

Articles, Information & Advice

From Educators of Gifted Children

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Article Title	Article Description	P
Better Songs to Sing	Autobiographical reflections on the school years of a highly gifted adult.	2
Coffee Table Contributions	Survey responses of gifted homeschoolers. Why they began, how they do it, etc.	5
The Graffiti Wall	Reasons given to parents for why their gifted children are not allowed to learn.	10
Teaching, Testing & Disabilities	Reflections of a retired school teacher	11
The Individual Testing Experience	Parents provide advice and information from their experiences with their children's educational testing.	12
IEP Pro-forma	Pro-forma used for planning Independent Education Programs for the classroom	19
Doubtful Days	A mother of young children talks about homeschooling through those down times	20

Better Songs to Sing- A Rhapsody of Disempowerment?

"There must be better songs to sing than this" - Willy Russell, *Educating Rita*

Once upon a time (but not so very long ago), there lived a little girl who trotted off to primary school in a daggy uniform every day. The little girl was fresh-faced, wide-eyed and had a Mona Lisa smile which others took to mean that she was happy.

But this is not nostalgia.

Those memories of 10 years ago are so near me that, if I reached out, I could touch them with my fingers and try to tell that sad-faced little girl that she was not alone.

On the surface, everything was perfect. It is safer to be perfect.

I won awards. I had friends. Friends who never could understand me, but still mates in the casual and dispassionate ways of childhood. I came top of the class without any effort, every single year. I was that smug-looking child who walked off with the Academic Achievement prize every year.

And I didn't even care. I was miserable, always seeking some desperate kind of communion which never, never came.

It is 1989, and I am nearly 7. The Berlin Wall has come down and Russia's about to crumble and I am fascinated. There are no books to tell me what I want to know, and I don't have the words for it anyway.

My teacher watches me trying to explain the Iron Curtain to a friend, and tells me sharply to stop showing off. Is she afraid of having a 6 year-old potential political dissident in her class? I tell her that some things just might matter more than learning how to tie our shoelaces (the day's lesson, and one which I didn't master). The look on her face tells me she's not interested

For the first time, my parents can't teach me what I want to know. They are not overly concerned with politics or the Berlin Wall, and I have a sense of moving beyond their tabloid world.

It is 1991. I am bored to death, and write poetry in class. I barely even know what I am doing, but know that I need to say something to a world that has never listened. If only I could find the right words.

The teacher ignores me as much as possible, smiling benignly at the nice kids who colour in between the lines and don't ask so many questions. There is no place in her class for kids like me, who don't come from a nice little nuclear family, who don't own a boat and who can't draw a picture of Disneyland to go with their five lines of 'What I Did in My Holidays'.

I stare out the window, squint my eyes, and start writing about the light patterns glistening in between the leaves. I want a world away from this one, but am too firmly grounded within it.

The teacher walks over, sees that I am writing instead of colouring, and calmly tears my poem up with an air of self-righteousness. My friend whispers to me about how mean the teacher's being today. I nod, trying not to cry. The teacher keeps me in at lunch for talking, even though I haven't said a word.

After writing out I must obey my teacher 50 times, I look up at her and say, defiantly:

"One day I'll write about you too, you know."

She tells me I am rude and loudly announces in class later that afternoon that I will never get anywhere.

The school obviously had little faith in any of my rather esoteric and unrecognised abilities. Convinced that an element of plagiarism was involved, they gave me low marks for creative writing (even writing which I'd completed solely in the classroom without the possibility of any sort of plagiarism!). A teacher criticised one of my short stories and found out later that day that the selfsame story had won a prize in a literary competition.

The irony is that I could write anything then which I can now. Had I been encouraged back then, who knows what beautiful works I could have produced?

I went to a small suburban primary school where only age-appropriate development was recognised. And I was obviously a slow learner when it came to the rules of Proper and Regimented Education. (Write that out, Katy O'Toole, and try to learn.)

Primary school passed by in a type of haze, a miasma of boredom and futility. Teachers told my mother at the end of each year that "We didn't know quite what to do with Katy, lovely girl, but not quite sure where she's at."

I was an anomaly in an alien environment. Here is the sum total of what I learned. I sat in a classroom for 7 years, but it will take you less than a minute to digest these absolute pearls of wisdom, these gems of so-called 'universal truth':

Children must fit in with their grade.

Smart children must be docile and not ask questions.

Smart children also always come from wealthy homes with professional parents.

And, Kate O'Toole, for heaven's sake keep your nose out of books you couldn't possibly understand.

But, oh, how I could!

I can't begin to understand the antagonism I aroused in most of these teachers over the years. My brother dealt with the atmosphere by trying to fit in as much as possible. As a result, he is now at the local high school (which appears to be very run-of-the-mill, but I won't pass judgment), and will never know that the long, upsetting saga of our primary school education can have a happy ending.

The last year of primary school was a quiet one for me. Hoping desperately that there were better songs to sing, I decided not to sing any at all.

School reports boasted of my 'dedication and maturity'. Inside, I felt numb, and fell pray to headaches at night. It seemed like there was no place in the world for me. I didn't understand what I'd done to feel so lonely, sad, and, above all, different.

The selective school exams came and went. It was heavily implied that, because of a mild-to-moderate hearing impairment which cemented my image as 'that

deaf freak' (quote unquote), I would be highly unlikely to make it. Teachers cooed at the well-off and slightly neurotic parents about the brilliance of their offspring and shot disgusted glances at me. However, I was lucky to be taught in Year 6 by the one teacher who had some care for what was going on with me.

I made it in, to the disdain and envy of many. I made it in, not just to a selective high school, but to the most highly regarded school in the area. (I should add, perhaps, that no one else from my small and unremarkable primary school has made it to that school ever since. It is hardly surprising.)

As I write this, I am acutely aware of the need to strip my writing of much of its emotion. To aim for objectivity in describing those wasted and lost years is supposedly to aim for validity.

I could go on for hours and hours, carefully elaborating on events that sting even now. But I don't feel bitter, even if I was deprived of the basic right to belong to the world around me.

Now, I stand tall and give as good as I get. I feel real.

Education has set me free. Knowledge is power, and that's a fact so simple it'll probably be a political slogan one day. However, school was the place where I was first made aware of my own lack of power in society.

My life today is due in no small part to my later years of education, which helped me to be the very best I could be. I hate to talk in cliches, and life rarely fits the preciseness of words. All I can say, inarticulately and gratefully, is that it was wonderful.

Okay, so it wasn't perfect. There is no need to write rosy, lyrical descriptions. However, selective high schools are exciting places to grow in. My high school was a place which taught you that you mattered. It empowered you to change the world as a socially and politically aware being.

I believe in public comprehensive education. I believe it is based on fundamental concepts of equity. I am torn between the need for egalitarianism and equality of opportunity (often denied me due to financial constraints) and the need for an education which is tailored to the needs of all individuals.

What if I hadn't been successful in that multiple-choice test, sat long ago on a sunny day in 1994? I am acutely aware that the great secondary school education I received was almost a matter of luck. There is no doubt in my mind that the selective schools test is based on extremely 'selective' (no pun intended) criteria and that its focus on standardised convergent thinking does discriminate against working-class individuals such as myself.

Here, I must resist the urge to quote my IQ score or use all sorts of complicated sociological terms in an effort to sound impressive, authoritative and 'educated' in the conventional sense of the word. After all, what am I trying to prove? Class assumptions made about me in my childhood have been internalised to a shameful extent.

Today, I feel like somewhat of a half-caste. I attend a sandstone university on a prestigious scholarship. I am the President of my faculty society. I rack up High Distinctions and coach at a private school, which I love despite my own left-wing misgivings about the role I am playing in the reproduction of the social hierarchy.

I can't talk to the people who live near me without being accused of pretension or snobbery or both. I grimace at what I see as their superficiality and ignorance. I feel, with the arrogance of youth (and it is arrogance) that I am somehow greater than them. I see myself as an intellectual, but reject the so-called 'elitism' which is seen to come hand-in-hand with the image.

Among those at university, I also feel somewhat displaced – even when I'm with friends. I don't live or want to live on the North Shore. My father isn't an executive, but an intelligent man who was denied an education because of the poverty of his family. The waste of working-class talent is colossal. And no one understands why these things are so important.

I am aware that my account is somewhat fragmented and incoherent. I am aware that I am an anomaly, a 19 year-old who came unbidden to a world which often refused to support her. The fact that I want to become a teacher is only due to the fact that I did have some wonderful teachers later on. They really did care about me. And in this, is embedded a value judgment: they thought I was worth caring about.

But how many times does it take? How many times do you ignore a child before that child believes it does not have the right to be listened to? How many times do you tell a child to shut up before she will – forever?

Gifted students are often disadvantaged. So are students with sensory impairments. And socio-economically deprived students. Did anyone care about that 10 year-old girl from a struggling sole parent family? No. That 10 year-old grew up to be a university-educated student who is now on her way to a double Honours degree and, eventually, a doctorate. But I am one of the lucky ones.

Some impassioned voice within me calls for a revolution of sorts. But how easy is it for anyone to make sense of the world in which I and so many others have lived?

Writing about my experiences, even in an article where I have chosen to reveal so little, has been a bit like peeling an onion. I can also feel the layers slowly being stripped off, but I cannot attempt an autobiography. Rewriting Angela's Ashes is out of the question.

I have a bright future and a hectic but rewarding present. But will I ever get my past out of my system?

Anne McDonald, a victim of cerebral palsy wrongfully imprisoned in an institution for the mentally retarded, demanded that we 'free the still imprisoned' after her release. So many members of our society are still imprisoned. We cannot forget the voiceless.

Voltaire once said 'I may not like what you say, but I will defend to my death your right to say it'. I've worked with and listened to disadvantaged children on a daily basis. Their voices are confronting, and easily dismissed through lack of understanding.

But they are still voices. And they are still valid.

I cannot privilege my voice over any other, just as I cannot presume to talk for anyone but myself.

If there's any concrete point in my writing, it is that alternate voices must be sought out and listened to.

Otherwise, we can never free the still imprisoned.

Coffee Table Contributions

Q1 How did you first encounter/become aware of homeschooling?

- In the beginning... At first we were blissfully unaware that our child, a girl, was gifted. We thought it perfectly normal that she could do the things she did. We lived on a high, this child we were blessed with, we knew I couldn't have any more. One of our friends did try to tell us about giftedness, he even gave us some reading material. I said thank you, smiled and put it into a drawer for later. As first time parents, we were inundated with well meaning advice on pregnancy and child behaviour. We thought he was just being kind about some of the behavioural problems we were experiencing.

When she was four, I approached the local school asking for advice; my daughter had been writing for some time and would only use capital letters, when asked she told us that writing is for communication and she was communicating, I couldn't see anything wrong with that logic. But, I wanted the advice of a professional, will this become a problem when she went to school at age six.

The abuse I got from the head mistress could be heard at the other end of the school. How dare I teach her, I mumbled that every thing my daughter has learnt was self-taught. Impossible, she says, my daughter who sat curled into a ball on my lap and I, listened, stunned. As we stumbled out, a Grade 1 teacher stopped us, she had heard the abuse and suggested we home school until our daughter was 10. On leaving she gave us the phone number of a lady who taught her teenage daughter using the Christian group called ACE. We were too numb to pay much heed but thanked her. By the time we got home the shock had turned into anger. I began writing letters to the education department etc.

Outcome she was emotionally too young to go to school - wait 2 years. Frustrated to the max – I began to look at other schools

- I read John Holt's [How Children Learn](#) and [How Children Fail](#) and there was mention of [Teach Your Own](#) so I ordered the book. We decided to go on a long trip and met homeschooling families at the Family Tent during the 1986 Confest. The idea began to take hold.
- I had never heard of homeschooling until a university lecturer in education recommended that I pursue this option for my son due to his being potentially profoundly gifted.
- I came across a parent's forum based in the US, and read about homeschooling there for the first time. I didn't know any other homeschooling families when we started to homeschool in 2001.
- First heard of it over 15 years ago on Oprah <g> and never really forgot how different the little homeschooler interviewed was. Five years ago when I took my son out of school I tried to get him into a government run correspondence programme and was surprised to find that in NSW that is not allowed unless you are travelling or your child is disabled. We were advised by the Dept. of Ed. that homeschool was an option and went on a big research spree.

Q2 How long have you been homeschooling?

- 2.5 years
- 6 years
- 2 years
- 15+ years
- 5 years

Q3 What made you decide to homeschool?

- Have thought about it a lot over the years and know several families who home school. Initially it was because we didn't like a lot about the curriculum content, even in a Christian school. Also peer influence/socialisation, which further down the track leads to issues like drugs etc. Can't protect them from everything, I know. We noticed how friend's kids would go through a personality change when they went to school and often became disrespectful to adults and came home with some anti-authoritarian indoctrinations, even at the age of 5/6.

We believe that home is a much safer and loving environment (usually). Did LOTS of reading about it, particularly hubby. Saw lots of other advantages like no working bees, no school fees, not having to get out the door by 9, we can take our holidays when we want and structure the year to our needs. It gives us ! much more scope and flexibility with our children's education. We are also travel philes and intend taking long trips, which home schooling lends itself to. In the end it came down to personal conviction that it was right for our family, but there are days/weeks where you feel like throwing it all in and having some "space" to yourself and you wonder if you are doing more harm than good. But then you just have to read through a couple of mailing lists and you realise you'd only be swapping one set of problems for another. We find that it challenges you a lot to home school as it confronts you about your own weaknesses, ways of thinking etc and turns you (if you let it) into a better person, I believe. To send them to school you could just pass the responsibility on to the teacher and stick your head in the sand.

- A particular focus for us with homeschooling is character development, which we can work on as a family. Being homeschooled also means that you have to work harder at relationships, because you actually live with the people. You can't just drop people and find another group of friends. Again, this is character development.
- A long-term personal interest in education; being fully involved in Play Group and Kindergarten; not wanting to be separated from our daughter during the week (we had a weekend business). The birth of our son a month before April would have started school clinched it - we didn't want her to feel pushed out; the writings of John Holt; and a need to be in control and to continue to be involved in our children's education.
- (The) school refused to be flexible and see that my child was gifted. They also had not realised he was LD. The LD was masking the giftedness but they refused to work with me in solving his problems. The key issue though was the child feeling there was something wrong with him because he could not fit in and make friends. He was getting depressed and also acting out aggressively at home.
- I was not able to negotiate a workable compromise with my child's school in regards to bringing together the disparity between his tested achievement levels and the classroom work. The child's infancy was marked by considerable behavioural difficulties which school experience contributed to. These difficulties have been ameliorated in the home environment through the recognition of the differences in subjective perception of sensory and emotional input experienced by very gifted children along with the design of an educational program which is sensitive to the asynchronous needs of the student. The student has therefore avoided being labelled as a behaviour problem and avoided loss of potential, motivation and self-identity seen in similar schooled children.
- We found the local school and teachers and just the education system in general lacking. We found out once we started that homeschool is ultimately a better environment to learn in than school.
- While doing the annual spring clean I came across the gifted papers our friend had given us, ages ago. Procrastination set in and I began reading, it was simply amazing, I couldn't believe what I was reading, I rang our friend and he offered to have her tested – Results IQ 185+
- Knowing she was gifted solved a lot of problems but boy, did it create some new ones. Our search for education became stronger. We rang up the Ace lady and she invited us to a home school camp, some of the parents

used the Ace system, some Distant Ed, while others did their own thing. What a lovely experience, the kids, about 100 of them, were really nice kids. All helping each other and well adjusted socially (this was a major concern as our daughter was not a social butterfly). So we decided to give it a go, not an easy choice as our families and some of our friends were very negative about our decision.

- Both children started off at public schools. The eldest became more and more unhappy, and eventually we arranged an educational assessment. This assessment showed that his learning abilities were very wide ranging and that the local school was not the best fit for his particular needs. After doing some reading and research about G/LD, the advantages of homeschooling became more and more apparent, and this provided the impetus to give homeschooling a go. Attending the NSW State Conference in May last year was also very worthwhile.

Q4 What are the reasons we continue to homeschool?

- Continued inability to find a school which could meet the needs specific to this child. Horizontal curriculum planning and varying levels of achievement across different subjects cause a problem.
- Now that we have had our son formally assessed and we have had the chance to become more literate on gifted issues we are only further convinced we are doing the right thing. We have noticed that bullying is a particular problem when we are out in public places, so this would only be aggravated in a school environment. We believe he would not get the intellectual stimulation he needs in a school.
- Being able to be flexible about so many aspects regarding education. Being able to cover things in line with the children's interest, rather than just because Grade X should be studying a certain topic this year. Being able to provide a consistent curriculum, despite the fact we average moving every 1.5 years due to work commitments. (In our experience, the differences between states in curriculums, and in provision for gifted children, has been marked). Homeschooling allows both children to work at their own level, and gain confidence about their own abilities.
- The everyday outcomes and results. Our family grew in love and respect for each other, we enjoyed each other's company, we grew close as a family and loved doing things together. I was amazed at how much the children had to teach me about the process of learning. Most of all I loved the way the children naturally learned to compromise and cooperate and the fact that they remain very close friends into adulthood.

Q5 How do you keep track of your child's progress?

- Not feeling very confident in inventing our own education system, we opted for the structure of Ace, this also took some of the pressure off, from our families. The Ace system uses a test to determine the child's level in each subject, then starts the child at a level slightly below their ability, this way the work is easy while they get used to the idea – it's an American system, very thorough & they send out report cards.

At 4½ she began grade 3 Ace, mostly she enjoys the work, tho it is a bit heavy on the Christian bit. Each book contains a test and workbook. During the primary years we would give her the test if she got 95 or higher she didn't have to do the work book.

The last couple of years she has entered the NSW Uni competitions, they only allow her to do her age grade level, but we feel this will keep any official happy, after all, that is the level she is supposed to be doing and they use the test in most schools in Australia.

What is she doing now? Officially she should be in grade 7 this year. We found as the years went by our confidence grew, and started supplementing her studies with books from Dymocks or Computer Education packages.

We could have continued with Ace only, lots of families do, it is very efficient. But we kept thinking - what if our daughter wanted to go to school, she may not be advanced several grades if she continues to learn a curriculum that is designed differently to the Australian system. For example in math - addition is taught only, and then when the student is proficient in that, minus is introduced, the Australian curriculum does a mixture of math. At present we use 20 percent Ace, the remainder is books & Computer software. She has nearly finished General Science Grade 12 (Excel HSC). Slowly working through Physics and Chemistry Ace with a mixture of other books. In Math she has finished General Math and is now working on Advanced Math (Grade 11) Writing skills hold her back, mostly this is a motor skill problem. I shouldn't say problem she has good motor skills for her physical age. Her English is about grade 8 level, mainly due to motor skills and her complete boredom with learning grammar rules.

She is not very good at writing about a topic called "What I did on holidays" but excellent at writing a science report. To assist her motor skills we include typing We visualise a lap-top when going to uni for note taking. She also studies music - AMEB Theory she will go for her 5th grade in May. In AMEB Violin she will go for her 8th grade in August. Note - She is more than ready to do the violin exam, but has to work hard on her theory exam cos of her motor skills, in music one must go with the other.

- I have a column for each day in an account keeping book (one week per double page), with the left hand column having certain subjects, jobs, social activities, physical activity, character development. I then record brief notes as we go through the day (which is far more than any school keeps on individual students!). I have kept most of the written work in folders and cull them at the end of the year. Phonics is ongoing, maths tends to be completely culled. Still juggling things as we get more settled. I record "test" results against relevant subjects. Some families I know of have their children assessed at the end of each year by a professional teacher so they have a piece of paper with the signature of an accredited person certifying what level their child is up to. We don't see the need for this. Home schooling lends itself to be very in tune with where a child is up to.
- This varies. I've done just about everything, including writing report cards, diaries, calendars, scrap books (for excursions, different subjects, for each child), checklists, summaries, portfolios and work samples. We never stuck to any one method for longer than about six months, and our recording became haphazard - usually when we needed to do it, to boost confidence in homeschooling or our approach to learning, or when we needed to prove the educational attainment of the children to others (the educational authorities or for employment needs).
- By working with them every day I have a good idea of their progress. I do keep portfolios as a record (as part of the NSW registration requirements). I don't feel tied to ticking off all the outcomes and objectives provided by the BOS, but I do use these as a guide when planning.

Q6 How could your homeschooling experience be improved?

- Having access to like minded people on internet lists has been a huge help. There were a couple of people who went out of their way to encourage us as we started homeschooling and that was fantastic. I think linking up with others in the local area would also make things easier. Also, being able to share resources rather than purchasing things would help a lot.
- Spending more time listening and talking with the children, really listening, fully attentive. That's hard to do, even after all this time. Becoming more democratic as a family - involving the children in everyday decision making about what we are doing at any one time and why. Being more physically active, getting rid of the television. I would have liked to read aloud more often but my sinus and asthma made that difficult. Setting different priorities - building two houses over 15 years, on a low income, left little money for having fun, trips away, taking up expensive hobbies or sports (other than Lego and computer, which we somehow managed!) Overall though,

I'm exceptionally happy with how life has turned out - I have three wonderful children aged 21, 19 and 15 who are simply beautiful, sociable children who delight in loving each other and their parents, and who believe they can do anything, learn anything, anytime. In short, my homeschooling goals have been achieved. What more could I ask for?

- Regular meetings with a small group of like-minded people with whom parent and child could build relationships. More games. more time for Mother by herself. None of these are really a problem though.
- More money and a housekeeper would be nice. I think traveling is one of the best ways to learn about our world and the people in it - that's where more money would be nice :o) With all members of the family home all day there's a lot of activity going on - that's the housekeeper part. But, seriously, we are just so pleased with how it is all working for our family that there's nothing we would change at this stage. The laws regarding homeschool are stressful rather than supportive so to see changes made there in the favour of homeschoolers would be fantastic.
- Our home schooling experience could be improved by: better networking with other homeschoolers (for social interaction and sporting activities for the kids); a pool of resources, particularly scientific equipment; or access to school laboratories. a "talent" pool so that people with areas of specific expertise provide workshops/activities eg foreign languages, electronics, mechanics, kite making. forming home schooling teams to enter national competitions maybe a camping weekend/week once a year to all get together.
- Financial aid would be nice. Most of us have to survive on one wage while home schooling. Though, there are some super mums and dads who manage to work from home as well. Tutor or Teacher Service. People who are trained to assist gifted children and can help parents with the tricky Questions, that they really have no interest in discovering.

How can Schools be improved? Unfortunately schools are unable to teach the way my daughter learns. Life would be a lot less stressful for us, if they could. Switching from teacher mode to parent can be difficult, especially as the child gets older and their interests are different to the parent. Personally I do not want to learn the high end math like she does. Some teachers even feel threatened by a child who is different. We have special schools like the school in Sydney for those kids who have acting or dance etc potential why not schools for gifted? I noticed when my daughter went to gifted group outings, she felt she could be herself, each kid accepted the other for the way they were. Note the above information are our thoughts and feelings, we hope they will be of some assistance to others, we have not intentionally meant to upset anyone with the above content. Accept our apologies if we have.

- Having a central meeting point to make contact with other gifted homeschoolers, sharing resources and making social contacts for child and parent. I would benefit from a more positive attitude from society in general towards homeschooling as I came to it from a very painful and exhausting process of attempting to meet my child's needs and have taken responsibility where other systems have failed to do so. As many perceptions about homeschooling seem to be based on myths or anecdotal evidence rather than our reality it is a compromising factor in socialising with the community in general if one is continually confronted with ignorance and discriminatory attitudes. As homeschoolers are often criticised for being unable to provide the supposedly sociable experience of formal schooling, it would seem that a more positive attitude from the community would only serve to ameliorate that perceived inadequacy.

The Graffiti Wall

We do not have the resources

He will be bullied

She will have problems when the others go through Puberty and she doesn't

The other students might exploit him

We haven't had time to assess him properly.

Doing well in a small class does not mean a high achievement in standardised terms (re PG child)

You do not have the resources.

He will be smaller than the other children

But what about when the other children are all driving?

His scissor skills will prevent him from keeping up if he is accelerated into yr3

She may be ahead now, but it all evens out later on.

IQ tests can be inaccurate in young children

I don't want you to expect too much

You need to let her be a (insert age) year old

Talking will hold him back

Nothing that he's accomplished counts for anything as, even though I've never met him I'm sure he is too immature to be included.

I don't think giftedness is the issue

Basic skills tests do not necessarily reflect functioning level

She needs to learn how to socialise so this needs to stop as she'll be psychologically damaged by this.

Even though he is 4 years ahead of his age, he needs to do the age appropriate work so he doesn't fall behind in later years by not reinforcing the basic skills.

We don't have behaviour problems in our selective classes (re PG ADHD child)

Teaching, Testing & Disabilities

I am a retired high school teacher, and also a mother who has seen my children, and now my grandchildren go through the school system. I am very interested in the debate over testing, not only for placement in selective schools, but also the primary school testing, which is taken as an indication for grade placement in year 7.

I think these written IQ tests may have a part to play in a school, to see which children would benefit from extension work, etc; but more specific tests are needed to truly test the whole of a child's potential.

Each child should have a comprehensive one-on-one test (oral as well as written components), to truly test ability levels in all aspects of education, including social interaction, not just reading, comprehension and mathematics.

Of course, this would need trained testers, and many of them, so it is dismissed as a pipe-dream.

There are times when I think things have not progressed much past where they were when I went through Teachers College in the early 1960's. We were told then: "Don't worry about the bright children, they will learn in spite of you. The hard part is teaching the dull children".

Of course what we didn't know in those unenlightened days, was that the children coming into high school who could not read or write, had some kind of disability. We had not heard of dyslexia, autism, ADD, etc; so struggled along with these children until they were old enough to leave school. We now know that some of the children suffering from these symptoms are very, very bright, but the disability leads to difficulties in performing to their true capability. They also may have difficulty relating in an appropriate manner to other members of the school population. This leads to bullying and ostracism by both students and teachers often, and is the sure sign that the child has been failed by the education system.

Back in 1966 I was teaching in a Sydney high school, and had a class of so-called "dull" children. One boy, about 14 or 15 years old, was very badly affected by spasticity, and had difficulty dragging himself around

with the aid of two canes. His hand muscles were so badly affected, he had great difficulty forming letters, so his writing was all but unreadable. For some reason, these disabilities gave the impression that he was not very capable, even of understanding the lessons given to the class. Imagine my surprise when one day he had on his desk a copy of "The Rise and Fall of the Holy Roman Empire". I found that he could read and comprehend at a very high standard, it was just his movement that was restricted. This was a lesson for me, and I now wonder how many of his other teachers realised his potential.

Ten years ago, I was teaching privately a year 7 girl with dyslexia. She had been tested orally as having an IQ of 125, but because of her inability to read letters and numbers that kept moving about on the page, she was in the lowest class in her year. Then, when in year 9 her doctor discovered some medication to help with dyslexia, she began performing to her potential, and gradually moved up through the classes until she was with other pupils of her IQ equivalent. She went through to year 12, and has worked in insurance since. How many of the other "dull" students may have been helped if their disability had been recognised and treated.

I know when I was teaching, the school system had not the knowledge or capability to recognise or help overcome these disabilities. But it seems that nothing much has changed today. When a school principal can turn away a prospective very bright pupil because he has ADD, even though he is on medication, it seems as though these things are still not understood by the very people who should be working to find solutions.

This means more trained personnel, first to teach the principals and teachers that there are solutions, and second to put enough trained counsellors in each school to be able to work out solutions for each child.

Each school needs enough support staff to work in the school every day of the week, not just one counsellor, one day a week, to be able to help the teachers through these problems. After all it is supposed to be the students who benefit from their

time at school, but often they are so misunderstood, that school becomes hell to them.

And, of course the teachers do try to get some satisfaction from their job, but the complete lack of resources, and ever-increasing work loads only lead to ever more dissatisfaction. It is the bureaucracy which keeps blaming its shortcomings on the people who are pleading for help.

I know schools perceived to be disadvantaged economically, have grants allowed for extra resources (teachers aides etc), and also students with some specific disabilities are allotted a tutor to help them in school for a certain number of hours a week. However, when the money runs out, it is not automatically replaced (in the country at least), and the help is withdrawn. The children and teachers have to struggle on regardless. Is it any wonder that teachers and parents consider there is a state of crisis in our schools?

Our governments are constantly denigrating the efforts of teachers, with the result that many who are

most passionate and idealistic about their job, become quite cynical and frustrated with their working conditions, and move on to something else. I know not all teachers are dedicated to working in poor conditions, for small salaries, with the hope that they can benefit the children in their care, but the great majority are. Better training, geared to present day conditions in schools, and a better knowledge of the symptoms of the disabilities they will face, could completely turn around the education system in Australia.

The reason so many parents have felt compelled to home-school their children, is simply to give the children a fair go, but the truth is, if the education department was doing its job properly, there would be no need for an alternative. The education department registers these children and their parents, recognising, apparently, its own shortcomings. Isn't it high time the government bit the bullet on this subject, and actually did something constructive?

Editors note: Since this article was published, the NSW government has increased the number of educational counsellors substantially.

The Individual Testing Experience

This page is the result of an informal, anonymous email survey for parents of gifted children by parents of gifted children carried out in recent years. I thank all parents that took time to contribute their experiences for the benefit of others.

1.The age your child/ren were initially tested?

- Son 5y 4m Daughter 4y 8m
- 6 years 2 months
- Child 1 aged 7years 6months; Child 2 aged 9.
- He was tested at 3 years 2 months
- His first IQ test was at age 5
- 3 years 1 month 17days
- At age 3 years and 10 months
- 6 years 3 months of age

2.Reasons for referral:

- Reasons for referral - concerned school principal believed my child was gifted and was considering acceleration in kindergarten. In the absence of knowledge about GERRIC I used a private practitioner.

- Son - by teacher as she suspected he may be gifted. Daughter - by us for our own peace of mind. My daughter had been allowed very early entry at 3y 2m and we wanted reassurance that we were doing the right thing and expectations were not too high.
- Brick wall at the school. When approached teacher that child was reading adolescent novels at home and age appropriate books at school, was told "but does she understand what she's reading? I think not." To which child promptly proved teacher wrong. Child complained of boredom at school - teacher's approach to students was a definite incentive - probably suffering from post-natal depression and, in my opinion, shouldn't have been teaching (and the opinion of a few other parents by the way).
- He had become disruptive in Kindy. He was hard to handle at home. It was suggested to me that he was in fact gifted and we needed to make some educational decisions earlier rather than later.
- Child 1: Lack of reading; child 2: boredom at school, unhappy.
- Longstanding behavioral difficulties, over excitability, over activity, extreme frustration, unco-operativeness, impulsiveness, lack of patience, "insatiability".
- I wanted her to attend preschool in 2002 and the preschool said she would not get in unless she had special needs. The fact that her father had just died and I needed a little time-out (she is pretty full on when awake!!) was not considered enough. As she was already reading well, they suggested I get her tested.
- 1.Suspected she was gifted and wanted some confirmation...out of interest really. 2.School wanted their own assessment done ...I wanted to see what year level she was working at...but this wasn't done. 3. Ammunition for acceleration.

3.Which test(s) were used and what was the cost of the testing to you?

- Child 1: WISC III (\$360, 1995 no rebate); Child 2: WISC III (\$110, 1993)
- Son- WISC III, even though he was too young at the time, administered by the school psych for no fee. Daughter- WIPPSI, private, cost £350. This was only for the testing and report, no other consult.
- Weschler Intelligence Scale for children -111, Cost \$90 and a tank of petrol to get child to tester.
- WPPSI-R was used. It cost \$425.
- WPPSI which cost about \$350 with pensioner discount from private psychological practice by a Bachelor of Behavioural Science. In later testing the SBLM cost a similar amount. Other testing was covered by school fees or Dept Ed.
- WPPSI-R cost me about \$400
- 1.MCarthy Scales (cost a carton of beer- it was a friend)
- Test used was Wechsler III at a cost of \$390 to me.

4. Were you happy with the venue and the way the tester related to your child? If not why not?

- Son- we were unaware of when it was happening, had never met the school psych and still do not know where, how long etc. However our son came home very excited by it all and had had a great time!
- Son- The venue was awful, a room in a business complex on an industrial site. It had no pictures/toys, and very little furniture. It was a cold room. In her defence, I don't think the psychologist had been there long. She did not relate that well to my daughter. I later heard she prefers to work with older children. She did the WIPPSI and educational tests in one go, taking three hours, which we were not expecting. This was far too long and my daughter was very tired after and not that excited by the process.
- Yes, bearing in mind that I have nothing really to compare it to.
- I was very happy with the venue and, at the time, with the attitude of the tester.
- Child 1: Yes, large and airy and took over 3.5 hours and quiet; Child 2: yes
- It was done and my home which I thought was good for him being so young. The tester didn't relate to my child at all well. He made no effort with him. It felt to me that he was just after the money and didn't care about the results he obtained. No encouragement was given to my son when he performed well and therefore he stopped trying. I also feel that the psychologist was just interested in getting it finished and didn't give my son enough breaks. Testing went for 3 hours and by the end my son was not at all interested in the testing and tasks performed at the end when done very badly. I think you should make sure that they don't go over 1.5 hours for children so young.
- The venue seemed appropriate and I did not notice any difficulties between the tester and the child, although she did seem a bit taken aback with my vehemence that I get a result that explained the difficulties I was seeing in my child.
- A small office was used to test her. The Principal Psychologist examined her and was able to gain her trust very quickly. She appeared to enjoy most of the tasks. He was quick to notice when she tired of answering questions, and he gave her appropriate breaks to have a snack. I was allowed to remain with her, but there was no need for me to do or say anything. We both enjoyed the whole experience.
- 1. She loved this testing...he was wonderful and she felt very comfortable.
- 3. Yes...Yes Yes Yes...wonderful tester...child felt totally at ease.

5. Were you happy with the test that was used?

- Child 1: Didn't know of any others; Child 2: Didn't ask, didn't say there were choices!
- I was happy at the time with the results, even though my child was assessed in strongly worded terms as "moderately gifted" (I did not know about "ceilings" on the Wechsler III) and the school principal used her own judgment (maybe she knew about ceilings?) to do the acceleration anyway.
- Son- would have been happier if she had used the correct test for his age. - WISC III 18 months later. - SB-LM
- Daughter - Yes

- I was happy with the test that was chosen. I just wasn't happy with the tester. I feel that I didn't do enough research myself into getting the right person (this one was suggested by the paediatrician). I think he had no previous experience with gifted children.
- The test was appropriate for the age of the child and the purpose of assessment. He was actually being tested for ADHD and the IQ test was considered an indicator via certain discrepancies between sub-tests.
- I had no real idea what to expect. I thought he would at least ask her to read, in order to gauge her reading age (he didn't). But I was happy with the tasks he did in the test.
- Unfortunately not well known in this country and so of little use to anyone but me. But I thought the test was excellent and gave me a lot of useful info.

6. If your child has been subsequently tested, which test(s) have been employed?

- Knew she was at the upper age limit, they only offered the WISC III Child 2 tested again at 16.9 years
- My child was subsequently tested, on the advice once again of the school principal, two and a half years later, as she believed the initial IQ results were inadequate and that my child might be far more gifted. She recommended (a testing service at a prestigious university) - similar cost - Stanford Binet L-M. A very much different result was obtained!
- Lots of tests at the school, all without my knowledge until an IEP was attempted last year, where all sorts of tests and results were inserted in the boxes - is that legal?
- No subsequent testing has been done to date.
- My son has been retested at age 7 on the WISCIII and the Stanford-Binet at age 8 years 8 months. He has also sat a wide range of achievement tests for maths, reading and spelling including the Woodcock-Johnson, Neal Reading Analysis, APTS, TORCH, Key-Math Diagnostic. He has also had tests for motor and coordination problems, auditory and visual processing problems including the Bruininks- Oseretsky, the TOVA, Ayers clinical obs - the latter free via public health system.
- Too soon to do any other tests
- 2. age 4.4 - Boehm-R Form C, Beery Developmental Test of Visual-Motor Integration, Vane Kingegarden Draw a Man, Coloured Progressive Matrices (cost nothing(about what it was worth) - done by school).
- 3. age 5.9 - Stanford Binet Intelligence Scale: L-M Version (\$ 500 which included some costs to bring tester).

7. Were you happy with the venue and how the tester related to your child?

- I was happy with the venue at the university and how the tester related to my child
- The subsequent WISC was given by a psych with some experience with gifted children. Excellent environment, she treated my son with respect and as an equal and he enjoyed himself. The SB-LM was given by a psychologist at a university.
- Tester was female (same as child), young and very good with children - very happy
- This can be a hard question to answer because most testing occurs out of sight of the parent. I have no memory of any particular problems with any of the testing.
- 2. No... I was not consulted before hand and I was unhappy with the way the assessment was done and the follow up discussion. Tester was anti-gifted and anti-gifted-parents. It was very rushed and tested stereotyped my child after only seeing her for half an hour.

8. Were you happy with the result/did you get the result expected?

- For our son, the first WISC surprised us greatly, we had no idea that he may be gifted. Second test gave similar results but with far more interpretation and useful information that gave us a greater deal of understanding. We also had an hour and a half follow up to talk through the results and where to go with them. The SB-LM was another shock - probably the greatest as it put him into the PG range.
- With our daughter - this result was a disappointment and we did not feel that the tester brought the best out in her, especially as she was so tired. Also the tester commented that she only attempted things she knew she could do, and the tester didn't push her to try the things that she wasn't so sure about! While she did score gifted it didn't satisfy our need for information as there still seemed much remaining hidden.
- Happy may not be the correct term for our reaction to the result - pleasantly surprised is pretty close to how we felt - furious with the staff at school that they either didn't pick up on child's intelligence or ignored obvious signs of high intelligence. (the good old head in the sand approach).
- Child 1: Yes - but didn't know then what sub-tests meant and it was never mentioned. Child 2: No, they averaged all sub-tests and she came out average. No written report, no follow up. Two lines of recommendation said to "leave her be".
- No there was a 37 point discrepancy/ Verbal higher IQ and it came out 'average'. *(Editor's note: IQ tests are made up of several smaller tests of different skills. A normal result will have small discrepancies between sub-tests, an LD or GLD person will have large discrepancies. It is possible for a GLD person to be in the lowest 5% for some tests and highest 5% for others. When averaged, this student may obtain a 'normal' score but their learning needs are not at all normal).*
- The result was a shock!! I knew she was bright but 160??? No I did not expect that at all, but I am happy.
- I was obviously happier with the second result than with the first - and surprised! I was unprepared as I had expected a much smaller difference from the first, given the wording by the psychologist, although I should have believed the school principal (still did not know about "ceilings!!").
- I got the results expected but not the correct interpretation of the results. The examiner had absolutely no idea how to interpret the results on the WPPSI-R when the child hit the ceiling on most sub-tests.

- I have noticed a discrepancy over the years and extensive testing history between the results of group testing and those of individual testing, other than when off-level testing has been used. There have been some anomalous results ...when viewed against the rest of the tests. I think some of them can be put down to the student just not attending at that particular time. Some of the testing can be quite long if they begin testing at chronological age level and go through all the grades till they reach the ceiling of the test - this puts the most gifted students at a bit of a disadvantage as they can get tired and sick of doing the test. I think in these cases, where it is obvious that the test is going to be a long one, it should be broken down into two lots rather than obtaining a false report. Knowledge about off-level testing needs to be more widely available and the limitations of timed group tests, which are a particular concern when they are used to exclude the most gifted children from selective class environments. The mark gained by the younger child should not be required to be higher than the older child as I see this as discriminatory and can see no justifiable basis for adding extra hurdles to the at risk education of very gifted children.
- On the whole, I have been very happy with the results obtained from the tests that my son has completed. Apart from the odd anomaly, he never ceases to amaze me with his enthusiasm, application and wisdom.
- We got more than we bargained for. Absolutely thrilled and petrified.
- 2. No...a waste of time...telling us things we already knew and very general. 3. Extremely Happy....

9. Were you happy with the way the results were employed by those you have shared them with?

- Yes...the school has been wonderfully supportive and we got the two year acceleration we wanted. I don't think we would have got this without the SB L-M.
- I have found the results of the testing to be very useful in negotiating my child's education.
- For both children the school has taken the results on board and used them. They seem to give the school courage to take great steps, radical acceleration and moving through subjects at a pace.
- Not at all - classic case of pushing the proverbial up a very steep hill. Initial reaction of the Principal was: "But these tests are just an indication, they don't really prove anything....." Blown away by the complete lack of willingness to learn by a group of "educators". For the school community, an opportunity to learn and grow has been lost because of prejudice and bias..... Child has been transferred to another, more sympathetic education establishment - so sad for all concerned, not the least the child who has spent 4 out of 8 years with the same group of children. Could only be described as a tragedy for all concerned.
- Child 2: Didn't share the results; Child 1: Yes, we knew her issues mostly already. Verbal higher. There was a 37 point discrepancy. It came out "average".
- Even with the bad interpretation of the results that I obtained I have been able to use it to get my son into preschool a year early, which is what we wanted to achieve in the first place. I do feel, however, that we will need to get another assessment done at the end of the year if we have any chance of early entry to school.
- No, school didn't read report or act on recommendations.
- The answer to this question is, unfortunately, no. I have never been happy with the responses to my son's test results from the schools he was attending or whom I have approached. He was offered a grade skip after kinder but as he had started late (being born later in June), it was not seen as much of an amelioration of his educational issues. He did obtain one radical acceleration but that too was fraught with conflicts between his approach to learning and the content level of his own work and the lack of depth in the school work offered. His

emotional sensitivities have never been well understood and there has been nobody at the schools he attended who was able to help me to understand this aspect - it is something that I learned from other sources. Highly gifted children are still viewed through the lens of the average child and not understood and validated for who and what they are and this shows through in how their behavior is approached by schools. While later tests were done more to access better education than for our benefit alone, the first test was probably the most valuable in terms of educating me about my son's needs. The advice I received that he was already underachieving for his IQ and that I should begin teaching him was, in retrospect probably the best advice I ever got in terms of improving the quality of his life experience and our relationship.

- Well, she starts pre-school on the 1st of February 2002, so I am very pleased the test has helped that. And I think I have found the perfect school for her..... this school will support me in home schooling her until she is ready to join her class, whether that is later this year or early next year. She will have the same teacher all her primary years and this school really does seem to cater for the gifted child very well

10. Do you have any recommendations to other parents for how to prepare themselves and their child for an individual testing occasion?

- Education is very important for the parent in order to be able to judge who will be a good assessor and test for their needs/child. Word of mouth is the best reference, particularly where someone has a child with very similar characteristics. Individual testing is not like a competition and so should not be a source of stress. The child is not competing, just doing what is comfortable for them to do - providing they do not have to wade through 6 grades of math or reading before beginning to falter. The best testers of your child may be as difficult to find as a needle in a hay stack. A good tester will make you feel comfortable not uncomfortable. If you feel uncomfortable it could be because the tester is not empathetic with your experiences and if they are not you have to ask yourself how they are going to help you? You need someone with experience in testing gifted children and even highly gifted children otherwise your money could be wasted. You can ask potential testers what are the typical needs they test for?
- Try to tell the tester what your fears are as they are perfectly normal. The tester should put you at ease by explaining things to you rather than expect you not to have any anxieties. It is normal to feel anxious when there is something you don't understand as you would not be having your child tested if there was not something that needed clarification. It might be a good idea to have coffee with a friend while the test is taking place and meet up again after to discuss the experience. Sharing with them when the result comes in is also important. This is a very tense time for most parents as you just never know when you are going to get a surprise. Try to educate yourself before hand on the range of possible results and the reasons for them so that you have some framework to interpret the result and some familiarity with an appropriate response. With highly gifted children being tested from their chronological age-grade upwards, keep in mind that their result can be influenced by the length of the test. A tester who is competent in testing highly gifted children should allow for this in their interpretation but these people are few and far between. The testing of highly gifted children is thwarted by the instruments currently available for testing and this effects all kinds of testing including achievement testing, individual and group testing. Most school personnel have no understanding of this at all and little understanding of intelligence testing. Being aware of this going in will help you deal with the outcome better than I in my time when I always assumed the school would have a better interpretation of results than I and was surprised at the interpretations that did emerge.
- I would say take your time finding a tester. Go for a recommended person but perhaps by more than one person. Someone who has worked with gifted kids is essential and if possible meet the person when you make the initial enquiry/appointment. My children needed a lot of reassurance about being left with a stranger as well, that we wouldn't be far away etc.
- I feel that parents should do a great deal of research into selecting the right psychologist to perform the testing. An initial interview with the psychologist would be a good thing, especially to see whether they have a good

way with your child. A bad psychologist can make the whole experience horrible and useless. The best way to get your child ready for the testing, I feel, is to let them know that they are going to meet someone who is very interested in what they can do and is going to play a lot of games with them.

- Ask for recommendations. Talk to psych first alone. Do it in 2 x 1.5 hour lots. Ask for a thorough report and follow-up consultation. Ask the school will they give sub-tests scores - they did. never, ever let them give you percentiles raw scores, averages. Always ask for which test and a thorough report with subtests and explanations for any discrepancy between them.
- I did not prepare myself at all. The only preparation I gave to my daughter was to tell her: "A gentleman will ask you questions and you should answer as best you can. He will also give you tasks to do which you should attempt. Just do your best and if you don't know the answer, just say so and he will ask you a different question. It's OK if you can't do something very well, just try your best. I don't know exactly what he will ask, it will be a surprise for us both!"
- My child was quite unconcerned but, on both occasions, I felt nervous, as though I was peeking at something private that belonged to my child. Also, I had previously been suspicious of IQ testing at all as it seemed to me to "box" someone in to either a) having to live up to an unrealistically great expectation or, b) seem to judge that person as not able to aspire because of a low IQ. I was therefore nervous as if a sentence were being passed on my child. I was unprepared for the intensity of the feelings I experienced after the second test's unusual result. I felt shell-shocked and felt acutely the lack of anyone else to talk to who had undergone a similar experience. I have since met other parents who have felt like this. It took me some weeks to settle down and some months to really come to terms with the responsibility I now had and what a strange and wonderful being my child was in ways that I had not before considered. It also brought up some unexpected thoughts about myself and my abilities - and what I had and had not done with them. For a time immediately after my child's testing I felt the lack of appropriate emotional support. Perhaps this web page may help. Congratulations on this initiative!
- No..... I didn't "prepare" child for testing just told her to do her best and we'll go and get an ice cream afterwards..... Going into town was the occasion, secret about not telling anybody at school was a bit of fun too.... From memory, didn't tell child why testing was being done, although she probably worked it out as she listened to mother and father discuss the situation around the kitchen table. If asked for advice - I would suggest parents don't make the testing a big deal (like their life depends on it) and put child under too much pressure, or cause child to feel like a performing seal. Of course we're all different...
- Relax.....Don't try to prepare them too much. Tell them to enjoy themselves. As a parent...try not to get too hung up on the numbers...but understand that others may. Prepare yourself for what you are going to tell your child before hand so you don't say something you later regret telling them.

Independent Education Plan Pro-Forma

CURRENT INFORMATION

(Name)

Ability

(eg objective and subjective measures)

Achievements

(eg academic, arts, social, sporting)

Interests and learning strengths

(eg academic areas, learning style)

Personal

(eg introversion, social preferences, resilience, motivation)

EDUCATIONAL PLAN for (name)

Beginning date:

Duration:

School-based Essentials

Academic progress and remediation

Psychological adjustment and socialisation

When/how often

Who/how managed

Assessment of action

Homeschooling- The Doubtful Days

First, a little bit about our family. We have three children, a 7yods, a 3yodd and a 16mo daughter. This is our third (second serious) year of homeschooling. At first it was my husband who did the homeschooling (I lacked confidence, particularly with phonics). I took over towards the end of the first year, just before the birth of our third child. Up till this year we have been teaching one child, but have just started some basic phonics and maths with our three year old (whom we suspect is also gifted). I would love to say that it has been a joy and an easy decision to homeschool, but the reality is that there have been many difficult days and weeks where you wonder whether you can cope or whether you are perhaps doing more harm than good. What have been the main reasons for these days/weeks? For me it has been:

- Exhaustion (we have a baby), resulting in my moodiness and lack of patience;
- Uncertainty about how or what to teach;
- Unrealistic expectations of myself and our son (we are both perfectionists);
- Lack of support, both on the homeschooling and gifted front; and
- Not knowing for certain whether our son was gifted until a recent assessment (which subsequently explained much behaviour). The ongoing issue is how to keep him intellectually stimulated whilst teaching those things that are foundational, such as phonics and maths. I am becoming more creative as time goes by!

So, what has kept me/us going, when packing them off to school seems like a great idea? Some of the following have helped to keep us going:

- A supportive husband;
- A conviction that homeschooling is right for our family;
- My faith in God;
- Taking a step back and realising that our children are a blessing, and that it is a privilege to teach them and learn alongside them;
- Re-evaluating my expectations, goals and direction, sometimes stopping lessons for a while to let things settle down;
- Going through the advantages of homeschooling (write them down) and reminding myself that these are the reasons to keep going;
- Having a couple of friends that I could talk things through with;
- Recognising the fact that the tough times are temporary;
- Learning to talk more with my son and seek input from him about his learning;
- My determination and stubbornness; and
- Giving myself time out for me.

On occasions I have had to reassess expectations of both myself and my child. What am I really trying to achieve? Is the timeframe that I have set realistic and/or does it really matter? I find that it is me who is changing as much, if not more than, my child, that there are many things I need to learn, and it is a journey that we walk alongside our child/ren, not behind of or in front of them. It is indeed a privilege and a blessing to be their teacher, and to discover the world through the eyes of a child.

This year has started off much better than where we left off. I have had many questions answered, we are more confident about what we are doing, I am happy with the curriculum we are using and I know where to get resources (always looking for more). This year will see us focus more on networking, as this is still our greatest need, not only for us as parents, but also for our children, who need other children that they can feel at ease around and be understood and accepted for who they are. I have found the Oz-gifted site a source of comfort as I have realised that I am not alone and that my son is, in fact, quite OK. Understanding goes a long way to patience and wisdom, and I slowly feel that I am getting there. The journey has just begun, and what a special journey it is.