



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Proof Committee Hansard

SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS, SMALL BUSINESS
AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Australia's higher education needs Education of gifted and talented children

FRIDAY, 27 APRIL 2001

HOBART

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SENATE
EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS, SMALL BUSINESS
AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Friday, 27 April 2001

Members: Senator Collins (*Chair*), Senator Tierney (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Brandis, Carr, Crossin and Stott Despoja

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Allison, Boswell, Brown, Buckland, Calvert, George Campbell, Chapman, Coonan, Crane, Crowley, Eggleston, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Gibbs, Gibson, Harradine, Harris, Hutchins, Knowles, Lightfoot, Mackay, Mason, McGauran, O'Brien, Payne and Watson

Senators in attendance: (Insert, in alphabetical order, the names of senators provided by committee secretary)

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on the education of gifted and talented children with particular reference to:

- (a) a review of developments in the education of gifted and talented children since the 1988 report of the Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children;
- (b) consideration of whether current policies and programs for gifted and talented children are suitable and sufficient to meet their special educational needs, including, but not limited to:
 - (i) the means of identifying gifted and talented children,
 - (ii) whether access to gifted and talented programs is provided equitably, and
 - (iii) investigation of the links between attainment and socio-economic distribution; and
- (c) consideration of what the proper role of the Commonwealth should be in supporting the education of gifted and talented children.

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Committee met at 9.02 a.m.

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee. On 12 October last year, the Senate asked the committee to inquire into the education of gifted and talented children. The committee is reviewing progress made in this area since the 1988 report of the Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children. Before we commence taking evidence today, I wish to state for the record that all witnesses appearing before the committee are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to their evidence. Parliamentary privilege refers to special rights and immunities attached to the parliament or its members or others necessary for the discharge of the parliamentary functions without obstruction and fear of prosecution. Any act by any person that disadvantages a witness on account of evidence given before the Senate or any of its committees is a breach of privilege. I welcome any observers to today's hearing.

[9.03 a.m.]

HALL, Mr Jeffrey, Deputy Director, Catholic Education Office, Tasmania

WEBB, Mr Tony, Principal, Immaculate Heart of Mary School, Catholic Education Office, Tasmania

CHAIR—Welcome. The committee has before it submission No. 96. Do you wish to make any changes or corrections to that submission?

Mr Hall—No, not at this stage.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although we will consider any requests for evidence to be given in camera. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement, and we will move to questions after that.

Mr Hall—On behalf of Catholic Education, Tasmania I would like to make a couple of brief and general comments. We have presented a two-page summary, which we ask you to take into consideration in this process. By way of introduction, leading into our submission, we ask you to acknowledge the fact that we, as a system, do recognise the need for the provision for the gifted. In this particular hearing, you are talking about gifted and talented. The jargon tends to be moving towards ‘gifted’, and we recognise the need to make provision within our own system in that area.

By way of introduction, I will make a cautionary note. Whilst recognising there is a need, it is but one of many. Teachers in this day and age are constantly bombarded with changes in the whole field of education. I will name three that are significant for teachers not only in Tasmania but also in Australia. First is the issue of behaviour management. More and more, children are bringing into the school context behavioural problems, which create pressures upon teachers. There is also curriculum change and the whole impact of technology. That is my introduction, and the context in which I make comment. Specifically, our submission indicates that we have a very strong belief that we should be educating the whole child. That allows us to incorporate provision for those children who may be talented. There is recognition within our system that we certainly strive to do that.

The second area we offer comment on is in relation to the extension of students academically. We again add a cautionary note that, whilst we recognise that some students are academically gifted, that has to be put into some balance in relation to the other aspects of the child’s development, be it social or whatever.

Another area we do identify—which is the old chestnut that I am sure you hear every time you have a Senate hearing—is that there is never enough money to go around to meet all the needs. I register that because, if we are to realistically address the needs of students in this area, we must also acknowledge that there has to be some sort of response financially. I believe very sincerely that teachers today do a very good job with the resources that they are allocated, and at times they are very limited resources.

Section 5 of our submission notes that we are in fairly close dialogue with the Department of Education in Tasmania with respect to the development of policy statements, position papers and guidelines to assist schools. This is not a new thing. For many years we have enjoyed an excellent sense of cooperation with the department here in Tasmania. I make that comment because I have read some of the other submissions. In our submission we registered some concern that the TAG response in particular seemed to imply that Catholic Education was not really interested in gifted and talented children, that we do not have a policy and therefore, if we do not have a policy, we are not doing anything about it. I make the point that, whilst we may not have a written document, practice has preceded policy. Clearly the sorts of activities that we engage in in our schools attest to the fact that we are endeavouring to meet the needs of those children who have been identified. With that very brief introduction, I introduce Mr Tony Webb, who would like to make some comments.

Mr Webb—Following on from that, I would like to focus on the actual practice. The principals in the Catholic system have a high degree of autonomy to do the things they believe they should be doing. After all, they have been trained to do what they are set up to do. Part of that autonomy means that, if I want to, I can devise my own policy and practice for the school for which I am responsible. I have a strong belief that that is part of my real role in that place. I have a personal view that we ought to look more closely at what is happening for certain students who are not remedial and not what we used to call ‘normal’. There are people out there who have particular talents, and there are certainly children who are what we now call ‘gifted’. I guess there is a trick about the identification of those people. Any number of people—Silverman and Miraca Gross—have written about how we might identify, particularly at an early stage, these particular children who need some assistance and who need to have special programs to assist them.

In my background of 30-odd years, I have come across probably three children who I would call gifted, given the definitions that are around. These are people who are extraordinary—above and beyond anyone else within the place. With those three children, we straightaway had to talk to the parents. We straightaway had to find something to do with them that would make an effective program. It was very difficult. We found out, more often than not, that we were dealing with the parents and not the child. We could construct a program for the child within the construct of the school, but it was the parent at home who had a significant problem. My view has been that we should seek to engage the support networks that are there—organisations such as the Tasmanian Association for the Gifted have been very supportive of parents—and that would be my first port of call.

On the issue of PD for teachers, my peers and I want to ensure that people within our schools are aware that there are children who will come along sometimes who are extraordinary. We need to do something for them. If we are a Christian school, we cannot simply leave them to the side and maybe forget they are there. We are required to do something for them, and we do.

The link with the parent is very important, and I have said already what I have done. We have begun talking about how we might support the parent further. We do not have a big practice yet because I have not seen all that many children who strictly come under the definition of ‘gifted’. I am not sure I need tonnes and tonnes of paper to tell me what to do. However, I recognise that, once I have a gifted child in front of me, I may struggle. Therefore I need to keep my mind open and will work with the parent and with the school to find an appropriate program for that child.

One boy I had in grade 3 simply had been accelerated into grade 3 from a chronological age of, say, a grade 2 child in Tasmania. He did not know how to ride a bike, amongst other things, so among the things we needed to do was to have him understand how he could converse with other kids and learn to ride a bike. Probably one of the least academically inclined in that classroom showed that child how to ride a bike. I saw this boy across a seven-year period, and at the end of the day we had a person with a fairly normal relationship with his peers and with others. He also had some academic peers. We had worked something out for him that made his life worthwhile.

Programs are a big issue. It is sometimes difficult for us in schools to come up with something that will be unique and specific for that child, but we do it. If we seek it, there is enough information out there to help us find something that will fit the bill. The highlight for me is the question of awareness. I am not sure that I—or, indeed, many of my peers—have a complete awareness yet of some of the needs of gifted children. We are still on a learning curve.

Senator TIERNEY—Do teachers for Catholic schools come through the University of Tasmania, or do you have separate arrangements?

Mr Hall—We do not have our own training institution. There is an Australian Catholic University in Melbourne as well as in other major capital cities. We certainly do not train students here separately. In the main, we would draw from the Tasmanian university, but we do also recruit from the mainland.

Senator TIERNEY—Are you aware of what the University of Tasmania does in terms of preparation of teachers for gifted and talented children?

Mr Hall—I personally am not aware; I am only a new arrival.

Mr Webb—I am the Catholic Education representative on two faculty consultative committees, one of them in-service and the other pre-service. Within those faculty gatherings, I am aware that there has been some discussion of a module along the lines that you have commented on. I have not seen this module. I do not have something in my hot hands such that I can say, 'Here it is.'

Senator TIERNEY—For teachers up to this point in time, there has been no special provision?

Mr Webb—As I understand it, very little.

Senator TIERNEY—You mentioned that you are also on the in-service committee. What is being done in terms of in-servicing teachers?

Mr Webb—In the meetings that I have attended, and in the minutes of those that I have not, I have not discovered anything. I personally have not raised the issue.

Senator TIERNEY—How do the teachers identify those who are gifted and talented? What sorts of skills do they have to do that if there is no pre-service or in-service preparation to do it?

Mr Webb—It comes back to what I, as an autonomous principal, might do in my place. If I have a degree of interest in this area—and I believe I need to—I will go out of my way to find ways and means to properly have professional development for teachers within the school and to have that flow back through the whole staff, not just teachers. Also, at a really practical level, I will find out how we will identify kids who are gifted.

Senator TIERNEY—If you take teacher preparation in a system like New Zealand's, 20 years ago all teachers did a particular course identifying how to teach the gifted and talented. Doesn't it strike you as curious that in Tasmania nothing is done for that in terms of preparation, and nothing is done in in-service either?

Mr Hall—Certainly we have to recognise that there have been some opportunities for practising teachers to engage in professional development in this area. That is not trying to duck the question that you are raising in relation to pre-service preparation. I would argue that there would certainly be reference to the needs of gifted and talented students within the context of learners. I recognise that there would not be a stand-alone module that says specifically, 'This will address the needs,' but in any basic teacher preparation program there would be reference to the meeting of the needs of individual children. In the sort of language we use with our teachers, building upon the special education emphasis that we have put into our schools, there is the need to recognise that we have to develop individual educational programs for children. At the moment we particularly focus upon special education needs, but we certainly recognise we have to do the same for children who are gifted.

Senator TIERNEY—It seems that the reality on the ground is that nothing happens. It is all right to say that we teach for the needs of the individual, but if the teacher does not have the skills or training on how to identify and how to especially teach, how do they do it?

Mr Hall—I would have to ask you how you formed that perception. It is a sweeping statement to say that nothing happens. It is a bit of a damning condemnation of teachers.

Senator TIERNEY—No, not of the teachers but of the training.

Mr Hall—I cannot defend that, because it is not my domain.

Senator TIERNEY—When I was trained as a teacher, I cannot remember one lecturer mentioning the word 'gifted', and it does not seem that much has changed in 30 years.

Mr Webb—Let me comment on that. I am not sure, within the time frame you have for training people, that firstly there is adequate time to do it properly or, secondly, that it is quite the right place. In many cases, people start their real learning when they come out of training institutions. They have learnt the craft, but they then need to practise it. The rise in the style, type and number of in-service programs in the last, say, 15 years, gives credence to the fact that learning is now an ongoing process.

Senator TIERNEY—Are any of those programs in the gifted?

Mr Webb—Yes, some of them are. As a principal, I have had to access them because I have had a need and I have gone out and looked for them.

Senator TIERNEY—Who runs those programs?

Mr Webb—Various folk. In some cases, it is not an educational background thing; it is made into support structures that we have in the state. The Tasmanian Association for the Gifted has run several PD sessions, and we have accessed some of those over the years.

Senator TIERNEY—What proportions of your teachers would get access to that?

Mr Webb—I might send two to that, as an example, and have them come back and report to the rest of us.

Senator TIERNEY—You made the statement that in pre-service preparation there is no room—

Mr Webb—I do not know that I said ‘no room’.

Senator TIERNEY—In a three or four-year course, you do not think there is any room to have any lectures on giftedness.

Mr Webb—It is a bit like diets in a six-year course for a doctor, isn’t it. How many lectures do they get on diets? They will not do it all during their training; they will have to do some when they get out there.

Senator TIERNEY—But they do try to cover every area of the body in pre-service. It is a bit of a problem if you miss an area.

Mr Hall—We would not argue with the point that you are making that there is a need to include it in pre-service training.

Senator TIERNEY—In relation to TAG’s comments, why doesn’t the Catholic Education Office have any policy on this?

Mr Hall—I will not go into the full issues in relation to the comments by TAG. In my opening remarks, hopefully you would have picked up the fact that there we have some concern about a couple of comments. The interaction that occurred was between a couple of our staff members and the author. They talked about general sorts of things and the resources available. There was no reference to the fact that it was going to be presented in a report here. If we had known, we would have provided a substantial amount of further information and would have drawn that person’s attention to the fact that we are currently engaged in a fairly detailed process of developing exactly what you are asking for—a policy. Certainly the broad answer was, ‘No, there is not one in existence at this particular point in time,’ but certainly we have recognised there is a need. We are trying to work cooperatively with the Department of Education here in Tasmania.

Senator TIERNEY—What is your timing on that? When do you think you will have a policy?

Mr Hall—My hope is that something might be appearing well and truly by the end of this year.

Senator TIERNEY—One of the ways in which they have provided for the gifted in states like New South Wales is with vertical timetable organisation. The Tasmanian Association for the Gifted is pushing for that in their submission. Do you have a view on vertical timetable organisation in terms of providing for the gifted?

Mr Webb—I would not want to talk about a secondary level, because my current area is primary.

Senator TIERNEY—You can do it in primary as well.

Mr Webb—I know you can. I would be very open to the suggestion, but I would not want to tie myself to it just yet. I am not yet convinced that that is the sole answer; it probably is not. There are other ways that we might be able to more fruitfully apply to a child now. We might place them in a class according to their chronological age—because we have this arbitrary way of doing that in schools—but as far as their program is concerned, I might want them to be in grade 6 with a certain group of kids doing their science and I might want them to be in grade 3 doing their art. I can structure it specifically for that one gifted child in that year.

Senator TIERNEY—Does that actually happen? For example, if a child has gifts in mathematics, do you put them up a class?

Mr Webb—Yes. I have done it twice with the two children I had in the last 15 years whom I, along with their parents, had identified as having special gifts. We did exactly that because that is what worked with the kid.

Senator TIERNEY—It did actually work? You found at the end of that it was successful?

Mr Webb—Yes. What I did not have, though, was a program that set out the next four years of work for that child. I could not have done that. We had to see where the child would go before we could construct the next part of the program.

Senator TIERNEY—I appreciate that.

Mr Webb—It did work, and there was no hassle with it. It does mean you have to be careful with your timetabling, and you have to play games with it, but there is a requirement to look after that child along with how ever many others there are.

Mr Hall—A number of our secondary schools have implemented some modifications to a vertical curriculum. St James College at Cygnet has well and truly done a fair bit of work in this area. A number of our secondary schools would be very conversant with the concept.

Senator TIERNEY—Does it disturb you that they would do those sorts of things without any policy framework?

Mr Hall—Basically there is a policy that says that we should be doing everything we can to provide for the individual needs of every child that we have in our system. That is what I call an overarching policy. What happens is that schools take that and then try to develop strategies within their own school structure.

Senator CARR—I was interested in the discussion you had with Senator Tierney about teacher training and the process of life-long professional development. I agree with you that, more often than not, there are substantial amounts to be learned in the classroom. The question arises, though, as to the nature of teacher training. Is it your experience that teacher training does involve education for individual differences? Isn't it the case that all teachers are prepared to identify different levels of ability and skills—that they are required to identify learning differences within any particular classroom?

Mr Webb—That is very much my experience. Those who have come out of institutions—particularly those doing the four-year Bachelor of Education Course, with which I am very familiar—are certainly quite skilled at how to identify individual differences. They are not necessarily skilled yet as to what they would do with them.

Senator CARR—That is a different question. Diagnostic identification is one thing, and then there is the actual teaching itself. What is your average class size?

Mr Webb—In our place, it would be 22 or 24.

Senator CARR—An individual teacher faced with 22 to 24 students may find it difficult to identify particular problems, particularly in the area of special education, whether it be in the area of gifted or remedial. I will give my own experience. Just this week I spoke to a group of parents in Broadmeadows, which is a very depressed economic area in Victoria. The parents complained about the lack of services provided for children who had particular learning difficulties—special education difficulties. They said they had real problems identifying teachers and education authorities that would truly appreciate the struggles that they face. Would you agree that parents would sometimes feel frustrated that they do not get sufficient support for their children who have learning difficulties, be they gifted or remedial?

Mr Webb—I would agree that there would be schools across sectors where a family or a set of parents would be frustrated because, in their particular school, there does not seem to be a structure that screens children properly, assesses them and assists the classroom teacher to provide appropriate programs. In many schools across the three sectors here, there are additional staff employed—in our place, the person is called the Learning Support Coordinator—who are particularly there to assist the teachers to identify where there may be remedial difficulties or where there may be other circumstances. I have someone who works in our places two days a week. They oversee the programs and get them going.

Senator CARR—How many children do you have in your school?

Mr Webb—Altogether, 180. It is a beautiful small school.

Senator CARR—So you have one person, two days a week, assisting with 180 students?

Mr Webb—Yes.

Senator CARR—That is still a fair load, I would have thought.

Mr Webb—Yes, but it is a manageable load, given the fact that one of the first things I did when I went there was to look at the socioeconomic basis for the place and what the potential needs were.

Senator CARR—The problem arises, though, of actually identifying students with special needs.

Mr Hall—Let me comment on that. There are in place a number of regimes in relation to the identification of a student's ability. The national testing program does at least give us some indication of the performance of students on the national framework. Also, in particular in relation to our primary schools, there is a very strong commitment to First Steps, which is the Western Australian literacy program—we are now moving into a numeracy program as well—which really highlights the need for the continua in the primary school. Our schools have done a tremendous amount of work in plotting the progress of students on a continuum. I feel very comfortable and very confident that our schools have certainly got the areas of language and numeracy reasonably well covered with the sorts of methodologies that they are using for the monitoring of students. It does not mean that they have all the answers in relation to what they are going to do with them, but I think the identification has improved considerably in the last five to six years.

Senator CARR—Do you think it is adequate? Do you think the diagnostic testing arrangements or the diagnostic measurements of special needs are adequate within the system?

Mr Hall—This exercise is looking at gifted, but I am looking at children with special needs. You are putting it in a very broad-banded thing.

Senator CARR—I have a real problem with this idea of dealing just with gifted, because I think special needs is a much broader concept than one particular aspect of it. I think the problems that have been identified with gifted apply right across the educational spectrum. It is often difficult to distinguish between learning disabilities and behavioural problems, be they remedial or highly gifted. The lines are often very difficult to distinguish.

Mr Hall—I think the means of identification have improved considerably, but the big challenge for all of us in the education field is to work out, once the needs have been identified, how we can support the classroom teacher in implementing a program that will help that child.

Senator CARR—That is the point I want to go to. What do you think the Commonwealth can do to facilitate support for students that have been identified with special needs?

Mr Hall—The obvious one is to increase resources.

Senator CARR—Can we examine what is done at the moment? What do you think is done at the moment by the Commonwealth?

Mr Hall—In the area of gifted?

Senator CARR—Special needs. What is done? What particular program can your teachers call upon to get support from the Commonwealth government?

Mr Hall—The broadbanded program that identifies needs in literacy and numeracy. I believe that there is sufficient scope within that to allow us to make some provision. The difficulty I have there is the main target there is students with learning difficulties and that we have sufficient resources to meet all of those adequately. So my initial reaction would be that I do not perceive that there would be very many resources available.

Senator CARR—There is nothing in that program that says that ‘learning difficulties’ has to be defined in any particular way, is there?

Mr Hall—I acknowledge that. But I suppose it has been a matter of priority, in the sense that—

Mr Webb—There is an additional part here. As a principal in a school, I have to prove to a committee, who will give me particular funding for a particular student, that they fall above some benchmark—because obviously there are too many children for the pool of money that is available that has been given to us by the Commonwealth. In part of that proving the point, I might have to provide some doctor’s information, with the permission of the parent of course, and other diagnostic testing information. If it comes above a certain benchmark line, we will get a certain amount of money. As I understand it, at the moment it is all pushed towards those who have a remedial difficulty, and the definition does not really allow for me to provide enough benchmark information for a kid who may in fact simply be brilliant.

Senator CARR—How much extra money do you get for a child with a learning difficulty?

Mr Webb—For example, for one of our children who is profoundly autistic the Commonwealth, through our own local committee structure, will give me \$7,000 a year. That is a significant way down the track to one-on-one teacher assistance.

Senator CARR—That is ‘profoundly’ autistic. We are talking way out on the edge there.

Mr Webb—But that is what I want to use if I am going to use the word ‘gifted’. To me, ‘talented’ is distinctly different to ‘gifted’. I said that in my 30 years, I have struck probably three or four gifted children in the schools where I have been.

Senator CARR—Of the thousands of children you have taught?

Mr Webb—Yes. I do not want to argue the definition with you, because in this room we could have seven or eight definitions, and the definitions from all the experts have been changing over the last 10 years. If I could access, through the Commonwealth programs, a degree of money for a child who is ‘gifted’—and we would have to agree on the definition—then I would be more than happy, for the number that I am likely to turn up.

Senator CARR—Mr Hall, the Commonwealth will be providing \$9 billion to the Catholic Education Commission over the next four years, and out of the last State Grants Bill it will receive an additional \$100 million extra on top of that. Do you think any of that money could be redirected in any way to support the few children we are talking about that Mr Webb has identified?

Mr Hall—We have already had to use some of that funding to give at least a reasonable support to those remedial students that we have been talking about. We are already taking some of our money and injecting it into that particular area of need. If we have the capacity, we certainly would do it, but what I am saying is that if we can we will, and we certainly try. There are support programs in place. We do receive some limited support to provide support programs from the state government as well, and where we can we utilise some of that.

Senator ALLISON—Mr Webb, could you explore a bit more the problems that you have about with parents. You have said the concentration of your activities was required with parents as much as if not more than with children.

Mr Webb—It is intriguing to me. There are two parents I bring to mind when I talk about this. They came to the school to talk about how we might make the school work for the child but, in the conversation, what appeared to be the bigger problem was what they did for the other hours when the child was not at school. They were really in some difficulty. They asked me: ‘How can I best look after my child?’ and ‘How do I stimulate and how do I keep providing things for them?’ That is when I went looking, with the parent, for support structures outside, and we found some. I am not sure how good they were, but the two parents came to me and said later, ‘We have been satisfied, but we now want more.’ I could not provide something for them outside of school hours. That would be beyond our possibilities. I wish there were some better support structures for parents for the hours outside the five hours the child is at school. I am not quite sure what it ought to be.

Senator ALLISON—Is this support for a problem or support for maximising the potential of the child?

Mr Webb—I am not sure whether you have been in a house or a place with a gifted child. They tend to be very interesting people. They tend also to be not good at one or two things and extremely good at a number of others. They end up, in some cases, becoming a behaviour difficulty, perhaps because they are frustrated. We can within the context of the school manage that, but for Mum at home with perhaps two or three other children it becomes a real problem. I actually think that the parents need significant additional support from somewhere. I just do not know where it is coming from.

Senator ALLISON—You draw the distinction between ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ fairly narrowly, it would seem to me. Is there a demand amongst the parents of your children for programs and accelerated learning for talented students?

Mr Webb—There are not enough chairs here, probably, for the number of talented children in a school that I am at with 180 kids. There are an awful lot of those students with a lot of talents. So what do we do, under the gamut that we have already had? We are here to provide for the holistic education of the children. We would provide a specialist music program and,

where we can, private tuition. We run ‘philosophy for children’ classes in our place, because we recognise that as an object way to getting through to kids’ lateral thinking powers. We run a school parliament module, because we think that is important as a civics program. We also keep our numbers in our classrooms as low as we can while remaining financially viable. We have our learning support coordinator and her team, and a team of volunteer parent tutors who are briefed and trained for the work they do, to make sure that every kid will get the chance. It will not be perfect, but I have to have an ideal I will fight for, and that will be it.

Senator ALLISON—It has been said that private schools cater for talented students more than government schools do. Would you agree with that? Do you actively go out and seek enrolments from those children?

Mr Webb—I am not sure what private schools do but Catholic schools probably attempt to do the best they can for every child. It will vary from school to school because of all sorts of circumstances—the quality of your staff, the particular personalities on your staff. You could have a staff member in one particular school who has an extraordinary interest in music or in looking after children with chess, perhaps, and who are great thinkers. Another school may not have anything like that. I do not know if I have answered your question.

Senator ALLISON—I will put the last part of it again. Do you actively go out and promote the enrolment of, say, ‘talented’ students—since you are suggesting ‘gifted’ ones are so rare?

Mr Webb—No, I do not. But what I will do in my brochure will be to tell them about the programs we have in our place, because there may be a parent out there who will access our school because they are interested in their child being in that program.

Mr Hall—I would have to make the comment that Catholic schools promote themselves as clearly part of the mission of the Catholic Church, and those who want to be part of that and want to come and work with us in that area are welcome, be they Catholic or non-Catholic or whatever. I think you will find that the philosophy in our schools is consistent with that approach. I do not think we would do that. To me, that would be against the whole philosophy that we believe in, if we went out there trying to target particular groups of people saying, ‘We want you because you are better than other people.’ I think that would be against our whole philosophy.

Senator ALLISON—It strikes me there are not many long-term studies done of students identified as being ‘gifted’, to understand the role that their education plays in their giftedness and where they end up in society. Would you agree with that?

Mr Hall—Yes.

Senator CARR—That would be an interesting thing for the Commonwealth to fund, wouldn’t it?

Mr Hall—I wanted to go back to Senator Carr and just comment in relation to the question that you asked me about what would we do and what do we consider are some of the things that the Commonwealth might respond to. That is one in which we can further study and understand the whole concept of giftedness and how schools can contribute. I use that word quite

deliberately: how can we contribute to nurturing students like that? To expect schools to do it all is just not an acceptable position. I would say the Commonwealth could increase the support for the professional development of our teachers to help them understand what it really means to have a gifted child in their classroom and then, more importantly, once they understand that, to help them understand what they can do within the confines of their classroom and within the constructs of that school to nurture that child. I think that is one of the big areas.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your appearance today.

[9.44 a.m.]

BEATTIE, Mrs Jane Elizabeth, President, Tasmanian Association for the Gifted

DAVIDSON, Mrs Lorraine Mary, Past President, Tasmanian Association for the Gifted

WURF, Mrs Susan Jane, Membership Secretary, Tasmanian Association for the Gifted

CHAIR—Welcome. Is there anything you would like to add about the capacity in which you appear?

Mrs Davidson—I am a life member of TAG and an educational consultant for TAG committee.

CHAIR—The committee has before it submission No. 42. Are there any changes or corrections you wish to make to that submission?

Mrs Beattie—No.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although we will consider any requests for all or part of evidence to be given confidentially. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, and then we will move to questions.

Mrs Beattie—Thank you for this opportunity to give assistance to the Senate inquiry. Lorraine, Suzie and I will field questions put to this association. TAG is a parent based association whose primary objective is to provide support to teachers and parents of gifted children throughout Tasmania. Gifted children are very scattered throughout Tasmania, and rural families may travel one to four hours to attend meetings and activity days in major centres. References made to case studies in this hearing are subject to parents' requests for anonymity. TAG has verified that the children described in any case studies have been professionally assessed as being actually gifted.

Counselling and the provision of resources to parents and teachers from all educational sectors in Tasmania form a major part of TAG's work. These include requests by parents for assistance to overcome issues with teachers, principals and school curriculums. As a result, we feel we have a strong feel for what you would call the 'coalface'—that is, what impact the lack of provision for gifted students is actually having on these children and their families. Problems like these arise because there are still a large number of teachers and principals in Tasmania who do not have a current understanding of 'gifted'. Generally, they seem to have the attitude that supporting gifted children's learning needs is elitist, that gifted children do not need assistance, and that parents who approach the school asking for assistance are pushy parents who force their children to have unrealistic expectations. TAG's experience shows this to be a major blocking factor in establishing constructive relationships between parents, children and their schools in Tasmania.

Although the education department says it is promoting a more realistic attitude to gifted children, there is still a very long way to go. Current Tasmanian government policy on provision for gifted students, although positive in its effect, is limited in its effectiveness. TAG is aware of

many cases where the parents have attempted to obtain assistance from the schools but the principals are either unaware of the policy's existence, refuse to acknowledge it, or are unable to give effect to it for a variety of reasons. The policy has resulted in the position of PEO—principal education officer—in gifted education, which administers the current department project to increase the critical number of teachers trained in gifted education needs in Tasmania. TAG strongly supports this project. However, we are concerned that the current PEO position is reviewed annually, and there seems to be no long-term funding devoted to gifted education. There are upwards of 230 state schools in Tasmania, and only approximately 30 per cent have received any form of assistance since the PEO position was established. The PEO position also operates under a significant handicap: parents can approach the officer to assist them, but the officer is unable to intervene where difficulties are experienced unless they are actually invited to do so by the principal.

The cyclic nature of provision for gifted education at the state level is caused by fluctuations in funding availability. It does seem to be the first dropped when funding is reallocated on needs. Contrast this with the continuing and increased funding into special education—of which gifted education is in theory a part. In practice, funding for gifted education in Tasmania is very nominal. There is also no teacher training in gifted education in Tasmania. Teachers must travel interstate to undergo studies in this field. Therefore it can be seen that Tasmanian teachers are at a distinct disadvantage compared with their mainland counterparts. This situation needs to be urgently rectified.

We are given to understand that the University of Tasmania has a policy of educating student teachers so that they are able to cater for the diverse needs of students. However, TAG feels it is imperative, to be able to properly meet these needs, that teachers acquire understanding of what giftedness is and how it may manifest over the many ages and cultural groups which they may encounter in their teaching careers. This is not about using labels to identify children; this is about being made aware of the full range of learning needs in any given classroom, especially given that the gifted population is recognised as being five to 10 per cent.

TAG agrees with the suggestion of the Queensland association for gifted that the Commonwealth renew its former interest in the educational welfare of gifted children. We would also recommend that giftedness be established as a national priority in recognition of the nation's need for the development of the talent of its citizens. There still appears to be a cultural cringe associated with the term 'gifted'. TAG feels that the term 'gifted' can be a helpful description and a tool with which teachers and parents can assist children, where and when assistance is needed. It should be noted that our society is willing to recognise and support gifted athletes to the tune of \$160 million over the coming three years. We would like to see Commonwealth guidelines on the identification and assessment of children who may be gifted and a policy to protect the rights of gifted children, while leaving the details of actual education provision to the states. This means looking for underachieving gifted, hidden gifted such as children from non-English speaking backgrounds, and disabled gifted children.

In summary, the TAG experience is that not a great deal has changed for students in the various educational sectors in the intervening 13 years since the 1988 report was released. Provision for gifted needs throughout Australia has long relied a great deal on voluntary services being offered by parents and interested staff rather than the government providing appropriate resources to make sure there are coordinated, long-term, school based programs.

The continued high demand placed on gifted associations across Australia is ample evidence of the need for increased assistance in this field. In order to realise any progress in the provision of appropriate educational services to gifted children in Tasmania, TAG asks that the following recommendations be implemented immediately. You could call this our wish list: review and reform of teacher training in Tasmania; Commonwealth funding allocated towards raising community awareness of the special needs of gifted children; increased staffing in all educational sectors, private and public, to meet the demands for assistance by gifted children, their families and schools; grants available to teachers and students in all states attending events and competitions inter- and intra-state; if the government is committed to professional development to enable teachers to cater for the needs of gifted students, some financial assistance to teachers travelling to attend such courses; and, of course, grants allocated to state gifted organisations to provide support as required.

Senator CROSSIN—There are a couple of areas I would like to touch on. On page 3 of your submission, you talk about the role of the new PEO for gifted, under the Tasmanian government's education structure. Does that person also have responsibility to advise or assist in the non-government area, or is it their role purely connected with government schools?

Mrs Beattie—My understanding is that is not the case, but the PEO could best answer that herself.

Senator CROSSIN—Your understanding is that it is only for government schools; is that correct?

Mrs Beattie—That is my understanding.

Senator CROSSIN—You talk about difficulties experienced with interaction between principals. Is it at particular schools or across the system? What I want you to do is expand on perceived difficulties you see between the interaction of the PEO and principals.

Mrs Beattie—The difficulty is that, like the Catholic system, the principals in the government schools are autonomous in their school to a certain extent. The department would say, 'They have the funding to do whatever they want to do. They have got a funding package.' So, although there is an education department policy on gifted, there is no real imperative for the principal to follow the guidelines of the policy or even be aware of the policy. While there are some principals who are aware of the policy and would act on it appropriately, there would be many who choose to ignore it or not even follow it up. When a parent makes contact with them to request an interview or some support for their child, the principal can choose to say, 'Well, this is nothing to do with me. Your expectations are unreasonable,' or not even have anything to do with that person. For the principal curriculum officer gifted to be involved in that, they have to be invited by the principal because that is the appropriate way to do it. If they do not choose to invite the person in to help out, then the parent really has nowhere to go for support.

Senator CROSSIN—When you say the parent has 'nowhere to go', is there not a structure within the education department like a director above the principal or a superintendent, or even, for example, the CEO of the Department of Education that we met yesterday, to whom the parent can write and complain about the inertia of these principals?

Mrs Davidson—Yes, there are people you can go to. If you do not get anything from the principal, you can go to the district superintendent. But they can really only make recommendations. They cannot really force a principal to take advice or to invite somebody in. A lot of parents, once they get to the principal, feel disempowered and think, ‘I’m really in problems here.’ They often do not have the skills or the knowledge to take them any further than that. Some do, but a lot would choose not to because they do not want to be branded as a difficult parent because they would feel that would impact on their child. In lots of cases, they simply choose to move the child to another school because it is easier.

Senator CROSSIN—Do school councils play a role in ensuring that these policies are implemented in the schools?

Mrs Davidson—No.

Mrs Beattie—No, that is not our understanding of what actually happens. In theory, it should be part of the support network but in practice it does not act that way. These parents seem to deal with what is called the conspiracy of silence around gifted. People do not want to talk about it. They do not want to discuss it, and parents discussing their gifted children with other parents who have no such dealings or understanding of gifted tend to feel quite outnumbered or perhaps even shunned for ‘boasting’ about their children, or being perceived as boasting about their children.

Senator CROSSIN—Is the problem widespread, in terms of principals’ reluctance to take up these guidelines, or are we talking about isolated incidences?

Mrs Beattie—Our experience is that this does seem to be across the board.

Senator CROSSIN—Is that because the emphasis is on children with learning disabilities or even severely disabled children, as opposed to gifted children? Is it the view that they are gifted or they are bright or they are intelligent, so they’ll be right—we do not need to do anything particularly special about it?

Mrs Davidson—Yes. It is not something that sets out to be anti gifted. I think it is based on a general understanding among many principals, but not all, that the remedial kids are the ones who really need their help—their efforts are solely dealing with those needs—and the gifted kids will really be okay because they are gifted anyway and they will look after themselves. It is really a matter of not having the current information or understanding of giftedness that is colouring their views. A lot of them would think they are doing really well by having enrichment programs in the school. But really those enrichment programs should be available for everyone. Also, there is that constant view that ‘It is all too hard,’ and ‘It is one of those bandwagons that, if we ignore it long enough, will go away.’

Senator CROSSIN—So it is not actually the autonomy and the independence of the principal that you are questioning—you are actually saying that you believe more principals should have a commitment to the gifted and talented policy the department produces; is that right?

Mrs Beattie—We would like to see some professional development addressed to principals. There is professional development being conducted state wide. We would like to see principals

taking part in that so that they have a better understanding of just what the policy entails and what their responsibilities are in addressing this policy. We have situations where a parent cannot even negotiate with the school—as in one situation recently—because the principal has refused to meet or return calls.

Senator CROSSIN—Let us just go to the issue of professional development. In your submission you tell us that that is very difficult to undertake here in Tasmania. Let us leave for a moment pre-service training. What sort of professional development could be offered by the University of Tasmania, for example?

Mrs Beattie—We would like to see some compulsory component in teacher training which addressed gifted. This does not need to be large. This could be an invitation to the PEO, perhaps, to address student teachers in both the Bachelor of Education and the Bachelor of Teaching as a regular program, once a year perhaps, to talk to the students about gifted education to give them some basic understanding of what a gifted child is. We are not talking about the label of 'gifted'. We are talking about recognising these children.

Senator CROSSIN—So you are saying at this stage in those two courses there is not even a one-week lecture or a two-week block on—

Mrs Beattie—We have questioned the university directly regarding this and received no feedback bar the response that is in our submission.

Mrs Davidson—As a past president, and I have been involved in gifted in Tasmania for a long time—18 years—the university has often over those years sent me students who are doing individual projects on gifted to access information resources, advice on what to do and how to proceed and things like that. I have done that on a voluntary basis as president of the Association for the Gifted in the past.

Senator CROSSIN—In terms of professional development—let us go to the other side of the coin: those teachers who are out in the field—do you run information sessions or meetings? It is unfortunate that you have to generate it as opposed to the Department of Education.

Mrs Beattie—We see ourselves as part of the support network. We see ourselves as a resource. We work very hard as a voluntary organisation to fill the gap, so to speak. Up until the PEO position was established, the only courses I understand that were run were run by this voluntary organisation. We ran a conference last year at Lenah Valley Primary School, and it was fairly well attended from private, public and church schools all over Tasmania. We commit our organisation to running those things regularly to continue to highlight not only the needs of the gifted but our position as a supportive organisation.

Senator CROSSIN—What sort of support did you get from the Tasmanian government or education department in respect of that conference?

Mrs Beattie—We received a small amount of funding which enabled us to bring down a keynote speaker, Dr Braggett.

Mrs Davidson—That was for the latest one. Previous to that, the association had not received any support or funding. The Association for the Gifted would run meetings, conferences and sessions in Tasmania based on our own support and the good nature and voluntary input of teachers and people interested in the field of gifted who had attended, like myself, world conferences and national conferences on gifted which were self-funded.

Senator CROSSIN—In terms of a yearly program of professional development generated by the education department, there is never a slot for information about gifted children. Is that what you are suggesting?

Mrs Beattie—Apart from what the PEO is conducting, that is my understanding.

Mrs Davidson—The purpose of the PEO's professional development at the moment is to increase the critical number of people in the state who know information about gifted. That was something that we had input into setting up, because we saw that as a really difficult thing to move forward as there were not enough people with knowledge. So that is why we have suggested—and it has been agreed to by the department—to focus the PD in that way.

Mrs Wurf—One of our biggest problems with offering PD, even as an association, is that within the whole state of Tasmania there may be only one or two people who actually have a qualification in gifted education. That is a terrible state of affairs. Who do we get to do the PD even, particularly when the university does not offer, or have, to my knowledge, anyone with those qualifications? We are starting from zero.

Senator CROSSIN—What sorts of numbers are we talking about in terms of members of your organisation or children in Tasmania who have been identified as being gifted?

Mrs Beattie—My understanding based on discussion with the PEO is that, in the state system in the K to 12 enrolments for 2000, if we are looking at five per cent of the population, there would be 3,000 students. Our membership is not large, and we consider that to be the tip of the iceberg. There are constant contacts made to this organisation. There are constant requests. A lot of them are crisis requests, and not many of them will actually lead to membership. People will grab the information and leave. State wide we only really have about 70 members at the moment. We are pushing that number and we are trying to bring more schools in, but we are very underfunded and we are all voluntary, so time to actually circulate awareness of our organisation is a big thing just to start with.

Senator CROSSIN—I am not suggesting that your job is incomplete in anyway. I understand how difficult it is when you head up an organisation voluntarily. I was just trying to get a handle on the number of children. If you tell us it is around 3,000, that is what I was after.

Mrs Beattie—That would be in the public sector alone.

Senator CROSSIN—Your association is an association for the gifted. Do you include talented children under that umbrella, or do you separate those two areas?

Mrs Beattie—The definition that the Tasmanian Association for the Gifted refers to would be the one where we understand giftedness to be potential and talent to be exhibition of that

potential. So our understanding is that there would be a lot of gifted children whose potential you may not see now or ever for various reasons.

Mrs Davidson—Also, in all the programs we have run, we have always been inclusive. If somebody wanted to come, they came. If somebody wanted to be involved, that is fine. We figured they self-identified and we never, ever excluded anybody from anything. We would just offer things, and those people who wanted to come were the ones involved.

Mrs Beattie—We do not require proof of giftedness to be part of the organisation. We are very up front with the label. We do not hide behind any other terminology. We figure that, if people come to the organisation, see the information and get in conversation with parents and their children are definitely not gifted, they do not stay. They tend to be fairly overwhelmed by the open discussion of a parent whose four-year-old is reading Harry Potter. They tend to back off fairly quickly because that is a reality base. That is one of the things we see quite regularly.

Senator TIERNEY—Are you concerned that the principals are unreceptive to gifted education? How common are you finding that attitude in Tasmania?

Mrs Beattie—It seems to be, as I said, fairly widespread. What I would like to clarify is that I do not believe this is about principals being hostile. I believe it is mostly about principals being perhaps uninformed and overstretched. To get past that would take work on the part of the government to provide professional development and support to principals.

Mrs Davidson—Perhaps I should clarify here, because it is a little difficult for me. My paid job is as Assistant Principal at Lenah Valley Primary School, and we do have provision for gifted there. There are principals throughout the system who are supportive and who are approachable to parents but, overall, there is a limited response. If you take, for instance, the department's view on early entry for gifted children, that policy is not well recognised in the state. Parents who know about it could go in and talk to principals, but quite often we have had principals say that they do not even know that the policy exists and they certainly do not follow the procedures.

Part of the reason for that is that they have a set budget. These children who are early enrolments in that system are not counted as part of that budget, so they are not funded. The school taking early enrolment in kinder would not be given staffing against that child, so the school would carry that child until they are of school age. So there is no real incentive for principals in that way. They are taking a risk. They have to have spaces available. They may find that this is not an appropriate situation for the kid. So it is fraught with difficulties and they really do not have the knowledge and support to be able to make good judgments about it. It just gets too hard, basically.

Senator TIERNEY—Apart from that specific example, we seem to be picking up a general lack of interest in the system in giftedness. As a school principal, could you put your finger on why that might be the case across the system?

Mrs Davidson—I think it is really just part of the cultural cringe in looking at that sort of thing. A lot of people still perceive that provision for gifted kids is aligned with elitism. People think, 'Here are kids who have got something extra. Why would we give them more when there

are so many children who need us?’ One of the things we have always advocated is a whole class approach. It means rethinking what people do and that is always hard. It is always hard to do something slightly different. So it is just another thing that they have to deal with. There is the perception that we are being bombarded constantly with all these things and the thought is, ‘Oh my gosh. Here’s another one. Just put it to the side.’

Senator BRANDIS—And the gifted can look after themselves; that is the mentality you have described.

Mrs Davidson—Yes, absolutely. There is still a very strong belief about that within the system, I would say.

Senator TIERNEY—We will go back to your definition of gifted and talented. If giftedness is potential and talent is the actual fruition of that, surely the gifted are not being provided for in the system because there is not much opportunity for that potential talent to flower without proper development of that child through the skills the teacher may have or may not have. What are you finding in terms of the preparation of teachers in your school for gifted education? How do you provide for that on an in-service basis?

Mrs Davidson—In my school, we provide professional development. In fact, just a fortnight ago, we had a PD session with the whole staff, which I took.

Senator TIERNEY—On giftedness?

Mrs Davidson—Yes, specifically on gifted. The reason for that was that staff had said, ‘We need some more information. We need a session. Can you please run one?’ As well as that, because I am recognised as having some expertise in the school, I act as support to various class teachers who come and say to me, ‘Lorraine, I’ve got this kid who I think might be gifted. Can you have a look at the kid? Can you help me set up some programs within the context of the whole class?’ So we operate that way: on a needs basis. We also offer specific professional development in the school. Lenah Valley in the past has also offered professional development to other teachers before the principal curriculum officer’s position was in place.

Senator TIERNEY—Does this happen very often in Tasmania? How many schools would be doing what you are doing, for example?

Mrs Beattie—Not many.

Mrs Davidson—There are some. I know about those specifically where I have personally been invited to do professional development. There has been the odd Catholic school, for instance, which has invited me to do work with them specifically. As well, we have done work with cluster schools in, say, the north-west of the state where we go up and work with five schools in intensive professional development in the classrooms as well as speaking to PD. There would be clusters of groups around the state, but they are not representative as a whole.

Senator TIERNEY—How did you pick this up in terms of your training in giftedness? Where did that come from?

Mrs Davidson—I started as a parent about 19 years ago. I am a trained teacher and my first child to me seemed to be a little different somehow. I got involved in some gifted education things through, again, Explorers Unlimited, which was an early voluntary group working before the state association was established. Then, because of my teacher background, I recognised that I did not actually know anything about gifted and I thought that was really strange. I should have. So I set about educating myself.

With the support of the Explorers committee, I attended a number of conferences and things on mainland Australia. I began picking up information doing my own reading and research. I guess the biggest thing that really turned it around and gave my skills availability for people here was a world conference in gifted in Sydney in the late eighties where I learnt about a whole lot of things. I then started acting on them in my classrooms and developing things. So the PD I do now is based on my personal experience in classrooms and developing a whole class approach for gifted.

Senator TIERNEY—So if another teacher decides they want to do a similar thing today, is there anywhere they can go with the state education department or with the university here to seek that sort of information that you have found through various means?

Mrs Davidson—Not that I am aware of. The only way I could do it was really through the support of the local gifted association in helping me get to these places. There is no real reference centre here, apart from the library of the Association for the Gifted. That is why we still get university students coming to us and I lend them my private stuff or send them to the Association for the Gifted. There is no real support. A teacher could apply to the department, for instance, for support to go to a conference, but it is highly unlikely they would get funding for that.

Senator TIERNEY—Because of priorities in the system? Is that why they would not get it?

Mrs Davidson—Yes. It is really very much on the basis of an individual need and generating the chances for yourself.

Senator TIERNEY—Are you aware whether new teachers who come into the system and start teaching in Tasmania get any preparation in their training for giftedness?

Mrs Davidson—I am not personally aware of anything being specifically made available. My understanding is that they are trained to pick up a range of abilities and deal with a whole class approach. One of the problems we have with that is that it is a really good approach and we agree with the whole class approach for moderately gifted children, but you have to know what a gifted child is before you can actually recognise what you are dealing with. My whole class approach that I advocate is based on a very clear understanding of what a gifted child is, what their needs may be and the choice of things available that you can help that child with.

Mrs Wurf—The teacher's biggest problem also has to be the clarification on giftedness versus talent. There are so many gifted students out there. They are very gifted, but they can hide that gift extremely well. The best person who knows about that is the parent. The parent and the teacher can often have two very different views of the same child. The child can go to school and pretend that they cannot read, but at home they will be reading encyclopedias. So teachers

are not always the best people to identify a gifted child, even if they have a fairly good knowledge of the tools, because these children can be quite invisible. They do not stand out there in front of class every day reciting their times tables and reading their encyclopedias. They can sit very quietly at the back of the class and no-one will know because they are not exhibiting their talents. That does not mean they are not highly gifted. That is why our membership often come to us in trouble: they have a child who they know at home is doing quite extraordinary things and at school they are just one of the crowd. They come home and download to mum and dad and say, 'I really wanted to learn something today, Mum. I am getting a bit tired of school, Mum.' That is their attitude.

Mrs Beattie—Or else at school they are acting up. They are bored. They are getting silly. They are becoming the class clown. They are displaying their talents in negative ways and they head down the path of being labelled with other disorders.

Mrs Wurf—And they will not be given extra work until their behaviour improves.

Mrs Beattie—Yes. The teacher says, 'We would like to extend your child, but he has to finish the work sheet first.'

Senator TIERNEY—Given the low priority that state governments and universities are putting on this, what do you think the role of the Commonwealth government should be in trying to advance giftedness education in this country?

Mrs Wurf—If we are to be a clever country—and there seems to be some angst about the brain drain that we have—we have to understand that our children are our greatest resource, and our gifted children are really the jewel in the crown. We have to learn to recognise and have some sense of celebrating their intellect as opposed to their sporting ability. It has to come I think from the Commonwealth. There has to be an attitude of, 'We will be a clever country. We will celebrate intellect. We will nurture our young gifted children.'

Senator TIERNEY—What do you think we could do in a concrete way to help develop that?

Mrs Beattie—Formulate policy that recognises the rights of these children. Work on the public profile of these children. Work on public perceptions. It would be a long slow process, but try to change the public's perception and alter this cultural cringe, that knee-jerk reaction of, 'You've got tickets on yourself. You think your child's smart, but he can't kick a football. What is the point?'

Mrs Wurf—And it has to come down to teacher training. All of our children go through some sort of school system and we rely heavily on teachers to be supportive and understanding. Until they get really good grounding in the needs of gifted children, we can go no further. So there has to be funding into really good PD for teachers right from the bottom.

Senator TIERNEY—Thank you.

Senator ALLISON— I wanted to read to you a section from the submission by the Queensland University, which says:

The allocation of additional resources to targeted individuals or groups is now understood as contributing little to changing deep-seated social injustices.

It also states:

Elements of single programs and 'methods fetishes' ... are common to fields such as gifted education and are challenged by the proponents of inclusive education.

Would you comment on those statements in terms of whether additional resources are effectively wasted or contrary to notions of inclusiveness?

Mrs Beattie—I can argue from the coalface. I can argue from the position where we have parents coming to us regularly who are faced with these teachers who have been trained in these areas and are following this particular mode of thought—which is that these things are counterproductive, these labels are counterproductive, all children should be celebrated and there should be no special attention given to gifted children or any other minority groups. The issue is that the children suffer as a result. I can only talk about what actually happens on the coalface.

Mrs Davidson—Can I just get the gist of what they were saying? Are they saying that resources channelled into specific schools or specific groups do not have an effect? Is that the gist of what they are saying?

CHAIR—I think it was an opener for mainstreaming, as I recall it, which is different to no provision.

Mrs Davidson—Yes, it is. So they are suggesting that the whole gifted thing becomes a mainstream thing that happens. Is that what they are suggesting?

Senator ALLISON—We will ask them when then appear before us.

Mrs Davidson—Sorry. I was just trying to understand the context.

CHAIR—Senator Allison, was that the Queensland University?

Senator ALLISON—No, Tasmanian.

CHAIR—Sorry, I thought you said Queensland.

Senator ALLISON—Sorry, I may have done.

Mrs Davidson—Could you say it again, please?

Senator ALLISON—It states:

The allocation of additional resources to targeted individuals or groups is now understood as contributing little to changing deep-seated social injustices.

That is a little different from the suggestion that allocating extra resources is useless to that distinction; nonetheless, it seems to me to suggest that there is no evidence of the usefulness of this program in terms of, in this case, social injustice. Then it states:

Elements of single programs and 'methods fetishes' ... are common to fields such as gifted education and are challenged by the proponents of inclusive education.

It seems to me to be the crux of the problem we are dealing with. Perhaps if I can ask it a different way: have there been any studies that you can perhaps cite—apart from your own anecdotal evidence—that show that additional resources, special programs and the sorts of things that you advocate do have value to the individuals, the groups or social inclusiveness?

Mrs Wurf—If nothing had been given to learning disabled, where would it be now? There are specific programs. It is fairly well highlighted to my knowledge in teacher training that, if that had never happened, there would be no progress whatsoever. I think there is a lot of funding, assistance and lovely success stories of learning disabled children who have made a lot of progress. So if we were to apply that to gifted, I would have to say that you would expect a similar outcome: that it would only get better.

Mrs Beattie—I would also suggest they look at GERRIC and in New South Wales. Is that all useless? Is that not having any effect in the population of gifted in New South Wales? I do not think so.

Senator ALLISON—Just to clarify a point: it was said by the Catholic Education Office and the Immaculate Heart of Mary School that Mr Webb came from that in-service was being accessed by your organisation for teachers, but you say there is no in-service training available in Tasmania and that teachers have got to go to the mainland. Can you clarify what you do provide for teachers?

Mrs Beattie—Sorry? He said that in-service was being accessed to our organisation?

Senator ALLISON—Through your organisation.

Mrs Davidson—Over years, we have offered conferences, gatherings and information evenings, but they are not on a regular basis. They are not like an annual thing. They basically are pulled together when we have got the time and energy to say, 'Gosh, we'd better have another one. We'd better get organised and do something about it.' There is no regularity about that. We put them together when we can. We did one last year and that took a fair bit of organising. The one previous to that was two years ago. I actually coordinated a national gifted conference here under the umbrella of the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted. To my knowledge, no Catholic education people actually attended that. Before that, we would have had a number of minor things—for instance, an evening PD session for teachers at Lenah Valley perhaps. Before that, there would have been other things offered in other regional centres, but mostly they have been sessions that have been set up at the request of individual or cluster group schools.

Mrs Wurf—They are not accredited courses. If the teacher wants to have specific accredited training in giftedness, they cannot do it in Tasmania. They have to do it by correspondence or move to other universities.

Mrs Beattie—I would also add that the conferences and sessions we put on are in response to what we see as a complete gap. These are a stopgap measure. We feel that we are filling the void. Last year's conference was very well attended. There is obviously a need out there. We had 120 attendees to our little conference. We kept the price very, very low because we wanted to encourage attendance. These conferences are at great cost to us as an organisation, especially in time. But there is nothing else, so we feel the pressure to do so.

Senator ALLISON—The principal of the school said that, with 180 students, only three students with giftedness had been identified in the last 30 years. Do you find that surprising?

Mrs Beattie—Yes.

Mrs Wurf—Going back to the gifted versus talented understanding that we have, the gifted can be quite well hidden out there under all sorts of different umbrellas, and just plain hidden. People like Gross and Silverman and any number of people who work hard and long in gifted education tell us we are looking at a minimum of five to 10 per cent of the population. So if they have not been identified, it is telling us something: that they do not know how to do it.

Mrs Beattie—We would also ask: when these people are looking for a gifted student, what exactly are they looking for? What is their current knowledge on gifted children? Is it the tidy, neat, polite child with the beautiful handwriting who finishes their homework and is obedient in class? Or is it the child up the back who shouts out, 'I'm bored. I've done this. I did this three years ago'? I think it would have to do with current knowledge.

Senator ALLISON—Can you characterise for us the sorts of parents who say that their children are gifted? Are they all middle class, upwardly mobile groups?

Mrs Beattie—No.

Senator ALLISON—Or are there some that are socially disadvantaged?

Mrs Beattie—They are absolutely across the board. Really, it seems to come down to confidence as to whether we are approached by various parents. There are parents who have the confidence to look for and actually search out the information. There are parents who find out by accident. Any sort of publicity with any associated phone numbers brings a rash of people out. They come out of the woodwork and they come from all over Tasmania. They come from all sorts of backgrounds and all sorts of socioeconomic areas. There is no set area. I would say that our committee goes across the board when it comes to the parents' backgrounds and economic situations.

Senator ALLISON—You mentioned earlier parents from non-English speaking backgrounds. Can you expand on the experiences of those parents?

Mrs Beattie—We do not have a great deal of contact with those parents. We know they are out there.

Mrs Wurf—Tasmania is not nearly as multicultural as other states to a very big degree. At the moment, we have no non-English speaking members.

Mrs Beattie—A Filipino family has made contact from up in the north-west of Tasmania. Her English was difficult. Not many of those parents have been making contact with us. Again, I come back to the point where we are so stretched. We would like to be out there. We would like to actually have some publicity. We would like to be more apparent to the public as a resource, but it takes time, money and energy and we are really stretched as an organisation.

CHAIR—As there are no further questions, I thank you very much for your appearance here today.

Proceedings suspended from 10.29 a.m. to 10.44 a.m.

JACOB, Ms Alison Joan, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education

SHIPWAY, Ms Kate, Director, Equity Standards Branch, Department of Education

TAYLER, Ms Jennifer Ann, Principal Education Officer, Gifted Education, Department of Education

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Department of Education. The committee has before it submission No. 75. Are there any changes or corrections you wish to make to that submission?

Ms Jacob—No.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although we will consider any request for all or part of your evidence to be given confidentially. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement, and we will move to questions beyond that.

Ms Jacob—There are just one or two points I would like to emphasise about the government school system in Tasmania and our provision for gifted education. The first point to emphasise is the fact that we are a relatively small and fairly decentralised system. So in comparison to the larger states, our capacity to provide any kind of specialised services is reasonably limited. That is something we recognise in the philosophical approach we have taken.

We also have a fairly strong commitment to inclusive education in the government school system in Tasmania, and that has been very much indicated in our approach to students with disabilities. It also carries over to the approach we have taken to including students who are gifted in our education system. We are trying to take an approach which would say that we try to provide for the full range of students within what is available in every classroom. We are not saying we do that brilliantly and successfully for every child, but that is certainly the approach we are taking. We believe that that is where we can probably reach most of the students most constructively—by trying to make sure that as many classrooms as possible do provide for that full range of students.

The second point is that we also believe that the curriculum is one of the key areas in which we can provide adequately for all students, including students who are gifted. There are a couple of initiatives in relation to the curriculum that we would like to draw to your attention. The first is that we are doing a major review of our curriculum at the moment. That is a large project that is going to take five years. We are in the second year of that at the moment. We really do believe that the curriculum that is presently being developed will offer an opportunity for all students—but particularly for students who are gifted—to be able to work on a more enriched and open-ended curriculum, on the kinds of curriculum materials which will allow them to work at whatever ability level they are presently working at. We are hoping that that new curriculum framework will offer considerable opportunities for gifted students. We are, for example, trying to break away from a traditional subject area curriculum framework to look at what we are calling New Essential Learnings, which are much more open-ended ways of looking at the curriculum.

Related to that is that we have also been at the forefront of developing online digital curriculum materials, largely through the Networking the Nation project which has given us considerable funding to spend in that area. We believe that some of the online materials we have developed in the state and we hope will be developed by the national project over the next few years will also allow a lot of opportunities for gifted students to be extended and to have the kinds of enrichment activities that they should have and that we would like to provide for them.

Finally, we would like to draw your attention to *Learning Together*, which is the government's educational vision statement strategic plan which was only released earlier this year. That does include an initiative for students who are gifted as being one of the areas of government priority. We would like to elaborate on that later if the opportunity arises.

CHAIR—Perhaps you could do it now.

Ms Jacob—Basically, the *Learning Together* document details that there will be a mentoring project for students who are gifted. It also allows for early entry for students who are gifted and for acceleration, which we do now but it would make that a more formal activity. It also provides for the provision of those online materials, the further development of those online materials and the use of those materials by teachers who I have already mentioned.

CHAIR—Can I take you to page 4 of your submission, where at the bottom of the page you indicate:

An increase in the number of schools establishing a budget dissection for gifted students is a positive result of the professional learning program.

Is that a budget allocation within the school budget for professional development? Is that what you are referring to there?

Ms Jacob—Yes. Basically in our system, most of the money for professional development is controlled at school level and schools do have a fair bit of discretion over the use of those funds. While we do have some funds mainly for the work that Jenny does in her capacity as Principal Education Officer in that area, largely what she is relying on is schools putting some of their own budget into that area to pay for the PD.

CHAIR—Are there other areas where schools are making budget dissections in relation to gifted education?

Ms Jacob—Jenny might be the best person to answer that.

Ms Tayler—What do you mean by other areas? Do you mean other school systems?

CHAIR—No.

Ms Tayler—Do you mean other areas of the curriculum?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Tayler—Yes, that is so. A number of schools will develop particular budget dissections for particular school projects at given times. It may be that in a particular school they might want to establish an ecological project or something like that, and they will establish a particular budget dissection within their professional development budget for that purpose.

CHAIR—Sorry, I meant particular projects related to the provision of education for children identified as gifted. Are there other examples you could offer, apart from professional development, that schools are specifying funds for?

Ms Tayler—I see. Certainly schools will set aside funding to send some children to specific programs that are identified for gifted children—for example, the Gateways Program, which provides workshops for gifted children. I do not know of any other specific things that schools do. They enter children in Tournament of Minds. They provide opportunities for children to enter a whole range of competitions. They enter children in future problem solving competitions. The mathematical association has mathematical relay competitions and the Australian mathematics competition. A wide range of national competition strategies are implemented. Some schools look at student leadership programs as an appropriate forum for gifted children to work. Also, some schools are looking at philosophy for children classes and at more broader, open-ended discussion forums for gifted children to meet and discuss topical issues and learn elements of debate and ongoing discussion.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Senator TIERNEY—I listened carefully to what you said, Ms Jacob. I was listening in vain for what actually you are doing for gifted in Tasmanian schools. If I am a child who comes along at the age of five and I am gifted, what provision is there going to be for me in your system? What is going to happen that is different to what is happening to everyone else in the classroom?

Ms Jacob—I suppose the first point would be whether you had been identified as being gifted.

Senator TIERNEY—I have been identified.

Ms Jacob—That might be quite an issue, because at the moment that is one of our concerns—that many of these students are not being identified.

Senator TIERNEY—But I probably would not have been identified by the teachers because they have no preparation to do that. Isn't that correct?

Ms Jacob—I do not think that is quite true.

Senator TIERNEY—Isn't it?

Ms Jacob—No.

Senator TIERNEY—So where do they get that preparation?

Ms Jacob—Largely through the professional development program that Jenny is running in the schools that she has been working in.

Senator TIERNEY—So that covers all teachers? Do all teachers do that?

Ms Jacob—By the end of this year, we will have covered almost half of our schools.

Senator TIERNEY—What amount of time would they have in gifted education?

Ms Tayler—The program focuses on two full days of fairly intensive workshopping where teachers learn a great deal about the nature of giftedness, appropriate methods for identifying gifted children, a range of classroom practices and strategies for dealing with gifted children, and the nexus between enrichment extension and acceleration and appropriate ways to implement these in schools. Between these two full days, the schools are taking on individual projects within their own school related to gifted education. Some of those projects may be developing a school based policy for gifted students. It may be developing a school approach to identifying gifted children within the school. It may be at a particular level of the school looking at a strategy such as vertical grouping. As a result of this program, within an increasing number of schools, there is an increasing number of teachers who know what they are looking for and have some notions of what to do once they have found it. An additional plank of the program is that those teachers who have participated in the program are then known to have expertise, and at district level there is an understanding that they can be used to spread that expertise among other schools.

Senator TIERNEY—Where do they get that expertise from initially? From what we understand so far, the University of Tasmania does nothing on that.

Ms Tayler—The expertise that they gain from the program that I run is the expertise that I am speaking of. I suppose that comes back to what my expertise is. My background is in mathematics education initially and curriculum development. For a long time, I found that, because of my fairly high profile in the field of mathematics, gifted children were always being brought to my attention because mathematics has a tendency to bring them to the surface fairly readily. In a number of schools that I was working in, it was de facto falling upon me to look after gifted students in schools. So in the same way that Lorraine Davidson described, I took it upon myself to become educated in these matters, and I did some external work through the University of New South Wales. As Lorraine did, I have spent considerable time expanding on my knowledge through research, wide reading, use of the Internet and so on.

Senator TIERNEY—But I take it when you start with teachers, you are starting pretty much at ground zero in terms of their own knowledge of gifted and talented.

Ms Tayler—Yes, pretty much so.

Senator TIERNEY—So why do you think this is? Given there are three or four years of time in preservice preparation, why doesn't the faculty of education give them any grounding in this at all? When I went through, they didn't give me any grounding. No-one mentioned the word actually. It seems as though 30 years on nothing has changed.

Ms Jacob—I know you are going to hear from the university after us, so maybe they can answer the question better from their perspective.

Senator TIERNEY—We will be asking them, don't worry. We just want your perspective.

Ms Jacob—I guess from our perspective it would be a question of competing priorities.

Senator TIERNEY—In a three or four year course, they cannot find one lecture?

Ms Jacob—I guess we would say the same thing about a number of issues, such as working with children with disabilities, for example. I guess we all have areas where we really like to make sure students are well grounded by the time they come to us. We would agree with you: the area of gifted education is certainly one of them.

Senator TIERNEY—The Tasmanian Association for the Gifted says that principals tend to be unreceptive to the policy on gifted education. Would you care to comment on that?

Ms Jacob—I guess the same criticism could be made about the principals' receptiveness to any departmental policy. As a person who writes most of them, I am very well aware of that. Clearly a government policy is really setting a direction and setting a standard, and then you use that as your vehicle for producing strategic plans and the kinds of initiatives that have to support those. I think we would all be kidding ourselves if we believed a policy on its own was going to achieve a great deal. It has to be supported by a budget. It has to be supported by initiatives. It has to be supported by the kind of professional development that we are trying to get in place. We are only too well aware that we are just beginning to go down that track.

Senator TIERNEY—If you did have more resources for gifted education, in what way would you apply that?

Ms Jacob—I will get Jenny to comment on that in a moment. I guess I would really be very interested in following up what I said earlier about the provision of online curriculum. I think that has huge potential—particularly in a system like ours which is very devolved—to be able to reach a lot of children, not just simply by putting materials on the Internet but by being able to link kids, by being able to link them with mentors, by being able to put them in touch with relevant experts. I think there is a huge capacity in online learning for working with gifted students, and other students, but I think gifted students can particularly benefit from that. I know Jenny has some particular initiatives because she is the one who puts up the budget proposal.

Ms Tayler—In line with the priorities that have been identified in *Learning Together*, we have some budget proposals on the table at the moment related to establishing a fairly formalised mentor register in Tasmania which would need to be funded at a district level for coordination purposes. The idea of this project is to encourage schools to canvass their own communities and find out what sort of expertise is in that community, establish a list of local people who have particular expertise, establish a training program for those people—given that they have satisfied security priorities and that sort of thing—and have a coordination process at each of our six district levels where the coordinator will actively link identified students with

identified mentors for specific projects for a specific period. That is one of the projects that we are working towards and which we are struggling to find resources for at the moment.

Alison mentioned our work in online education and online forums. I currently also have a project going where I am developing a web site specifically for gifted students in the state. It is part of our Discover Online School and it will be a web site that will encourage gifted students to communicate with each other and to post their own work for discussion purposes. It will support guest experts coming online to carry out forums and discussions with gifted students on particular things that gifted students tend to be really excited about but cannot find anybody else who is excited about them.

Senator TIERNEY—Ms Tayler, are you a one-person show?

Ms Tayler—Pretty much, yes.

Senator TIERNEY—You do not have any support staff to help you?

Ms Tayler—No, I do not have any staff.

Ms Shipway—That is fairly common in our department. We tend to do it alone, but I am there with Jenny to support her.

Senator TIERNEY—Given we are discovering in most states that there is very little work done in the university preparation and not too much being done out on the ground, what do you see is the Commonwealth's role in this? What could the Commonwealth usefully do in the area of gifted education?

Ms Jacob—It is an area we have obviously been thinking about before coming to this inquiry. I think we would certainly see a role for some really good quality longitudinal research on what happens to some of these students in relation to what is provided. We do not really know what kind of provision is most efficient and effective. We do not really know what the long-term consequences are of the different sorts of programs. There is very little data that we can fall back on, so we would certainly see something like that as being particularly useful. I think there were some other things that Jenny identified as well.

Ms Tayler—Yes. I think there would be a very strong role for the Commonwealth to play, and I support what the TAG people were saying in terms of some kind of Commonwealth policy statement on the rights of gifted children to an education which is developmentally and intellectually appropriate for them and the incumbent responsibilities of states and systems to provide that education. I also think there might be a place for providing grants for teachers to undertake specialist study in gifted education. As has been mentioned before, that is not possible in this state, and teachers would need to go elsewhere to do it.

Ms Jacob—Increasingly, where we do have specialist areas where we need to train teachers, we find that the most sensible way for us to go is to access it through some form of distant education or online education. That might be another way. If there was a really good quality online course or distant education course provided by one university that every state and territory could

access, that might be a much more practical way of providing PD, rather than every state trying to set up something.

Senator TIERNEY—Centres like GERRIC at the University of New South Wales could do things like that. We are talking to them a bit later in the inquiry. Ms Tayler, it seems that your job could be made a lot easier if the teachers you are dealing with actually had some preservice preparation in this area. Have you been in dialogue with the university here about them doing something in that very long course students do before they come out to teach that would actually give them some theoretical grounding at least that you could work with? It may make your courses go a bit further if they already had that preliminary work.

Ms Tayler—I need to say, first of all, that this is only my second year in the position and it is only the second year that the position has existed. I have had a conversation with Rob Andrew, from the University of Tasmania in Launceston. He is involved with the Bachelor of Education program. That was a very positive and worthwhile discussion, and he did in fact invite me to go to speak to a group of final year students. Unfortunately, the day that he had determined for this to happen was a day that I was not available. I think the initial feeling is that it is a practical possibility that this could happen. It has not happened up until now.

Ms Jacob—It obviously should be planned on a much less ad hoc basis than that.

Senator TIERNEY—If they miss your day, they have just missed it, haven't they?

Ms Tayler—That is right.

Ms Jacob—Clearly one day is not adequate.

Senator TIERNEY—Thank you.

Senator CARR—What is the current financial support provided by the Commonwealth—

Ms Jacob—To?

Senator CARR—For this particular area? Sorry, did you say 'none'?

Ms Jacob—No. It was a question: specifically to the education of gifted? No specific targeted program.

Senator CARR—Does that mean none?

Ms Jacob—Other than what they would provide in general recurrent funding.

Senator CARR—Yes, recurrent moneys for initial students. But what additional moneys are provided that are identified within the targeted equity program, or what is left of it?

Ms Shipway—There is no mention of gifted education in there.

Ms Jacob—It is not one of the targeted equity groups that are funded.

CHAIR—What are those groups?

Ms Shipway—Aboriginal students, the country areas program, English as a second language students, and then students with special education needs.

Ms Jacob—And students who are geographically isolated.

CHAIR—Sorry? Students with special needs, was it? And gifted is not regarded as a special need?

Ms Shipway—It is disability.

Senator CARR—Is there anything in the guidelines that would prevent the identification of gifted from being part of special needs?

Ms Shipway—Not from my reading of the recent guidelines, but they do not allow for very much interpretation of reading. It is fairly specific.

Senator CARR—There has been a general broadbanding of the targeted equity program throughout the life of the Liberal government. Do you think that has provided you with more discretion or less?

Ms Jacob—It has probably provided us with more discretion but no more money to do it with. If, for example, we chose to provide funding to students who were gifted from the special education funds, that would, I think cause enormous difficulties for the students who were identified in that group already—that is, the students with significant disabilities. We would only be stretching it. It would not be very practical.

Senator CARR—So in your judgment, the priority ought be other than the gifted?

Ms Jacob—In my judgment, as far as special education funding is concerned, the priority should be students with disabilities, yes.

Senator CARR—And since there is no other funding and it is not necessarily inconsistent with the guidelines, do I take it you have made a decision that the priority ought to go elsewhere?

Ms Jacob—Again, most of the funding that we get from the Commonwealth for students with disabilities or special education funding would be used for things such as provision of teacher aids to help those students to be independent in classrooms. That is not a need for students who are gifted. So I guess we are looking at addressing their needs in broader ways, particularly as I mentioned in relation to curriculum development, online materials and those sorts of things, which we are putting a fair amount of money to.

Senator CARR—I understand that. The point I am making is that the Commonwealth would be spending several billions of dollars in targeted equity programs over a quadrennium. It may be said that the states have an extraordinary level of discretion in the way that money is spent. That is a point that this committee has drawn attention to in the past. Whether or not it is actually spent in the areas appropriated may be another argument entirely. I cannot see anything within the program that says you cannot spend it on any particular group with learning disabilities or special needs. On the other hand, it would be within your province to say that there is a higher priority, particularly autistic children or children with profound learning disabilities. That seems to me to be consistent with expenditure. Have you made that decision, or has it just been an ad hoc arrangement and that is the way it has gone?

Ms Jacob—Again, I would have to go back and look at the guidelines for the special education programs to answer that well. Certainly, if it came down to us having to exercise discretion as to which students had priority, I would say that the students with disabilities had priority for that particular program because their needs were going to met by that funding.

Senator CARR—I understand that, because the funding is so limited. Given the number of children we are talking about and that the children's needs are so pronounced, I could appreciate how a state education authority might take that decision. But I am wondering whether or not that is the case, or whether that is the way you respond to me now.

Ms Jacob—I would have to say that it is not a formal discussion that we have ever had in the sense of deciding whether we would use some of our special education money for gifted students. I think that would be a quite inappropriate use of that funding, personally.

Senator CARR—So there is no specified moneys. Your argument I guess is that there should be money identified for this particular purpose?

Ms Jacob—I think what we would be saying is that we are using other ways of catering for those students, such as through the curriculum development, online materials, the professional development that is going on and those sorts of things. We see that as a more appropriate way of addressing those students anyway.

Senator CARR—Did anyone ask you before how many gifted children you think you have in this state?

Ms Jacob—Again, it depends on the definitions and all of the other things. Jenny takes a fairly broad view of the concept of giftedness, so we would probably be looking at around five per cent of our population who would have a level of giftedness.

Senator CARR—How many would that be?

Ms Jacob—About 3,000.

Senator CARR—So you are saying there are 3,000 children here at the moment—

Ms Jacob—That would be our estimate of the number of children who perhaps need some additional support.

Senator CARR—Sure. I just want to get it clear, though. There are about 3,000 children in Tasmania without Commonwealth support for this particular area?

Ms Jacob—Not specifically for that purpose of providing additional provision for those students.

Ms Shipway—A large component of the Commonwealth education funding through the Say So Program and what used to be the equity program, if you like, is the literacy and numeracy funding. That obviously goes to these students.

Senator CARR—Not very much of it by the sounds of it. What discussion is there with the Commonwealth education department about these issues?

Ms Jacob—We have not had a specific discussion with the Commonwealth department about the provision for gifted students in the time I have been working in this position.

Senator CARR—Is it long overdue then?

Ms Jacob—Again, I think we would see that we have to meet the needs of those students by the sorts of programs that we have in place. Clearly, the Commonwealth would see that they were putting money into some of those areas that I have mentioned—such as the online materials, general curriculum development and those sorts of things. It is a question of whether or not that is an adequate or sufficiently targeted way of funding those students.

Senator CARR—The minister told us when I pressed him on these sorts of issues that 35 per cent of funding for public education is actually coming from Commonwealth sources. I know that there is an argument with the states about that issue, but that is the claim that is made. If you add up all the capital and all the different programs, it is about 35 per cent. You would have thought a considerable amount of that might go to people who actually need it. You are saying 3000 children, and maybe they should have a call on some of that money. How do you respond to that proposition?

Ms Jacob—I would go back to the fact that I would see that those 3,000 students are getting a part of the overall funding from both Commonwealth and state sources. That is really designed to make sure that they are as well catered for as they can be. I do not necessarily see gifted students as being in the same category of students who have an educational disadvantage. I do see that they have got special needs that need to be addressed, but I think there is a slight difference.

Senator CARR—That is fair enough. That is a view you are entitled to take, but it is not the submissions that we have received from various community groups that specialise in this area. They say that this is an area of special need. They do not like to call it that, but essentially they require special attention and additional support from the public purse.

Ms Jacob—Certainly, if there was additional funding available for those students, we would welcome it.

CHAIR—Ms Jacob, perhaps in part Senator Carr’s line of questioning follows a point I made a moment ago about the structure of your department. Correct me if I am wrong, but Ms Tayler’s position is within the equity division?

Ms Jacob—That is right.

CHAIR—So the Tasmanian government is structuring itself in a way where it recognises gifted children as an equity area.

Ms Jacob—That is true.

CHAIR—And Senator Carr is making the point that the Commonwealth is not.

Ms Jacob—They are not specifically targeting that group at the moment.

Senator CARR—I commend the administrative structures you have here. I understand that the size of the state apparatus here is not extensive, but I think 3,000 children are entitled to support from the Commonwealth. That is the point I am making. Whether or not there has been sufficient argument in support of those children is another issue again. Anyway, thank you.

Senator ALLISON—Ms Tayler, are your services provided to private schools as well as government schools?

Ms Tayler—Formally, no. Informally, if I get a request for advice or information from a parent or a teacher from another system, I would not refuse it, but I am not in a position to provide professional development on a large scale to teachers or parents from other school systems. Having said that, I do work with the parent association to provide some support for them in terms of professional development—and that includes parents and teachers from the other systems as well—but my major focus, which is professional development for classroom teachers, is only available to government schools.

Senator ALLISON—To your knowledge, there is no systematic way of doing what you do in the government sector in private schools?

Ms Tayler—There is no systematic way. I do know that in particular independent schools there are fairly major systems in place. Hutchins School here in Sandy Bay has a major focus on the centre of excellence and gifted education, but the independent schools are independent—they do their own thing. I am not aware of any structure in the Catholic system that supports gifted children or gifted education across the system.

Ms Jacob—Basically we do not provide services to the non-government system from our equity services branch. That is not in our brief, so any support would be incidental to the main focus.

Senator ALLISON—You may not be able to answer this, but do you get the sense that there are schools that are specialising, either within the government sector or outside it? The one you

mentioned might be an example of a school that goes out of its way to attract those students. What is the evidence of that?

Ms Jacob—I can only answer from the government school system. At various times we have tried models that have had a focus on a particular area of the curriculum in a school, and we have tried to raise the profile of that area. For example, in one program we really concentrated on the arts at one of our secondary colleges and encouraged students to go there if they were really interested in that area of the curriculum.

Senator ALLISON—Presumably it would primarily be music.

Ms Jacob—It is the performing arts in large number. We have also had a focus in the use of information communications technology in some of our schools. We have tried to build the expertise there by making them centres of excellence in that area. The problem is always that, with a very small population, our capacity to specialise like that is fairly limited. It raises all sorts of equity issues for the people who do not have access to wherever we happen to set up the centre of excellence. We see that as something that is quite productive in providing a model for how other schools can approach that area of the curriculum.

Senator ALLISON—Who initiates that process for a centre for excellence? Is that something you do?

Ms Jacob—We have done that as a government program. The last time we did it, it ran for three years. We did it in four schools around the state and then we evaluated how well that had gone.

Senator ALLISON—Did it attract parents with gifted children?

Ms Jacob—No, I do not honestly think it did. I think it was more a case of raising the profile of that particular curriculum area in those schools. I do not think it was ever really designed to attract the students. They are all around the state, so it would have been fairly hard to do.

Senator ALLISON—So it would be your understanding there would be an even spread of students in all schools, and that there is not a concentration anywhere?

Ms Jacob—I think sometimes parents would choose a school because of staff who were re-nown or who had a reputation, but it is not at a formal level.

Senator ALLISON—I am really interested in this question of concentration or spread. If a school is identified by TAG or by parents generally, would it have twice as many kids in this category as other schools, or is there not such a great difference?

Ms Jacob—I do not think so. I think it would be incidental. If a parent believed that a particular school was catering well for students who are gifted, they might well choose to send their child there. That is their prerogative. We do not have a zoning system, so the parents are able to choose the school. They could well choose to do that but, to my knowledge, it does not happen hugely. Some parents choose one of our two single-sex high schools over their local

school, and it is beyond our capacity to respond. That would probably be the only area we could identify as having a very significant effect on the student numbers.

Senator ALLISON—So, broadly speaking, the policy of the department here is for inclusion for diversity within classrooms?

Ms Jacob—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—Doesn't that suggest that, in order to nurture differences—where you have an estimated 3,000 students in this category—smaller class sizes might be an answer, not just curriculum approaches to dealing with it? What is your research that tells you whether these children survive better in smaller classrooms?

Ms Jacob—The research on class size is constantly growing. A couple of years ago, the only real evidence of the effect of smaller class sizes was very much at the early childhood end of the continuum. There was good evidence there that smaller class sizes seemed to benefit all students. I think there is more evidence now that smaller class sizes do have a general effect on the range of students in that class, but it is not just an automatic response. You cannot automatically, just because of the smaller class size, assume that students will be better catered for. It is what the teacher does, because of having fewer students to worry about, that really makes a difference. Increasingly, I think we would say that it is what the teacher does regardless of the class size that is the main factor on how well students do. The teacher effects increasingly are what we are identifying as being the major indicator of student achievement.

Senator ALLISON—Ms Tayler, let me ask you about your work. It may be too early for you to give us an answer to this. Having spent two days in the school talking with all staff, or just some of the staff—

Ms Tayler—The two-day sessions are across a number of schools. Usually two members of staff from a wide range of schools would come together for those two-day sessions. It is more practical to do it that way, largely for geographical reasons.

Senator TIERNEY—Just a point of clarification: when you said 50 per cent earlier, were you talking about 50 per cent of schools or 50 per cent of teachers?

Ms Tayler—Fifty per cent of schools.

Senator TIERNEY—That is very different.

Senator ALLISON—At some later stage do you plan to find out whether attitudes have changed, or have you already done so? Are principals in those schools that are a bit better informed prepared to talk to parents who have identified a child they think is gifted? Can you give us some feedback on what difference these two-day workshops make?

Ms Tayler—It is not just the two-day workshops; it is the project work that goes on at the school in the period between the two-day workshops. This project work brings the work that happens at the workshops back into the school. It is part of my job to follow up on those schools as well as to introduce new schools to the program. It is my impression that parents are finding

it easier to approach those schools and that teachers are much more aware to consider issues to do with gifted students. Certainly their views about what constitutes giftedness have been modified. Of course, I cannot say that I have had feedback from all of those schools, but anecdotally I feel quite positive about the degree of change that is happening out there.

Senator ALLISON—Have you had a chance to talk with teachers in the school other than those who came along to the workshop? How easier is it for those teachers to then disseminate that information and to change the school culture?

Ms Tayler—Again, I cannot speak from the perspective of a large number of schools. There have been schools where things have happened on both sides of the fence. I know of a couple of schools where change has not happened. The teachers who took part in the workshops were enthusiastic and very well informed, but the impetus was not carried through the school for various reasons—other projects and things. I know of several other schools where the staff took on board with enthusiasm the extra knowledge and information. Projects are in place to change the way they program for children and to change the way they look at mainstreaming gifted education.

Senator ALLISON—How will that evaluation inform you about what you do next year or in subsequent years?

Ms Tayler—One of the main issues was the reasons why teachers were put forward for the program in the first place. In some cases, I feel that in last year's program, which was a pilot program, teachers came along to the program without any real idea why they were there. There had not really been a full school push behind them. It was more a case of, 'Look, here's an opportunity for some people to go and do something. Would you like to go and do it?' On other occasions, there was full support from the executive of the school for the teachers attending this program. There was full support, when they came back into the school, for their implementing some of the things they had learned. In determining schools to take part in the program this year, I have been much more conscious of the importance of having whole-of-school support behind the notion of having teachers involved in this program.

Senator ALLISON—How do you get that support?

Ms Tayler—By requesting an expression of interest from the schools, in which they had to identify how they would support the program within the school. They had to specify whether they would support it with funding, with relief opportunities for the teachers to do some work with the other staff or with the provision of opportunities for full staff meetings for professional development—those sorts of things.

Senator ALLISON—Through that process, aren't you only getting the committed schools anyway?

Ms Jacob—We certainly are in the initial stages. That would be true of a lot of the professional development that we provide. We start off with the schools that really want to put their hands up and are enthusiastic. We then start to address the schools that are a bit more reluctant to come forward. We are very aware that we need to work with those other schools as

well. By providing some positive models for the enthusiastic schools first up, we find it adds a bit of impetus to the program to bring the others along.

Senator CROSSIN—Is the PEO Gifted position a permanent position within the department, or is it a temporary one?

Ms Jacob—At the moment, Ms Tayler's position is a temporary one. The funding for that position is now part of establishment, and we will be advertising it as a permanent position.

Senator CROSSIN—Does the department provide funds for teachers to travel to conferences or to attend any postgraduate training interstate if it is needed?

Ms Jacob—Interstate?

Senator CROSSIN—I guess you might refer to it as mainland Australia. I come from Darwin, so I have a bit of difficulty relating to that concept.

Senator CARR—The rest of the country calls it interstate.

Ms Jacob—If you are asking me specifically whether that has happened for the purpose of teachers' gaining knowledge in gifted education, no we have not done that. We have done that for other areas of the curriculum where we have identified particular expertise in another state or territory that our teachers can benefit from. Increasingly we are trying to negotiate with mainland institutions to provide what they are going to do online or by running seminars and such things within the state so that we can cover a larger group of teachers. We used to do that a lot with areas of special education such as hearing impaired, vision impaired and speech pathology—all of the areas that are not available in this state. For example, we are starting a course to help teachers who have students with challenging behaviour. We are finding that the best way we can provide that is by negotiating with the mainland to bring the course here rather than trying to send our teachers to the mainland.

Senator BRANDIS—Ms Jacob, when you responded to some of Senator Carr's questions, I understood you to be drawing a distinction between students who are educationally disadvantaged and students with special needs. Surely every student whose particular needs are not being met is, to that extent, specially disadvantaged?

Ms Jacob—If you put it like that, I suppose it is true. The distinction I was making was that we know that there are some students who may be educationally disadvantaged from the point of view that, if we do not provide some additional assistance and support, they will never reach what we would consider to be a reasonable level.

Senator BRANDIS—Those might be students with intellectual or physical handicaps.

Ms Jacob—Exactly. We know that students who are from backgrounds of low socioeconomic disadvantage often are not performing as well. We know that. We know that students who are gifted come from the full socioeconomic range, from ethnic groups and so on.

Senator BRANDIS—It may well be that a physically handicapped student is a gifted student, so the categories are not mutually exclusive.

Ms Jacob—No, they are not. The distinction I was making was that, while those students may well have special educational needs in the sense that their needs are different or are special and require some additional support, they do not have an educational disadvantage in the same sense as some of those other groups that I mentioned.

Senator BRANDIS—Do they, though? I understand there are equity issues here, and they go to the heart of this discussion, but I cannot help being struck by the evidence that Mrs Davidson from TAG gave earlier in the morning. She said that there is an attitude that, in the end, gifted students will look after themselves because they are gifted and therefore a lot brighter. Therefore their special needs are deprioritised. That was what I understood her to be saying. I must confess that that seems to be implicit in what you are saying to me.

Ms Jacob—I hope it was not. I think what I was trying to say was that I do think that those students who are gifted have a special need for additional support for something which is over and above what we might do for students who are not identified as gifted. However, I do think there is a bit of a difference between that level of special need and the level of educational disadvantage that comes from being part of a group which is not performing as well as the average student. To some degree it is almost a semantic argument we are having, but I take your point. I guess the fact that we do have gifted education provision within our equity standards branch is, in a sense, an indication that we do believe that there is an equity issue and that we do believe those students are disadvantaged.

Senator BRANDIS—That is an encouraging acknowledgment, if I may say so. Perhaps there is inequity in any student not being educated to the extent that fulfils their own particular needs, whether that be because they are gifted or because they are handicapped.

Ms Shipway—That is certainly the position we take.

CHAIR—To characterise it in another way, and to look at the comparison between those with physical or intellectual disabilities as opposed to those who are gifted, it is pretty obvious when someone with an obvious physical disability does not have their needs addressed so they can access mainstream education. In part, maybe it is a reflection of how we as a society have dealt with physical and intellectual disabilities over time. What happens to gifted children if their special needs are not met? Do they become educationally disadvantaged? The evidence seems to say that some do.

Ms Jacob—If they have needs that are not being met, you could say they are being educationally disadvantaged.

CHAIR—I am not necessarily saying they are being educationally disadvantaged but, without the preventative measures, they can become educationally disadvantaged—you have behaviour difficulties and lack of motivation.

Ms Jacob—That certainly can happen.

CHAIR—So why are those problems less significant than the obvious physical and intellectual disabilities?

Ms Jacob—I hope I did not say they were less significant. What I was trying to say was that I was conceptualising it in a different way.

CHAIR—I am not trying to direct this to you. In part, I am looking at the federal funding arrangements and how they are reflected at a state level. It is not only a Tasmanian issue. I am trying to apply a bit more distance here. I am looking at how policy making is being applied and why it is that the priority attributed to the special needs of gifted students is seen not to be as significant as that attributed to children with physical and intellectual disabilities.

Ms Jacob—Possibly one of the reasons is that, often, without some very specific targeted individual support to students who have that level of physical or intellectual disability, they are simply unable to access the kind of education that can be provided. With gifted students the argument is that they do need extra provision, they do need enrichment and they do need extension but often that can be done within the context of what is already being provided in that classroom. Does that make sense?

CHAIR—Perhaps they can access it, but not make the most of what they are accessing.

Ms Jacob—That is true. Certainly, without a teacher who has been trained to be alert to those possibilities, that is very much the case. It is not necessarily a different level of need but a different sort of need than simply providing an interpreter to a deaf student who otherwise would not be able to know what was going on.

Senator BRANDIS—There is also the consideration too—and this takes up some of the evidence from the TAG people—that, if gifted children's needs are not met, there is the potential for behavioural and psychological disorders that were not there at the start in the way that a physical handicap may have been there at the start.

Ms Jacob—That is a very important point and one that we are very conscious of. We certainly are aware of the need to make sure that students who are gifted do not become bored and develop behavioural and social problems. We know that that does happen in some cases.

CHAIR—There being no further questions, thank you for appearing today.

[11.36 a.m.]

MOSS, Dr Julianne, Assistant Head of School, Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania

CHAIR—Welcome. The committee has before it submission No. 97. Are there any changes or corrections you wish to make to that submission?

Dr Moss—No.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although it will consider any request for all or part of evidence to be taken in confidence. I invite you to make a brief opening statement and we will move to questions beyond that.

Dr Moss—Senators, you have before you the submission from the Faculty of Education. As I have outlined, the submission is directed towards the pre-service teacher preparation courses that operate in the Faculty of Education, namely the Bachelor of Education, which is a four-year pre-service teacher preparation that students enter on exiting from year 12. It takes them four years to complete, and students are prepared to take classes from kindergarten to grade 6.

The second program is the Bachelor of Teaching, for which I am Assistant Head of School. The Bachelor of Teaching is a two-year graduate pre-service program. We prepare teachers from kindergarten to grade 12. We have four strands within the program: early childhood and primary, primary, middle school and secondary school. As the only teacher education faculty in the state, we prepare the largest number of teachers for our schools, both government and non-government.

As you open up the submission, you will find some details of our program objectives. Briefly, I will summarise these. One of our key aims is to develop reflective practitioners who are able to teach in a local educational environment, which is one of devolution, school based management and rapid social, cultural and economic change. As a faculty, we are committed to the advancement of best practice in teaching and to the improvement of education in Tasmania. In our view, best practice in teaching requires teachers who have content mastery and interpersonal skills. They will have the habit of a reflective inquiry, professional commitment and the confidence necessary to avoid pedagogical practices that simply might reproduce existing institutional practices that fail to meet the most demanding standards or best professional practice in education.

All our students spend a considerable time within school during their pre-service programs in the Bachelor of Education and the Bachelor of Teaching. They spend 95 days within school. This is a considerable increase on programs that may well have occurred in the early 1990s. On examining our programs over the last few years, we have ensured that there has been an increase in the number of practicum days. Our pre-service teachers are assessed against the beginning teaching competencies, and we use that as our framework for preparation of our teachers within those two strands. We would hope that the broad intentions of the competency framework are that our teachers are prepared to teach all children, that they do understand how all children develop and learn and that, as beginning teachers, they have the capacity to respond

to diverse student needs and to make sure that those students are active in developing their own knowledge, and that the teachers foster independent and cooperative learning.

On page 4 of the submission, you will find a brief detail of the beginning teaching competencies, which are detailed in further reference in Appendix 1. The indicators that we have developed in relationship to the beginning teaching competencies are those that have been negotiated with our local educational community. There is also continuing reference to best practice documents. As a faculty, we hope to ensure that our students understand the need to cater for diverse student needs. We support programs that are strongly constructivist in their orientation and that are learning centred. We hope that within the faculty those people who are the teacher educators are also good models of that practice.

The issue of how we cater for respective target groups is one that, as a faculty, we receive continuing pressure from in relation to equity groups. We use as our blueprint the National Strategy for Equity in Schooling. We also draw upon the evidence of the beginning teaching competencies and recent research in the field of inclusive education. In the submission, I map how, in 1995 in the Bachelor of Education and in 1997 in the B.Teach, we might have taken a different approach to catering and managing for student diversity. Previously the unit would have been a core unit. Students would have covered all the areas rich in categorical description, including gifted, physical education and intellectual. These courses were categorical in their orientation and did little to assist teachers to implement learning programs within classrooms. We have located our recent work within the field of inclusive education underneath the international covenants of the Salamanca statement, which was proclaimed by UNESCO in 1994.

As a state, we are a small community and we have probably shown examples of strong community based partnerships between our educational faculties, our local schools and parents. Our belief is that the needs of students described as gifted, and indeed any targeted group of students, are viewed as being located in the curriculum, organisation and planning of the classroom and entire school community. I have cited some recent works from United Kingdom by Professor M. Ainscow, where we look at the barriers that students experience in their schooling, and how we can develop and guide our practices for our beginning teachers. I will conclude with these dot points: what are the barriers to participation and learning experienced by teachers; what practices can help to overcome these barriers; to what extent do such practices facilitate improved learning outcomes; and how can such practices be encouraged and sustained within schools and districts?

I provided in the submission detail of the provision that existed within both the Bachelor of Education and the Bachelor of Teaching programs. You will find differences in the approach that is taken within each of the programs because one is a beginning pre-service teacher program and the other is a graduate pre-service teacher program. In other words, in the latter program students come to us with a first degree and with prior experience in a particular discipline or subject area.

I concluded the submission with the issue that is significant to our faculty. All our programs have a strong inclusive thrust. The National Strategy for Equity in Schooling was proposed in 1994. A review was due in 1998, as is cited in that document, but that has not occurred. It is certainly one that we believe is a review that ought to occur and is long overdue.

Senator BRANDIS—Dr Moss, you say that one of your priorities—I am looking at page 5 of your submission—is an education that caters for all students. I assume you mean an education that caters for the needs of all students.

Dr Moss—Certainly.

Senator BRANDIS—And you would acknowledge, surely, that different students have different particular needs. Would you acknowledge that it is a reasonable benchmark of educational success that the talents and capabilities of any particular student are optimally catered for in the education they receive?

Dr Moss—I guess what you are encapsulating is the thrust of inclusive education.

Senator BRANDIS—Do you agree with the proposition I have put to you?

Dr Moss—An inclusive education is one that caters for the needs of all children, who will become young adults, and their schooling is absolutely the cornerstone of where many of those values are encultured in terms of how they perceive themselves as a person within that context.

Senator BRANDIS—Dr Moss, I just want to put a few propositions to you and explore whether or not you agree with them. You are talking about something that caters for the needs of all students, but I want to shift the emphasis of the discussion, if I may, to the particular needs of each individual student. I think we agree, don't we, that each individual student has their own particular needs. Do you agree with that?

Dr Moss—Certainly. And in terms of supporting young teachers to be able to understand the differences that they are going to experience within their classroom, we work from an individual. Individuals, however, join together in classrooms and in schools as a social organisation.

Senator BRANDIS—Yes, I understand that. I am just interested in knowing whether you affirm or disaffirm the propositions I am putting to you.

Dr Moss—Yes. And you will see, in our statement about teaching and school effectiveness, that we say that it is impossible to have meaningful improvements in teaching and learning unless students actually understand the notion of individual differences and the range that is going to occur in the development of social, cognitive and emotional development.

Senator BRANDIS—Sure. I have read the submission. The proposition that I put to you before—and you commented on it but I was not sure whether you were in fact adopting it—was that it is a reasonable benchmark for educational success or failure whether or not the particular needs and capabilities of an individual student are optimised.

Dr Moss—And certainly the expression of those individual needs is reflected in the learning outcomes that we would want to see in relation to our classroom practice.

Senator BRANDIS—So are you agreeing with what I put to you?

Dr Moss—In terms of teachers working in classrooms, both with individual students and the way they operate within a social nexus.

Senator BRANDIS—I understand the social context of this and I understand that a classroom is, whatever else it might be, a community of kids and a teacher. I just want to keep the focus on the particular needs of individual students. Can I just ask you whether you accept the proposition that I am putting to you that a reasonable benchmark for success or failure is whether the particular needs of an individual student are optimised.

Dr Moss—I do not have any difficulty with your proposition—

Senator BRANDIS—Thank you.

Dr Moss—I certainly think that respect for person and personhood actually lies at the core of what makes an effective teacher.

Senator CARR—Senator Brandis, I might assist. Are you suggesting that needs can be measured in social terms as well as individual terms?

Dr Moss—Certainly.

Senator BRANDIS—Can I take you page 8 of your submission. In the middle paragraph you say this:

Promising practices in managing diverse student need within school communities no longer center on restricted applications of principles of distributive justice. The allocation of additional resources to targeted individuals or groups is now understood as contributing little to changing deep-seated social injustices.

I just wanted to explore a few of the ideas involved in that with you, if I may. First, what do you mean when you speak of the principles of distributive justice?

Dr Moss—The dispersal through the named policy which, over the last 25 years—ever since the inception of targeted moneys to respective groups of student—have been allocated according to specific formulas in relation to who actually receives the material goods, without actually having to go into the Rawlsian principles about what we—

Senator BRANDIS—I am familiar with the Rawlsian principles. I used to teach Professor Rawls, Dr Moss.

Dr Moss—That model occurs in our school system as an understanding of equality or compensatory models, which are quite different to those of equity.

Senator BRANDIS—Would you say that it would be an acceptable outcome, in terms of distributive justice in a Rawlsian paradigm, if a gifted student who was considerably ahead of the rest of the class did not receive sufficient resources to enable him or her to fulfil his or her full individual potential?

Dr Moss—And that has been the basis of current policy as it has been delivered to the school. But of course you would probably be aware that, within the last 10 or 15 years, there has been enormous critical commentary on whether that has been effective in the distribution of those resources within the school, because resources, like policy, do not follow a rational direction. They actually end up within the school, and I come back to the school community and the values of the people who are then responsible for distributing those resources, either through their classroom through the amount of time that they might give to an individual child or through deciding that they might run a specialised program for gifted and talented students.

Senator BRANDIS—I would have thought, Dr Moss, that it is unjust for any particular student to receive an education in which there is not a concerted effort made, in their particular case, to ensure that they fulfil—to the extent possible through the educational system—their capabilities, whether it be a physically or intellectually disadvantaged student, a gifted student or any other particular student. Do you accept that?

Dr Moss—Certainly. But again: if only things fulfilled their rational promise in terms of the way that they may well have been intended—

Senator BRANDIS—We are talking about the level of policy.

Dr Moss—My background and experience is living the life of the reality within the school and how the distribution of those resources actually occurs within the school and the issues that teachers actually have in trying to be able to implement those processes within a school.

Senator BRANDIS—Do you think that the allocation of special resources to gifted students might be elitist?

Dr Moss—I certainly would not. Inclusive education is trying to help people understand that it is providing the maxim for those students who are within that school community, within that cultural context, to be able to gain access to what it is that is going to deliver to them the optimum opportunity within their years of schooling. One of the difficulties that has occurred within the notion of inclusive education is that people have got tied up with the traditions of the special education knowledge tradition, and that has in some cases caused a barrier for people in being able to understand what an inclusive school and an inclusive environment is about. I prefer to be able to conceptualise students' needs in the way that the Ainscow citation has been about barriers to learning. What are the barriers to learning that are experienced by the children within school A and school B.

Senator BRANDIS—I can't help feeling, Dr Moss—please correct me if I am doing you an injustice—having read your submission and having heard you elaborate upon it, there seems to be, at least implicit, an attitude that very gifted students should somehow be brought back to the field.

Dr Moss—Again I think it is a misrepresentation of perhaps the understanding of what inclusive education is about.

Senator BRANDIS—So if the allocation of resources to enhance the particular capabilities of a gifted student produced an inequalitarian outcome, in the sense that that student did a lot

better than the other students in the class, that would not offend your understanding of distributive justice?

Dr Moss—My understanding would have to be: what do you mean by ‘better’?

Senator BRANDIS—Achieved a much higher level of academic performance and thereby achieved opportunities that perhaps other members of that cohort did not achieve.

Dr Moss—So your questioning is directed to only the academic achievement of a child as being the only evidence of successful schooling.

Senator BRANDIS—Not necessarily, but let’s start there, because I would have thought that academic achievement has at least something to do with education.

Dr Moss—It certainly has got something to do with it, but I think in terms of looking at what actually constitutes a full education for people, what we would find evidence of is that is ultimately the social and the academic that actually might be in combination together in terms of life’s chances and successes.

Senator BRANDIS—Quite. But whereas most children will find their socialisation occurs in their family as well as in the classroom, most children will find that primarily their academic attainment is more a function of the classroom. Isn’t that right?

Dr Moss—I guess what I am reminded of is what children say to me when I ask them, ‘What do you like about school?’ Do you know what their answer is?

Senator BRANDIS—I know what my children say to me, so what do the children to whom you speak say to you, Professor Moss?

Dr Moss—They say, ‘I like coming because of my friends.’

Senator BRANDIS—Absolutely.

Dr Moss—I think that, continually, we need to bring together the dovetailing of the social and the academic. Certainly, referring to students who are gifted and talented, one of the issues that they can find in the classroom is, of course, how do they actually work out social relationships. They might experience perceived comments by the other children in the class that this child has got extraordinary skills in this particular area, so that puts them outside of their peer group, their interests, et cetera. So I come back to the importance of a well-rounded education including both those areas.

Senator BRANDIS—I want to come back to the passage I read to you. You go on to say:

The allocation of additional resources to targeted individuals or groups is now understood as contributing little to changing deep-seated social injustices.

That is really the gravamen of your submission, isn’t it? Reading through these nine pages, that seems to me to be essentially what you are trying to say.

Dr Moss—And what I am really commenting on is the way that policy has been distributed over the past 25 in terms of the special education policies, and it has been targeting resources to particular needs of interest groups rather than looking at what might be—

Senator BRANDIS—What do you mean by interest groups in that context?

Dr Moss—They might be people who are from a particular background. Certainly people with disabilities form a group. It is those groups that have been identified as not achieving within the school system. And that has been the way that we have attempted to find our way forward to this longstanding dilemma.[]

Senator BRANDIS—It would follow, it seems to me from a fair reading of that sentence, that you would be opposed to special provision for Aboriginal education. That strikes me as a surprising outcome.

Dr Moss—Again, what do you mean by special provision for Aboriginal education?

Senator BRANDIS—What I mean is the allocation of additional resources targeted to that particular group, to use your words.

Dr Moss—The notion of an inclusive education is one that is actually constructed with the community. It is not an education that belongs solely to a particular school or voice. It belongs to all those members who might well contribute to that community and how the community interests believe that it might best be represented.

Senator BRANDIS—But the point of an education and the dimension in which an outcome is primarily to be tested is what it does for the individual student, surely?

Dr Moss—Yes. I think we have actually—

Senator BRANDIS—When you say yes, do you mean that you agree with me or ‘ho hum, I’ll go on to say something else’?

Dr Moss—Again, we have actually identified that a core of teaching and learning is what individual students are going to achieve in terms of outcomes, but I believe those outcomes have both academic and social components to them.

Senator BRANDIS—All I am trying to put to you is what I would have thought the unremarkable proposition that the particular needs of individual students and the extent to which the outcomes are determined according to the competencies of individual students are the points at which the success of an education policy have to be benchmarked. Do you agree with that?

Dr Moss—I do not have any difficulty with that. As an educator, you always look at where an education takes you to.

Senator BRANDIS—In the context of this particular inquiry, if gifted students have particular needs, those particular needs ought to be catered for in their particular cases without offending principles of distributive justice. Do you agree with that?

Dr Moss—Again, I find it very difficult to respond to that question without actually contextualising a school and a community.

CHAIR—Dr Moss, let me go in a different way to what I suspect are similar issues. On page 5 of your submission you say:

Understanding and developing inclusive education in current research and school practices is guided by the following questions:

I want to take you back to those questions with respect to the provision of educational services for people who may be identified as gifted and also teacher training in those areas. The first question was:

What are the barriers to participation and learning experienced by students?

What professional development occurs in teacher training in the identification of barriers that might be experienced by gifted children? How do you deal with that within your programs

Dr Moss—The submission actually outlines the two programs: the Bachelor of Education and the Bachelor of Teaching program—

CHAIR—I read those and I still did not get a good feel for it.

Dr Moss—As you can see, there are slightly different methodologies used within those programs. Understanding that gifted people are also going to experience barriers to participation in learning is certainly included. The range of students who are currently targeted under the equity policy and the equity group are included in whatever way we might think about the ultimate impact of that. On page 16 of the equity policy there is actually mention of gifted education. Our students are urged to become familiar with current national policy, the interpretation of that policy that is provided by the Department of Education and subsequent resources that are utilised by the department and by the teachers within schools. We are preparing beginning teachers. There are competencies that we ask our teachers in the field to be able to assess our pre-service teachers on. It is not the academics that actually give the satisfactory or unsatisfactory on the school experience; it is the colleague teachers in the school. You can see within the range of the beginning teaching competencies that diverse student needs—all students needs—are continually referred to across the five competency areas.

CHAIR—The next question was:

What practices can help to overcome these barriers?

In your teacher education, what resources do you devote to providing teachers with an understanding of what practices they could utilise to overcome those barriers for gifted children?

Dr Moss—Within the Bachelor of Education, it exists within the ‘inclusive education’ strand and within the Bachelor of Teaching it is called the ‘practice of teaching’. Both are quite significant units that all students are required to do. They are not optional units; all students are required to do those.

CHAIR—But does it include a component that deals with the types of practices that might assist a gifted child?

Dr Moss—In terms of the range of classroom strategies, you will see that we have listed areas such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, mentoring, the use of information technologies, contracts, negotiated curriculum, drawing the theoretical position of multiple intelligences, the role of meta-cognition in learning and social skilling. In terms of talking about gifted education, there are also questions of acceleration that are provided. They are all strategies that the students become familiar with and are modelled and taught to our pre-service teachers. In the Bachelor of Teaching we have set up a mentor program in one school to enable our students to have an induction to education. Some of our pre-service students there are actually working with gifted students. Because of the particular skills that they have in the area, they are mentoring individual students. Our hope in our program is that right from the very beginning our students actually understand what catering for student diversity is about in all of its forms.

CHAIR—So the evidence that this committee has received about limitations in teacher training, particularly with respect to gifted children, is a misunderstanding about how you are covering it? Is that your view?

Dr Moss—I certainly think that is the case.

CHAIR—From your earlier comments about the pressures from specialised interest groups, it would seem that your view is—and correct me if I am characterising you improperly—that these specialised interest groups expect specialised segments to cover their key areas?

Dr Moss—Yes; for example, wanting to know whether we cover 20 hours for Aboriginal education, 20 hours for students with disabilities—but make sure that you include all the range of disabilities—20 hours for gifted children and 20 hours for non-English speaking background. If we actually did that, there goes the entire first year of a teacher education program. So, in terms of how we actually construct a teacher education program, we need to start from some fairly core pedagogical understandings about what we understand the work of our beginning teachers to be. Certainly the work of our beginning teachers will include catering for all students within their classrooms.

CHAIR—Yes, but if that alternative approach does not give a student access to material about what types of practices may assist with respect to the barriers experienced by a gifted child—

Dr Moss—I think I have outlined to you a range of teaching strategies—

CHAIR—That you believe do that?

Dr Moss— that are identified to be able to do that. If you want to go down to the fine grain—the problem solving and the higher order thinking—the words are not there but they are certainly are part of that whole battery of teaching strategies that our students are supported to learn and understand as a beginning teacher.

CHAIR—I would actually like to see the curriculum references to what you have discussed. For instance, you have said to me that the discussions and the material that students have access to about barriers to participation would make reference to gifted children.

Dr Moss—Do you mean in terms of books that might be recommended to the students to use on a day to day basis?

CHAIR—A description of the diversity of needs and where, if at all, it relates to gifted children.

Dr Moss—The most manageable references for them are within the policy documents that are provided within the Department of Education. They are directed to those.

CHAIR—Can we have a copy of those? Not right now, but—

Dr Moss—This is off my bookshelf. They are the curriculum materials that the local Department of Education produced for gifted students some years ago. There is also the revision of the policy documents which our students are made aware of.

CHAIR—Could you on notice take on board the discussion we have had—perhaps when you see it in *Hansard*—and identify for the committee those areas where you think the inclusive program does actually deal with the needs of gifted children and give us some examples of what students will access to pick up those skills?

Dr Moss—Would you like the name of a book that they might access? If I am going to develop a lesson for a particular classroom, I know that in my planning I will need to cater for a really wide range of children. Our students are taught how to manage and implement integrated curriculum, and the references that we would use for that include higher order problem solving and thinking. We use the work of Helen McGrath extensively, the work of Monsieur Gross and Eddie Braggett's books and texts. They are all materials that we can find copies of within our university library and which our students are encouraged to read.

CHAIR—I am only suggesting this because the other evidence seems to be that what you are telling us is not getting across to these special interest groups. This is your opportunity to put on the record that you are in fact doing this.

Dr Moss—There are very few people who actually have the responsibility of the role in the area. There is one lecturer on the Launceston campus and myself on the Hobart campus. But I would not say that it is only us; I would say that there is a very strong commitment within our whole faculty to ensure that all students are able to participate within their learning and within the curriculum areas as well. We have people who have taken a specialised interest in interest groups in either the maths or the science areas. So I guess that is an issue that might be related to very few of us in terms of the work that now needs to be done.

Senator ALLISON—Dr Moss, you comment on page 7 of your submission that:

Despite the efforts of the past two decades, the extent of non-participation of students in the curriculum generally and in their middle years, particularly those of Grades 7-8, remains low.

I think you meant the opposite. I wondered whether you could indicate what, if at all, you thought the role of gifted children was in that low participation. Have there been any studies that show that?

Dr Moss—I cannot actually cite you anything that particularly has targeted those children over those years. But the research evidence is quite overwhelming in terms of what does not happen for children over that transition between the primary and secondary years. In fact, some accounts give records of literacy achievements declining over that period. I cannot cite you a study, but that does not mean to say that there is not one.

Senator CARR—ACER recently undertook some research on the question of equity, participation and the meeting of the various targets. I take it from what you were saying to Senator Brandis that you do not support the existence of equity programs.

Dr Moss—I certainly would not want you to conclude that. I think there is time for significant revision of how our equity policies have been formulated and how they might actually live their lives in terms of a school.

Senator CARR—We appreciate that there are a number of barriers to equity and the participation rates within schools. One of the most profound is the issue of corporal capital—that is, no two students come to the table with the same assets, if you like. That is particularly the case between regions, between communities. We are not one community in this country; we are a whole series of different communities. You are not proposing to this committee, are you, that there not be some measure of discrimination in favour of poorer children or Aboriginal children or children from non-English speaking backgrounds? Have I understood you correctly? That seems to be the inference from your statements on page 9 of your submission.

Dr Moss—The academic literature reminds us over and over again about how deep-seated some of these barriers are.

Senator CARR—I understand that. I am aware of the material. But what it seems to imply is that the equity program is a waste of time because the levels of social injustice in this country have not been reduced as much as we thought, that there has been more resilience to class difference in this country than many people anticipated. Is that an argument against the equity programs or an argument for their intensification?

Dr Moss—I would have to say that it is an argument for their intensification. But one has to pit against that the whole issue of how resources are distributed between schooling sectors and what the impact of that has been over time.

Senator BRANDIS—But that is the opposite of what you say on page 8—in that passage I gave you before. I am completely with Senator Carr on this.

Senator TIERNEY—Which is unusual.

Senator BRANDIS—It is not completely unusual. You say on page 8:

The allocation of additional resources to targeted individuals or groups is now understood as contributing little to deep-seated social injustices.

Senator Carr is right, isn't he?

Dr Moss—My proposition in terms of how we might understand that—and I am speaking with the voice of someone who supports practitioners being able to implement policy within schools—is that we might want to think about the way we have been achieving those because—

Senator BRANDIS—But before you start implementing a policy, you have to have a policy to implement. You seem to be attacking the basis of the policy.

Dr Moss—Yes, I certainly have, because I do not believe there has been a sufficient bringing together of the respective understandings that can come from each one of those sectors.

Senator CARR—But it is an extraordinary proposition. You are saying that it has been a waste of time and we have not achieved these objectives. That is the inference in your submission. Senator Brandis may be more generous than perhaps some of this colleagues, but the argument may well be put that the money ought not be spent in this area because it is not achieving the objectives it set.

Dr Moss—You may have drawn that implication—

Senator CARR—That is what it seems to say.

Dr Moss—but that certainly was not my intention.

Senator TIERNEY—I would like to narrow the debate back to giftedness. I would like to go to the committee's 1998 report—which was the last time the Senate committee looked at giftedness. We have come back to it because very little seems to have happened in this country since then. The committee recommended in its 1998 report with respect to teacher training institutions that pre-service training courses include sufficient information about gifted children to make student teachers aware of the needs of those children and the special identification techniques and teaching strategies which the student teachers will have to use with the gifted on graduation. My question is incredibly specific, and I would ask you to please state your answer specifically. How many hours of lectures and tutorials do students in pre-service preparation in this teaching university get specifically on giftedness?

Dr Moss—We do not run a unit that specifies gifted education for 10 hours and physical disabilities for 10 hours; we run a unit on inclusive education.

Senator TIERNEY—I understand that. I think you say that it was 20 hours.

Dr Moss—The practice of teaching is actually 30 hours.

Senator TIERNEY—So you are ignoring that recommendation of the Senate that there are special identification techniques, special strategies? Are you denying that such techniques and strategies actually exist?

Dr Moss—No. In relation to the teaching approaches, we have actually said that our students are getting access to—

Senator TIERNEY—So why don't you teach those in your course directly in lectures and tutorials?

Dr Moss—We teach about the teaching strategies that are listed.

Senator TIERNEY—No, I am talking about identification and methodologies of teaching with respect to the gifted. Why don't you directly cover those in the lectures and tutorials?

Dr Moss—Because we have a two-year or four-year Bachelor of Teaching program.

Senator TIERNEY—I understand that.

Dr Moss—Coinciding with the policy of the Department of Education—

Senator BRANDIS—Because you have a philosophical objection to making special provisions for defined groups, as you say in your submission. That is the reason, isn't it?

Dr Moss—We have developed a practice in terms of inclusive education, which is an education which caters for the needs of all students.

Senator TIERNEY—Do you understand why groups such as TAG are highly critical of your faculty in not providing for the needs of the gifted and why the in-service officer who was before us, Ms Jenny Tayler, seemed to indicate that, when she does in-service work, teachers are a blank sheet in this area?

Dr Moss—If she is talking about working with teachers, it should be remembered that the median age of teachers is now 45 or 46 and many of these teachers are a long time away from their initial teacher preparation.

Senator TIERNEY—Like me. When I went through 30 years ago, not one lecturer mentioned the word 'gifted', and it looks like nothing has changed. Would that be a fair summation?

Dr Moss—No, I certainly would not think that would be a fair summation.

Senator TIERNEY—But you do not treat it at all in your course.

Dr Moss—I would refute that we do not treat it.

Senator TIERNEY—How do you treat it? How would I as a student—

Dr Moss—Gifted students are understood, as I say in the submission, to be students who have diverse needs. They have teaching and learning needs like any other child.

Senator TIERNEY—No, they do not; they have the specific needs of gifted children. You mentioned that you have a library and you have the work of Professor Gross, with whom I had lunch the other day, and Professor Braggett, with whom I use to lecture. These people are specialists in this field. The University of New South Wales runs special units in pre-service and in-service. They go around the state in-servicing teachers in the teaching of the gifted, which is very appreciated by the schools and the parents. My question to you is: why doesn't the University of Tasmania do this? Is this just an ideological objection to providing for gifted people?

Dr Moss—I certainly do not believe it is an ideological—

Senator TIERNEY—So why don't you touch it?

Dr Moss—We are a faculty of 30 people, and we are required to cater for not only our pre-service teacher education but also our postgraduate programs.

Senator TIERNEY—And in a two-year course you cannot find one hour to do anything on giftedness?

Dr Moss—I dispute that.

Senator TIERNEY—That was my initial question: how many hours do you spend on it? Nothing.

CHAIR—Thank you. That concludes the questioning.

Committee adjourned at 12.22 p.m.