

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Bendigo — 20 September 2011

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Ms P. Lyons, Coordinator, Able Learners' Enrichment Program, La Trobe University.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the hearing. As you know, the committee is looking at gifted and talented students' programs that currently exist and opportunities for advancing in this area. I have to point out a couple of things. Firstly, today's hearing will be recorded by Hansard. You will be given the opportunity to look at the transcript and fix any errors that need to be fixed. Also, your evidence is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege. It is the same parliamentary privilege that MPs are afforded. Anything you say in the room is covered by that; anything you say outside it is not. Do you want to make an opening statement?

Ms LYONS — I will just make a brief one.

The CHAIR — Yes, brief, if you could.

Ms LYONS — As background so you know where I am coming from, in 1998 I was asked by one of the people in head office in Melbourne, who was part of the group running the gifted education program then, to run a parent support group which was attached to one of the Bright Futures teacher cluster groups. I have been working with Bright Futures since then, which is what you have on the submission. How Bright Futures was set up is probably the best model you have, because there were teacher cluster groups all across the state, and there was PD being run throughout the regions, rather than as it is at the moment, where pretty much the VAGTC is running professional development in Melbourne. They do not come out here.

As part of the Able Learners' Enrichment Program, as well as working with children I have run mornings with guest speakers talking to the parents to inform them of what is happening. I have also had two intensives for teachers. Unlike at the VAGTC conference two weeks ago, where everyone gets, if they are lucky, an hour or an hour and a quarter listening to one of the speakers, I got someone up for two days and got the teachers in to have an intensive. I had Professor John Geake from Oxford — who died just recently — and Karen Rogers, who was a visiting instructor at the University of New South Wales but comes from the United States. I had both of them on at different times for two solid days.

Because I had it at Bendigo, teachers came in from the regional areas, and they got to do in-depth investigation. One of them was on cognitive neuroscience and the other was on acceleration. I did not get a brilliant turnout. I was not charging very much for it because I was trying to keep it within the means of regional schools that do not have much funding for replacement teachers. There were probably 50, 60 or 70 teachers coming to those, but it was something more. I looked at the list of the people we had at the VAGTC conference, and there were very few regional people coming down for it.

The CHAIR — How many students participate in the Able Learners' Enrichment Program, and how do parents and students find out about the program?

Ms LYONS — Generally I have been running it in July. We have had up to 300 students. This year it is in September — it is actually next week. We do not have as many students coming in September. How it is run depends on my ability to sustain it, and 12 months ago I drove into a tree, so I did not have quite the energy at the beginning of the year to get it up and running in July, which is why people who were expecting July did not come in September.

I have a mailing list I have built up over the years. I think I have been maintaining it since about 2001. I also send out the information to all of the schools in the Loddon Mallee region, Sandhurst diocese, the top end of Melbourne diocese and a few odd schools that I have had students from before. I have teachers on the mailing list from schools that have specifically asked me to keep them on the mailing list. I have some enrolments from Epsom Primary School that have specifically come from a teacher at that school.

The CHAIR — That is good. In terms of children who participate in the program, we have heard that they largely self-select or the families self-select. In your experience are parents skilled in identifying high academic ability in their children, and do some children who participate in the program ever struggle with the difficulty level of some of the workshops? Are they getting there or do the parents think they are gifted, but in fact they are not?

Ms LYONS — Generally, yes, the parents are picking it. They know what they are doing. I have not had any student come through who has been struggling with the concepts. What usually happens is they get excited. As Michael was saying, they meet like minds. So, yes, the parents do know, because it is something you can tell when the children are little; they are developmentally advanced. The parents know.

The CHAIR — That is a good answer. It is what I was looking for.

Ms TIERNEY — In your submission you talk about the particular emotional and social characteristics of gifted children. For the record can you indicate exactly what those characteristics are in your view and from your experience, and what sort of support should be available in the schools to support those gifted children and meet their needs?

Ms LYONS — They tend to be emotionally sensitive. They can have advanced moral outlooks. They will be the child who, if the teacher is telling off someone else in the class, will get upset or decide it is not fair. I was working at a school in Melbourne, where one of the students decided that the teacher was treating a number of the other students in the class unfairly, so he instituted a strike for that class and said he wanted to see the principal and have a discussion about it with the principal because of the unfairness of the teacher. Luckily the principal respected him, supported that, had a discussion and cleared up everything. They have the strength of character to go on with that if they have support from their families.

They will be the little children who will cry for what appears to be no apparent reason — ‘Why are you crying? Grow up. You can’t cry’. They are so sensitive, and they have so much empathy with other children and other things. They will know if the teacher is not well and will come and pat their backs and make them feel better.

Teachers need to have an understanding that there is that difference. That is why I like the Bright Futures program, because the teachers could come together in the cluster groups and discuss things. A few of the cluster groups had parent groups with them, and they had access to the PD that had the social and emotional sides included in it. It is something that, more than anything, has to be experienced to be understood. That is why for our pre-service teachers, doing the workshops in the Able Learners’ Enrichment Program was really good, because they got a room full of gifted students, they got to see them interacting and they got to talk to them, rather than going into a classroom where there may be one or two, and they are supposed to teach the whole class. In our program they get to have fun with the kids and get to know who they are.

It is sad we do not have anyone taking those subjects anymore. I do not know if I wrote this in my submission, but the only way you are going to get teachers doing pre-service gifted is to get the VIT to mandate that they have to have at least one unit of gifted education to get teacher registration. In the end it is the VIT that approves the education courses, and if they do not care if you are doing gifted education, it is not going to be put in the course. Something else is going to be put in it. That is what has happened here — we have lost our undergraduate subjects in gifted.

Mr CRISP — What kind of support information do parents of gifted children need, and how should this support and information be provided? That is part of that able learners’ program you have.

Ms LYONS — I have selected speakers for the parents to come along in the mornings so that they learn about the social and emotional aspects, academic provision and acceleration. Basically they learn about what the teachers need to know as well, but it is also about talking to other parents. A big part of the able learners’ program is for parents who have come in from long distances to get to talk to other parents so that they can see that their children are not as different as they would look if they were in a normal school.

It is really important for the parents to understand that more than the academic provision is the social and emotional aspect of it, because often — I have a degree in genetics — it is inherited. So if the children are like that, the parents are like that, and the parents need the understanding of what the advanced development — the social and emotional — aspects are, because they then have to understand themselves. When I was running a support group in Melbourne I got a lot of calls from parents in the western suburbs who said, ‘School was boring’; ‘I left school at 15 and got an apprenticeship’. All the social and emotional characteristics, the advanced development things, the parents had actually displayed. But because they did not fit into school and obviously were not gifted, where did these children come from? Educating the parents helps the parents then talk to the children and support them through school.

Mr CRISP — Pam, I am going to build on that a little bit more by looking at regional students. What programs or initiatives should be introduced to gifted students in primary schools in rural and regional Victoria?

Ms LYONS — They do not necessarily need specific programs. At the end of the VAGTC conference — I think you were still there — Maureen Neihart asked whether, if we did differentiated curricula to every student

in the school, we needed gifted education. The answer is, no, we don't if we actually cater for each individual child, specifically for their needs. Let's have lots of money and have an individual program for each child. That would be the ideal. Taking children out for a specific program leads to inclusion and exclusion. Where do you draw the line as to who actually gets in it?

If you let the child work at their own pace and go through the curriculum and say, 'I've finished that; I'll do something else', they can effectively accelerate themselves in the class. Let them go off to the next level class: 'Right; I'm really good at maths. I've finished all grade 4 maths. Can I go into the grade 5 maths class to sit with the grade 5 kids and do maths?'. 'It sounds good to me. You go off with the grade 5s'. To have a flexible school is the ideal. If someone is really slow at a particular subject, you do not make it a problem so they have to go down a class and sit with the children who are at that level. You have a flow of students, and no-one is picked out or isolated by someone saying, 'You're special because you're gifted'. The parents of the children are not going to be standing there going, 'Your children have got this; why haven't we? We are going to complain'. Does that make sense? That is my ideal.

Mr CRISP — Then we move into secondary schools. What should be provided for gifted secondary students in rural and regional Victoria? We have talked about primary, now I want to talk about secondary.

Ms LYONS — Basically the same: you let them go through at their own pace. My son is sitting in year 10 maths at the moment, and for some reason the school has decided that there is a cohort of girls who would behave better if they were put in the advanced maths class, so he has to sit and wait for the rest of them to catch up. If he was allowed to go at his own pace, he would have finished year 11 maths already. Again, it is the flexibility of the subject delivery. If they finish something, they do something else. I did model solar vehicles with a number of schools. They went out and did model solar vehicles. I think it is run through engineering at Monash. That was good; that gave them an outlet. But you cannot say, 'We have to do this specific thing, and it is going to work for all children.'

Mr CRISP — Do you have a view on vertical timetabling in secondary schools?

Ms LYONS — That would be wonderful, yes, because then the children can actually go wherever they are supposed to be.

The CHAIR — In addition to what you just said, do you support the SEAL model?

Ms LYONS — Yes.

The CHAIR — Why?

Ms LYONS — Because it is the best that they can do at the moment. SEAL does not suit everyone; the selection criteria for the SEAL do not actually suit everyone. If we could get vertical timetabling in schools, then we would not have to worry about the program for selection into a school. Up here we cannot access SEAL programs anyway; you are stuck with what you get. The Bendigo education model was supposed to have kind of vertical flexibility, but again that depended on the attitudes and opinions of the particular principal at the secondary school rather than being from an outside perspective. So if someone does not believe in vertical timetabling and everyone has to stay with their age peers, that is what is going to happen. It is definitely a change of attitude. But if you could bring in vertical timetabling at secondary schools and primary schools, you would then be catering for each student's individual needs.

Mr ELASMAR — Your submission says that negative attitudes and misconceptions about giftedness are prevalent and that education and awareness about the characteristics and needs of gifted students is the key to overcoming these attitudes and perceptions. What kind of education should be provided to principals and teachers to increase their understanding of the characteristics of gifted students, and how would such an education program be delivered?

Ms LYONS — Funding would be a good start so the teachers and principals can get out of the schools and go to something. The VAGTC does really good professional development, and the teachers who go along to that have had attitudes change. But they are already halfway there because they are going to something that has 'gifted' in it. Who you need to catch are the ones who are not interested and do not believe in it. Again the VIT mandate is that you have to do a certain amount of PD for the five years to maintain your registration — do

something in gifted education. It cannot be a voluntary thing because some people are not going to volunteer. If you do not believe they exist, why would you go and do PD in something that is mythical?

Mr ELASMAR — How can understanding of giftedness be improved in the wider community to overcome negative attitudes to giftedness? Is there any way we can help the community?

Ms LYONS — Any way we can do it? It depends how it is viewed, because the wider community appreciates its gifted artists and sportsmen, and we pay footballers — how much do we pay footballers now?

Ms TIERNEY — Not enough, obviously.

Ms LYONS — Yes, that is right. At one of the workshops for the Able Learners' Enrichment Program — for the third year in a row — I had a friend who is a brilliant singer/songwriter who tours internationally and does songwriting. I now have a different cohort; normally it is more academic, but I have children who want to do songwriting. At the end of it the kids produced songs. That is already recognised. The attitude problem is with academic giftedness, because everyone can achieve at school, so no-one can be better. How you change that attitude, I do not know. This is why you go to conferences. I have been going to conferences for over 10 years now. You sit there going, 'Same again'. I do not know the answer to that one — a magic wand: ding!

Ms TIERNEY — What challenges do teachers in rural and regional Victoria face in accessing quality professional development in the area of gifted education?

Ms LYONS — That is distance. For the intensives that I did I got teachers from a distance of 2 to 3 hours drive. As well as that, they cannot come down in the morning and go home in the evening; they have to stay here. The school needs money to replace them for two days, pay for their accommodation and travel. Then they could get here. Unfortunately this is all that is happening up here, and there are pockets of PD depending on where you are. The majority of the stuff is happening in Melbourne, so that is even harder to get to.

Ms TIERNEY — What are the other pockets across the state? There are some in the Latrobe Valley, aren't there?

Ms LYONS — Some in Latrobe Valley. I think Margaret Plunkett is doing things. I got an email from a parent in Bairnsdale saying they want to start something down there, but they want to know if I can travel down there. I am going to have to talk to him. If I tell them how to set it up there and get them in contact with Margaret — but then Bairnsdale is still a fair way from Churchill.

Ms TIERNEY — And nothing in western Victoria?

Ms LYONS — No, there is nothing. It is only if people travel to give it to them.

Mr CRISP — How important is it for gifted students to be able to access suitable cultural and extracurricular enrichment activities?

Ms LYONS — As important as it is for anybody.

Mr CRISP — Building on that, what should be done to improve those extracurricular and cultural enrichment activities for gifted students who live in regional Victoria?

Ms LYONS — What do you mean by cultural?

Mr CRISP — I guess it is cultural and social as well.

Ms RISELEY — It is things like libraries, theatres and museums.

Ms LYONS — In that respect gifted students are no different to any other regional student. Whatever is offered — libraries, arts — is sitting there. You have libraries in regional areas, you have arts and you have theatre groups and things. Most of the problems with the children are actually about the support in schools. Extracurricular things are sitting there.

Mr ELASMAR — In your submission you also recommend policy development in gifted education. What kind of policy or other guidance is needed, and should this policy guidance be at the school, state or federal level?

Ms LYONS — At the moment, state is the best we can do. Federal tried, but considering that we have political infighting and funding issues — and I am not going to talk to you, because you are the wrong party that is in government — statewide you are going to have a better chance of getting it in. The Bright Futures policy was the best that was done — if you look at what I have written; I did a historical piece — because that got into the regional areas.

The CHAIR — As you said, that again is mainly because of the support cluster network.

Ms LYONS — Yes.

The CHAIR — What other things do you think are important to include as part of a policy framework? What about teacher education?

Ms LYONS — Teacher education, yes. I take it you mean pre-service levels. Yes, that goes along with the VIT mandating a pre-service subject for registration. The Gagné model sitting up on your website. That is where Bright Futures fell down, because it gave teachers a selection of models — ‘Which one do I believe in this week?’. The Gagné model is actually the easiest. The VAGTC does a lot of PD with that because it is the easiest to understand. One model does not confuse teachers; they do not have to pick what they happen to believe in. The cluster groups — there was PD within them in the region, so the teachers did not have to travel. Even in the VAGTC PD — we have it mostly in the eastern suburbs. It is too hard for people in the western suburbs to get to it after school. It is the cluster groups that work the best, but they had an overarching policy that came from the government, and it had a section in town that was the support group.

The CHAIR — Are you happy with the term ‘gifted and talented’? There have been other suggestions going back, as we said before, with references to that as being seen as elitist. Would you look at changing that, or would you say that it is what it is?

Ms LYONS — It is what it is. ‘Gifted and talented’ is a problem. If you look at Gagné’s model, the ‘gifted’ bit is what you are starting with — what your potential is — and if you get support and encouragement, it develops into talents. You are not saying that someone is gifted but someone else is only talented. Because it has a genetic basis, you are born with it. If you put anyone in a situation where whatever they are born with is developed — that way also gets out of the elitist bit. If you are developing everyone’s — we are all born with something. People even say, ‘Everyone has a gift’. Fine, everyone has a gift because they are born with something, but if you develop them and give them enough support, some people’s gifts develop into much better talents. We have rocket science; we have engineers.

The CHAIR — Your submission talks about how there is a perception that schools in disadvantaged areas are unlikely to have gifted students. How do you dispel that by having the proper testing to identify some of these kids who are slipping through and not being identified?

Ms LYONS — If you can get some kind of testing of them, like a screening-in, yes, you can show that there are children who are gifted and whom teachers are not picking up. There is a school somewhere around here where a teacher has told me every year, ‘No, we don’t have any, because all the families with gifted children move out of town’. So you are not going to be able to get into that school and be able to do testing, because they have all moved. If you have a principal who is interested, you can identify them.

I am going to be doing some teaching west of Maldon, and I went to talk to them the other day. They want to do something with their high-achieving secondary students. They have a gifted coordinator in their primary schools, and normally you would not think that would be happening in this particular town, but it is the attitude of the schools and the principal. You cannot walk in and say, ‘Right; I am going to test all your students and prove that you have these gifted kids there’. It has to happen from the education and interest of the school leadership.

The CHAIR — Getting back to your particular program, the able learners’ program, how transferable do you think the program is to utilise, say, as a model in other parts across the state, and if that was to be picked up

and we said, 'Yes, we want to replicate that in other areas', what you think some of the challenges would be in replicating the model we currently have?

Ms LYONS — It is very much able to be replicated. The challenge is funding it. I keep the cost as low as possible so that people who are travelling 4 or 5 hours and have to stay here with family can afford it, but at the same time you cannot have it free, because you need to be able to pay the presenters. I have people who are convinced that a bottle of wine and some nice chocolates from Maldon is really good reimbursement for playing with the gifted children. David Kennedy does that — he loves it — but there are other people I have had to get in whom I have had to pay because they are professionals. You cannot say, 'We're doing it for free. I know this is your business, but we are going to do it for free'. We got a Telstra grant for it, and part of that was that it had to be self-sustaining. I was able to do that, but to transfer it somewhere else it needs funding so that you have a base there to be able to pay the presenters, basically.

The CHAIR — What is the participant cost?

Ms LYONS — This year I am charging \$45 for the day and \$25 if they only come a half-day. It is very cheap, but I have had families with four children who all have to come down from Finley. One of the presenters has been coming for a number of years. She is coming up from Lara, and her children have come up through the program. She is now teaching. Her children are old enough. I have a lovely woman from Boort who has been on family leave. She is now back teaching, but her children have all grown up, so she has been presenting as well. Her children are old enough, so they do presentations as well. They all join in together, and because the children have grown up through the program they do not mind doing it for wine and chocolates. So it depends on the mix, but in saying that, to sustain it you need money because volunteers lose energy and move on to something else.

The CHAIR — Pam, that concludes our questions. I want to thank you for appearing before the committee and wish you well with your upcoming group that you have in a few weeks, is it?

Ms LYONS — Next week.

The CHAIR — Good luck, and keep up the good work in the area. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.