

## Gifted Education in Australia: How Windows to the Future Have Been Opened

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Aronld Toynbee said *'The Creator has withheld from men the shark's teeth, the bird's wing, the elephant's trunk and the hound's racing feet. The creative power planted in a minority of mankind has to do duty for all the marvellous physical assets that are built into every specimen of men's non human fellow creatures. If society fails to make the most of this one human asset, or perversely sets out to stifle it, then Man is throwing away his birthright of being the Lord of Creation and is condemning himself to be, instead, the least effective species on the face of this plant!'*

Creativity has been planted in each human being and, as with any other gift or talent, the degree of power differs from person to person as does the person's use of it.

Edward de Bono has stated that *'Without creativity one creeps along far behind experience, with creativity one pushes ahead of it'*.

Barry Stevens has stated that *'Creativity is not what is done but how one does it'*.

Woodrow Wilson has stated

*'Originality is simply a fresh pair of eyes'*.

Mark Twain has stated that *'Creativity is a combination of the flexibility, originality, and sensitivity to ideas which enables the learner to break away from usual sequences of thought into different and productive sequences, the result of which gives satisfaction to himself and possibly others'*.

In essence, creative power is the power of life which holds promise and opportunity. Its life force turns a black and white world into a colourful one.

Robert J. Sternberg has said that Creativity does not stem from a single skill, trait or ability. In order to understand and to assess Creativity, it is not sufficient to look merely at cognitive variables, but rather we must look at the variables in conjunction with the environment. He has said that Creativity is the product of six separate resources:

- intellectual processes
- knowledge
- intellectual style
- personality
- motivation

- environment

Sally Todd maintains that Creativity is not a spectator sport. It is often defined in relationship to:

- fluency
- flexibility
- originality
- elaboration

She states that "*Creativity is the juggling of new possibilities that may or may not be in harmony with old paradigms. It takes courage to be a risk taker and to experiment with the possibility of a foreign or new paradigm*"

Too often, all our societies have not valued creative power. We appreciate the Creativity displayed by our outstanding artists and musicians but what about Creativity in forms less visually displayed?

Australia fits alongside other societies in its lack of awareness of the power of Creativity.

It is a massive continent and the size of the country can result in the inhabitant feeling diminished and ineffective and certainly this has been reinforced by government's adage 'the tall poppy syndrome': no one should be allowed to forge ahead of the majority; everyone should wait sport where talent is fostered and the king or queen of the

track/field /surf/pitch has been lauded. There has been an immense imbalance between this one realm in which the individual is allowed to excel and every other academic and social area. John Hattie (Professor of Education at the Universities of Western Australia and North Carolina) maintains that '*during the past fifteen years of research, Australia has remained, in general, in the romantic stage of Creativity of leaving the child alone to begin the development of Creative thinking, while the system waited until the child was sufficiently unique to be identified by some barrage of testing*'.

John Hattie believes there are two main reasons for there being virtually no research on Creativity:

- there have been few advances since the 1970s in the measurement of Creativity
- the conceptual boundaries of the notion of creativity became locked in an unresolved dispute.

He believes terminology is the key. Eddie Braggett (Professor of Education at Charles Sturt University, Wagga) was commissioned by the Select Senate Committee to publish his findings on provisions, debates and policies in each of Australia's States and Territories. He

concluded that a *'scrutiny of some of the documents indicates they are not true policy statements at all; they are philosophical statements which do not explore policy ramifications and refrain from committing resources'*. Certainly, the response to research into and the encouragement of Creativity has been minimal. However, in all States and Territories there has been a growing awareness of Gifted Education and a consequent development of policies and programmes. Many Schools, Universities and Associations have initiated and developed many exciting Programmes.

The approaches in each State and Territory have been varied. Basically each policy has aimed to identify and acknowledge gifted children, to design programmes to develop their potential and to support teachers through setting in place strategies and professional development pages. Most States or Territories have a full time officer with responsibility for gifted education who works with representatives from Schools and Tertiary Institutions, Parent bodies and Teachers' Unions in order to initiate and develop policies.

The degree of support and follow up does vary.

e.g. New South Wales has:

- 23 selective high Schools
  - many specialist high schools
  - providing enriched environment 80+specialist (opportunity classes) classes catering for the special needs of upper primary intellectually gifted children
  - many independent schools with special programmes for primary and secondary gifted children
  - a Talent Development Project
  - Centres of Excellence
  - mentor programmes
  - enrichment programmes and residential courses
  - improved curricula
  - early entry
  - accelerated progression
  - distinction courses in universities which allow movement toward accreditation at tertiary level
  - increased provision of courses, conferences and seminars for Teacher Education.
- e.g. Western Australia provides:
- a school enrichment for Junior primary classes
  - withdrawal programmes
  - special programmes for Senior primary groups (Primary Extension and Challenge Centres provide part-time extension programmes for

academically talented pupils during their last three years in Primary School. Each Centre offers a wide range of courses most of which are half day in length and run for 6-12 weeks).

- special classes for most able pupils in selected secondary schools
- special placement programmes in Art and Crafts, Dance Theatre, Arts, Foreign Languages, Choral and Instrumental Music.

e.g. The Northern Territory has:

- revised its policy on gifted education and implemented inservice courses which have resulted in forty schools currently developing school policies and programmes;
- funded particular schools to aid them implement programmes;
- established seven enrichment centres in Secondary Schools;
- appointed two Senior Education officers to implement an Aboriginal and Islander Tertiary Aspirations Programme;
- put in places:
  - early intervention
  - full-time classes
  - visiting teachers
  - vacations schools

- advanced units in Secondary schools.

Organizations and Associations have also done valuable work over the years e.g. The Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented; the CHIP Foundation (Children of High Intellectual Potential); Associations in each State and Territory.

Specific Programmes existing in many of New South Wales' independent Schools are designed to fit each School's culture, background and individuals. All incorporate elements of acceleration, enrichment, grouping and mentoring.

Most of these Schools now have Critical Thinking Skills, Creative Problem Solving and Philosophy as part of their Programmes.

Philosophy for children has been particularly advocated by Laurence Splitter from Melbourne. The basis of the programme is the Principle of Respect for children which reflects a reciprocity of mutuality that each person has ideas that are valuable and worth listening to. A new Australian Journal 'Critical and Creative Thinking' has emerged.

Within the Associations for independent Junior Schools (Heads of Independent

Co-educational Schools and Junior School Heads Association of Australia) annual residential courses are organised to give immense scope for the participating Schools' gifted children.

The advantages of bringing together a group of talented children from different schools and backgrounds are enormous:

- being away from family and friends encourages independence
- sharing a room and meeting new people in activities leads to friendships
- delving into subjects from 9.00 a.m. until 5.00 p.m. deepens the children's knowledge
- venturing into different options opens up new interests
- having constant access to interesting, interested adults is a joy to these children who have been isolated in their own school environment
- being introduced to a wide range of option, diversifies the children's interests.

The timetable involves six elements.

- 'Thought for the day'
- Core Subjects each morning (Art, Drama, English, Mathematics, Music, Science)

- Options each afternoon which encompass a wide range of activities
- Evening activities (ongoing games and competitions; bush dance; entertainment by the children; speciality nights)
- Outside games and activities organised for breaks.
- Presentations from each group on the final morning.

The end of the week always finds a band of exhausted but happy children and a team of equally exhausted but ecstatic teachers!

Many Schools involve their gifted pupils in State and National Competitions.

Tournaments of Minds is a major, creative, problem solving activity instigated in Victoria, which now operates on a regional basis throughout Australia. The competition encourages the development of individual creative skills. Everyone has some creative potential, but may not see it in themselves. Participation in Tournament of Minds provides an avenue to show potential in each student; this in turn build self confidence and encourage student-initiated inquiry. The necessity for working in a group and within

pre-defined limitations provides a challenge. Obstacles must be faced and overcome during the six-week preparation time and this experience stimulates personal and educational growth. Judges drawn from the educational and business communities make up panels to evaluate the team solutions. Students have ten minutes in which to present their problem solution before the judging panel and an audience made up of parents, friends and other participants. Watching other presentations reinforces the idea that most problems do not necessarily have only one solution but rather a range of appropriate and creative solutions which can be presented in a variety of ways.

Future Problem Solving is an experience in critical, creative and futuristic thinking which goes beyond the memorization of facts and ideas. It challenges children to use their imaginations and to apply information and advanced thinking strategies to significant world issues. Three Practice Problems are the heart of the yearly programme. Under the guidance of coaches, groups of students work through the problem solving process for each Practice Problem in turn, send their completed work, written up in a 12

page booklet, to evaluators by designated dates and then wait patiently (and sometimes not so patiently) for the return of their work. Upon receipt of their assessed booklets, teams learn of their strengths and weaknesses, hopefully using this feedback to good effect in the write-up of their next booklet.

There are specific courses organised by schools and universities to stimulate gifted children to think relatively e.g. Finders University in South Australia has its 'Palace of Wisdom' course; the University of New South Wales offers a 'Scientia Challenge'.

University courses now have as part of the Master of Bachelor of Education degrees, courses in Critical Thinking and training in Creativity is heavily weighted.

Some unique programmes which focussed on the development of Creativity have included:

The AAEGT's initiation of National

- Research Awards
- Special projects Awards
- Poetry competitions
- Youth Forums
- National Workshop.

The Youth Forums, attached to Stated Seminars or National Conferences, bring together gifted teenagers from a variety of schools, giving them the opportunity

*to spend time to think about themselves and the future. In Melbourne 1992 through Caroline Armstrong, the group believed that 'teachers will play a very important part in any such programme and the group, considered it very important that there is communication between teachers and the gifted students'. In the final session an across the board desire was revealed that all teachers 'should receive, in their training, information about the needs of the gifted student and ideas on how to help us. To be given extra work is not enough, we need to be extended laterally as well as vertically and so while acceleration works well for some students, and in some subjects, there are certainly other ways in which to make classes challenging. We want more discussions about the topics we are studying and believe that students at a high academic level should be given freedom during class time to follow through on aspects of their work which are of particular interest to them. Investigation of concepts are more relevant to the gifted student than the regurgitation of facts. The key to success is the use of unusual methods such as those which have been discussed at the conference over recent days. None of us*

*should be afraid to try new ideas, instead let us experiment and while the classroom may at times seem out of control, this is not always a bad thing, or necessarily so'.*

A most vital, unique, creative initiative was the AAEGT's National Workshop during which participants wrote a practical book for teachers. Everyone indicated prior to registration their area of interest. Thirteen areas surfaced so these became the thirteen chapters of the book. Everyone had to research and find sources to bring with them. Once into groups, everyone fired each other so that ideas were flying around, the degree of creativity was maximum and within two days, the chapters were completed. Once typed, we proofread and then left the transcripts to be edited. The book was published. It gave teachers something practical from which to work and all the participants the most wonderful, challenging, sharing creative experience.

Australian researchers Biggs and Collis (1992) developed a SOLO model to encapsulated the depth of processing. It can be used as a foundation of critical and creative thinking programmes. Structure of Learning Objectives proposes a

structure of learning outcomes that can provide clear bases for the technology of teaching and testing within learning theory. It can guide lesson plans, model Law Students learn, model Law Effective teachers, teach and can be used with any form of test item. There are four stages in the SOLO Taxonomy:

- Unistructural:-

One aspect of a task is picked up serially and there is no relationship of facts or ideas.

- Multistructural:-

Two or more aspects of a task are picked up serially, but are not interrelated.

- Relational:-

Several aspects are integrated into a coherent whole.

- Extended abstract:-

That coherent whole is generalized to a higher level of abstraction.

Developing work with gifted Aboriginal students, Alan Day in the Northern Territory reports that *'Despite the low participation and success roles of Aboriginal students (in programmes for the Gifted), there is an increasing number of Aboriginal students who are succeeding at School'*. In order for them to achieve successfully, he concludes

in his research that the following factors seem to be important in the students' success at school:

1. Strong personal and Aboriginal identity, for example, all students and their parents are very proud of their Aboriginal culture and heritage

2. Display of academically purposeful learning behaviour, for example, most of the students have clear, long term career goals.

3. Positive relationship and support within the family, for example, all students have strong support from their family to do well at school.

4. Parents and students possess some school and Western cultural knowledge and attitudes which are important for success at school, for example, the importance of homework was recognised by all students and parents.

Many people working with Aboriginal students are realizing the uniqueness of their culture and the need to recognize the values inherent within.

The adaptation of Edward de Bono's lateral thinking concepts with prisoners. In a memorable closing address at the AAEGT's Fourth National Conference (1992), Karen Linstrom, Chief Prison Officer, HM Prisons, Victoria, asserted



that the Victorian Office of Corrections had adopted a creative approach to prisoner management (Unit Management) which is beginning to show measurable results in the community. She recounted anecdotes relating to particular prisoners with the gift of creativity.

e.g. *'One prisoner took "lateral thinking" a bit too literally when he combined work, relaxation and mechanical engineering. He had a long history of violent behaviour, but had moderated his behaviour greatly through anger management programmes. Trouble was, his favourite art work expression was in the form of tattoos, which, when done in custody, constitutes a deliberate change of one's appearance and is therefore an offence. The prisoner had all the usual paraphernalia confiscated, but had booked out a Walkman for relaxation tapes. The next day a number of events occurred:*

(1) The walkman was malfunctioning when returned, and on investigation it was discovered that the motor and drive wheel had been adroitly removed.

(2) Upon searching the prisoner's cell, a 'novel' tattoo gun was discovered, comprising the motor from the recorder, a hollow leatherwork awl, a self-feeding ink supply made from a ball point refill

and a number of paper tattoo stencils.

(3) Upon close inspection of the prisoner's persona, two new tattoos were noted in rather remarkable areas of his anatomy.'

The paper clearly illustrated that prisons are often a forgotten source of creativity. Because of the non-conforming behaviour attached to various expressions of creative thinking, the individuals end up behind bars.

In Victoria, the Prison service is striving to make most creative time of an offender's captivity.

An Australian futurist, Peter Ellyard, has stated that *'Those not living in the future today, will be living in the past tomorrow'*.

He says that *'the future is not the place we are going, it is the place we are creating'*.

In order for us all to ensure that we are opening windows to the future for our creatively gifted children, we must be flexible and respectful toward the ideas of the creative.

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