Module 3

Professor Miraca U.M. Gross
Welcome to Specialisation Module 3: Other Issues in Social-Emotional Development. In this Module you’ll look at how having a talent or interest in sport can influence peer acceptance of intellectually gifted children; how schools can work to increase peer acceptance of academically gifted students; and the influence of the forced-choice dilemma on gifted students in rural areas and on students from culturally diverse groups. You’ll also explore issues of introversion and extraversion; issues affecting gifted boys and gifted girls; and ways in which you and your colleagues can work to make your school a place where it is socially and emotionally safe to be ‘similar but different’.

Professor Miraca U.M. Gross
## Specialisation Module 3: Primary

### Other Issues in Social-Emotional Development

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Outcomes

At the completion of this Specialisation Module you will be able to:

- understand why academically gifted students sometimes pretend an interest in sport as a form of talent mask.
- plan ways to make your school a safer environment for academically gifted students.
- explain to your colleagues how the forced-choice dilemma can be a special issue for gifted students in rural settings and gifted students from culturally diverse groups.
- develop strategies to assist gifted students who are introverts.
- evaluate the extent to which your school is meeting the special needs of gifted girls and gifted boys.
Part 1

Meeting the needs of gifted learners

Costa and Callick (2000) describe school as ‘a home for the mind’. This is a lovely image but school must be much more than that. Teachers and schools need help to develop a learning environment which provides not only for their students’ intellectual and academic needs but also for their social and emotional needs. For children and adolescents who differ in many ways — in their capacities to learn, in the way they view the world, in their emotional maturity and in their social interactions — as do many gifted students, meeting these needs may require thoughtful planning and sensitive accommodation of their differences.

What are the needs of students in our schools — including gifted and talented students?

Intellectual needs

- The need for intellectual challenge and stimulation — the provision of work that is engaging and makes the student want to learn more.
- The need to develop one’s potential as a learner to the fullest regardless of one’s level of ability.

Academic needs

- The need to be presented with work which is neither too difficult nor too easy but which is set at a level slightly beyond the level one has reached; the ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 1976).
- The need for new material to be presented at an appropriate pace: a pace which is too fast or too slow actively hinders learning.

Social needs

- The need for companionship of children of similar abilities and interests as oneself — children at similar developmental stages.
- The need for social acceptance by the groups in which one is placed for the purposes of learning. Feelings of non-acceptance or rejection by classmates interfere with learning efficiency, motivation, self-esteem and self-acceptance (Silverman, 1993; Gross, 2004).

Emotional needs

- The need to feel secure; this allows one to take intellectual risks.
- The need to express, rather than conceal, one’s abilities, feelings and interests.
- The need for self-acceptance.
Often we use the term ‘self-acceptance’ without really thinking about what it means. Self-acceptance means accepting, liking and valuing oneself. This doesn’t mean that we have to imagine that we’re perfect; simply that we need to like and value who we are at any stage, even while we know there are some aspects of ourselves we can still improve.

Linda Silverman (1993) points out that the capacity to love others cannot develop fully until we have learned to love ourselves. She points out that the process involves several stages:

1. Self-awareness. Becoming aware of our own characteristics, needs, strengths and weaknesses.
2. Finding kindred spirits — people with whom we share more similarities than differences.
3. Feeling understood and accepted by others.
4. Self-acceptance.
5. Recognition of other people’s differences from each other as well as their differences from ourselves.
6. The development of understanding, acceptance and appreciation of others.

What Silverman is saying is that the capacity to develop strong and lasting friendships cannot develop in the gifted individual until she herself has experienced the peace and fulfilment of being understood and accepted by ‘kindred spirits’ — people of somewhat similar values, interests and abilities.
Being gifted and socially acceptable

In both Australia and the United States, research has shown that gifted students are more likely to gain social acceptance if they fulfil at least one of two conditions; if their gifts lie in fields which are admired by the community in which they live, or if they adhere closely to the social values of the community.

Tannenbaum’s research with high school adolescents

The wariness shown by adolescents towards age-peers who are academically gifted is not new; it has been around for a long time. More than 40 years ago, in one of the classic studies that investigated adolescent attitudes towards high ability, Abraham Tannenbaum asked American high school students to rank, in terms of social acceptability, eight hypothetical students who varied on three dichotomous traits: brilliant versus average, studious versus nonstudious, and athletic versus nonathletic (Tannenbaum, 1962). He found that academic brilliance did not of itself engender strong negative or positive reactions; rather, it was how brilliance was combined with other characteristics that influenced the rankings. If the brilliant student was nonstudious and athletic, his or her ranking was relatively high. However, brilliant students who were also studious and nonathletic (the stereotypical ‘gifted nerd’) ranked very low indeed in terms of peer acceptance.

Cramond and Martin’s research with teachers

Twenty-five years later, two American researchers, Cramond and Martin (1987), used Tannenbaum’s questionnaire to investigate the attitudes towards academic brilliance held by two different groups of educators. The first group had been teaching for several years; the second were young people still in training to become teachers. They found that the values expressed by teachers and trainee teachers in 1987 differed very little from those expressed by teenagers 25 years before. Both the teachers and the trainee teachers ranked students of average ability much higher than gifted students, while athletes were consistently preferred to non-athletes. Disturbingly, however, both groups preferred students who did not study to students who did! The brilliant, studious non-athlete was right at the bottom of the hierarchy in terms of teacher preference (and perhaps in teacher tolerance!).

Neil Carrington’s study of Australian adolescent attitudes

In 1993, Dr Neil Carrington of the University of New England replicated Tannenbaum’s study of adolescent attitudes with Australian high school students and found a very similar situation to that which Tannenbaum found 31 years before. Indeed, the Australian students demonstrated an even stronger rejection of academically brilliant students who tried to optimise their potential through study — or who, perhaps, simply enjoyed studying — than did their American counterparts two generations earlier! The chief determinant of social acceptability in Carrington’s 1993 study was an interest in sports.
Neil Carrington and Stan Bailey’s study of Australian teacher attitudes

Seven years later Neil Carrington and Stan Bailey (2000) published the findings of a comparison study using Australian preservice teachers: 942 in training to be primary teachers and 528 training to teach in secondary schools. However, they changed the research design slightly. Aware that Australia is even more sports-conscious than America, they felt there was little point in including the athlete-nonathlete comparison. That Australian teachers would prefer sports-loving kids could be taken as given. Instead, they included gender as a variable — both the gender of the teacher and the gender of the hypothetical student. As with the Cramond and Martin study, these trainee teachers were asked to rank, in order of preference, eight hypothetical students who varied according to gender, ability (average or gifted) and attitude to study (studious or nonstudious).

The results were even more disturbing than those of Cramond and Martin. Preservice teachers training to teach in primary schools considered children of average ability to be significantly more desirable than gifted children, and showed a clear preference for their future students not to be studious! However, for young people training to teach in secondary schools the child’s level of ability was less important than his or her attitude to study. Students who enjoyed studying appeared at the bottom of the pecking order regardless of whether they were gifted or average.

Interestingly, however, the gender of the trainee teacher was a factor influencing preference. Female preservice teachers greatly preferred gifted nonstudious boys to gifted nonstudious girls while for male preservice teachers it was exactly the reverse. As Carrington and Bailey point out, perhaps the fact that a member of the opposite sex could perform well in school with a minimum of effort was seen as more acceptable. However, for both primary and secondary teachers, regardless of gender, the least acceptable student was the gifted, studious girl.

Carrington and Bailey commented, perceptively, that the preservice secondary teachers were only marginally older than some of the teenagers they would be teaching in a very few years time. Perhaps they were carrying over, into their professional lives, some of the social attitudes which influenced them in their personal relationships. For whatever reasons, the attitudes held towards gifted students in Australia both by adolescents and by trainee teachers in these two studies were uncomfortably similar. It seems that to be bright and studious, and particularly to be bright, studious and female, does not augur well for social acceptability either by one’s peers or one’s teachers.

Giftedness, sport and the forced-choice dilemma

Carrington’s study of adolescent attitudes to academic giftedness and studiousness confirmed what many academically gifted students had already recognised; admit that you deeply enjoy learning and you’ll be classed as a nerd and avoided. However, gifted students have also known, and practised for generations, what Tannenbaum uncovered in 1962; there is an escape clause in the forced-choice dilemma!

Students whose gifts are in sport or athletics don’t experience nearly as much pressure to ‘dumb down’ for peer acceptance as do their classmates who are gifted academically. It’s cool to be talented in sport. In fact, the more you develop your sports or athletic talents, the more you are admired. Indeed, even if you’re not personally talented in sport, if you know a lot about it you can gain a certain degree of acceptability.
So maybe it’s not a simple dichotomy: excelling academically and risking being called a nerd, versus dumbing down a bit and having a better chance of peer acceptance. Perhaps there is a third pathway: excel academically but also show a talent — or at least a strong interest — in sport, and you can be accepted, or at least tolerated, in the peer culture.

Another form of talent mask

In Module 4, in our discussions of underachievement in gifted students, we have discussed factors which can act as talent masks, concealing students’ high ability from their teachers and classmates — and sometimes even from the students themselves.

Many gifted students in Australia deliberately choose to wear a talent mask. They have constructed a ‘camouflage personality’ by pretending an interest in sport that they don’t particularly feel, in order to be accepted by their classmates. The exceptionally and profoundly gifted children in Miraca Gross’s longitudinal study had, in general, very little interest in sport; when asked, as primary school students, to rank eight leisure time activities in order of preference, fully 40% of the children named sport as the least favourite activity and another 13% listed it in seventh place (Gross, 1993). Yet several of the children acknowledged that they regularly skimmed the sports pages of the weekend paper, or caught a short segment of the sporting news on television, so that they could have a comment or opinion to contribute to the Monday morning postmortems of weekend football games. David, when he was 10, described this to Miraca as ‘throwing a sop to Cerberus’. He was a fan of Greek mythology and had been reading how dead souls who were being rowed across the river Styx by Charon the ferryman would take with them a sop, a piece of bread dipped in wine, to pacify the three-headed dog Cerberus so that he would not devour them. David produced this metaphor in a calm, matter-of-fact way; camouflage had become a necessary part of surviving in an otherwise hostile school environment.

Philip Wilson, a young man now in his thirties, looks back at his feelings as a child. He was was aware from an early age that he was different from his classmates and at first he found this difficult to understand.

‘Initially I thought I was a bit weird, but I was quite good at being normal as long as I stuck to those things that everyone else spoke about and did, and I was pretty keen to be accepted. So good was I, in fact, at being “normal” that I began to wonder who I really was underneath. I happened to be good at sport and that seemed to stand me in good stead throughout my school career .... In high school I found that while I got some hassle for being the brainy kid, I don’t remember it being intolerable. My sporting activities seemed to ameliorate this and went a long way towards making my academic side palatable to the throng. My scholastic achievements seemed to be quite OK as long as they sort of stayed in the background, and as long as I remained accomplished athletically. I remember thinking that I was good at sport because I thought very hard about how to do something well. It struck me as ironic, that it was ultimately still my brain that was making me credible, albeit indirectly’ (Wilson, in Gross, 1998).
Philip’s talent in sport allowed him to be forgiven for being gifted intellectually — as long as he allowed his intellectual gifts to remain in the shadow of his sporting prowess. He was expected to show a passion for sport, but he had to conceal his deeper love of learning.

**Why do we accept sporting talent so readily?**

Gallagher (1976) tells the story of Mr Palcuzzi, the Principal of an American primary school who decided to liven up a Parent-Teacher Association meeting with a revolutionary proposal. He announced that from now on academically gifted students within the school would be ability grouped in their particular talent areas so that they could learn with other young people of similar abilities and interests. Acceleration would also be used, he said; there was little point in insisting that children should be placed only with age-peers. Artificial age-grade barriers should be removed so that highly able Year 4 or 5 students could learn with Year 6 students if they were capable and mature enough to do so. In addition, gifted students should receive a differentiated curriculum specifically designed to respond to their faster pace of learning and higher level of skills.

The PTA reacted with mixed feelings. Some said it was an elitist and disgraceful suggestion; others said it sounded all right in theory but would be impossible to put into place. Timetabling would be a major problem and where would the funding come from?

That would be no problem, said Palcuzzi, calmly. Programs would be funded by a special levy which would be placed on the parent body. He was confident that the parents would agree because of the enormous prestige that would accrue to the school through the achievements of the gifted students. In fact, he added, to ensure the success of the program, the school would employ a teacher with special qualifications in the education of talented students. The gifted students would travel widely throughout their region of the state, learning with, and indeed competing against, gifted and talented students from other schools with similar programs.

The PTA members were horrified. They called the proposal undemocratic and a violation of the spirit of American education. They protested that the establishment of discrete, elitist groups would divide the school and bring it into disrepute.

Palcuzzi sat quietly, nodding at each of their points. Then he pointed out, gently, that the program he had outlined, complete with ability grouping, acceleration and differentiated training, right down to the highly qualified coach, funding levy and inter-school competition was not, in fact, a new program for academically gifted students, but a program which already existed and which had been operating successfully for many years — the school's program for gifted basketball players!

Mr Palcuzzi’s PTA learned an important lesson. Identifying and providing special programs for gifted students is accepted, and indeed supported, by the community when the gift lies in areas which we value and support. Competitive sport is an important part of Australian culture — especially when it is team sport. Team loyalty is an important part of sport to many Australians. We identify with the fortunes of the team we follow. Their successes are ours. For this reason the excellence of individual players is accepted and valued not only for itself but also because it contributes towards the team's success — and because it increases our enjoyment.
We accept that special training is necessary for optimum success in team sport and the funding, grants and other expenditure that goes towards this training has public support; again, the group, more than the individual, is seen as benefiting. As discussed in Specialisation Module 1, Australia’s first ever Talent Search was in sport. For similar reasons, talent in the performing arts is valued and accepted in Australia. The individual talents of musicians, singers and dancers contribute to the success of the band, orchestra, choir or dance company — and our enjoyment as audience members is enhanced with the increasing skill of the performers.

By contrast, talent in maths, in science or in the humanities tends to be viewed in a different light. It is often seen as a vehicle for personal gain in an individual rather than for the benefit of the group as a whole and, as such, it may be viewed with wariness or distrusted. It is difficult for most of us to see any national benefit from fostering the talent of a 10-year-old who hears the music of maths in a way that we have never heard it, or a 12-year-old who is so entranced by Steven Hawking’s *A brief history of time* that he takes it to bed each night. If we cannot understand and enjoy the concepts these children are exploring, their abilities will seem of little immediate advantage to us, and many of us will be hard pressed to identify a concrete, practical long-term benefit.

In contrast to many of the nations which are our economic and industrial partners and competitors, Australia has a long tradition of remaining blinkered to the long-term benefits of investing in the development of high intellectual potential. To us it seems quicker and surer to invest in musical or athletic ability. You know, roughly, what you’re going to end up with.
Changing our schools’ attitudes to academic talent

How can we change our school and community attitudes so that it is emotionally safe to be ‘similar but different’? How can schools work to create an environment in which talent development is fostered wherever it is found and where it is as ‘safe’ to be academically gifted as it is to be gifted in areas which are more valued by the peer culture?

One of the first and most important steps is to look at the formal and informal messages your school is giving the community about the talents that are valued and fostered and whether there is a ‘hierarchy’ of talent fields. Is your school, without meaning it, telling the community that ‘all gifts are equal but some are more equal than others’?

Does your school foyer have a display of the cups, shields and other awards that are presented annually? When was the last time you really looked at the awards?

It’s a safe bet that the largest, most ornate cups and shields are for sporting achievement. Do any of them honour academic achievement? If so, how many? Are there as many cups and shields honouring academic achievement in different subject fields as there are cups and shields honouring achievement in different sports and athletics? If not, what is that saying about your school's hierarchy of values?

Some schools don’t offer any end-of-year awards for academic excellence. Sports and athletic achievement — absolutely. Citizenship or community service — yes. But not academic achievement. Sometimes no reason is given; it is just what the school has always done — or rather not done. Other schools say they are concerned that if they presented academic prizes, the academically gifted students might become conceited or arrogant.

If your school does give academic prizes, what are they? In many schools, the sporting and athletic champions are presented with the cups and shields; their names are engraved on them and they are then proudly displayed in the foyer or school hall for successive generations of students to admire. The academic prizewinners get books — or little medals. What does that say to the school community about the relative valuing of sport and academic talent?
Richard Jones’s cartoon from Core Module 1 says a lot about how the pictured school views athletic and academic talent. Might the muted applause for the kid with the books change to something a bit more enthusiastic if the nature of the prize was changed?
One school's story

A few years ago, journalist Bruce Elder, who is an Australia Day Ambassador, presented the Australia Day address at Tumut and Adelong in country New South Wales. Bruce was a Tumut High ‘old boy’. After the ceremony Jim McAlpine, who was then Tumut’s Principal, asked Bruce whether he would renew his relationships with the school and act as a role model for academically minded students. The school had a strong sporting culture which was warmly supported by the parents, kids and local community, but some of the staff felt that perhaps the academically able kids might be feeling a little undervalued.

Bruce was invited to become the school’s Patron of English and he developed a warm and supportive relationship with the school’s English Department. Towards the end of the year he happily agreed to Jim’s suggestion that, as an academically talented old boy who had gone on from Tumut High to a successful career, he would donate, to the school, a prize for academic achievement which would be presented annually at the Awards Night. The staff decided that the new trophy, which would honour Outstanding Academic Achievement in any subject area, would be something the winner would be proud to receive — and the shield which they selected was equal in size and impressiveness to the sporting shields which already graced the school foyer.

The trophy has been presented each year since 2000 to the student who has demonstrated the year’s most outstanding academic achievement — regardless of grade level. One year it went to a Year 9 student. The winner each year takes home a cheque, books and a small cup; his or her name is engraved on the shield which is presented as the final and most important award on Presentation Night.

Peter Browne, the present Principal of Tumut and Peter Bensi, the Deputy Principal, say the shield has had a significant impact on the student body’s attitude towards academic success. They believe that there has been an empowerment of both the students and the parent body to develop a culture where music, drama and art have become more accepted and where study skills, academic striving and enrolment in extension courses have taken on a greater value in the school community. It’s still cool to win sports awards at Tumut High — as it should be — but it’s also cool to win the Academic Achievement Shield. And, yes, the kids cheer the winner.
The forced-choice dilemma: Issues for students in rural and remote areas

Many academically gifted students in rural and remote areas experience another forced-choice dilemma; should they leave home to do Year 11 and 12 studies, or to go to university — or should they stay home to contribute more directly to their families?

As we briefly discussed in Core Module 1, country students whose talents are in sports or athletics, or in the creative or performing arts, may experience a similar dilemma. It is very unlikely that they would have access to advanced training in their talent area outside the cities.

It can be a poignant and painful dilemma. Some gifted students, with their enhanced capacity for empathy, can imagine vividly how much their parents and family will miss them. They may experience strong feelings of guilt — in leaving home for their own advancement are they putting their own learning needs and career needs before the needs of their families?

Being the first person in your family to go to university can be both exhilarating and alarming. There can be the exciting sense of being a groundbreaker — the one who leads your family into a new experience or a new era — coupled with the awareness that if things don’t turn out as you hope, or if you hit problems you had not anticipated, there is no member of your family you can turn to for practical ‘Been there, done that’ advice because no one else has directly experienced the situations or issues that are causing you difficulty.
James Harrison lived all his life in a small country town. He loved working with animals and he planned to be a vet and return to the country after training and eventually set up his own practice. His friends used to tease him gently and call him James Herriott after the author of the *All creatures great and small* books.

Jim had visited the capital city of his state several times on holiday and although he had enjoyed the holidays he never really enjoyed the city; it was just too big, too noisy and too dirty. However he thought that when the time came for university, he would get used to it.

Jim’s first two years at university were deeply unhappy. He loved his studies and excelled, but the pace of life in the city was alien to him. ‘Nobody takes time to think about things,’ he told his father on a trip back home. ‘Everything has to be done “now”. There are no seasons in people’s lives.’ He began to feel like an exile and lived for the vacations when he returned home to work on the farm.

Things improved in Jim’s third year when he met Briony, whom he later married. A country girl herself, she was in her first year of vet study and was experiencing some of the problems of homesickness and disorientation that Jim had experienced. He was able to help her work through some of these issues and in doing so he came to understand himself and his own situation.

Jim and Briony’s son, Tom, is in his final year of school and ready to move to the city next year for his own university education; he wants to be a vet and go into the family practice. Jim and Briony have been able to prepare him for some of the experiences he might encounter, in ways that their parents were unable to prepare them. Second generations sometimes have it easier!
Some aspects of rural education can be an advantage for academically
gifted students. Smaller class sizes can result in a higher level of
teacher-student contact and more individualised instruction. There is
much greater opportunity for learning through community involvement.
Colangelo, Assouline, Baldus and New (2002), in a survey of rural and
remote schools in the United States, reported that students in smaller
schools also indicated a greater sense of belonging. Teachers in smaller
schools reported that it was much easier to work together to create
individualised instructional plans for students with special abilities and
interests because they were less hampered by rigid bureaucratic issues
and large enrolments and they had more time to spend on students as
individuals.

The downside of this, of course, is that rural centres also have fewer
resources. Some of the difficulties identified by Colangelo et al are:

- A lack of community resources, including museums, libraries and mentors.
- The relative scarcity of gifted students in a small population can result in social isolation and loneliness.
- Teachers may find it difficult to access training or inservice in issues related to teaching gifted students.
- This can lead to a sense of isolation for teachers who are trying to develop new ideas and techniques.
- Limited curriculum options due to small populations.
- Rural communities may be even more wary of ‘elitism’ than larger communities.

Gifted students in rural and remote communities may experience even more serious intellectual frustration and social isolation than their ability peers in the cities and this may increase the poignancy of the ‘forced-choice dilemma’. Catherine, a 12th grade student in a small American town, describes the love-hate dichotomy very clearly:

‘I like the stuff that I hate. I like that I know everybody. I like that people know me and my family. That it’s safe and no one locks their doors at night. But some of that stuff drives me crazy too. I don’t like it that few people have very open minds — this is a fairly conservative place. There’s little diversity and not many viewpoints’ (Colangelo et al, 2002, p. 573).
Jubal, also a rural student in 12th grade, describes his own dilemma about leaving the land:

‘I don’t think I could live in a big city but I’m not sure I could live here either. The only reason would be to be near my parents if they needed me. I have a strong tie with the mountains and with our property — but not to the area’ (Colangelo et al, 2002, p. 576).

Students like Jubal whose families have farmed the land for generations may have grown up with the expectation (both their own and their family’s) that they will inherit the farm and continue that way of life. The realisation that they love that particular patch of land very deeply, but that ‘the land’ itself no longer has the power to hold them, can come as a disturbing shock. They may feel disloyal and ashamed, as if they have betrayed both the land and their family.
Cultural affiliations and the forced-choice dilemma

We have talked, in Module 4, about some of the difficulties facing gifted students from Indigenous groups who may feel that they are being disloyal to their family or peer group if they develop their talents in ability domains that have not been traditionally valued. This is, at heart, another form of the forced-choice dilemma; gifted students in this situation feel that they have to make a choice between achievement — developing their high potential into high performance — and continued social acceptance within their cultural peer group.

However, this situation is not confined to gifted Indigenous students; it can be a problem for gifted students from any ethnic or racial group which has strong cultural affiliations. Little research on this has been undertaken in Australia but Donna Ford, an American researcher, proposes that gifted students from minority groups who are experiencing the forced-choice dilemma can benefit from 'multicultural counselling' (Ford, 2002). They need opportunities to share their concerns with gifted students from their own, and other, minority groups. Sessions could focus on such topics as coping with peer pressures and understanding how self-perception influences motivation, choices, achievement and social relationships. Counsellors can assist these students to come to a fuller acceptance of themselves both as members of their particular cultural or racial group and as academically gifted students. The provision of mentors and role models — adult members of their own ethnic group who have achieved success in fields valued by both the mainstream and minority cultures — can help the students to understand that gifted students can live happily and successfully within both cultures.

Schools should actively seek out gifted students from culturally diverse groups and involve them in activities which will encourage them to accept and develop their high abilities.
(Important: In this professional development activity we are not asking you to ‘label’ your students. Rather, you are recording how they seem to you, at this particular time, in terms of some aspects of their academic and social development.)

Make a list of the students in your class. Now classify your students under three headings, as you perceive them.

**Academic ability:**
Well above average for your class; above average; about average; below average; well below average.

**Popularity within the class:**
Well above average in popularity; above average; about average; below average; well below average.

**Sports-mindedness:** (The degree to which the student participates in and excels in sports or athletics.)
Well above average in sporting participation and ability; above average; about average; below average; well below average.

Now look for relationships between the three variables.

- Do any patterns emerge in the relationship between students’ academic ability and their degree of popularity?
- Where do your most academically able students stand in terms of popularity?
- Do differences appear between boys and girls?
- Does the popularity of high ability or low ability students vary depending on their talent or participation in sport?

Do your findings resemble the findings of the research studies discussed in this section? If they don’t, what could be some reasons for this?

If academically able students who are not sportsminded appear less popular than equally able students who are sportminded, what can you, as a teacher, do to address this bias?
(Important: In this professional development activity we are not asking you to ‘label’ your students. Rather, you are recording how they seem to you, at this particular time, in terms of some aspects of their academic and social development.)

The first thing to be done in this exercise is for each teacher to make a list of the students in his or her class and then classify the students under three headings, as he or she perceives them.

Academic ability:
Well above average for your class; above average; about average; below average; well below average.

Popularity within the class:
Well above average in popularity; above average; about average; below average; well below average.

Sports-mindedness: (The degree to which the student participates in and excels in sports or athletics.)
Well above average in sporting participation and ability; above average; about average; below average; well below average.

Still working as individuals, look for relationships between the three variables.

• Do any patterns emerge in the relationship between students’ academic ability and their degree of popularity?

• Where do your most academically able students stand in terms of popularity?

• Do differences appear between boys and girls?

• Does the popularity of high ability or low ability students vary depending on their talent or participation in sport?

Do your findings resemble the findings of the research studies discussed in this section? If they don’t, what could be some reasons for this?

Now share your findings with your colleagues. Has there been any change in the patterns of high or low acceptability (and possible causes) as your students have moved through school? What might be some reasons for this?

If academically able students who are not sportsminded appear less popular than equally able students who are sportsminded, what can you, as a staff, do to address this bias?
(Important: In this professional development activity we are not asking you to ‘label’ the students in your school. You are recording how they seem to you, at this particular time, in terms of some aspects of their academic and social development.)

Make a list of the students in your school who you believe are academically gifted in Gagné’s terms; in the top 10–15% of their age-peers. Now classify these students under the following headings, as you perceive them.

**Popularity within their class or within the school:**

Well above average in popularity; above average; about average; below average; well below average.

**Sports-mindedness: (The degree to which the student participates in and excels in sports or athletics.)**

Well above average in sporting participation and ability; above average; about average; below average; well below average.

Now look for relationships between the three variables.

- Do any patterns emerge in the relationship between students’ academic ability and their degree of popularity?
- Where do your most academically able students stand in terms of popularity?
- Do differences appear between boys and girls?
- Does the popularity of high ability or low ability students vary depending on their talent or participation in sport?

Do your findings resemble the findings of the research studies discussed in this section? If they don’t, what could be some reasons for this?

If academically able students who are not sportsminded appear less popular than equally able students who are sportsminded, what can your school do to address this bias? How can you begin to create a climate, in your school, in which it is more socially acceptable to be academically gifted?
When you have completed the reflective/practical activity above, please undertake this second activity.

List the prizes and awards which your school gives out at Awards or Presentations Night. Make separate lists of awards for academic subjects and sports/athletic ‘subjects’ (eg cricket, netball, soccer, etc).

How many different academic prizes are awarded? How many different sports/athletic prizes are awarded?

Beside each prize or award, note down the nature of the award; eg cup, shield, books, medal, certificate, special colours on school uniform, etc.

Do any patterns (number or nature of awards) appear which may lead your students to believe that your school values talent in sports and athletics more than academic talent?

If so, could your school use the Tumut High experience to begin to change these impressions?
Part 2

Introverts and extraverts

Like most simplistic classifications, the designation of people as either introverts or extraverts arises from, and results in, a lot of stereotyped thinking. Introverts are often portrayed as socially withdrawn and socially inept. Extraverts are often portrayed as party animals.

The key to the difference, however, is not so much the individual’s behaviour as the source of their energy. Introverts gain energy from within themselves; they tend to be reflective people who are ‘oriented towards the subjective world of thoughts and concepts’ (Silverman, 1998, p. 39). Extraverts are more directed towards the world outside themselves and gain energy from other people or events. Introverts constitute a minority group in western societies, comprising approximately 25% of the population. Interestingly, however, studies of gifted adolescents and adults have found a much higher proportion of introverts. Shelagh Gallagher (1990) studied more than 1,700 adolescents in programs for the gifted and found that 50% were introverted. Very highly gifted students are even more likely to be introverted; Linda Silverman, in her studies of young people of IQ 160+, found that more than 75% were introverts (Silverman, 1993).
Studies of the personality characteristics of introverts and extraverts, and, in particular, how they ‘show themselves’ to the world, have found that, in general, extraverts have more of a ‘single-layered’ personality. What you see is pretty much what you get. By contrast, introverts are more likely to have a ‘private self’ which they see as the ‘real me’ and a ‘public self’ — the persona — which they use for ‘everyday wear’.

Some introverts can ‘act’ good extraverts! Many gifted teachers have this talent. Indeed many ‘closet introverts’ who have a high public profile as actors, popular musicians, or politicians and who are required to ‘perform’ frequently in their public role, develop a carefully cultivated extravert persona for public consumption, showing their introvert side only to family or close acquaintances.

Obviously, the majority of people have elements of both introversion and extraversion in their personalities. The question is not ‘which’ one is, but which ‘side’ dominates. The following list, adapted from Silverman (1993), describes essential differences between introverts and extraverts — but remember that this is not so much an issue of dichotomy as a matter of degree.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extraverts tend to:</th>
<th>Introverts tend to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>get energy from interaction with people or events</td>
<td>get energy from inside themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have a single-layered personality; they are much the same in public and in private</td>
<td>feel drained by people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be open and trusting</td>
<td>have an ‘inner self’ and an ‘outer self’ (multilayered)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>think out loud</td>
<td>need privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like to be the centre of attention</td>
<td>mentally rehearse what they are going to say before they start speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learn by doing</td>
<td>dislike being the centre of attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be comfortable quickly in new situations</td>
<td>learn by observing rather than doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make friends easily and have a lot of friends</td>
<td>be uncomfortable with changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be easily distractable</td>
<td>have a few very close friends rather than a wide circle of more casual friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be impulsive</td>
<td>be capable of intense concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be risk takers in groups.</td>
<td>be reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dislike being in large groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>be quiet in groups for fear of embarrassment or humiliation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Schools are highly ‘social’ organisations. Children are encouraged to be gregarious and to form wide-ranging friendship groups. Children who prefer the companionship of one or two close friends, as gifted children often do, are often encouraged to socialise more widely. Students who don’t often respond in class because the pace of discussion is too fast and they don’t have time to formulate their thoughts into words before the topic has changed, are urged to ‘contribute a bit more’. We pay lip service to reflective thought but we don’t encourage it. ‘Wait time’ — the length of time a teacher waits in class for a question to be answered — is seldom more than two or three seconds.

The following section is adapted from the work of Silverman (1993, 1998) and Roedell (1988), and provides useful advice for teachers and parents of gifted introverts.

**Responding to the needs of introverts**

**Give ‘wait time’**

Introverts need rather more time to think before responding to a question or statement than do extraverted age-peers. Gifted introverts may be able to think of many more responses and they need time to select the response that says most clearly what is in their minds. A useful and practical teaching technique is to give ‘wait time’.

The teacher asks the gifted or reflective student a question and then gives her structured time to respond. ‘Jacquie, how did the author build up suspense in the story? I’ll come back to you in a few minutes’. Then the teacher moves on with the lesson or asks simpler (lower level in Bloom’s hierarchy) questions to two or three other students before glancing back to Jacquie. If Jacquie is ready to respond she can nod to the teacher to indicate this; if she needs a little more time she can smile a ‘not yet’. When she does respond, her answer will be much richer and more detailed. She will be happier with her response — and so, probably, will her classmates and teacher. Note that the teacher’s question required an analytical and evaluative response. Students should not be expected to ‘snap’ back answers to questions at the higher levels of Bloom, and introspective gifted students are especially unlikely to be able to do so.

**Don’t interrupt them**

Gifted students have an enhanced capacity to see the ‘interconnectedness’ of things and they may want to explain these interrelationships in their answers to questions. It can be extremely frustrating and deeply humiliating for a bright introverted student when a teacher or classmate interrupts before he has reached the end of the explanation. Sometimes it completely destroys the student’s train of thought. Besides, it’s rude. We teach students not to interrupt; we should obey the same conventions of courtesy ourselves. If we want to explain to the student that it’s counter-productive to be so long-winded, it is better to do this in private, after the lesson. We could assist the student to practise making her answers more concise.
Don’t embarrass introverts in public

Of course, we shouldn’t do this with any student but introverts are liable to be much more humiliated. Remember that gifted students are not only likely to be introverts, they are also likely to be more emotionally responsive (remember the section on overexcitabilities in Core Module 3?).

Reprimand them privately rather than publicly

This is a natural lead-on from the last paragraph and for the same reasons! However, if, as a teacher, you feel the reprimand must be public, address the behaviour, not the individual. ‘Chad, that was pretty thoughtless behaviour. Somebody could have been hurt,’ rather than, ‘Don’t be so thoughtless, Chad, you could have hurt somebody.’

Let them observe in new situations

As indicated above, whereas extraverts learn by doing, introverts tend to learn by observing. Most people make mistakes in their early stages of learning a new field or process but introverts tend to value privacy and they like to be allowed to make mistakes in private. We should also remember that gifted students are less accustomed to making mistakes and they are also more likely to be mocked by classmates when they do so. They are usually poignantly aware of this and it may increase their nervousness. Let them watch first, when they are learning something new, before attempting it. ‘Discovery learning’ is not the preferred process for introverts!

Develop an ‘early warning system’

Gifted introverts are more likely than extraverted ability peers to enter a ‘flow’ state when they are working on something they love and are good at. Some can become quite distressed if they are suddenly told to stop what they are doing immediately and move on to something else. Give them a 15-minute warning to finish whatever they are doing — or to get to a stage where they can leave it — before moving on to the next activity or before calling them to dinner.

Don’t push them to make lots of friends

You are unlikely to make a gregarious student out of an introvert but you are likely to make the introvert feel pretty uncomfortable if you insist. The introvert is well aware that society is comprised largely of extraverts and that he or she is a member of a minority group. Assist the introverted child to find one or two children who have similar interests or abilities and encourage the development of this friendship. By the middle years of primary school gifted introverts may already have experienced rejection for being ‘doubly different’ and they may need encouragement and practical advice if they are to develop the confidence to approach other students as possible friends.

Respect their introversion; don’t try to make them into extraverts

If you do this, you risk giving them the wrong message — that it is not acceptable to be an introvert. They will have enough people giving them this message; they don’t need their teachers or parents joining the choir.
Introversion: Issues for rural students

Gifted students from rural and remote areas who have lived all or much of their lives in the country and who move to boarding schools to complete their education may experience particular difficulties if they are introverts. The constant presence of other people, the crowds, the continual chatter, the emphasis on competition in sports and, above all, the absence of privacy in sleeping, eating, learning and leisure time can be extremely distressing.

Paul, aged 16, was sent to a boys’ boarding school in a large city two years ago. He lives on a remote property two hours’ drive from the next settlement and all his previous education was through correspondence and School of the Air. For weeks on end he would see only his family and the people who worked on the property and he was content with this way of life. ‘We have literally thousands of books,’ he says, ‘because mum and dad and grandpa are great readers and so was my grandmother before she died, and from as far back as I remember bookstores in the city would send up packages of new books every few weeks.’

Boarding school came as a severe culture shock.

‘There were times when I thought I would go mad,’ says Paul. ‘I was surrounded by noise all the time. It just never stopped and even when I did try to get as far away as I could — I would go right out to the end of the oval when no one was there and sit down with my head between my knees trying to shut things out — the noise still seemed to be there inside my head.’

‘Nobody seemed to be able to discuss things quietly. It was cool to be raucous and the teachers didn’t seem to be able or willing to do anything about it. And answers had to be snapped back and I just can’t do that. I need space to think. One of the teachers used to shout at me, “Snap out of it and snap it out” and that caused great hilarity, and any time I delayed in answering after that someone would shout it.’

‘The worst thing was having no silence at night. I’m used to the absolute quiet of home where all you hear at night are the stock and the wind and there would be continual noise — beds creaking, kids snoring, traffic noises in the distance, planes going over. And having no privacy at night; that was even worse in a way.’
This year Paul’s parents moved him to another school which has a special ‘acclimatisation’ program for students coming in from the land and things are a little better because there are teachers who are rather more understanding and a school counsellor who himself was a gifted boy from the bush and understands the situation for these students. However, he has had a rough two years.

Ellie, who is now herself a teacher, remembers her years at boarding school as being ‘years of compromise’. ‘I missed the smell and sound of the bush almost unbearably — the homesickness was physical, like an ache inside me — but the quality of the education I was getting was just amazing. The teachers were wonderful and they realised I was bright and encouraged me to excel. In addition I was able to talk to them about how I was feeling and they really tried to understand. The other girls were a problem sometimes because they were very lively and always chattering and I really need spaces of silence — but I love reading and they would understand that I would just have to go away sometimes and be by myself. Really I would have been happy to be by myself outside class hours — I’m not much of a socialiser even now and I’m content in my own company and with my husband and two or three good friends; I don’t seem to need groups of people as much as most other people do.’

It is important that schools anticipate and respect the social and emotional needs of gifted students who are introverts in environments which are, understandably, designed for the majority of young people who are extraverts.
Issues for gifted boys

In comparison to the considerable amount of research conducted over the last 20 years on gifted girls, there has been surprisingly little research on social and emotional issues affecting gifted boys. Thomas Hébert (2002), in a review of the research literature, reports that the few studies which have been conducted appear to focus on identity and a belief in self, understanding emotional sensitivity and empathy.

A study of gifted, high-achieving boys in an urban high school found that the most significant factor in their success was their strong belief in themselves (Hébert, 2000). They had definite aspirations that were aligned with their particular talents and they believed firmly that these aspirations would be met, not only because of their high ability but also because of their drive to succeed.

Hébert noted, however, that because of this strong belief that they would succeed through their intellectual and emotional qualities, these young men allowed themselves to appreciate qualities in themselves not normally associated with ‘masculinity’ — or at least, stereotyped views of masculinity. These qualities included the capacity to appreciate individual differences among people around them; the ability to appreciate beauty in poetry and literature; and a valuing of interpersonal relationships, including protective relationships with younger children. They had developed the ability to acknowledge their capacity to empathise with the emotional needs of others, and to be emotionally self-aware and self-expressive. Furthermore, they viewed their capacity to express themselves emotionally as something that would help them to become more successful in life.

Hébert’s study is consistent with what theorists have proposed about the heightened emotional sensitivity of gifted individuals — although it is more usually reported in gifted girls and women. Hébert (2002) proposes that it was accepted and observable in the gifted young men in his study because they were achieving at high levels, were admired and valued in their particular high school which placed a high value on academic achievement, and were therefore able to demonstrate this side of themselves without so much risk of social rejection. However, as Hébert warns, ‘if a sensitive, intelligent young man grows up experiencing criticism and ridicule in a culture that does not appreciate sensitivity within males, he may suppress his sensitivity and consequently withdraw emotionally from others around him’ (2002, p. 139).

This is happening today in Australia. Even after several years of growing community concern, boys are generally socialised to conform to what Barbara Kerr and Sanford Cohn (2001) call ‘the Boy Code’ which expects them to:

- be strong, silent and self-reliant
- be able to handle anything they try
- never or rarely show weakness
- be in control
- achieve status and power over others
- avoid at all costs behaviour which could be interpreted as oversensitive, overtly compassionate or ‘sissy’.

In short, boys are discouraged from taking emotional risks.
Competitiveness seen as masculine

As discussed in Core Module 3, in 1983 John Nicholls proposed two types of intrinsic motivation, task-involvement and ego-involvement. 

In task-involvement, learning is more inherently valuable, meaningful or satisfying, and attention is focussed on the task and strategies to master it, rather than on the self. In ego-involvement, learning is a means to the end of looking smart or looking stupid, and attention is focussed on the self. Both types of motivation involve an element of competitiveness; however, whereas the task-involved student is competing against herself (‘I want to do better than I did last time’), the ego-involved student is competing against his peers (‘I want to do better than the others’).

Australian research reveals that boys are significantly more ego-involved than girls. This in itself would not be of concern; however, as reported in Extension Module 3, this research also showed that ego-involved students have significantly lower self-esteem than task-involved students of similar ability (Gross, 1997).

We encourage boys, much more than girls, to compete against their peers for success and prestige, but we may not be sufficiently concerned about the effects of competitiveness which arise from ego-involvement.

Underachievement in gifted boys

Underachievement continues to be a major problem for gifted boys. Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen and Macy (1993) found nine times as many boys as girls who were achieving significantly below their academic potential. Indeed, Kerr and Nicpon (2002) propose that underachievement may be a way in which gifted boys define their masculinity. When gifted boys are denied an education appropriate to their stages of academic development they know, and resent, the fact that they are being held back and they may become difficult and disruptive students.

Among boys, athleticism is generally admired and fostered over academic success

- As discussed in Part 1 of this Module, official acknowledgement and rewards in school are more likely to reinforce students’ sporting prowess than academic achievement. It is not surprising if this reinforces the perception of gifted boys that, while sporting ability is valued, academic ability is not.
- Status among male peer groups is generally achieved through sporting achievements rather than academic achievements.
- Sporting activities are generally arranged through skill levels, thus allowing for acceleration, ability grouping, mentorships and other opportunities for the enhancement of skills through working with students at similar levels of achievement.
- The sporting culture provides an expectation of commitment and hard work, and reward for effort, as well as acknowledgement and support for talent.
• For all these reasons, it could be said that an ‘ideal’ environment for talent development is provided on the sports field. Can we say the same of our classrooms?

• Is it any wonder that many highly able boys are expending time and energy in sport and using the class time to recuperate before the next sporting session?

Absence of effective male role models

• Increasing numbers of Australian children live in single-parent families. In more than 85% of single-parent families, there is no father living with the children.

• More than 80% of primary school teachers are female.

• Yet two-thirds of non-teaching school executives are male. What message does this give boys — nurturing is for women, decision-making is for men?

• A number of studies have found that, of the parents who participate in courses and workshops for parents of gifted children, the considerable majority are mothers.

• Researchers speak of ‘father hunger’ — the need for effective role modelling by fathers who will see their son’s gift not as an embarrassment or unmasculine, but as a strength to be fostered (Hawley, 1993).

• Many of the ways in which parents are advised to help with their gifted child are impractical for fathers: eg help in the child’s classroom; help teacher with materials; act as an advocate for the child within the school. Often we only bring Dad in when there is a problem to be fixed. Mum is the ‘minder’; Dad is the ‘mender’!

Boys are oriented into ‘gender-appropriate’ courses

The example we give here is replicated regularly in organisations across Australia.

GERRIC — the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre at the University of New South Wales — runs enrichment workshops for gifted and talented students in each January and July school vacation period. The Scientia Challenge program offers several two-day workshops for gifted students in Years 7–10. The work is set at Year 11–12 level and the workshops are taught by UNSW academics working in their fields of special expertise.

Workshops in the sciences attract many more boys than girls. Our sincere efforts to encourage girls with talent and interest in science do work sometimes — but not as often as we would like. ‘Jenny’, in Year 9, who chose a Scientia Challenge workshop on Ethics in Law, gave the workshop a glowing evaluation but said to one of the assistants afterwards, ‘It was so good, but I still have a little niggling wish that I’d applied for the Physics course.’ ‘Why didn’t you?’ asked the assistant. ‘Oh well,’ she said, ‘I thought it would be all boys and I didn’t want to be the only girl there.’
If Jenny and other gifted girls retain that perception, it will be a self-fulfilling prophesy! Teachers and parents must encourage girls with special interests in maths and science to attend vacation courses and other enrichment opportunities in these talent fields. Likewise, boys with special interest in the social sciences, art and music must be encouraged to pursue their interests in those fields.

**Some practical courses of action**

1. **Provide, for boys, positive role models of men** who:
   - (a) share their feelings
   - (b) admit to making mistakes
   - (c) listen to and trust women.

   These can come from the media, books or real life.

   Discuss with your students: Why is it culturally acceptable to express emotion on the sports field and take pride in one’s success, but less so in the classroom?

   Bring in, to talk to the students, sportsmen and other real-life heroes who are also very bright and very articulate; and have them talk about their hobbies, interests and attitudes, outside of, as well as within, the world of sport. (Explain to the visitor, beforehand, what it is you are trying to do.)

   For gifted boys from diverse cultures, bring in successful models from their own cultures.

   Have as guests male doctors, police officers, TV personalities and others discussing the emotional peaks and valleys of their own lives. Discuss with them, beforehand, the sort of things you would like them to address — both cognitive and affective issues.

2. **Provide gifted boys with male mentors** who can assist them academically and with class projects (eg students from nearby universities, senior citizens from local retirement villages). Give students the experience of seeing strong men as nurturers.

3. **Establish support groups for gifted boys.**

   Issues you might like to present to them for discussion could be:
   - How were you identified as gifted?
   - Do you agree with the identification?
   - What do the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ mean to you?
   - What do your parents think it means to be gifted?
   - What do your teachers think it means?
   - What do your classmates think it means?
   - How is being gifted an advantage to you? How is it a disadvantage?
• Have you ever deliberately hidden your giftedness? If so, how and why?
• What is different about being gifted and being a boy?
• Is there a time in school (primary, secondary) when it is easier being gifted? More difficult? Why?

(Issues suggested by Nicholas Colangelo, 1996)

4. **Form cluster groups of boys gifted in language** — placing 6-10 gifted boys in the mixed-ability classroom to support and encourage each other.

5. **Try to avoid gender-role stereotyping.**
   • Show men involved in quiet activities.
   • Books should portray boys being sensitive, in nurturing roles, displaying gifts other than physical, trying not to hurt other people’s feelings, allowing other people to be themselves.

6. **Encourage boys to read more fiction** where they will come across dilemmas of ‘the human condition’.

7. **Talk to them** about the issues raised in this presentation and about their gifts.

These suggestions for practical activities first appeared in Gross (2002).
Issues for gifted girls

In Australia over the last 10 years girls have come to outperform boys on almost every academic school subject. Why then, are researchers and educators still concerned about underachievement among gifted girls?

Underachievement is a concern wherever it appears and it is certainly of concern that many of our ablest young women, like many of our ablest young men, are performing at levels very considerably below their potential.

Linda Silverman points out that in the early years of school gifted girls are more socially aware than boys of the same age; they notice nuances of behaviour and what is and is not acceptable to the peer group, and they are more likely to conform, even in the first few weeks of school, to what they believe is expected of them (Silverman, 1993). Sally Reis (1998) identified the following cluster of interacting issues as being of particular importance in influencing both gifted women’s self-perceptions and their perceptions of their obligations towards their parents, their own families, the workplace and society in general:

- Dilemmas regarding understanding and accepting one’s own abilities and talents.
- Ambivalence of parents and teachers towards the girl’s development of high achievement.
- Decisions about duty and caring (putting the needs of others before one’s own needs).
- Personal, religious and social issues.

Parental issues

Girls in the primary school years and in adolescence seem to be rather more influenced than boys by their parents’ beliefs about giftedness in general and about their own children’s high ability in particular. Girls seem to adopt their parents’ beliefs as their own, changing their own former attitudes towards their ability. For example, a study of maths self-concept among gifted adolescent girls (Dickens, 1990) found that the girls ‘took on’ parental opinions about their maths achievement even when their parents’ impressions were quite inaccurate. As a result, even when girls were outperforming boys on classroom maths tasks and tests of maths achievement, they tended to perceive their maths ability as substantially inferior to that of boys, and attributed their success primarily to effort (Pajares, 1996).
**Teacher issues**

Teachers are much more successful at identifying academic giftedness in boys than in girls (Reis, 2002). This is partly because girls who do not want to be recognised as talented are rather more skillful than boys at ‘dumbing down’ and disguising their gifts, but also because teachers tend to ascribe high ability more often to boys than to girls. For example, an American study found that maths teachers were much less successful in identifying girls with unusually high maths ability than they were with boys (Kissane, 1986).

Indeed, teachers have been found to adhere quite strongly to one of the most prevalent gender stereotypes; that boys are innately brighter than girls and that when girls’ achievement matches that of boys it is because girls have worked harder (Arnold, 1995). If girls are acquiring this belief from teachers as well as from parents, as discussed above, it is not surprising if they come to decry their ability.

Ironically, from the middle primary years onwards gifted girls avoid displaying outstanding intellectual ability in order to be accepted by the peer group (Silverman, 1993; Callahan, Cunningham & Plucker, 1994). This may be why teachers assume their success is due to ‘grind’ rather than giftedness!

**Social issues**

Competition — or rather the avoidance of it — can be quite an issue for girls. For girls with strong affiliation needs, competition can be perceived as a dichotomous situation in which ‘if one wins, the others lose’. Gifted girls who take this perspective may even actively avoid being compared to others in case the other person ‘loses out’ on the comparison and feels distressed or undervalued. ‘The “winner” at best feels uncomfortable, and at worst undeserving. The “loser” feels inadequate, jealous and guilty for her reaction.’ (Bell, 1989, p. 119). Consequently these gifted girls frequently downplay or even deny their success. Add this to the fear of social isolation if one is identified as ‘too’ bright or ‘too’ studious and it is easy to understand how and why gifted girls may mask or camouflage their ability for peer acceptance.

Perfectionism is another issue which has special repercussions for gifted girls, as some aspects of perfectionism seem to affect women more than men. In her study of perfectionism in gifted students in the upper primary and lower secondary years, which we discussed in Extension Module 3, Patricia Schuler (1997) found that gifted girls were much more anxious about avoiding mistakes, both because of their own high standards and because of the high standards that they perceived their parents set for them.

These girls viewed making mistakes in schoolwork as ‘failing’ — even if they then corrected the mistakes before handing work in. Just making the mistake was viewed as failure! They worked to please others — particularly their teachers and parents — rather than for their own intellectual or emotional satisfaction and it was important to them that the work should be as flawless as possible at each stage of the process.
By contrast, boys were more likely to view the finished piece of work as the goal for success; for them, the process was much less important than the final product.

The regularity with which the same themes appear in studies of parental and teacher expectations of gifted girls, and gifted girls’ expectations of themselves, reinforce how important it is that the home and school work together to identify and foster high abilities in gifted girls in the primary and secondary years, and to encourage gifted girls’ acceptance of their abilities and acceptance of themselves.

**Some practical courses of action**

Many of the practical strategies suggested in the section, above, on gifted boys, can be adapted for use with girls. For example, placing a cluster of girls with special aptitude in maths or the sciences into a mixed-ability class may give them the confidence to speak out and display their talents in a way that they might be reluctant to do if they were the only girl with high abilities and interest in the subject. The questions suggested for use with counselling groups can be readily adapted for use with girls.
Managing your own responses

In 1997 Bruce Knight and Stan Bailey edited a remarkable book called *Parents as lifelong teachers of the gifted*. It is a treasure house of practical advice for parents, grounded in sound research, and much of it is equally valuable for teachers. This section paraphrases some of the practical suggestions offered in a chapter by Deslea Konza, on ways of managing the challenging and difficult behaviours displayed by some gifted students.

Examine your own expectations

Gifted students tend to be more socially and emotionally mature than their age-peers but this does not mean that their behaviour will be socially mature at all times and under all conditions. Gifted children are primarily children and sometimes they will behave in ‘stupid’ and immature ways. Don’t expect perfection.

Resist the call to battle!

Gifted children tend to be articulate and quick-witted and some like to use these skills in argument rather more often than they should. Try to avoid being ‘sucked in’ to a debate by one of these mini-lawyers; they may have been thinking out their strategic points before starting the argument.

Tell the child firmly that you have made your position clear and you are not going to argue about it. Then move on with what you are doing and if the child keeps arguing, ignore him. He’ll stop when he starts feeling stupid — there’s no point in arguing into a vacuum.

Turn the negatives into positives

It’s not easy to view a stubborn or obstinate child’s behaviour in a positive light when that behaviour is being used as a weapon against you; however, looking at it positively can be an effective strategy. The determination and persistence that the child is demonstrating can be very useful qualities if he or she is encouraged to use them to contribute rather than to hinder.

This is referred to as ‘cognitive reframing’ or ‘restructuring’. It can help you take a more positive view of the situation while you are working to help the child turn his or her energy and inventiveness towards more productive goals.

Be a good model

The most positive way of showing students how to live happily and productively among others is to model it yourself. If you want to teach students how to admit fault and apologise, make sure you let them see you doing this too. Most of us have at some time spoken or behaved towards a student hastily and perhaps less than fairly; it usually happens when we’re stressed! The next time it happens for you, model a graceful (and rueful) apology. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it. Model patience, restraint, honesty, sensitivity, negotiation and compassion. Your students will respect you for this. They will see it as strength rather than weakness and they will come to value you highly.

— Gifted and Talented Education: Professional Development Package for Teachers —
Reflective/Practical Component

What are the three most important pieces of information this Professional Development Package has given you about the social and emotional development of gifted and talented children and adolescents?

Are these issues separate or interrelated? If they are interrelated, in what ways?

How can you use this information to make your school a safer place, socially and emotionally, for academically gifted and talented students?

If only some staff members in your school have taken this Professional Development Package, how can you share, with these colleagues who have not done so, the information that you regard as particularly important?
Resources

References and Further Reading


