

How can schools make sure gifted students get the help they need?

March 28 2024, by Maria Nicholas, Andrew Skourdoumbis and Ondine Bradbury



Credit: Max Fischer from Pexels

Earlier this month, the New South Wales government [announced](#) it would roll out programs for gifted students in every public school in the state.

This comes amid concerns gifted school students are not achieving their potential.

A [previous review](#) in 2019 estimated that 10% of the state's students were gifted but that [up to 40%](#) of those students were not meeting their potential. Other studies have suggested [about 50%](#) of [gifted students](#) are underachieving.

Our [new research](#) found teachers tend to focus their tailored approaches toward helping students performing below standard, rather than their gifted peers. Our study also looks at how gifted students can be better supported at school.

What does 'gifted' mean?

There are lots of different ways to be gifted and different definitions of a gifted child.

Gifted students are generally understood to have [natural abilities](#) well above their peers of the same age. This roughly puts them in [the top 10%](#) of their age group.

Many Australian school systems, such as [NSW](#) and [Victoria](#), base their understanding of gifted students on the work of Canadian educational psychologist François Gagné.

Gagné says giftedness occurs across various domains, from intellectual

to physical, creative and social-emotional.

Signs a child may be gifted [include](#) reading or manipulating numbers before they start school, being very knowledgeable about topics of interest, and making connections easily. Gifted students can also have an acute interest in [social justice](#), a mature sense of humor and enjoy hypothesizing. Or they may show advanced skill in the arts or sporting activities.

A student is seen as underachieving when there's a significant mismatch between their ability and their performance in assessments.

Our research

[Our research](#) was a scoping review looking at 38 studies from 2000 to 2022. It examined what teachers and schools have done to meet the needs of high-achieving students. A scoping review is a study that maps out all the available evidence on a topic.

The review included studies from around the world, including Australia, the United States, England, the Netherlands, Canada, Germany, New Zealand and Singapore.

It found while teachers try to meet all students' needs, their tailored efforts tend to be geared towards supporting students who are not meeting basic standards.

This means gifted student may not get sufficient help at school to support their own particular needs. Instead, they may be directed simply to work on their own or take on "class helper" roles if they finish their tasks early.

How can gifted students be supported?

Teachers of course need to have the time, resources and school support to get to know each individual student and to offer appropriate programs.

Provided teachers have these things, our study identified multiple teaching approaches that can have a positive impact on gifted students. They can be used in both primary and secondary schools.

The emphasis is on collaborating with students, tailoring content for individual students and being flexible. Some specific approaches include:

- exploring a topic in [greater depth](#) or breadth with a student
- assigning tasks that specifically tap into a student's interests
- giving open-ended tasks that allow for problem-solving
- giving students a choice in how a topic should be investigated
- having students work through the curriculum at a faster pace
- skipping content if a student has already mastered it
- encouraging students to explore topics across different disciplines (for example, studying a novel as a piece of literature, from a historical perspective and as a basis on which to explore a health issue raised in the text)
- providing access to role models and experts to extend learning.

There are other reasons students can underachieve

It is also important to note there are other reasons why gifted students may not meet their potential.

There [may be issues](#) with a student's confidence at school or motivation.

Or they may have attitudes towards teachers or school that negatively impact their learning.

Or they may not be identified as gifted, if they come from a [socioeconomically disadvantaged or culturally diverse background](#), or if they have a [disability](#) such as dyslexia or autism that makes schooling challenging.

Very [narrow definitions](#) of "gifted" may also mean students are not picked up as high-achieving if they don't perform above expected in certain assessments.

If parents think their child is showing signs of being gifted they should contact their child's teacher or school to talk about specific support.

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