

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne — 19 September 2011

Members

Mr P. Crisp
Mr N. Elasmarr
Ms E. Miller

Mr D. Southwick
Ms G. Tierney

Chair: Mr D. Southwick
Deputy Chair: Ms G. Tierney

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Riseley
Research Officers: Ms M. Scott, Ms A. Madden
Administration Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Dr D. Lipson, and
Ms B. Black.

The CHAIR — Welcome to this public hearing. As you are aware, we are the Education and Training Committee. We are looking specifically at the areas of gifted and talented students, some of the programs that currently exist and also at opportunities for enhancing programs and teaching into the future. We are recording the hearing today via Hansard. You will have the opportunity to have a look at the transcript once it is complete, and if there are any typographic errors, you will have the opportunity to correct those. I add that your evidence today is covered by what we term parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege that members of Parliament are afforded, so feel free to say what you wish. However, the same privilege does not cover you once you leave the hearing today. In a minute I will give you the opportunity to make opening remarks. You do not have to, but if you want to do that, we give you that opportunity, and then we have a series of questions for you.

Dr LIPSON — Firstly, we would just like to thank you and both parties for opening up this investigation into the gifted and talented children. We feel it is a very important aspect that needs attention throughout education. We would like to start off by saying that, as teachers and teacher educators, we are keenly interested in the discussion addressing all issues pertaining to this area. However, as lecturers at Victoria University, our focus will primarily be on the western and northern regions of Victoria, but it is basically our perception — and our views are based on our perceptions; we are not actually speaking on behalf of VU.

Ms BLACK — We are also speaking as educators and teachers. We have both taught for many years. Between us we have taught all levels from prep to year 12 and now tertiary. We are also grandmothers, so we are very involved in what is happening in preschool education and from birth upwards.

The CHAIR — I am going to kick off the questions by looking at the terminology that is currently being used. Many of the submissions suggest there are negative perceptions associated with the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’. What terminology do you think we should use for gifted and talented students in Victoria? If you think we should continue to use the terms we are using, that is fine as well.

Dr LIPSON — I think an egg is an egg; you have got to call it what it is. They are gifted children; they are children who have exceptional ability. Whichever way you phrase it, there are going to be people in the community who do not necessarily hold to the idea that there are gifted or above-intelligence children at all.

Ms BLACK — We would also agree that there needs to be a generally accepted definition of what is understood by giftedness and gifted and talented, and the differences between them. Some kind of consensus needs to be reached on the difference between gifted and high-ability students and the difference between gifted, high-ability and gifted and talented students, as well as recognition of gifted underachievers. Gagné’s definition of gifted and talented is accepted in Victoria and in a lot of places by the informed, but we are the few, we are the minority, and I think this is where the problem arises. There are many teachers who believe that through a differentiated curriculum and good teachers we are already catering to the needs of all students. Some people will not accept that there is such a thing as giftedness; they believe that it is something that belongs to the privileged wealthy who can afford the resources that develop and help children to achieve high results. That is where the problem starts and where it is at the moment.

Ms MILLER — Your submission suggests that pre-service and in-service teachers need training in how to identify gifted students, particularly underachieving gifted students. What specific training do pre-service and in-service teachers need to identify giftedness, and what information, support or resources do teachers need to help them identify giftedness in the classroom? For example, would a toolkit for teachers, as has been developed in New South Wales, be useful?

Dr LIPSON — We have given a lot of thought to the specific training needs and we believe that for both pre-service and in-service teachers there are some common areas. We believe that we need to develop a sort of understanding related to what giftedness means, and as Barbara said, to the relationship between gifted and talented and between the very bright and gifted, and the appreciation that a child with a disability can be gifted. That is the first understanding. The second understanding is that both pre-service and in-service teachers need to be aware of the indicators of giftedness using some form of identification checklist. We are also suggesting that both pre-service and in-service teachers in the western suburbs should be aware that the psychological tests and other testing indicators of intelligence and aptitude are not always relevant when applied to children from non-English-speaking backgrounds. We are very aware of that.

Our third point is that we would hope that they would know how to create a profile of a child whom they believe may be gifted through their research, gathering information from a range of sources. The final thing is that they need to be sensitised to the social and emotional needs of gifted learners.

Those four steps should be embedded in all educational courses at all levels, both undergraduate and postgraduate. Pre-service teachers could do a compulsory unit in their education degree that covers areas such as differentiating the curriculum, the creation of creative materials specific for individualisation of the curriculum, the promotion of higher order thinking skills, higher order questioning techniques, and the appropriate assessment tools and techniques for the evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies.

At VU we cover these areas in detail in a range of education units from first to fourth year; however, there is only one dedicated elective at this point in time that pre-service teachers can undertake that addresses giftedness as simply one component in a unit called 'Teaching children with special learning needs' — that is, what we find is that many pre-service teachers do not engage in deep and reflective discussions pertaining to gifted education in any targeted, thorough, sophisticated or overt way through the four years of their course. However, the needs of gifted children should be mandated to be included throughout all educational courses at all year levels. By doing this, giftedness becomes a component of the repertoire of all teachers. This can be done through consideration of giftedness being linked to case studies, pertinent topics being covered in all the education subjects.

Ms BLACK — I think one of the best ways to cater for in-service teachers, and this goes along with pre-service teacher teaching, is to give them case studies of children who are gifted and talented, or, going back to the ones I mentioned earlier, those who have aspects of giftedness, and then to get them to differentiate the curriculum to cater to those children's needs. Materials need to be created that teachers have at their disposal, because teachers are very busy, and if it is too difficult for them to prepare materials, it will not happen. There needs to be the creation of materials for them so that they can individualise the curriculum.

You have probably heard many people come in here and mention the promotion of higher order thinking skills, but what is it? It is how to do it and to be skilled in doing it. This is part of what teachers need to talk about in their professional development. They need to be discussing higher order questioning techniques. What is a good higher order question? — and go into detail about it. Then they need to look at how they assess children who are gifted. Are our assessment techniques for all the children relevant in the assessment of a child who is gifted and talented? This kind of in-service teacher training needs to occur very much on site. Teachers need to come together at a time when they are not exhausted. They need to come together with fresh minds and a desire to do it. I think that is also one of the issues that is going to need government intervention.

Ms MILLER — Going back to pre-service teachers, in your view what are the benefits to pre-service teachers of studying gifted education?

Ms BLACK — They do it in a very small way, and when they are asked the question, 'Have you got any gifted students in your class?' — and I am talking western suburbs now — almost everyone puts their hand up. They have identified what they believe are gifted students. According to our definition they may not be gifted, they may be very able or they may be gifted students who are have an IQ of from 130 up to 180. They have no way of knowing, but they know that these children become bored quickly, do not seem to be challenged, want to do different things, are not stimulated, use the words 'I'm bored'; and they say that they then become behaviour management problems. For a pre-service teacher that is often an area of great concern. How do they handle those children? They have done everything they can with their strategies for engagement. Then you have these students who quickly absorb and understand what they are going to do. It would be very good for them to have strategies and materials in place and know that when they go into schools there will be someone there they can turn to.

Ms MILLER — Your submission says that pre-service teachers at Victoria University are engaged in a small amount of discussion about gifted education in their second year. Is this insufficient, and do you think some training in gifted education should be mandatory for all pre-service teachers?

Dr LIPSON — Is it insufficient? Yes, obviously, because in the course we have introduced over the last 12 months, which is 'Teaching children with special learning needs', only 1 lecture out of 12 has been identified

as dealing with giftedness, and the lecturer taking that class has admitted that he has a very poor background in this area so there is not much attention to it. As Barbara said, if the children are not treated properly, they become very disengaged. The pre-service teachers need to know how to manage these sorts of children. Should it be mandated? I believe so. I think just as we are very aware that the bottom 5 per cent of the scale is being helped and attended to in a school and in a classroom, that there are teaching aides and that there are oftentimes special intervention programs for the intellectually disabled, I think we need to consider the other end of the spectrum that these children need to be dealt with as a fair and equitable approach to it.

Ms BLACK — Can I just mention also that in the second year all students do a subject called Making the Conditions for Learning, and one of those lectures is devoted also to students with different learning needs, and part of that one session of 2 hours is devoted to giftedness.

Ms MILLER — Does that help break down any negativity either at a student level or teacher level?

Ms BLACK — With regard to the students, it seems to, but I am then dealing with staff who are taking that, who may not have time to do it in the 2 hours or may not feel that it is necessary, because if they are doing something on how do you cater for children with different learning needs, I think surely that has to be addressed in what they are doing.

The CHAIR — And even if they are doing it, would you suggest that that is certainly not enough?

Ms BLACK — Absolutely not enough.

Dr LIPSON — It is not enough, so they are getting a very small dose in Barbara's subject and in the subject I introduced last year. I do a little bit in the science education course as well, but there is no concerted effort by the school of education to ensure that giftedness is addressed all the way through. We do know that it is touched on because we do it in second year, but other than that from what we have heard it is not dealt with after that.

Mr ELASMAR — Talking about professional development, what kind of professional development in gifted education does Victoria University provide teachers; and what kind of ongoing professional development do teachers need to effectively cater for gifted and highly talented students?

Ms BLACK — We do not provide any professional development for teachers at Victoria University. We provide it in a limited way for pre-service teachers, but we do not provide anything at the moment for teachers in the area. We have not even had any requests.

Dr LIPSON — No, no requests.

Mr ELASMAR — Do you believe some ongoing training or professional learning in gifted education should be required for all teachers?

Ms BLACK — Absolutely.

Dr LIPSON — Absolutely

Mr ELASMAR — In your submission you say that professional development in gifted education has fallen off and that there has been no demand for professional development in this area from teachers in the western suburbs. How can all teachers be encouraged and supported in relation to professional development in gifted education?

Dr LIPSON — I would like to start off by saying that in 2001 and 2002 I was working at the then Department of Education and Training and I was very involved with gifted education programs, and designing and running the gifted education conference in 2002. I have noticed, of course, that gifted education conferences and the like have actually fallen off, so I think there are a number of areas that we would like to see reinstated. One of them is that there should be acknowledgement or some form of accreditation of in-service training or courses. Maybe there needs to be some form of ongoing registration associated with the VIT. In that way teachers are encouraged to keep up to date with the latest advances.

We also would suggest that there should be some form of mandatory attendance for in-school professional development, so that is, I guess, encouragement. One of the things that they could do as a part of the encouragement is open ways for promotion into leadership roles if they undertake professional development in gifted education. The support that we would be looking for would be that maybe the government again should help in providing conferences where international experts are brought across to keynote and to follow up with training and workshops over extended periods of time. All attendances should then be able to feed into some form of accreditation for courses or again for promotion. Further teachers could be funded to do some sort of secondment work, to work with some of the various organisations that provide support and support material for gifted students, maybe for a semester, so that when they are then immersed in an environment where the focus has been gifted education they may upskill very quickly, and of course then they take that notion back to their schools.

I believe we need to have some form of encouragement to have our gifted organisation provide offices in the western and northern regions to enable teachers ease of access to material, resources and support programs. We believe support for staff to do high degree courses with some sort of financial and/or time support — for example, leave to do study, leave to do assignments and exams — but with a commitment at the end of the course for the staff to then remain at the school for a specified period of time to manage and develop the programs is required; it is a little bit like the old studentship program, but to get teachers back in to retrain and then to stay on and feed that back into the schools.

Ms BLACK — And also whilst they are doing the course to be coming back to the school — to keep that contact with the school and to be sharing the knowledge and skills that they have developed during their course.

Dr LIPSON — We also feel there is a need for a whole-school approach, so we need to have the administration and the leadership teams firmly behind any initiative and in particular this sort of initiative. We need to ensure that teachers appreciate there is an urgent need for understanding, identification and management of our gifted children and that they see the need in the value of upskilling in management of the gifted and being rewarded for this upskilling in their training.

We also believe professional development should be undertaken in the school on curriculum days rather than teachers attending out-of-hours school conferences. You need to start also with people in the school who are either passionate or motivated by the needs of gifted children. They have to be the people that you target to help effect the changes that we need. Then if they are attending these training sessions those selected staff may be able to enthuse the rest of the staff or at least some of their close colleagues.

Ms MILLER — Your submission says that there is a lack of agreement on the best strategies for educating gifted students. You also say that there could be a range of giftedness among a cohort of gifted students, and this is sometimes overlooked in curriculum planning for gifted students. In your view what are the most effective methods and approaches to educating gifted students?

Ms BLACK — You have probably by now heard all the characteristics of gifted students, so I will start with the first part — that there are a range of abilities among gifted students, a range of levels. I think there is a misconception that if you have a gifted child in your class, this strategy is going to work for that one. Of course what works for one child, as with anything in your class, will not necessarily work for someone else. As a teacher I think you have to again assess the particular student in your class. The ideal is that the gifted child comes in to you. You know their IQ. You have heard from their parents. You get feedback. You have an idea of what this child is like, and teaching is all about forming relationships, so you form your relationships with your gifted children just as you do with all children in your class, and you have a very good idea of what their particular areas of interest are.

I will talk about it in real terms. I gave a pre-test to a child I had in science, as I do to all the students to find out what they know, and she knew it all — the whole year. She could stand up on her little soapbox and just go on and on and on. There was absolutely no point in expecting her to sit through a year of experiments, except that I did ask her to come and work with us during experiments. I devised a program for her by asking her what she was really interested in with regard to this topic. Then I let her work on that and do research, and I had to draw up a particular assessment program for her. I find that is what works best. Then she had the opportunity, which a gifted child likes very much, of going into assembly and talking to everyone about what she had done. We had

Science Week, during which we had groups of children again, and she was part of that. She was able to take her particular group to a level far above the other groups in the class. In making decisions as a teacher about what will be the best for this child, it starts off with a discussion about the child, knowing where the child is on the topic, knowing what they know about the topic and then sitting down and working out a program. There is no easy way around it.

Ms MILLER — Your submission suggests that a community-based education program should be implemented to promote understanding and acceptance of giftedness. What should be the key component of an education program aimed at overcoming negative attitudes to giftedness? How would such a program be delivered?

Dr LIPSON — We had a long discussion about community-based education and what that would look like. In general we are not sure what it would actually look like in the end. What would have to happen to start off with is that there would need to be some general research. Essentially one of the things we would be looking for is a look at the research around the world about what is being offered in the community, looking in particular at what is happening in Victoria, and then a look at the communities through which these programs would be run. We know that there are gifted children in a range of communities that find it very difficult to engage with the education system. They come from generations of disadvantage and generations of unemployment, and they often come from having a perspective of low value of education. When you start to do the research into your community and look at the various programs around it is a matter of matching and marrying the right sort of program with the community you are actually looking at.

Ms BLACK — We are thinking of looking at involving councils and the community centres that are there, getting feedback and using those centres as places where parents could be interviewed. Our feeling and belief is that you cannot rush into a particular suburb and assume that you know what is best for their community. All our research tells us that in some communities the attitude towards females is very different from the attitude towards males. If you go in and expect that you are going to be able to provide something for girls whose families expect the girls to be at home with them looking after the children, it is doomed to failure. You have to gently try to have public forums and people there, including interpreters, who will be able to speak to parents and stakeholders in each suburb about this notion of intellectual giftedness and what it is.

Ms MILLER — In terms of components, it is obviously involving parents. Is that what you are saying?

Ms BLACK — Yes. We talk about parent voice. We think the parents are very important. Either they will be absolutely aware but reluctant to say that their child is gifted, or they will not acknowledge it at all.

The CHAIR — I will extend that. We had a parent forum today, and one of the themes that came across was negative attitudes of principals and some of the leadership bodies within schools, suggesting that taking kids out and putting them into specialist schools, programs or clustering is sort of taking the attention away from, more and more, educating at the broadest common denominator. There seemed to be a negative attitude towards gifted and talented kids per se within the school environment. Do you think that is a problem? Do you think principals need some work?

Ms BLACK — Can I be very provocative here? Is it because the principal did not want to lose numbers?

The CHAIR — That could be a point.

Ms BLACK — A lot hangs on principals retaining their numbers, and I think that can often affect the attitudes of people. I am not sure that taking gifted children out of school during the school day is necessarily the way to go. There are many different options and many different ways of doing it, just as you do not want to take a child out of the class if they have a learning disability. You want to keep them in the class as much as possible. Of course if you want to develop the skills of a child who has a learning disability, it will be much better one on one, and sometimes there are possibilities in the school curriculum when you can do that. There are also possibilities in the school curriculum when you can do that with gifted children without the child missing out. It is very important for gifted children to have peer interaction, and by peer interaction I do not mean just their age group. It is very important for them to mix with like-minded, gifted students — we understand that — but that can be arranged out of school hours or at different times in the school curriculum.

The CHAIR — What about extending that to specialist schools and schools that run SEAL programs?

Dr LIPSON — One of the schools we heard from last week was the John Monash Science School, which is a specialty SEAL school. We did a lot of talking through the week about those sorts of schools, and again it goes back to the need to research the background of the community in which you hope to plant that particular program. It may not actually gel very well, so it is about knowing the community before you bring in any other specialty school or SEAL school into that area. Again a bit of research is needed.

Ms BLACK — I think it is about making parents in the western suburbs aware of what goes on in Victoria and what is available in all parts of Victoria.

The CHAIR — In terms of identifying students from disadvantaged backgrounds, your submission identifies that indigenous students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds face particular barriers in having giftedness identified. How can the identification of giftedness in these groups be increased?

Dr LIPSON — We were talking about non-verbal types of tests.

Ms BLACK — We were talking of ways other than the traditional IQ test. There has to be another way of identifying them, because often they do not have the language skills. Compiling a profile of a gifted child is more than an IQ test, so you have to look at anecdotal evidence often with children from these backgrounds. What does the family say about this child? What are the children in the school at the same level saying about this child? What is the child saying about themselves? Sometimes that is going to be very difficult for some children who come from a culture where the culture does not necessarily celebrate a child who stands out. They are going to have to speak to someone who they trust and to whom they are able to talk about how they feel and whether they feel any different.

The CHAIR — How do you then prepare teachers to identify specifically with that cohort of students? Might further training be needed, particularly in some of the schools these teachers go into, as opposed to other schools? Is there a further PD that might be required for schools in different regions?

Ms BLACK — I think a good course in gifted and talented education would address all of those issues. One from VU would have a particular focus on the needs of children in the western and northern regions and would probably put a big focus on asking what are the indicators of giftedness in indigenous children, and what are the indicators of giftedness in children who are from non-English-speaking backgrounds?

Mr ELASMAR — In your submission you say that there is a lack of research into programs and facilities for gifted children in the western suburbs. What kind of research needs to be carried out, and what specific issues should this research focus on?

Dr LIPSON — All stakeholders in the community need to be involved in the research of available programs and facilities. This would involve interviewing and surveying a range of people. We would need to gather data on the programs and facilities that are currently operating from community centres and libraries and through organisations that focus on and provide support and programs for gifted children all around Melbourne. These areas also need to cover the physical, creative and science programs. There would be a need to do a comparative analysis of these facilities and programs and ask the question, 'Is it really different between the east and the west?'.
Research is required around the programs and facilities, and as I said earlier, if we are looking at something like the John Monash secondary school for science and a SEAL school, we would need to investigate whether that sort of program fits into the background of the community that we would be looking at.

We would have to find out what facilities are available for gifted children now in the western suburbs. We start off by talking about something like looking at tennis clubs, providing piano or music lessons and golf, but unfortunately a lot of parents cannot afford to provide the equipment for these opportunities for their children to engage in these activities, so we would need to find ways of being able to facilitate this in the western and northern regions.

We would need to find research that is able to identify the gifted students, again through non-literacy based programs. We would need to do interviews in the community where parent voices can be heard, but of course interpreters may need to be present. We will require government offering support, in particular for the children who may be required to stay at home to support families, for after-school hours or for other support needs. I think the government needs to step in to help the children come out of situations that tie them to other areas, other than in developing themselves more fully.

Ms MILLER — You mentioned a point about a difference between the north-west versus the east. What did you mean by that?

Dr LIPSON — What we are finding is that some people are saying that the students in the west do not get the opportunities as much as the children in the eastern suburbs. There are a lot of facilities offered in the eastern suburbs. As I said, John Monash school is one, but there are plenty of others. A lot of organisations are housed further away from the west. We have a perception that the western suburbs are poorly serviced in regard to programs and facilities for gifted children.

Ms MILLER — Do you think that may be because no-one has really taken the lead like you two ladies are now, and so that will change?

Dr LIPSON — Yes.

Ms BLACK — I definitely think so. There is, as we said, firstly a great misconception that there are no gifted students, so if there is no such thing as a gifted student, how could there be gifted students in these areas? If you do not accept the first premise, you are not going to accept the second.

Ms MILLER — It is about changing those attitudes?

Dr LIPSON — It is about changing the attitudes and then looking for the facilities and providing those sorts of facilities to encourage those children who are gifted and have that potential in them, absolutely.

The CHAIR — You mentioned in the beginning that you have taught it all, between you, at all age levels, and you are grandparents. Are there any strategies you could suggest in assisting children in the early years, in terms of supporting them, that might be necessary at the identification level or support level?

Ms BLACK — I think there is a project going on at the moment involving parents in early childhood, not for gifted children but for parents to learn how to play with their children, and it is in the western region. I think this is a very important key, because not only do a lot of parents in these regions, and in the eastern region too, not know how to play with a child and develop a child who is only a couple of months old and provide educationally significant moments for that child and understand them, but it applies to all families and parents.

There is not enough being done for parents in that area, so there will not be enough done for parents with gifted children, because if a gifted five year old is at an age of eight, go backwards: what were they at three months; what were they at six months and what were they at one year? They were well ahead. I know from personal experience that parents who have had children at a very young age who have thought that their child was highly advanced or gifted have not known where to go or how to cope with the child, who often did not sleep more than 4 or 5 hours at all, and the child was just wanting more and more stimulation and talking early and doing everything early. There were no services or supports available for those parents. I do not think that much has changed.

Dr LIPSON — In actual fact, picking up on the grandparent perspective, considering we have moved very much away from the extended family into the nuclear family, a lot of families are struggling and are single-parent households. Maybe it would be an interesting piece of research to find out how many children are being looked after by grandparents and to provide some sort of facility to support the grandparents in helping in the education of their grandchildren as they come in and out of the home.

The CHAIR — We have concluded our questions. Is there anything that you have not had the opportunity to mention that you would like to, as part of your submission today?

Dr LIPSON — Yes. Being academics and working in this area — and I have worked at a number of tertiary institutions — I find in general that although our academic community keep up with research and are very au fait with what is happening, they tend to lose connectivity with what is actually happening in a classroom.

They may say that they are teaching in a classroom, but they have got a narrower focus on the cohort in their lecture than if they are in a primary or secondary classroom. In particular when it comes to the identification of gifted students a lot of our colleagues have not had sufficient training to be able to introduce the material that is required to train our pre-service teachers about gifted children.

Maybe one of the things needed would be the following: if all academics who are involved in education were asked to maintain their VIT registration — which they do not need to do, because they are not teaching in school — that would involve them in keeping up with some form of professional development, and if it could be mandated at some point that some focus on gifted education be included in their ongoing training, that may be a way that we could start to overcome the lack of education of our pre-service teachers, and hence our teachers in our schools, in gifted ed.

I appreciate that academic life may seem nice, but it is really very hectic and we undertake a huge range of ongoing personal and professional development anyhow, but there must be some form of mandating the addressing of specific targeted areas, whether that be literacy, numeracy, identification of gifted, identification of those who have a disability who are not gifted or management of the disabled. There is a whole range of it, and we need to start to tick some boxes for tertiary educators.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Debora and Barbara, for appearing before the committee today.

Witnesses withdrew.