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Preface

As its title suggests, this short book is an introduction to some of the issues and ideas currently being explored by Australian educators as they attempt to nurture individual differences and encourage a range of talents. It is by no means sufficient in itself, as readers will quickly realise, but it is hoped that it will help to raise awareness about some of the possibilities while also highlighting more detailed sources of specialist information for those wishing to pursue these further.

Because Armidale is a rural diocese we are particularly aware of the disadvantages associated with rural isolation and these are a major focus of the National Equity Program for Schools project which led to the production of this book, as part of the project's teacher-in-service component. Other forms of disadvantage may be addressed in less explicit detail here but we hope that educators across the nation will share and act upon our belief that social justice demands that potential talents be diagnosed and developed in all schools and within all social and cultural groups.

Stan Bailey, Bruce Knight & Dan Riley



SECTION 1—POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Chapter 1: What is Talent?

As is probably true of any aspect of education, the “commonsense knowledge” about gifted and talented children contains many partial truths and myths. Though it provides little reassurance, it needs to be said at the outset that there is no universally agreed upon definition of what is meant by the terms “gifted” and “talented”.

In NSW the following definition has been adopted as part of the government's policy.

Gifted students are those with the potential to exhibit superior performance across a range of areas of endeavour.


Talented students are those with the potential to exhibit superior performance in one area of endeavour.

The Department of School Education's policy statement goes on to state that:

It is critical for gifted and talented students to be given appropriate opportunity, stimulation and the experiences to develop their potential and satisfy their learning needs. Special emphasis will also be given to identifying those students whose gifts and talents may have been previously overlooked.

Gifted and talented students are to be found in all communities regardless of their sociocultural or socioeconomic backgrounds (NSW Department of School Education, 1991, p.3).

This distinction between gifted and talented is not universally accepted, however. Some people use “talented” to mean of high ability and “gifted” to mean of very high ability, while others use the terms interchangeably. Gagné makes a distinction between giftedness as potential and talent as performance, or realisation of that potential. It is certainly important for teachers to remind themselves regularly that potential is not always realised and that this may be more likely when a child is disadvantaged in some way. Gagné's definition is a developmental one that recognises



the importance *over time* of environmental factors and their influence on motivation and personality. It is gaining acceptance both within Australia and internationally.

Renzulli has complicated the issue by arguing that we should not be focussing upon gifted children, which implies “you either have it or you don’t”, but on what constitutes gifted behaviour. He contends that potentially gifted children will only engage in actual gifted behaviour occasionally, rather than all the time. A consequence of Renzulli’s view is that those with the potential for gifted behaviour may constitute about 15-20% of the school population, not the 2-5% commonly stated in the past.

On the other hand, the top 1-2% in any domain may well have special needs that warrant them being identified as a separate group, though not at the expense of the moderately talented. In fact, it needs to be recognised that within the gifted or talented population, however defined, there are different levels of potential (and performance) and consequently there are differences in the specific needs of such children. For example, the highly or “profoundly” gifted are more likely to encounter social difficulties because they are much further removed in abilities and interests from their age peers than those students who are “moderately” gifted.

Howard Gardner’s “multiple intelligences” concept seems to have appeal to many practitioners. He has identified seven intelligences and claims that each individual will have a particular profile of relative highs and lows across the seven:

1. Logical-mathematical
2. Linguistic
3. Bodily-kinaesthetic
4. Visual-spatial
5. Musical
6. Interpersonal
7. Intrapersonal

Gardner comments as follows on his position:

I define giftedness as a property of individuals who are “at promise” in an intellectual domain. I use the term “intellectual” more broadly than others. Music is an intellectual domain just as understanding other people is an intellectual domain. A person is more gifted than other people in a specific domain if he can advance more quickly in competence given the same amount of exposure to that domain. Giftedness is therefore a function of rapidity of development.