Submission No 60

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Name: Ms Carol Barnes

Date Received: 9 August 2020

Submission

to the

NSW Legislative Council Inquiry

into the

New South Wales Curriculum

Prepared by Carol Barnes

9 August 2020 – version 2

Summary:

This experiential submission focusses on **students** with **disability** who are also intellectually **gifted** (ie, intellectual ability in top 10% of age peers) in primary and secondary education settings. The submission addresses one of the many barriers encountered by intellectually gifted students with disability and by their parents, as a result of the relatively recent introduction of the '**differentiation**' and '**inclusion**' models into the NSW education system.

In light of those models, the implications of some of the **proposals** of the **Masters** Review are canvassed and critically analysed. **Recommendations** are included regarding possible solutions to the problems and issues raised in the submission.

Terms are **defined** whenever they first occur in the text, and a glossary of defined terms appears in an **Appendix**.

Contents

1. What is this submission about?

This submission is made in response to the call for submissions by the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into the New South Wales Curriculum https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=2604#tab-termsofreference (‘***Inquiry***’), which has been established to report on the proposed changes to the NSW school curriculum, in light of the April 2020 final report (‘***Masters Report’***) of the 2018 Independent Review of the NSW Curriculum 0https://nswcurriculumreview.nesa.nsw.edu.au/pdfs/phase-3/final-report/NSW_Curriculum_Review_Final_Report.pdf (‘***Masters Review’***).

The submission focusses on para 1 (c) of the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/2604/Terms%20of%20Reference%20-%20Review%20of%20the%20NSW%20School%20Curriculum.pdf (‘***TOR***’):

> *The extent to which the Masters Curriculum Review addresses its terms of reference, including…recommendations for…’differentiated learning’ in schools and whether such initiatives are research-based and proven to be effective.*

2. Author’s familiarity with the population of students described in this submission

Since 2015 I have been an Honorary Visiting Fellow at the **School of Education** at the **University of New South Wales (‘*UNSW*’)**, but I make this submission in my ***personal capacity***, and I note that it has not been endorsed by, and does not necessarily reflect the views of, UNSW.

Since 2005 I have also been national coordinator of **GLD Australia**, a national non-commercial online learning community and support group responding to the needs of intellectually gifted learners with disability (‘***GLD***’), and the needs of those who teach, care for, or advocate for them, through the sharing of information, research and personal experiences.

GLD Australia is a not-for-profit independent learning community with a member-owned and member-operated online discussion list. It is affiliated with the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented http://www.aaegt.net.au, which is the Australian national umbrella association for State and Territory gifted associations.

GLD Australia has no political affiliations, is not an incorporated association, and thus has no income, membership fees, property, officers, employees or premises. Run entirely by non-paid volunteers, it does not offer any tutoring or exam preparation courses or other commercial services.

Because GLD Australia is not a legal entity, I make this submission in my ***personal capacity***, as a volunteer advocate who has been supporting parents of GLD children for around 15 years.

In the course of my volunteer work for GLD Australia and for a variety of other gifted and learning disabilities associations and groups, I have since 2005 spoken to, and communicated via email with, many hundreds of parents whose GLD children are not having their needs met at school, and in particular parents who have encountered problems:

- when applying to education providers for disability adjustments for their children's in-class work, or

- when applying to the NSW Education Standards Authority ('***NESA***') for disability adjustments for their children's Year 12 final exams, or

- when appealing to the Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority ('***ACARA***') to reverse NESA's decisions to refuse disability adjustments for NAPLAN.

I have also liaised with a wide variety of NSW and Queensland primary and secondary teachers, schools and other professionals in this context for over a decade. This submission is based on my everyday experiences in volunteering and lecturing in this field, and on the experiences of many hundreds of those parents, teachers and other professionals, as reported to me.

I include the biographical information above to explain the genesis of my familiarity with this population – not as an assertion that my views reflect those of all members of GLD Australia or of any of the other voluntary associations with whom I work, or that I in any way have authority to speak on their behalf.

In the interest of completeness, I note also that I do not run a business or sell any publications or products. I do not accept fees from parents for advocating for their children, and I do not accept fees for lecturing at universities, for providing in-service professional development or training to teachers in schools, or for speaking at conferences, even when I am an invited speaker.

I am not a qualified teacher. I lectured at the university level for around 10 years in the 1970s, but I have no personal experience of teaching

gifted or non-gifted primary or secondary children, with or without disability.

Though I am a retired lawyer, I do not 'act for' parents in my capacity as such. Rather I support parents in my capacity as volunteer support person, notetaker or advocate only.

In the interest of transparency, I note also that I am currently undertaking a PhD in Law on the legal aspects of gifted students with disability at Bond University, Gold Coast, Queensland.

Confidentiality

This is **NOT** a **confidential** submission, and I expressly grant permission for it to be published on the Inquiry's website and/or circulated to anyone who the Committee believes might wish to see it. Similarly, I record here that I will be sharing it with the members of GLD Australia and with a variety of other parents, teachers, academics, government officials and disabilities associations who have reason to be interested in its contents and recommendations.

3. Implications of some recommendations of the Masters Review for intellectually gifted students, with and without disability

From the perspective of intellectually gifted students, I welcome the Masters Report's recommendations regarding students being able to move through the mandated syllabi working *at their own pace* (see for example pages 21 and 31), and recognition that there needs to be flexibility to allow students capable of more rapid progress to move more quickly through the curriculum (page 31).

Similarly, the Report recognises that some students ready for their next syllabus are currently being required to mark time, are not adequately challenged (page xiii) and do not make the progress they are capable of (pages xv and xvi). Instead they should be allowed to advance once they are ready (page xv).

The Report also acknowledges that:

> *…it is now well established through research that learning is maximised when learners are given learning opportunities appropriate to the points they have reached in their learning and at an appropriate level of stretch challenge.* (page xii)

Students learn best when they are presented with appropriately challenging material, rather than being under-challenged by being expected to again review what they already know (page xv).

All of the above portions of the Masters Report are in keeping with what we already know about gifted education.

There are other parts of the Masters Report, however, which have given me pause, particularly the fact that students are to continue to be grouped in classrooms by *chronological age*, allegedly because there are 'sound social reasons' for doing that (page 106):

> *The Review does not assume or require an end to grouping students by age. Indeed, it believes there are sound social reasons for having students move through school with their age peers. … Some schools may choose not to group students by age, but this is not a recommendation of the Review.*

I note that this is, on the one hand, consistent with the NSW Department of Education ('***DOE***') new Disability Strategy https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/media/documents/disability-strategy-2019-text-only.pdf which mandates that children are to be grouped with 'similar-age peers' (page 3).

On the other hand, however, it is at odds with the new DOE High Potential and Gifted Education policy https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/high-potential-and-gifted-education/about-the-policy/high-potential-and-gifted-education-policy which in paras 1.4.4 and 4.1.3 provides for the possibility that gifted students (with or without disability) may be accelerated and moved ahead (in some cases, far ahead) of their similar age peers. The new gifted policy expressly provides for some children in certain circumstances to be taken out of their age-appropriate classroom and accelerated to be grouped with older children, either full-time (grade skipping) or part-time (subject acceleration).

While the Masters Report's recommendations do accept that students may be accelerated (page 21), they do not envisage that students will move out of their age cohort classroom, allegedly because there are 'sound social reasons' not to do that.

If the Review's recommendations were to be translated into policy, then these **two departmental policies could not logically co-exist on the same website. They would be inconsistent – they would be striving to meet opposing, incompatible and irreconcilable goals.**

According to the Masters Report, however, each student will be working at their own pace on different schoolwork according to different syllabi page xv), and what determines each student's 'own pace' is prior achievement, not ability.

Acceleration (presumably moving through the syllabi faster, but still sitting in the same classroom with age peers) is to be permitted (page 21), but not in-class grouping (ie, cluster grouping) (page 106), so that

students working at their own pace on the same advanced syllabi will not necessarily be separated out to work with like minds who are also doing that. Children who have already mastered all the curriculum designed for students several years ahead will not be able to move up to higher Year levels to study with like minds who are working on the same syllabi.

I submit that this whole approach needs to be further researched and explored, especially in light of the 100 years of research showing that, in the case of intellectually gifted students, there are generally no 'sound social reasons' for grouping students according to their year of birth (see **Part 5.2** below).

4. The effect of the 'differentiation' and 'inclusion' models on intellectually gifted students, with and without disability

When I began advocating for disability adjustments for students with disability some 15 years ago, the 'inclusion' excuse was one which I never heard.

The students for whom I was advocating were presenting with disabilities which back then were considered serious and worth addressing in the mixed-ability mainstream classroom, but which today are increasingly being eye-rollingly dismissed as too 'mild and unimportant' to be bothered about.

These include:

- DSM5 disorders such as **specific learning disability** (dyslexia/reading disorder, disorder of written expression, and dyscalculia/mathematics disorder);
- **ADHD**, especially the predominantly inattentive presentation thereof, without visible symptoms of hyperactivity, impulsivity, defiance or disruptive behaviour;
- **ASD** Level 1 – then called Asperger's; and
- to a lesser extent, **mental health** concerns such as depression and anxiety disorder – which some parents see as 'parasitical' disabilities, in that the child began to experience them only as a result of starting school and soon realising that they were not able to learn to read or do math or pay attention as effortlessly as their peers.

In general back then, children with apparent and easily identifiable disabilities such as severe intellectual impairment or physical disability or Tourette's or non-verbal autism were not represented in mainstream

classes, and most teachers were not usually required to become skilled at learning about their diagnoses, or differentiating teaching practices to address the very wide range of those students' needs.

This has now all changed, seemingly with amazing speed, because of an ideology termed 'inclusion' or 'inclusive education'.

Inclusion

Proponents of inclusion assert that all children should be educated full-time together in the same school ('inclusion'), or preferably in the same mixed-ability classroom with similar-aged peers and with the same teacher ('full inclusion') – instead of in separate 'special education' support units within mainstream schools or separate facilities or schools staffed only or largely by teachers with extra specialised training.

Advocates posit that inclusive education means that *all* students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar-aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. *See the 2019 NSW Department of Education Disability Strategy, page 3:* https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/media/documents/disability-strategy-2019-text-only.pdf **.**

The catchcry of some inclusion advocates is something such as, "*All means all*" or '*Same classroom, same teacher'*.

Some advocates envisage a system where all children are invariably grouped by chronological age, and where mainstream classroom teachers are trained in meeting every child's needs all by themselves, including how to insert feeding tubes and how to oil the inner workings of wheelchairs. This, I have been told, is what every student teacher knowingly signs up for on entering university, and this is what 'same classroom, same teacher' means.

Some inclusion proponents suggest in public that we must stop training teachers in special education, and we must remove all allied health professionals from classrooms. It is posited that regular classroom teachers should be able to do whatever these highly trained specialist professionals used to do, and that all students, with and without disability, will benefit from being educated by the same teacher with similar-age peers in the same room.

The idea is that there should be no 'special treatment' for anyone, ever. In meetings and at conferences, I have heard some full inclusion advocates argue for the closing down of all schools for special purposes, all support units within mainstream schools, anything employing special

education teachers, all selective high schools, all selective Year 5 and 6 Opportunity Classes, all sports and performing arts high schools, the Australian Ballet School, and even the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. These are all condemned as forms of so-called 'segregation' because they separate some children out at the expense of others who don't get 'selected'.

Some mainstream educators, special educators and allied health professionals, however, are not such enthusiastic fans of the new ideology.

Not everyone is in favour of full inclusion – or indeed the concept of mandated inclusion at all. While the concept of everyone always harmoniously learning together sounds rosy, what of those children who, year after year, are learning nothing?

Into this category would fall:

- students with or without disability who are also gifted - who are learning nothing, not because they are incapable of learning, but rather because they have learned it all several years before, and

- students with or without disability who find that their classrooms are now too noisy and chaotic, as a result of exceedingly disruptive behaviour on the part of a few students (whether such behaviour stems from disability or other cause), and who are thus increasingly asking to be home-schooled: they now perceive of the classroom as a potentially dangerous place, where they have actually been instructed to rehearse strategies to avoid being hit by a flying chair in the event that another child has an unexpected 'meltdown'.

Inclusion sceptics quietly complain to me that teachers employed in all sectors do not dare to openly criticise full and universal inclusion at their schools or elsewhere, except in the most veiled of ways, eg on the basis of 'not enough extra funding for students with disability'.

Teachers explain to me that they say nothing year after year because they are prohibited by their professional codes of conduct from criticising in public any aspect of the teaching profession or their education department or diocese.

Those academics who privately would wish to question the wisdom of full inclusion claim they are keen to avoid condemnation from fellow academics, especially those who sport a string of publications consistently and enthusiastically favouring full inclusion for everyone, always and regardless of effects on other students. Sceptics tell me that therein lies one of the reasons that the number of published studies critiquing full inclusion has fallen off in recent years.

Specifically, I am told by teachers and by current HDR students at university that the following kinds of research are now de facto prohibited and, if they manage to be conducted at all, will find no place in academic journals:

- research showing that students *without* disability do NOT indeed always benefit from full inclusion and can indeed be harmed, in terms of learning progress in English and Math; or
- research showing that no classroom teacher, no matter how talented and well intentioned, can be quickly skilled up to do the specialised work of psychologists, language pathologists, occupational therapists and special educators; or
- research on the views of those parents who claim to have, against their best inclinations, been 'bullied' by some inclusion advocacy associations into enrolling their child with disability in a mainstream local school, but have subsequently removed the child and chosen instead a school for special purposes, where the child has ultimately enjoyed far greater academic and social success and wellbeing.

In short, anyone now daring to speak out against the politically accepted script risks being accused of wanting every child with any kind of disability to be relegated to 19th-century-like institutions – and educationally forgotten.

I am sure that the Inquiry will receive many more submissions in *favour* of full inclusion than doubting it. I submit that this may be accounted for by the frosty reception awaiting anyone who publicly dares to so doubt it, as outlined above. Those who have asked me to raise the inclusion issue in my submission to the Inquiry have done so because they claim to be afraid to do that themselves – especially in the case of anyone who perceives that their continuing employment and promotion depend on not being seen to be an 'inclusion doubter'.

Differentiation

In the face of the issues raised above, the standard glib answer is of course that all teachers must simply learn to '**differentiate**' the curriculum in mixed-ability classrooms to meet the needs of *all* students, including those with the full range of abilities and disabilities. And yes, there are some teachers who are trying very hard to do just that.

Yet what teachers tell me is that **differentiation is just too hard.**

In my experience, countless teachers at the end of a professional development session on differentiation have been heard to mutter, "Well if they really want me to do all *that*, then they'll have to pay me more. I won't do it, and they can't make me." Or "I went to some PD on differentiation, and even *they* admitted that it won't work unless classes are already ability-grouped. The gap in most classrooms now

between the most advanced and the least advanced is just too huge for teachers."

The Masters Report makes this point on page 6:

> *In each year of school, the most advanced ten per cent of students are at least five to six years ahead of the least advanced ten per cent of students, and this appears to be unchanged across the years of school. And there is some evidence that, in mathematics, students become more varied in their levels of knowledge and skill the longer they are in school.*

This finding is taken up also on pages xii, 54, 75 and 89 of the same Report.

If this is correct, and the Review's findings are implemented, then even without considering all the extra needs of students with disability, teachers will have to differentiate (page 21) to an even greater extent as students work at varying paces towards achieving minimum attainment levels. This is because teachers will have to deliver lessons to students working on five or six different syllabi (page xv) within the same classroom, depending on each child's progress.

So for example, if there are five or six Year levels in each classroom, each teacher of, say, a Year 4 class will be simultaneously and singlehandedly teaching their differing students a variety of levels of different curriculum designed for students in Years 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 – all the while:

- regularly keeping track of who is doing what level, and how well they are being 'stretched' (page xx) and are progressing, and then (without grading them on an A to E scale – page 106)

- deciding when each child has mastered enough of the mandated material to move on to a higher syllabus, while still sitting in the same age-grouped classroom.

And teachers must do all this all day for every subject, presumably including the new compulsory second language in Primary, as recommended by the Masters Review (page xvi).

Teachers become individual private tutors for each and every child.

How could *any* teacher, no matter how well trained, energetic and well intentioned, be reasonably expected, without an array of teacher aides, to teach so many different topics at the same time in the same mixed-ability classroom encompassing children who all happened to be born in the same calendar year, but who are working at five or six different Year levels? How could that teacher at the same time continually track each child's progress in each subject, and move some up to higher syllabi? And document all of that?

Further, while a sole unsupported classroom teacher is in the process of introducing new material relating to *one* of the six syllabi being studied in the age-grouped classroom, who is looking after all the other students who are supposed to be learning the other five syllabi – especially those who, because of disability or otherwise, are manifesting disruptive or even dangerous behaviour? And what about those quiet students with impeccable behaviour who for whatever reason just disengage and refuse to independently work on their assigned syllabi, and instead spend their time staring out the window?

And when the children in one of the five or six syllabus levels are being tested to ensure that they are enjoying their expected excellent ongoing progress (Masters Report pages xi, xiii and xv) (presumably requiring a quiet environment), what are the other five levels of children in the same room doing? Or are all the levels writing different tests in the same quiet room at the same time? What is done with students whose tests reveal that, for whatever reason, they are making no progress at all at *any* level, no matter how incipient?

What would a teacher's daily lesson plan look like?

What if an intellectually gifted student, with or without disability, has been obediently working through the mandated syllabi 'at their own pace' since Year 1, and then by Year 4 is ready to launch into the Year 7 syllabi? Being required to remain in a classroom with '*Year 4'* emblazoned on the door, overseen by a primary-trained teacher, that student will wonder who will now teach the Year 7 material.

I fear that the answer to that will be the traditional, "No one. You have now finished primary school. You can't go up to high school because it is full of students who are older than you, and there are 'sound social reasons' for not exposing you to them. So just sit quietly and wait for the others here to catch up."

One Year 7 English teacher at a State school who was teaching *Romeo and Juliet* found that she had three age-appropriate, English native speakers in her class unable to read the play (even in a simplified, modern-language version). One of those students had a professionally measured reading comprehension level equal to that of a Year 1 student, the second a Year 2 student, and the third a Year 3 student. The teacher asked if those three students could be removed from her Year 7 classroom to participate in remedial intervention in reading comprehension, instead of being forced to study Shakespeare. She was told that such a step would constitute 'segregating' those three students from their similar-age cohort, might hurt their feelings, and as such would be 'against the law'.

The teacher was also told that, according to current DOE policy, it was her job to 'differentiate' *Romeo and Juliet* in three ways, so that it would be

equally accessible to a child in Year 1, Year 2 or Year 3. Otherwise, those three students' parents might 'complain'.

Realistically, how many parents would 'complain' if told that their child was significantly behind in reading comprehension, and was going to be offered extra free lessons at school in order to catch up? Would any adult realistically respond, "But what if my child doesn't learn about *Romeo and Juliet*? That's discrimination!"

Yet a fear that some parents may complain seems to be a significant factor which is driving some recent in-school decisions to prioritise inclusion above all other considerations. One teacher confided to me that parents of children with disability are now such strong advocates for their children that it is just 'easier' to capitulate in the face of any and all demands than to 'stand up to it'.

And it is acknowledged that that teacher may have a point. On the other side of the argument, I do receive complaints from teachers that some parents insist that, instead of offering their child remedial intervention (ie, teaching them to read), schools must now ensure that the child always has exactly the same curriculum as everyone else in the room 'because that's the law!' So if that curriculum happens to be Macbeth, so be it – even if one child in that high school class is reading at the age of a 5-year-old.

This is actually corroborated by what some parents tell me. The parents themselves would indeed have initially been happy for their children to be removed from the classroom to receive remedial intervention for the disability (ie, to be taught to read), but the inclusion advocacy associations are coaching parents to always insist instead on 'same classroom, same teacher, same schoolwork' – no matter how inappropriate and inaccessible that work may be for a given child. See in this connection a case in which a mother filed a complaint with the Australian Human Rights Commission on the grounds that her child with Down Syndrome was not being taught the same curriculum as others in her Year 9 classroom, but instead was being offered work which would have been suitable for a much younger child: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-22/student-with-down-syndrome-has-school-enrolment-cancelled/12478980

Further, consider the high school Macbeth classroom child with the reading age of 5 (mentioned above). Would that child really enjoy sitting in a classroom listening to their classmates discussing something called Macbeth, wondering "What is this all about, and why can't I read it the way all the other kids do?"

Into my Inbox virtually every day file teachers who somewhere along the line have heard me speak in public about gifted students with disability, and who were trained at university for years to do what some have called

'bowling down the middle'. These teachers are now finding themselves being asked to do something radically different, supposedly in classrooms with the same number of similar-age children and the same number of teachers (ie, one).

No doctor, dentist, lawyer or architect is expected to do this. Lawyers generally work on the matter of only one client at a time and, while we are meeting with one client, we do not have to be constantly looking over that client's shoulder to ensure that all our other clients are not throwing chairs at each other. If other professions can train students at university, more or less, for what they will realistically be expected to do on graduation, why should teaching be any different?

Accordingly, I am no longer surprised when teachers increasingly complain to me privately that it is impossible to competently meet the needs of everyone whom they are now expected to teach, either because teachers have never been properly trained in how to do that, or because the irregular, bits-and-pieces differentiation training which they have indeed received is simply too difficult to implement in a classroom with such a wide range of diversity.

Media suggest that nearly half of graduate teachers quit teaching within five years, for example: http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/keeping-teachers-in-our-schools/8243714 . Perhaps one reason is that, as mentioned by a participant in the linked radio interview (circa 21:00), 'differentiation' means that 'every problem in society should be solved by a teacher in a school', but in reality 'that's never going to happen'.

Schools are not adequately resourced when it comes to supporting students with disability in mixed-ability classrooms, *a fortiori* in the current climate:

- where the concept of full inclusion is being universally applauded and haphazardly implemented (but not fully funded) in schools in general, and

- when teachers do not receive mandatory training in modifying their daily classroom practices in the very challenging fashion demanded by the 'differentiation' model.

Teachers understandably argue privately that, if the resources which are known to be required are not available and provided, it is unrealistic for the community to expect that unsupported mainstream teachers can adequately meet the needs of all children, especially in the case of:

- intellectually gifted children, or
- children with multiple disabilities and complex needs, or

- children with invisible disability but no documented professional diagnoses, or
- children with disability who are not actually failing, or
- children with disability for whom an individualised education plan or personalised learning plan (however called) must be devised, implemented, evaluated and continually updated.

The 'inclusion' excuse

All of which brings me back to what parents report to me as the so-called 'inclusion excuse':

> *We can't provide remedial intervention or disability adjustments for your gifted child with 'mild' disability because they are not 'disabled enough'. Sure, he can't read or count or keep up with the class, but at least he is quiet and behaviourally compliant, and that is all I care about.*
>
> *I am told now that I must devote the majority of my attention to this child over here with severe physical or intellectual disability, and this other child over here with severe behaviour challenges, and so that's what I am going to do. All we really have time for these days is students with severe and serious disability who are increasingly being represented in mainstream classrooms under the ideology of 'inclusion'. We watch as every year more and more of these very needy students are coming out of schools for special purposes and over to us.*
>
> *But the department of education pays my mortgage, and I dearly need for that to continue to happen, so I will do whatever I'm told, and always deal with students with catastrophic disability first.*

Parents report that they receive no (or very poor…) reactions from school officials and education department representatives when they draw attention to their concerns that more and more children with grave and time-demanding disability are now being channelled into mainstream mixed-ability classes and are being left to cope there without individual and specialised support. Some parents claim that they have been made to feel 'ashamed' to have had the audacity to advocate for their own child who is "really not all that disabled anyway."

To be clear – such parents are NOT asserting that children with severe disability should *not* be having their needs addressed, educationally and wellbeing-wise, by anyone, anywhere, ever.

Instead, parents are arguing that a sole unsupported, untrained and unmentored teacher in charge of a mixed-ability mainstream classroom will rarely be able to accomplish such a feat unless it be at the expense of both:

- children without disability; and
- children with so-called 'mild' or 'unimportant' disabilities – even if those disabilities do result in the child being unable to read or write or do Math or pay sustained attention to schoolwork – children who still arguably require measures such as remedial intervention and disability adjustments.

Parents suggest that perhaps 'full inclusion' might 'work' if there could be *several* teachers in each classroom, some with extra specialised training in the complex needs of some of the students in those classrooms. Parents are being told by educators (now, but even well before the current COVID crisis) that that is something which is not going to be happening any time soon, because it would cost twice or three times as much in teacher salaries.

All of which makes teachers and parents conclude that 'inclusion' is simply a painless and cheap way of paying lip-service to a patent need which otherwise will not go away.

As mentioned above, some parents of children with disability claim also that they are being strongly and relentlessly encouraged by some disability support and advocacy organisations to categorically insist on sending their child to a local mainstream school, without even first considering or becoming knowledgeable about the possible benefits of a so-called 'special school' or a school devoted to addressing the very disability being experienced by that child (eg, deaf or blind).

One mother mentioned to me that when she contacted an advocacy association, it was the first time she had ever spoken to anyone who sounded as if they truly understood her child and his challenges. She was delighted! But there had been a subtext: "If you don't do as I say, and discontinue your research into special schools, I won't help you anymore. You must send him to your local mainstream school, even if they don't want him or claim they can't teach him."

Such parents report further that the 'inclusion excuse' (ie, "I have to look after those in the 'plenty who are doing worse' category before attending to your child's disabilities") is often followed by a suggestion such as, "If you really want your child with dyslexia to learn to read, why not enrol him in [name of commercial, expensive edu-business] down the road. I'm sure they'll have time to give him the attention he needs."

One mother was reportedly told by her school principal:

> *Well if you really wanted your child with dyslexia to learn to read, you should have sent him to a private school, because State schools are now so busy solving all of society's problems and addressing all of its inequities and worrying about everyone's 'wellbeing', we no longer have time to do the 'old stuff' like teaching reading!*

In recent years, I have had to tell my teachers that 'headquarters' has decreed that from now on they must include in their lesson plans driver education, drug education, dealing with bullies, media literacy, financial literacy, caring for pets and table manners. Children used to learn those things at home, but it seems as if children no longer have parents. So now it's our job.

In any event, all I can tell you is that if the only disability your child has is mere dyslexia, then we can't help him here. But if you'd like to allege severe trauma or disadvantage or low SES or precarious wellbeing or other inequity, then you've come to the right place, because that's what we do here now!

Private tutoring and private schools are terrific solutions of course for families with a money tree in the backyard – but perhaps not for others who have actually sent their child to a State school so that the child can learn to read.

Especially tragic in this context are the outcomes awaiting parents who are prompted to act on the first suggestion and haemorrhage cash in the direction of all manner of expensive 'neuro-babble' programs or courses or remedies or 'cures' offered by 'edu-businesses' which are far more interested in a parent's wallet than a child's long-term improvement at school. It is amazing how many businesses seemingly make a living out of offering expensive but unproven therapies and out-of-school programs run by commercial 'edu-enterprises'. Some of these commercial programs have even been approved to be offered in NSW State schools during school time.

Disabilities associations such as AUSPELD, SPELD NSW, and Learning Difficulties Australia caution in particular against programs such as:

- Reading Recovery
- Arrowsmith
- Brain Gym
- Cellfield
- Cogmed
- Fast ForWord
- Davis Dyslexia
- DORE/DDAT
- Lumosity, and
- Tomatis.

Over the years, many parents of children with disability have devoted enormous amounts of money to programs and 'remedies' which turn out to be shams, scams and hoaxes. All the time and money spent on such programs could have been more usefully devoted to a non-commercial, evidence-based remedial program delivered by an experienced special education teacher or a qualified allied health professional.

Parents' extreme fragility and vulnerability understandably result in the often heard, "Well there may be no science behind this new program, but my hairdresser's nephew tried it and it 'worked' for him. We're desperate, and we won't rest until we have tried absolutely everything."

Families with seemingly unlimited funds try program after program and 'cure' after 'cure', and when nothing actually 'works', they console themselves with the thought that at least they did indeed try absolutely everything.

Families with little money, on the other hand, are reduced to taking all the savings for this year's summer holiday and donating it instead to some evidence-free scam.

In addition to all the wasted money, participation in such programs invariably means that, as well as coping all day at school, a tired and academically discouraged child is faced with the prospect of regular after-school attendance at an outside clinic or tuition centre, or evenings under parent supervision at home spent mindlessly performing repetitive computer exercises which are purportedly designed to 'rewire' the child's brain. Invariably when the interventions fail to live up to their business owner's hype, what the child internalises is that, "Yet again they have tried to fix me, and it didn't work. So how dumb must I be?"

5. Recommendations:

5.1 Commission independent research into whether students *without* disability do indeed always benefit under a 'differentiation' or a full 'inclusion' model

As noted in **Part 4** above , most proponents of full inclusion allege that inclusive education is designed to be of benefit to *all* students, including those *without* disability.

I agree that there may be some merit in this assertion, in terms of the engendering of compassion and understanding amongst students *without* disability. However, I submit that we need to re-examine counterintuitive claims that all students in an 'inclusive' classroom will always benefit from differentiation and inclusion, and will learn as much, progress as quickly, and stay as engaged as they would in a different setting. Blanket assertions about inclusion always being beneficial for *all* students, including those *without* disability, need to be re-analysed. There is in fact research going the other way, though to date I have not seen it cited in publications favouring full inclusion. All I am told is that, as noted above, researchers are now being prohibited from engaging in it.

In recent years we seem to have hit a new nadir in meeting the needs of children with disability. The arguments in favour of the currently fashionable 'differentiation' and 'inclusion' models have too many rough edges to merit remaining unexamined and unchallenged.

Politically incorrect as this suggestion may be, perhaps the whole 'inclusion' premise needs to be totally re-examined and possibly recalibrated.

I am not an education researcher and am not qualified to opine on the validity or methodological soundness of studies which have found a decrease in the reading and math scores of students *without* disability in classrooms containing students with disability, when compared to controls in classrooms which do not include students with disability, especially when the disabilities in question are complex and result in disruptive, time-consuming, repeated and sometimes even dangerous behaviour. Further, the academic attainment of students without disability then allegedly goes up again, once the students with disability are suspended or otherwise removed from mixed-ability mainstream classrooms.

Admittedly, most such studies tend to be older, and are perhaps thus representative of a time when the inclusion notion was new and ill-understood. On the other hand, perhaps there are fewer more recent studies simply because (as discussed in **Part 4** above) HDR students and academics are prohibited from conducting them (or afraid to do so).

Perhaps this whole question could be addressed by the commissioning of independent research to re-examine some of the premises underpinning the concept of universal 'inclusion', and to look carefully at what really does happen academically to students without disability under a full inclusion model.

It would be interesting also to gather evidence from former students who were 'included' when perhaps now, looking back as adults, they would have preferred to be 'excluded' and to receive remedial intervention in a separate setting. They could be asked, for example:

- Did you enjoy knowing that you were always the slowest in the mixed-ability class in X subject?
- Did you like having all the others know that you found learning or reading or writing or math so very difficult?
- Were you pleased that your teachers always had to go out of their way to 'differentiate' the work just for you?
- And in any case, did your teachers actually bother to do that? Did you find it helpful?

- How did others in your classes respond to your need for what they may have considered to be 'special privileges'?

I would suggest that the person selected to lead the recommended research be an academic who has a special education background, but who does NOT already have a long list of published papers favouring inclusion. And a way would have to be found such that teachers could contribute their true views anonymously, so that they could feel confident to relay to the researchers what they currently dare to whisper only to each other and to me, and so that they would not find themselves in breach of their teacher codes of conduct prohibiting public criticism of the education system.

Because of my general interest in this area, and in light of the number of children (with and without disability) whom I have seen damaged over the last decade by so-called differentiation and the full-inclusion model, I have been collecting 'anti-inclusion' articles and other such literature for years, and am happy to share these, should this recommendation be considered worthy of being pursued.

5.1 Commission independent research into whether there are indeed 'sound social reasons' for having students move through school with their age peers

At the 2015 international conference on gifted education, held in Brisbane and hosted by the Queensland Association for Gifted and Talented Children, Geoff Masters as keynote speaker made many of the welcome points supporting gifted education which he has repeated in the Masters Report – specifically, about the five-to-six year difference in each classroom, and about children being able to move through the mandated curriculum at their 'own pace'.

These assertions were heartily welcomed and, as one attendee remarked in plenary, he had us all eating out of his hand - *until* he was asked about acceleration for gifted children who had shown that they had mastered the mandated curriculum and were ready to move on. He responded with the same trite rejoinder (alluded to in **Part 3** above) about there being 'sound social reasons' for children being compulsorily encased in classrooms with others who just happen to have been born in the same calendar year.

In the case of gifted children, what are these 'sound social reasons'?

Without expressing a view as to whether grouping by age is, or is not, the best option for students who are *not* gifted, I note that when it comes to

gifted children, the research literature does not support the Masters Review claim:

- *A Nation Empowered: Evidence Trumps the Excuses Holding Back America's Brightest Students* 2015 http://www.accelerationinstitute.org/nation_empowered/
- *A Nation Deceived* 2004 http://www.accelerationinstitute.org/nation_deceived/
- *Releasing the Brakes for High Ability Learners* 2011 https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Releasing_the_Brakes_Overview_A4__Nov2011.pdf

Accelerating gifted students to learn with like minds and with older children is generally far more beneficial than insisting that they remain in classrooms with similar age peers.

Here are a sprinkling of findings from the first report listed above:

> *Some people believe students will pay a social price if accelerated. But, again, research studies show that acceleration is almost always a plus in the social-emotional sense because students are more engaged—happier—when they're learning at a rate and in an environment that's right for them. They enjoy being with like-minded students.*
>
> *To be fair, the research suggests some gifted children may experience a hiccup when they're first accelerated and, all of a sudden, aren't automatically the smartest ones in the room. But the research shows this dip is slight and almost always temporary. In the long run, the "reality check" pays off… because a bright child develops realistic self-esteem rather than an inflated sense of self. That common-sense observation is supported by researchers who track down adults who were accelerated as children. The only regret most of those adults have is that they weren't accelerated earlier.* (page 39)
>
> *Gifted children tend to be socially and emotionally more mature than their age-mates; therefore, for many bright students, acceleration provides a better personal maturity match… The few problems that have been experienced with acceleration have stemmed from inadequate planning and insufficient preparation on the part of educators or parents.* (page 3)
>
> *Dr. VanTassel-Baska, who was founding director of the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University, says, "I have found nothing better for the social-emotional*

> *adjustment of gifted children than having students of similar ability and interest meet and engage in an advanced and challenging summer academic experience. For some students, it is the first time they have made a friend."* (page 21)

> *The bottom line, according to Dr. VanTassel-Baska: "Given a choice, a child's readiness for advanced-level work should be the determining factor in acceleration, not unfounded worries about potential social-emotional impact."* (page 22)

In summary then, grouping by age is somewhat like astrology: if you're born in the year of the rabbit, that inexplicably determines what your school curriculum will be tomorrow.

A mandated curriculum which ties what a student learns to their date of manufacture is bound to engender frustrations similar to those of a driver caught in a traffic jam.

The Masters Review claim about there being 'sound social reasons' for having students move through school with their age peers needs to be subjected to scrutiny.

As with 'anti-inclusion' articles (see **Part 5.1** above), I have been collecting 'pro-acceleration' articles and other literature for years, and am happy to share these, should this recommendation be considered worthy of being pursued. I am also in a position to recommend academics in Australia already familiar with the issues surrounding acceleration and its social-emotional effects on gifted children, and able to conduct an inquiry into whether there are indeed 'sound social reasons' for all children progressing through school with similar-age peers.

6. A final provocative thought

Why should taxpayers pay for students to sit in classrooms with age peers year after year and learn nothing – not because they are incapable of learning, but rather because they have learned it all (or have independently taught it to themselves…) several years before?

I am now hearing increasingly from NSW parents that, when their children returned to school after the COVID restrictions, the children found themselves confronted with the same mundane existence in their regular classrooms which perhaps has always been there, but had never been so apparent or annoying before. Remote learning had unwittingly allowed these gifted children to do exactly what the Master Review recommends - compact the curriculum and work ahead at their 'own pace'.

Reports from parents allege also that, during the isolation, their children easily finished all the school's mandated online work by around 10 am, and then had the rest of the day to pursue their own interests, and work independently on their own projects in their areas of passion – be it planets or insects or Oliver Cromwell. Learning online from home has given some gifted students a taste of what life might be like, if only they could continue to work at their 'own pace' at school.

But working at one's own pace alone at home is different from doing that surrounded by a classroom of age peers who are working at all differing, but probably slower, paces.

Anecdotally, we are hearing more and more cases of gifted children pressuring their parents to start home-schooling. Data on numbers is hard to source as no parent is forced to disclose that the reason they have opted to homeschool is that their child is gifted, is academically ambitious, and hates going to school.

Admittedly, children demanding homeschooling probably don't recognise the difference between true 'homeschooling' and the kind of remote online learning which they participated in during the COVID restrictions. All they know is that schoolwork is more pleasant when they can do it at home, away from the disruptive and sometimes dangerous behaviour of some of their 'similar-age peers', and, as the Masters Report recommends, 'at their own pace'.

Every gifted child who decides to drop out of school for whatever reason is a tragedy.

Intellectually gifted children are those who have the greatest potential to become Australia's next generation of leaders and innovators, and ultimately the greatest potential to contribute to the economic and social welfare of the nation.

This portion of today's school population will produce tomorrow's outstanding inventors, vaccine hunters, mathematicians, engineers, airline pilots, poets, judges, and creative business executives. Meeting their needs at school now is unquestionably central to building the future economic prosperity of Australia.

In an age where knowledge creation and innovation are of paramount importance, gifted children (with and without disability) are the nation's greatest resource, and neglecting their needs will risk leaving our nation behind in an increasingly competitive world.

If we squander this resource, and if we offer this group of children a mediocre education today, we doom ourselves to a mediocre society tomorrow.

What are the long-term implications for Australia of gifted students not proceeding to tertiary education? Consider all the Australians who are currently every day working round the clock in labs, searching for a COVID vaccine or treatment or cure. Who are they? They are gifted children, grown up of course – gifted children who, for whatever reason, managed to stay in school long enough to get the ATAR that they needed to study medicine or medical science at university. We need more of these gifted adults now more than ever.

7. Further information

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry, and GLD Australia is of course very happy to provide further information with respect to the issues raised here, or to otherwise collaborate with you to pursue the Inquiry's goals.

I am also happy to appear and give oral testimony at any future public hearings which are to be held in Sydney or online, and to answer supplementary questions with respect to this submission.

Finally, I note that the Masters Review recommends that its proposed new curriculum be developed collaboratively and 'owned' by the widest possible range of NSW stakeholders (page xviii), and that relevant stakeholder groups should be consulted and involved in its planning and development (page xix). If the current Inquiry sees fit to endorse that recommendation, I record that GLD Australia would welcome an opportunity to be so consulted.

APPENDIX

The following abbreviations are used throughout this submission:

ACARA Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority - defined in **Part 2**

DOE NSW Department of Education - defined in **Part 3**

GLD gifted learner with disability – defined in **Part 2**

Inquiry NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into the New South Wales Curriculum - defined in **Part 1**

Masters Report April 2020 final report of the Masters Review - defined in **Part 1**

Masters Review 2018 Independent Review of the NSW Curriculum - defined in **Part 1**

NESA NSW Education Standards Authority - defined in **Part *2***

TOR Terms of Reference - defined in **Part 1**

UNSW University of New South Wales - defined in **Part 2**