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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The authors of this book have accepted the challenge of analysing the type of provision required for outstanding talent.

This book has been specifically written for Australian secondary school teachers, administrators, consultants, advisors and other professionals who wish to provide for

- highly able students
- students with specialised abilities
- gifted students
- students with outstanding talents, and/or
- academically advanced learners.

These terms overlap, of course, but they all refer to adolescent students who have high to outstanding abilities which show up, or could be developed, in some aspect of their school education.

It is difficult to obtain Australian publications that are devoted to a study of giftedness at the secondary school level. Most books have a primary school orientation in which examples of effective programs are drawn from primary classrooms.

The authors of this book have accepted the challenge of analysing the type of provision required for outstanding talent within a secondary school context and of providing an up-to-date, scholarly overview in user-friendly language.

The secondary school is a unique institution: it has its own characteristics which are quite different from other educational institutions and certainly distinct from those of the primary school. Moreover, anyone who writes for the secondary school market must be aware of the needs of a wide range of schools in city and country locations and across the spectrum of State, Catholic and other Independent Schools throughout Australia.

Characteristics of the Secondary School

Culture

Secondary schools have developed their own particular culture and most are large, complex institutions. While some schools in rural areas have fewer than 200 students, the majority of secondary schools in large towns, cities and metropolitan areas enrol from 600 to 1,200 students and, in some instances, well in excess of this figure. This wide range of enrolments is similar across State and Independent Schools in all Australian states.

Size

It is not only in relation to size that the secondary school differs from its primary counterpart. The secondary school, whose organisation differs by state or system, may cater for Years 7 to 12, Years 8 to 12, Years 7 to 10 or Years 8 to 10. In special situations, it may be incorporated within a school providing for all ages from 5 to 18 years, or be confined to the senior years as a separate college. Within this wide diversity, however, secondary education has its own qualities and attributes which help to determine its outlook and the way it approaches educational issues. Some of these characteristics are outlined in Figure 1.1

Characteristics of the Secondary School

- The secondary school is subject or discipline oriented and teachers are usually specialists in one area or two-related areas.
- Secondary teachers work within departments or faculties with well developed approaches that are adapted to the subjects they teach. While teachers may be interested in general school matters, they are often more directly concerned with their own departmental needs.
- Each secondary school teacher is responsible for a number of classes and may teach from 100 to 130 different students each week.
- The traditional method of timetable organisation is quite restrictive when changes are required but it is seen by many to be the most cost-efficient method of organising teaching at a time when resources are scarce.
- The junior secondary school curriculum has more flexibility than the senior secondary school but both are constrained by the requirements and the curricula determined by the Board of Studies in each Australian state and territory.
- The pressure of external examinations restricts the amount of time available for alternative teaching methods and inhibits the degree of experimentation that may occur in the secondary school (especially the senior secondary school).
- Students and their parents often have a clear perception of the relatively conventional education that they seek in order to meet tertiary entrance requirements and the demands of future employers. Many are wary of change.

The diversity of secondary schools not only spreads across state boundaries but is also obvious within states and localities.

Figure 1.1

Anyone who wishes to modify the school organisation, the curriculum, or the teaching strategies of the secondary school must be aware of the culture that already exists and the constraints on what can be done or what can be afforded. The organisers of this project have kept these constraints in mind as they have collated the following chapters and devised units of work to exemplify their ideas.

CHAPTER 2

ESSENTIAL ISSUES

What are the essential issues about the education of gifted and talented students? Is there a best method of providing for outstanding students? Is giftedness or talent in *Literature Studies* different from giftedness in *Art, Languages (LOTE)* or *Technology and Design*? Is the giftedness that is identified early in the primary school the same as that which is exemplified in Year 9? Does giftedness or its expression change over time? These are fascinating questions which go to the heart of teaching students with outstanding abilities.

It is interesting to observe the reactions of different members of staff when the topic of gifted students is raised in the staffroom. The reactions range from agreement that much more should be done to assist gifted students to adamant opposition to special provision on the grounds that it is elitist and offends equity principles.

Fundamental Issues

If one explores a little more deeply, it is found that there is a lack of consensus among educators on a range of fundamental issues, including

- the meaning of the terms, *gifted and talented*,
- the percentage of secondary students who might be considered to be gifted,
- how best to identify gifted students,
- whether gifted students should actually *display* outstanding ability in their studies or whether *potential* (as indicated on some identifying test) should also be considered sufficient,
- whether selective or specialist secondary schools and special classes should be provided and, if so, whether on a full-time or part-time basis,
- the specificity of talent (eg. can it be limited to some aspect of a discipline such as *debating* or should it be evident *across a range of endeavours?*),
- the need for graded or mixed-ability classes in the secondary school,
- the extent to which acceleration (grade promotion) should be encouraged within each department and across the whole school,
- the modifications that should be made to the curriculum, and
- the type of teacher who is best suited to teach gifted students in the secondary and senior secondary schools.

While it is likely that debate will continue for years on many of these issues, it does not permit us to wait for a final resolution before we try to provide for the talent within our schools. Each faculty and all teachers need to determine an approach based on sound educational reasons.

Issues should be considered by each faculty before an approach to the education of gifted and talented students is determined.