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Stretching the gifted

Gifted children are missing out on appropriate education and harsh truths have been confirmed, writes Emily Parkinson.



"If your kids are bright they won't do well in Australian classrooms," says renowned educational researcher Professor John Hattie. **Chris Dixon**

by Emily Parkinson

NAPLAN's 2015 report card delivered some harsh truths about the state-of-learning in Australian classrooms.

For renowned educational researcher Professor John Hattie of the University of Melbourne's Educational Research Institute, they reinforced a blunt warning he has been sounding for years.

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"If your kids are bright," he warns. "They won't do well in Australian classrooms."

He's talking about the top 40 per cent of students, he says, but the problem is worse still if your child is one of the 10 per cent or so of Australian students regarded as gifted.

His harsh verdict is based on how Aussie kids stack up against the brightest kids in high-performing education systems like China, Finland and Japan.

Underachievement in gifted students is a national problem, he says, with the proportion of Australian students achieving at the highest level in maths and science in annual decline since 2000, currently sitting at about 15 per cent compared to 40 per cent for those high-achieving nations.

Stretching our brightest kids to achieve their potential became the basis for a Victorian parliamentary inquiry into gifted and talented education in June 2012.

It found that between 10 and 50 per cent of all gifted school students fail to perform at levels at which they are capable, often leading on to behavioral issues and mental health problems. A significant number, somewhere between 10 and 40 per cent, drop out before completing Year 12, the inquiry found.

"It's clear we're not supporting our students to achieve their potential," says Dr Pete Goss, education program director at the Grattan Institute. "Very appropriately, teachers and schools want to ensure that low-achieving students get strong support but high-achieving students also deserve to be maximising their learning while they're in school, and the national and international evidence suggests that we're not stretching them."

TOP STUDENTS NOT BEING EXTENDED

He says this is especially true for mathematics. Nearly 40 per cent of students in high-achieving education systems are in the top two PISA bands versus only 15 per cent of Australian students.

"Are we stretching our top kids? The answer is almost certainly 'no,'" says Dr Goss.

The inquiry found efforts to educate gifted children are being held back by the fact there is no national or state-based framework for gifted education.

Of the varied learning programs that do exist, many are ad hoc, vary from school-to-school and are focused mainly on the secondary years.

In addition, a "paucity of program evaluations" made it difficult to assess their worth, the inquiry revealed. "Even flagship gifted provision such as Selective Entry Schools

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have not been evaluated," the Committee report said.

Because there is no central database of schools offering gifted programs families often struggle to identify where to go for additional learning support.

"The education system, for the most part, is really letting those gifted children down," says Penny Willoughby, an educational consultant specialising in gifted education and former vice president of the Victorian Association for Gifted and Talented Children.

She believes the problems of gifted education are compounded at the level of the classroom, where teachers often lack the training to recognise giftedness or teach inappropriately to their needs.

"There's a lot of misconceptions about clever children and how they learn and a lot of assumption that because they're quick at picking things up they'll just learn it and they're fine anyway."

Gifted learners, according to expert Dr John Munro, associate professor of exceptional learning and gifted education at Melbourne University's Graduate School of Education, learn in a way that is qualitatively different to even high achieving students. If a kid is gifted they are more able to get to the main ideas of a topic, more able to organise their ideas into networks, more able to pull in more ideas than their peers, he says. They respond to teaching methods that emphasise open-ended problem-solving and self-paced learning, and they work at a faster pace, preferring depth of content and minimal repetition.

Up to 10 per cent of the student population may be gifted under the most commonly accepted Gagné definition of the term, which emphasises natural ability, or potential, in one or more areas, as distinct from "talent", or realised potential.

But misunderstanding about what it is to be "gifted" is commonplace, and sometimes these students needs are missed altogether because teachers don't know what they're looking for, says Ms Willoughby, who performs assessments on gifted children in consultation with specialist psychologists.

She says some teachers make the mistake of looking for genius qualities, or those only found in the top 0.01 per cent of kids, when in fact many gifted kids are hiding in plain sight, and won't even be among the high-achievers in the class, for a variety of reasons.

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