

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Bendigo — 20 September 2011

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Dr K. Ward.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Welcome, and thank you for finding the time to be with us today. All evidence taken at this hearing is being recorded by Hansard. A transcript of today's proceedings will be sent to you, and you need to check that and liaise with Kerryn and Maria in respect of that. You are also covered by parliamentary privilege during the course of this hearing. As you probably know, you are not covered by parliamentary privilege if you say something outside of these walls this afternoon. It is my understanding that you have been invited to make an opening statement, and the committee also has a number of questions for you. If you could keep your opening statement fairly short — we have received your submission — that will allow for genuine discussion amongst ourselves.

Dr WARD — Thank you for inviting me. My opening is just some anecdotal things I have observed around Bendigo that I think are important with regard to general education and certainly with regard to gifted students. I recently spent a bit of time at Bendigo Senior Secondary observing, and I was in one year 12 English class in which a young lass read a very short piece. Because I was not teaching the class I was able to listen possibly a bit more deeply than the teacher, and I picked up that the student may have dyslexia. I spoke to the teacher, we spoke to the student and then she said that she had had a teacher's aide in years 7 and 8. There was no record of what that teacher's aide was for, and the student did not know why she had had a teacher's aide. There seems to be a real need, from preschool upwards to year 12, for dedicated data on students that staff can go and look at as students move from school to school and from year to year. You may have one year when a teacher is not particularly good and misses things about a student, but this needs to be a long-term record of what is happening to individual students. This dear, very sweet girl was leaving year 12 with a lesser education than she should have had. That was one thing.

Another experience I have had was at NETschool, which is just over the road. NETschool has been set up and is very successful for students who leave school and then decide they want to go back but cannot go back into the normal system. This young girl was exceptional. I played a word game with her, and both times that we played I got 22 or 23 and she got 57 and 73, or something like that. I read some of her writing, and it was imaginative, with a beautiful use of language, and descriptive. This girl was exceptional. Her mentor had a real cigarette addiction, so she had to keep leaving the building. One morning she bumped into this student's mother, and they were going to be evicted that weekend. How does an exceptional child cope with such family breakdown? There need to be real scholarships for underprivileged people.

Bendigo has a huge welfare problem. Lightning Reef Primary School has 92 per cent of students on student welfare. The middle class can look after their own gifted children to a degree, but there are all these students, particularly Aboriginal students, who are missing out. They need scholarships to encourage them to stay on and to be given the right direction.

Another thing I have picked up on is the concept of differentiation in teaching, which is an absolute imperative for all students who have disabilities, and we can consider gifted children as having a form of disability. There is very little differentiation going on in the schools that I can find out about in Bendigo. I spoke to three of the top senior secondary students, who are really delightful young people, and they do not remember any differentiation in their primary or secondary schooling. They were aware that they were gifted only because of their family backgrounds; they came from educated and stable backgrounds that encouraged education. They are the main issues I am concerned about.

Mr CRISP — The committee understands that you have a son who has been assessed as being gifted but who also has dyslexia. I would like to go through a couple of issues. Reflecting on your experience as a parent of a gifted child with a learning difficulty, what can be done to ensure that gifted students with learning disabilities have their giftedness identified?

Dr WARD — I was so close to my son that I could not actually see it. I also suffer from dyslexia, but when I went through school naturally it was not known. My son went to Preshil, one of Melbourne's better primary and secondary private schools. They did not pick it up. It was only that a friend suggested it, because he was struggling. A lot of dyslexic children can get through primary school; it is when they get to secondary that the problems really start to compound. We took him to the Krongold Centre at Monash. As I said, middle-class people look after their own. It cost us something like \$2000. My son is now 36, so this was 20 years ago. It was very expensive to have him assessed, and he was genius rated in non-verbal language areas and average in language areas. The school had not picked it up. We sent the report to the school, and then in year 11 we had a kerfuffle where he wanted to leave school and was not coping. We went along to see his teachers, and the

principal had not passed on the report because she did not believe in children being tested, so none of his teachers in years 11 and 12 understood that he was dyslexic or that he was also genius rated. As a parent, it does not matter how many times you suggest these things; often it goes unheard.

Mr CRISP — What kinds of support and educational provisions do gifted students with learning difficulties need?

Dr WARD — They need teachers who are educated in gifted and talented education. There is a great lack, particularly in Bendigo, of courses for giftedness in the university up here. Most undergraduates might have an hour at best taught to them, and certainly the postgraduate courses do not cover giftedness or dyslexia, and dyslexia is possibly the most common disability. It goes hand in hand that you get very creative people who are gifted and dyslexic, and Bendigo is not really a good town for creative people. It is fine if you are academically bright or if you are sporting bright, but not for the gifted musician or the gifted artist. It does not have that culture.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — What do you think are the specific challenges faced by gifted children in rural and regional Victoria, and how can gifted children in rural and regional Victoria be better provided for?

Dr WARD — I think there is a problem with a lot of rural areas in that there is a culture of not respecting education. A lot of gifted children will dumb down in order to be accepted by their peers, and you do not want to look out of place in a small country town. Also I think parents would be fearful of their children being graded as gifted because then they might have to go and be educated away from the family. I think there are a lot of social pressures.

There are also cultural pressures. We have a big migrant group up in Swan Hill — islander people, and a significant Aboriginal population — and they are often not culturally happy with being special; it is not part of their culture. We have all of those problems. Also there is not enough enrichment for those students academically or creatively in Bendigo. The senior secondary students I spoke of earlier were going down to Melbourne University to go to lectures. A staff member was dedicated to taking them for their enrichment program, but that is the exception rather than the rule, I think, in this region.

Mr CRISP — What gifted educational programs and initiatives would be available for gifted students in the Bendigo area? You have already worked this way, but we will tighten that a little.

Dr WARD — The Catholic College seems to be doing a good job. They have somebody out at the Coolock campus who is very keen; she is only working part time. I note that Girton has not seemed to be forthcoming with this inquiry. Having sent my youngest child to Girton I have found that it is a strange school of status. If you were not willing to be a doctor or a lawyer and fit in, as my son did not, it was a very difficult school. Bendigo Senior Secondary College do not grade their students, they do not test them, but they do have enrichment programs. What is going on in the rest of the high schools in Bendigo and primary schools I have little knowledge of.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — The next one I think we have covered off, so I will go back to teacher training and professional development. What kinds of training do pre-service and in-service teachers need, and do you think that some training in gifted education should be mandatory?

Dr WARD — In answer to the last one, absolutely. In fact I think it should be mandatory that disabilities across the board are a major feature of pre-service teaching education, along with a differentiated curriculum. Both of those things seem to be really missed. I think the standard at La Trobe University is not high, but then unfortunately you have to look at who their students are. You have a lot of students coming in from rural areas and you have a lot of people who are born in Bendigo, go to university in Bendigo, teach in Bendigo and have no world view. They have a very low understanding of what a teacher really can do and the importance of teaching. Particularly for women in primary school, it is a good vocation if you want to have children and lifestyle. It is not necessarily about lifelong learning and about going beyond what you need to learn in order to get your diploma or your degree to go out and get a job.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Are you aware of any significant challenges teachers have in accessing professional development because they live in rural and regional Victoria?

Dr WARD — There is a lot done online; I know La Trobe does quite a lot of online work. But then again I still think that it is not of a high enough standard. I think it really skirts around the issues, but certainly giftedness is not one of the online programs offered.

Mr CRISP — With that online work, do you think that that can provide learning opportunities for those gifted students who are in rural Victoria, and do you agree that technology can offer that online experience and that could be useful in gifted and talented education?

Dr WARD — Absolutely. There is a program for Melbourne University that mentors people in the region, and there are some excellent programs that you can buy. I know Renzulli, the American gifted expert, has a really well-formed online program that you can buy. Things like that certainly help. The only problem with the online or internet experience for a lot of students is that a lot of gifted students, particularly those with a higher IQ, will be introverted people and the computer can become their best friend and they can become extremely isolated.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — That dovetails nicely into my next question, which is that we have received evidence from a number of stakeholders that gifted students have distinct emotional and welfare needs and that gifted students in rural and regional Victoria often feel particularly isolated. What kinds of emotional and welfare supports do gifted children need, particularly in a rural and regional setting?

Dr WARD — In an ideal world there will be a really stable family that appreciates and encourages education, but teachers can only do so much if the child is coming from a dysfunctional family, and then it is very difficult. Leadership from the principal down is very important. It is important that inclusivity in education is really the norm, not the exception, and that there is a differentiated program where students are encouraged to take pleasure in their talents. It needs to be acknowledge that all students have different talents and that you can encourage students in a very positive way. Some gifted students need accelerated classes with like peers. They might need to go up a few grades in their speciality to give them that encouragement to think of their talent as being worthwhile and to foster it. It is just too easy in the normal classroom for them to just dumb down and not show their talents. Girls, classically, will dumb down so that they are popular, and boys will just become the class clown or be disruptive because they are bored. It is a really hard one and it takes dedication by teachers, but I think it really starts with their training.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr CRISP — Many Victorian parents have told the committee that they receive very little support or guidance in nurturing and supporting their gifted child. What kind of support do parents need, how is this best provided and what are the particular challenges faced by parents of gifted children who live in rural and regional areas?

Dr WARD — I think one of the first things is that teachers need to listen to parents. You are going to get a certain number of parents who think their child is brilliant and they are really just an average child, but parents are the child's only advocate in the early days. Miraca Gross, who is at the University of New South Wales, tested 60 children who were able to read quite proficiently before they started school, and 40 of them stopped reading or went to the level of the rest of the students in first grade because of that peer pressure and not being encouraged by the teacher; yet the parents had actually said, 'I think my child is gifted'. It is really difficult for parents when they are hitting their head against a brick wall. In my own case I was paying this amazing amount of money to have my son tested and then for the principal to think that it was not relevant was a really difficult one. People question giftedness. They think that is not really important, that it is just a concept of anxious parents or parents who want to push their children beyond their limits. There is a hesitancy in people to accept the concept of giftedness, and I think for a lot of teachers it is just too hard; it is just another disability that they really do not know much about.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — The Goldfields LLEN submission to this inquiry talked about the need for good communication between schools and parents of gifted children. What can be done to ensure that parents have a greater input into their gifted child's education?

Dr WARD — I think they need to be kept informed about what is going on. In primary school there needs to be an open dialogue with one teacher. The teacher needs to feel that it is not an inconvenience to talk to parents after school; they need to be emailed. If they have free time to come in and help in the classroom, they need to

feel they can participate in their child's education and the community of the child at that school. Secondary school is a little more difficult, but students' home teachers, people of that ilk, must make themselves available to the parents to pass on information and discuss any problems. IEPs are really important for gifted children so that they have a pathway they understand, the teacher understands and the parents understand and they all come together to really support that child in his or her potential, because giftedness is only a potential until the child becomes an adult.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — We do not have any other questions for you. Is there something else you would like to say?

Dr WARD — There was just one other thing I had in the back of my mind. One of the things I mentioned in the paper for the GLEN was the idea of having a SEAL school in Bendigo. I have my own problems about that because Bendigo, as I previously said, has a great underclass; it really is a divided town. The main road divides the city. There is a really aspirational middle class living out at Strathfieldsaye, those types of suburbs, in very large houses, and they have no idea of what is going on in the other suburbs which are very poor. For one primary school to have 92 per cent of students on student allowance indicates an incredible poverty. With that poverty will go poverty of parenting, of nourishment, of educational aspirations and all that sort of stuff.

I think Bendigo needs to just improve its schooling as it is at the moment. Girton Grammar has grown exponentially, so people are willing to pay those fees. It is the same with the Catholic College. That is extending; they are building another campus. It is the people who do not have those financial opportunities and the stable family options who really need the assistance, so a differentiated program is really important, and that must be set from the principals down. Again, it goes back to just teacher training.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.