

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Bendigo — 20 September 2011

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#### Witness

Dr. M. Faulkner, Lecturer, Faculty of Education, La Trobe University.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, on behalf of the committee. Thank you for appearing before us. I begin by explaining the process today. We have a number of questions to ask you, and we will give you the opportunity to make a brief introduction. Everything is being recorded by Hansard, and you will have the opportunity to look at the transcript to check for any errors that may need to be corrected. All evidence at this hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege — the same privilege afforded to MPs — but anything said outside the precincts of the hearing may not be so covered. Feel free to say whatever you like in this hearing. Would you like to make your opening comments?

**Dr FAULKNER** — Just by way of introduction, since I am the first cab off the rank, as it were, this morning, I have worked at La Trobe for about 15 years, including about 10 years full time. During most of that time one of the aspects I have been teaching and researching has been the area of gifted and talented children. I am part time these days. I also work as a psychologist in private practice, and I have done that for a number of years. I worked as a psychologist in the Victorian education system and have a portfolio of various other career aspects.

As a way of starting, I was watching *Lateline* last week. Malcolm Turnbull was being interviewed by Tony Jones. The question was put to Malcolm Turnbull: ‘Do you meet Kevin Rudd?’, and with exquisite irony he said, ‘Yes, sometimes we have a cup of tea together’. The point of that, I thought, was very interesting. It is often recognised by the public that these two men are two of the most intellectually gifted individuals in the federal parliament, among a quorum of gifted individuals, and one of the things that comes from that is the need for young people to have the opportunity to mix with peers.

For many years one of the things I have heard from teachers is that there is a very strong focus on the way they look at things regarding their pupils with respect to peers. They tend to see things in terms of a chronological peer group. In adult life we do not restrict ourselves to a peer group which is bound by 12 months. We have friends and we have colleagues of different ages, stages and interests et cetera.

When I talk about peer group I always like to add an ‘s’. Peer groups are very important, and they are very important for the gifted and talented in particular. There are many entrees from that that we can proceed from in terms of the sorts of schooling that is being provided in systems, such as the Select Entry Accelerated Learning (SEAL) Program that we have in Victoria, which has been expanded over recent years.

We can look at the program we were running at La Trobe here in Bendigo for kids across regional and rural Victoria and the fact that their parents would bring them three or four hours to our program one or two days a year just for the workshops we provide for them. We could see some of these kids interact with peers — kids from small groups. Five, six or seven years ago, I remember sitting in a group and just watching a group of 10-year-olds interacting and perhaps for the first time being challenged by an intellectual peer. I saw the frisson that goes with that sort of experience. It is very exciting. Most of the kids who have come to our program have enjoyed the day, and they have come back.

**The CHAIR** — We might start by specifically looking at the Able Learners’ Enrichment Program. The committee is aware that you and Ms Lyons run the Able Learners’ Enrichment Program, and Ms Lyons will be giving evidence to the committee a little later this morning. Firstly, how do you decide what workshops and programs will be provided as part of the Able Learners’ Enrichment Program? How do you select tutors to host the workshops? And how do you decide what programs and what tutors?

**Dr FAULKNER** — I will let Pam complete the details, but I guess it is through searching for appropriate people who would be appealing to a group of bright kids aged, say, 9 to 11. They tend to be a mix of community teachers, academics, a few teachers from the school systems and people who have a passion in some area of artistic flourish. For example, we have had David Kennedy, who was both the state and then the federal member, who retired some years ago, as a participant in our program for, I think, 10 years. He runs a program on Latin. He introduces kids to ancient language. He does it with panache and enthusiasm, which takes kids into a different space. So it is really that sort of thing.

How are they selected? They are selected on the basis, almost, of self-nomination — that is, by their schools or mainly their parents — and there is quite a network of people on Pam’s database. We simply send out the information each year, and parents will decide, or sometimes the school decides, that it would be good if this particular kid went along to it. We do not have a selection process.

**The CHAIR** — What about in terms of people delivering on the programs? Are bachelor of education and master of education students used to deliver the program?

**Dr FAULKNER** — In the last three or four years of the program, with the exception of the last two years, because I am no longer teaching in the area of gifted and talented — and that is another story — I have involved them in teaching these kids for a two-and-a-half-hour workshop. There were small groups of 15 students from all over, and I usually got my Bachelor of Education and Master of Education students to work in teams of 2 or 3. This was an experiential basis for these young beginning teachers, because one of the things that is very important — and this goes to the centre of pre-service and in-service teacher education — is the attitudes that individuals have towards the gifted and talented. In many cases teachers can be quite antithetical to that view.

The broad research evidence suggests that teachers are good at identifying children who are gifted and talented from, I guess you would call it, mainstream groups in the wider society, but they are certainly less able to identify other kids from a range of backgrounds. There are different ways of classifying gifted and talented children, and the more conforming, perhaps perfectionist and anxious kids, are the ones who are easily identified. However, of those kids who are, I will call them, from 'the underground' gifted students — those who deny they have any attributes; those who have a compulsiveness to attend to or to be similar to their age peer group, for whatever reason; others who have perhaps quite challenging behaviour, and the challenging behaviour becomes the dominant thing that is seen by the teachers while they do not see the subterranean gifts and potentials the student has; and kids who come from a second-language background — some will find their way through, but others from a disadvantaged background, and this of course includes some from rural and remote areas of the state, are less seen.

In research I have done over a number of different times, when seeking assistance from schools or principals they may say, 'We do not have any gifted children here', but of course giftedness is a fluctuating definition. How do you define it? That is an issue in itself, but if a person is not recognising that there are unusual children in a body of 200 or 700 children, that means they are not looking for it, so they do not see it. That is what typically occurs.

Can I give you an illustration briefly? Last year I was invited to do an assessment in my capacity as a psychologist at a school in this region in relation to a boy who had been suspected of having an Asperger's condition, but he was also seen by his parents as very bright. They wanted the best transition. I went along to the preschool and observed him. He was a bit withdrawn, but when I got talking with him I found we could engage in a mathematical conversation because he had this fascination with his maths, so he could tell me all sorts of interesting facts. I can read this here — just simple facts that you might not expect of a barely five-year-old child, such as 10 000 times 10 000. I gave him the question: 'Which number is bigger — 16 by 7 or 7 by 16?', and he said, '112. They are the same'.

So that was one aspect that was well recognised, but when we got him to do some reading testing, we found that he was also two, three or four years in advance, depending, in terms of accuracy, in terms of fluency and in terms of comprehension. The preschool teachers were not seeing that, and the beginning teachers were not seeing that. I have to say that, fortunately in this case, I think the transition that was made, with the open-mindedness of the principal, the class teacher and the school, has made this a very good beginning. However, you see instances where it is not like that, and we would like to replicate more of that good practice.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Michael, I think in many ways you have answered some of these questions, but for the record I will go over it again. What specific training in gifted education should be provided to pre-service teachers? We note in your submission that you say there should be at least one unit undertaken.

**Dr FAULKNER** — Yes. The 2001 Commonwealth government inquiry into the education of gifted students suggested that pre-teacher education should have one semester unit as a minimum and that the evidence was that across Australia that was not the case. Now, in a four-year teacher training program, it is the same as schooling; there is a crowded curriculum and all sorts of players want to put their bit into it. We have had that at La Trobe for some years — that is, La Trobe Bendigo. We have had that one semester, and when I started for the first four years we had two semester units. They were not compulsory; they were electives. That is another issue. But more recently, as the course has evolved, changed, taken a different shape to meet new conditions, there is no individual semester unit on gifted and talented children, and I think that is unfortunate. This is not unusual in university pre-service teacher education elsewhere.

**Ms TIERNEY** — We have been led to understand that. Your submission also suggests that teachers should be provided with more opportunities to undertake professional learning and gifted education. What sort of professional learning should be provided to teachers to enable them to cater for gifted students, and how can teachers and schools be encouraged to undertake professional learning in gifted education?

**Dr FAULKNER** — That is a difficult question. Yes, I think one of the best learnings in a sense for teachers is the ways in which they can learn from other teachers; so having capacity for teachers to learn, visit other schools, for speakers to come from other schools to talk about what they are doing in this area I think is a primary way that that can happen. I will put my university hat on; I think there is also a case for more of a focus in, say, masters programs where we can find ways to invite — and this is not just for gifted education — people to come in and work with the university staff on areas of interest and generate perhaps a minor research project that has an impact upon what they do, so having perhaps an action research orientation to the work that is done. I think they would be the main things.

Interestingly, the week before last the Victorian gifted and talented association conference, which returns every two years, was in Melbourne, and I think they had 120 delegates. If you look at the number of government school delegates, it would be very small indeed. I am not sure really, but I suspect — —

**Ms LYONS** — Three.

**Dr FAULKNER** — Three. I would have thought less than 10 per cent. That is a serious issue, and it is an issue for that association because it is a voluntary association, but there was a lot of good material that was presented at that conference that runs every two years. It is not the only conference of that sort. I suppose it is perhaps in Victoria, but it was overwhelmingly attended by independent school personnel and a sprinkling of academics.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Can I ask a further question and in an area that you have already dealt with, but again for the record it is important, and it is of particular interest to me. It concerns the underrepresentation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, students from rural and regional Victoria and indigenous students who do not really seem to get a look in when it comes to gifted and talented students. What sort of professional development can we narrow in on, particularly for rural and regional kids, with respect to gifted education and teaching? What can be done to improve professional development in gifted education for teachers in rural and regional Victoria?

**Dr FAULKNER** — One of the things structurally that is being done is the expansion of the SEAL school arrangements. They have expanded into regional Victoria, in the last 10 to 12 or 15 years, with the exception of this region. This region stands out as being anomalous in that sense: it has no SEAL schools — for example, Gippsland has three or four. I am not sure how the region is going to be encouraged to look at the value of having alternative arrangements. The SEAL schools provide a different sort of focus, in much the same way as the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra provides a focus. Most Australians have heard of that. After all, it was estimated that it costs \$40 million in investment to achieve one Australian gold medal, but we do not invest to that degree, it seems to me, in our intellectual and artistic talent across the country. Looking for ways to expand that program I believe was researched by the people at Monash University about three or four years ago, and they found a number of very good indicators of what the program was doing.

Moving to the urban areas, I used to visit Box Hill High School a few years ago and that is one of the schools under that program. Its intake comes from something like 40 feeder schools from across Melbourne, so it became a magnet for children who were certainly very able and some of whom who had not had very pleasant lives in their home school. Sometimes bullying was implicated. To see them flourish in that sort of environment is very important and an exciting observation.

Of course, we have the tyranny of distance in the regional areas, but there are technologies that can be used to link schools and to assist schools. If we are looking for models internationally, I suggest that we could look at Iowa in the USA. I had some sabbatical leave there seven or eight years ago, and what the Belin-Blank Center at the University of Iowa was doing there at the university with the state department of education was quite astounding. I think the developments have continued, and Iowa is predominantly a rural and regional area.

Looking at a very different, you might say, cultural political milieu, I would like to mention Finland. Australia is not Finland, but it is interesting that Victoria and Finland have a similar population. Finland is where

educators of all types visit, almost as a pilgrimage. Why? Because of the results they get in literacy, in numeracy, in science education and development which are measured by the OECD's international PISA studies. There is also the multilingual aspect of their education. But then if you look outside that, at the creative aspect, Finland, compared on a per capita basis with Australia, exceeds Australia by the number of patents that are put through.

**The CHAIR** — Are you aware if they have any specific programs that could be modelled?

**Dr FAULKNER** — Yes, that is a very interesting aspect. One of the aspects of their schooling system is that, as I understand it, the teachers are highly educated; they all must have a masters degree first of all. They have the equivalent of one specialist teacher to every six classroom teachers, but they make that specialist teacher inclusive in the sense that 30 per cent of the student population will have some dealings with the special needs teacher. The special needs teacher is not just the special needs teacher who deals with those who have a disability. It is the gifted and talented, it is the artistically able. This person weaves their way through the school and works closely in a team capacity with the classroom teachers.

Finland is not recognised as a leader in gifted education in a sense, but if you are looking across the board, one of the things that stands out when comparing Finland with Australia is the evenness of performance across schools and regions. Finland's rural population is, I think, about 40 per cent; ours is 8 per cent. We have much more variability in terms of urban and regional and rural year 12 performance et cetera. It seems not to be the case in Finland.

**The CHAIR** — Extrapolating that a little bit further, you mentioned the Finland model that is keeping kids within the school system and having a specialist within the school, compared to what we are doing here with, say, SEAL programs and specialist schools. What model would you advocate here based on the knowledge and work that you have done?

**Dr FAULKNER** — We have to be pragmatic, and while I might have an admiration for some aspects of the Finnish society, we have to look at what is here. There is the idea of the SEAL schools. The Western Australian system has a process of identifying early achievers at grade 1 or 2 and then giving them opportunities on a district basis to have enrichment on a fortnightly basis, or something like that. Part of that is the identification. We identify those who have a significant disability and we make provision for them, but it is assumed that because a child is intellectually gifted, that means they will get through. That is not the case.

**The CHAIR** — Nazih has a question which links to what were talking about in terms of the research.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Yes. I think he has already started to cover it. It has been suggested to the committee that there is limited research in Australia on gifted education. If you agree with this, what can be done to encourage and develop academic discussion on gifted education in Australia? Secondly, what is the best way to ensure that schools, teachers and families of gifted students have access to research findings and information on gifted education?

**Dr FAULKNER** — That is a big question because it deals with different sectors. I have no stake in this any more because I am on the verge of retirement, but it seems to me that we need to find ways to establish better links between some schools and universities with a research focus. This means giving some currency to this area we are looking at of how can we best — I use the word 'harvest' which is not a bad term — identify, nurture and then harvest the talent we have in our community in our schools. That would be one. To have teachers who have completed a masters degree in gifted and talented students, much the same as in the area of disabilities — and of course they are not necessarily mutually exclusive areas; there is overlap — would be one way.

We need to find better ways of support. I am not familiar intimately with any of the SEAL schools, but as new schools come on line, they need support to build their programs — and some of the support money needs to come from the universities and the other schools that are further down the track. That practically needs some time or money allocation to enable those sorts of things to happen.

**Mr CRISP** — The committee understands that there are a number of approaches teachers can use when catering for gifted students, such as personalised learning, curriculum telescoping and acceleration. What educational methods and approaches are the most effective for teachers to meet the needs of gifted students?

**Dr FAULKNER** — One of the challenges with the term ‘gifted and talented’, it is a very generalist concept, and hidden within that are so many diversities. I like the terms Eddie Braggett, an Australian researcher, used some years ago — that is: all students need cultural enrichment, training in skills and thinking processes; able students need appropriate enrichment, less time on routines, opportunities for faster learning; highly able students require extension and specialised programs; outstanding students require acceleration, mentors, special programs, classes and schools; exceptionally able students require highly individual programs, acceleration and mentors. There is, if you like, a continuum of different forms offering provision, depending on the student.

**The CHAIR** — Just elaborating on that, what sorts of mentors are you specifically referring to?

**Dr FAULKNER** — They could take many forms. They could take the form of retired folk who have been teachers or have an interest in a particular area that can be hooked in with a particular student. It can be with someone at university. There was a program that I was not involved in, but one of my colleagues was involved with mentoring about 10 or 12 years ago between the senior secondary college here, some students and a few lecturers at the university.

**The CHAIR** — Of peer-to-peer-type?

**Dr FAULKNER** — A few lecturers at the university, yes. It can take many forms, but most able students do need exposure to ideas and people that can challenge them.

**Ms TIERNEY** — In your submission you make some suggestions for policy development in the area of gifted education. What kind of policy or other guidance is needed on gifted education? Should this policy or guidance be at the school, state or federal level?

**Dr FAULKNER** — That is a really big issue. I am currently on a small New South Wales Department of Education committee that is reviewing the provision of school counselling services — that is, psychologists in schools. In terms of the education of teachers, there is a need to give a little bit more focus for this particular group who are also servicing the schools in Victoria. The overwhelming experience, I think, for most of those people would be that they are not getting much exposure to referrals of children who are gifted and talented, or if they are, they go to the bottom of the referral list and never get attended to. That is my experience in listening to parents. They have said, ‘I could not get any assistance from the psychologists in the schools’.

Policy development has to happen. Think of a state level. There are developments across all states that are occurring in this area. I have mentioned the development in Queensland — they did a review on gifted education in 2005. Out of that has come The Clever State that they are now marketing around as they try to look at ways to build lighthouse schools, I think, up the coast, which can serve as schools that are in the early years, supported with additional funding and with the expectation that they would share their knowledge in the education of gifted and talented students. They were not like the SEAL schools — it is a different arrangement — but they would share their expertise with a number of other surrounding schools, say, two years down the track. That is one model.

**The CHAIR** — Looking at the other states, which state do you think has started to get it together when it comes to a policy framework that could then reflect and move down to the school system?

**Dr FAULKNER** — I think each state is doing things differently, and we can learn from each. In Queensland the idea of having a support group for a gifted and talented student who has been identified with the prospect of acceleration seems good sense. The other way it is done usually is often with a sense of resistance. The school might say, ‘Okay, we will give him or her a try and we will just see how it goes’, but putting in place some support and accountability mechanism to support those people — the receiving class teachers et cetera — is better assured for success over a 12-month or two-year period. In Western Australia I have mentioned early identification and opportunities. New South Wales has a range of selective schools, but of course they are all in Sydney, so that does not help the rest of the state.

**Mr CRISP** — Your submission suggests that negative attitudes to giftedness can exist among schools, teachers, parents and the wider community.

**Dr FAULKNER** — Yes.

**Mr CRISP** — What can be done to address and improve attitudes to giftedness, particularly in rural and regional areas?

**Dr FAULKNER** — My experience is the courses that I have run mainly — the pre-service course and sometimes postgraduate courses where I get experienced teachers in. I remember when I started at La Trobe 15 years ago. I had a teacher come in with 20 or 22 years experience. She said, ‘The reason I am doing this course is not because it is available, but because I know nothing about gifted students. I hope I never come across one, because he or she would scare the hell out of me’. That was her entry attitude, and it was lovely that she was so honest. But at the end of the program she had lost her anxiety about gifted and talented kids, and retrospectively had started to identify kids that had come under her supervision in earlier years. I thought that was a win. That is one of the ways we can do that.

It is interesting, looking at attitudes, to look at some research done in New South Wales a few years ago — 10 years ago now. The researchers surveyed pre-service teachers in primary and secondary training programs — 1300, 1500 or something like that. They provided them with little identikits of students. They said, ‘Can you say which of these students you would prefer to have in your class?’. The identikits were framed around gender, being ‘average’ or ‘very bright’ or ‘gifted’. The other dimension was ‘studious’ or ‘non-studious’. The ones that came at the bottom of the poll for the primary teachers were the gifted studious males and the gifted studious females. It was not quite the same in secondary, but essentially the students who were considered to be average were seen as being the most preferred student — average and generally non-studious. That is an interesting comment on our wider culture.

Those are the attitudes of the people coming from the wider community into teaching. We have to start to shift that. It has been my experience that of the students who would do the gifted and talented program, we would get about 25 or 30 of the total intake, the total year cohort, which would be about 180 or 200, and there is the need in schools for specialties in PE, music and creative arts, and for the students who have particular disabilities of course. That would be my response.

**The CHAIR** — The committee has heard that there are limited opportunities for extracurricular activities and cultural activities for gifted students in rural and regional areas. How important do you think it is for these students to access the activities? What ideas do you have to be able to provide these sorts of activities to rural and regional students in Victoria?

**Dr FAULKNER** — There are things that schools do already, like the Tournament of the Minds program. There are other programs that give students an opportunity to work in ways outside the usual curriculums. There are other programs in other states similar to the programs we run, but that are much more expensive. The University of Sydney, which is the primary institution that has researched gifted and talented education and has done an enormous amount of work in the area of teacher education in that state and beyond, has a cost-recovery basis on which they work, and maybe that is a reality — I suppose it is the reality for all universities these days, too.

We have tried to keep it low cost. The view we have had is that it gives them a different view of the world, a different view of themselves perhaps, just by coming down to one or two workshops, and there is often follow through. Pam will give you much more of the detail. Sometimes important friendships are made between kids in quite different areas of regional and rural Victoria. That support network is very important for those young people. They need to be exposed to peer groups — interest, ability as well as chronological peers.

**Ms TIERNEY** — I am also interested in how we can break down the notions of elitism, particularly in terms of selective entry schools. We heard some evidence from John Monash secondary, where one of the things they do is to have a five-week program when rural and regional kids are billeted by the parents, families of students, for example, and then there is follow-up, teleconferencing et cetera. The principal has also undertaken to personally mentor, at the school, a Koori kid who is gifted, and then that unlocks a lot of avenues in terms of indigenous education more generally. It is also seen as a beacon for other indigenous children, and a number of other things. It has taken its social responsibility to the wider community quite seriously. I wonder what your views are on this, or if you have other views with respect to selective entry schools playing more of a role in attracting and connecting with the students who are not represented in the system as well as they should be.

**Dr FAULKNER** — On face value that sounds an admirable program that John Monash Science School has developed. Certainly for regional and rural, and particularly the rural, often it is not the lack of opportunities, it is the tyranny of distance physically. It is just a wider, broadening experience for those young people to spend some time at another school.

If I can be a little biographical for the moment, it was another era, but I went to school at Wonthaggi High School — higher elementary school. The intake there was about 200 in year 7, and I think about 2 or 3 matriculated. I matriculated but not at that school. I did what others did in year 11: I failed, and then my father, who was a teacher, transferred to another school in another region. I went to Shepparton and completed a very good year 11 and 12, but it was the context of the school and the expectations and a whole set of assumptions that were, at that time, central to that. It just opened my eyes about how possibilities could be other than what I had experienced. I think that is one of the things that comes from this Monash initiative, it seems to me. It is not dissimilar to the sort of initiative we have had with the able learners' program.

There is a bit of an allegorical story we sometimes tell about the ALEP. Early in that program we had a seven-year-old finish a workshop. Walking out, he and his mother ran into someone they knew, and there was a little discussion. This person said to the seven-year-old, 'If you keep working away and studying, one day you might go to university and attend classes here'. The seven-year-old pulled himself up to his full height and said, 'I already do', and off he went. He had a different sense of himself to the day before, and I think that is important — different possibilities.

**The CHAIR** — That is a nice place to finish. Thank you very much for presenting to us today. The evidence you have given us has been very helpful.

**Witness withdrew.**