

Australia's gifted and talented deserve a much better deal

BY CHELSEA ATTARD

TEACHERS are charged with the task of helping each and every student be the best they can be. But what if a student's best is well beyond the rest of the class?

For about 10 per cent of the student population this is the case, and according to Dr Jae Jung, a senior lecturer in the School of Education at UNSW Sydney, many of these students are being let down.

Jung puts this down to a lack of teacher training in gifted and talented education, and says the effects are far reaching.

"We need to remember that our brightest students are the ones who are the most likely to make a real difference in society.

"They're the ones who are likely to find the cure for cancer, they're the ones who can find a solution to global poverty, and they're the ones who are best positioned to address environmental issues like

loss of biodiversity and ocean acidification.

"And yet, they're the ones who are most neglected in our education system."

According to François Gagné's differentiated model of giftedness, young gifted children have the potential to develop capacities for high-level performance in one or more areas.

However, the extent to which young gifted children are able to develop their potential depends on a number of factors, including the support and teaching they receive at school.

"...in that model, 10 per cent of students of a particular age group are considered gifted," Jung says.

"So that's 10 per cent of a student population, that's a pretty sizeable group [whose] educational needs need to be attended to.

"If you look at the performance of Australia in international assessments like PISA and TIMSS, the

results indicated that students at

the top end in Australia were not performing well in comparison to students at the top end in other countries," Jung continues.

Mark Scott, Secretary of the Department of Education in NSW, shares this concern, and mentioned it in his speech to World Council for Gifted and Talented Children Biennial Conference in July.

"Of great concern nationally is the slide in performance among our high achievers on international and national assessments.

"If we track the percentage of students achieving in the 'high' achievement range (top two bands) on the three PISA test components from 2000 to 2015, we see a general decline, nationally, from 17 per cent for reading, 20 per cent for maths, and 15 per cent for science, down to 11 per cent for all three in 2015," he told delegates.

"Across many measures, not enough high potential Australian students are achieving their academic potential," he added.

"We recognise that student underachievement is a significant problem not just limited to gifted students, but also to high potential students who are above the average range, but may not be in our selective schools or classes."

According to Jung, this may be attributed to the lack of educational intervention for gifted students, and a lack of teacher-training in gifted education.

Jung points out that in New South Wales, all pre-service teachers are required to undergo training in special education, Indigenous education, and English as a second language, but there's no requirement for gifted and talented education.

"This is despite the fact that the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers explicitly requires all teachers in Australia to be able to differentiate their teaching to meet

the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities.

"We therefore have the unfortunate situation whereby intending teachers in Australia are not being trained to fulfil requirements outlined in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers."

New South Wales isn't alone in this situation.

Lesley Henderson, a lecturer with Flinders University's College of Education and president of the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented (AAEGT), says few teachers have any background in this area.

"To my knowledge, only three universities that offer initial teacher education (ITE) courses have a compulsory topic in gifted education - all three in NSW," she says.

"Without professional learning about gifted students, teachers in schools are ill-prepared to understand how to cater for the most able students."

Jung agrees.

"You can't really blame the

teachers because they haven't had training in gifted education.

"And a lack of training in gifted education, perhaps also influences the attitudes of teachers toward gifted education.

"They may rely on common stereotypes, that gifted students will look after themselves, gifted students don't need anything special, this sort of thing. I think this is a very unfortunate situation."

"In addition," Henderson says, "there are widespread misconceptions about gifted students and negative attitudes towards special provisions for gifted students.

"These attitudes are widely researched and prevalent in our society where gifted students are often considered to be advantaged and any special provisions are regarded as being elitist,"

One educator who is determined

not to rely on such stereotypes, is Troy Eggleston, a science teacher at Castle Hill High School in Sydney.

Eggleston is in his last semester of a master degree in gifted education. Excelling at school himself, Eggleston was keen to gain some specialist knowledge in how to extend top students.

"I just thought it was a fascinating area to get into, because I've learnt a bit more about myself and I've learnt a bit more about the gifted students I teach," he says.

Eggleston says he agrees with Dr Jung "wholeheartedly".

"...We're expected to differentiate and we're expected to cater for these gifted students' needs, and teachers don't have the training to do it.

"Now don't get me wrong, there are some pre-service teachers with gifted training, not all universities completely ignore it ... so, it's not as much they're not trained, it's just that the training is inconsistent.

"And when you get inconsistent training you're going to get inconsistent programs.

"Some of them are going to be pretty good, at some schools, some of them aren't going to be as good at other schools.

"And in [the public sector], the school you go to is dictated by where you live ... then it becomes a bit of a lottery."

Jung says when gifted students are allowed to fall through the cracks, there are very negative consequences.

"Research suggests that approximately 20 per cent of gifted students drop out," he says.

"You have dropping out behaviours, students who are not performing to their potential, they may become very bored in the classroom.

"Even students who are performing at a seemingly high level to teachers, they may in fact not be extended to their full potential, either. This is also a waste, and also needs to be addressed."

Eggleston says there are also dangers of giftedness being masked and students going unidentified.

"The difference between gifted and talented is 'gifted' means you can do it, and 'talented' means you do do it," he explains.

"I think sometimes giftedness is masked by other issues, such as low socio-economic status, ESL, even other learning disabilities, so these students get pigeonholed in

that category and therefore gifted education doesn't even enter the question.

"[People say] 'oh they live out back, they're from a low socio-economic area, we don't have any gifted students here,' and they get labeled.

"And their giftedness gets closed off to them," Eggleston says.

Jung sees compulsory training in gifted education as the No.1 priority for addressing this shortcoming in our education system.

"Another thing that can be done - obviously those teachers who are already in the system, they need to get regular professional development in gifted education," he adds.

"In New South Wales we have schools that cater specifically to gifted students. We have no requirement for these teachers of gifted students to get any training in gifted education."

Jung would also like to see gifted students offered a diverse range of options to suit their learning needs.

"We need to make sure that we have a wide range of educational interventions that are appropriate for gifted education students," he says.

"Not all gifted students are the same. Gifted students are a heterogeneous group, we need teachers to be able to identify these students ... we also need to make sure the full range of educational interventions for students, starting from academic acceleration at one end, to interventions within the regular classroom."

Selective schools are often touted as the answer for giftedness, schools which are set up with these students' needs in mind, where the curriculum and assessment is better targeted and they can learn among like-minded peers.

But as Eggleston points out, these schools aren't available to everyone.

"Basically there are no selective schools in New South Wales north of Newcastle, south of Wollongong or west of Penrith.

"So if you live out in Broken Hill, or you live in Dubbo, you live in Orange, and you need your learning needs catered by a selective school, you've either got to see what the gifted program at the local high school is, or go to an

expensive private school, and so that's a bit inequitable," he says.

Another equity problem arises when motivated parents from high SES backgrounds invest thousands in tutoring to give their children

the best chance of securing a spot in the nearest selective school.

"As a local issue, we recognise that an industry of private tutoring colleges has developed over time, where families can pay extra money to independent businesses to do extra test practice for the OC and selective school exams," Scott told the conference.

This issue will form part of a review of the state's 2004 Gifted and Talented policy.

"We cannot talk about reviewing gifted and talented policy without looking at the role of family motivation and the influence of the tutoring industry," Scott says.

"There is ... significant community perception that tutoring is necessary for successful entry and parents can spend more than \$20,000 a year on preparation for OC or selective high school tests.

"Estimates place the size of the school tutoring business industry at well over \$1 billion dollars annually.

"As coaching booms we are seeing a decline in the proportion of low SES students gaining entry into selective schools. It isn't difficult to join the dots."

Jung confirms there is evidence to suggest gifted and talented students come from all SES levels.

"Gifted students come from all walks of life," he says.

"I think we in Australia, and around the world, can do a better job of catering to the needs of gifted students from lower SES backgrounds and Mark Scott's proposal for changes to the way we select students for entry into selective schools, to allow more gifted students from lower SES backgrounds. I think that's a very positive step."

Eggleston says it's time we start talking more about gifted and talented students, and the fact that the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children Biennial Conference was held Down Under this year, is a great start.

"It's not going to fix everything overnight, but it will get conversations started and that's the first step in the process.

Along with conversation,

Henderson would like to see more investment in the futures of these students.

"We need funding for research into the needs, aspirations, achievements and experiences of our highly able students.

"What is working for them and what needs to change for diverse groups of gifted students in a range of different contexts?

"When we understand these children and their needs, we will have greater insights into how to provide appropriately for them," she says.

In the meantime, Henderson and fellow members of AAEGT will continue to blaze the trail in gifted ed.

"As with every other human endeavour, change comes about with the commitment and passion of a few advocating for and working towards that change," Henderson says.

"Uniting professionals, parents and gifted individuals through state, territory and ultimately the national association, provides support for those working towards change, and a networked group to advocate on behalf of the gifted children in Australia."

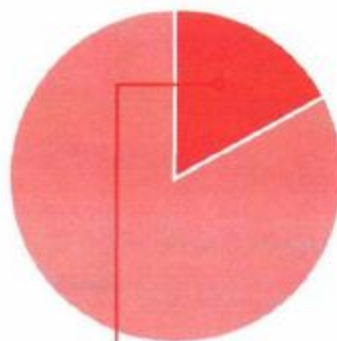
"Of great concern nationally is the slide in performance among our high achievers on international and national assessments."

Students achieving in the 'high' achievement range on PISA

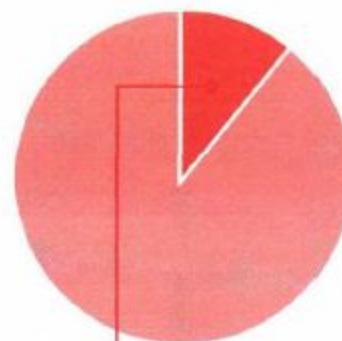
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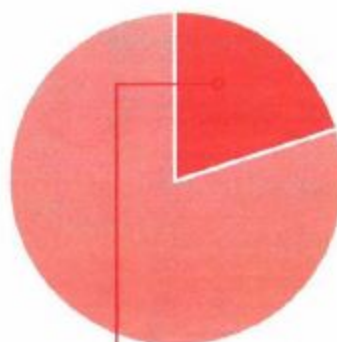


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Maths

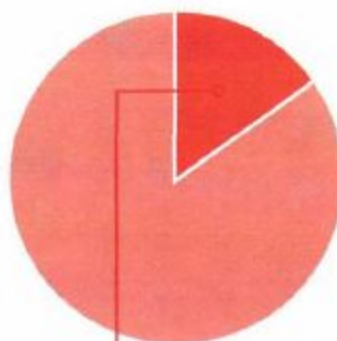


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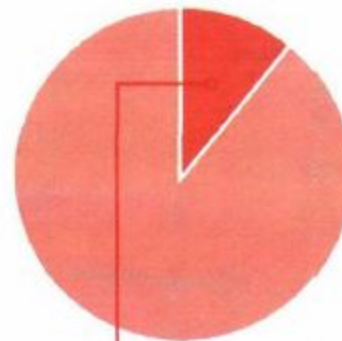


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