

## Optimising the Learning of Gifted Aboriginal Students

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### Abstract

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (2000) "Education for All" goals, all students are entitled to opportunities to fulfil their potential. This implies that appropriate programs need to be in place for all children, especially gifted Aboriginal students. Accordingly, this means that all educational institutions in Australia have an obligation to provide involvement and commitment opportunities for all gifted and talented Aboriginal students in meeting their basic learning needs. This goal is not being achieved within Australia.

Gifted and talented Aboriginal students have been identified as the most educationally disadvantaged group in the Australian education system (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2004). Education for Aboriginal learners varies throughout the states of Australia. While New South Wales has provided excellent modelling of accommodating for inclusion of gifted Aboriginal students, in Queensland the lower representation of Indigenous students in gifted programs suggests inappropriate facilitation. This discussion paper compares and contrasts New South Wales and Queensland gifted Indigenous educational policy, exploring the issues of appropriate identification and programs for gifted Aboriginal students, Aboriginal learning styles and the role of the classroom teacher in accommodating these students.

### Introduction

The Learning Futures movement highlights the importance of developing inclusive education that is equitable, effective and non-discriminatory (see United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2000). Inclusive education means that schools must provide quality educational opportunities to all students irrespective of their varying abilities, especially "those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion" (p. 12).

In spite of the rhetoric of inclusivity both around the world and more locally in Australia, Aboriginal gifted students remain the most educationally disadvantaged group within Australia (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2004). Moreover, while gifted minority groups are acknowledged within every Australian state education policy, advice on suitable identification procedures is limited.

When Gagné's (1993) model of development is applied, 15% of students within every classroom are gifted. This would suggest that up to 90,000 students in Queensland classrooms may be gifted. Given the relatively low numbers of students who are identified by Education Queensland as gifted, there is a significant number of gifted students who remain unidentified within the Queensland system. In particular, the low

representation of Aboriginal students in gifted programs suggests that current identification procedures within Queensland schools are inappropriate.

Furthermore, despite numerous studies over the past 20 years which have highlighted the number of gifted children underachieving at school (Gross, 1993), Education Queensland's current definition of giftedness does not include gifted underachievers or provide appropriate tools to identify them. Underachievement is defined as "general academic achievement at a level significantly below that which is predicted by the student's intelligence quotient" (Gross, 1993, p. 225). By contrast, the New South Wales Education Department has developed suitable testing and programs to cater for the needs of gifted Aboriginal students. Implementation of similar methods should occur throughout Queensland to provide opportunities for all students, regardless of culture.

This paper outlines the problematic discourse of gifted Aboriginal education, highlights problems with current practice in Queensland compared to New South Wales educational policy, identifies appropriate strategies for the recognition of gifted Aboriginal students and provides recommendations for the future advocacy of gifted Aboriginal students.

### **The Problematic Discourse of Gifted Aboriginal Education**

Acceptable gifted Aboriginal education within Australia has been a complex endeavour for educators. The Australian Government (Purdle, Tripcony, Boutlon-Lewis, Gunstone, & Fanshawe, 2000, p. 1) defines an Aboriginal person "as a person who is a descendant of an Indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which she or he lives". A history of marginalisation and prejudice against Aboriginal Australians has created an erroneous belief within Australian society regarding the academic abilities of Aboriginal students. Up until the 1960s, "the Australian government believed Aboriginal children should be offered only minimal schooling as they had limited inherent intellect within their race" (Beresford & Partington, 2003, p. 43). Such racial prejudice "permeated into every fabric of society for education, constituting a form of institutionalised racism" (Wieviorka, 1995, p. 56). The Australian Principals Association Professional Development Council (2000) believes that there is a systematic lack of optimism that Aboriginal students can excel in the school context, with many sectors of society accepting the gap in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

#### *Identification and testing*

Unfortunately, being gifted does not assure educational productivity. Aboriginal gifted *underachievers* exist within most classrooms in Australia. According to Rimm (1995), students fall into underachieving patterns because of a combination of factors in home, school and peer environments. This presents particular challenges to teachers in the identification of gifted Aboriginal students as they must consider conditions outside the classroom which influence student performance.

The process may be complicated by several factors. First, testing for giftedness within Queensland is based upon individual schools' identification strategies, predominantly falling upon teacher judgments and professional recognition. The *Framework for Gifted Education* (Education Queensland, 2004) recommends the identification

methods of Saylor's (1999; cited in Education Queensland, 2004) tools. However, it is likely that such measures may fail to identify gifted students who may not excel at the communication domains of reading and writing. Such methods may therefore be prone to underestimate the presence of the cultural difference of Aboriginal children. Second, Aboriginal students may be gifted but not recognised because of cultural bias, leading to inequitable identification. Finally, these children may be affected by socio-emotional issues leading to inefficient metacognition, rather than because their cognitive potential is lower (Tzuriel & Feuerstein, 1992). Therefore they may present as possessing limited potential rather than as underachievers.

The identification of Aboriginal gifted students is further hindered by definitions of *giftedness* and *underachievement*. While Aboriginal gifted children are acknowledged within all state education policies, little advice is given regarding definitions of underachievement and giftedness. Examples of appropriate identification instruments or suitable programs that cater for the needs of the student are also absent. Most definitions of giftedness do not provide an emphasis upon the underachiever. Education Queensland (2004) defines gifted as "students who excel in one or more areas, characterised by an advanced pace of learning, quality of thinking or capability from remarkably high standards of performance compared to students of the same age" (p. 1). No acknowledgment of the *potential* underachiever is made. Giftedness can be defined using Gagné's (1985) differentiated model of giftedness, corresponding to competence that is distinctly above in one or more domains of ability. Gagné (1991; cited in Gross, 1993) believes that gifted underachievers should be correctly defined as the potential to perform at a level significantly in advance of what might be expected at one's age. Likewise, underachievement should be defined as an "individual's potential is less than their actual potential and who [are] also under performing in the classroom" (Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003, p. 3). Gross (1993, p. 225) claims that many studies "over the last twenty years have reported alarming incidences of underachievement among the intellectually gifted". Gifted students can be underachievers because their school achievement level may still be acceptable by the teacher. Such definitions may enable Aboriginal gifted underachievers to be effectively sought through a reconceptualisation of the differentiation of giftedness.

### *Cultural factors*

Cultural language differences impact on the overall educational achievement of Aboriginal students (Bishop, 1988). A level of cultural understanding is needed regarding language acquisition by Aboriginal gifted students. For example, it is essential that educators value the role of non-standard English for Aboriginal learners. Eades (1995) suggests that to value the language that learners bring to school is to value the children, their culture and their history. The issue is significant as Tripcony (1995) estimates that 93% of the Queensland Aboriginal population use non-standard English, creating cultural differences for gifted Aboriginal students. Non-standard English refers to the varieties of English spoken by Aboriginal people with differing sounds, grammar, words, meanings and language use (Eades, 1993).

Additionally, Aboriginal community understanding of giftedness is limited. Gifted Aboriginal students may receive little encouragement from peers and family. Students who have the capacity for academic success at school find that their parents, siblings and particularly their peers give little or no encouragement (Gibson, 1995, p. 38).

Furthermore, an Aboriginal student who strives for advancement may threaten the group ideology associated with Aboriginal culture.

Parents may have little knowledge about available state gifted provisions (Taylor, 1998) and, according to Vasilevska (2004), underrepresentation of Aboriginal students is linked to a lack of community and school knowledge about available gifted programs. Taylor (1998) defines the problem further as a breakdown in collaboration among schools, teachers, parents and students. The responsibility to repair this breakdown and to inform parents rests with local education providers working with individual Indigenous communities to determine ways in which education can be integrated with other services to provide a cohesive delivery. The *Positive Self-identity for Indigenous Students* project (Purdle, Tripcony, Boutlon-Lewis, Gunstone, & Fanshawe, 2000, p. xiii) recommends that “communities and schools should encourage parents to play a role in promoting the value of education to their children and encourage their participation in programs and activities organised by the school”. The involvement of community involvement in gifted education programs is therefore essential.

Notably even these issues, as identified, are not straightforward. There are potential distinctions to be made between rural Aboriginal students and urban Aboriginal students and their social contexts (Partington & McCudden, 1993). Without a culturally specific context, gifted Aboriginal students are unable to establish a point of reference for their learning and so are prevented from creating bicultural learning. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the range of nuanced subcultures which influence identity formation and learning within Aboriginal communities.

### **Why Are Current Queensland Policies Inappropriate for Gifted Aboriginal Students?**

Education Queensland’s (2000) policy for *Partners for Success: Strategy for the Continuous Improvement of Education and Employment Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Education* identifies a “need for equal education for Indigenous students” (p. 7). It acknowledges that Aboriginal students have the same capacity to learn and to achieve high standards of education as any other child within the state. All students have the right to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes to function successfully in life beyond school, to access further education and training and to secure rewarding and worthwhile employment.

In particular, Education Queensland (2004) created a *Framework for Gifted Education* to allow appropriate accommodation for gifted learners within the classroom and community. *Acceleration* is stated as the preferred gifted program to be used, as age matriculation classrooms do not meet the needs of the gifted student, further creating underachievement. Students are identified by parents and teachers based upon a series of checklists to identify key characteristics amongst gifted students. It is important to note that these characteristics are unique to the dominant culture, largely excluding gifted Aboriginal students from being recognised. The questions focus upon a student’s advancement in reading and writing, two areas of development that are not common in Aboriginal culture. Cooper (2003) believes that such identification techniques that are culturally biased are responsible for underachievement amongst Aboriginal students, created by feelings of isolation from peers and misunderstandings from teachers.

Furthermore, the advice provided by the *Framework for Gifted Education* (Education Queensland, 2004) contradicts the advice in Education Queensland's (2000) policy for Indigenous education (2000), which states that Aboriginal students should *not be exposed to acceleration* but instead to an inclusive Aboriginal curriculum to develop effective education. The document fails, however, to provide appropriate definitions, suggestions or examples of what is required. Clearly, there is need for clarification of this advice and for exemplars for teachers in the accommodation of gifted Aboriginal students.

By contrast, New South Wales has utilised Gagné's (1993) model of giftedness and talent successfully to provide a holistic and inclusive teaching environment. Gross (1993, p. 40) believes that an educational system that has adopted such a definition has provided "commitment to identifying high potential in students and created an educational and social environment which will develop that potential into high performance". This implies that such a system is also interested in identifying underachievers. This belief is central to the New South Wales *Gifted and Talented Policy* (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2004), which states that "all government schools have a responsibility to educate students to their potential" (p. 7). Furthermore, their commitment to the identification of gifted students is strengthened by the belief that "it is imperative that schools and communities develop effective, equitable and defensible identification programs that avoid cultural bias and provide developmentally [appropriate] programs for gifted and talented students" (2004, p. 7).

### **What Are Appropriate Identification Tools for Gifted Aboriginal Students?**

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (1996) and the Senate Inquiry into Indigenous Education (Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996) have stated that effective educational programs must incorporate Aboriginal involvement at all levels of curriculum development in order to create flexible programs to build on Aboriginal culture and experience. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2004) believes that identification must be multifaceted, involving parents, teachers, students and other professionals. In particular, it is strongly argued that identification must be culturally fair (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2004). This has led to the development not only of a gifted and talented policy but also of extensive support information dealing with identification, acceleration, curriculum differentiation and parent support.

Dynamic testing is one solution that has been successful in parts of Northern New South Wales. Dynamic testing is defined as "approaches to the development of decision-specific information that most characteristically involve interaction between the examiner and examinee, focus on learner, metacognitive processes and responsiveness to intervention, and follow a pretest-intervention-posttest administrative format" (Lidz, 1997, p. 281; cited in Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003, p. 4). Grigorenko and Sternberg (1998; cited in Chaffey, Bailey and Vine, 2003) argue that such testing solves the problem of providing a suitably assessed aptitude technique for the achievement of Aboriginal students.

The Coolibah dynamic testing method is one potential exemplar. This method seeks to “determine the learning potential of an individual, rather than to establish long term cognitive change” (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1998; cited in Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003, p. 4). Students are not required to read or write during the test or to provide culturally specific knowledge. A post-test is given after the intervention to determine the extent of improvement from the pre-test.

The Coolibah method reduces the forced choice dilemma that Aboriginal gifted students face (Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003). The dilemma is based around the students behaviour; “should they ‘act white’ and risk alienation from their cultural peers or retain peer acceptance and shun academic excellence?” (Colangelo, 2002; Ogbu, 1994; cited in Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003, p. 6). Students are exposed to an ‘ice-breaker’ session in groups that is designed to make them comfortable with the assessor and the data collection process. The ‘test’ nature associated with identification is de-emphasised and replaced with the notion of fun. The framework of the method also abolishes ideas of ‘pass’ and ‘fail’, with a greater emphasis being placed upon students ‘doing their best’. At no time during the assessment are students asked to perform at a given level; instead they are encouraged to try. A well-known and respected Aboriginal adult is present at every session with the students whose role is to offer support to the students when required.

Throughout the assessment, encouragement is given to students to support their self-efficacy. “Feedback is given to the students to support metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive control leading to self-efficacy development” (Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003, p. 10). Such encouragement may allow students to develop to their full potential, allowing New South Wales educators to meet the basic learning need of gifted Aboriginal students, in compliance with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (2000) mandate of *Education for All*.

## Identifying Models for gifted Aboriginal Education

### *Curricula*

For curriculum to be appropriate for gifted Aboriginal students, it must meet their basic learning needs. Ebeck (1991; cited in Butterworth & Candy, 1998, p. 23) believes that Aboriginal students need to be provided with a curriculum that is effective, acceptable, efficient, accessible, equitable and relevant by:

- Building on prior knowledge experiences and language, while incorporating different culture and learning styles of Aboriginal people, in order to build the child’s self-esteem and cultural identity.
- Incorporating Aboriginal learning styles of: observation, imitation, cooperation, trial and error, rote learning, holistic rather than step by step, problem solving by repetition and persistence, broad concept of time, importance of past and present, emphasis on sharing and groups goals.
- Involving Aboriginal teachers, aides, parents and family and community members in planning and implementation to enable utilisation of Aboriginal languages and culturally appropriate activities, resources and styles of learning.

The ideal environment and curriculum for Aboriginal students is one in which each child is respected as an individual and as a member of a cultural group with distinct learning styles. Proctor (1992, p. 93; cited in Butterworth & Candy, 1998) believes

that a correct focus should be on “the enhancement of successful learning, the promotion of self-esteem and self-worth, and the fostering of cultural learning strengths” (p. 24).

### Programs

Programs catering for the needs of Aboriginal gifted and talented students have been implemented throughout New South Wales. The names of these particular programs have been specifically designed to exclude the words “gifted and talented”, which have been replaced with a general description of “talent development”, for the following reasons:

- “The egalitarian nature of Aboriginal culture (Eckermann, 1998) has been counted as one of the factors that cause the more able Aboriginal students to ‘hide’ rather than show out. The term shaming is often used by Aboriginal children to describe their shyness and reluctance to show out in a group. The term ‘talent development’ does not so obviously single out identified students as being especially different” (Chaffey, 2001 p. 2).
- Using the term “gifted and talented” with identified gifted underachievers may lead to internal and external pressures, especially from program observers who may be making judgements from a limited knowledge basis.
- Using the term “gifted and talented” creates targets for detractors within deficit models of schooling. Detractors may also be established by groups who are opposed to gifted and talented programs generally (Davis & Rimm, 1994).

Three trial programs exist within New South Wales for gifted Aboriginal students that are related to the Coolibah dynamic testing method: the Armidale Diocesan Talent Development Programs for Indigenous Students; the Anaiwan Enrichment Project; and the Walgett Talent Development Camp for Indigenous Students. Their key aspects are summarised in Table 1. These programs have been in place in Northern New South Wales, with children coming from schools in Walgett, Moree, Narrabri, Gunnedah, Tamworth, Armidale, Uralla, Barraba, Werris Creek, Inverell, Glen Innes and Walcha. These programs incorporate the major learning styles of Aboriginal people, such as observation and imitation, personal trial and error, real life participation, learning of context specific skills and personal orientated learning. These programs clearly show the commitment by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (2000) goal of *Education for All*.

### Where to from Here with Advocacy...?

Considering the societal similarities between Queensland and New South Wales, identification methods and programs for gifted Aboriginal students could be easily transferable. Both state education departments have made commitments to Aboriginal gifted education; however, New South Wales has taken the initiative to explore appropriate techniques and programs. Education Queensland must reconceptualise their concept of giftedness to include *potential academic ability* and to encourage teachers to identify gifted Aboriginal underachievers.

While Education Queensland has recently taken steps to develop the recognition of gifted Aboriginal students under the same program as New South Wales, they have trained only five teachers within one school to identify underachievers. This does not accommodate the needs of other gifted Aboriginal students in other areas of the state.

Table 1: New South Wales talent development for Aboriginal students

Armidale Diocesan Talent Development Program	Anaiwan Enrichment Program	Walgett Talent Development Camp
<p>Identify in-school mentors from staff members. Staff member given one day a week to work with gifted Aboriginal students.</p> <p>Aboriginal assistants were involved in all aspects of the program, playing an important role in the in-school mentoring program.</p> <p>In-service training for all staff.</p> <p>Cultural awareness was central to all aspects of the program.</p>	<p>Aboriginal assistants were asked to participate and given program in-service.</p> <p>In-school Aboriginal mentors created to provide advice, inspiration and support.</p> <p>Teachers trained to orientate students to the projects goals of technology improvement.</p> <p>Use of email to bring all students around the area together and to bring students to the cutting edge of contemporary technology.</p> <p>Cultural input used throughout.</p>	<p>Meeting place for all program participants.</p> <p>Work with Aboriginal students of similar ability in supportive environment.</p> <p>Necessary experience for students and staff.</p> <p>Generated group feeling of success and participation.</p> <p>Camp had constant but unobtrusive cultural theme.</p> <p>Local Aboriginal elders present.</p> <p>Used cultural stories and songs.</p> <p>Activities were specific to the identified potential talents of the participants.</p>

Stakeholders at all levels must be vigilant in their efforts to promote better opportunities for gifted Aboriginal students. Additionally, schools and communities need to establish collaborative structures to create appropriate curricula for gifted Aboriginal students. While the initial implementation may be difficult to establish because of training, the benefits available to the gifted Aboriginal students will flow on throughout the community.

## Conclusion

As Miller (1989) has pointed out: “Aboriginal people are entitled to the highest quality of education available” (p. 126). However, unless the current conception of giftedness is expanded to acknowledge and support Aboriginal students, underachievers within these Aboriginal groups will continue to be excluded from the highest quality of education available. This is inconsistent with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (2000) principle of inclusive education.

As Lindqvist (1994), a United Nations Organisation rapporteur, has suggested, it is not education systems that have a right to certain types of children but instead we must cater to all. Recognition of Aboriginal gifted education is a basic human right, without vulnerability to marginalisation and exclusion. Currently Queensland’s education policy does not provide sufficient accommodation of gifted Aboriginal students to fulfil the goals of meeting students’ basic needs. Gifted Aboriginal students need appropriate identification techniques, programs, curriculum and defined roles of the teacher. New South Wales leads Australia in providing excellent



examples of accommodating the gifted Aboriginal student. Queensland must provide similar programs if they are committed to the education of gifted Aboriginal students. While gifted Aboriginal students have the potential to contribute to society and achieve personal satisfaction, they require recognition from Education Queensland to reach this potential. Only then can Queensland move towards achieving the futures oriented principles identified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2000).

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