

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 19 September 2011

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Ms C. Greenbank, student.

The CHAIR — Welcome everybody, and I particularly would like to welcome you, Caelli, for appearing before the Education and Training Committee. I will begin by explaining the process this morning. We have a series of questions that we will ask you. As you can see, today's inquiry is being recorded by Hansard. As part of our inquiry, what you say today is protected by what we call parliamentary privilege. That means anything you say is protected under the same privilege that a member of Parliament would be afforded, but if you leave here and say anything outside of this particular inquiry, the same parliamentary privilege is not afforded. You will also get a copy of the Hansard transcript, and if there are any typographical errors of something that you have said today, you will have the opportunity to correct those.

As you know, this inquiry is looking at gifted and talented students. We are looking at programs and activities that currently exist. We are also looking at options and ways to improve what is currently out there. Your evidence today will certainly help us in doing that. To begin, are there any opening remarks that you want to make before we ask questions?

Ms GREENBANK — No, I am happy to proceed straight to the questions.

The CHAIR — Firstly, many contributors have told the committee that there are too few options for gifted students at primary school. Do you agree with this, and what was your experience at primary school?

Ms GREENBANK — Yes, I would say that is true. From my understanding, a lot of students are not identified as gifted at primary school. It is very much straight down the line and everyone does the same thing. The only differentiation you get is that some teachers will ability group students; so I was in the top spelling group, or the second top maths group, and that sort of thing. But beyond that everybody does the same thing. No-one realises that kids can be as different as they are that early.

The CHAIR — Is there anything in particular that you would suggest could be done at the primary school level — for example, I am going to ask you a bit about the SEAL program that you were in at secondary level. But is there a SEAL program for children of primary school age, or are there other things that you have experienced later on in life that could be utilised in the earlier years?

Ms GREENBANK — I think anything that applies to older students can equally be applied to younger students. The main thing is early identification. The earlier you can figure out a child is gifted, then the earlier you can make a difference, the earlier you can do something that is going to help them and is going to help their peers. Imagine how a normal child feels seeing someone else who can do the same work so much more easily; it is hard for the gifted child to be sitting there twiddling their thumbs the whole time, but it is hard for the other kids going, 'Why can't I do it this easily?'. The earlier you can figure out a child is gifted, the earlier you can take steps to do something about it. But, yes, something like a SEAL program for primary school kids or acceleration; anything that you can apply to a gifted child you can equally apply in primary school as at high school.

The CHAIR — Is there any downside in terms of accelerating at the early years? I know that you found difficulty later on through the university years in being accepted into university at your age, but is there a point or a limit in terms of acceleration?

Ms GREENBANK — I actually wish that I had been accelerated more in primary school than at high school, because it is much easier in primary school to adapt the curriculum slightly so that you still get all the information necessary for later on, whereas in high school the curriculum is much more set in stone. You have to do what your class is doing; it is harder to shift it. It would have been so much easier to do it in primary school and then go into high school, you know, go straight into year 7 with the other kids.

The CHAIR — I am going to ask you specifically about the SEAL program now. The committee understands that you were a student in the SEAL program. Do you think the SEAL program is a good model for educating gifted students? If so, what are the most effective components of the SEAL program, and what improvements or changes would best be made to the SEAL program?

Ms GREENBANK — You will probably hear over the next half hour that I am a big fan of SEAL. It made a big difference. It was good educationally, in that the teachers were aware that everyone in that class had a

greater propensity to learn; it was easier to pick up information, and we did not need as much repetition. It was good in that fashion. It was also really good socially. Apart from the fact that I was placed with 25 other kids who were all like me, it made it a lot easier to make friends, but it also removed a lot of the stigma of being gifted. At my school we also had a program for children at the other end of the scale; so it was not so much, 'You're a smart kid; let's pick on you'; it was, 'Oh, you're from the smart class'. But there were 26 of us; they were not going to bully 26 of us. We banded together and could be friends with each other. We also had things like sport and so forth with the other kids, so they got to see that we were just like them as well. It made it a lot easier to fit in with the mainstream kids. It took away that stigma.

The CHAIR — What improvements do you think could be made to the current SEAL program?

Ms GREENBANK — I guess one thing would be ensuring that whoever is running the SEAL program at each school has some understanding of giftedness. When I started, the teacher in charge of gifted education at my high school had a diploma in gifted ed; she knew exactly what she was talking about. She knew the literature; she knew exactly what she was doing. Through later years they began handing it off to different teachers who actually did not know what they were doing. They did not understand nearly as well as the first teacher had why they were doing things the way they were and which ideas were good ones — that sort of thing. Again, it makes it harder. If they believe the myths and not the truths, then how are they going to be able to properly accommodate those gifted students?

Mr ELASMAR — The committee understands that, because of your age, you were unable to obtain early entry to university when you finished school. Can you tell us about your experience in seeking early entrance to university, and what challenges do you think you would have faced if you had entered university straight after completing year 12?

Ms GREENBANK — As it was, and as you possibly know, I ended up going to uni early anyway. I went to a different uni at first; I spent a year at UB and then went to Monash afterwards. That was easier in a lot of ways. If I had gone straight to Monash, I would have had to have moved out and would have had to have been entirely self-reliant and independent at 16. It still would have been better in some ways. I still would have gotten along academically and socially with the other kids, but that self-reliance would have been rather daunting. It was kind of an easier way as I had my family's support, so that by the time I started at Monash I already understood the uni structure, what classes were going to be like, and that sort of thing. I was used to relying a lot more on myself, so it was not nearly as scary as it might have been.

Mr ELASMAR — Do you believe that early entry to university should be more accessible to gifted students?

Ms GREENBANK — I certainly do. I have been trying to pursue this at Monash. I have been in contact all year with Education (Academic Affairs), within the student association in trying to lobby the uni to drop the age limit. They have done their own research, and they have noted that Monash is the only Go8 university in Australia to have an age limit. This is not strictly true; Melbourne does, but theirs is 16 at time of enrolment, and they are willing to negotiate below that, whereas Monash's policy is a lot more set in stone. So, yes, I will continue to try to change that, because the way they have structured their early entry requirements is not at all conducive to what they are trying to achieve. In actual fact it is counterproductive.

Ms MILLER — Many submissions suggest that some teaching professionals and school leaders have negative attitudes towards gifted students and gifted education. What is your experience of the negative attitudes towards gifted students or gifted education? Do you agree that such attitudes sometimes exist? If so, what can be done to address these attitudes?

Ms GREENBANK — They very much exist. My year 8 English teacher definitely exhibited some of those negative attitudes. If she had these negative attitudes, I still wonder why she was placed as the English teacher of a gifted class. Yes, it is simply putting up a blockade and not wanting to accelerate; wanting to conform to what the rest of the class is doing and not being willing to acknowledge that children can be different and they can learn differently.

Ms MILLER — Did you find that negativity was de-motivating?

Ms GREENBANK — Yes, knowing a teacher does not like you really is not fun, and I could tell. It is so much easier if a teacher is willing to work with you. It is one of those things where everybody has to be willing to cooperate. If a teacher does not believe in giftedness, so to speak, and does not like to acknowledge that children can be different and can be more intelligent in some ways than other children, then you are never going to get anywhere.

Mr ELASMAR — In your submission you say that there is very little training in gifted education for pre-service teachers and this adversely impacts on the education of gifted students. What specific kinds of training do pre-service teachers need, and do you think that some training in gifted education should be mandatory for all pre-service teachers?

Ms GREENBANK — Yes, I would love to see teachers being given some understanding of what giftedness is. I particularly remember an incident in year 8. We had a substitute teacher for two periods. We just wanted to be teenagers. We wanted to run around, run amok and do nothing for two periods. The teacher's response was, 'Oh, you're the SEAL class; I thought you were meant to be clever or something' — as though we were little angels who were perfect, who studied all the time and were not actually children. If this is what they expect of a gifted child, no wonder we are not getting anywhere. They do not know the first thing to look for. If they could be taught in university, if they could be given some ideas — for example, referred to publications such as works by Miraca Gross which explain what giftedness is — and if they could be told that these children exist and that they are going to need a slightly differentiated curriculum, it would make it so much easier to recognise gifted children. They are still normal children, but they just learn differently and more quickly. If they do not know what giftedness is, we are not going to get anywhere.

The CHAIR — Caelli, your submission says that gifted children relate to people with a similar mental age, not chronological age. What are the benefits for you of being educated with like-minded students?

Ms GREENBANK — It means I can make friends. I do not have a lot in common with people of my own chronological age. By now I am at a different point in life. I am already looking ahead to planning the exchange for the final year of my degree. I am looking ahead to postgrad work. How do I relate to other 18-year-olds who at the moment are enjoying the freedom and partying of the first year of uni? They have only just got out of high school, whereas for me that was two or three years ago. Already I am at a different life stage to them, to a certain extent. But even at high school and so forth I did not have the same interests, I did not think the same way they did. In my first year of uni, at the University of Ballarat, I was 16, and the closest friend I had in a couple of my classes was 34. Yes, it is not so much about chronological age; it is about mental age — the people who think like you who have had similar experiences to you.

The CHAIR — It seems with your experience you have that level of maturity to deal with people at the same sort of mental age as where you are at. What about in terms of some of your peers who went through, say, the SEAL program, or others who you met along the way? Has there been any negative side that you have experienced with dealing with people, or friends potentially, or being educated with people who are three, four or five years older than them?

Ms GREENBANK — For me or?

The CHAIR — For you. Has there been some downside in terms of being educated with people who are a lot older than you, in terms of socially; and if not you, what about for others?

Ms GREENBANK — Occasionally there are issues like that. In VCE I was a lot younger than the other kids; they were all having 18ths. They had just started getting their Ps, they were able to drink, that sort of thing. In first year of uni, or my first year at Monash rather, I was still 17, so I could not engage in all the pub crawls and a lot of the activities that involve alcohol. But I was not interested anyway, so that was not such a big downer for me. And besides, for me the numerous benefits that came with being able to make friends and to actually enjoy my classes because they were mentally stimulating hugely outweighed things like not being able to drive. My friends drove me around anyway; so there are some downsides, mostly sociocultural, but there are ways around them, and they did not really come up against the numerous benefits that I found.

The CHAIR — In terms of you being accelerated through school — and I know we have touched on this — can you outline some more of what you think the benefits of being accelerated are, other than obviously dealing with people with like-minded ability and what have you, and, again, some disadvantages in being accelerated, from your own experience?

Ms GREENBANK — Outside of things like being with like-minded people, it was mainly that the more I was accelerated, the more the work was at a standard that was challenging me. By about the age of 10 my teacher had given up trying to use spelling words with me, because I could spell anything she threw at me. I had a lot of that in grades 3, 4 and 5. They just could not teach me anything more, so there was a lot of sitting in the corner doing nothing, or a lot of silent reading. I did a lot of reading. Yes, it is actually being in a grade where I have got something I need to learn that I do not already know that is going to challenge me. It was about re-engaging me.

Year 7 maths was great, because it was the first time I had actually learnt anything in maths and the first time I had ever liked maths, just because it was finally a little more stimulating. The teacher was willing to teach me and was willing to challenge me and explain the things that did not quite make sense and fill in the gaps, that sort of thing. Yes, it was having that social element as well. I did not get on with the other students in primary school, not in the least. I had a very negative relationship with them; so being with people who did think like me, or at least were not so different from me, made it easier to form friendships and made it easier to get along.

The CHAIR — Can you see any disadvantages in being accelerated?

Ms GREENBANK — I suppose some of the ones I mentioned before relating to age-based cultural things, like drinking, driving, voting and that sort of thing. All my friends were doing things I could not because I was not old enough. But, like I said, at the same time on balance it was still a huge advantage.

Ms MILLER — The committee has received submissions that suggest gifted students have particular emotional needs and require support through information, counselling and access to networks, such as like-minded peers. Do you agree with this? If so, what kinds of support do gifted students need, and what role can schools play in providing support to gifted students?

Ms GREENBANK — I am not sure to which emotional needs you are specifically referring. I would say those increase the more a student is not challenged. I know I am in a far better position today than when I was in primary school. I was not in a good mental state at all because I was not challenged, I had no friends — I really had no reason to get out of bed in the mornings. Whereas now I have got people who will text me at 10 past 5 if I do not show up at uni that night. I have got classes I need to go to because they are interesting. One of my favourite lectures is on Monday mornings, so I am skipping that one to be here today. But I will go home and listen to that because I enjoy it, because it is interesting and it stimulates me.

So in a sense those emotional needs do increase the less a student's needs are addressed, and the longer they go on the worse it gets and the more likely it is that counselling and support are needed. At the same time, things like family support and friends' support are necessary with things like acceleration. As I mentioned, being at a different age to people who can drive or whatever, sometimes it is a little bit depressing and you go, 'Oh why can't I get my licence yet?' or, 'Why can't I vote, because I have just as much of an opinion as them. It's just because they're older'. Sometimes it can be a little bit frustrating knowing that you are capable and cannot. Sometimes it is good to have people who can support you through that.

Ms MILLER — On the emotional needs I am curious about, if you were frustrated, was there a particular teacher, or even the principal, that you could go to and express how you were feeling?

Ms GREENBANK — Not really. In high school there was. I had a really inspirational teacher in high school. Especially being in a school where they had SEAL, they were aware that they had some very clever students there who may have needed something slightly different, and they were willing to do that. But at least in primary school, no; there was no-one who was willing to acknowledge or realise that I was different from the other kids, and that they had different needs educationally, socially and emotionally and that sort of thing. So no; I had my family, that was it, and no matter how hard they tried, they could not do anything to make it better.

Ms MILLER — The committee understands that you grew up in regional Victoria. How did living in regional Victoria impact on your ability to access opportunities for education or enrichment?

Ms GREENBANK — I was thinking about this on the weekend, because this was an angle I had not really considered before. I guess my main response to that would be that it is the mentality of the country versus the city, the old idea of the villein — the one who lives in the ville, or the city, or in the country. There is not as much exposure to different things, to new ideas, in the country. For teachers it is harder to be aware that students are different when everyone is the same.

The town I come from is small, it is rural, so everyone is Anglo-Saxon and everyone is the same in all those sorts of regards — they are all the same age, that sort of thing. It made it harder to realise that one of the kids in that class was very different to all the others, who could think differently and who needed something different. They just had not been exposed to that sort of thing; not to mention that because there are fewer people in the country there are fewer programs. There was the SEAL program and there was a gifted support network in a nearby city, but that was really it. There is just not enough need in the country to actually require those programs to be there. That exists more in the city but not so much in the rural areas.

Ms MILLER — I have one other question. It touches on the point that David made about the disadvantages and so on when you finished school at 16 and went to university. You can do degrees online, so you do not actually have to go to university, which is non-contact, and you are currently doing the contact. If you had your time over, do you think it would have been advantageous for you to do an online degree? Or are you now better off doing a contact degree?

Ms GREENBANK — I think if given the second choice, I still would not do the online degree. I wanted the actual experience. I wanted to be at uni, I wanted to make friends, I wanted to be on campus, I wanted to go to the bar with my friends after class and sit there and eat nachos and make funny faces and all that sort of thing. I wanted the full uni experience, and that is what I was being denied. I would still have had the educational experience online; I would not have had the social aspects and the cultural exposure that I have now. It would have been a replacement for what I actually wanted and was not allowed to have.

Ms MILLER — You also talked about mentality as against chronological age. Had you gone directly to the university at a younger age, would you have been accepted?

Ms GREENBANK — It is hard to say. I think I probably would have been. I have got a lot of friends who are in older year levels. I have got friends at uni who are 23, 24, 25. I think one of the things I have learnt about uni is the average IQ in general is higher. I go to one of the best universities in Australia — you have to be good to get in. There is a slightly higher ability of functioning there, so I get on pretty well with everyone I meet, because they are all of a similar mindset to my own. I cannot be certain, but I suspect I probably would have been. I cannot be sure if it would have been as well as now. But yes, I suspect it would have been a lot easier, simply because the people are more like me.

The CHAIR — Caelli, just a couple of final questions. Firstly, when were you first identified as gifted and how?

Ms GREENBANK — My parents had me tested when I was 10 years old. I think they had gotten reasonably suspicious and were not happy with what the school was doing in relation to that, so I was independently tested over a couple of days. That was when I realised that I was far beyond what anyone had previously thought and that something serious was going to need to be done.

The CHAIR — It is going back some years now, but as early as you can recall, what were some of the experiences with the teachers before you were identified? Did you have any teachers that you were positively engaging with at that stage?

Ms GREENBANK — There were a few teachers who I think could see that I was probably a bit above the other students, but a lot of the time it was a case of, 'She can do the work; I have got other kids to worry about'.

The CHAIR — What age was that? Try to remember back as early as you can.

Ms GREENBANK — Yes. I think it was really only one teacher who really understood I might have been a bit above, but I only had her for two years in primary school and the second year she was pregnant most of the time, so she had baby brain and often could not — —

The CHAIR — What year were you in?

Ms GREENBANK — That was grade 5, and my class was being particularly belligerent that year. It was enough for her to try to keep order with trying to remember everything that she was meant to be doing and trying to keep them in line. She did what she could, but it was not really enough. I remember grade 3. The teacher knew there was me and three other kids who needed more than she could give us, but she was focusing on the kids who were still trying to learn to read. In my prep class there were a lot of children who did not speak English. I remember we had some Vietnamese girls. The focus was trying to get them to learn the English alphabet, so the girl who could read all the books that she got sent home — her little prep readers — ‘Do not worry about her; there are other things to focus on’.

The CHAIR — So in those early years, you would probably agree that that was a difficult time for you. Once you were identified did things get better, and if so, how?

Ms GREENBANK — They did, mainly because my parents had something they could wave in people’s faces when they were trying to fight for me to have an actual education. They had proof from a psychologist that no, it was not just pushy parents; they actually had a gifted child who needed something more. It also helped that at that point my mother, who had read a lot of literature, knew what she was doing, so she went to the SEAL school and said, ‘All right, I have a child who I think fits your program’. Yes. Once we knew I was gifted, we had a better idea of what we were doing. We knew who to ask, where to go, what I needed better, and we could try to pursue those interests, plus — like I said — we had a piece of paper that actually was proof and meant people would now listen to us. It was not just my parents being pushy; they knew.

The CHAIR — In all the things that you have been involved in — I know we touched on SEAL before — maybe you can be specific in terms of some of the things that you have felt have been really good for you that would be a good model for us to be able to suggest as part of our findings to say, ‘This is really good practice; this is something that gifted kids should be participating in’?

Ms GREENBANK — The one I am going to focus on is acceleration. It is the easiest to work with in the current system. It is the one that is going to be most effective if used correctly. By that I mean some kids are going to need a one-year acceleration. Some kids may need three or four. It is a matter of identifying those kids and offering that to them. The main obstacle with that is the highly negative attitudes towards acceleration. The chair of gifted education at my high school — like I said, she had a diploma and knew what she was doing — was quite happy for me to do it. It was convincing the school counsellors that me being younger than the other kids was not an issue, and that was the point of the acceleration. She said she had seen so many accelerations go wrong, most likely because they had been applied to the wrong students. They had misidentified some of those students and had accelerated them, and because they were not gifted it had gone wrong.

That is providing an obstacle for the truly gifted students who actually need the acceleration, because no-one wants to do it. They are all too scared, which is where the teacher training comes into it. If teachers could be told that occasionally you are going to come across a child who actually genuinely needs this acceleration and that when it is used correctly it can be an absolute blessing instead of a curse, then maybe something can be done for these kids. Like I said, it is the easiest one to fit into the current curriculum; it does not actually involve giving them different work. It is simply putting them a year ahead with some work that is actually more relevant to them across the board and more challenging.

The CHAIR — Caelli, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. Good luck with the rest of your studies and your future.

Ms GREENBANK — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.