

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 12 September 2011

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#### Witness

Dr L. Kronborg, Coordinator, Gifted Educational Advisory Service, Krongold Centre.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to the inquiry into gifted and talented children which you are here today to provide evidence for. As you know everything is covered by parliamentary privilege, so what you say in this room certainly you are able to express that freely. The same privilege does not apply outside of the room. Hansard is recording proceedings today, and you will be given a copy of the transcript to correct any typographical errors that may unfold as part of that. We will spend the time now discussing specifically your work with the Krongold Centre, so we will get straight into it.

I am going to ask the first question. Dealing with terminology, so many submissions suggest that there are negative perceptions associated with the term ‘gifted and talented’. What terminology do you think we should use for gifted and talented students in Victoria? If you think we should use what we are using, that is fine.

**Dr KRONBORG** — I think we should stay with what we are using. I do not have a problem with the terminology. I think that giftedness was seen as the terminology to be used in the Senate inquiry in 2001, and giftedness and talent do have different implications and bases for me. I tend to see giftedness as innate natural ability that tends to be identified through intelligence testing from an academic perspective, but it is also much more about the natural abilities that individuals have. Where I do see talents related to the talent development process that takes place — and not all students are gifted who end up being — it depends on which theory you use, but with Gagne’s theory the talent development comes from the gift. Although Piirto has her theory of talent development, she looks at innate talents, but I think because of the different theories that exist in the literature, we need to keep both terms in existence.

**Ms TIERNEY** — The assessments that are referred to the gifted education assessment centre, how does that happen; what is involved in it?

**Dr KRONBORG** — There has been a change that has taken place. I did coordinate a gifted education clinic and I did invite Sandi Hepenstall, who is the psychologist who used to work with me before she went to Singapore and has come back recently, and she ran that. We actually have had a change in the clinic this year, and we have a psychologist called Roger Edwards, who I also invited to come today but was unable to attend, who has been managing the assessments there, but basically it is to do with parents who ring the Krongold Centre and refer their child for a psycho-educational assessment.

Regarding the gifted aspect of it, I spoke to Roger last week, and he said a number of students are referred to our centre who are not referred for giftedness but are referred for other reasons, and with the intellectual assessment they find they might have high IQs or high intellects.

**The CHAIR** — Can I take a step back for a minute. How did this centre come about?

**Dr KRONBORG** — I am not sure when it was first developed, but Professor Marie Neale was the first professor at the Krongold Centre, who was there to provide for the exceptional needs of students. That grouping was for all students who were considered to be exceptional, and there was a group of gifted kids within the exceptional. Initially I think Marie Neale had prioritised kids more with intellectual disabilities and impairments, so giftedness has just come as a priority over the years.

**The CHAIR** — What kind of information does the Krongold Centre assessment report contain? For example, if a child is assessed as gifted, are there specific suggestions about how the child’s educational needs can be met?

**Dr KRONBORG** — When Sandy was doing the assessments with me — and I have had different psychologists over the years who did it, who also had some training in gifted education — I would also work as an educational consultant. I am actually not a registered psychologist. We did the reports together, and it was grounded in the information of giftedness. The change has taken place this year where the psychologists are actually dealing with it — and I wish Roger was here. We are also training our psychologists at the moment, and we have registrants who are actually in training with assessment processes.

The intellectual report at the moment, based on one that I have seen recently, was looking at the intellectual assessment, and then they were using — I think it was — the Woodcock-Johnson achievement test, looking at subtests with it, so the analysis and interpretation was done with that. We are in a transition position at the moment as to whether I bring another psychologist, Sandy, back in to work with some of those students and

another consultant to come in to do more educational referrals, because I just do not have the time to put in that I used to put in in the past.

**The CHAIR** — Many parents have expressed frustration that schools fail to act on formal assessments of giftedness. How should assessment results be communicated to schools, and what obligation, if any, should schools have when they receive a formal assessment indicating that a child is gifted?

**Dr KRONBORG** — Teachers should read the report in the first place. It is a concern that sometimes teachers get these reports and they just put them in drawers. There is also concern sometimes that teachers do not understand the implications of what the reports are saying, or they actually do not believe what the reports are telling them. In our situation, with any reports that are done, there is also a case conference, and I believe teachers are still invited into those case conferences with the parents. Depending on who refers, sometimes parents may choose to have the case conference with the psychologist and not bring the teacher in, and other times they may welcome bringing the teacher in. I think the ideal is that in any psychological assessment that has been done on a child, parents and teachers should be involved in case conferences.

**The CHAIR** — So written and verbal?

**Dr KRONBORG** — Yes.

**Ms MILLER** — Some submissions have suggested that all Victorian students should be screened for giftedness. Do you agree, and, if so, at what age should students be assessed, and who should conduct the assessment?

**Dr KRONBORG** — I know that across America at grade 4 they use a cognitive abilities test and all kids are screened for ability. They do a lot more ability testing, and they use their scholastic aptitude test as well to look at aptitudes. I do not necessarily agree with the idea of screening all kids for giftedness. I think if there is an individual need, the child needs to have an individual intellectual assessment. They need to be able to find a professional who is informed and who understands the implications of giftedness, and it should be followed through that way. That is where again it is the teachers' responsibility to make the changes and address the needs of the students — or the school to address the needs of the student.

I guess in response I have just remembered part of David's question before: what should the teachers do in response to the report? They should be able to address what it is they are being told about the needs of the child and differentiate the curriculum or provide the curriculum that the student actually needs. Often teachers just do not know what to do. They do not really know what it means to have a child with an IQ of 140, or else some teachers become threatened and do all they can to try to deny that that child has that high ability. Should all students be screened? I do not think so.

**Ms MILLER** — With the professional that you mentioned, would that be someone from an education department or a psychologist?

**Dr KRONBORG** — We did at one point have regional psychologists who were guidance officers working in schools. I think all regions, or whatever the breakdown of the areas are now, should have a number of guidance officers who are informed in gifted education to be able to do the assessments. I guess we do at the Krongold Centre, too. There is a limited number of psychologists out there who are informed about gifted education.

**Ms MILLER** — When you said there used to be, how long ago was that? Was it in the last 10 years or 20 years?

**Dr KRONBORG** — We used to have regional guidance officers, centres — I cannot remember the actual name of them. We also had some special assistance, special education units, that used to be on a regional basis, where we had special ed consultants who went out to schools and worked with teachers in schools too. I am not quite sure. The guidance officers still may exist in regions. I know working with the Catholic Education Office down in Ballarat a couple of years ago I did some professional learning with some teachers down that way, and there were a number of guidance officers but in a limited capacity, so I do not really know the structure of that.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Again just going back on the point that I made in the previous session, your submission acknowledges that some children are less likely to be identified as gifted — for example, children from indigenous, culturally diverse and low socioeconomic backgrounds. How can we increase identification in these groups?

**Dr KRONBORG** — We do know that dynamic assessment processes are usually better for identifying giftedness in some of the culturally diverse groups that we have to deal with, and that is about exposing a student to a new problem, teaching them and then testing them to see how they respond to it. But then we also know across some of those populations you can also give some of those students intelligence tests and they actually do exceptionally well too. So it depends on the context of where it is. I guess we do need teachers to become more informed, and I guess we are not doing that within our own faculty, looking at cultural differences, different contexts of students and probably different assessment processes. It is a constant battle just keeping teachers informed of the different processes for providing for these students and identifying the students.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Do you think it would be appropriate to try to work out a particular strategy?

**Dr KRONBORG** — I do not think there is one strategy. The more teachers are informed about the students that they are working with, the different characteristics they have and the implication of the different characteristics they have and being aware of a range of processes for assessing students, pre-testing, post-testing, I think teachers are becoming more informed of those processes now than they used to be. We are providing much more diverse assessment processes in teacher education.

**Ms TIERNEY** — I do not have a problem with that; in fact I would agree with all of that. My concern is that that will take time — which I think the parents said about a different issue. I am more concerned that the representation that we have in the potential student body will continue on and on the way it is at the moment without specific strategies that are really thought about and worked on.

**Dr KRONBORG** — I am really not sure of the best way of going about it. I guess if you have got guidance officers in regions who are responsible for assessment, they are going to be highly informed, which schools will be aware of and able to call on, so they can actually assess individual students who are seen as different enough to the groups that they are within to need some extension or need other ways of being provided for.

Part of the difficulty is some of these students are referred because they have got behavioural issues or they are not learning for particular reasons. There are still plenty of teachers out there who have really no idea of the implications of what it means to be gifted and have a specific learning disability. You cannot teach everything to teachers as undergraduate teachers. It is a complex issue that we are dealing with. How do we fit all the essential factors into the courses? I could advocate for something in our faculty, but it might be quite different to all the other contesting ideas that other people have that they think should be included in a course.

**The CHAIR** — Just on the testing again, it has been suggested that there should be different approaches to testing of kids at different age levels. Do you agree with that, and if so, how would you differ the approaches to testing at different ages?

**Dr KRONBERG** — It depends on the purpose of the testing.

**The CHAIR** — To identify; testing for identification.

**Dr KRONBORG** — To identify gifted students. It is interesting that most independent schools, if not all — probably most — actually do ability testing at the beginning of year 7 for most students who go into those schools. We have got the NAPLAN data, but that is achievement data, and yet they are indicators for teachers for differences amongst the students they are working with. I think teachers need to be aware that they do have diverse students and they are going to have to provide for different students who are in their classes, whether or not they have guidance officers to support that specific identification and again whether or not there are subsidised funds for parents to be able to call on places like the Krongold Centre or individual private psychologists to assess students.

**The CHAIR** — Do you agree with the idea of some initial screening and then a referral? We have heard a lot today in particular about checklists being referred to as that initial screening, particularly — I know it is not your area — at the primary levels. Would you agree with that?

**Dr KRONBORG** — As long as the teachers are not teaching to the test.

**The CHAIR** — Testing is purely for identifying, to then be able to refer to get some further assistance.

**Dr KRONBORG** — With checklists? Again the department of education could have different screening lists up on the web that teachers can access any time that they have interest or concern about gifted students, and they should be able to download and use some of these things.

**Ms TIERNEY** — At the centre do you administer online tests for giftedness?

**Dr KRONBORG** — No.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Is there a particular reason? Are there advantages or disadvantages to online testing?

**Dr KRONBORG** — I must admit I am not as involved in the actual assessments at the Krongold Centre as Roger Edwards is. We have also got a very strong orientation at the moment towards students with Asperger's and those on the autism spectrum. So we have got a number of staff and students sort of working in that direction too. I guess it is more the psychologists who are making the decision. Probably we just have not got the time because we are so busy with our teaching of our students to actually develop that. I must admit I did discuss having a website once with our current director, and there were concerns about the time it would take to actually maintain it and keep it up to date.

**Ms MILLER** — You talked about Asperger's just now. What special provisions need to be made for such students in schools?

**Dr KRONBORG** — It is interesting that one of my PhD. students at the moment, who has a specific interest in talent development and students with Asperger's, spoke to my masters group the other week while I was overseas at the world council conference, and most of the teachers were really surprised to think that you could actually have gifted students who also could have Asperger's. Even just starting from thinking about that paradox, a lot of teachers just do not understand that you can have demonstrated, gifted potential in some areas but yet have the lack of social skills that are associated with Asperger's syndrome. So they have exceptional memory but yet they have difficulty in more of their divergent thinking at times and their social skills. It is a very specialised field.

**Ms MILLER** — What kind of provisions do you think could be made for them? You may not know; you may not have the answers.

**Dr KRONBORG** — In one PhD. paper I read last year that was done by a psychologist in Canada — who also happened to be a parent of a child with giftedness and Asperger's — she found that having a teacher in the school who was supportive of students with giftedness and Asperger's syndrome, who the students could go to if they were in meltdown or having some difficulties at the time just for time out, was really one of the most significant findings that she found in her study. Often because the students are being overwhelmed by the noise that is around them and the demands that are being made of them, they just need space to escape and a teacher to understand that that is something that they actually need. It is also being aware of teaching them the social skills that they need from an intellectual perspective. It is another big area that we need to be trying to understand. It is just such a beginning field of knowledge at the moment.

**Ms MILLER** — In your experience are there many out there who do have Asperger's and are also gifted and talented?

**Dr KRONBORG** — People in SEAL schools are telling me more and more that they are turning up in SEAL programs. And why it is a good place to be able to provide for these kids in SEAL programs is because often the kids who come in are quite eccentric anyway, so just being a bit different means they fit in quite well. Also because the teachers are aware of having to provide for the differences of the students they can focus on their academic strengths, and some of their limited skills start decreasing.

**The CHAIR** — I just wanted to delve into the primary school program side for a moment. Many parents have expressed frustration with the lack of primary school programs for gifted students. Do you agree that this is an issue, and if so, what programs or services should be available for gifted primary school children? It is quite broad.

**Dr KRONBORG** — I think, going back to Margaret's comment earlier, that all teachers would benefit in a primary setting from being informed of ways of providing for gifted students so that we could have a more differentiated curriculum for students within the primary school. New South Wales have had their opportunity classes for years for grade 5 and 6 students. They seem to work very well on a district basis. Western Australia have actually changed their priorities in the last year or two. They are focusing more on primary education of gifted students in their gifted department with the Department of Education. They have regionally-based programs such as PEAC — primary extension and challenge — programs. I had a cohort of students from Western Australia, a number of whom were teaching in PEAC programs, do their masters with me. They are teaching those programs, so they tend to set up short courses on different topics, and students come into regionally-based schools, maybe for an afternoon a week, and that is provided for them.

A number of years ago Lynne Mackenzie-Sykes and I ran a Saturday morning program for primary students, and the reason for that, largely, was just to motivate students and give them the opportunity to be with other like-minded, highly able students in a program on Saturday. It gave them the tolerance to cope with what was going on in their schools for the rest of the week. I think I like the idea of having differentiated curriculum within the schools and teachers feeling responsible for having to provide for gifted students. But a regionally-based approach could still take place on a primary level, and you still could have some schools offering grade 5 and 6 programs for gifted students. However, you are still going to have some issues. I know that with one of my masters students at the moment her son started university last year at 15 years of age. He had a lot of difficulty in primary school because he was so exceptionally able, and she ended up homeschooling him part of the time in primary school. She was an off-campus student last year and came in and spoke to some of my on-campus students in class.

One of the interesting factors is that even in teaching our undergraduate students often it is so hard for teachers to actually imagine. Some teachers will sit there and say, 'I have never had a gifted child in my class', and I will say, 'Maybe they have never presented to you because you actually haven't provided the diverse range of opportunities that you should so that they can reveal themselves'. It is interesting when teachers say they have never had a gifted child in the class. You know that they are probably there but that they are just hiding because it is not safe to come out. I think the more diverse and flexible provisions we can have, the better it will be.

**The CHAIR** — Do you think programs based on the SEAL model would be effective at a primary school level? If so, what changes would need to be made to the model to accommodate the primary school years?

**Dr KRONBORG** — I think it would be harder to do that, because one of the advantages with SEAL programs at secondary schools is that students have much more of an individual say. With primary students we might find parents are directing kids far more than kids are having a say in what their choices are, because children are not as aware of what their choices are. I think there should be situations where, if there is a group of advanced, verbally able students in the infant department, a teacher in the infant department or in the early years should be able to provide some small-group literature classes.

I think what it is important is to engage the students in learning where they feel it is effective for them. It is not about schools saying, 'We have a gifted program'. The more varied ways we can have for teachers to actually realise they could accommodate individual needs, the better.

In relation to the SEAL program notion, I guess the other concern I have with that — at the primary school level — is the personality development that goes with achievement. By secondary school, kids have had more opportunity to develop themselves. I think what is really crucial is that students have strong self-esteem so that they can actually feel responsible for their learning as well. Teachers could be more aware that they can compact curriculum for some of those students. Also in primary years you can have some students for whom you would need to compact, say, maths, but they would not need it for their verbal instruction as well, so it is harder to provide for the individual differences amongst the students at that stage.

**The CHAIR** — Some of the strategies you suggest at the secondary level, like grouping — —

**Dr KRONBORG** — Compacting curriculum?

**The CHAIR** — Yes, curriculum differentiation and accelerating — would you suggest that those sorts of things are okay at the primary level as well, or would you think that there would be modification?

**Dr KRONBORG** — Acceleration works if the teacher who is receiving the child is in agreement with acceleration and understands the need for modifying the curriculum still, even if the child is accelerated, and if the parents and the child are really aware of what is going on — that is, if the child actually knows that they have a choice and that if they are not happy with what is going on, they can go back to their place. There needs to be trial periods as well for that to take place.

Acceleration seems to be very good at particular transition points. The friendship aspect is also important. It is really complex in the acceleration process, and that is why often in the secondary years you are also asking students, ‘Do they want to be independent? Do they want to travel by train to get to a place? Are they motivated enough to actually do that and be more independent?’. In the primary years, because they are in such a closed environment there is probably more of a concern about how other students react to them if they are accelerated. One has to be very careful, depending on the culture of the school, to avoid any bullying that might take place for those students as well.

**Ms TIERNEY** — In your submission you say that as a result of schools having a SEAL program there are benefits to the entire school. Can you give us some indication as to what those benefits are?

**Dr KRONBORG** — If you have a group of 25 intellectually able students that you know you are responsible for, usually teachers have to do some form of professional learning. Box Hill High School is one of the key schools that I know has really worked on professional learning for teachers. As they are doing it for some of the teachers, it becomes available for all of the teachers. Those teachers who are teaching in the SEAL program are also teaching mixed-ability classes, and I know from one of the independent schools where Margaret and I did an evaluation of the extended curriculum programs there on a detailed level that just because you are mindful of providing for those particular students — that is, if you know you are going to have to do it for those highly able students and you become aware of what the critical times are when you need to provide differentiated curriculum for those students, even within the high-ability group of students — you tend to transfer those skills to the mixed-ability class you are working with. You see a child who is in need of something, and you do something about it. As teachers become more informed, the achievement levels of students rise.

**The CHAIR** — Your submission highlights, and we have spoken about it today, New South Wales and Western Australia as good jurisdictions that are running some really interesting programs. What features of the systems in those states do you think are the most effective, and are there other jurisdictions you think are doing great things that the committee should be looking at for best practices that we could adopt here in Victoria? That is a good one to finish on.

**Dr KRONBORG** — I do not know if they are doing any better in some of those schools; it is just that they have more of them. I think the things happening at Nossal High School at the moment and John Monash Science School are both excellent examples of education for diverse groups of students. One of the things that happens when you have a selective group is that the teachers really have to modify their teaching behaviours to be able to provide for those students, or else those students yell loudly. We have been researching the teachers at Nossal High School, and we will be continuing with that. Just going to John Monash last week, I know the teachers are working incredibly hard. What is important at any of these schools is that teachers continue to maintain their professional learning.

**The CHAIR** — What about in a broader sense — not necessarily just in the specialist schools but around gifted and talented support programs and initiatives in a broader sense? Are there things that may be done really well in New South Wales and Western Australia that we could potentially learn from, and other places as well? You mentioned the website earlier that had some really good testing programs, which we have now adopted. Are there other things?

**Dr KRONBORG** — One of the things that NSW did in 1991 — I think it was 1991 — is that it actually did in-service for all principals across the state in gifted education, and they have always had a strong group of gifted educators within the department of education in New South Wales who have training in gifted education,

whereas our department of education has not had that. In Western Australia they have also had informed educators in the gifted group in the Western Australian Department of Education.

I guess as time has gone on in New South Wales, more and more of the leadership in the selective schools has also had specialised education in gifted education, and Perth Mod has also been working on professional learning with its teachers in a concentrated way since it became a selective entry school again. Really what we are talking about is an emphasis on professional learning, and it is interesting where Nossal and John Monash are at the moment, because being linked to a university is really quite a new initiative. It will be interesting to see how things progress with those schools in the next few years too — to see the outcomes and what outcomes there are for students there.

I think we really need more selective schools in this state. If we want to improve government schools in Victoria, more selective schools would make a difference. The enthusiasm and inspiration I sense when I walk into John Monash and Nossal High School I do not sense in many other schools.

Kids should have the opportunity to love their education. If we really want to see exciting changes taking place with these students, kids should want to be at school. Yes, ideally it would be wonderful to have all schools in this state like that, but I think that is a bit too optimistic. But we can work on improving a number of schools that are centres of excellence and that can have an impact on other schools around them.

**The CHAIR** — We have had it suggested that additional specialist or selective schools would take away more of the kids from the public schools — take that talent away — and that would be a detriment to the public school system. What is your view on that?

**Dr KRONBORG** — At the moment they can only take 5 per cent, and at the selective schools there is also principal discretion. I do not think parents across Victoria are going to be able to continue paying the independent school fees they have been paying. I tend to think that more parents who have their kids at independent schools now would be looking at the better government schools we have here if those government schools improved. Reducing the principal's discretion, on top of the 5 per cent, might be one way. But if you look at New South Wales and its numbers — and I have the numbers here for students in selective high schools this year — there are 44 schools, and around 200 students in those 44 schools are in selective schools. That is a lot of students. Where they have 44 schools and around 200, we have 4 schools and around 200.

**Ms MILLER** — Why is Victoria so behind?

**Dr KRONBORG** — I have no idea; I really cannot fathom it. If you look at the results that come out for VCE at the end of the year, so many of our high results come out of the independent schools. If you look at the high results in New South Wales, they come out of the government schools.

**Ms MILLER** — In New South Wales and Western Australia are they linked to universities already?

**Dr KRONBORG** — No, they are not.

**The CHAIR** — We are going to have to conclude there. Is there anything you want to briefly add that has not been covered?

**Dr KRONBORG** — I think we should see as a priority the provision for gifted students and be less concerned about the impact on the schools. If we are providing for the academic needs of these students, then I think teachers need to change their thinking about how to provide for the highly able students in their schools. Many of those students become the top students in a school after they are taken out. We have to remember about parents and those kids who decide to leave those schools for a better education that if the schools they were in were able to provide that, they would not go. It is a parent's right, if the child is able and willing to change schools, to make that move. I think it is the responsibility of the teachers to improve their own teaching skills and their own strategies if they want to make sure those students do not go.

**The CHAIR** — It is a good way to finish. Thank you very much for your contribution.

**Committee adjourned.**