Keynote Speaker: Dr Denise Wood

Dr Denise Wood has been involved with gifted education over a period of nearly three decades, working in regional NSW in schools, the community, early childhood and higher education. Teaching in one of the first opportunity classes established beyond the Blue Mountains highlighted how a gap can exist between one classroom and the rest of the school, and how the community can sometimes constrain the gifted learner through misunderstanding and assumption. Reflecting on many years of engagement in various levels, Denise has done with teachers, school leadership, preservice teachers and families and wondering what the next steps might be led to the concept behind this presentation.

Dr Wood’s research has focussed largely on gifted learners in rural settings – their teachers, their schools, their engagement with popular culture and their talent development. This reflects her passion for understanding the lived experiences of gifted young people, their families and their teachers.

Differentiation: Beyond the classroom walls.

For many years now teachers have been supported to differentiate the learning experiences and programme within their classroom, using frameworks from literature (i.e. Maker, Tomlinson) to guide practice. Such a focus on the classroom supported teachers to consider gifted learners in one context – this classroom, with this teacher and these peers. Many gifted learners have thus been engaged and their learning has been nurtured and improved. Great things have been achieved!

For many years, gifted education has been guided by a number of models of gifted and talented development that provide frameworks for programs and provisions, and suggest focus areas of need to address (i.e. Gagne, 2009, Silverman, 1989; Sternberg, 1985; Renzulli, 1976, 1977; Tannenbaum, 1983; Tomlinson, 1999, 2004) and there are many sources of ideas, strategies, hints and examples to support the quality teaching of gifted learners. All of these provided a great deal of content for the classroom teacher committed to best practice for gifted learners. Over a number of decades now awareness has been raised and change has some about.

However, this presentation raises a provocation. What if classroom differentiation only scratches the surface? Is it enough to report that classrooms are differentiated, without considering the whole of school setting?
Over many years of working in schools, in community settings, in higher education and with gifted learners and their families my attention has been drawn to a bigger picture. There have been many opportunities to collaborate – crossing the fence lines of school, university, community groups to develop partnerships that offer authentic and challenging learning for gifted students. The collective wisdom gained from working together brings opportunities for creative thinking, knowledge production, surprising discoveries.

In a thought experiment, I will explore what whole of school differentiation might look like, and challenge current practice. We will consider the systemic approach towards gifted education suggested by Ziegler and Stoeger (2012) in the context of the whole school. We will explore the potential of collaborative connections between educators and the community to impact on our gifted learners and their talent development. It may be a fantastical concept – and perhaps the realities of school now may be challenges that appear monumental. But it may also help us to take the next steps in creating school environments that provide a long term differentiated learning opportunity for gifted students.