

Policy development and practice: The New South Wales experience

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Three key documents are being used for the revision of the NSW Policy for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students and its associated implementation strategies (originally published in 1991). These documents post-date the 1988 report by the Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children. The three documents which are the focus of this paper are the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented national position paper (1996); the NSW Ministerial paper on the Quality of Teaching (1999); and the 2001 Australian Senate Enquiry report.

Policy, gifted, identification, provision, accountability

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a brief overview of each of the three key documents that comprise it. The findings of the papers, their terms of reference and their specific policy issues are then evaluated in terms of how they instruct the revision of policy in New South Wales.

Document 1. *Australian Future: A National Position Paper on the Education of Gifted and Talented Students*

This paper was written to 'provide a broad theoretical and functional framework to complement and support the policies developed in States and Territories' (AAEGT, 1996). It argued that a significant number of gifted students are not readily identified or catered for by school systems, including:

- disadvantaged populations;
- students with divergent aptitudes; and
- students of profound ability who do not demonstrate conventional behaviours associated with school-based achievement.

Document 2. *Professional Development for Teachers: Identifying and Catering for the Needs of Gifted and Talented Students*

This report advised on the professional development of teachers to identify and cater for gifted students (NSW, 1999). Through a literature review it observed that:

- a practicum component of initial teacher education can be beneficial (Feldhusen and Huffman, 1988; Leroux, 1987);
- professional development is needed (Pears, 1993);
- university post-graduate courses and teacher employers' professional development programs are effective (Hansen and Feldhusen, 1994; Sexton, 1995);

- staff development involving parents, teachers and students broadens views about giftedness and understanding of the educational needs of gifted students (Copenhaver and McIntyre, 1992; Roberts, 1993);
- networking is key to the success of gifted programs (Larsson, 1986; Shaw, 1990);
- staff training is important for differentiation of curriculum in the regular classroom (Reis and Westberg, 1994);
- teacher training is important to meet the needs of high ability students in mainstream classrooms (Coleman, 1995; Goree, 1996);
- training of teachers and multiple measures are needed to identify gifted students from minority groups (Baldwin, 1987; Parks, 1994; Van Tassel-Baska et al., 1991); and
- particular interventions are required for gifted learners in special populations (Van Tassel-Baska, 1994).

The main findings were that:

- identification of gifted students requires a variety of strategies;
- identification of students from different cultural backgrounds requires teachers who understand the values and attitudes of the various groups;
- teachers are unlikely to acknowledge giftedness in those of low socioeconomic status (SES) or in indigenous or ESL students;
- teachers in the regular classroom need to be able to identify gifted and talented students and to have the appropriate skills to cater for them;
- acceleration as a strategy for gifted students has become popular, and in combination with curriculum differentiation, extension work, enrichment activities and mentoring may meet the educational needs of individual students;
- teachers in specialist classes or schools may need additional professional development to cater for the needs of their gifted and talented students;
- the compulsory core of teacher education courses lacks a component in gifted and talented education; and
- professional development and networking opportunities are needed in gifted and talented education.

Document 3. *The Education of Gifted Children*

In 2000, the Australian Senate referred an inquiry into the education of gifted and talented children to its Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee. The purpose of the inquiry was to review developments since the 1988 Senate Select Committee report. The committee considered the means to identify gifted and talented children, the adequacy and equity of gifted and talented programs, the relationship between achievement and socioeconomic status, and the appropriate role of the Commonwealth.

The committee's report noted some positive developments since 1988 but concluded that much remained to be achieved (Senate, 2001). All interest groups represented at the inquiry recognised problems in education of gifted students, such as underachievement, boredom, frustration and psychological distress, due to special needs not being met. The report commented particularly on negative attitudes towards giftedness. It noted a lack of awareness that giftedness occurs regardless of socio-economic status, rural isolation, physical disability or ethnicity. A further key

finding was that teacher training, essential to identify and cater for gifted and talented students, was not being provided. The committee also concluded that differentiation of the curriculum to cater for gifted students was inadequate, under-resourced, uneven across jurisdictions and often misunderstood. Confusion existed over what constitutes enrichment, extension and acceleration.

GENERAL FINDINGS

The following issues were emphasised in each of the key documents.

Definitional variations

States and Territories use a range of definitions of the terms 'gifted' and 'talented'. Some differentiate these terms whereas others use them interchangeably. Some refer to 'high intellectual potential' or 'exceptional abilities'. The MACQT report noted that the definitions expressed in the Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT: Gagné, 1995) are well supported by research and have been adopted by the Board of Studies in NSW.

Identification: Problems related to practice and inclusion

States and Territories are philosophically committed to multiple criteria for identification of gifted and talented students. For the most part, however, identification relies on teacher nomination and test performance. Consequently, students selected for programs are generally those who achieve in class. Students who are from minority or rural backgrounds, of low SES, indigenous, learning or physically disabled or underachieving may be overlooked.

Lack of expertise of teachers

Policies and support documents from all States and Territories provide ideas about curriculum differentiation for gifted students. Acceleration is increasingly popular in NSW, in combination with curriculum differentiation, extension work, enrichment and mentoring. However, this requires teacher expertise and time.

Teacher training

The level and quality of pre-service and ongoing training in gifted education vary among Australian universities. The MACQT report observed that in initial teacher education in NSW there is:

- no requirement from teacher employers that the compulsory core include gifted education, and
- negligible or no attention to gifted education in the compulsory core of teacher education courses.

OVERVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN POLICIES ON GIFTED EDUCATION

Eight Australian departments or ministries of education have developed policies that provide, to varying levels of detail, the:

- rationale for gifted education,
- general definition of giftedness or talent,
- approaches to identification,
- provisions,
- programs available at State level,
- lists of resources, and
- contact persons.

The education of gifted and talented students is often not recognised as an equity issue by educators or politicians in Australia. A major challenge is to provide for individual excellence while not invoking criticisms of elitism and privilege. Braggett and Moltzen (2000, p.780) complained of 'little realisation that giftedness is culturally based, that talent is developmental..., and that both are intricately related to motivation, self-confidence, interest and sustained effort'. An increased level of teacher awareness about gifted educational issues relies on well publicised government policy.

Provision for gifted students within mainstream classes is increasingly emphasised. This has produced positive outcomes but there is a danger that the most advanced students may be ignored. It is important that provisions for gifted students of varying ability levels are adequate and appropriate (Braggett and Moltzen, 2000).

The NSW *Policy for the Education of Children with Special Talents*, published in 1983, was followed by the *NSW Policy for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students* and associated implementation strategies in 1991. This policy recognised that gifted students exist in all communities, irrespective of ethnicity or socio-economic background, and that schools have a responsibility to identify them and educate them to their full potential. Seven policy statements were outlined, as listed below.

1. School communities have a responsibility to identify their gifted and talented students.
2. School communities have a responsibility to provide a range of opportunities for their gifted and talented students.
3. Teachers have a responsibility to identify the gifted and talented students in their classes.
4. Teachers have a responsibility to select a variety of teaching strategies for inclusion in the programs for the range of gifted talented students in their classes.
5. Regions and schools have a responsibility to coordinate school provisions for gifted and talented students when it is feasible for more than one school to share this responsibility.
6. Regions and schools have a responsibility to provide staff development opportunities for principals, teachers and other appropriate school personnel in the education of gifted and talented students.
7. The Director-General and the Central Executive have a responsibility to account for the implementation of government policy and to report on the outcomes of schooling for gifted and talented students in NSW government schools.

Relevant documents can be accessed at <http://www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/>. A companion document, titled *Guidelines for Accelerated Progression – Revised 2000*, is available at <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/>.

Terms of reference

The terms of reference for the current revision are to:

- examine the current Department of Education and Training (DET) Gifted and Talented Policy (1991);
- determine whether it is suitable and sufficient to guide provision in relation to the definition of gifted and talented students the means of identifying gifted and talented students equitable access to support for all gifted and talented students the range of provision for gifted and talented students;

- report on current provision for the professional development needs of teachers to identify and cater for gifted and talented students; and
- not extend to consideration of structural changes to specialist classes or specialist school groupings. (NSW presently has 70 schools with 111 opportunity classes for academically gifted students in Years 5 and 6 of primary school. There are 28 selective high schools comprising 17 fully selective high schools, 4 selective agricultural high schools and 7 high schools with selective classes.) A reference group of representatives from key organisations was established to oversee the policy revision and provide submissions. In the second phase experts in gifted education provided advice about policy improvements. The third phase of the project involves school surveys. Twelve representative schools have been selected at random for surveying. Principals, teachers, school counsellors, parents and students are included in the survey process.

Policy Issues and NSW Policy Improvements: Definition of giftedness and talent

The reference group has agreed that the definition should be research-based, accessible to teachers and have a direct and logical connection to identification programs and programming strategies. Gagné's (2000) model is highly regarded nationally because it recognises the dynamic factors involved in the processes of learning, including skill development and self-efficacy.

Identification

The use of nomination, screening and monitoring is well supported by research. The same applies to off-level testing, which has been considered by the reference group for possible inclusion in the revised Policy as a way to pinpoint a student's level of ability (Gross, personal communication 2003). The current NSW policy does not include a formal definition of under-achievers. In particular the terms 'invisible underachiever' and 'deliberate under-achiever' are not precisely defined (Chaffey 2003, personal communication). Teachers need to recognise under-achievers in order to intervene.

The factors contributing to underachievement must similarly be addressed. This condition is often concordant with underlying social and emotional issues as well as immature cognitive and meta-cognitive processes. These issues need to be addressed initially, to allow students to reach their potential eventually. Lack of self-efficacy or a fundamental lack of self-belief, as opposed to self-esteem or self-concept, is evident in these students. Self-esteem will generate from improved self-efficacy. These issues can be addressed in an identification program by employing a dynamic testing model (Chaffey 2003, personal communication).

Historically, parents have had to take the initiative to draw attention to the needs of their gifted child. A closer, more systematic approach to generate information flow between parents and schools may need to be incorporated into the new Policy.

Provision

The reference group has been considering whether schools should implement policy developed through community consultation and should have a school-based gifted and talented coordinator. Such a coordinator would have expertise in Board of Studies and Department of Education and Training policies, and have an ongoing responsibility for informing staff and parents about gifted educational opportunities.

Of the recommended practices for gifted students, acceleration and grouping strategies are most strongly supported in the literature (Van Tassel-Baska, 2000). The only intervention mentioned in

detail in the current NSW policy is acceleration. The reference group has considered the option of communicating an expanded concept of acceleration. For example, curriculum compacting, telescoping the curriculum and online learning can also expedite student access to the syllabus.

Forms of ability grouping could also be more detailed. Flexible grouping of students by ability within particular domains, including cluster grouping to provide social interaction and cross-grade learning opportunities for younger students, has support from research literature (Rogers, 2000; Van Tassel-Baska, 2000).

Appropriate models of provision and differentiation need to be described to assist teachers to address diversity. The new policy could provide, for the school community, an amplification of the rationale for differentiation. It could also give greater attention to appropriate adjustment of the level, pace and degree of abstraction of curriculum. Scope exists to expand the use of technology for learning centres, mentor programs and student and teacher networks for students of metropolitan, regional and rural backgrounds.

Accountability

The translation of policy into practice in the NSW government school system from 1977 to 1990 was investigated by Forster (1993). The analysis of how policy became practice was achieved by using a 'policy making framework'. The first stage of the framework was *normative* relative to the purpose of the educational system. The second was *strategic* relative to the way that the purpose could be achieved, and the third was *operational* relative to how the first two stages can be implemented. The fourth stage was *administrative* relative to what is done to achieve the purpose (Forster, 1993).

Forster (1993) aligned the four types of decisions within the structure of the then NSW Department of School Education. She concluded that with the advent of the 1991 policy, the matching of commitment, needs and educational initiatives had a better chance of making opportunities for gifted students a reality. With a new policy being developed, this matching needs further consideration.

A model whereby districts are supported by an overarching State infrastructure warrants further consideration. For example, a strengthening of the relationship between the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Board of Studies (BOS), with greater opportunities for collaboration to support district personnel, would be desirable. District personnel can work strategically to assist with the identification of and provision for gifted students. The modelling and sharing of best practice at the school level is necessary for policy to become an effective reality. Currently, principals have the prime responsibility, in consultation with their staff, for deciding how gifted students are catered for in their schools. An expansion of the annual school reporting process to include outcomes in gifted education is an option for the communication about provision for these students. Consideration could also be given to monitoring of policy implementation by the institutionalisation of an on-going reference group.

Professional development

Few universities in NSW offer specialised training in gifted education. All pre-service teachers need to take a mandatory course in gifted education, as research indicates that qualified (post-graduate study) teachers should be equipped to implement necessary educational strategies for gifted students (Rowley, 2002). Training is needed at all levels of the school community to link identification to effective intervention. For example, training courses for gifted and talented coordinators coupled with annual briefings supported by DET and BOS personnel would be advantageous. Schools currently have the responsibility to provide regular staff development

opportunities in gifted education for administrators and teachers. However, it would be beneficial if different levels of training/qualifications were specified and accredited.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Just as the 1991 NSW policy was advanced in being solidly underpinned by research findings, the current process of policy revision has brought into focus recent research findings on the diversity and characteristics of the gifted population. Policies need to include definitions of giftedness and talent that communicate to teachers more clearly the population of students that is currently underserved (Senate Report, 2001). A shared understanding of the nature and variety of the gifted population is necessary for their identification.

Educators need training in identification procedures and tools to diagnose students' profiles of abilities. Training for educators and parents is also essential to implement the range of practices and strategies that are recommended for gifted students. A more school-focused approach with stronger home-school partnerships could optimise student development. The instigation of specific and systematic initiatives could further enable the effective translation of policy into practice. Action research and models of provision and best practice – so called 'real world stuff' – need to be shared. As Forster (1993) observed, coherence between the various phases of the 'policy making framework' is critical to the comprehensive implementation of policy to avoid inadequate or ad hoc provision for gifted students in NSW specifically and Australia in general.

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