

Report on research from 2016 to 2019 involving 123 academically talented Year 9 boys

During my time as Dean of Advanced Learning Programmes at a large, high-achieving, state boys' secondary school from 2006 to 2013, and my Doctor of Philosophy research from 2007 to 2015, it became apparent that academically talented boys had much of importance to articulate to educators that could inform their decision making and practice. As a result of reflecting on this, I decided to begin a study which asked the question: What elements of society, schools and teachers, family environment and your own intrapersonal characteristics have helped or hindered your achievement in at least one academic area? In 2016, I was given consent by a high-achieving state boys' secondary school to undertake a study over an eight-year period. I then undertook a pilot study with all 31 boys in the top Year 9 class. They completed open-ended questionnaires, and were interviewed in a semi-structured manner, individually or in focus groups of two to five students. The findings of this study were presented at the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children Conference in Sydney in 2017. Thereafter, in 2017, 2018 and 2019 the participants were also asked to identify the single greatest contributor to their achievement and the single greatest hindrance. A further 92 boys participated in these three years. This reports the key findings of the research, focusing on the dominant themes that emerged from the questionnaires and interviews.

The first question related to societal assistance. As befits a society undergoing significant technological change, it was the Internet that featured as the main way society assisted boys with their learning. Twenty-six boys mentioned this. Some of these boys only discussed the Internet as a general influence but others specifically mentioned on-line books and other resources, on-line help, on-line quorums, social media (including Facebook groups focused on learning), Google, Google classroom, websites, applications, and interactive sites. Eleven boys commented on the value of the resources they could access through public libraries. Nine boys identified the positive influence of friends outside of the school setting as helpful to them. Six boys mentioned competitions in sports, debating and music as contributing to their achievement. A further six stated the resources such as videos, articles, drawings, books and tutors were helpful. An additional six remarked that society in general encouraged them to excel.

The second question examined the ways society had hindered achievement. The most dominant hindrances related to stereotyping. These stereotypes had different manifestations, but all were considered to hamper achievement. Of the 16 students who identified stereotyping as an impediment, four discussed how expectations of high achievement, and always being able to answer questions, were a hindrance to them. Of these four, two were Asian students who considered the stereotype of Asians as high academic achievers put unnecessary pressure on them to excel. In addition, three boys spoke of how expectations related to the *Boy Code* affected them. Two of these remarked on the way, what one termed "girly emotions" such as sadness, pity and caring are not supposed to be shown. One of these commented on the expectation to be stoical, asserting, "We're supposed to be able to just suck it up and just keep going and not really

ask for help.” Two other boys commented on the way society does not like them standing out academically and desires that they become normal. Two further boys remarked that this is shown in the *tall poppy syndrome* where people actively try to pull them down to their level. One student mentioned that some subjects taught at school are stereotyped as good or bad. Although some students considered social media were helpful to learning, 11 students also identified them as hindrances to achievement. Related to stereotyping, ten students identified as a hindrance, the issue of verbal bullying, including being called a “nerd” and the use of sarcasm when they do not achieve as well as expected. Five students remarked on being diverted from their studies by a range of distractions that society provides, such as mass media, including gaming.

The third question related to the way schools and/or teachers had assisted the boys to achieve in at least one academic domain. Fifty-eight students considered that streaming (or ability grouping), particularly in their secondary school, had made a positive difference to their achievement. Particular comment was made by many of them about how their learning was enhanced by being grouped with others of similar ability. One student encapsulated the view of himself and others stating, “If you’re all of the same ability level, the teacher can focus on one thing and the whole class can understand it, and if you don’t understand it, there are always your peers who will understand, and they can teach you.” Fifty-seven students commented on particular teacher attributes that had contributed to their success. In the students’ view, knowledgeable teachers with high expectations who provided support and encouragement, along with a sense of humour, made their classrooms places where effective learning took place. Twenty-seven students expressed appreciation for being challenged in their learning. This was generally within a streamed environment but not always. Linked to a learning environment with appropriate challenge 17 students viewed the competitive environment within their streamed class at secondary school as beneficial to their achievement. With one exception, they were especially careful to explain that the classroom environment can be both competitive and supportive, and when questioned about this, were adamant that there was no nastiness between them and their competitive peers. The exception was a student, who dissented from this view, considering that some of his peers were overly competitive. In addition to competition, a further byproduct of streaming to advance student learning, mentioned by 12 students, was acceleration. They were appreciative of being able to cover two years of content in one year in up to six subjects to enable them to start their National Certificate in Educational Achievement a year earlier than normal in these subjects.

It seems that many of the students in this study had experienced working in both a school environment with adequate challenge and at least one other school where they considered there was insufficient challenge. All who commented, agreed they were receiving appropriate challenge in their current secondary school, but 56 students stated they had experienced inadequate challenge in either a primary or intermediate school, or both. Lack of challenge was the single most significant way schools and teachers had hindered their learning. One

student spoke of being depressed by the lack of challenge at intermediate school. He discussed how during his intermediate schooling he was required to complete work that was no different to what he had successfully done in primary school. As a result, he began to think that must be where he “was at” academically and became depressed. He then outlined how the teachers in his streamed high school classes had lifted him out of depression by having high expectations of his achievement and encouraging him to meet those expectations. Other students spoke of boredom, needless repetition, lack of teacher input into their learning because the teacher’s focus was on low-end students, waiting for others to catch up, being left to their own devices by the teacher, being given breadth of learning without depth by having to do irrelevant non-academic work, being grouped with slow learners, and lack of competition.

Thirty-one boys mentioned attributes of teachers or aspects of teaching practice that had impeded their learning. Chief of these were the lack of specialist knowledge, teacher intellectual inadequacy and incompetence. One student remarked, “Some teachers don’t have proper skills necessary and can’t provide deeper understanding because they don’t have one themselves.” Teachers who lack enthusiasm and don’t engage with students were also mentioned. Furthermore, some teachers were said to be biased and to misjudge students. In addition, some students said their learning was hindered by teachers deviating from the topic, poor planning of homework loads and unrealistic expectations.

Fifteen students considered mixed ability classrooms had impeded their learning. For them, the main issues were the teachers’ focus on lower students, the amount of time that was spent waiting for slower learners to catch up, and being placed in mixed ability groups for group work, having to do the majority of the work for group projects, and everybody in the group receiving the credit for their work.

What the students termed Modern Learning Environments or Open Plan classrooms but are generally known internationally as Innovative or Flexible Learning Environments, were viewed as hampering achievement by ten of the twelve students who mentioned they had experienced them. It was significant that nine of the ten students who were critical of Modern Learning Environments were participants in 2016. The tenth one was a participant in 2017. It is a matter of conjecture as to why Modern Learning Environments no longer appear to be an issue for most of the students who have experienced learning in them. Perhaps both teachers and students have now adapted to them. However, it was significant that the student who was most emphatic that Modern Learning Environments were the greatest single hindrance to his learning was a boy who was twice exceptional. By the tone of his comments, it was plain that the less structured organisation in the classroom(s) in which he had been taught, was annoying to him.

The fifth question was about how the family had assisted students to achieve. The main component contributing to the boys’ achievement, mentioned by 60 boys, was the encouragement to achieve through parental and older sibling support. Some aspects of encouragement mentioned by boys were, parents

taught them to be aspirational, were inspirational role models, provided resources, held intellectual conversations with them, used incidental moments to teach and ensured they had some leisure time to balance with study requirements. For 46 of the boys, general encouragement was enhanced by specifically targeted assistance. For example, there was assistance in specific subject areas and with specific skills such as essay writing, and analysis of test and examination results. It seems many of the boys' parents and/or siblings were well qualified to provide academic assistance, because 21 of the boys spoke of parent and/or sibling academic expertise. Numerous parents were involved in a range of professional and business careers. Twenty-one boys also spoke of the reminders their parents, particularly their mothers, gave them to study. Although only nine boys specifically mentioned high parental expectations, it seems reasonable to link the encouraging environment, specifically targeted assistance, family academic expertise and study reminders to high parental expectations. The parents of most boys would have had a good understanding of what is necessary to achieve highly. This could explain in part why expectations of their sons' achievement were high.

In contrast to ways the family had helped students to achieve, where most students made comment, less than half commented on ways that the family had hindered achievement and these students in general had little to say. The major issue, mentioned by eight students, was with distractions from younger siblings. These distractions included having the TV on too loud and repeatedly being asked for help or to play games. Other distractions specified by five students were, both nuclear and extended family activities and commitments, including commitments to disabled or ill siblings. Three students mentioned the pressure to over-study from parents, which they described as an Asian study mentality, yet one of these students was not of Asian ethnicity. He said, "My parents have an Asian study mentality in a white English body." Three students also mentioned that their parents spoke a language other than English at home, and three viewed the family chores that were required of them as a hindrance.

The seventh question investigated what intrapersonal characteristics contributed most to achieving academic success. It seems that these qualities are closely related and may best be thought of in terms of a cluster of traits that empower students to achieve highly. In rank order these are: determination, self-motivation, competitiveness, strong work ethic, perseverance, curiosity, goal setting, focus, and pursuit of excellence.

The boys also spoke of a range of intrapersonal characteristics that had hindered their achievement. The four most dominant of these in rank order were procrastination, distractibility, lack of motivation and laziness.

I found the data from the additional questions asked in 2017, 2018 and 2019 of particular interest. These questions asked students to identify what one element most helped them to achieve, and what was the single greatest hindrance to achievement. I categorised the responses into the five broad areas of: influences from society, schools and teachers, peers, family, and intrapersonal qualities. The most significant help to achievement was considered to be the student's own

intrapersonal characteristics, mentioned in 37% of responses. Family had 32%, schools and teachers 18%, society 10% and peers 3%. The single greatest hindrance was considered to be schools and teachers, identified in 45% of responses. Intrapersonal qualities had 35%, society 7%, peers 7% and family 6%.

Of all these findings, I consider the ones related to schools and teachers are most important to address. It is of particular concern that 45% of responses identified schools and teachers as the greatest hindrance to their learning. Furthermore, across all four years of the study, 56 students specifically identified lack of challenge at some point in their primary and intermediate schooling as the main school-based hindrance to their achievement in at least one academic area. Programmes that lack challenge, are strongly linked with low teacher expectations. Because of low teacher expectations and programmes having insufficient challenge, academically talented students are not treated equitably, and they are not achieving the standards of excellence of which they are capable. Clark (2008) argues that the mission of gifted education and talent development is a mission of equity and excellence. The secondary school with a streamed or ability grouped environment, which the 123 boys in my study attended, provides a model of how to achieve the mission of providing equity and opportunities to achieve excellence for academically talented boys, and perhaps girls as well. First, engage students' minds by providing appropriate challenge. Second, enrich students' learning through providing a wide range of curricula. Third, extend students' learning by enabling them to learn in greater depth. Fourth, accelerate students' learning by allowing them to learn at greater speed. When these four principles are put in place together with high teacher expectations and encouragement, the mission of equity and excellence for academically talented learners is much more likely to be achieved than is currently the case for many such students. Yes, engagement + enrichment + extension + acceleration x (high expectations + encouragement) = equity + excellence.

Reference:

Clark, B. (2008). *Growing up gifted* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.

Graeme Miller 25/6/2020