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GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE A MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART ON TUESDAY 22 OCTOBER, 2024

INQUIRY INTO DISCRIMINATION AND BULLYING IN TASMANIAN SCHOOLS

The in camera hearing commenced at 1.30 p.m.

CHAIR - Welcome to today's hearing of the Government Administration Committee A's Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools. We thank you very much for your submission and for presenting to us today. Could you please state your name and the capacity in which you're appearing before the committee?

[REDACTED] - My name's [REDACTED] and I'm appearing as [REDACTED] for the Tasmanian Association for the Gifted.

CHAIR - Thank you. Can I confirm that you've received and read the guide that was sent to you by the committee secretary?

[REDACTED] - Yes, I have.

CHAIR - This hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, which allows individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place outside of Parliament. This protection is not accorded to statements that may be defamatory or are repeated or referred to outside the parliamentary proceedings. This hearing isn't public today. If we were to be in public session then we would ordinarily say to you that the media could be listening, but obviously if we move into a public session then it's important for you to know that. If you're making a confidential contribution, there will be the opportunity at the end to review the *Hansard* and to look at if there's an opportunity for things to be made available to the committee, whether that be that information is redacted or crossed out, all that type of thing.

You have before your statutory declaration. Would you mind making that, please?

[REDACTED], TASMANIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE GIFTED WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED

CHAIR - Thank you. If you wanted to give us your opening statement, that would be great.

[REDACTED] - Thank you for the opportunity to represent the Tasmanian Association for the Gifted, or TAG as we are often known, and our members, some of whom generously shared their experiences for our submission. These contributions are greatly appreciated because although 10 per cent of the population is considered gifted, gifted experiences are rarely discussed. Many gifted individuals do not realise they are gifted, and those who do, in most cases, choose to keep it hidden.

This reluctance to reveal is influenced by fear of tall poppy syndrome and pervasive misconceptions around what it means to be gifted. Gifted individuals should be proud to express all aspects of themselves, but generally they hesitate to disclose their giftedness, or that of their children. In Australia, to my knowledge, we have no public figure role models who

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have openly identified as being gifted. Being known as gifted can impact how people are perceived, shifting attention to a misunderstood label rather than a wonderful, multifaceted individual.

A few years ago, we at TAG hosted a kids' forum, and one thing this group of gifted kids all agreed upon was that they did not like the term 'gifted'. Yet for gifted students, the term is crucial. This is where parents ensure they will speak up for their children. They put their trust in schools, because being identified as gifted in an educational context is essential. Gifted students have learning needs that differ significantly from the majority. As we outlined in our submission, this is widely known, as are consequences when these needs go unmet.

Gifted students require interventions such as acceleration, enrichment and extension to reach their potential. They need to be challenged and they need to be allowed to express their true selves. Unfortunately, the reason that I'm here today is that what we're finding is that even when students are identified as gifted in Tasmanian schools, they're not receiving the interventions that they need, that they're known to need. These students are suffering due to misconceptions around giftedness that exist in Tasmanian schools, leading to both direct and indirect discrimination, experiences of bullying, and deeply detrimental impacts on gifted children and their families across Tasmania.

CHAIR - It's really important to state from the outset that it was great to have your submission to the work that our committee is doing. One of the things that has come through as part of this work that we're doing is that I was hearing from lots of different groups who provide advocacy across a whole range of areas, and that sometimes people don't even recognise that there are these strong advocacy groups. Thank you, it's really good.

You've spoken about the fact that gifted children across Tasmanian schools aren't getting the level of intervention that they require. One of the things that you highlighted in your submission, which I was interested in, was around early starter age for school, and some of the barriers that exist around that for gifted children. Could you expand on that for the committee please?

[REDACTED] - In our submission we mentioned some of the experiences parents of gifted children have had in trying to access early entry, and the benefits of having that choice on early entry being separate from schools and separate from principals who might not have the knowledge that is needed to make the decision that's right for the gifted child.

One thing that I probably will add to what we said in the submission is that the level of giftedness they look for in early entry is in the top 2 per cent. It's probably quite important to realise that for those gifted students, often early entry is not the end. When you have that level of giftedness, there will quite often be more acceleration needed, whether subject acceleration or another grade acceleration, or other types of acceleration that are needed. Sometimes there's the perception that they've had early entry, that's fine, that's it then. When you're talking about kids at that level, the top 2 per cent includes the top 0.2 per cent - there's a very large range of gifted needs in there. Someone at 2 per cent and someone at 0.2 per cent are going to have widely different needs.

Very frequently, those kids who enter kinder are the kids who are already reading and things like that. When they start early entry, it's a great start, but there's often a perception that in kinder it's not the start of the Australian curriculum. There's very much an attitude that this

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is about play and interactions, which is very important. For kids who are reading and are keen and eager to learn, they're starting school excited because they have a passion for learning, that's part of who they are. Sometimes when they are starting in kinder and being denied that extra learning, or even in a lot of cases not being allowed access to books at their level and things like that, that's not a good start for them in their schooling experience.

Obviously, as I have outlined, underachievement and disengagement is one of those really common things that you see happening. Early entry is wonderful and very good for a lot of kids, but it's definitely not the end.

CHAIR - Miriam, do you have anything that you wanted to ask?

Mrs BESWICK - I don't really have anything specific. I was excited to have this particular - this is like the experience of my family. My daughter, in Canberra had to get early entry, three days past the cut-off and they had to do a full IQ test. She is in the gifted category. It is frustrating as a parent. You get some really great teachers who push them along, and you get some teachers who just don't even notice. I don't even know where to start when it comes to questions. Thank you for coming.

[REDACTED] - I think you would very much understand that as a parent often you start out and you don't realise your child is gifted because that's all you've ever known. Then suddenly you're doing a lot of learning about what that means and realising that other people don't know what that means either. It's the start of a path of having to advocate for your children because there is a large lack of understanding there. Yes, you're welcome.

Ms JOHNSTON - I'm really keen to explore the concept of school refusal on the grounds of the gifted student, and to get some case examples of what that looks like, and if it is different between government sector schools and private sector schools from your experience?

[REDACTED] - I don't know when it was. It was within the past few years we did a submission for a Senate inquiry or something to school refusal as well. We had some contributions from members around that as well. School refusal can start very early. I think we give a few examples in here [our submission] of a child who's starting kindergarten and is able to read. There's that knowledge there that they do have extra needs, but not being able to access that. If you can imagine going to school, you've been excited about learning, you're expecting this place of learning and then you're not learning and you're having to sit through things that you already know. A lot of kids go in, they can read chapter books and then they're expected to spend their days sounding out letters. That, I think, can be quite a challenge when that's your everyday life. One of the quotes we had in here from one of the students who said:

I've probably learned about two or three things this year, I don't learn.

To sit in that environment, it's hard for these kids. When they have to go there every day and aren't getting what they need to thrive or meet their potential, it's hard. Parents, you know, their children have to go to school. They will quite often try very hard to advocate for their children. We have our monthly sessions and the 'advocating for your child' session is often one of our most popular ones. When you have a gifted child, that's something you learn is part of having a gifted child, unless you're lucky and you have someone who understands.

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One of the things Miriam mentioned was that you can have good teachers and bad teachers. They're not bad teachers, just not as informed teachers. The problem is that there's not a systematic way of addressing gifted education and those needs. For parents who are trying to advocate, it's the luck of having a great teacher or a great principal.

In Tasmania, we're the source for people who have gifted kids. They are recommended to come and talk to us. If they go to their GP, the GP says 'go and speak to TAG'. There are government websites, that say talk to TAG. We get everyone coming to us. When we hear things like 'my child got accelerated' or 'they did this', we're actually really surprised and happy because it's so rare.

School refusal is something that does happen quite a lot. In the other submission that I did, we also looked at how it's one of the causes of turning to homeschooling for some gifted kids who just can't keep going into that environment. One author of a paper referred to it as forcibly pushing these kids out of school. Their parents try lots of different things. Some people change schools. One of the students in here [our submission] came home and told her mum, 'That's it, I'm just not going back.'

At some point, their wellbeing is so important. You don't want to put them into distress.

Ms JOHNSTON - You talk a lot about how it's a bit of pot luck as to whether you get a teacher who understands the interventions that are required. Is that within a school setting, or are there indicators that people can look at in terms of school communities about what might be good interventions. As a parent with a child, what do you say to them in terms of how do you find a school that's going to suit your child or what should they be looking for?

[REDACTED] - Unfortunately, we don't have any schools that we can go, 'Hey, this is great'. We say to try to talk to other parents of gifted students for their experience of schools, but even within schools that there have been good experiences it will still be hit and miss. Unfortunately, it's difficult. One of the people in here [our submission] went to a private school that when they engaged with the school to try to decide on it, they sold themselves very well and said that they had great understanding of giftedness. When they got there, the reality was very different and, unfortunately, there was very little real understanding. I think the expectation of the school was perhaps the facilities that they had would be enough to peak interest but with the level of need of this child he suffered quite greatly with anxiety and it was quite a hard experience for them. They had gone through and done their homework and gone around to the schools and that was the school that said, 'Hey, we're doing a great job'.

Even when parents do try to get schools to do something, often the response from schools is, 'Hey, we are doing a good job' and the perception between what the schools think they're doing and the parents' perception is quite different. There was a study done that I mentioned in here [our submission] that said that the difference in perception between what students are experiencing and what the teachers think that they're giving to the student - that's a real problem, because the teachers think that they're doing what they need to do. And particularly if you don't listen to the students and what they're saying about what they need, that's an easy way of finding out am I doing the job.

Mr WILLIE - As a former teacher, do you think that there's enough support for school staff in professional learning and things like that? I can't ever remember being given a gifted

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professional learning opportunity myself when I was teaching, and you probably have to seek it out specifically.

[REDACTED] - This is the problem. When I was looking at discrimination and it says that discrimination exists even if the person doesn't realise that what they're doing is harmful. That's the thing: teachers often have their own beliefs or things like that and they don't think they're doing anything wrong, but they are, and that's that lack of education. The 2001 Senate inquiry recommended a minimum of a semester of teaching around gifted education as a bare minimum and that's not happening.

Mr WILLIE - There's not even just a module.

[REDACTED] - There's not. In a lot of universities it's covered under inclusive education. I just mentioned that the level of complexity and ensuring that gifted students are getting what they need is complex, and there needs to be more learning around that. In public schools, there's a one-day session that's offered when students are accepted into early entry. They offer a one-day course for the receiving teacher. That's at the discretion of the principal - whether or not they get sent to that, which can be troubling.

A lot of our members will make it known that their kids are gifted and teachers will say, 'Well, I'm not seeing it in a class. I can't give them extra hard work if they're not doing the minimum in my class'. There are so many reasons for that, that if you have that knowledge of gifted students, you'll realise that. I mean, one parent of a child in Kinder who was reading was told by the Kinder teacher he can't read. She came in and sat and watched. What he was doing was kind of copying the other kids and making their sounding out sounds because he thought that's what they were supposed to be doing. There's masking, and there is a quote in here [our submission] that the child was so bored that the teacher didn't know she was good at maths. She was making mistakes.

We had a session the other week about underachievement and we had an expert in, talking about that. She gave the example, which we do hear about, of someone in grade 7 who just would sit there and not interact at all because they've gone through their whole schooling not being able to learn. They just think of school as this horrible place. Even though teachers are being told they're gifted, and their parents are saying 'This is what they can do at home', they're not seeing it in the classroom. Unless you've got that understanding, you don't know what to do. Education for teachers is very important.

The other thing is that if you've got a student in your class who's working at three grades above, differentiating for them in that class is very hard. How is the teacher expected to do that with a whole class? Whereas, if that child was accelerated to an appropriate level, differentiating for them in that high grade is going to be a much easier task for that teacher. There is a lot of misunderstanding around acceleration by teachers and unfortunately it just doesn't happen, even though it's the one intervention that's supported by decades of research and long-term research. Kids have been followed for 20 years and yes, their well-being has been looked at and it's all good with it. There's no research that said that there's negative impacts from acceleration, but there's a very deep-seated misconception about it in schools.

Ms JOHNSTON - How are children currently accelerated in schools? You have spoken about the early entry process. What's the process for accelerating a student through grades once they're in school?

[REDACTED] - There are policies in some schools. If we look at state schools, department schools, there is an acceleration policy in place. Often, parents can often get quite excited about this and think, 'This is good, we're covered here'. The policy says acceleration, whether class or subject, which is often something that's needed, is available for those in the top 2 per cent of the class where quality differentiated teaching isn't meeting their needs - but it's at the discretion of the principal. We've had members who have said, 'My child is reading *Harry Potter*. She's in prep. She's obviously in those top percentages. Her needs aren't being met'. 'She can read, but she hasn't been taught punctuation', things like that. In the policy, it says, at that stage, a parent can refer it to the principal to go through the procedure. We've had examples where this has happened and the principal has said 'No, they don't need that'[acceleration] and that's the end. Unlike early entry, the decision is given to one person. It's not an independent decision. That can be very frustrating. Acceleration doesn't happen as often as it should do. In fact, it happens very, very rarely.

Mr BAYLEY - Is that what sits behind - do you think - you noted in the submission that one school has the attitude that the notion of giftedness is in itself discriminatory. Is that because they're sort of in denial that it's there and, therefore, they need to provide for it and, therefore, they're mounting a counter-argument against it, or what do you think sits behind that perspective that you articulate there?

[REDACTED] - I think - and this is where I think that idea of indirect discrimination comes in, in that it's kind of putting the thoughts that work for the majority of students into this group that needs something different. When they've said that it's discrimination to do something extra for these students, often it's almost seen as a reward. As I said before, teachers will say, 'Well, I'm not seeing anything in my class that indicates that they need anything extra and they're going to have to perform or show me before I'm going to allow them to have this extra work'. And it's almost seen like a reward or a gift. I guess, there's that mindset that why should they get that and not the rest of the class? But I think it is again lack of understanding of how essential these interventions are to the wellbeing of the [gifted] kids.

It's not just, 'I want a little bit of extra fun'. It's, 'I need to learn'. And it's not just learning new content, which of course you're supposed to do at school. It's also learning that skill of learning. And a problem that happens quite often when kids get into grade 11 and 12 when they haven't been given that, they hit a challenge and they don't know how to deal with that, whereas other kids have had to go through challenges of learning how to read. It hasn't come easily and so they learn how to get through those. So often, when gifted kids are in those higher grades, some just give up and go, 'Oh, I can't do that, I'm not going to do that'.

Some people are quite affected by that. They've always gotten As and now they're not, they're getting Bs, and what does this mean for who I am? The lady we had the other week, the expert on underachievement, was saying that that is quite common at that point where kids do drop out of school because they have such trouble. They haven't learned how to learn. I'm not sure if I answered your question then.

Mr BAYLEY - I think so. It sounds like it's almost masking for their own inabilities, kind of articulating giftedness as being the notion of being discriminatory. It's almost masking their own inability to provide for it and to accept that they need to step up and do something to provide for those students.

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[REDACTED] - Yes, and I think there's also - one of the other parents mentioned - and I think it is another mindset - that giftedness isn't really taken that seriously. There's not really the understanding of what it means. Whereas if a child has an autism diagnosis or ADHD, that's seen as more real, our members said, than giftedness.

We mentioned that there's funding for some disabilities or difficulties that kids have in school. There's not funding for giftedness even though if you think about that bell curve of IQ, at the low end, you have children who have quite significant needs to get them through school and there's funding to help with that because obviously teachers - it's a harder job to be able to do that - they need help. At the other end, gifted kids also have those needs to get through school, but there's no funding for it. Why would you take that seriously? Obviously, no one else is. People don't understand what's going on, the difficulties that people are having.

One of the other examples we gave was despite the parents saying that, 'Our child's gifted, we think he needs some extra work', there was that pathologising things: 'He's acting 'bad' because he must have ADHD, he must have something else'. That happens a lot and there are characteristics that can come out that crossover with other things. That's kind of going, 'It's not giftedness, it must be something else'.

Mr BAYLEY - When it comes to bullying, you've identified giftedness as attracting bullying, finished first or just different or seen as different. In terms of perpetration, the disengagement from school, does that lead to a propensity in that space to be a perpetrator as well, do you think? Someone who is super gifted, they're not getting what they need at school, they're disengaged and therefore engaging - is that a trend that you've noticed?

[REDACTED] - It's not a trend that I've noticed, but I have heard that 'forced choice' masking kind of thing. There's an Australian researcher who's very famous, who gives an amazing example of that, of a boy who was from a very disadvantaged area. To protect himself, he put on a mask, as it were, and became part of the tough kids in school and hid his abilities. One day he turned up at school and his friends in his group were kind of torturing a little dog. He was very sensitive to the needs of the dog and he did not want that to happen. There were little children watching, but to say something would remove that mask and he didn't feel safe to do that. He had this horrible moment. Luckily he came up with something and said, 'The teacher's coming!' and the kids stopped and ran away.

Some gifted kids will put on a persona to protect themselves. Some kids can be - I've heard of some kids being not sensitive to other people who are learning at more average ability, particularly when they're younger and they're still figuring out what it means to be gifted, but I haven't seen any trend of that side.

CHAIR - Any other questions, Kristie?

Ms JOHNSTON - I don't think so. It was very comprehensive. The examples you've given are really clear, so thank you.

CHAIR - The other thing I wanted to ask before we finish is if you have any data around the number of kids who are disengaging from school and moving to home schooling from the people that you -

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[REDACTED] - We would love to be able to provide data like that, but there's no studies around that. With school refusal, again, there's no studies that give us any figures. We're just driven by what we're getting told and we know is happening. It would be great if studies were done into that.

Can I mention another thing as well? I'm sure you are aware that gifted students aren't actually covered by the Discrimination Act. Giftedness is not a prescribed attribute under the Act. I think this also is something that, you know, may make people not take things seriously. It definitely is more of a risk. I wanted to draw attention to in the Act, under the definition for disability, there's a part of disability – it can be a disorder, malformation, malfunction, or disfigurement that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder, malformation, malfunction, or disfigurement.

I think giftedness is also this innate thing that kids have and are born with that results in learning differently from a person without this innate ability. It feels to me not quite right that gifted students who need these interventions to be able to be in school and to reach their potential, aren't covered, given that it is an innate thing that they can't control.

CHAIR - Thank you. It's a very important point. Thank you very much for presenting to us today.

[REDACTED] - Thank you.

CHAIR - I think probably from what we've shared together, there will be things that you will be able to say that the committee can use. There's not a lot of really confidential reference to people's names and things.

[REDACTED] - Yes, we didn't.

CHAIR - We will forward you a copy of the *Hansard*, and you'll get to say what you are happy to have included or not treated confidentially.

[REDACTED] - Okay, thank you.

CHAIR - That will happen after this hearing. Before you leave us, we have to reiterate to you that the things that you have said here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table, you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to the comments you may make to anyone, including the media, even if you are just repeating what you've said to us today. Thank you very much, it has been lovely to meet you.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

The committee suspended at 2.07 p.m.