some argue that the type of intervention must be determined by the level of giftedness. They stress the advantages of grouping gifted children with their intellectual peers. They doubt whether a suitably differentiated curriculum can really be achieved in a comprehensive class – particularly for the profoundly gifted. Many gifted education specialists were in this camp.

1.12 Some support or have no objection to selective schools or ability grouping, but feel that the comprehensive classroom must remain the main focus of attention, because that is where most gifted children will be.

1.13 In evidence to the Committee state education authorities tended to have ambivalent views. Most states have some form of selective schools or cohorts. They are mostly of small scope in context of the whole system. For some there appears to be a tension between a general commitment to comprehensive schools and the knowledge that selective schools or classes are popular and can help market public education as committed to quality.

1.14 All submissions agreed that better teacher training and better curriculum support are essential so that teachers have the skills and the teaching materials to differentiate the curriculum for gifted children.

1.15 A significant opinion group not represented in submissions are those who fundamentally oppose what they see as doing favours for gifted children. Many submissions described the views held by such people. They include those who refuse to acknowledge the existence of abnormally high intellectual ability, or who regard gifted education as a further privilege for the already privileged. They include those who ask why the school should provide additional advantages for students who are supposedly already advantaged. They include the teachers who continue to have ‘a degree of apathy and opposition to gifted education’. They include the other parents who see gifted education provisions as a threat to the attention provided to their own children.²

2 Reported by, for example, submission 100, Board for Lutheran Schools, p.2; submission 110, Australian Secondary Principals Association, p.6; submission 42, Tasmanian Association for the Gifted, p.4; submission 25, Dr J. Watters & Dr C. Diezmann, p.4; submission 206, NSW Association for the Education of Gifted and Talented Children, p.10; submission 55, Parents Association for Children of Special Ability, p.4; submission 54, Victorian Affiliated Network of Gifted Support Groups, p.4.

1.16 These views are reported through the eyes of their opponents who did make submissions. But there is no reason to doubt the general picture. The existence of hostile views is probably a significant reason for the discrepancy between fine sounding official policies on gifted education and limited action in practice. However, the inaction that results from fundamental hostility should be distinguished from the inaction that results from lack of interest, well-meaning ignorance, lack of confidence or lack of training. The different reasons for inaction may suggest different remedies.

1.17 Submissions argued that hostile views are based partly on misunderstandings and widespread misconceptions. Submissions also blamed the Australian culture of egalitarianism, and the supposed Australian fondness for cutting down tall poppies. The Committee suspects that this is true up to a point but too simplistic an explanation. It would be useful to know more of the details and causes of these hostile attitudes. Professor Brian Start recommended research into the different public attitudes to the different domains of human behaviour – ‘particularly why the human intellectual domain is perceived so antipathetically.’³ This is a reference to the contrast between positive attitudes to high sporting ability and negative attitudes to high intellectual ability, which many submissions mentioned. This is taken up from paragraph 2.84.

1.18 Some other key points argued in submissions were:

- There have been some positive developments since the 1988 Senate Select Committee report; however there is a long way to go.
- There are a variety of appropriate interventions for gifted children, depending on the circumstances.
- Many beneficial interventions would not need much money, but depend mostly on the willingness of authorities, schools and teachers to act. For example, to put gifted education units in teacher training courses should not significantly increase the cost of the total course.
- Refusing to acknowledge the need, out of a misplaced sense of egalitarianism, is counterproductive because it is most damaging to the prospects of disadvantaged and minority groups. Gifted children are found in all socio-economic and ethnic groups. However children from wealthier families have more out of school supports, while children from poorer families depend more on what the school can do for them. Untrained teachers are more likely to identify as gifted well behaved children of the dominant culture, and less likely to notice giftedness among underachievers or minority groups.

A note on terminology

1.19 There is a problem with the use of value-laden terms in relation to gifted education. Terms which may be value-free technical jargon among specialists can

3 Submission 216, Prof. B. Start, p.14

cause misunderstandings or arouse emotions in wider debate. It is better to use terms which have a clear, value-free meaning as far as possible.

1.20 ‘Gifted’ is a contentious word. In many submissions parents spoke of their difficulty and embarrassment in approaching teachers for help with the fact that their child is ‘gifted’. The attitudes involved are discussed further in chapter 2. Here the Committee notes that even the plain meaning of ‘gifted’ is not agreed. Most submitters used it to mean something like ‘having high intellectual ability relative to the peer group’ - with an implicit focus on academic schoolwork. Others with a broader concept of giftedness can speak of giftedness in ‘vocational education and training, citizenship and extra-curricular work.’⁴ This takes the core concept of ‘high ability’ and transfers it to other fields of endeavour. Others can say ‘all children are gifted’, by which they presumably mean ‘all children have personal strengths’ or ‘all children can do things which excite our wonder.’⁵ The vagueness of ‘gifted’ permits these confusions.

1.21 Furthermore, for some ‘gifted’ has unwanted connotations – that is, linked and often value-laden ideas. People may think that a ‘gift’ is something that we should feel grateful to receive – though for some parents of gifted children it is a curse.⁶ ‘Gifted’ implies a false dichotomy with ‘not gifted’ – when in fact individual variations of intellectual ability lie on a continuum. Most seriously, because we regard intelligence as a good thing, closely associated with wisdom, ‘gifted’ or ‘highly intelligent’ have unwanted connotations of general moral superiority. Consider for example:

One day I was in conversation with the school chaplain on some other matter and I said by the way, I just can’t believe the ignorant use of those words ‘talented and gifted’ in connection with young children at the stage when they are beginning to form an image of themselves and their attributes. I said that the feeling of competency is extremely important and shouldn’t be damaged [among those not labelled as gifted] so early... She replied that the school she used to work at only uses the words ‘extension’, ‘enrichment’, advancement or similar.... I have no objection to extension courses for students who can obviously cope with the harder work (more power to them) and label them as above but please do not play God.⁷

1.22 The writer does not object to gifted education interventions, but simply objects to the *word* ‘gifted’. The writer has read into ‘gifted’ meanings - a dichotomy between gifted and not gifted; a claim for the superiority of the gifted - which no academic in the field, and no parent who submitted to this inquiry, would intend.

4 Submission 214, Australian Council of State School Organisations, p.2

5 Submission 26, K. Imison, p.1. Submission 44, I. Bett, p.3: ‘... as one school classically put it before refusing to provide additional facilities, “all our children are gifted in one way or the other.”’

6 ‘Giftedness implies that the children have been given something special and the tendency is then to suggest that they should not ask for more.’ Submission 44, I. Bett, p.3

7 Submission 4, S. Tratnik, p.2

None of the parents who made submissions to this inquiry said anything to suggest that they regard their children as generally wiser or better than any other children. They were writing because they have problem children whom they want to help.

1.23 It would be possible to use ‘high intelligence’, where ‘intelligence’ is broadly defined as follows:

Intelligence is a very general mental capacity that, among other things, involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, think quickly and learn from experience. It is not merely book learning, a narrow academic skill, or test-taking smarts. Rather, it reflects a broader and deeper capability for comprehending our surroundings - ‘catching on’, ‘making sense’ of things, or ‘figuring out’ what to do.⁸

1.24 However, ‘high intelligence’ still has the unwanted connotation of general superiority, and it will not satisfy those who deny the existence of a unitary general intelligence.

1.25 Some submissions suggested less value-laden terms. The CHIP Foundation uses Children of High Intellectual Potential to avoid ‘the implied elitism inextricably linked to the use of the word ‘gifted’.⁹ The Gifted and Talented Children’s Association of Western Australia noted suggestions like Advanced Academic Ability or Academically Talented:

In general parents have expressed the view that these children are going to be labelled as something and that the label needs to have general public acceptance, whatever that label is.¹⁰

1.26 For some, though, such terms may seem to narrow the field of interest too much towards ‘book learning’. A recent British report settled on ‘highly able’.¹¹

1.27 On the other hand it may be argued that the problem is not the fault of the word, but of the negative public attitudes around the subject. The attitudes, not the word, should be changed.

1.28 This report will retain ‘gifted’, on that basis that it is a concise and well-established term. It should be understood that ‘gifted’ means ‘having significantly high ability relative to the peer group’. This deliberately leaves open the question of which fields of endeavour are valued: for example, whether ‘giftedness at sport’ is equivalent to ‘giftedness at academic learning’. In the Committee’s view the practical

8 R.D. Arvey and 51 others, ‘Mainstream Science on Intelligence’, *Wall Street Journal*, 13 December 1994

9 Submission 41, The CHIP Foundation, p.2

10 Submission 270, Gifted and Talented Children’s Association of Western Australia, pp.3-4

11 House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment, *Highly Able Children*, 1999, par. 6

focus should be on needs. Giftedness in any valued field of endeavour should be accepted, valued, and supported, but this says nothing in particular about what interventions (if any) are needed to respond to it. The focus for action should be on what needs require what interventions. This is taken up from paragraph 2.59.

1.29 It should be noted that there is no clear cutoff point between normal and ‘high’. In any field children lie on a continuum of ability from the lowest to the highest. ‘Significantly high’ in this context means ‘to a degree which suggests a special need deserving some intervention’. Different circumstances will suggest different interventions. However the fact that there is no clear cutoff point should not be used as an excuse to deny attention. This is discussed further from paragraph 2.68.

1.30 The Committee notes that ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ have been usefully distinguished as referring to potential and achieved performance respectively. ‘The basic equation is, potential plus “environment” leads to achievement.’¹² On the other hand, ‘gifted and talented’ is often used loosely as one term. ‘Talented’, arguably, evokes further unwanted connotations to do with child prodigies. This report will avoid ‘talented’. However the useful distinction between potential and performance should always be kept in mind.

Conclusions of the overview

1.31 The Committee emphasises and endorses some key points which emerge from the overview of submissions:

- All types of interest groups agree that there is a problem with education of gifted children. These children have special needs in the education system; for many their needs are not being met; and many suffer underachievement, boredom, frustration and psychological distress as a result.
- Submissions differ only in their preferred solutions – in particular, over whether the main focus of intervention should be in the mainstream comprehensive classroom, or in ability groupings.
- All agree that better teacher training and better curriculum support are essential to dispel myths about giftedness, and to ensure that that teachers have the skills to differentiate the curriculum for gifted children.

1.32 The Committee notes that the argument over whether selective schools should exist is long-standing and highly polarised. This argument should not be allowed to overshadow other issues to do with gifted education. In all state education systems where they exist selective schools involve only a small proportion of the student body.¹³ Most gifted children are located in comprehensive schools. The need for

12 Submission 216, Prof. K. Start, p.5. F. Gagné, *Giftedness and Talent: Reexamining a Reexamination of the Definitions*, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, vol. 29 no. 3, 1985, pp.103-112

13 For example: New South Wales has by far the most developed system of selective schools and classes in Australia. In New South Wales in 2000 year 5 and 6 opportunity classes accommodated about 2.7 per cent of all public primary year 5 and 6 students, and about 0.7 per cent of all public primary students.

intervention to give appropriate education to these children should be agreed by all, regardless of their views on selective schools.

1.33 The Committee stresses that denying the need, on the ground that the gifted are already privileged, or because of ideas about equity, is misguided and counterproductive. Denying the need is most damaging to the prospects of poorer or minority children. Gifted children are found in all socio-economic and ethnic groups. However children from wealthier families have more out of school enrichment and support. Children from poorer families depend more on what the school can do for them, and will suffer relatively more if the school does nothing. Untrained teachers are more likely to identify as gifted well behaved children of the dominant culture, and less likely to notice giftedness among underachievers or minority groups. This is taken up in paragraph 3.21.

Academically selective high schools accommodated about 6 per cent of all public secondary students. For various reasons it cannot be assumed that this 6 per cent are the top 6 per cent of students by ability: for example, some more able students may not apply for geographical reasons. Pers. comm. NSW Department of Education and Training Selective Schools Unit, September 2001. (In 2000: public primary students 454,363; public year 5 and 6 students: 114,637; opportunity class students: about 3,060. Public secondary students: 303,681; selective high school students: about 18,564 (approximation obtained by multiplying the year 7 entry 3,094 by 6).