

The identification of gifted children in Australia: The importance of policy

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Abstract

Historically, Australia has lacked a consistent approach to identifying gifted children, not just between States and Territories, but between the districts within them and from one school to the next. A consistent approach requires a common definition of giftedness and well defined identification policies and procedures. This article summarises the policies espoused and practices recommended by the public education authorities (Departments of Education) in the identification of gifted children in the six States and two mainland Territories that comprise Australia. The analysis included the review of publically available policies and guidelines accessible through government departmental web-sites and correspondence with State and regional curriculum or gifted education coordinators, where they existed, to ensure accuracy of representation. Recommendations include being more prescriptive in the instruments, methods and procedures which are mandated for use and including the procedures by which schools, principals and teachers will be held accountable for implementing gifted policies as a part of the policies themselves.

Key words: Gifted, Policy, Identification

Introduction

In 2012, the Education and Training Committee: Enquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students (Victorian Government, 2012) concluded that the overwhelming majority of evidence presented suggested that the present identification practices in Victoria were not adequately identifying gifted students and furthermore that in the

absence of any standard identification procedures identification became dependent on the knowledge and views of individual educators (p. 81). This finding echoed those of two earlier investigations into the education of gifted children in Australia; The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Reference Committee on the Education of Gifted Children (2001) and the Senate Select Committee on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children (1988). Therefore, despite nearly 30 years since the issue was first noted at the Federal Level, there has been little progress.

In order to identify gifted children, a clear definition of what the term ‘gifted’ means is essential. This does not seem to be problematic in Australia, with all states and territories using definitions for ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ reflective of those offered by Gagné (2008) in his Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT), either directly or indirectly (Merrotsy, in press). The actual manner in which Gagné is quoted, and the level of implementation of the DMGT as a Model for supporting talent development in gifted children in Australia is an entirely different matter (Merrotsy, in press). In this article, therefore, the author reviews the policies that exist and the methods of identification being recommended to identify gifted children in Australia.

Definition of gifted

The majority of states and territories make reference to the definitions of ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ outlined in Gagné’s (2008) DMGT. Gagné differentiates between giftedness and talent: a gift is a natural ability, while a talent is developed. However, both definitions require that the gift or talent be expressed in a demonstrable form.

Giftedness designates the possession and use of outstanding natural abilities, called aptitudes, in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of age peers.

Talent designates the outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities, called competencies (knowledge and skills) in at least one field of human activity to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of age peers who are or have been active in that field. (Gagné, 2008, p. 1).

Gagné’s (2008) DMGT comprises five basic components: Natural Abilities, Environmental Catalysts, Intrapersonal Catalysts, Developmental Processes, and Competences. The Natural Abilities or ‘Gift’ component of the DMGT has six sub-

components of natural ability. Four of them are mental: intellectual (GI), creative (GC), social (GS), and perceptual (GP). The remaining two are physical: muscular (GM) abilities devoted to large physical movements, and abilities associated with fine motor control and reflexes (GR). The Intrapersonal and Environmental factors in the DMGT impact the Developmental Process of turning a gift into a talent. The Intrapersonal component considers those attributes of an individual, both physical and mental, which may contribute to or inhibit a gift from being developed into a talent. The Environmental component describes a person's social context in relation to groups and individuals and the provisions that might be offered to them in their context. The Developmental Process describes the impact of time, money and energy into the development of a gift and how the learning pathway is structured. The final component of Gagné's model, Competencies, suggests the nine fields in which a talent may develop. These include academic, technical, science and technology, arts, social services, administration/sales, business operations, games, and sports and athletics.

Only the Northern Territory Department of Education (2016) includes a definition of giftedness from an Aboriginal perspective: "Having intellectual strength in relation to their own world view, inclusive of linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, intra- personal, naturalistic and spiritual intelligences" (p. 1).

Terminology

State and Territory Government Education authorities, generally called 'departments', provide schools with documents that are both mandated and not mandated. In most States and Territories, 'policy' documents are mandated and schools should therefore be held accountable to implement them. Documents such as 'procedures' and 'guidelines' are often not mandated and are provided by Education departments to support schools in their efforts to comply with departmental 'policy' documents. Not all States and Territories use the same terminology and thus for the purpose of general discussion, this paper refers to mandated requirements as 'policy' and non-mandated supporting documents as 'guidelines'. Since schools have no accountability to implement 'guidelines', the key focus in this paper is on the mandated policies for the identification of gifted children in each state and territory.

The structure of public education in Australia

In accordance with the Australian Constitution, the Australian Commonwealth Government is responsible for all matters of national impact, such as customs and foreign affairs, while the state and territory governments are responsible for matters including police, health and education. The Commonwealth Government has primary responsibility for the overall economic management of Australia, including the distribution of supplemental funding to states and territories for education; however, the majority of education funding in Australia is provided by state and territory governments, and is administered under their own school funding models. Under constitutional arrangements, state and territory governments are responsible for ensuring the delivery and regulation of schooling to all children of school age within their boundaries. It is common for the Commonwealth government to set targets or other directives to which states must adhere in order to receive additional federal education funds, and in this way they exert some influence over educational policy in the states and territories (Australian Government, 2017).

A national curriculum

Australia's National Curriculum, produced by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) makes reference to gifted children in the Gifted and Talented Students section, stating "Gifted and talented students are entitled to rigorous, relevant and engaging learning opportunities drawn from the Australian Curriculum and aligned with their individual learning needs, strengths, interests and goals" (para. 1.). It continues describing giftedness in terms of three different models: Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (2008), Tannenbaum's (2003) Sea Star Model, and Renzulli's Three-Ring Model (1978), conceding that there is no universally accepted definition of giftedness. The supporting information in the Australian National Curriculum recognises that giftedness is a broad concept that covers a range of abilities and that schools play an important role in the development of gifts into talents (ACARA, n.d.).

Additional funding to States and Territories is tied to the implementation of the Australian National Curriculum which has led to all States and Territories either implementing the National Curriculum or devising a mandated local curriculum which incorporates the National Curriculum. For example, in Western Australia (WA), "The

Western Australian syllabuses remain broadly consistent with the Australian curriculum but have been contextualised to make them more suitable for Western Australian students and teachers” (School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA), 2014, para.4). Of the states and territories that have a modified local curriculum, only one state, Victoria, makes any reference to gifted students, stating “The Victorian Curriculum F–10 structure enables the curriculum to be used to appropriately target the learning level of each individual student in a class. This includes gifted and talented students who are able to work well above the nominally age expected level of achievement” (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d., para. 17). There is no reference to how gifted children can or should be identified in any of the curriculum or syllabus documents in Australia.

Teaching standards

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is responsible for the accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia. The AITSL *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2011) outline the professional knowledge, practice and engagement standards for teachers across four career stages: graduate, proficient, highly accomplished and lead. There is no direct mention of the identification of gifted students in the AITSL standards. It can be inferred that Standard 1.5 “Differentiate teaching to meet the specific needs of students across the full range of abilities” (AITSL, 2011, p. 9) and Standard 3.1 “Establish challenging learning goals” (AITSL, 2011, p. 12) are both inclusive of gifted children. In order to provide differentiation and set challenging goals, however, a student’s capacity for learning must first be known. Teachers cannot support gifted children if their gifts go unrecognised in the classroom. Again, Standard 7.2 (AITSL, 2011, p. 19) requires that teachers “comply with legislative, administrative and organisational requirements.” Therefore, where state and territory governments have mandated policies and/or procedures that include the identification of gifted children, teachers at all career stages should be adhering to those policies.

Accountability for identification

New South Wales (NSW) has the only policy which spreads the responsibility for the identification of gifted children across multiple roles by describing all roles and responsibilities with a degree of specificity. The Policy and Implementation Strategies

for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students (State of NSW, Department of Education and Training, 2004) “applies to all staff employed in State Office, regions, NSW public schools, their school communities and all students who attend public schools” (p. 5). The policy mandates that, “School communities have a responsibility to identify their gifted and talented students” (p. 7), and “it is the principal’s responsibility to communicate and implement a gifted identification process in collaboration with stake holders in the school community, including parents/carers, students, peers, teachers, principals, councillors and other community members” (p. 7). Under the policy, “teachers, with support, have a responsibility to identify the gifted and talented students in their classes” (p. 7). In contrast, for example, the Western Australian (WA) Gifted and Talented Policy (Western Australian Government, 2010) requires that “principals will plan and implement strategies to identify gifted and talented students” (p. 3), making no reference to the teacher or school community. The Gifted and Talented Guidelines (Department of Education, Western Australia, 2011) note that teachers, principals, parents and other members of the school community need “to be aware of processes involved with identification of gifted and talented students” (p. 6), but this document does not hold the strength of policy.

Table 1 summarises the direct accountability for identification stated in the mandated policies, where they exist. It was surprising to find that Victoria, having had the most recent review into the education of gifted children (Victorian Government, 2012), had no mandated policy that encompassed identification. While their web site, *Making a Difference for Young Gifted and Talented People* (2014), is comprehensive in relation to information and guidance, there appears to be no legal accountability to schools to follow any of the advice given. Queensland also appears to have no ‘Gifted and Talented’ policy. There were two mandated documents the author was able to find which referenced gifted education in Queensland: the *Queensland P–12 Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework (P–12 CARF)*, (Queensland Government, 2017), and the *Advancing education: Action plan for education in Queensland* (Queensland Government, 2016). Both documents contain one or two sentences related to gifted education and there is no direct reference made to identifying gifted children. The documents *Curriculum Provision to Gifted and Talented Students* (Queensland Government, n.d. a) and *A Whole School Approach to Support Student Learning* (Queensland Government, n.d. b) are guidelines containing some advice on identifying

gifted children. No stand-alone Gifted and Talented policy can be found or accessed at the time of writing. The absence of a stand-alone Gifted and Talented policy was confirmed through personal communications (Queensland Government, Department of Education, personal communications, May, July 2017).

Table 1: Summary of accountability (identification) roles in gifted education policies

	Whole school community	Principal	Teacher
NSW	x	x	x
Qld*			
Vic*			
Tas	x		
SA		x	x
WA		x	
NT	x		x
ACT		x	

*No 'gifted and talented education' policy

Procedures for school based identification

In the literature on identification in gifted education there are a number of points where researchers find agreement. The commonly supported elements that should exist in a process for identifying gifted children include early identification (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Merrick & Targett, 2004), and the use of multiple instruments (Baldwin, 2005; Merrick & Targett, 2004; Johnsen, 2009; VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, & Avery, 2002). Each instrument should act as a separate entry point to a gifted program, not as an additional hurdle (Borland & Wright, 1994; Johnsen, 2009; Roedell, Jackson, & Robinson, 1980; Silverman, 1998). Identification procedures should occur at multiple points across time (Lakin & Lohman, 2011; Merrick & Targett, 2004; Silverman, 2009). Identification procedures must relate directly to the program(s) being offered or the programs must be designed to meet the needs of each identified group (Lakin & Lohman, 2011; Richert, 2003). Finally, like-like norms (for example schools with similar SEI/ICSEA rankings) should be considered as a method to reduce the effects of socio-economic assessment bias (Frasier, 1987; Lohman & Gambrell, 2012; Peters & Gentry, 2012; Renzulli et al., 2004).

Table 2 summarises the criteria that are either mandated or suggested as a part of an identification process for gifted children, by State or Territory. Mandated criteria appear in policy documents that schools are required to follow and should be held accountable to by their relevant jurisdictions. For example, the Government of Western Australian (2010) “gifted and talented policy” states, “All policy and procedural statements contained within this document are lawful orders for the purposes of section 80(a) of the Public Sector Management Act 1994 (WA) and are therefore to be observed by all Department of Education employees” (p.3). Other state and territory education department, non-mandated guidelines and web-based information for schools and teachers were also reviewed for advice to schools and teachers regarding the identification of gifted children. As reflected in Table 2, NSW and South Australia (SA) have the most comprehensive list of criteria to which a school’s identification process must adhere.

Table 2: Criteria for school based identification procedures by state and territory

Criteria in policy	States and Territories							
	NSW	Qld	Vic	Tas	SA	WA	NT	ACT
School wide approach	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Multiple criterion	✓	•	•		✓	•	•	
Inclusive	✓	•			✓	•	•	✓
Dynamic and continuous	✓		•		✓	•	•	
Culturally fair	✓	•			✓	•	•	
Include all ‘domains’ and ‘fields’	✓	•			✓	✓		✓
Recognize degrees of giftedness and talent	✓					•		
Link to differentiation	✓		•		✓	•		
Allow for early identification	✓		•	✓	✓	✓	•	
Be inclusive of stakeholders	✓		•		✓	•	•	
Specialized or flexible for minority groups	✓				✓	•	•	
A combination of subjective and objective strategies	✓		•		✓	•	•	
Reliable					✓			
Valid					✓			

Note: ✓ Mandated in policy; • Suggested in guidelines.

Many of the elements promoted in literature on the education of gifted and talented students are evident in State and Territory policies. The sole widely mandated criterion, included by six out of the eight states and territories, is that a whole school approach to identification must be in place. When non-mandated guides are considered, six out of the eight states and territories have included early identification, inclusivity and the need for multiple instruments, while five have acknowledged the need for continuous, culturally fair procedures that are inclusive of all stakeholders. Five States and Territories also include the necessity to differentiate between different domains of giftedness, such as those represented in Gagné's DMGT (2008), and to use both objective and subjective methods of identification. Half of the states recognise the need for flexible or specialised procedures for minority groups, an example of which would be the use of 'like-like' norms.

Of foremost importance should be that the instruments used for identification are valid and reliable measures of the gifted construct. As previously mentioned, in the Australian context the gifted construct is generally defined by Gagné's (2010) definition, and therefore identification should focus on valid and reliable measures of giftedness as so defined. These criteria, 'valid' and 'reliable', were noticeably absent in the criteria for identification procedures outlined in State and Territory documents. Only the SA policy document makes reference to the need for "reliable and valid assessment tools and strategies" (Government of South Australia, 2016, p. 5). This document, however, goes on to include in its appendices two checklists for implementation as interval scales, and for which no external reference to research or the psychometric properties can be found. The inclusion of 'instruments' in appendices in guidelines and on education department websites was common across states and territories and in the majority of cases there was no reference to the psychometric properties of the 'instruments' or external references to their research based development.

Table 3 summarises the types of instruments and evidence that are promoted in State and Territory policies and/or guidelines. A copy of *Identifying Students who are Gifted – a Guide for Schools* (Author unknown) was requested from the Tasmanian Government, Department of Education; however, the document was unable to be shared (personal communications 30/06/17). Tasmania uses lists in its application form *Early School Entry for Gifted Students* (Tasmanian Government, 2012). The author was

unable to obtain any further information on the identification methods promoted in Tasmania.

Table 3: Identification methods described in policy or guidelines, by state or territory

Identification methods in policy	States and Territories							
	NSW	Qld	Vic	Tas	SA	WA	NT	ACT
Responses to classroom activities	•	•	•			•	•	•
Self-nomination	•	•				•		•
Peer nomination	•	•				•		
Teacher nomination	•	•				•	•	
Parent nomination	•	•				•		
Competition results	•							
Above-level tests	•	•			•			
Standardized tests of creative ability	•							
Standardised cognitive assessments (IQ tests)	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
Observations and anecdotes	•		•			•	•	•
Checklists of characteristics	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Interviews (child or parent)	•				•	•	•	•
Academic grades	•						•	•

Checklists were the only method of identification promoted by each of the states and territories. Seven states and territories all considered that standardised tests of cognitive achievement, such as IQ assessments, were a valuable way to identify gifted children. This is consistent with the DMGT, where ‘g’, the general intelligence factor, is included in Gagné’s ‘Intellectual’ (GI) domain. Responses to classroom based activities were the next most frequently cited method for identification followed by interviews and formal observations and anecdotes. The document *Policy and implementation strategies for the education of gifted and talented students* (State of NSW, 2004) outlines the most comprehensive list of possible identification methods. Surprising to the author was that the use of competition results, such as the Australian Mathematics Competition (AMC), were only promoted as a valuable method of identification in NSW, despite the benefits of nationally comparable longitudinal data and a high test ceiling clearly able to identify students with exceptional ability in a specific subject area. NSW was also the only state to promote the use of standardised tests of creative ability, despite the ‘Creative’ (GC)

domain being an essential element of the DMGT, the most frequently cited model of giftedness and talent in policy documents. Above-level tests (whereby a student is given a test in a subject area from one to two years above their current grade level and is continued to be tested in one grade level intervals until their results fall below approximately 85% correct) were only promoted by three states. Above-level tests, however, can be teacher created (so are inexpensive) and have the added advantage of offering valuable diagnostic information relating to appropriate curriculum intervention (Merrick & Targett, 2004).

Summary and recommendations

In reviewing the publicly available documentation, it is evident that, despite three formal reviews into the education of Gifted and Talented students within an Australian context, little progress has been made in implementing consistent, valid and reliable procedures for identifying gifted children in Australia. The states and territories lack consistency in mandating who is accountable for the identification of gifted children, the elements an identification procedure must contain, and the instruments and evidence promoted as appropriate for identification. Six of the eight states and territories have formal ‘gifted and talented education’ policies that require schools to have procedures in place to identify gifted children. Neither Victoria nor Queensland has an existing ‘gifted and talented education’ policy.

The lack of ‘valid’ and ‘reliable’ as criteria for selecting the instruments used to identify gifted children is a cause for concern. A cynical person might infer that to identify gifted children in a valid and reliable way would mean schools and teachers are then held accountable to provide for their educational needs and, more pertinently, that the public education system would have to support schools and teachers in their efforts to do so. The lack of consideration of validity and reliability as important criteria for instrument selection is perpetuated by some of the specific ‘instruments’ which are suggested for use by schools and teachers by education departments; an area for further research.

NSW and SA clearly lead the way in mandating criteria that must be adhered to in the procedures their schools implement to identify gifted children. The degree to which the schools in these states, and others, are held accountable to their gifted and talented policies is not known. Teachers are held accountable to “comply with legislative,

administrative and organisational requirements” through the teacher registration body AITSL (Education Services Australia, 2011, p. 19), and through mandated policies that are linked to legislation. However, in the light of a mandated ‘school wide approach’ in six of the eight states and territories, each teacher should not be expected to be independently devising and implementing identification procedures in their classrooms, but rather should be appropriately directed, led and supported in their efforts to implement the school’s procedures. Since no procedures or specific individual methods for identification are mandated in the majority of states and territories, this can only result in a continued lack of consistency, reliability and validity in Australia’s approach to identifying gifted children in its schools.

There is evidence of research informed information in each of the state and territory ‘gifted and talented education’ policies; however, much of the information lies in guidelines, either formal or web-based. There is no necessity for schools to implement either ‘guidelines’ or any of the web-based information provided by their relevant education departments. Where states lack a separate ‘gifted and talented education’ policy it can be difficult to find what, if anything, is mandated in relation to the education of gifted students. For these reasons, separate policy documents are essential. In addition, there needs to be greater specificity within policies relating to the instruments, methods and procedures used to identify gifted children. This does not need to result in a one size fits every student approach. It does need to result in the inclusion of instruments and methods which are valid and reliable measures and indicators of the gifted construct, with a firm foundation in peer reviewed research, and procedures which reflect the ever growing support in gifted research for early and continual identification in a way which is inclusive of minority groups, including twice exceptional children. Furthermore, the mechanisms which will be used to monitor and hold school communities, principals and teachers accountable to implement ‘gifted and talented education’ policies need to be included as a part of the policies themselves. Ultimately the author would like a national Gifted and Talented Education policy. However, given the structure of public education in Australia and our attempts to implement a National Curriculum that has been modified by some states, this seems unlikely in the near future.

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