

# Gifted Education in Australia

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It is necessary to explain, briefly, some of the characteristics of the Australian educational scene. Each of the six state governments and the two territories — the Australian Capital Territory, A.C.T., and the Northern Territory — organizes and implements the responsibility of educating all children of school age within an Education Department located in the respective capital cities. Each Department operates as a central system which defines and evaluates the significant policies and related decisionmaking that are pertinent to the governmental school system.

As a society, Australia does not seek out intellectual and creative talent, does not channel money into the cultivation of academic or aesthetic precocity, and rarely publicizes outstanding thinkers with vigor. The cult of mediocrity — under the guise of egalitarianism — remains strong. Yet, attitudes are changing slowly among educators, as evidenced in official governmental policies and in new directions in program implementation. This paper summarizes the policies in each of the states and territories, considers some of the programs in operation, and comments on current research.

The government school sector still provides for about three-quarters of the school population, although this has been diminishing over the last decade. Western Australia's Education Department, for example, administers a public education system which provides for some 135,000 primary and 72,000 secondary students. Of these, about 70 percent attend schools within the Perth metropolitan area. In a national perspective, the Western

Australia education system, with approximately 700 government schools is relatively small in number, compared to the two, more populated states of New South Wales (2,300 schools) and Victoria (2,200 schools).<sup>1</sup>

## New South Wales

In New South Wales, the Catholic school system has developed as a powerful, monolithic structure parallel to the state system and, in many respects, has been more innovative in educational change, particularly in creating programs for the gifted and talented at the primary level and the establishment of senior colleges. The state systems, in their implementation of provisions, have been frustrated by powerful teachers' unions. This has enabled the non-Catholic, independent sector to become stronger, with more parents opting for an alternative system, despite high fees. Little attempt is made at creating either a differentiated curriculum or special provisions for the gifted and talented — except in sporting facilities and school libraries built with federal funding.

It is in its financial support to recurring programs and special-interest requirements that the Commonwealth government has played a significant role in education. A particular influence at the national level has been exercised by the Commonwealth Schools Commission, a statutory authority established to advise the Federal Education Minister on such matters as the needs of

schools. It has the authority to recommend amounts and types of grants to be directed to the state education system to provide assistance with both capital and recurrent expenditures in the private and public sectors.<sup>2</sup> It is the Commission, too, that has alerted educationists to the need for a differentiated curriculum for the gifted, for counseling services, and for trained personnel who relate to the specific needs of the gifted and talented and are able to identify underachievement.<sup>3</sup> The Commission recommends that specific professional development funding be provided to enable all teachers to have opportunities to develop techniques for nurturing students' gifts and talents, and to enable school administrators to familiarize themselves with appropriate approaches to school organizations to better provide programs which promote individual excellence. This is a very important objective to be realized in a period of anti-intellectualism where there is concern for socializing rather than education, converging rather than extending, and the group rather than the individual.

It is the Commission, also, that has attempted a definition of giftedness that is appropriate to the Australian context: Gifted students are those possessing, to an outstanding degree, demonstrated competence or potential in intellectual, creative and/or other abilities, and needing different education or services beyond those provided by the regular school.<sup>4</sup>

Most states now have a theoretical definition of giftedness. There is some agreement existing over the rudiments, but almost no consensus existing over the operational definition. The result is widely disparate programs.

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#### Western Australia

In 1984, the Western Australia Education Department's Research Branch completed a major evaluation of the Secondary Special Placement Program (SSPP) which first came into operation in 1981 to meet the needs of intellectually talented students. The evaluation highlighted criticisms of

the identification and selection of students for the SSPP. Students with outstanding general ability did not perform equally, or even show superior reasoning ability in school subjects across the board. Also, students with similarly outstanding scores on general ability tests had very different subject strengths. In addition, students were included on the basis of scholastic aptitude, either general or specific, and did not necessarily have outstanding records of performance in any school subject. The result was that students in the SSPP schools varied widely in achievement, motivation, specific talents, and maturity. The policy that followed this finding was that "for maximum effectiveness specific programs must be for specific groups." Students to be placed in these special schools must have identified "high potential and achievement in one or more of the academic areas of the school curriculum."<sup>5</sup>

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#### Victoria

Other important factors emerged also in the Research Branch's findings. For many teachers, involvement with SSPP students had been a period of professional growth and satisfaction. They had pioneered new teaching strategies and found themselves challenged and enriched. For the SSPP students, they found enjoyment and stimulation in being with other students of comparable ability, vocabulary, and interests; release from the boredom of being-held-back, and a strong sense of cohesion from other class members. The latter finding was particularly important in that "even the most eccentric students have generally been accepted as members of the whole."<sup>6</sup> These student statements correlated very closely with those who attended the special accelerated program at University High School in Melbourne, Victoria. That program, which was established in 1981, enabled 30 specially selected pupils to complete their secondary school to university entrance level in four years — instead of the usual six.

The situation improved in Victoria with the creation of the Gifted Children's Task Force in 1977. In the opinion of the Task Force, the Victoria Education Department should encourage schemes to individualize pupils' learning and introduce supplementary activities, such as foreign language house parties, to complement rather than replace the normal school program. The Task Force did, however, encourage the formation of a cluster-group organization whereby a number of secondary schools could develop a program for selected schools on a part-time, withdrawal basis.

**E**valuation of the cluster-group program revealed that the more able children were not sufficiently challenged by the extension activities, and that they required more structured studies of a qualitatively different character.<sup>7</sup> It was on the basis of that evaluation that the accelerated school curriculum at University High School was set up. The welfare of the pupils has been closely monitored. Few problems have arisen as students are of similar physical, social, and intellectual maturity; and, in many cases, formed friendships and functioned as a group for the first time.<sup>8</sup>

#### Tasmania

Tasmania was one of the last states to formulate a specific policy in the 1980s. One reason for this was the deeply ingrained egalitarian attitudes to education and the equating of provision for the gifted with special privilege. Provision for outstanding children was regarded as subsidizing intellectual elitism. Isolated programs of extension work and enrichment were the provisions made between 1976 and the early 1980s, and only gradually has any concerted systematic attempt developed. Most official Tasmania reports between 1977 and 1983 did little to resolve the issue. In 1982, the *Mahoney Report* concluded that the senior administrators in the Education

Department were responsible for any lack of commitment in the schools.

The *Report* went on to recommend that the most able of the intellectually gifted should be selected and withdrawn from classes on a part-time basis for differentiated programs under the direction of specialist teachers.<sup>9</sup> The *Report* was significant in that it led to the eventual release of the Tasmanian Policy Statement in 1984. It was, however, a non-mandatory document which suggested certain courses of action. Full-time segregation and homogeneous grouping were not countenanced; rather, the Policy Committee recommended the need for all teachers to work with the gifted and talented within the normal classroom. Grade acceleration was rejected outright in almost all schools in Tasmania. Since 1985, there has been an increasing objective to encourage mainstream provision for gifted learners.<sup>10</sup>

#### South Australia

The gifted movement in South Australia is not encouraged to be viewed as a separate course. Instead, it is part of a general movement to provide for a range of abilities within the neighborhood school. There is no attempt to select academically gifted children for purposes of special attention. Nevertheless, in 1983 the Australian Departmental Policy Committee issued a "Policy Regarding Fostering Gifts and Talents Among Children" and Special Interest Centers were to be attached to neighborhood schools.<sup>11</sup>

This was an extension of the concept of the special music centers that were opened in Adelaide between 1976 and 1978 and indicated acceptance of the principle to establish centers, not only in music, but also in languages, dance, drama, agriculture, and mathematics/science. In general, however, the academically gifted continue to be taught within an adaptive education context; they are perceived as students with individual differences that need to be catered for within existing schools by regular teachers.

## About Australia

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**AREA:** 2,966,368 sq mi.

**POPULATION:** 16 million.

**MAJOR CITIES:** Sydney, 3,365,000; Melbourne, 2,833,000; Brisbane, 1,150,000; Perth, 995,000; Adelaide, 978,000; Canberra (capital city), 270,000.

**LITERACY:** Nearly 100 percent.

**ECONOMY:** Leads the world in export of beef and veal, 624,000 tons in 1987, and second to New Zealand in mutton and lamb, 293,000 tons.

*Australia is the only nation that is a continent — also the smallest, flattest and driest; which explains why less than ten percent of the land is arable and its largest lake, Eyre (3,600 sq mi), is usually bone-dry. Australia is flat, the highest peak, Kosciusko, is only 7,310 feet — but its Great Barrier Reef is the world's longest at 1,250 miles, more than half as long as its longest river system, the Murray-Darling at 2,300 miles. Australians have one of the world's highest per capita income at \$11,200 U.S., and one of its longest life expectancies, at 76 years.*

Source: *National Geographic*, 173 (2) February 1988, 188.

The first "Policy Statement on the Education of the Gifted in Queensland State Schools" appeared in February 1985.<sup>12</sup> It was non-mandatory; however, schools might consider such organizational structures as in-class provision, full-time withdrawal, partial separation, streaming and subject setting, acceleration, before- and after-school classes, weekend camps, and vacation schools. Since 1985, various approaches have been adopted in the schools, usually of an enrichment nature. There are, however, some interesting schools-of-excellence that have been established in certain Brisbane state high schools in the areas of dance, artistic development in the performing arts, and fine arts and design.

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### New South Wales

New South Wales has a distinguished history in its educational provision for the academically gifted, but, since the introduction of neighborhood comprehensive high schools in the 1960s, the Education Department has developed a policy of low-scale services. The *Education of the Talented Child* (1977), or the "McDonald Report" as it is usually called by teachers, made 27 recommendations. These recommendations included not only cautious support for the education of gifted children, but also advocated the phasing out of all academically selective high schools. However, the Conservatorium of Music High School, and many other selective high schools in Sydney, have continued to operate despite the recommendations of the Report. In fact, under the current Liberal government in New South Wales, eight new

selective high schools opened this year. In addition, there are also specialist packages offered in certain schools in mathematics, science, music, languages, and technology. For the first time since the 1960s, the notion of an open-access, comprehensive, neighborhood school that has been exclusive to the state system has been challenged. Parents and their children will "shop around" in the selection of a particular "package."<sup>13</sup>

Since the issuance of the New South Wales policy statement, *The Education of Children with Special Talents*, in 1983, the Education Department has left the decision to the schools to implement programs for their gifted and talented children. These programs vary in quality, although guidelines have been provided and consulting services made available on a limited basis. Enrichment programs are the most utilized in the schools, either on a regular, weekly basis, or in weekend camps.<sup>14</sup>

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### Northern Territory

Costs of providing educational services is high in the Northern Territory so it is not surprising that specific educational provisions for the talented are restricted. Nevertheless, in 1983 a decisive step was taken with the publication of the Education Department's document, *Direction for the Eighties*. In this document, recognition was given to "the special needs of gifted children." The *Education for Gifted Children in the Northern Territory* was also published in 1983 and contained both policy and rationale. School-based initiatives were encouraged and experimental withdrawal programs

introduced for primary children selected on the basis of high IQ results and personal needs. Few attempts at the secondary level have produced differentiated programs for outstanding students.

### Australian Capital Territory

Until 1973, New South Wales had been responsible for education in the Australian Capital Territory. When the *Guiding Principles and Aims of the Australian Capital Territory (A.C.T.) Schools Authority* was published, reference was made to providing for the gifted; but, in practice, only the slow learning, disadvantaged or handicapped groups were given special consideration.

A policy on the "Education of Gifted and Talented Children" was adopted in early 1983 in which acceptance was given to the multifaceted concept of giftedness. Schools were advised to make provisions for those classified as gifted and talented, but the provision was to be essentially within the context of the neighborhood school.

The senior colleges established in the A.C.T. in 1976 have been remarkably successful in offering a range of educational offerings to suit students and to develop their potentiality in various disciplines. Narrabundah College, for example, has placed emphasis on music studies and offers the International Baccalaureate Program, recognized by universities in many countries for matriculation purposes. The Program demands excellence, and successful students reach a high level of competency in a foreign language.

### Conclusion

A comprehensive survey of the situation in Australia was undertaken by Dr. E.J. Braggett for the Commonwealth School Commission. Essentially, he confirmed that the egalitarian ethos prevailed despite ad hoc attempts in the 1970s to provide for the needs of gifted and talented students, and then the legitimization of those needs in the 1980s with the various education departments publishing policy documents.<sup>15</sup> Fears of elitism persist. Most teachers show preference for

mainstream education, yet there are usually insufficient resources or teacher expertise to cater adequately. Inservice provisions are limited and there are few pre-service programs to prepare teachers to accommodate high academic achievers.

A brief comparison of the periods 1930s to mid-1960s and 1970s to 1980s (Table 1, see opposite page) shows a change in the role of the teacher moving towards school-based provision for the gifted and talented. Greater responsibility is placed on the classroom teacher. This more complex role for the teacher in being a curriculum organizer and implementer is mainly a response to widespread dissatisfaction with centralized approaches and control of the curriculum. Research evidence also points to the need for programs to be developed at an individual school level. Research in Australia remains limited and spasmodic in gifted and talented education. In J.P. Keeves' review of recent research,<sup>16</sup> half a page is devoted to "educating the gifted." Keeves identifies 1983 as a significant year, but recognizes that the acceptance of enrichment activities within schools to cater for the needs of the gifted is an inhibiting factor in productive research to promote alternative strategies.

A Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children is not as ambivalent in its recommendations as many of the state governments' policies are. Although it has no power to initiate legislation, its findings, published in 1988, are significant.<sup>17</sup> The Committee's report stated that "schools have a major responsibility to advance the talents of their highly able students in order to counteract the disadvantage experienced by some of these students in their home background, geographical location, or health." The Committee found the situation quite anomalous that "gifted young athletes, for example, can receive intensive coaching in special institutions and can engage in international competition at public expense, while this treatment is generally denied those with academic, artistic, or other talents."

The Committee has made a number of recommendations which could be implemented realistically by the Commonwealth Government. This is

Table 1

### Changing Role of Teachers Toward School-Based Provision for the Gifted and Talented 1930s to mid-1960s and 1970s to 1980s: A Comparison

1930s - mid-1960s	1970s - 1980s
<p>Definition of gifted in terms of academic excellence. Usually 2 to 7 percent of an IQ score.</p>	<p>Multifaceted definition of giftedness includes leadership ability, as well as musical, artistic, linguistic, and sporting talent.</p>
<p>Selective secondary schools in each Australian state. Special primary classes in New South Wales. Acceptance of streamed classes.</p>	<p>Teacher preference for provision for the gifted and talented in comprehensive schools. Increasing emphasis on catering in mixed-ability classes.</p>
<p>Withdrawal techniques most prevalent curriculum strategy. Occasional acceleration or grade skipping.</p>	<p>Variety of strategies used, including extension, enrichment, partial/full withdrawal, cluster groups, weekend and weekly camps. Few examples of acceleration.</p>
<p>Standardization of syllabi at central level.</p>	<p>Greater variety of curriculum materials in junior and secondary high school. Some attempt at differentiation of materials for academically gifted.</p>
<p>Parental preference for state education. Middle class choose selective high schools.</p>	<p>Increasing parental choice for non-state system, particularly among middle class.</p>

important in view of the states' responsibility to education. Two of the recommendations are of particular significance. They are:

- **Recommendation 4:** The Committee recommends that the professional development of teachers in the education of gifted children be supported by the Commonwealth Government. [Paragraph 7.36]
- **Recommendation 6:** The Committee recommends that a national center for research into the education of gifted children be established in an Australian tertiary institution and that the center be financially supported during its establishment phase by the Commonwealth Government. [Paragraph 7.50]

The key to the success of the recommendations lies in the financial support the Commonwealth Government is prepared to allocate and the Education Departments' initiatives in implementation. Already, in Melbourne, a Foundation for Children of High Intellectual Potential (CHIP) exists.<sup>18</sup> Among its objectives are the development of the curriculum, teaching method, and school administrative structures to aid teacher maximization of the education of the intellectually able child in the mainstream classroom. This objective is likely to be endorsed by teachers in the government schools.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Year Book Australia*, No. 67, Canberra : Commonwealth Government Printers, 1983.
- 2 Larsson, Y.A. "Gifted education policy in Australia" in *Gifted Education International*, 4 (1), 1986, 49-55.
- 3 Commonwealth Schools Commission. *Curriculum for Gifted and Talented Children*, National Seminar, Brisbane, 1983.
- 4 Commonwealth Schools Commission. *The Education of Gifted Students: A Discussion Paper*, Canberra, 1980, 12.
- 5 Harslett, M. "Recent developments in education for academically talented students in Western Australian government schools" in *Second National Conference on Gifted and Talented Children*, Brisbane, Queensland, May 15-18, 1985.
- 6 Tuttemann, E. and H.J. Jenkins. *The Impact of the Secondary Special Placement Program in Selective Schools*, Discussion Paper #19, Research Branch, Education Department, Perth, Western Australia, 1984.
- 7 Faulkner, A. "The Victorian cluster group program" in *First National Conference on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children*, Canberra : Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1984.
- 8 Murphy, B. "Descriptive overview of University high school's accelerated program" in *First National Conference on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children*, Canberra : Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1984, 322-324.
- 9 Mahoney Report. *The Education of Gifted and Talented Children in Tasmanian Schools*, a report to the Director-General of Education, December 1982.
- 10 Education Department, Tasmania. *Gifted and Talented Students in Schools*, a policy statement, Hobart, 1984.
- 11 *Education Gazette*, August 19, 1983.
- 12 *Policy Statement*, No. 3, 1985.
- 13 *Education*, Journal of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation, 69 (18), November 21, 1988.
- 14 New South Wales Department of Education. *Readings on the Education of the Talented Child*, No. 17, 1988.
- 15 Braggett, E.J. *The Education of Gifted and Talented Children: Australian Provision*, Canberra : Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1985.
- 16 Keeves, J.P., ed. *Australian Education: Review of Recent Research*, Sydney : Allen and Unwin, 1987.
- 17 Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children. *The Education of Gifted and Talented Children*, Canberra, March 1988.
- 18 *World Gifted*, 9 (2), September 1988.

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