

A summary of gifted education needs in Catholic Education, Tasmania.

By Allison Cornish

Gifted Education Consultant (North / NW) TCEO
Literacy Key Teacher – Larmenier Catholic School
(allison.cornish@catholic.tas.edu.au)

Receiving the Kate O'Driscoll scholarship allowed me to attend a Gifted Education conference in Victoria in order to further my knowledge of how different education systems are catering for the needs of gifted and talented students.

I would like to provide you with a very brief outline of our progress in Tasmania and set a challenge to our schools to meet the needs of their high potential students.

Introduction

Catholic Education Tasmania (CET) currently has approximately 15,000 students enrolled in 37 schools state-wide. Based on Francois Gagne's definition of giftedness (DMGT 2000), it is conservatively estimated that there may be as many as 1 500 students amongst this cohort who are gifted in one or more domain.

Background

Until the beginning of 2013, the special learning needs of gifted students in Catholic education in Tasmania were not formally recognised. There was no policy relating to gifted education and interventions for gifted students were dependent on the knowledge and ability of individual schools to cater for their needs. Identification relied on parents advising the school of their child's abilities and was not undertaken pro-actively by classroom teachers or by an identified school approach.

Investigations into common practices at the beginning of 2013 revealed that whilst teachers readily altered learning content, teaching strategies and environment for low ability students, the same was not true for high potential students. The prevailing belief

amongst teachers was found to be that gifted students did not require special interventions. There was a commonly held misconception that 'gifted students would cope well and be alright anyway'.

Until 2013, teachers within Catholic Education Tasmania (CET) had previously had minimal or no training in understanding, identifying and catering for the unique needs of gifted students. Surveys completed at the time revealed that many staff, including principals, school management and teachers, held a range of misconceptions about giftedness. They also lacked knowledge about research-based evidence about giftedness and the ways in which to cater for gifted students. They were unfamiliar with practical classroom strategies such as differentiation, curriculum compacting, cluster grouping, and a range of acceleration options. They were also unaware of the characteristics of gifted children and tended to identify high achievers as potentially gifted, whilst ignoring gifted children who displayed negative behaviour patterns or exhibited some learning difficulties. This lack of knowledge is not uncommon around the world and it is only when teachers receive meaningful, in-depth professional development in this field that they begin to understand the issues and in turn become more adept at catering for the gifted students in their classrooms.

In 2013, AGQTP money was set aside to establish the role of a state-wide gifted education specialist within CET. I took on this position. The purpose of my role was to provide direct professional learning for teachers throughout the state in identifying and catering for the needs of gifted students. Since then, staff in 27 out of 37 schools, approximately 600 teachers, have received a minimum of 3 hours introductory professional development (PD) in gifted education, covering the common characteristics and needs of gifted children. A further 200 teachers will have received at least 1.5 hours of PD and 48 school principals or leaders will have received 5 hours of PD. 27 CET education officers or support staff have received one hour of PD. This has all been delivered through face-to-face, practical hands-on sessions run by myself.

Additionally, individual schools have been provided with support and advice relating to specific gifted students in their cohort whose needs have required expert advice and intervention strategies. In all, more than 1,000 staff have benefitted directly from this introduction of this role.

Parents of gifted children also benefitted from the provision of a gifted education specialist role. Parents have been able to contact a specialist within Catholic Education Tasmania for support, advice and assistance in communicating with their school about the needs of their gifted child. This has reflected well on CET and has enabled schools to improve their offerings for all students and hold on to enrolments that may potentially have been lost due to the frustrations of parents who perceived the needs of their gifted children as going unmet.

The CET gifted education policy was released in January 2013 to all school leadership staff in the state.

It is recognised that the goals set out this policy will be achieved incrementally. This is particularly true as there has not been a gifted education policy in Catholic schools in Tasmania prior to January 2013 and the majority of schools do not currently offer programs that specifically cater for gifted children.

The first step in bringing about change is for staff to gain a shared understanding of what giftedness is and what educational provisions can be put in place to cater for gifted students. A shared understanding is being enabled by wide-reaching and ongoing professional development for staff throughout the state.

Ideally, this will be followed up by in-school support enabling schools to implement rigorous programs that support gifted education and to reflect on the success of these programs with the aim of continual improvement. As the awareness of giftedness and proper identification of gifted children increases, the need for in-school support will also increase and will be essential if developing programs are to become successful.

A snapshot of offerings in other states.

In Tasmania, high ability students are amongst some of the most disadvantaged in Australia.

They grow up in an environment with

- The highest teen pregnancy rates in Australia
 - The highest youth unemployment in Australia
 - Very few community resources specifically catering to the needs of high ability students
 - Low performing academic results limit the ability of gifted students to study in an culture of high challenge and academic achievement
 - Schools Systems that have no embedded provisions for high ability students in place
- this is in comparison to other states which offer selective schools, opportunity classes, select entry accelerated learning classes and extension and enrichment programs that are a matter of course. In addition, teachers in other states operate in a competitive environment where rich curriculum programs are developed and differentiated to meet the needs of all learners.
- In Victoria, for example, there are
- 36 SEAL (Select Entry Accelerated Learning) schools which offer students the opportunity to complete years 7 – 10 in 3 years instead of 4. 13 of these schools are located in rural areas.
 - 3 Secondary specialist schools including with links to higher education opportunities. These include VCA Secondary School, John Monash Science School and Maribyrnong College Sports Academy.
 - 4 Select Entry schools catering to years 9-12.

There are also a wide range of other provisions in place including numerous community organisations, competitions, primary school and high school gifted programs and specialised groups catering for sub groups of gifted students such as those who are gifted with a learning disability.

A 2012 survey of our own Catholic schools in Tasmania revealed that many well established ways of catering for gifted students in schools are unknown or under-utilised. These results show that there is a great opportunity for growth.

A challenge for our schools.

International test results in Australia show little or no growth in our high ability students.

- What are we doing to challenge these students?
- Are our teachers pro-actively differentiating in order to meet the needs of top-end learners?

Statistically the top 10% of students in any given domain can be considered gifted.

- How does your school pro-actively seek to identify these students, knowing that many gifted students are under achievers, behaviour problems and flying under the radar?

Current academic results in schools indicate a typical bell curve or one that sits a little to the left, indicating below average results from many students.

How can you move results from the 'bell curve' to the 'mountain' (a bell curve bump sitting more to the right) if you don't have high expectations for all students?

How can you create a culture of high academic achievement in your schools?

Catholic Education in Tasmania has the opportunity to learn from well established provisions in other states and put in place both system wide and school specific programs that can challenge and inspire gifted students.

One thing is for certain, if we want to improve our results, we need to change the way we are currently doing things. It is no good trying to keep pushing results up from the bottom end. Instead, we need to set our standards high and aim for excellence in order to serve the needs of not only our brightest and most able students, but all of the students we teach.