Module 4

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EXTENSION
Welcome to Extension Module 4: Further Issues in Understanding Underachievement in Gifted Students. You have worked through, or demonstrated prior knowledge of, Core Module 4 and now we are going to look more deeply into some of the key issues associated with academic underachievement. These are:

- the implications of low self-efficacy toward academic learning and practical pathways to enhance academic self-efficacy.
- the establishment of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982) as a way of assisting gifted students to work to their potential.
- issues specifically related to the academic underachievement of Australian Indigenous children.

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1. What specific educational performance outcomes are likely for a student who experiences low academic self-efficacy?

2. How would you determine if a student's academic outcomes are being negatively influenced by low academic self-efficacy?

3. What strategies could you employ in the classroom to help reverse low academic self-efficacy?

4. What does the word ‘flow’ mean in the educational setting?

5. What does the term ‘involuntary minority status’ refer to?

6. In what ways can involuntary minority status issues affect gifted children with this background?
1. These students will often have poorly developed basic skills in literacy and numeracy, be cognitively inefficient and underachieve academically.

2. A good question! These students are often very hard to identify, for low academic self-efficacy can be a serious talent mask. However, children with low academic self-efficacy may not engage in academic tasks and when they do they may give up quickly. A home where few academic role models exist may also be a clue. These students may show glimpses of high academic potential but are rarely consistent.

3. There are two key sources of self-efficacy, mastery experiences and vicarious experience. Mastery activities are essential to improve self-efficacy in any academic area. Further, there needs to be a long-term approach since low self-efficacy can be deeply entrenched.

   When mastery activities are accompanied by appropriate performance and attributional feedback (so that students attribute their success to their own ability and effort) a more powerful outcome is likely. The inclusion in the school life of the child of positive academic role models (ie vicarious experience) - including you, the teacher - can also be a very influential step.

4. ‘Flow’ is the term used by Csikszentmihalyi to describe the zone where the cognitive abilities and skills of a student match the degree of difficulty of the task being attempted. Flow is closely associated with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development.

5. ‘Involuntary minority status’ refers to ‘people who are brought into their present society through slavery, conquest or colonisation’ (Ogbu, 1991, p. 9).

6. Involuntary minority status has a number of possible effects on the academic performance of gifted children. These effects largely stem from the long-term educational disadvantage that the involuntary minority status community has experienced.

   One of the major consequences is the strong possibility of a powerful forced-choice dilemma (Gross, 1989). Why? Long-term educational disadvantage has led to oppositional attitudes to education in the involuntary minority status community in general. Therefore, academically gifted students will often be faced with the choice of either achieving academically or being accepted by their peers. Another effect is that many individuals from involuntary minority status communities simply do not believe that they can be academically successful (ie, they have low academic self-efficacy).
Outcomes

At the completion of this Module you will understand:

• that academic self-efficacy is an important factor in optimising academic achievement and, when weak, may act as a powerful talent mask.

• that working in the ‘flow’ zone of gifted students is essential to avoid boredom and anxiety, and consequently, to enhance academic achievement.

• that the disproportionately high levels of academic underachievement of Australian Aboriginal children are often the result of factors that influence all children. However, Aboriginal students are also influenced by involuntary minority status issues, a powerful force that makes Indigenous students more prone to academic underachievement.

• that teacher expectations can play an important role in the academic development of gifted children, especially those from culturally diverse and/or low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds.
Part 1

Academic self-efficacy and underachievement

In Core Module 4 the basics of self-efficacy theory were presented. Self-efficacy was defined in everyday language as your *self-belief* that you can plan and successfully complete a given task. In Part 1 of this Extension Module we expand upon the foundation provided in the Core Module to give you a deeper understanding of this important contributor to academic achievement or underachievement (as a potentially strong talent mask).

Academic self-efficacy

The issue of self-belief (self-efficacy) often arises when achievement and underachievement are discussed. Academic self-belief is likely to suffer when an individual experiences repeated failure (a lack of mastery) in a particular domain. This lack of mastery may come from many possible sources. For example, a student may be a dysfunctional perfectionist (as we discussed in Extension Module 3), may have a hearing impairment or may experience any number of other specific learning difficulties that result in limited mastery experiences.

Academic self-belief can also be influenced negatively when an individual does not have sufficient positive academic role models or ‘significant others’ in his life. Whatever the source of poor mastery experiences and/or inadequate vicarious experiences the outcomes are the same: low academic self-efficacy is likely, producing poor task engagement, poor persistence when difficulties emerge and low resilience (Bandura, 2003). These outcomes are a formula for academic underachievement.

In this section we will investigate the damaging consequences of low academic self-efficacy and provide pathways to help you identify those who may experience low academic self-efficacy.

*Bandura (nd) comments:*

‘Self-belief [self-efficacy] does not necessarily ensure success, but self-disbelief assuredly spawns failure.’

To begin, it is worth looking briefly at the multidimensional nature of self-efficacy and at how self-concept and self-efficacy are very different ideas.
**Self-efficacy is multidimensional**

Self-efficacy is not a ‘contextless global’ way of seeing ourselves (Bandura, 2003, p. 42). That is, we do not simply have a high or low general self-efficacy. The very nature of self-belief is that we have a separate self-efficacy for most activities we engage in.

Another example is that of Jacinta, a 10-year-old academically gifted child who is very good at maths. She engages quickly and persists with any maths task given. However, English is another matter. Jacinta has experienced little success in writing tasks and is a poor speller. She engages in literacy tasks with reluctance and gives up quickly if the task is perceived as being difficult. That is, Jacinta exhibits behaviours consistent with a much higher self-efficacy toward maths than toward literacy. Even within a subject/KLA there are often different self-efficacy levels.
Self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy

In Extension Module 3 we discussed the link between self-concept and self-esteem. Self-esteem is the affective element of self-concept - how the student feels about what he or she believes. When the term ‘self-efficacy’ is used there is often initial confusion with self-concept or self-esteem. However, these terms refer to quite different ideas. As Bandura (2003, p. 11) points out:

‘Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with judgements of personal capability, whereas self-esteem is concerned with judgements of self-worth. There is no fixed relationship between beliefs about one’s capabilities and whether one likes or dislikes oneself.’

Bandura (2003, p. 11) goes on to explain that:

‘Individuals may judge themselves hopelessly ineffectual [having low self-efficacy] in a given activity without suffering any loss of self-esteem whatsoever, because they do not invest their self-worth in that activity.’

While there is no fixed relationship between self-concept and self-efficacy, an obvious link does exist. Bandura (2003, p. 11) points out: ‘It is true, however, that people tend to cultivate their capabilities in activities that give them a sense of self worth.’

‘People who regard themselves as highly efficacious [have high self-efficacy] act, think, and feel differently from those who perceive themselves as ineffectual. They produce their own future, rather than simply foretell it. (Bandura, nd)

Academic self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1986, p. 391) as ‘People’s judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance.’

Bandura’s theory states that psychological factors, whatever their form, alter the level and strength of self-efficacy. His model suggests that the level of self-efficacy will determine:

- ‘whether coping behaviour will be initiated’,
- ‘how much effort will be expended’ and
- ‘how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences’ Bandura (1977, p. 191).
Further, Bandura claims that it is possible for individuals to believe that a particular course of action will produce given outcomes but that if they have serious doubts about whether they can perform the necessary activities such knowledge will not influence their behaviour. That is, they may not try even though they have been given clear and precise instruction and understand the process.

Consequently, a student’s academic self-efficacy is of primary importance as it determines how much effort he will expend and how long he will maintain that effort if difficulties are experienced.

‘If self-efficacy is lacking, people tend to behave ineffectually, even though they know what to do.’ (Bandura, nd)

Developing academic self-efficacy

In Core Module 4 it was established that the major contributors to self-efficacy are mastery and vicarious experiences (Bandura, 2003).

- **Mastery experiences** result from an individual’s ability to plan and complete a task successfully.

- **Vicarious experiences** are provided when positive comparisons are made with ‘significant others’, that is people the individual respects and looks up to. These people include mentors, peers, other role models … and teachers. These comparisons can provide the impetus for an otherwise reluctant child to attempt a task, a necessary first step if mastery is to be attained (Bandura, 2003).

A third source of self-efficacy, **verbal persuasion** (Bandura, 2003), is closely linked to mastery and vicarious experiences. Self-efficacy may be enhanced when ‘significant others’ express faith in the child’s capabilities and/or provide confirmation that a process has contributed to mastery. This faith must be perceived by the child as realistic and is particularly powerful if the feedback is provided soon after the experience of mastery.

Two key types of feedback, following mastery, are:

- **Performance feedback**, which simply involves reinforcing the process that was followed to achieve success.

- **Attributional feedback**, which involves attributing the mastery outcome (ie the success) to the student’s ability.
Beware! Vicarious experiences and feedback can be a double-edged sword.

- It is fundamental to enhancing a student's academic self-efficacy through vicarious experience that a teacher is perceived as a 'significant other' by the student.
- The expression of negative views of a student's capabilities is likely to have a negative impact on the student's academic self-efficacy.

Some outcomes of low academic self-efficacy

Once low academic self-efficacy has become established a number of behaviours can also become entrenched. These include:

- poor task engagement and, in the worst cases, non-engagement.
- giving up quickly, even when the task is assumed to be interesting or important to the child. It may be safer for the child simply not to engage rather than risk the failure she believes is likely to follow.
- appearing generally unmotivated to attempt academic tasks.
- behavioural problems. A student who is disengaged is a classroom management problem just waiting to emerge.

These behaviours can, in turn, have such undesirable consequences as:

- poor academic skill development.
- cognitive inefficiency.

Cognitive inefficiency exists when an individual is not functioning at his full cognitive potential. This may be due to poorly developed or immature cognitive abilities (Vygotsky, in Reber & Carton, 1987) and poor metacognitive skills. This notion will be further discussed in Section 2 of this Module.

- low teacher expectation.
The effect of low academic self-efficacy on academic achievement

Limited exposure to the two major contributors to self-efficacy, mastery and vicarious experiences, is the likely source of low self-efficacy. Figure 1 (Chaffey, 2004, p. 11) provides a concept map summary of the interactions involved.

Students from low SES and some culturally diverse backgrounds may be particularly prone to low academic self-efficacy (Chaffey, 2002; Ogbu, 1994; Lovaglia et al, 1998). Many children from these backgrounds are likely to begin their school lives with low self-efficacy toward academic learning. The lower than average number of academic role models (vicarious experience) in the lives of these children and lack of pre-school academic mastery can begin a chain of events in their school life that both masks, and inhibits the development of, their high academic potential.

From day one of their school life many children who experience insufficient early academic mastery experiences and/or engage with few academic role models are at risk of low academic self-efficacy and, consequently, underachievement.
Developing Low Self-efficacy Toward Academic Learning

Vicarious experience (Bandura, 1977)

Limited

Mastery (Bandura, 1977)

Start behind

Low teacher expectations

Weaken this potentially important source of vicarious experience

Low self-efficacy

Figure 1: How low self-efficacy toward academic learning may develop in gifted children (Chaffey, 2004)

The effect of low academic self-efficacy on academic performance and teacher expectation can be cyclical in nature. Students who experience low academic self-efficacy tend to be disengaged to various degrees. Long-term disengagement is likely to lead to poor academic skill development and cognitive inefficiency, with academic underachievement the inevitable outcome. Poor academic outcomes, low motivation levels and a disengaged approach to academic work influence teachers’ development of low academic expectations for the student.
A concept map summary of these interactions is presented below in Figure 2 (Chaffey, 2004, p. 12). The constant reinforcement of low teacher expectations and the students’ low self-efficacy toward academic learning ensures that few students with low academic self-efficacy are identified as gifted. Furthermore, academic underachievement is perpetuated.

![Figure 2: The effect of low self-efficacy on academic skill development and achievement (Chaffey, 2004)](image-url)
How can I determine whether a child has low academic self-efficacy?

The first step in developing a child’s academic self-efficacy is simply to recognise that she may be experiencing low academic self-efficacy - and is not manifesting behavioural or learning problems for other reasons. To help you determine whether low academic self-efficacy exists, ask yourself the questions in Table 1, below.

Table 1
To use Table 1:

- Read, and consider, the question in the left column. The ‘X’ (in columns on the right) suggests that the subject of the question may substantially affect mastery and/or vicarious experience. For example, Question 1 relates to books in the home. If books are rare or absent in the child’s home this may limit opportunities for mastery and vicarious experiences in book usage and literacy in the home environment.

- The answers to these questions should allow you to gain some insights into whether the child has had the opportunity to benefit, or otherwise, from the two key contributors to self-efficacy, mastery and vicarious experience.

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<th>Influences mastery</th>
<th>Influences vicarious experience</th>
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<td>1. Does the child have access to many books at home?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Does the child receive consistent literacy and numeracy support at home?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is there strong positive support for education at home?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Is there strong support for education in the child’s cultural or social group?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Does the child have peer and adult role models who value, and have been successful in, education?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Is the child consistently exposed to negative educational role models?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Does the child consistently present well-attempted homework?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Can you think of any reason why the child may not be achieving academic mastery, to his potential, in your class?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Does the child have any specific learning disability?</td>
<td>X</td>
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You suspect a child may be a victim of low academic self-efficacy. What do you do now? In Core Module 4 we presented a number of do’s and don’t’s regarding self-efficacy development. Specific classroom strategies to assist children who have behaviours consistent with low academic self-efficacy will be presented in Specialisation Module 4.

A cognitively engaged gifted student is on the way to reaching her academic potential. The hoped for outcomes in reversing low academic self-efficacy include improved task engagement, persistence, resilience and intrinsic motivation.

Low academic self-efficacy results in the belief that one cannot achieve in a particular task. To reverse this effect the belief that one can achieve must be established. A long and focussed process involving positive mastery and vicarious experiences will be necessary.

Consequently, a concerted effort by the teacher to reverse low academic self-efficacy will be necessary. Patience and persistence on the part of the teacher will be necessary. That is, your self-efficacy as a teacher will be tested!

Michael was 8 years old when he was identified as being intellectually gifted using Coolabah Dynamic Assessment. Michael's classroom performance did not indicate that he possessed high academic ability or even high potential. Michael was often disengaged and gave up quickly when challenging tasks were presented. His academic performance placed him in the bottom half of the class.

Michael was accepted into a project (the Wii Gaay Project) designed to enhance the academic self-efficacy and academic performance of underachieving gifted students. After a slow start Michael began to engage with academic tasks and three years later he is now working much closer to his true academic potential in school. He has stated that he hopes to become a pilot.
Reflective/Practical Component

1. (a) Create a list of three activities in which you have very low self-efficacy. Repeat the exercise for three high self-efficacy activities.

(b) Repeat (a), reflecting on a student you have taught who you suspect is much brighter than his actual academic performance suggests.

2. Table 1 provided a list of nine questions designed to provide insights into a student’s academic mastery and vicarious experiences. Apply these questions to the student in 1 (b) above. What conclusions can you draw?

In small groups (say three or four) complete the following tasks:

1. (a) Create a list of three activities in which you have very low self-efficacy. Compare individual responses. Repeat the exercise for three high self-efficacy activities.

(b) Repeat (a), reflecting on a student you have taught who you suspect is much brighter than his actual academic performance suggests.

2. Table 1 provided a list of nine questions designed to provide insights into a student’s academic mastery and vicarious experiences. Choose an interesting student discussed in 1 (b) and apply these questions to her/him. What conclusions can you draw?
Flow - that feeling when all is going well!

‘Flow’ (as previously outlined in Core Module 3) is the term coined by Csikszentmihalyi to describe the autotelic experience; that is, an experience that is ‘rewarding in and of itself’ (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 8). In 1974 and 1975 Csikszentmihalyi and his students worked with dedicated people, such as chessmasters and dancers, who devoted large amounts of time and effort to their talent area for little financial reward or recognition. That is, people who were basically intrinsically motivated.

The research sought to learn ‘how such people describe the activity when it was going particularly well’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982, p. 7). The experience described in a diverse range of activities, from artists to athletes, was very similar: ‘To this state we have given the name “flow”, using a term that many respondents used in their interviews to explain what the optimal experience felt like.’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982, p. 29).

The term ‘flow’, then, describes how intrinsically motivated people feel when they are highly engrossed in their focus activity.
Experiencing flow

When in the flow zone, or channel, an individual will feel uplifted, happy and engaged. Success follows success and time flies. Some individuals experience time as seeming to slow down in vital moments. They appear to have plenty of time when an instant reaction is required.

Conditions for flow

For flow to occur two factors, challenge and skill levels, interact in such a way that the task difficulty (challenge) is matched with the individual’s skill level. As Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988, p. 30) put it, there must be ‘a balance between the challenges perceived in a given situation and the skills a person brings to it’. Flow can result whenever a desired activity is matched with appropriate skills and knowledge.

This relationship between challenge and skill level has been illustrated graphically by Csikszentmihalyi (1982) in Figure 3, below.

![Flow Chart](image)

Figure 3: The Flow Chart. The interaction of task difficulty (challenge) and skill level to produce the flow channel (adapted from Csikszentmihalyi, 1982)
The flow experience is possible only in the flow channel. Look closely at the graph in Figure 3. The horizontal axis shows skill level extending from low to high, while the vertical axis shows task difficulty rising from low to high. The flow channel occurs where task difficulty is matched by appropriate skill level of the individual.

**Flow and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development**

Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as the ‘difference between the child’s actual level of development and the level of performance that he achieves in collaboration with the adult’ (Rieber & Carton, 1987, p. 209). That is, the ZPD represents the area where cognitive abilities are maturing and appropriate teaching and support are needed for these abilities to emerge and grow.

Vygotsky (Rieber & Carton, 1987) stressed that cognitive development in the ZPD must be accompanied by an appropriate social context where collaboration occurs with an adult. Although a student may not be able to complete a cognitive task independently today, she may be able to do so with the support and guidance of an adult, either now or at some time in the future.

The implications of the ZPD for teaching are clear: teaching is only useful when it moves ahead of development and when it does, it can extend or evoke cognitive functions that have the potential to mature within the ZPD (Rieber & Carton, 1987).

The flow channel is closely linked to the ZPD (Kanevsky, 1992). Like the ZPD, the flow channel requires that appropriate level of teaching (or skill development) is matched with task difficulty.

> When you, as teacher, collaborate with a gifted student in your classroom, effective cognitive development will only occur when the teaching and task difficulty are just ahead of the student's level of cognitive development.

**Some implications of the flow chart for the gifted child**

There are a number of important implications of flow for the education of the gifted.

**Dynamics of cognitive growth**

One of the most important aspects of the flow chart (Figure 3) is that it provides a way to understand the dynamics of cognitive growth (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982). If flow is to be maintained it is essential that task difficulty increases only as fast as the skill (and knowledge) level of the individual develops. If this balance can be maintained the intrinsic rewards - the joy and the focus of working in the flow channel - can be attained and maintained. The chance of achieving mastery is optimised in these conditions. Furthermore, the emergence of cognitive abilities is maximised under these conditions.
Boredom

If task difficulty is consistently much lower than the student's skill level, boredom is a likely result (see Figure 3). There are two groups for whom this is particularly problematic:

- A gifted student constantly given tasks with difficulty levels below her skill level clearly is at risk of being bored. This is likely in any classroom where the need to extend gifted children is not addressed systematically. However, there is another, more worrying, potential negative outcome. As we discussed in both the flow and ZPD models, optimal cognitive development requires engagement in tasks with difficulty levels just above the student's current level of development (skill level). Consequently, long term mismatch of task difficulty and skill level can lead to underachievement through the emergence of cognitive inefficiency.

- The second situation involves children who are not recognised as gifted. These ‘invisible’ underachieving gifted children (discussed in Core Module 4) may be equally as bored, for all the same reasons as other gifted children. However, their behaviours may not be recognised as boredom.

The important point here is that gifted students who are behaving inappropriately in class may simply be bored. While this may be relatively easy to see with identified gifted children it will be much less obvious with invisible gifted underachievers. [EdTec: Box & indent this paragraph]

Mastery

In Part 1 of this Module the notion was developed that mastery is one of the key contributors to self-efficacy. The ideal matching of skill level with task difficulty that creates flow also optimises the chances of achieving mastery. In fact, mastery and flow go hand in hand.

Creating opportunities for students to experience flow in a given academic task - by differentiating the task according to their individual abilities and readiness levels - is a good way to enhance their academic self-efficacy.

However, if flow is not achieved because the task difficulty is too high relative to the actual skill level of the child, anxiety is a likely result when mastery does not occur. More importantly, failure to achieve mastery is likely to affect academic self-efficacy negatively.

Gifted underachievers with poorly developed academic skills

One of the unwanted outcomes of being a chronic gifted underachiever is that, due to long-term disengagement in class, academic skill and knowledge levels are often substantially below the student's real potential. With these students flow may not be achieved by using task difficulty levels that are matched to perceived ability (ie potential) levels.
It is easy to consider these students to be capable of achieving more; however, their efforts may be inhibited by poor engagement (low motivation) due to low self-belief (efficacy) and skill development well below their learning potential.

If you suspect that a student is an invisible gifted underachiever create tasks with a beginning difficulty level substantially lower than the level you think them capable of. This will encourage engagement - these students are highly likely to have low academic self-efficacy - through mastery.

Flow may result.

However, you will also have to persist in your efforts to scaffold to mastery as some of these students will be reluctant to engage, no matter what the difficulty level.

Some key factors associated with the academic underachievement of Australian Indigenous children

The number of Australian Aboriginal children achieving to their academic potential in our schools is growing. However, academic underachievement of Australian Indigenous students is still evident in all measures of academic performance, from early primary years to tertiary levels. This trend is evident in gifted education where participation rates in programs for gifted students have been low (Taylor, 1998). In Core Module 4 some key issues regarding the academic underachievement of Australian Indigenous children were introduced. These issues will now be discussed more fully.

Indigenous children are affected by many of the same factors that contribute to academic underachievement in other Australian students. However, there is one powerful factor that is unique, within Australia, to Indigenous people. This issue is involuntary minority status (Ogbu, 1994).

Involuntary minority status

The Indigenous peoples of Australia, Canada and New Zealand (and elsewhere) experience in a similar way the general academic underachievement mentioned above, as well as a number of other negative social outcomes, despite being widely separated geographically and having cultures which differ considerably in their specific aspects.
The important conclusion that can be drawn from this observation is that the common factor among these culturally and racially diverse groups that may explain their similar below average academic outcomes is clearly not race or culture.

These peoples share what Ogbu (1994) describes as involuntary minority status. Involuntary minority status theory focuses on the impact of long-term disadvantage (over hundreds of years) on the current social and educational outcomes of these peoples.

In order to understand better this issue it is useful to distinguish between the different kinds of minority group in our country. Ogbu (1994, p. 363) categorises minority peoples as autonomous minorities, voluntary or immigrant minorities, and involuntary or caste-like minorities. Autonomous minorities are usually white people (e.g., Jews and Mormons) whose minority status is linked to religious beliefs, while voluntary minorities are those who have moved to a new society ‘more or less’ voluntarily, seeking opportunities and/or more political freedom.

**Voluntary and involuntary minorities**

**Voluntary minorities** often have problems initially in school due to language and cultural differences, and lack of understanding of the school system (Ogbu, 1994). However, these difficulties usually do not extend into long-term, disproportionate school failure. On the other hand, involuntary minorities do experience long-term problems with education - and the brightest children may be the ones most affected.

Involuntary minorities are ‘people who are brought into their present society through slavery, conquest or colonisation’ (Ogbu, 1991, p. 9).

African-American, Canadian First Nations, New Zealand Maori and Australian Aboriginal peoples may be considered examples of involuntary minorities.

Historically, people belonging to these groups have experienced long-term social and educational disadvantage, producing the self expectation that their educational and life chances are limited (Ogbu, 1994). Although the technical barriers to equal educational opportunity for Australian Aboriginal people have been lifted, the legacy of involuntary minority status issues still affects the academic performance of Aboriginal children. After all, it is barely 30 years since Aboriginal people were allowed to vote and receive mainstream schooling.
The cultural conflicts that involuntary minorities experience offer an insight into their academic underachievement.

Long-term educational disadvantage can generate community attitudes that are oppositional. The outcome is that academically gifted students believe it is difficult to be academically successful and ethnically different simultaneously, thus activating a powerful forced-choice dilemma (Gross, 1989).

Pause for a moment and consider how voluntary and involuntary minority groups came to their current positions in society. Members of most voluntary minority groups came to Australia anticipating that a better life would be possible. Problems encountered were mainly short-term. In contrast, Aboriginal Australians were firstly conquered and then totally dominated for generation after generation, for well over a hundred years. Minimal, substandard education for their children was mandated by law. Put yourself in these two situations. Can you understand why Aboriginal Australians often developed oppositional attitudes to education and voluntary minority groups mainly did not?

Primary and secondary cultural differences

To understand better the behaviours of Indigenous students in school it is helpful to distinguish between primary and secondary cultural differences.

**Primary cultural differences** are those that existed before the two cultures came together (Ogbu, 1994). Primary cultural differences create short-term difficulties between cultural groups of a given society, but it is the **secondary cultural differences** that lead to the long-term educational difficulties of involuntary minority children. Secondary cultural differences develop after two populations come into contact or after members of an involuntary minority begin to participate in an institution (such as education) controlled by, and largely for, the dominant society. Secondary cultural differences arise initially to serve boundary-maintaining and coping functions under subordination following initial contact with the dominant culture (Ogbu, 1994).

Secondary cultural differences manifest themselves in several ways that can affect schooling (Ogbu, 1994):

- **Different cognitive, communication, interaction and learning styles** can adversely affect the progress of involuntary minority students in dominant culture schools. Lack of understanding about these styles by teachers and the school in general is an obvious impediment to learning and can lead to deficit attitudes by members of the dominant society (eg teachers).
• **Cultural inversion**, which is the tendency to behave oppositionally to the dominant culture, can cause underachievement among involuntary minority students since school learning is largely controlled by and for the dominant culture. Consequently a common reaction of involuntary minority students is to shun education, with underachievement in school the outcome.

Ogbu (1994, p. 369) states:

‘Involuntary minorities may consciously or unconsciously interpret school learning as a displacement process detrimental to their social identity, sense of security, and self-worth. They fear that learning the White cultural frame of reference, they will cease to act like minorities and lose their identity as minorities and their sense of community and self-worth.’

The dilemma is clear: should the students ‘act white’ and risk alienation by their cultural peers, or retain peer acceptance and shun academic excellence?

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*Eight case studies of Indigenous children (8-10 years of age), identified as intellectually gifted using the Coolabah Dynamic Assessment method, revealed a most interesting pattern. All were from schools where they were numerically, as well as culturally, in the minority. Seven of the eight were academically achieving at about the middle of the class, but they were the most academically successful Indigenous student in their class. Only one student was achieving in the top five. Her teacher thought that this student could top the class if only she believed she was good enough.

The case studies reveal that the most likely explanation for this ‘average’ performance was that a strong forced-choice dilemma was affecting the students. It was also likely to be the result of secondary cultural traits producing oppositional attitudes to education in the community and was, therefore, very likely to be a subconscious reaction (Lovaglia et al, 1998; Chaffey, 2002).*
Moving away from academic achievement is made easier for members of a cultural minority when their perception is that it will be hard for them to succeed in the dominant society even if they are successful at school (Ogbu, 1994). This perception is understandable when one examines the high unemployment rates (especially in non-government jobs) and low university attendance rates of Australian Indigenous people.

The general academic underachievement of involuntary minority status peoples is fundamentally the result of long term educational disadvantage and the consequent distrust of, and negative attitudes toward, education.

Have you ever reacted oppositionally to a perceived injustice in your life? If you were powerless to change this injustice and it was maintained for a number of generations what would be some likely outcomes for you and for your family?

If teachers lack an understanding of the cultural consequences of involuntary minority status they may well develop deficit views and negative expectations for students from such groups. We will explore the effect of teacher expectation on achievement in Specialisation Module 4.

Involuntary minority status and self-efficacy

One outcome of the long-term educational disadvantage that Australian Indigenous people have experienced is that there are fewer academic role models in most Indigenous communities than in the broader community. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the academic vicarious experiences of most Indigenous children are limited. In communities where education is often mistrusted and not highly valued, academic mastery experiences are also likely to be limited. It is not surprising that a strong link exists between involuntary minority status and low academic self-efficacy (Chaffey, 2002; Ogbu, 1994; Lovaglia et al, 1998).
Breaking down negative involuntary minority status outcomes

Involuntary minority status need not be a permanent condition. Many Indigenous people, worldwide, have broken out of the cycle that is very similar to the poverty cycle. However, the process of change is slow because many of the issues are embedded as secondary cultural traits. In the long-term, educators must be patient and work on developing genuine and deep inclusion of Indigenous communities in the educational process. That way, trust can be established. In the short-term, strategies to overcome immediate classroom underachievement are required.

Understanding the impact of involuntary minority status issues on the academic performance of Australian Indigenous students is a necessary first step to helping gifted Indigenous children work toward reaching their potential. Specific classroom strategies to address the needs of gifted students from involuntary minority backgrounds will be discussed in Specialisation Module 4.
Self-Assessment

- It is possible that some children will enter school on their first day with low academic self-efficacy?
- How might you identify gifted children with low academic self-efficacy?
- What strategies might you use to help these children overcome this problem?

- How is self-efficacy different from self-concept?
- What initial steps would you, as a school leader, take to overcome involuntary minority status issues that may be inhibiting the academic progress of gifted Indigenous students?
- Can you suggest any whole-school policies that may help address the issue of low academic self-efficacy in your school?

Discuss with your colleagues the following questions:

- How is self-efficacy different from self-concept?
- What initial steps would you, as school leaders, take to overcome involuntary minority status issues that may be inhibiting the academic progress of gifted Indigenous students?
- Can you suggest any whole-school policies that may help address the issue of low academic self-efficacy in your school?
Resources

References and Further Reading


Websites


http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/self-efficacy.html