Flexibility of Curriculum Options for Gifted Learners: A Practitioner's Perspective

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Former President of the New South Wales Board of Studies, John Lambert, commented at the 1993 Selective High Schools' Principals' Conference that he was ashamed to admit that he once boasted that Australia's educational standards had remained the same for the past one hundred years. The world around us is constantly and rapidly changing and we, the teachers and educational decision-makers, must not simply follow suit, but, more than this, we must anticipate the needs of future learners, and create appropriate curricula and structures for their delivery, which will result in the optimum development of gifted youth.

It is not enough to "pay lip-service" to a defensible movement in education, which has sceptically been described as a fad, a fashion or the latest "band-wagon". It is true that every decade would appear to generate its differing educational emphases, whose popularity waxes and wanes. This is natural and predictable, and part of the process of change and progression. Providing differentially for the gifted, however, cannot be equated with a "here today and gone tomorrow" fetish, and it is certainly not tantamount to *a new form of apartheid,*
whereby the gifted and talented are segregated *from the great unwashed,* as suggested by Carey (1994,18)! The incidence and needs of gifted young people will not disappear by the turn of century, (nor should they) and it is, indeed, time that schools embraced the challenge of catering appropriately, not as a frill or a token, but as a fundamental matter of course.

This paper details the way in which one school in New South Wales, Australia, has attempted to serve the needs of its gifted learners. It also examines the impact of these provisions, as reflected in the attitudes, behaviors and achievements of the students, to demonstrate the reality that catering to individual needs is preferable to assuming that all learners need the same things at the same time. It has taken us a century to arrive at this salient realization and it is now vital that we publicize the knowledge that there is a

better way to facilitate learning than preserving the notion that the teacher is the fount of all wisdom and that the students are the empty vessels waiting to be filled.

The influence of the Australian Ethos

The fact that Australian education systems have been slower than many of those in the northern hemisphere to recognize their responsibility to provide meaningfully for the gifted child has, of course, been a function of the nation's socio-political climate (Hughes, 1991,6). In spite of a mushrooming of worthy initiatives during the late seventies and early eighties, Australia's strong egalitarian tradition was maintained by educational policies which supported the erroneous notion that equality of educational opportunity would lead to equality of outcomes. Prior to 1988, any dramatic departure from the perception of education as the great leveller would definitely have been in conflict with the nation's ethos and image. In the words of Justice Michael Kirby, when he addressed members of the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented at Monash University in 1991, *We have grown up in a country which prides itself on lopping down the tall poppies. For Australians by and large the word intellectual is a word of derision.*

Indeed, much has been achieved for able students since the early eighties, when the MacDonald Report revealed that the gifted were the most disadvantaged learners in New South Wales. It is no longer accepted that children of high intellectual potential will achieve, in spite of the nature of their schooling. In fact, it is widely accepted that the quality of teachers and programs has considerable bearing on a student's level of achievement. It is pleasing that Australia, like its Asian neighbours, is at last prepared to strive for excellence without embarrassment, for it is only in a country where individual needs and basic rights are respected that the talents of all can be utilized for the creation of a better world.

The Need for Talent Development

When the New South Wales' Curriculum Document, Excellence and Equity, was published in 1989, it acknowledged the fact that there was *widespread community unease with the quality and focus* of contemporary education (New South Wales Ministry of

Education and Youth Affairs, 1989). According to the document, many students were *not learning the right things* and nor were they gaining essential skills. With modern technology facilitating the acquisition of knowledge at an unprecedented rate, it was obvious that different strategies were needed to prepare adolescents for self-directed, productive and socially responsible lives. Motivation, flexibility, creativity and commitment, coupled with healthy self-esteem and sound moral values, were seen as important attributes for youth (ibid,10). All students were to have access to a *balanced* and *relevant* curriculum to enable them to realize their potential and to contribute meaningfully to society (ibid, 13). Initiatives proposed by the Ministry were seen as a means of raising standards and alleviating the incidence of underachievement. New syllabi were to be organised within eight Key Learning Areas, spanning from the study of English and the pure sciences to Technological and Applied Studies and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education. The gifted were to be challenged rather than *neglected,* and schools were to devise structures which would enable talented learners to move ahead of their age cohort, when necessary *(ibid,66).*

Responding to the challenge

Meriden School in Sydney, an independent girls' school catering for students from Kindergarten to Year 12, responded to the Ministry's challenge by conducting an assessment of its students' learning needs in 1990. Fifteen high-achieving senior students were issued with a series of questions designed to evoke their perception of the appropriateness of the curriculum and its delivery for talented students. Respondents then participated in a seminar for the purpose of discussing their observations. Their chief concerns were that:

- lessons were largely teacher-centred and teacher-controlled;
- summarizing text books was an unstimulating, unproductive and inappropriate practice;
- the pace of instruction was frequently too slow;
- there was little opportunity to deviate from the set curriculum, because of the teacher's perceived need "to get through the syllabus";
- students were not taught skills needed for senior courses at a

sufficiently early stage;

- more opportunity was needed for students with special talents to associate with others of similar ability (Christie, 1990,10-20).

Hence, it was obvious that, in spite of the fact that the students interviewed were "prize-winners", they were not learning what they wanted to know and nor were they learning in ways that engaged their interest. Giftedness, as cynically defined by one of the participants, meant *having the ability to regurgitate facts (ibid, 1990,13).* Would these students be adequately prepared for life in the 21st century or were new approaches needed to ensure their optimum development? Could we show that changes in our strategies and learning environments would make a difference to their attitudes and capabilities? Could we keep alight that creative spark in young children, so that it became what Renzulli (1992,170) describes as *a fire in the crucible?* Could we develop in our students a passion for scholarship and inspire them to become life-long learners? Moreover, could we create a school culture which was what Roeper (1993) calls *a microcosm of our ideal world?* A proposal outlining recommendations for change was prepared and submitted to the School Council for approval. These recommendations included:

- the establishment of an interdisciplinary curriculum committee to assess needs;
- the development of a policy for the education of the gifted and talented;
- intensive professional development for teachers;
- modification or elimination of structures and programs which discriminate against appropriate educational opportunities for the gifted;
- schoolwide identification of gifted and talented learners;
- the provision of differentiated programs and appropriate ability groupings;
- the institution of a support network for the gifted, including underachievers.

Key principles were to guide the nature of provisions. It was understood that:

- appropriate planning for the gifted implies recognition of their unique characteristics and a concomitant understanding of their specific learning needs(Ganapole, '89, 81);
- a differentiated curriculum for the gifted should be defined by design and not by happenstance (Kaplan

in Renzulli and Reis, 1985);

- there are specific strategies and skills by which creative cognition or reconceptualisation can be facilitated (Feldhusen, 1990);
- flexible timing and flexible scope in terms of curriculum content allows for catering to these individual needs (Witham, 1991, l1);
- appropriate differentiation of the curriculum in one area necessarily affects all areas and levels;
- provisions should be comprehensive and sequential (Van Tassel-Baska and Campbell, 1988,3);
- gifted and talented youth will not possess all of a set of characteristics for a talent area at a high level (Feldhusen, Hansen and Kennedy, 1989,13);

It was further understood that multiple offerings are needed in any one setting to cater to the fact that giftedness is multi-dimensional and differs among persons in terms of degree.

Implementation of initiatives

Special full-time classes in core subjects for students of high intellectual potential were instituted in 1991. Although Meriden had always had graded classes in compulsory subject areas, curriculum differentiation of any sort had always been unconscious, and all students had basically been subjected to the same learning materials and experiences. Accordingly, assessment had been similarly uniform, so that students could be ranked in order of ability. This system had served to reinforce a feeling of achievement in those who were capable and to institutionalise a sense of failure in those who inevitably floundered. Hence, it was realized that only a policy of meeting individual needs, irrespective of a student's level of capability, would comply with the principle of aiming for both excellence and equity. Teachers of the gifted were encouraged to provide both enriched and accelerated learning opportunities which would enhance the students' motivation, extend their knowledge and develop their ability to become critical and creative thinkers and producers of new information. And, just as Passow (1987,16) believes that it is not enough to foster the development of cognitive processes without an emphasis on affective growth, concentrated attention was given to the nurturing of appropriate

values.

In 1992 an independent research program was implemented to complement the modified curriculum and to provide additional stimulation and challenge. Students of high ability were given the opportunity to investigate issues of personal interest over a protracted period of time. Based on elements of Renzulli's Type III process and Betts' and Knapp's Autonomous Learner Model, gifted adolescents defined problems about which they were curious and were taught the necessary strategies which would lead to their resolution. Although it was expected that teachers would facilitate the learning of research skills in the course of a differentiated curriculum, it was also recognised that students would have greater control over their own learning if, on occasions, they were permitted to determine the focus. Because of the fact that advanced senior students, owing to the complex nature of their inquiries, were often in need of the assistance of specialists, mentor links between academics, professionals and members of the School Community were established. In 1994 the Program was extended to the Junior School for children from Years 3-6, who work with Bachelor of Education students from the University of Sydney, serving as guides, sponsors and counsellors. In addition, because of the knowledge that, even with an enriched curriculum, there would be some students who would need to work at a more advanced grade level, the New South Wales' Board of Studies policy of Flexible Progression was implemented. Children in the Junior School were comprehensively tested and placed in appropriate learning groups for English and Mathematics. Approximately 7% of students who had achieved the outcomes of syllabi set for their age group were placed with learners at a more advanced stage. Similarly, outstanding performers in individual subjects in the Senior School were given the opportunity to progress beyond their age cohort. Thus, it became possible to work at different levels in different subjects, not only horizontally but also vertically. This flexibility was endorsed by the Board of Studies who legitimized the practice of abandoning lock-step progression by providing students with different pathways through secondary school (Board of Studies NSW, 1992).

"The proof of the pudding"

So, is it possible after only three to four years to see changes in children for the better? Are the programs effective? Are the goals of these programs being met? Critics would suggest, as Carey (1994, 18) does, that providing differentially is *a waste of effort.* Yet, Renzulli (1990,319) believes that *the proof of the pudding is in the eating.* Are the students becoming more autonomous? Are they actively and enthusiastically seeking knowledge? Are they growing in self-awareness and awareness of the needs of others? Do their products reflect the acquisition of skills and the development of creativity? When allowed to progress beyond their peers, do talented students benefit? And is it all worth it in the long-run?

According to Hattie (1994) at the University of Western Australia there has been a pitiful dearth of research, detailing the outcomes of gifted programs in Australia, but there is little doubt that the volume of evaluative studies will increase, as the importance of providing a defensible, needs-based education for children of high ability is more widely realized. Measures to determine the appropriateness and efficacy of programs at Meriden are varied and continuous. The first phase of an examination of the extent to which programs in practice reflect the objectives and planned learning experiences specified in the differentiated programs of teachers was conducted in Semester 1, 1994. While the effectiveness of in-service provisions for staff would seem to be reflected in their ability to design curriculum which challenges the cognitively able and which allows for individualisation, a study of teachers' attitudes to acceleration at Meriden revealed the fact that the majority of staff members, while supportive of the notion of flexibility and differentiation, feel ill-equipped to implement strategies in the classroom (Poole, 1994,6). This finding underscores the extensively documented claim that teachers of the gifted require specialized training, as well as number of personal characteristics which enhance their ability to relate meaningfully to their students. Even so, it is, nonetheless, clear that more flexible provisions at Meriden, by allowing for choice and diversity, are serving the needs of the learners, their families and the community. Correspondingly, the appropriateness of this new flexibility is reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of scores of individuals, who, through greater involvement in the learning process, have become self-directed, socially responsible and

creatively productive.

Over sixty personal projects have been completed by students in the independent learning program. Hypotheses or problems framed by the learners reflect their passionate interest in abstract and complex ideas and issues and questions to which there would seem to be no ready or simple answer. The exploration of issues such as extra-sensory perception, hypnosis, reincarnation, demonic possession and exorcism consume the interest of students in their junior secondary years, while seniors have sought to explore such topics as the rise of neo-nazism and the effects of schizophrenia on both sufferers and their families. One of the advantages of having the opportunity to investigate self-selected subject matter is that the pursuit is necessarily meaning-oriented for the learner, as recommended by Van Tassel-Baska, (1993,20). This has been demonstrated by the fact that several students have chosen to explore their foreign heritage, which, owing to their having grown up in Australia, was formerly an area of which they were relatively ignorant. Participation in the Program for these girls has meant the acquisition of valuable skills, which have unlocked the door to their past.

In many cases, too, the provision of a mentor, who serves as role model, guide and companion, has been of great value to the learners. The following excerpts from the journals of protegees are a testimony to the cognitive and affective benefits of mentoring:

· *I really loved it! It meant that I could explore what ever I wanted with someone who had enough knowledge to help me achieve my goals,* commented Amanda in Year 10, who was able to establish that there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and achievement by working with an expert in Educational Psychology.

· *I was so inspired after my first meeting with my mentor. I am a person who is shy to express things ... I was so relieved that Maria had great faith in my ideas and helped me to realize how important my research is. I now look forward to going to University* (Simone, Year I).

· *I treated the research as one would treat a Master's thesis. Dr. Smith was wonderful in the sense that he taught me techniques and*

> *theories which I would never have learned, if left to my own devices, and which I'll use for the rest of my life (Tharini, Year II).*

Not only did the above cited student examine the attitudes of adolescents towards the need for protection against the sun to avert skin cancer, but she later worked with a writer whose impact has also been highly significant.

> · *Writing was always something I'd wanted to focus on but I lacked the discipline. So, entering into a mentor relationship with an established poet, writer and all-round brilliant woman was exactly what I needed. Growing up in South Africa, we shared a common heritage and it was this bond that enabled me to tell my parents' story - the story that taught me the meaning of justifiable pride.*

It is not only the primary and secondary students who have reaped great benefit from involvement in a mentor relationship. Tertiary students have developed a greater understanding of the way in which gifted children do not conform to a stereotype, and the process of guiding a child through the stages of problem-finding and problem-solving has enabled them to refine their micro-teaching skills. It has also given them the opportunity to reflect on the appropriateness of the strategies they have used and to modify their approaches in accord with needs of the learners.

The Program has also had a positive impact on underachievers, as the findings of Emerick (l991) would predict. This claim is illustrated by the case of Meaghan, a highly able but reluctant performer, who dwelt so long on introspection and destructively critical self-analysis that she was often paralysed into inaction, when confronted with a demanding task. Through a process of synectics, advocated by Kaufmann (1992), it was possible to enable Meaghan to recognise her motives for shying away from taking an extra unit of her favourite subject in Year 12. Her conception of English was *light at the end of the tunnel, never being in the dark, expressive, romantic, unassuming, modest, not confronting, sweet soft, supple, cosy, complex, ambiguous and beautiful.* It was *wonderful, expressive, superior, imaginative, an escape...* It had *the capacity to change your life!* But when asked to "be a negative English" she

was *always afraid of being misunderstood*, worried she *would fail to communicate, that no-one would persevere* with her and that she *would be a waste of time.*

Meaghan saw that she could not bear to fail in the area that was her passion but with patient encouragement rose to the challenge of taking the course, and performed in the top percentile band, when she presented for her tertiary entrance examination. More than this, after failing to complete her independent investigation of the differing ways in which adolescents perceive spirituality, she synthesised material on the debilitating effects of procrastination and perfectionism on gifted learners and presented her treatise at an education seminar for students in a Masters' program.

For many students there is a feeling of liberation, as they master the skills which allow them to process and communicate what they know. This was the case with Despina, aged ten, when she compared the lifestyle of leopards in their natural habitat with that of leopards in the zoo, in order to determine which environment was potentially more threatening to the animals' survival. After completing her research, which was to be presented to a Year 7 science class, she expressed her satisfaction:

Now I feel I can learn anything I want any time I want to! This is possibly the biggest experience of my life!

Her mother, too, was grateful:

It's as if a little seed was planted and now it's begun to germinate. In fact, it seems as if it's going to hit the sun! The fact that she's presenting something meaningful is emotionally stabilizing and this security has given her the impetus to work. She's found her place.

Not all gifted children find their place, as is indicated by the following excerpt from a letter from a parent to her son's School Principal:

> *My son is caught in a type of time warp; he is too intellectual for children his own age but too immature for children of his own intellect. He is constantly being put in his place by adults who are threatened by his knowledge or by the fact that he is different from their children. It's a frustrating thing to watch your child frustrated, sad and confused by the fact that he doesn't fit in and there's nothing you can do to make his life complete.*

As educators, it is vital that we realize our responsibility to enable children like this to discover their unique purpose, place and potential. Feldhusen, at a conference in Sydney in 1993, said, *Find out where the child is.* We must also find out where the child wants to go and help make that pathway a possibility. Consider the case of Anna, who was grade-skipped in primary school because of her exceptional ability and who was again offered total acceleration at secondary level, when her performance remained superior to her classmates. She chose to decline the offer, but after some months was reported as failing Maths and Science and copying from her less able classmates in History. When Anna was interviewed, it was obvious that her underachievement was a form of passive resistance to a system which she saw as *focussing on all the wrong things.*

She felt that the curriculum was largely irrelevant to her needs and that the superficial emphasis on marks had greater priority for teachers and students than deriving pleasure from learning. The outcome of the meeting was that Anna opted to accelerate in her favourite subject, Geography, and she worked with a mentor who taught her to compose music using a computer. As well as this, she built a solar car! Before long, she was performing at the top of the class again and still found time to represent the school in hockey, cricket, tennis, softball, athletics and debating and to play her clarinet in the orchestra.

One of the important aspects of a more flexible approach to student placement is that the learner's experience is not necessarily limited by the range of activities designed for the average student of a particular chronological age. The merit of this is clearly demonstrated by the response of fourteen year old Nikki, who, because she was continually asking questions about the nature of God, the self and the soul, was invited to attend a seminar on the mysteries of religion organised by older students. Below is an extract from her letter of thanks:

> *It was fantastic yesterday evening to be able to give opinions without fear of offending people...It was very different to be with people not of my chronological age group yet still feel "at home"*

Discussion and Conclusion

Increased opportunities for accelerated learning, both formally and informally, have been embraced with enthusiasm and characterized by success. Accelerated students have achieved outstanding results in their tertiary entrance examinations but, more than this, they have become more satisfied and well-motivated individuals, as a result of being able to progress at a pace that is suited to the speed at which they learn, this being an observation which is validated by the Board of Studies (1993,14). It would be sad, indeed, if this new flexibility were to become a policy and practice of the past. Critics such as Carey (op cit.,20) question the need to seek differences at all. Carey believes that ability is a construct rather than a reality, and that a separatist ideology, conceived of and perpetuated by governments and policy-makers, is responsible for our desire to differentiate. There is certainly evidence however, that a failure to cater appropriately for the gifted may well be more damaging to both the individual and society than appearing to segregate in order to match the curriculum to the learner. And there is certainly evidence, at least in one school setting, that special provisions do make a difference, as suggested by a student in Year 9 when evaluating the usefulness and level of interest of a unit of work in English:

> *It gave me something to think about in bed at night. I had no idea my mind could stretch so far!*

No-one would argue that it is only the gifted who require enriching learning experiences but what is enriching for one may well be both boring and irrelevant for another. Only if the students are challenged at their level of capability, will they know how far they can go.

Novelist Sumner Locke Elliot communicates the message that we must find out who we are in order to know how to love. Perhaps this is good advice for our young leaders who must work towards the assurance of a harmonious future. According to a gifted thirteen year old, young people in the 21st century will need the ability to control the urge for power and to co-operate and exercise caution, as well as to listen and adapt. She writes:

> *A certain hardness of soul may be required to brace oneself from the ultimate disasters of the future... One must not give in to the temptations that lead to our grave ... Justice and fairness are represented by the*

scales. Yet, we must utilize them in our daily lives (Claire, Year 9).

Hence, we must provide our students with the type of education which will promote both personal and global a awareness. We must demonstrate the ability to listen and adapt in our classrooms, if we are to foster in our students the skills and values necessary to enable them to become the people they have the potential to be and to manage their lives effectively in the context of a unified society. Differentiated curriculum provisions for the gifted are far from *a form of apartheid,* as proposed by Carey (op cit., 1994,18). Rather, they are a means of realizing the concept of the school as a *microcosm of the ideal world*, in which the needs of all are equitably addressed and a sustainable future is assured.

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