

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 12 September 2011

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Dr L. Kronborg, Senior Lecturer, Coordinator of Postgraduate Studies in Gifted Education, and
Dr M. Plunkett, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Monash University.

The CHAIR — Welcome to this public hearing looking at gifted and talented students. You are now both aware of the work we are doing, because we have met on different occasions. Welcome. I also point out that today's hearings are obviously part of the overall process of the committee receiving evidence so it can develop a series of recommendations and a report on this very important area. As you know, everything we say today will be recorded by Hansard. We will give you the opportunity to have a look at that and fix any typographical errors or things that were not said. Also, there is the fact that these hearings are covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that members of Parliament are afforded. That means you are free to say what you like within these four walls, but if any statements are made outside, the same privilege does not apply. What we normally do is provide an opportunity for an opening statement if you have one, otherwise we will go straight into questions. So over to you.

Dr KRONBORG — I guess I should begin. Thank you for inviting us here to present. Monash University has a range of courses in gifted education for teachers, psychologists and educational administrators who are interested in upgrading their skills. We have courses at the undergraduate or preservice level, the masters level, going through to the PhD level. We provide for on-campus and off-campus students. People across Victoria are able to gain access to the courses we provide. We have students throughout Australia and internationally as well.

The CHAIR — Fantastic. Great. We will get straight into it. Firstly I wanted to deal with the research project on attitudes to gifted education. In your submission you talked about your research project on the impact of learning about gifted education on teachers attitudes and on their classroom practices in regard to gifted students. Can you tell us more about your research project and the main findings of this research?

Dr PLUNKETT — So far we have had 500 students who have completed the unit EDF4512. We have looked at their attitudes before and after completing the 13-week course to basically determine whether they have more positive attitudes at the end, because a lot of the research suggests that there is a real correlation between attitude and provision. What we have found is that the attitudes have changed significantly. We did significance levels and effect sizes. We used a validated opinionnaire by Gagné and Nadeau, and with the 380 that we have actually analysed so far — we have another 100 from this year that we have not yet analysed — we found significant differences in most areas, but particularly in relation to ability grouping, acceleration and looking at the needs and support areas. The effect sizes were extremely large. We were actually quite blown away by the level of significance and the effect sizes. We had a statistician at our Gippsland campus check to make sure that everything was kosher, because the results were quite dramatic. They really are very significant.

The results have basically shown that there is a very big impact on people who do the course in terms of developing a much more positive attitude towards giftedness, particularly in relation to the value of acceleration, the value of grouping by ability and the fact that these students actually do require support.

We have also gathered a lot of qualitative evidence from students' reflective journals, basically asking them to analyse why they felt their attitudes had changed. So we have hundreds and hundreds of statements from them discussing that, basically talking about how they had no idea, really, prior to taking the unit, about — —

Dr KRONBORG — How to provide for gifted students in the classroom. The students were fourth-year students in their preservice courses. Some were double-degree students, postgraduate diploma students training to teach in secondary schools.

Dr PLUNKETT — And upgrading teachers.

Dr KRONBORG — Also teachers who are training to teach in primary schools. I guess what really comes through is the change in attitude once students are actually given evidence-based learning about how to provide for gifted students in the classroom. It is quite amazing that they have actually all changed. With every item there has been a significant change.

Dr PLUNKETT — All 34 of them.

Dr KRONBORG — That is across the data, which is quite amazing. But that also tells you how little our students or preservice teachers know about the individual differences and what giftedness is. Many people come in with misconceptions about what giftedness is. They think of giftedness in relation to a genius, and so they always think they have never seen any students like that. Also many of them may come up with a person they

know who has been provided for or who has had some difficulty in a school. They may say that gifted kids are favoured and they may have all sorts of personal issues in relation to other gifted students too, so they have to work through all of those.

A strong part of the course was that there were two assessment tasks that students had to do. One was extensive reading on gifted education, differentiation and social and emotional needs and looking at twice-exceptional students as well. They had to reflect on that and relate it to themselves personally or professionally. They were also asked to develop a differentiated curriculum unit of work, which most of them had never even thought about before. If they can, they also have to trial it when they are out in their schools. Both of those experiences seem to have a significant impact on the students.

Dr PLUNKETT — We are actually publishing it; it is under review at the moment by an international journal. That is just about the 380 responses so far, and we will reanalyse the results once we have the 500 responses at the end of this year.

The CHAIR — When do you expect that will be published?

Dr KRONBORG — Possibly later this year or early next year. It is in at the moment.

Ms TIERNEY — Drawing on that, how do we then try to address the negative community attitudes toward giftedness?

Ms TIERNEY — Let the record show a long pause.

Dr PLUNKETT — That is the million-dollar question.

Dr KRONBORG — Continued education. There are just so many misconceptions and misunderstandings about giftedness and gifted education. How do you inform parents and educators in every school about what gifted education is really about? I do not know. How many staff do we have across Victoria who can actually do it? In New South Wales GERRIC produced some CDs for professional learning that were sent to all schools around Australia, and yet I have a number of students who come in for the masters program who have said they have never seen the CD in their schools. It had been sent to their school, but somehow it had gone missing. I do not know how you can expect to educate teachers. The more we can get the information out there, the better the situation will be.

We need to have more research in Australia on gifted education. We are seriously lacking on that. We need more funding for research projects to take place so that we can actually get evidence out there. There is a lot of opinion out there and limited access to what the research actually says. There are jealousies and envy.

The CHAIR — Just in terms of a teacher's role in the identification of gifted kids, the committee has noted that there are many gifted children who are actually not identified by their teachers. The committee has noted that education students at Monash University can undertake a unit of study on the identification of gifted children. What strategies do you suggest to your teaching students to help them identify gifted students?

Dr KRONBORG — There is a component within that unit of gifted education identification and programming that talks about identification, but you also have to remember that they are masters students, so they are experienced teachers who are coming in. The focus that I have is on getting students to be aware of the characteristics of gifted kids and to be aware of those characteristics that have been researched, then to provide programming or differentiated curriculum according to some of the individual needs of those students. We also talk about intellectual assessment and the importance of that, but psychologists are the ones who are qualified to assess students individually for intellectual assessment based on those tests, and they actually give us the best results as far as intelligence goes. There are also different profiles that students can do. I also get students to look at websites around Australia for what happens with the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and in the Western Australian Department of Education and what that they can access.

We also have texts for students to be aware of. There are also different identification procedures, depending on the age of the students you are working with. In the masters courses you have preschool teachers, but the same as with our double-degree students, we have teachers who are training to be preschool teachers, primary

teachers and secondary teachers. You need to use different criteria, although there are similarities across them all, depending on the age group you are working with.

Then there is the talent domain. One of the things that most people find difficulty with is that there is a stereotypical perspective of what a gifted child is, when in fact it is far more complex than that. You need to be aware of different talent domains. If you are looking for talent orientation of students, you need to be aware of ability testing, you need to be aware of characteristics and you need to be aware of teacher profiles for teacher referral and different ways of students recommending other students who might be gifted within classes. We also know that having multiple criteria is the best way. Teachers can develop portfolios with students, and some teachers almost innately are excellent teachers who are able to provide for the individual differences of gifted kids. Not all gifted kids need to be assessed to be able to have their needs met in educational environments.

The CHAIR — You mentioned before that you look at other jurisdictions in terms of their websites. Are there some that you could suggest are better than others that we could be looking at?

Dr KRONBORG — I think the New South Wales and Western Australian ones are much bigger than ours, although ours has improved dramatically in the last few months.

The CHAIR — Good. Thank you.

Ms MILLER — You mentioned in your submission that the number of students studying the elective unit on gifted education has been rising steadily. Why do you think that is?

Dr PLUNKETT — It has become very popular within Monash in that students talk amongst themselves and they will make comments like, ‘You really need to do this unit because it has just taught me so much’. I think students are realising amongst themselves that they are very underprepared to deal with individual differences across a whole range of areas, but particularly in relation to giftedness.

Dr KRONBORG — We also have different academics who will sometimes direct the students towards our subject too.

Ms MILLER — That makes sense. What are the benefits to preservice teachers of studying gifted education?

Dr PLUNKETT — It is breaking down the misconceptions. I think that is probably the thing that most of them find so valuable. They will say, ‘In 13 weeks I am not going to learn how to identify and cater for gifted children in a really’ — —

Dr KRONBORG — In an in-depth way. It is a starting point.

Dr PLUNKETT — That is right; breaking down the misconceptions so that they are much more likely to identify someone who may be gifted rather than just a high-achieving student.

Ms MILLER — And that is kind of consistent with your results. They come in obviously with a more negative outlook, they do the course and 13 weeks out they are saying ‘Wow, this is fabulous’.

Dr KRONBORG — Also I think what happens is that some of the students have been in rural areas and have not even been aware that select entry high schools exist in Melbourne or that select entry accelerated learning programs exist in secondary schools that they could ever have gone to. Many of them realise that they have some of these characteristics and that maybe with different teaching they could have had more opportunities.

Ms MILLER — Sure. Following on from that, your submission also says that many preservice teachers leave Monash University without any training in teaching gifted students. Do you think some training in gifted education should be mandatory for all preservice teachers?

Dr PLUNKETT — This an area that we probably have a mixed opinion on. I deal mainly with primary education, and I believe 100 per cent that all primary teachers need to do something as a core unit.

Dr KRONBORG — I teach mainly secondary students, and I would prefer that secondary teachers elect to learn about gifted education. Even though you can teach a course, there is still almost a bell curve of student responses. I think the most enthusiastic teachers are the ones who actually elect to do it, and even within those who elect to do it there are some students who are a little recalcitrant about the whole idea. They think it is being unfair to all students, depending on their personal experiences and their personal philosophies. Often secondary teachers are far more critical about some of those issues than primary teachers.

Ms MILLER — I am going to challenge you now, if that is the case, and I totally respect your view. An individual's first years of life learning are in those first critical years of, say, up to eight years of age, so hypothetically if you have a student who has gone through primary school and potentially been a bit disruptive in class or did not want to come out — 'dumbing down' I think was a common term used — then aren't you missing that opportunity at primary school level and to pick up on it at secondary level? Do you see a problem with that, or a disadvantage, if you like?

Dr KRONBORG — It would be really nice if all teachers were highly competent. I also think intelligence comes into effective teaching. A concern I have sometimes is that a little bit of knowledge can be dangerous. I would prefer to have a person in a secondary school who maybe has a masters in gifted education who can lead other staff and make professional learning available more intensively for all of the staff in that school than for them to do one unit of study in gifted education. One unit is really the beginning of a journey.

I think we need a range of provision for teachers because one unit is not enough. I really wish everybody could have a masters in gifted education — if we really wanted to lift the quality of education across Victoria — because the teachers generally come out really inspired. So many of my teachers who do a masters in gifted education are pretty capable themselves. There is a lot of work that goes on in providing for gifted kids in schools. That is another reason why I think select entry high schools and SEAL programs are very good for them. I do not really think that all teachers have the skills to provide for gifted kids, dare I say.

The CHAIR — In terms of the primary years, do you think it is important to have some type of training at the primary years to at least help with identification and referral?

Dr KRONBORG — I totally support that in the primary years. This is because you have generalist teachers, so they have to be able to provide for a range of students in the primary sector.

Mr CRISP — I am going to shift this from undergraduate to when they are in the workplace and talk about professional development provided by Monash University. What kind of professional development in gifted education does Monash provide for teachers?

Dr KRONBORG — As in professional learning as opposed to an accredited masters course, you are talking about?

Mr CRISP — Yes.

Dr PLUNKETT — We do it voluntarily. We go into schools and basically do sessions.

Dr KRONBORG — We do, but that is more on a limited basis because we just do not have the time. At Nossal High School we have been doing it. There we have dealt with concepts of giftedness, mainly characteristics identification and attitudes; we have talked about differentiation. I have also spent a week in a school with a couple of international visitors in gifted education counselling psychology: Professor Barbara Kerr from Kansas University and Professor Kathleen Noble. Especially in the week when Kate Noble was here we had small groups of interaction with teachers, talking about what they considered their needs were and discussions with teachers about that. Also in our project with Nossal High School we have been providing ongoing professional development with leadership and ongoing discussions about any issues that need to be raised.

Dr PLUNKETT — I have done an awful lot in professional development in Gippsland. They probably ring me because I am part of Monash, and I do it, but it is really individuals rather than the university. I go and spend a lot of time in a lot of the local rural schools doing PD with the teachers.

Mr CRISP — When you do that what do they specifically ask you? Is there a packet of a dozen questions or issues that they raise?

Dr PLUNKETT — Always ‘How do you identify these students?’. They always want to know how to go about identifying them, and they definitely ask ‘What are the best ways we can meet their needs?’.

Dr KRONBORG — And concepts of giftedness, talking about ‘How do different models of giftedness apply?’. It also differs depending on whether you are talking to primary teachers or to secondary teachers. Secondary teachers often home in on different aspects to primary teachers. Primary teachers are much more generalist in their approach. There are a number of strategies to deal with development of thinking skills that can be used with primary teachers that can make a difference in their teaching with gifted students. Over the years I have done a lot of professional learning with teachers too; I just do not do it now.

Mr CRISP — Earlier you had a very good debate about whether it should be mandatory. I guess some of the thoughts you put forward apply equally to professional development. You would still, in your case, Leonie, prefer to have someone with a masters working in a school; that was the example you used. When we are looking at teachers who are out there now in the workforce, should it be mandatory or a different model?

Dr KRONBORG — I would like to see scholarships offered to teachers in schools so that they could come and do a masters in gifted education. We found in one school that we did a lot of intensive study on their extended curriculum program — and we have also found this in a couple of other places and also across the SEAL schools in an evaluation that we did — that if you have a coordinator of a program who really understands the needs of gifted kids and how to provide for the curriculum for those students, they also know how to bring in appropriately informed teachers and bring in professional learning staff to provide professional learning that can upskill the teachers. They are much more focused, and they are much more supportive.

Dr PLUNKETT — On an ongoing basis, too. Leonie and I have both done research looking at professional development, and on its own it does not have a lasting impact. It really needs to be supported. Teachers are often very buoyed by the experience, but without ongoing support it is an effect that does not last. It does not bring about real change over a long period of time because they have not been immersed in research and they have not really done anything practical. They have had a few tips and tricks shown to them, but it is not a long-lasting thing.

Dr KRONBORG — The other thing is that one of the things with masters studies is that teachers have to do assessment. They really have to seriously read, and they have to examine their thinking and present that in writing. With my master students I also have a number of reflective journals. Where they start off in their thinking and the development of the thinking over time is quite staggering. Some of the more experienced and informed teachers can start off at a much higher level of knowledge and move on, and they end up doing brilliant things at schools.

It is interesting the number of people who have not really grappled with a number of the issues, even when they are parents of gifted kids themselves. It really challenges their thinking. When people are changing their thinking due to evidence it takes time. You can support that more from an academic perspective, whereas in professional learning they are not assessed on it. You can have people sitting there, they can look engaged, but how much they take away from it sometimes you really do not know. That is one huge difference with getting teachers to do specialised studies at a university.

Mr CRISP — Are scholarships the only way that you can think of?

Dr KRONBORG — Scholarships, reduced fees or any other way to encourage more teachers to do further study.

Dr PLUNKETT — Their professional development could be something that is given some credit, too, if they want to do a masters later on.

Dr KRONBORG — Yes; recognise prior learning.

The CHAIR — Your submission suggests that gifted students have particular emotional needs and that teachers require education on how to support these needs. What kind of training is required to enable teachers to meet the emotional and welfare needs of gifted children?

Dr KRONBORG — I do not know where to start.

Dr PLUNKETT — It is being introduced to that idea. Leonie and I have both quite often questioned whether we should have social and emotional learning at the end of our core unit.

Dr KRONBORG — Of the undergraduate unit.

Dr PLUNKETT — We often see that our students say, ‘All of a sudden everything is falling into place because we have recognised their cognitive needs over this period of time, and now it has really hit us that they are really socially and emotionally vulnerable’.

Dr KRONBORG — I think teachers need to be aware of the context that there is a cognitive substructure as well as an affective substructure. Most people do not understand that the two things which have an impact on the giftedness come together and also that twice-exceptional students are more vulnerable. Not all gifted students are vulnerable socially and emotionally. For some students it is a real advantage for them because they use it in a very constructive way. But a lot of people do not even think about the affective domain, how it affects the learning process and that it affects individuals.

With where gifted students are mentally, for some students that is midway between their emotional development and their intellectual development, and that is their overall mental age. But some students, say gifted students on the autism spectrum, have such limited social skills and language development. Teachers can be so uninformed out there it is unbelievable. You can have gifted students with specific learning disabilities and gifted students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Dr PLUNKETT — I think it is good to be introduced to a lot of the literature. We give them quite a lot of readings, as well as stories from children and parents of gifted children and a lot of relevant research. I think that is what they need — to see it in writing that there are students out there who have really suffered in schools.

Dr KRONBORG — Often, though, teachers do not become aware of the need unless they have a child in their own class who has a specific problem, and then they have to go looking for answers. Even then they sometimes do not look in the right places. Again, it is why approaching teacher development in regard to gifted students is so important in terms of so many different aspects.

Ms TIERNEY — The committee understands there are a number of approaches teachers can use when catering for gifted students, some of which include ability grouping, personalised learning and acceleration. What methods and approaches do you recommend to your students as being the most effective ways?

Dr PLUNKETT — Those three are big.

Dr KRONBORG — I think it depends on the context of where you are teaching. In primary schools I think you need to consider differentiated learning. For some students cluster grouping, small ability grouping within classes, may be the most appropriate way, depending on the intellect of the student and the concerns. Some children may need to be accelerated, but we also know that in providing for the social and emotional needs of highly gifted kids it is better to promote them in cohorts if you can. It really depends on the context. I ask teachers to go back, consider the context and consider the evidence from the different areas before they make a decision and to also be aware of the different ways of providing for students. If you can provide for students through a differentiated curriculum, that is a great start, but it depends on the students and the individual differences amongst the students. You have to make informed decisions from the evidence that is there. There is not one specific way that solves everything.

Ms MILLER — Your submission suggested a field of research on the educational and psychological needs of gifted students needs to be developed in Australia. What is the best way to encourage academics and education professionals to undertake research in this field? Sorry to give you the difficult questions.

Dr KRONBORG — I know there are higher degree research places for masters students that are commonwealth funded. Even some of my masters minor thesis students this year have dropped out because

they cannot cope with the demands of their work, their families and their studies. Some compensation for time would make a difference. Maybe part-time leave from government schools to do some research would be really important. I think our expectations on teachers are getting greater and greater, and teachers are finding it harder to keep on top of everything with the demands. We are lifting the bar everywhere.

Dr PLUNKETT — Giftedness has not really been an area that has been well funded. We were looking at the ARCs in the last 10 years, and one had the word ‘gifted’ in it. There was one funded project, which was at the University of Western Sydney. It is not an area that generates much funding. Actually when we have applied for funding, even at our university, it is often — —

Dr KRONBORG — We have been pretty lucky.

The CHAIR — Is that an area to look at — more ARC grants and enticement for PhDs in this area?

Dr PLUNKETT — We do get grants. We have quite a few PhD students and masters students now.

Dr KRONBORG — But they are not funded.

Dr PLUNKETT — No, they are not.

Dr KRONBORG — We need more funding for gifted education across Australia. What is interesting when you talk about ARC funding is that you have your peer group that is also evaluating and prioritising what is important. One of the concerns with gifted education often amongst educators is that it is seen as elitist, and people are also very uninformed.

The CHAIR — How do we change that stigma?

Dr KRONBORG — I think it has taken us 15 years to change the attitudes of our colleagues within our faculty. It takes time.

Dr PLUNKETT — We are the only two in the whole of Monash who have a background in gifted education.

Dr KRONBORG — Yes, a background; there are many who have an interest in gifted education or are interested in high achievement. That is definitely there within the university, but the notion of actually looking at research in gifted education and talent development is often different to looking at subject discipline expertise, and gifted education is generally built on top of subject expertise at the secondary level. A lot of people go in the direction of talent development. Even research with our Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development would be really good if they prioritised some funding for research in gifted education so that we could evaluate programs and research teachers. That is seen as a concern to be researched. We do need to increase our research in gifted education.

Ms MILLER — Continuing on with this theme, what is the best way to ensure that schools, teachers and families of gifted students have access to research findings and information about gifted education?

Dr KRONBORG — We have our associations, being the Victorian Association for Gifted and Talented Children, the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented and the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children. Parents of gifted kids can join any of those associations and have access to the refereed journals in gifted education.

Dr PLUNKETT — We have a website at Monash now too.

Dr KRONBORG — That is not open to the public; it is just involved with our teachers at Nossal. I think the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development could really increase its gifted education website. There could be articles in the newspaper to inform people.

Ms MILLER — So it is about really just trying to communicate it in all sorts of media and hope that someone out there will read all of it or some of it?

Dr KRONBORG — Yes.

Mr CRISP — Let us return to the SEAL program; you mentioned it earlier. I understand that you have undertaken an evaluation. What were the results of that evaluation? Have there been any changes to the program as a result of that work?

Dr PLUNKETT — The results were basically that parents, students and teachers found it to be a positive development within their schools. We looked at students who were not involved in SEAL programs as well to look at whether those students felt disadvantaged, and we also asked teachers that specifically. We found that there really did not seem to be any element of disappointment from that. Most of the schools found that it was a very good way for their teachers to take risks in their teaching, because they were in an environment that was more conducive to doing that. They would say, ‘Then we go off and try that with our mainstream classes as well’. What we discovered was that spillover effect. Teachers were saying, ‘What we are trialling in these classes then becomes part of our teaching’. Good teaching practice was definitely developing as a result of having those programs.

Dr KRONBORG — Also one of the key findings was that the coordinators of the most successful SEAL programs did have studies or masters in gifted education.

Dr PLUNKETT — The coordinators were definitely more qualified.

Dr KRONBORG — And more informed.

Dr PLUNKETT — The results of our report were that the SEAL programs were expanded. There were 21 schools when we began, and they then expanded after our report was finished. Now there are still people on the waiting list. We found that a lot more students wanted to get into them than there were places available, so there was quite a big waiting list in a lot of schools.

Dr KRONBORG — There was also variation amongst SEAL schools, depending on teacher education and how informed teachers were. I also know about differences amongst programs from anecdotal evidence from students who come in and have had experience either as parents or as teachers. A small cohort from Box Hill High School is the main SEAL program that I have been involved with. Kate Mitchell is the principal, and she did a masters and then got funding from her school council to have teachers come and do studies in gifted education. She has also had ongoing professional learning. I have also had a couple of my masters research students do research in that school to look at what is going on in that school. The principal was really keen to get evidence as well.

Dr PLUNKETT — I know that the three SEAL programs in Gippsland have made an enormous difference in the region, preventing quite a lot of students from going to private schools and allowing the government schools to retain quite a lot of their good students. I have evaluated two of the three Gippsland ones over at least a six-year period. I have done longitudinal studies with them, and from interviewing them all as year 12s — I always look at cohorts that are involved in the SEAL program and those who are not — I have found out that every single student who was involved in the SEAL programs at those schools said that they would do it again. They found that it was a very beneficial experience. I found only very small numbers of students who had not been involved in it saying, ‘I think they may have got a better deal than us’. Most of them said, ‘We really didn’t care, and we actually think it impacted positively on our school by having such a program, even though we weren’t involved in it’.

Dr KRONBORG — In one of Margaret’s studies of one of those schools a couple of the students who had not been in the SEAL program — who were highly able initially but chose not to go into the SEAL program — by year 12 wished they had gone into the SEAL program earlier because they realised that their options had been reduced.

Dr PLUNKETT — One or two of them, yes.

The CHAIR — What happened to the initial SEAL program that you did the research with in 2004?

Dr KRONBORG — We actually had the 27 schools involved with that, and then we had focus groups of 12 schools involved.

Dr PLUNKETT — You are talking about what happened with the report of that?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Dr PLUNKETT — The report was not released. We reported on that to — was that here?

Dr KRONBORG — No, it was at the Victorian department of education at the time. It was decided not to release the report.

The CHAIR — Do you know why?

Mr CRISP — They do, but do they want to say?

The CHAIR — You are covered by parliamentary privilege.

Dr KRONBORG — I guess some of our findings were contentious to people within the department of education.

The CHAIR — And what do you think those might be?

Dr KRONBORG — That teachers needed further education in gifted education to improve the quality of the SEAL programs.

Dr PLUNKETT — That there was a lot more — —

Dr KRONBORG — Spillover effect?

Dr PLUNKETT — We found definitely that the SEAL programs did mirror the socioeconomic status of the schools, which was one of the criticisms that had been levelled at them.

Dr KRONBORG — And also the range of ethnicity of students across schools where in fact there was a range of ethnicity across all programs, socioeconomic status. I had forgotten some of this stuff.

Dr PLUNKETT — It was contentious. We had a large steering committee, and we had some very interesting meetings with them. Our findings were questioned on a number of occasions because they were very positive. We had a lot of interviews.

Dr KRONBORG — It was a qualitative study, but there also tended to be a mindset within the department of education, which was trying to go in directions that were not necessarily in support of gifted education.

Dr PLUNKETT — And I think the SEAL programs were seen as perhaps favouring a particular socioeconomic bracket, which was brought up to us over and over again, that parents who could perhaps afford to were moving into those schools specifically to — —

Dr KRONBORG — The concern about the 5 per cent of students going into SEAL programs. There was also a concern of the leading educator within the department of education who thought that all schools should provide for gifted students and that there should not be SEAL schools.

Ms TIERNEY — And yet the government of the day then went on to make a number of decisions to set up a number of additional selective schools.

Dr KRONBORG — They did, because they ended up calling an extraordinary meeting with the principals involved in the SEAL program, and all principals actually totally supported the SEAL programs that existed in their schools, so that was a bit of surprise.

Dr PLUNKETT — There was an intention to make a different report. Our report was an 80 000 word report, and we were told at the final meeting that our report would be set aside and there would be a separate, much smaller report, which we objected to and said it would not show what we had found.

Dr KRONBORG — Because the findings were not exactly as we had found.

Ms TIERNEY — Can I tease out that issue, because we have talked about it to a degree informally amongst ourselves after we had visited a number of the schools. It has hit us that there seems to be an

underrepresentation of people from lower socioeconomic groupings, from the Koori community and regional and rural Victoria, and that there seems to be a fairly strong cohort in some schools towards different aspiring cultural groupings.

It is the elephant in the room, and I think we really need to test it in some way, because firstly, we need to know more about the facts associated with it, as opposed to just our visual interpretation. But the second thing is in terms of tackling elitism or the elitist views or notions that people might have, we could think about some strategies that are more long term that could break down, intervene in what people perceive to be a student body not being a reflection of the wider society. For example, today we had the principal of John Monash Science School here, and he gave us some really good examples of not just thinking about individual students or the individual school but what the wider contribution needs to be to provide greater access. There is a regional five-week program running that I am sure you are aware of. He has personally mentored a Koori student, and that has meant that there are links with that school with a whole lot of other indigenous programs. It is a role model also for other indigenous kids.

The CHAIR — And a primary school program.

Ms TIERNEY — And a primary school program that connects, not just locally, but a little wider as well, with the use of technology through the internet and whatever other facilities and follows up the kids who come down from the country. These are the sorts of things that my mind is churning around at the moment. It is great that you are here this afternoon to see whether you think that some of us are thinking along similar lines to what you might have been doing some work in.

Dr KRONBORG — I think the John Monash Science School is doing some excellent work at the moment with highly able students who are really interested and have talents in science. I think one of the pluses of that school is that they are selecting their own students, so they are ability-testing them, but I was also there last week while they were doing some interviews with some students too. They have got more discretion about who they select to come into the school, where if you are selecting students for, say, a select entry high school, it is driven, at the moment, by centralised ability testing and achievement testing.

I am just thinking of where you are going. I guess one of the concerns I have about what a lot of people think about gifted education is that they think about it from a competitive paradigm. I look at gifted education from a creative paradigm for the individual student. If you have got an individual student who has intellectual potential, then you need to provide, as an educator, for that individual student. It is a different mindset also about what schools do to provide for students or what the students do to provide for the school. I think we need to think that our goal should be about providing for individual students. It is excellent that John Monash Science School is able to bring in a student who may not normally get into a selective school by actually focusing on the science orientation of that particular student.

Dr PLUNKETT — In regional areas, though, there is definitely a wide array of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Koori backgrounds and so on who are in the SEAL programs. Have you looked at any?

Ms TIERNEY — No. We are going up to Bendigo next week.

Dr PLUNKETT — Gippsland is quite different too, and as I said, there are three official SEAL programs and many more unofficial ones operating in the Gippsland region.

The CHAIR — Can you elaborate further about those?

Dr PLUNKETT — It is very difficult for students in rural areas to get to any of those three SEAL programs. Transport is virtually impossible for a lot of them. A lot of local schools have introduced their own extension programs, which they call accelerated learning program, ALP; the Like Minds program; the PAL program and so on. They have introduced those as a way of preventing their students having to leave their school and go to one of the three main schools that offer SEAL programs. They are basically grouping programs. They operate very differently because we do not have the same level of students, so the ones who get in are basically the motivated students who really have high aspirations. It is a way of grouping them together and having them work in an environment where they have the best opportunity to maximise their potential.

Dr KRONBORG — Something that has entered the debate of talent development in the last few months in some of the journals is looking at what is the representation of the different ethnic groups across the community and then looking at the representation of gifted students to see what the relative representation of the different groups is. We do know that there are groups who value high achievement far more than others, so that is something else that teachers have to grapple with with students and with the different values within families.

Dr PLUNKETT — But when we did the evaluation initially in 2004, we got the data from the department and the schools, and it really was representative at that stage, was it not?

Dr KRONBORG — Although I must admit — I am just trying to think back now — some of the rural schools did have much lower ethnic groups, but they probably had much lower ethnic groups within their towns too.

Dr PLUNKETT — Definitely, but they had a higher Koori representation.

Ms TIERNEY — They had a higher SES too.

Dr KRONBORG — But for the SEAL schools in the metropolitan area, they tended to be representative, and I guess we did focus on — I cannot remember now — seven or nine focus schools.

Dr PLUNKETT — Nine focus schools that we had, yes.

The CHAIR — Picking up from Gayle's earlier point with the SEAL programs and the representation, a number of people have brought up the issue of coaching for people to get into some of these programs. Do you see that as being a problem that needs to be addressed to ensure that there is broader representation rather than just those who can afford additional coaching can get into, say, SEAL programs as opposed to those that cannot?

Dr KRONBORG — That is also a good reason why ability testing needs to be maintained. It is far harder to coach kids for ability testing than it is to coach for achievement testing. Any testing that is used really needs to be kept private rather than becoming familiar out there to train kids on, and that is one of the reasons with the Wechsler intelligence scale why psychologists are so protective, I guess, of having that test available to people, so that people cannot train their kids on different sub-tests et cetera. That is a change in community that has taken place — that coaching in testing for all sorts of things. I have heard of it being done for the UMAT this year, and it has just been a change that has taken place in our culture.

Dr PLUNKETT — It certainly would not be an issue in rural areas. They would not have the access to coaching even if they wanted it, really.

Dr KRONBORG — It is a concern, though.

The CHAIR — We have covered our questions. Is there anything else you want to add before we finish up that we have not covered off already?

Dr KRONBORG — I think we need to focus on the needs of the students, and I know there is a concern from principals sometimes about losing gifted students in their schools, but I also think that it is the responsibility of principals and teachers to upskill all students in those schools, and taking two, three, four, five or however many students out of the school should not make a huge difference to an educational program that is taking place.

Dr PLUNKETT — I just think there does need to be a big focus on rural gifted students, and that is really something that has not been a focus in the past.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.