

The Tasmanian Association for the Gifted (TAG) is a voluntary organisation of teachers and parents who are committed to improving the understanding of and education of gifted children. We see our roles as advocacy, lobbying, the provision of information, networking opportunities and, where our capacity permits, the provision of professional development and activities for gifted children.

TAG very much supports the School Workforce Draft Report interpretation of equity as focusing not on equality of outcomes, but on all students having equal opportunity to realise their educational potential irrespective of their individual, economic or social circumstances.

Unfortunately the draft report makes only passing reference to this opportunity to realise potential being applicable to gifted and talented students. For the needs of gifted students to be recognized, it is essential that the report address this area specifically and in adequate detail.

The needs of gifted student have long been neglected within our education systems. While much focus is placed on efforts to bridge the gap for those with special needs at the lower end of the academic scale, whether they are there because of environmental or innate factors, only a small fraction of effort and expenditure is allocated to those with special needs at the other end of the scale, where the students are also disadvantaged in terms of opportunities to meet their potential.

The term “gifted” is used by Francois Gange to describe an individual’s potential, with the term “talented” being used to describe the realization of those gifts through the impact of a range of intrinsic and environmental factors including their school education.

Experts in gifted education define the gifted cohort as being the top 10-15% of academic potential. Degrees of giftedness vary from mild to profound.

By not working, through our education systems, to maximize the potential of these gifted students, we are not only neglecting one of our nation’s greatest resources, we are potentially creating a range of problems for these young people. Overlooking any group of students with specific learning needs is inequitable and unconscionable.

The lack of gifted education training in pre-service teacher education is a huge gap in the professional development of the school workforce, as is ongoing professional development in respect of gifted education.

TAG receive regular feedback from our professional development and training sessions that attendees are now beginning to understand that this is a complex and often misunderstood field, and that the lack of adequate education provision for gifted students has very real and damaging effects on students in the long term.

The 2001 Senate Report into the Education of Gifted and Talented Children made a number of recommendations, many of which have STILL not been implemented:

better teacher training ... essential to ensure that that teachers are able to differentiate the curriculum for gifted children

TAG would point out that being able to differentiate the curriculum is an essential skill for meeting the range of individual needs, which the School Workforce Draft Report identifies as being important. In being able to differentiate the curriculum effectively, a classroom teacher’s job is potentially made easier by being able to address not only the range of levels of learning but the range of learning styles and preferences within the classroom, thus better engaging the entire range of students. Differentiation is a skill that requires specific training.

The Senate Report further identifies that

MCEETYA should expand the national reporting framework for school education to focus on not only minimum benchmarks but also high achievement targets for gifted children.

In relation to this, TAG would point out the need during teacher training to educate pre-service teachers in relation to setting high goals for gifted students with effective assessment and reporting practices. Particular emphasis will need to be placed on this in respect of the Australian Curriculum, which needs appropriate training in interpretation to use it to best cater for the needs of gifted students. Inflexible reporting systems within schools may also need to be reviewed in order to report accurately on the high achievements of gifted students.

Another of the Senate Report's key points is that

Negative attitudes and mistaken beliefs about gifted children appear to be widespread.

This is a significant area for the education of our pre-service teachers, as well as professional development for the school workforce. It is critical that our school workforce understands the difference between substantiated fact and urban mythology with respect to gifted students, in order to be able to make informed decisions about appropriate educational opportunities for them. The School Workforce Draft Report makes passing reference to the need for the workforce to recognise the scope for acceleration and modifications to curriculum, but without adequate professional learning, the need will not be recognized and implementing these interventions will not happen effectively.

Also from the Senate Report:

Teachers need to be trained to identify gifted children. Untrained teachers are more likely to identify as gifted children of the dominant culture and less likely to notice giftedness among minority or underprivileged groups.

This training should pay particular attention to the need to identify gifted children who have disadvantages such as low socio-economic status, rural isolation, physical disability or Indigenous background.

Recommendation 4 (paragraph 3.38)

Training for teachers to identify giftedness should pay particular attention to the need to identify gifted children who have disadvantages such as low socio-economic status, rural isolation, physical disability or Indigenous background.

And further, from the Senate Report

There is overwhelming research evidence that appropriate acceleration of gifted students who are socially and emotionally ready usually has highly advantageous outcomes. However willingness to use acceleration varies considerably from state to state. ...

Recommendation 6 (paragraph 3.94)

The Commonwealth should propose that MCEETYA develop a consistent policy encouraging suitable acceleration for the gifted.

School workforce professional development and pre-service teacher education needs to include the research and the benefits of acceleration, along with best practice guidelines for implementing acceleration as an intervention for gifted students.

The workforce learnings also need to encompass the benefits and implementation of like-ability grouping for gifted students, also as per recommendations from the Senate Inquiry:

Recommendation 7 (paragraph 3.110)

MCEETYA should develop a consistent policy exploring the options for ability grouping and supporting ability grouping as a way of meeting the needs of the gifted, whether in selective or comprehensive schools.

And in summary, the Senate Report identified that

Recommendation 14 (paragraph 4.67)

The Commonwealth should propose to MCEETYA that State and Territory education authorities should require, as a condition of employment, that newly graduated teachers have at least a semester unit on the special needs of gifted children in their degrees. This should include training in identification of gifted children and the pedagogy of teaching them.

And

Recommendation 15 (paragraph 4.72)

The Commonwealth should specify professional development on issues to do with giftedness as a priority in the Quality Teacher Programme.

TAG advocates strongly for the inclusion of a significant component of gifted education into all pre-service teacher education and ongoing professional development for the school workforce. As a minimum, this should include:

- characteristics and identification of gifted students
- identification of gifted underachievers, including visual spatial learners and those with dual exceptionalities or asynchronous development
- social and emotional development of gifted students
- understanding of the myths versus the facts about gifted students
- development of attitudes and beliefs that enable the lauding of academic achievements and dispelling our national hobby of cutting down tall poppies
- curriculum options for gifted students, including
 - Grade telescoping;
 - Subject acceleration;
 - Pretesting and subsequent curriculum compacting
 - Multi age groupings;
 - Concurrent enrolment
 - Grade skipping;
 - Use of mentors;
 - Enrichment of the curriculum

That so many of the recommendations of the Senate Report from 11 years ago are still not implemented is deplorable. The implications of this for the current school workforce are huge and reflect a great gap in workforce skills and ability to cater for a significant portion of the student population.

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