

Helping gifted children:

Access and equity in early childhood services for young gifted children

In this article I will examine young gifted children's opportunities in early childhood settings and will be guided in this endeavour by the NSW Government's Early Childhood Services Policy (2000) and the *Anti-Discrimination Act, 1997*. There are a number of stated desired outcomes in the Early Childhood Services Policy. Of particular interest are the following, that:

- 'the importance of early childhood and the well being of children are reflected in policy and in practice',
- 'children's lives are enriched and improved through access to good quality early childhood programs'
- 'a 'child-centred' focus is the core of the Government's commitment to children's services'.

The ensuing discussion concerns a minority group—gifted children—and the barriers to the above outcomes in early childhood settings.

Priority

The Early Childhood Services Policy, 2000, gives particular support and priority to 'children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and for children with disabilities, children from families on low incomes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from ethnic communities, children in isolated rural & remote (and urban) communities, and children at risk of neglect and abuse'. Further, fundamental underlying principles in the policy are that children are not discriminated against 'on any grounds covered by the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1997*'. Gifted children are not considered to be within the target groups covered by the *Anti-Discrimination Act, 1997*. In spirit, however, access and equity in the Early Childhood Services Policy (2000) refers to children from *all* walks of life, and this includes children who are gifted, and whose IQs range from moderately gifted (IQs between 130-144) to profoundly gifted (IQ 180+) (Gross, 1993).

Tall poppi

It has long been known that there is a 'tall poppies' attitude in our community. Curiously, though, it tends to particularly affect those who are academically gifted rather than those who are gifted in the area of, say,

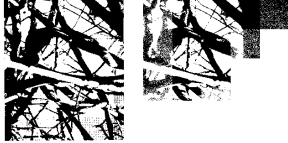
sport. There is a perception in Western society and in Australia in particular, that academically gifted children will be OK and need no help (if they are deemed to exist at all). Unfortunately, this perception is neither supported by research relating to gifted children, nor by a recent Senate inquiry (The Senate Inquiry into Gifted Education, 2001). Although such research is scant due to the lack of public interest, and although there is therefore a lack of sufficient evidence that gifted children do better if they are included in special programs, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence suggesting that if they do not receive adequate educational support, their opportunities will be greatly reduced or lost. (Clark, 1992).

Use it or lose it

Many gifted children, particularly those who are in the moderately gifted range (IQ of 130-144), are well catered for in many early childhood settings. Additionally, early childhood teachers who have been trained in identifying and programming for gifted children do identify and program extremely efficiently. Unfortunately, however, many early childhood teachers are not trained in educating gifted children as it is not a compulsory unit in their university training. Furthermore, many children's services do not even employ an early childhood teacher. Consequently, gifted children who are often left to their own devices, develop behaviour problems and are perceived to be 'difficult' and 'trouble-makers' by child care or preschool staff. If their talents go undiscovered and their needs remain un-addressed, they may eventually become drop-outs or even social misfits (also known as under-achievers in gifted 'speak').

Equity

Although gifted children are not a target group covered by the Anti-Discrimination Act, they are nevertheless often discriminated against indirectly due to lack of information*. Many gifted children, for instance, abhor routine, dislike having to pack up their project before it is completed, and are bored by having to listen to or carry out the same type of program or activity day after day. Profoundly gifted youngsters also prefer older children or adults for



company, and therefore often play alone or try to engage a teacher in conversation, who in turn tries to re-engage them with their age-peers. Gifted children and their families do not have legal recourse, yet they are often treated less favourably than other groups; by services failing to identify them as gifted, and through lack of the provision of a differentiated program or an Individual Education Program (IEP) that considers and addresses their particular strengths and needs.

Unmet need

Gifted children are often intensely interested in a particular topic on an on-going basis. However, early childhood workers, according to research, often hold a view that children should be 'well rounded' (Wellisch, 1997). Therefore, the response will be, if a child has a gift, let's work on his needs instead. A case in point was a young gifted child whose interest was HSC physics, and who was left sitting in the book corner during the majority of free play time at preschool, because the teacher did not know how to program for his interest (Wellisch, 1999). As for his needs, the teacher only saw these in terms of deficits rather than strengths. For instance, his hand-eye coordination was quite poor, which is often the case with gifted children. Here, she felt qualified to try and pursue a program for him, making up drawings of atoms for him to cut out.

This approach does not develop a child's view of himself or herself as competent. Gifted children often suffer from feelings of low self-esteem. This is probably caused as much by the adults around them as by the children's own need for producing perfect products, and their feeling of 'being different'. Despite a common impression of these children as arrogant, their chronic low self-esteem is just one area of their special needs.

Gifted children come from all backgrounds

One major misconception is that gifted children are already privileged and need no further provisions. In fact, gifted children cut across cultural and social boundaries: they are found amongst children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds,

Aboriginal children, children from low socio-economic backgrounds, and amongst both boys and girls. Whereas children from higher socio-economic backgrounds can access educational opportunities provided the parents are aware of their needs, it is the disadvantaged gifted children who very often lose out due to lack of opportunities. Their only hope then, is that someone in the early childhood and public education systems correctly identifies them and supports their very different strengths and needs.

The need to reevaluate access and equity issues in early childhood services for young gifted children is obvious. A transformation from current policies, practices and thinking is necessary if we aim to provide adequate programs that enrich and improve gifted children's early childhood years.

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*'Indirect discrimination' as referred to in the Anti-Discrimination Act, requires a person to comply with a requirement or condition which would not be reasonable when the person's case is taken into consideration

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