

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Melbourne—10 October 2011

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Ms M. Cowie, Director, Starjump

The CHAIR—Maxine, firstly, thank you for joining us this afternoon. As you know this is a hearing looking at gifted and talented students and we are the Education and Training Committee. In terms of the process today we have a number of questions that we want to ask you. We have only a limited time, unfortunately. We have about 20 minutes to get through the whole thing, and if you could be as brief as possible in terms of the questions. We will go straight into the questions and then give you the opportunity at the end if there is something you have not covered that you feel we need to.

Ms COWIE—Fire away with the questions and stop five minutes before the end.

The CHAIR—Give you five minutes at the end. Is that all right?

Ms COWIE—Yes.

The CHAIR—Also if I could mention, it is important for me to point out, the evidence you give today will be recorded by Hansard. You will have the opportunity to look at a copy of that and any errors that you pick up of a typographical nature will be corrected. I also need to point out that in the hearing today the evidence you give is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege which is the same privilege afforded to members of parliament. If you say anything outside this room it is not privileged. Firstly, identifying twice exceptional students. The committee has been told that the presence of a learning disability can mask a child's giftedness. What are the best ways to identify coexisting giftedness and learning disabilities in a child, and what kind of training or education do teachers need to be able to identify giftedness in a child with a learning disability?

Ms COWIE—Okay. I think all of you should have received a copy of my assessment report. That comes out of the Starjump assessment. It is the best way to identify gifted kids per se, and it is the best way to identify 2e/GLD kids because it is a whole child assessment. Some of you would have seen the statistics that I presented at the conference recently. The conditions are very complex. You cannot have a generic—it would be very nice to say, 'GLD or 2e kids need X, Y and Z.' Unfortunately that is not possible. You will see the complexity in that report, and individualised assessments are needed.

Training: you will notice in that document there are three document reports—one for the classroom teacher, one for the parent and one for a specialist teacher. The training is embedded in those reports specifically for each of those children.

The CHAIR—Good.

Ms COWIE—We have a solution to the identification and the training. We have an online training program for teachers where case studies can be looked at. It truly is a solution to all the problems that we have heard—

The CHAIR—Extending on from that, in terms of the program that has currently been in use, how many schools are utilising the program at the moment?

Ms COWIE—This is a very new program. In fact it was only at the beginning of the year that we finished the incredibly complex data analysis program that lies behind it. We have three psychologists using it—some in schools and some in their private practices—and it is in two schools, or it is going into another school next week.

The CHAIR—Okay.

Ms TIERNEY—The committee has been told that twice exceptional students need to be educated in a way that optimises their gifts while accommodating their disabilities. What are the most effective methods and approaches for educating twice exceptional students? Secondly, what are the particular challenges faced by these students in Victorian schools? What support or resources should be provided in classrooms for these students?

Ms COWIE—The most effective response to GLD/2e children is to find out what the problem is.

Without finding out what the problem is generic responses are damaging. Children who are often diagnosed with ASD, for example, have a social skills problem, they are put into a social skills program. They come to us and we find they have chronic visual problems or they have an attention deficit disorder that affects the regulatory functions of these kids which impacts on their ability to socialise out in the playground or wherever. Giving a social skills program for ASD without treating the underlying regulatory problem through ADHD treatment, you are not going to get the results. The problem will not be addressed at a core level.

The challenges are of the complexity—the complexity of the difficulties that these kids have. Identifying where the problem lies is the biggest challenge, and then providing the support to parents to understand why their kids will not go to school, why they are depressed, why their anxiety is so high that their learning is debilitated. The challenge is to take teachers who see an IQ test—a child is in their classroom and totally under-performing. They have an IQ test with a 99 percentile in perceptual reasoning and an average score in their verbal processing, and the teachers will argue with me about the validity of that IQ test because they do not understand twice exceptionality. That child never gets the real issues identified. They are given remediation programs. The focus is on remediation, not on giftedness. It is destructive, quite frankly, seriously destructive.

Support and resources: I have developed the Starjump program over a 25-year period with six years of program development to give the support to teachers that they need for individual kids; to look at the way these kids learn; to look at the underlying conditions that are preventing learning, but also to identify the social-emotional problems that are endemic with the 2e group and gifted generally. If you give a social skills program without understanding what the real need is, you are going to miss the boat with a social skills program for gifted kids as well. That is why an assessment of the kind that I have shared with you is vitally important—vital.

Ms MILLER—You talked about technology programs for twice exceptional students. What would be the benefits of using the technology as an educational tool for twice exceptional students?

Ms COWIE—It depends on what the technology is and who is using it. The biggest mistake is to say, 'We want this program for 2e kids.' It does not work like that. I wish it did. I wish it was that easy. But the general principle for 2e kids and gifted kids generally is to provide for their area of strength—end of story. The fellow before me, Phil, spoke about the Khan Academy, and that somebody researched it for himself. We recommend that program, but each individual child has got their own strengths and we need to follow their lead on what is going to make a difference for them.

Ms MILLER—Is there any technological education tool that you are currently using with your students?

Ms COWIE—The Starjump program.

Ms MILLER—Anything outside that?

Ms COWIE—Yes, we recommend the Khan Academy for maths.

Ms MILLER—That is the only external—

Ms COWIE—We have a variety of programs we access for individual kids. I am not going to make a general statement about, 'This is a good one for 2e,' because for that 2e kid, yes, it will be good; for that 2e kid it will be destructive. That is why the assessment is vital. It is not possible to have a generic response to this.

Ms MILLER—Like a toolkit of the technologies.

Ms COWIE—You need a toolkit and you need somebody who can do an analysis of the programs to see the suitability for gifted kids and see how it fits with the needs of the particular child. I have had children do all types of computer based programs that have been a waste of money, a waste of time and

totally hopeless, quite frankly.

Ms MILLER—These technologies, that is also that the teachers and the parents have an understanding of these technologies as well in order to help the students?

Ms COWIE—The model that I see working for rural and remote, for indigenous education, for schools here in Melbourne is if you have a cluster; one person in the cluster who is trained to identify issues, to do the assessments, to be able to recognise when a program is worthy of using and when it is not. That should be part of the training.

Ms MILLER—You have like a product champion and then a train the trainer kind of person?

Ms COWIE—Yes.

MS MILLER—Thank you.

Mr CRISP—I want to take you to the area of emotional support. The committee understands that as a result of their exceptionalities, twice exceptional can experience frustration, low self-esteem and behavioural problems. What kinds of emotional and welfare support do twice exceptional students need?

Ms COWIE—Again you cannot generalise. The statistics say that the most important thing is social time with like minds. If you can hold a child together emotionally then they are going to find their way through into a productive adult life. We run camps for gifted kids with the Australian Gifted Support, Helen Dudeney. She runs them all over Australia and she works with me here in Melbourne to run them as well. It is the most important time in those kids educational lives, to get together with each other socially.

Mr CRISP—What age group is that?

Ms COWIE—We run them from six to around 12 or 13, and the parents come to those camps. You get the parents support, you get the children being supported socially and emotionally. Anger, frustration and anxiety are the biggest problems. I get eight-year-olds clinically depressed, who come to my clinic, because they are not understood and they are not catered for. Bright and angry is not a good combination. It is a very serious combination. If you do an assessment, our assessment picks up the specific emotional needs of these individuals. We have a bank of modules that can be downloaded and used with not only an individual but with a group of students in a cluster, for example, who have similar social-emotional needs. We have an anger learning module, we have a perfectionism module, we have an introversion module; we have a social skills module, and the list goes on, for gifted kids. We pinpoint who needs what.

Mr ELASMAR—The committee understands that Starjump runs clubs which bring twice exceptional students together. What are the benefits for twice exceptional children of being able to socialise with other twice exceptional children?

Ms COWIE—Starjump, per se, does not run the clubs because the cost of professional indemnity and public liability insurance, I stopped them because I could not afford to run them. However, we encourage the schools who are engaged with our program to run those clubs for kids. If a school takes on our program they have to sign up to running the clubs because often it is the only place in the school where these kids will shine, where these kids can finish a project and learn and be held in good esteem by their peers. It builds confidence. It is a place where they can practise their social skills. It is a place where they learn to understand their different processing systems and their different needs.

I specialise in visual spatial thinking and learning, as described by Dr Linda Silverman who is from the Gifted Development Centre in Denver, Colorado. She personally backs my work in this area. We specifically build these clubs to nourish that part of the 2e kids, and without it they fail.

MR ELASMAR—Yes, thank you.

The CHAIR—Maxine, we have concluded our questions. I am going to now hand over to you for your

five minutes.

Ms COWIE—Good. My key points are identification of gifted. The issues are complex: looking at the economics of identification; partnerships that are required; professional development; technology, and the emotional wellbeing. Let's look at the identification. Early identification of giftedness and the underlying problems is made possible through our program. It is economically viable for all schools and it is equitable because it accurately pinpoints gifted kids across different cultures and socioeconomic groups. The issues are extremely complex. No single approach will work. In fact generic interventions are damaging if the issues are not identified and understood. The complexity is accommodated in the reports for the teacher, the parents and the specialist teachers. We do not have to shy away from complexity. We have built in our responses.

The economics of the identification. If you want an IQ for every kid who may be gifted, you are looking at a lot of money, a lot of resources, a lot of time. We can do it really economically because we do it in two levels: (1) a parent screening and (2) a one-hour consultant part of the assessment. It is web based and accessible in rural communities and indigenous communities. It targets action by parents. Parents come to me, they have spent five grand, and the real issue still has not been identified. With unnecessary assessments, it is an incredible emotional cost to the child, being dragged all around town getting assessment after assessment. We need to screen to pinpoint which specialists need to be targeted, to save everybody time and money. There needs to be a parent and school partnership. The report assigns responsibility to the parents and the teachers appropriately. Teachers in schools cannot be blamed for not getting results when parents have not taken action that has been identified.

Professional development: pre-service training is absolutely essential for all teachers in giftedness and in hemispheric processing specialisation. That is the key, that second one. Our Starjump solution is that the training is embedded in the reports. We need to train a special education teacher or the school psychologist to do part of the specialised assessment. You screen everybody, you pinpoint who needs a specialist assessment and you only target those who need the specialist assessment. It is all done online. The training is using online platforms that we have developed.

Technology: I think I have covered most of it from our point of view—virtual classrooms within schools, within the community, within classes. We need to open up the culture in schools to allow external organisations, businesses like mine, to engage and provide the services. Teachers cannot do it on their own. We need to use technology for the remediation of deficits, as well as for the extension of gifted kids. I have already spoken about that. The emotional wellbeing: the most important thing is being with like minds but also nourishing children's strengths. The Starjump assessment pinpoints the social and emotional modules that are needed. The club provides the space. Kids need mentors. I have talked about the cultures.

Failure to act is very costly. If you have a child depressed at eight, you have looming mental health problems. Brightness and anger is dangerous. You have law and order antisocial behaviour. The prisons are full of ADHD bright people. The burden on social security is enormous. The loss of productivity, stress in families and, significantly, the loss of engagement of our brightest creative minds in the business world.

The CHAIR—That is a good place to finish, I think. Thank you very much for being here and good luck with the rest of the work that you are doing.

Ms COWIE—We are out there.

The CHAIR—Thank you.

Witness withdrew.

Committee adjourned.