

Influences on Gifted Education in Australia

By Mimi Wellisch

Until recently, education of the gifted and talented child has not seriously been regarded as the responsibility of Australian society (NSW Department of School Education, 1991). One major reason for this, argues Christie (1992, p.14), has been that our education system has been "characterised by a strong belief in an egalitarian tradition which advocates the cutting down of tall poppies". Tomlinson (1994, p.259) explains this as a difficulty in attending simultaneously to the voices of equity and excellence, and asks us to be mindful of the fact that "excellence is also part of the democratic equation". Rankin (1993, p.21) concludes that although excellence is acceptable in certain areas such as sports, and to a lesser extent the arts, an "anti-intellectual ethos" continues to prevail in Australia.

Political and Social Influences

Political will regarding the education of gifted and talented children has waxed and waned depending on the political party who was in government both at a State and at a Federal level. Thanks to a strong egalitarian ethos, the support of students with gifts and talents was often seen as an unnecessary luxury (Braggett, 1993; Rothman, 1990).

Braggett believes that gifted education is excluded in the egalitarian model because of outmoded societal beliefs that ability is fixed, easily measured, bound to manifest in later life, and that the owner of the ability is automatically going to do better than most. Such views, he argues, lead to beliefs that "it is elitist to provide for gifted students" and that "it will discriminate even further against those with...needs" (Braggett, 1993, p.816). Ford, Russo & Harris (1993, p.8) liken this kind of thinking to the "rich get richer and the poor get poorer" view which is ignorant of the plight of minority groups such as the gifted disabled, gifted girls, the gifted culturally and socially disadvantaged, and underachievers.

Let us define egalitarianism, then, so that our history of gifted and talented education can be understood in its true context. *The Macquarie Dictionary* (Delbridge, 1987) defines egalitarianism as "asserting the equality of all people". And although Shearman saw equality as meaning that each person has equal value and is entitled to effective schooling, he also pointed out that equity in education calls for "fair distribution of resources...and...treatment" (1992, p.12). Gewirtz explains these two relatively opposing philosophical viewpoints by pointing out that there are two competing concepts of equity, namely *distribution according to merit*, and *distribution according to need* (1996, p.210), and it is the needs based concept of equity which has been adopted in this country (Rankin, 1993). But is it reasonable and "right", asks Shaklee, to ask gifted students to limit or sacrifice their potential for the ideal notion of "social good" (1997, pp.214-215)?

Whether right or wrong, political parties, particularly on a State basis, have impacted on the educational provisions of the gifted and talented. Needs-based equity has been traditionally argued for by the political Left, whereas the right to excel and to be helped to achieve to the fullest potential has been connected to the political Right (Braggett 1993; Gewirtz, 1996; Long, 1995). It may not be surprising, therefore, that the implementation of the 1991 Policy on Gifted and Talented Children (NSW Department of School Education, 1991) was instigated by a Liberal State government.

Historically, education of gifted and talented students in Australia has been marked by ambivalence, suspicion of excellence as an educational goal, and lack of political will to provide teacher education and support in this area of education (Kirby, 1985; Larsson, 1986; Long, 1995).

The States and Territories

The State of New South Wales began to offer opportunity classes in the 1930s for academically gifted and talented children (Larsson, 1986, p.49; Braggett, 1993, p.815). A high IQ score was the condition for entry to these classes (Fetterman, 1988, p.105), as well as to selective high schools, such as the Conservatorium of Music in Sydney, which were also established around that time.

Western Australia's launch of gifted and talented education in 1967 (Braggett, 1993, p.818) preceded the newly energised and American influenced gifted movement developed in the mid-1970s. Talents encouraged in Western Australia in 1967 were in the fields of art, language, dance, theatre and music (Fetterman, 1988).

South Australia followed suit in 1976 by offering programs for the gifted and establishing Special Interest Music Centres, as well as encouraging music education, visual and performing arts and creative writing (Fetterman, 1988). This approach has been recently supplemented with "new focus schools" for academically gifted students (Braggett, 1993).

The ACT has included gifted and talented education within special needs provisions, whereas Queensland, Victoria and the Northern Territory have state and regional provisions of in-service, special camps, acceleration, special classes and a wide variety of other programs for their gifted and talented children (Braggett, 1993). Tasmania, however, has no special provision for gifted and talented students. Each school chooses their own methods for providing for these students.

During the 1970s, with the Labor Party in power at the federal level, the focus became equity, and attention was paid to education of children with disabilities (Long, 1995, p.4). Despite this, the gifted

and talented movement has, according to Braggett (1993), "proved to be relatively resilient" (p.831), with "every State having its own association for gifted and talented children", providing newsletters, networking, materials for teachers and parents, and special learning opportunities for children (Long, 1995, p.5). The Australian Association for Gifted and Talented Children was formed in 1985. Two decades later, Braggett (1993) declared that there were signs of permanence for gifted and talented education within the Australian education system.

Educational provisions in Australian schools today

In state schools across Australia, although influenced by the Marland Report (1972) and by Renzulli's (1977) Enrichment Triad Model, no uniformity of approach has been apparent. The introduction of gifted education into mainstream schools in NSW from the beginning of this decade can be compared to that of the inclusion of children with disabilities three decades ago, although gifted and talented education has been rather slower in becoming an established educational reality (Ford, Russo & Harris, 1993).

Thus far, seven different types of educational provision have been available at various times and in various places for gifted and talented students: enrichment, cluster groups, special interest centers, special classes or schools, acceleration, supplementary programs, and activities organised by Gifted and Talented Associations as well as other interest groups (Braggett, 1993).

Gifted and talented education is further complicated by a large private school sector, which included 25% of all schools (Braggett, 1993, p.816), with enrolments in private schools on the rise at the present time. This sector is made up of various organisations, and each has its own philosophies, making it difficult to gauge the type and extent of educational provisions for gifted and talented children in private education

Gifted education in early childhood

Courses in gifted and talented education for young children is relatively new to Australia. A course was first offered at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, NSW, in 1992 (Janice Hall, personal communication, July 1996). Two years later the writer

attended the fifth National Conference for the Education of Gifted and Talented Children in Perth, and was still the only representative from the preschool sector. It is therefore heartening to report that a special Early Childhood Gifted and Talented Conference which was hosted the following year by the University of Western Sydney, was well attended.

Gifted education in the rural setting

Two Australian papers with a primary school focus (Pears, 1994; Smith, 1987) maintain that it is impractical to create special classes for gifted and talented children in rural primary schools due to the geographical distances involved between the small number of children needing these services. Smith (1987) thinks that the solution is "special training for teachers in isolated schools so that they are able to respond to each child's abilities at his or her own level of understanding" (p.32). This suggestion is backed up by an American study, which found that training rural teachers does improve identification (Gear, 1978, p.96). McDougall, an Australian rural teacher and gifted and talented coordinator in an isolated school, reports success with a "whole school approach", involving individualised programs for each child and maintaining a philosophy which espouses that "every child has the potential to exhibit gifted behaviour" (1994, p.147).

Scant provision for rural preschoolers

A pilot study conducted with a small number of preschool teachers in rural NSW (Wellisch, 1997a) suggests that the lack of opportunity available for Australian gifted and talented children was similar to that observed in American rural areas by Benbow, Argo, & Glass (1992, p.15), who warn that "gifted students in rural areas are frequently underserved, and thus at great risk for underachievement".

The pilot study found that two major factors appear to have influenced the lack of provision in rural early childhood centres. One is the lack of teacher knowledge on gifted and talented children, and the other is teacher held myths and misconceptions about children who are gifted. One teacher's view was that there would be no point in a Mozart being at preschool if he only wanted to do one thing: "It might be all very well to be excellent at the piano, but I feel that you need other skills..." (p.26). Results of

a more recent study (Wellisch, 1997b) confirms the lack of adequate provision for gifted and talented preschoolers, and calls for further studies in the area of young gifted and talented education.

Conclusion

The pendulum is now swinging towards recognition of the needs of gifted and talented children, but the chasm between egalitarianism and excellence is still very deep. Only time will tell whether our society will eventually reach the kind of maturity needed to recognise that there may be a third option in the education of gifted and talented children to those of the left and right of the political spectrum; and that a bipartisan approach is needed in order to grant these children their democratic right to educational opportunities which will enhance their chances of achieving their full potential. This is, after all, no more than what we have practised with their disabled cousins for decades.

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learning; if we supported complication and elaboration rather than simplification; if we supported children to express themselves in the "hundred languages of childhood" (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1993) rather than in the one way which we have traditionally considered best; if we could work with parents sincerely and genuinely as partners in the educative process; if we could create environments which surround children with beauty, which stimulate curiosity and support exploration, research and collaboration; if we could assist children learn from each other and to seek out negotiated solutions to conflict and puzzlement, if we could...

It is hoped that this paper will provide some insight into the learning needs of young gifted children and some suggestions regarding suitable responses

to giftedness in early childhood. It is also hoped that it will stimulate interest in the educational approach of Reggio Emilia. The wisdom and beauty of the practices and philosophies of Reggio Emilia challenge both early childhood practitioners and parents from a position of complacency and motivate us all to rethink our role in the care and education of young children. The centres of Reggio Emilia also speak very powerfully of what is possible when early childhood is genuinely valued by the community and financially supported by government. The decimation of Australian early childhood services which has occurred in the last eighteen months indicates that we have a long way to go before young children are high on our national agenda. The costs born by young children and families may have helped to reduce the deficit but have created a deficit we are yet to pay for.

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