



SOUTH AUSTRALIAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PARENTS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

NORWOOD TOWN HALL

ADELAIDE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

TUESDAY, 18 JUNE, 1985

BRIGHT CHILDREN HAVE RIGHTS

The Hon. Justice M.D. Kirby, CMG

June, 1985

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BRIGHT CHILDREN ARE NEGLECTED

I am glad of the opportunity of addressing this meeting on Special Education. I had a great deal of education myself and much of it was special. Those who took advantage of fine teachers, particularly in the public schools, owe a duty to speak up in favour of the needs of education in modern Australia.

I wish to put forward the somewhat unfashionable thesis that it is essential to provide educational opportunities tailored to the needs of individual students. The needs of the intellectually and physically handicapped students are obvious and well documented.¹ Much harder to sell to the Australian community are the special needs of the intellectually gifted. These needs all too often tend to be squandered in Australia, except where the parents are rich enough or make special sacrifices to send their children to special private schools.

The other points I want to make are these:

- * Many parents of talented children themselves need help in coping with their children.
- * Many parents, especially nowadays, feel

inadequate in discussions about computer software and advanced mathematics.

- * Teachers often dampen the abilities of gifted pupils because they prefer class progress to proceed at a steady and uniform pace.
- * Some State Education Departments may actually be reducing services to gifted pupils.
- * Australia's economic performance needs to be lifted; but this will depend largely upon the next generation of gifted, talented citizens.

THE EGALITARIAN BUGBEAR

To get real progress in the educational treatment of gifted children it is necessary to challenge one of the fundamentals of Australian society, its egalitarianism.

The Australian infatuation with egalitarianism survives from the earliest colonial days. Perhaps it is a remnant of convict resentment of which only South Australia was spared. It has benign and even desirable features for our national psyche. The absence of rigid class barriers is a beneficial offshoot. But it has some undesirable consequences too. One is the "tall poppy syndrome". You know what I mean. It is the passionate desire of Australians to pull down anyone who emerges from the ruck. I use that analogy to the ruck deliberately. The obsession with sport, the contempt for intellectuals, egg-heads and academics, the indifference to opera and culture in many quarters are not simply a stereotype. They represent the standards for many of our fellow citizens. In the field of education these features discourage gifted children. They even discourage their parents. Somehow, standing out with pride for talent seems an un-

Australian Activity. Speaking for talented children is condemned as elitist. What we need is a Madison Avenue attack on this problem; so that the imperative need of our country to harvest all of its students is accepted. All of them are precious individuals. But investment in the talented benefits the whole community in the long run.

The provision of special education facilities for talented children is not elitist or undemocratic. Democracy in education means individual rights: escaping the dull hand of uniformity, imposed on all students and replacing it with a system which encouraged all to reach their full potential.

Far from being elitist and undemocratic, attention to the rights of the talented and gifted student is an essential need of a democratic education system. Above the Old Bailey in London is the Biblical injunction: "Defend the Widows and the Children of the Poor". Unless the community, especially through public education, pays attention to "the children of the poor", their democratic rights in education would be lost. Clearly it was a mistake of the past to harness all secondary educational systems to the needs of matriculation and university entrance. But, in correcting this error, it is equally erroneous to ignore the rights and needs of talented "children of the poor". If they are ignored, this will be a lost generation of talented young people. But it will not only be the loss of bright individuals, condemned to a life where they are not fulfilled. It will also be a loss to the community of the contributions which such people, properly mobilised, might have made to cultural and economic well-being. Equally important, such a loss will, for default, turn over the future leadership and government of our country to

people who by chance or through the wealth or efforts of their parents have been given the chance to flourish. The system of education should do better than this. By streaming, and by flexibility to adapt to the needs of bright students, it should ensure that they are tapped and diverted to a suitable education at the earliest age.

DIFFICULTIES OF PARENTS

A recent university study of the problems of parents bringing up gifted children in Australia has become available.² An intensive investigation at the University of Newcastle, NSW, has studied the special difficulties of parents of gifted children over a four week period. The results of the study had shown some surprising findings:

- * Frequently parents are hesitant and apologised for believing that their children were gifted. They are "embarrassed" or "felt guilty" for having to admit the fact.
- * Some parents find difficulty in the fact that their gifted children might not wish to participate in joint efforts but prefer independent or autonomous activities.
- * Such children sometimes have difficulties with less talented siblings and needed specially supportive home environments in which "some disorder is tolerated in the name of creativity".
- * Parental relationships with teachers are often difficult because of the preference of some teachers that "all children proceed at a

determined rate".

- * Parental criticisms of schools indifferent to their children's needs should not be assumed to be "unfounded". Although in some cases there is over-concern by parents of alleged neglect by teachers, sometimes this over-concern is "perfectly justified".
- * As a result of inattention to their talents, gifted children, frequently lose their incentive and sometimes adopt attitudes to school which are "less than positive".
- * Especially within the public school sector, the opportunities for changing schools and seeking a more creative and sympathetic school environment is limited by the educational bureaucracy and often by the principle of district schools.
- * Home development depends in part upon parental interest, sensitivity and means. A parent who can provide a micro computer, a set of encyclopaedias and plenty of books to read was helping the bright child to flourish. But this help might "come to a full stop" in the class room because of a lack of resources, time or interest on the part of the teachers who are concerned with the rights and needs of the vast majority of children in their care and cannot spare the attention needed to the very bright, exceptional child.

SPECIAL NEEDS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

Far from improving the position of public education, in some parts of Australia things are actually getting worse.

When I was in education, thirty years ago, the public school system was unashamedly directed to advance the rights of the gifted child. Perhaps it was obsessively and exclusively so. Certainly, the system had faults. It failed to allow lateral entry. It separated families. But it did provide streaming. Now, under the influence of egalitarian theories and some teacher union pressure, and under successive governments, the system has been deliberately dismantled. The special primary schools and the selective high schools (which trained the past leaders of our country in politics, law, medicine and business) have given way to district schools. I would mount the ramparts for the rights of average students to have an education suitable to equip them for life. Likewise, I would be first to advocate the special needs of the intellectually and physically disabled. But who, in our egalitarian country, will mount the battlements for the gifted children of the poor? What we need is a national program to persuade governments, teacher unions and the whole community that it is our national duty, and is compatible with our democratic ideals, to identify and nurture our bright children. Our national economic revival and Australia's place in the world requires nothing less. Equally, we must get rid of the notion that this is elitist talk. It is nothing of the kind. It is not elitist to assure the clever children of the poor an opportunity to utilise their gifts for themselves and for the whole of our future community.

NEED FOR NATIONAL INQUIRY

There is, in my view, a need for a national inquiry into the special education needs of talented children. Such an inquiry was conducted in the United States by Commissioner Marland of the United States Commission for Education in 1971.³ Numerous reforms had come out of the U.S. inquiry, including additional funding for science education for girls at school. In Australia, role stereotyping and a fear of being different tends to reduce the opportunities for gifted students to reach their full potential.

We cannot afford this squandering of our scarce genetic resources. Our declining economy and our loss of relativity in standard of living must be arrested. But the long term solution requires for Australia to nurture and encourage its talented school children from earliest days. The children of the rich will be looked after by their parents and by the system. It is the clever children of the poor who need special facilities and encouragement. They are specially deprived - a wasted human resource of precious potential. Somehow we must get over the message that this is not educational elitism but educational equal opportunity.

- * Chancellor of Macquarie University, Sydney. Former Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission. President of the Court of Appeal, Supreme Court, Sydney. Views expressed are personal views only.
1. S. Hayes & R. Hayes, Mental Retardation, Law Policy and Administration. 1982, Law Book Co. 90ff.
 2. E. J. Braggett, Meeting the Needs of Parents of Gifted and Talented Children, unpublished mimeo, see also E.J. Braggett, Curriculum for gifted and talented children: a summation, 1983, in press (Commonwealth Schools Commission).
 3. S.P. Marland, Education of the Gifted and Talented Vol 1, Washington DC, U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1972.