

PRIVILEGED GIFTED GIRLS AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT – DOES IT REALLY EXIST AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

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Abstract

Gifted girls in private education would be considered the double-elite by many, as their endowment of giftedness coupled with the good fortune of being born into a life of financial privilege presents two chance-factor advantages. Their female gender, which has been described as a 'protective factor' for underachievement (Seeley, 2003), may be considered a third chance-factor advantage, catapulting them to the status of triple-elite before their journey has even begun. With so much opportunity landing at the feet of these girls, is falling victim to underachievement really a possibility, should we care, and if so, what can we do about it?

Introduction

Pierre is in Year 6 and his teachers can't wait till he moves on to secondary school. His disruptive and dangerous behaviour in and out of school over the years has led to special programs, multiple suspensions and trouble with the law. His single mother works long hours full-time, is difficult to contact and has been fatigued in her efforts to handle him. He has manipulated a very attractive time-out program for himself in his classroom that permits him to entertain himself in a separate room, drifting from beanbag to beanbag, doing as he chooses (if he is quiet) when he elects not to participate in lessons. He performs at the level of an average Year 2 student when he does involve himself in any testing. His delinquent behaviours are incredibly creative and demonstrate advanced thinking skills and his favourite consequence for his disruptions is to be kept in at break times with his young, newly-qualified teacher so that he can attempt to engage her as an intellectual peer in such discussions as the pros and cons of the Vietnam War, the historical and contemporary initiatives of the British Military and international politics. School leaders, experienced educators and psychologists laugh at his young teacher's suggestion that Pierre may be gifted.

Lola is in Year 5 and experiences mixed reactions from her teachers. Some are more appreciative or tolerant than others of her quirky sense of humour (that can be inappropriately timed), but her erratic behaviour, regular meltdowns, work refusal and sloppiness can test the patience of any teacher. Her school career has been littered with volatile relationships with friends, often resulting in behavioural issues requiring social interventions in and out of the classroom. Her mother and father report signs of intense frustration and very low self esteem related to image and ability in behaviours that can be quite difficult to manage that she exhibits at home. She is recognised as a very gifted artist, but can find structured art lessons frustrating and misbehaves in them at times. Artworks that she attempts at home are subjected to her own very critical appraisal and are regularly shredded and disposed of in a great fit of fury. Lola performs adequately in her school work but as a below-average student in areas of self-perceived weakness, such as Maths. Observations about Lola's intellectual and creative thinking giftedness are met with surprise and disbelief from her teachers, her parents and from Lola herself.

It is undoubtedly clear to anyone knowledgeable in gifted education that two gifted underachievers have been described above. Pierre comfortably fits the stereotype with classic environmental but mixed interpersonal signs — he is male, from a low socio-economic background and attends a co-educational public school in a rough part of town. He has no siblings, no father and lives with his poorly educated mother who is struggling with long hours of manual work to support them both. He is charming, manipulative and unaffected by any consequences that are imposed if he does happen to get caught when misbehaving in school or society. Lola, on the other hand, defies the environmental stereotype but also demonstrates mixed interpersonal signs — she is female, from a high socio-economic background and attends a single-sex private school in the inner city. She comes from a loving, supportive home where she lives with both parents and two siblings. Her parents are well educated, but the family is in a financial position for her mother to stay at home to tend to the needs of the family. Lola can be unpredictable and manipulative, but is affected by the impact of her behaviour on herself and others; she is just unsure about how to embrace the solution.

So who should we care about more – the underprivileged boy heading for delinquency, or the privileged girl heading for a life of self-loathing? The child who is likely to inflict greater damage on society or the one more likely only to impact on self? Pierre and Lola are both extreme examples of the gifted underachiever in their particular settings, but both of these children are crying out for understanding and support. There should be no competition between them. Regardless of background, gender or extremity of manifestation, all children should have access to individually appropriate educational and emotional support that will assist them to serve themselves primarily, that they might then consider service to their society.

The Carnegie Task Force of Learning report (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1996) claims that underachievement is 'not a crisis of certain groups', but rather an issue that crosses all cultural, gender and socio-economic barriers. Based on years of experience of working with underachievers in underprivileged settings, followed by observations made over several years of teaching in an inner-city independent girls' school, I explore that assertion by posing the question: How does underachievement manifest in gifted girls in private education and what we can do about it?

What the literature says

A look at giftedness

Before it is possible to discuss the underachievement of gifted girls in private education it is essential to define giftedness. Gagné, in his *Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent* (2008), defines gift as 'natural ability' and talent as 'systematically developed skill'. To be gifted, one would have the potential to perform within the top 10% of age peers and to be talented, this potential would be realised. His comprehensive model acknowledges that there are multiple internal and external factors that may influence the translation of gift into talent and categorises the cognitive, affective and physical types of giftedness into six domains. Combinations of domains and levels of giftedness (Gagné, 2008; Gross, 2003), personal characteristics or experiences (Gagné, 2008; Silverman, 1993), and preferred learning styles and interests (Rogers, 2002) that might present are always highly individual, rendering the task of identifying and catering for the needs of each gifted learner a complex one.

A look at damaging myths

Silverman (n.d.) outlines a set of historical and contemporary myths that are damaging to gifted students. Of these, there are particular myths that can perpetuate the underachievement of gifted students or provide excuses for their needs to be ignored, especially those from high socio-economic backgrounds. Two such myths are that *gifted students will make it on their own*, and that *provisions for the gifted are elitist and undemocratic*. Research shows that gifted students do not necessarily make it on their own and, in fact, many underperform in school (Whitmore, 1980), drop out of school (Marland, 1972), head down the path of delinquency (Mahoney & Seeley, 1982) or vanish (Silverman, 1986). In relation to the second myth, what could be described as genuinely elitist and undemocratic is providing for the academic and emotional needs of some students (the non-gifted) over others (the gifted). Providing for the gifted would simply establish equality of provision.

A look at gifted girls

Historically girls have been neglected in education (Calic-Newman, 2003; Rimm, 1999). Whilst many positive changes have occurred in the past century in this regard (Reis, 2003; Kerr, 2003), much concern for gifted girls still features in the literature (Delisle, 1998). Societal gender bias has an impact on the perceptions, comments and actions of even the most liberal-minded (Kerr, 1994; Reis, 1998a; Rimm, 1999). Early learning and play opportunities presented to girls are regularly tainted by this bias (Kerr, 1994; Reis, 1998a), teachers and parents communicate different or lower expectations of girls compared with boys (Supplee, 1990; Kerr, 1994; Reis, 1998b) and assertive girls are described as aggressive or bossy, which acts to discourage them from demonstrating strength (Silverman, 1993; Smutny, 1998; Reis, 1998a). These are just some of the external barriers (Kerr, 1994; Reis, 1998a) imposed on gifted girls, which may affect the development of their gifts into talents.

Gifted girls generally demonstrate their giftedness earlier in life than gifted boys (Silverman, 1986). Verbal precocity and strong reading and writing performance are common indicators, but the greatest gift said to be possessed by many gifted girls is social aptitude (Silverman, 1993). Girls are adept at reading social cues and adapting to social conditions and

expectations (Silverman, 1993; Kerr, 2003). As beneficial as this may be for ensuring smooth and pleasant encounters, it is too often to the detriment of the gifted girl as she tends to sacrifice her own desires, motivations and achievement to effect her social skills. This chameleon-like behaviour of the young gifted girl can occur as early as her preschool years (Silverman, 1993), as she responds to social demands that reward the nice, humble, well-blended girl with acceptance.

This deception of peers and teachers facilitates her budding underachievement at the first critical development period described by Silverman (1993). For the girl who survives this crossroads, two further critical development periods occur: around Years 3 and 4, and then again around Years 7 and 8 (Silverman, 1993), when she is again faced with the dilemma of choosing between relationships and academic pursuits. Invariably relationships are victorious in these battles, and in the many battles still to come as romance, marriage, children and aging parents all tend to take precedence over personal aspirations (Reis, 1998a; Kerr, 2003; Peterson, 2003).

There are other internal barriers that have been observed to interfere with the achievement of gifted girls. Diminishing self-esteem often begins to develop around the age of 8 or 9 (Silverman, 1993) and is perpetuated by a common belief in girls, parents and teachers that their achievement is a result of luck or hard work rather than ability (Kerr, 2003). They differ from boys in this perception and in the way that they prefer to learn less competitively, with a greater focus on value-based content (Kerr, 1994; Smutny, 1998; Reis, 1998a). They behave differently in co-educational settings where boys tend to demand more attention and are more confident in their abilities, often leading girls to the conclusion that boys are superior academically and ultimately influencing their study choices (Reis, 1998a; Calic-Newman, 2003). This belief exists in spite of the fact that girls not only out-number but out-perform boys in gifted programs in schools (Kerr, 2003). Girls can tend also towards perfectionism in their learning that can make it difficult to assess their true capabilities through testing, particularly as they age (Smutny, 1998; Reis, 1998a). Many respond well to single-sex classes or opportunities to work alone on challenging academic material (Kerr, 1994; Smutny, 1998; Reis, 1998a; Rimm, 1999).

Whilst being a girl has been described as a protective factor for underachievement (Seeley, 2003), concerns have also been raised about gifted girls at risk (Kerr, 2003). Their plunging self-esteem in teenage years can leave them vulnerable to eating disorders, substance abuse and sexually transmitted disease (Phillips, 1998). The misconception that their giftedness and their gender provide protection from risks is misguided (Kerr, 2003) and can in fact render them more prone.

The study of eminent women has been used to identify the internal and external factors that allow gifted girls to grow into successful women (Kerr, 1994; Reis, 1998a; Rimm, 1999), and some common factors have been observed. Greater self-confidence, determination, motivation, patience, creativity, risk-taking abilities and sense of purpose are common interpersonal characteristics (Reis, 1998a). As girls these women were voracious readers, explorers and adventurers (Kerr, 1994) and they were afforded time and opportunity to develop their special abilities through the support of family, peers or significant role models (Reis, 1998a). Women who succeed tend to challenge conventions, question authority and speak out about necessary change (Reis, 1998a).

The number of gifted girls observed in schools is not commensurate with the number of successful women found in society (Nelson & Smith, 2001; Kerr, 2003). Some possible explanations involving internal and external barriers have been presented above, but Delisle (1998) and Willard-Holt (2008) challenge us to consider the interests of and choices made by gifted girls and young women, and to think a little more carefully before we decide what is and is not deemed successful. The passionate researchers who study gifted girls all demand the same consideration for them, but they implore parents, educators and society in general to level the playing field so that the choices made by girls are not contaminated by stereotypes, lowered expectations and denial of access to educational and career options (Kerr, 1994; Silverman, 1993; Reis, 2002; Smutny, 2008).

Girls have different interests, learning styles and learning needs from boys, so it is not enough just to present them with identical opportunities (Calic-Newman, 2003). Exposing them early to a wider range of non gender-specific stimuli; responding appropriately to their interests,

learning styles and needs; encouraging their intellectual, social, emotional and physical growth; and applauding their achievements equally are all essential for positioning them favourably to make choices that lead them towards personal fulfilment — something that should be considered the true definition of achievement (Reis, 1998b).

A look at underachievement

Underachievement by gifted students has been described as an oxymoron (Hoover-Schultz, 2005), a syndrome (Rimm, 2001), a national crisis (Marland, 1972), an national epidemic (Rimm, 2003b), a social waste (Gowan, 1955), a perplexing phenomenon and an enigma (Reis & McCoach, 2000). The use of such terms highlights the seriousness of the issue and inaction is to the detriment not only of the individual but of society at large. All stakeholders in education have a responsibility to respond (Silverman, 1993; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Heacox, 1991; Rimm, 2001; Emerick, 1992; Supplee, 1990; Hoover-Schultz, 2005).

Multiple definitions of underachievement exist, but it can be broadly defined as a significant discrepancy between ability and achievement (Rimm, 1997; Reis & McCoach, 2000). Developing a rich profile of the child as an individual and as a learner, using a range of objective and subjective measures, can assist in determining potential and performance and in highlighting any discrepancies.

Profiles have been developed by researchers to assist in the identification of the gifted student who underachieves (Whitmore, 1980; Betts & Neihart, 1988; Heacox, 1991; Mandel & Marcus, 1995; Rimm, 1995) and although some overlapping characteristics do exist, there are also enough differences to 'illustrate the difficulty in trying to create a profile of a *typical* underachiever' (Emerick, 1992; Reis & McCoach, 2000).

In a review of associated literature, Reis and McCoach (2000) summarised a range of traits commonly attributed to the gifted student who underachieves, grouping them according to *personality, internal mediators, differential thinking skills/styles, maladaptive strategies and positive attributes*. Low self-esteem is a characteristic that consistently features (Reis & McCoach, 2000; Hansford, 2003) and low socio-economic background is deemed likely to be a

contributor as a range of related factors can interfere with identification and subsequent intervention (Reis, 1998b; Colangelo & Davis, 2003). Studies reveal more male than female students who underachieve (Peterson, 2003), with onset usually around middle school. This onset generally occurs sooner in boys than girls (Reis, 1998b; Peterson, 2003), although it may just be a reflection on manifestation (Hansford, 2003) as girls have been observed to hide their abilities very quietly at a much younger age (Silverman, 1993).

Some common negative behaviours and characteristics of the underachiever include procrastination, disorganisation, inattention, careless work, incomplete assignments, rebellion, anxiety, self-criticism, fear of failure and fear of success (Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 1997, 2003a; Peterson, 2003). It has been suggested that underachievement only begins to warrant attention when behaviours attached to it begin to make us feel uncomfortable (Hansford, 2003). The greater and the more obvious the discrepancy, the more likely the underachievement is to induce frustration in parents and teachers (Hansford, 2003; Peterson, 2003). It is the invisible underachiever, then, who is at the greatest risk (Hansford, 2003).

The cause of underachievement will vary for each individual and may be triggered by single or multiple factors related to family, school or self (Reis, 1998a; Smutny, 2003). The factors responsible for temporary underachievement will differ from those related to chronic underachievement, so interventions will vary. Cognitive causes of underachievement, such as learning disabilities, are generally treated separately (Reis, 1998a; Reis & McCoach, 2000) for a similar reason.

Difficult or unstable family circumstances can have an impact on the well-being of any child (Smutny, 2003). Contending with physical issues, such as poverty, hunger, illness, neglect or abuse can be all-consuming or may force absences from school. A range of emotional issues related to parenting style, inconsistent parenting, separation or divorce, poor attitudes towards learning and school, poor modelling of learning and achievement, intense pressure imposed on children to perform academically and sibling rivalry can also affect performance (Reis & McCoach, 2000; Peterson, 2003). The background and home life of a child are critical

factors in ensuring that a solid foundation for achievement in learning is laid and maintained.

The school environment is seen by some researchers as the primary cause of students' slipping into underachievement (Whitmore, 1980; Delisle, 1998; Smutny, 2003). Sporting versus academic atmosphere, teachers inadequately trained to recognise or respond to giftedness or underachievement, delivery of undifferentiated curriculum, satisfaction with mediocrity, and non-existent or inequitable gifted programs and selection procedures are just some of the reasons that a child might suffer a mismatch with their educational environment (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Students who feel undervalued, bored or unmotivated when continually presented with meaningless or repetitive work may elect to underachieve (Hoover-Schultz, 2005). Reis (1998b) suggests that this might be better described as 'dropping out with dignity'.

The interpersonal composition of an individual can also influence achievement. Low self-esteem, self-concept or self-efficacy, perfectionism, inability to self-regulate, poor organisation and poor behaviour are common hindrances (Reis & McCoach, 2000; Hansford, 2003; Peterson, 2003). Lack of basic skills, not related to inability, may create barriers to achievement. Students tend also to react in kind to the learning attitudes and achievement of their peer group (Reis & McCoach, 2000).

There are two clear components in the action required to address underachievement: prevention and reversal. Children are not naturally prone to underachievement (Hansford, 2003) so knowledgeable and vigilant parents are in a position to prevent its development (Rimm, 1995). Early, multi-dimensional identification of giftedness should be accompanied by an appropriate educational response, tailored to match the level and type of giftedness, learning style, interests and emotional needs of the individual learner (Hansford, 2003).

Reversal is much more complex. There are many different potential reasons for underachievement, so the 'strategies used for intervention and remediation must be varied and flexible' (Hansford, 2003). Tools and profiles have been devised to aid recognition and identification of students who underachieve (Whitmore, 1980; Rimm, 2001; Heacox, 1991; Mandel & Marcus, 1995), and models, processes and programs

based on observations involving successful underachievement reversals have been developed (Whitmore, 1980; Rimm, 2003a; Supplee, 1990; Baum, Renzulli & Hébert, 1995; Emerick, 1992) to assist educators in initiating appropriate interventions.

Counselling and instructional modifications feature in successful underachievement reversal (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Emerick's (1992) study highlighted six main influential factors: maintaining out-of-school interests (academic or creative in nature), positive and supportive parents, a connection with a particular teacher, interesting or varied classroom instruction or curriculum (linked to out-of-school interests where appropriate), goal-setting for academic achievement, and changes in self (-concept, approach to learning). Reversal is complicated and time-consuming, and programs must be highly individualised (Emerick, 1992; Rimm, 2001; Hansford, 2003), but patience and perseverance in modification processes have proven successful (Rimm, 2001).

In Rimm's (2001) Trifocal Model for 'curing underachievement', teacher, parent and student involvement are encouraged for optimum impact. A comprehensive assessment of the child's abilities and degree of underachievement, communication, changed expectations, identification with achieving role models, deficiency correction, modification of environment and reinforcements are the key components. Underachieving behaviours have been learned, so new behaviours can also be learned (Rimm, 2003a) and experiencing the relationship between effort and outcome is important for regaining an internal locus of control (Rimm, 2001).

Another important distinction is made between gifted students who underachieve and 'gifted non-producers': underachievers are incapable of changing their behaviour because they lack the 'personal power or inner resources', whereas non-producers actually choose not to perform (Delisle, 1992). Reis's concept of 'dropping out with dignity' (1998b) and the suggestion by Emerick (1992) and Crocker (2004) that some students choose to underperform in some areas of their lives in order to direct their energies to other more interesting pursuits, are aligned with Delisle's non-producer. This distinction has implications for educators who are attempting to

identify and remediate underachievers in the school setting.

A multi-faceted approach to addressing the issue of underachievement is required that begins with dispelling the damaging myths about giftedness. Educators then need to be educated in identifying giftedness; recognising and responding appropriately to the signs of underachievement; providing stimulating, differentiated, interest-based curriculum that will engage each learner; and creating an emotionally safe learning environment. Prevention is always going to be preferable to cure.

A look at socio-economic status

When socio-economic status is referred to in underachievement studies, the general perception is that a lower status, with its accompanying home environment and possible complications, may be a factor that contributes to underachievement, particularly in girls (Smutny, 1998; Peterson, 2003). It can affect the time and inclination of parents to advocate for the inclusion of their child in gifted programs, cause related family stresses which induce negative behaviours from students at school (Peterson, 2003) and it may contribute to the bias of teachers and self belief of children caught in its cycle (Silverman, 1993; Hansford, 2003).

Silverman (1993) begs a distinction between giftedness and socio-economic advantage. Private schooling, tutoring and enrichment from home may contribute to higher performance that results from opportunity as opposed to giftedness (Silverman, 1993). Gifted girls from high socio-economic backgrounds are also more likely to be exposed to encouragement, expectations and advice from successful, professional parents who have experience in higher education; these exposures may not be available in low socio-economic homes (Reis, 1998).

What the setting says

The underprivileged setting

My early teaching experiences in a great range of disadvantaged schools in low socio-economic areas led to encounters with chronic gifted underachievers like Pierre. Behavioural issues were rife in these schools and teachers were under pressure to attempt some level of curriculum coverage in the midst of managing extremely challenging classes. Supportive parents who valued education were scarce and underachievers in general were far more likely to

exist in these classrooms than achievers, with very harsh and unforgiving peer groups compounding the issue. Identifying and catering for the gifted underachiever generally meant working with overt and disruptive boys. A certain set of skills and a strong interest in underachievement evolved for me. Sadly, with today's knowledge, I have no doubt that some underachieving gifted girls passed through undetected.

The privileged setting

Moving from these underprivileged environments into an independent setting for girls, I didn't anticipate too many further encounters with underachievement, but began to make some interesting observations. Various mild-mannered manifestations of underachievement soon became apparent, highlighting the truth in the assertion that underachievement crosses all cultural, geographical, gender and socio-economic bounds — no child, regardless of circumstance, is immune to underachievement (Carnegie Corporation, 1996; Smutny, 1998). It also highlights the true factors in play — the individual nature of each child and the inadequate response of caring and well-equipped parents and teachers to the demonstrated signs of giftedness or underachievement. We must ensure that ignorance, innocent or otherwise, is not permitted to allow this phenomenon to persist unnecessarily.

The setting that prompted this observational study is an independent, Anglican girls' school in the inner city, catering for approximately 900 students K–12. Years 3 and 7 are intake years and student numbers double at these two points. It is non-selective but achieves consistently excellent results, and whilst academic success is valued highly, so is spiritual development and community-mindedness. Physical and personnel resources are plentiful and a wide range of co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities, across the domains, are on offer to girls of all ages.

Parents on the whole are very supportive of the school and its aim to produce independent, well-rounded, confident young women and they are generally not as demanding as might be expected in such a setting. They are, themselves, well-educated professionals from a broad range of careers. The incidence of broken marriages is surprisingly low and single-child families are reasonably common.

The girls are generally well-mannered, amiable people and learners. They are comfortable in the company of adults and on the whole enjoy good, respectful relationships with their teachers. Behavioural issues are virtually non-existent, making those that arise very easy to manage. Achievement is valued in their homes and therefore within their peer groups as well. Whilst the focus of this study is on girls in the primary school, observing these girls beyond into secondary school has been of benefit too.

In this setting, two main types of underachievement exist, which are classically in line with the research involving both gifted girls and underachievement:

1. *The passive underachiever* — tends to function and achieve to an 'acceptable' level so as to avoid raising concerns from teachers or parents;
2. *The restless underachiever* – tends to hover below the achievement radar and present with erratic performance and negative behaviours that interfere with identification and progress.

Variations of the passive underachiever are most common, with at least one found in each class of the primary school. Their levels of underachievement might be considered achievement in another setting, contributing to the justification of their neglect, but the definition of underachievement as a discrepancy between potential and performance qualifies them. These girls are well-behaved and respond almost to the letter to the expectations of each teacher, fine-tuning their effort and performance accordingly. When these gifted girls have joined the school in Kindergarten, it has been easier to observe their raw knowledge, attitude and style and sadly see them 'level out' within their cohort. Even if they do perform towards the top of the grade, they have had to compromise their true abilities to do so. They are still often rewarded with one of the coveted yearly achievement prizes.

These girls begin as non-producers, but are at risk of long-term underachievement as their mediocre efforts, that result in acceptable levels of achievement, prevent them from developing the study habits or perseverance required to excel. Low self-esteem can ensue when they are presented with real challenge, as they are more inclined to interpret the difficulty they encounter with their own inability and shy away from the task rather than fail. Whilst they continue to

achieve to some level as they pass through school, the subject and extra-curricular choices that they make do not reflect or assist to develop their unique capabilities. Safely selecting subjects and extra-curricular activities in which they are guaranteed success prohibits the realisation of their true potential.

The restless underachiever, like Lola, is less common in the setting. These girls are invariably identified as creative divergent thinkers, noted by Seeley (1984) to be more vulnerable to delinquent behaviours. These girls are erratic in performance and teachers seek guidance in managing their behaviour or emotional intensities and understanding their unclear giftedness. Low self-esteem and an inability to self-regulate are common to these girls and they continually misjudge teacher, parent and often peer expectations of them. The relationships they build with particular teachers who demonstrate greater understanding of them are highly valued. Most lament the absence of boys when it comes to topics of conversation and playground games and whilst the manifestations of their underachievement are much milder than Pierre's, the similarities are clear. Their privileged experiences have perhaps just dulled their expression of similar frustrations.

These girls are at risk of being crippled by their ever-lowering self-esteem. A genuine belief that they are flawed as learners and human beings results from the conflict they experience with teachers, parents and peers. Whilst they continue to achieve to some level as they pass through school, the subject and extra-curricular choices that they make do not reflect or assist to develop their unique capabilities. Never achieving to potential and not understanding why contributes to building frustration and anger.

When reviewing the research about individual, home and school factors that contribute to either underachievement or success in gifted girls, in relation to the girls and families in this setting, multiple background and setting benefits can be generally observed:

Background: stable home life; enriched environment (travel, theatre, museums, galleries, exhibitions, etc); educated parents (value child's education and achievement); professional parents (strong role models); involved parents (high levels of attendance at class and school events); intellectual mothers (at home or at work);

Setting: single-sex, academic atmosphere in non-selective, well-resourced, stimulating learning environment; some classroom programs that encourage exploration and address gender bias; encouragement and celebration of achievement; passionate and highly skilled specialist teachers; broad range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activity options (some gender-neutral, some in connection with nearby boys' schools); strong, confident female role models (in management and secondary students); strong community service atmosphere and action (hands-on local, national and global opportunities); strong pastoral care focus; two full-time counsellors.

Eliminating the factors that cannot be responsible for the underachievement by gifted girls in this setting makes the task of addressing the real contributors more manageable. Privilege does not exempt a gifted girl from the interpersonal vulnerabilities, the familial issues, and the gender bias and expectations, inadvertently or otherwise imposed on all girls in society, that can lead to underachievement. The school cannot control all of the remaining factors, but they can control some by committing to teacher and parent education, early identification, differentiation, the combat of gender bias and a reversal program.

What our response must be ...

Teacher/parent education

Understand giftedness (Gagné, 2008; Silverman, 1993; Maker, 1982; Gross, 2003):

- familiarisation with gifted and talented concept, domains, levels, characteristics, provisions

Understand gifted girls (Silverman, 1993; Reis, 1998a; Smutny, 1998, 2008; Rimm, 1999; Kerr, 2003):

- early childhood signs of giftedness, social aptitude
- critical developmental periods
- chameleon-like
- internal and external barriers
- low self-esteem
- nurturing need
- relationships over achievement
- perfectionism

- internalisation of gender bias
- impact of physical beauty
- potential at-risk behaviours

Understand underachievement (Emerick, 1992; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 2003a):

- recognise negative signs of low self-esteem
- procrastination
- disorganisation, inattention, careless work, incomplete assignments
- rebellion
- anxiety
- self-criticism
- fear of failure and fear of success
- appreciate power of connection with a particular teacher

Identification

Early identification of giftedness (Silverman, 1993):

- multidimensional approach involving parent and child, using a range of objective and subjective measures (standardised testing, questionnaires, inventories, samples, observations, interview)

Profile-building (Emerick, 1992; Rogers, 2002; Martin & Merrotsky, 2006):

- getting to know individual interests, learning styles and preferences, out-of-school activities (inventories, questionnaires, interview, portfolio of artifacts)

Individualised identification (Hansford, 2003):

- different individual, home, peer and prior learning experiences will have an impact on accurate identification

New intake identification (Silverman, 1993):

- collect as much early data as possible from newcomers, their parents, their past learning environment and build a current identification profile, caution around critical development periods coinciding with each intake (Years K, 3, 7)

Testing (Silverman, 1993):

- early identification in girls is essential before underachievement and perfectionism set in and affect their testing performance

Differentiation according to need

Response to the data (VanTassel-Baska, 2003; Richert, 2003; Peterson, 2003):

- identify academic, social and emotional needs of individuals and group
- adapt content, teaching style, learning opportunities and counselling for optimum learning

Acceleration (Silverman, 1993):

- grade acceleration should be considered (where appropriate) before the second critical development point in Year 3/4 when girls become more likely to resist leaving their friends

Program selection (Richert, 2003; VanTassel-Baska, 2003; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2003):

- include or refer students to appropriate internal or external programs according to identified need

Response to gifted girl literature (Silverman, 1993; Smutny, 1998; Peterson, 2003; Gavin & Reis, 2003):

- psychological education
- encourage risk-taking
- teach goal-setting
- exposure to math/science content and skills
- bibliotherapy
- less competition (more collaborative or individual work)
- more varied assessment methods (less timed, less testing)
- consider affective needs
- incorporate interest and value-based content
- incorporate choice or negotiated curriculum opportunities

Combat of gender bias

Discourage conformity (Silverman, 1993; Smutny, 1998; Kerr, 2003):

- encouragement not to blend in with peers
- delight in achievements of each other
- encourage voice, celebrate individuality
- challenge convention
- encourage initiative and leadership

Adjust language (Silverman, 1993; Smutny, 1998, 2008):

- open discussion of gender bias
- behaviour expectations based on respect rather than 'good girl'
- refer to 'assertiveness' rather than 'bossiness'
- provide specific feedback

Raise expectations and celebrate achievement (Smutny, 1998; Gavin & Reis, 2003):

- communicate stronger belief in the abilities of girls (particularly in maths/science)
- encourage them to dream big
- discuss their own achievement and success in relation to effort
- reward persistence and risk-taking
- highlight essential failures on the road to success
- discuss and explore wider range of possible career paths

Celebrate achieving women (Kerr, 1994; Smutny, 1998, 2008; Reis, 1998a; Rimm, 1999):

- exposure to successful women, study of successful or eminent women
- identify interpersonal characteristics, educational experiences, adversities overcome in order to achieve success

Select teaching resources thoughtfully (Kerr, 1994; Smutny, 1998):

- exposure to range of learning and exploration opportunities and resources
- balance dominant focus on men in many curriculum resources with focus on women

Role models (Kerr, 1994; Reis, 1998; Rimm, 1998a; Smutny, 1998)

- exposure to strong and successful female role models in older students at school, teachers, parents, historical figures, fictional characters
- establish mentorships

Reversal

Rimm's Trifocal Model (Rimm, 2001):

- whilst there are other programs that have proven successful for reversal, this model, or a similar adaptation of it, is an appropriate match to this environment

- teacher, parent, student involvement increases likelihood of success

Conclusion

There is no question that the girls in this setting, or others like it, have been born into an environment that provides them with a very distinct advantage. And there is no suggestion that we take from the underprivileged in order to shower the privileged with more. The suggestion is, rather, that by arming teachers and parents with more knowledge and guidance, we can assist them to utilise their abundant resources more effectively in order to prevent their gifted girls from underachieving.

Any level of sustained underachievement is an issue for the person who underachieves, either immediately or in the future, and we need to respond because it exists, rather than waiting until it makes us feel uncomfortable. We should care about these girls because every one of them has the right to develop her strongest sense of self-worth. We should care because each of these girls could also potentially be a wasted national resource. We should care because responding to the needs of the individual, regardless of gender or background, is the embodiment of true equity.

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IN SEARCH OF THE OPTIMAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE: FLOW THEORY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Janet Thomas

Introduction to 'flow'

The act of writing justifies poetry. Climbing is the same: recognising that you are a flow. The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow. It is not a moving up but a continuous flowing; you move up only to keep the flow going. There is no possible reason for climbing except climbing itself; it is a self-communication (cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, pp.47–8).

The words of this young poet and rock climber first inspired Csikszentmihalyi's use of the word 'flow' to describe the autotelic experience. The concept of flow has attained such wide acceptance that it could be seen to have 'become a technical term in the field of intrinsic motivation' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p.3). This article will trace the evolution of the theory of flow, comment on its research base, and discuss its implications for talent development.

Csikszentmihalyi was originally inspired to explore intrinsic motivation as a result of his PhD research on Fine Art students at the Chicago Art Institute (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p.3). He writes that 'one of the most intriguing enigmas about creative people is the origin of their motivation' (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976, p.208). Subsequently he began a study 'to understand better what these intrinsic rewards are that people derive from a variety of different activities not rewarded extrinsically' (1975, p.13). In *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975), he details 'a new model of intrinsic rewards' derived from the self-reports of an eclectic group of participants. Hence it was in 1975 that Csikszentmihalyi coined the term 'flow' to describe the crucial moment of individual enjoyment of an activity (1975, p.36).

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, pp.40–47) describes the following characteristics of the flow experience:

1. The 'clearest sign of flow' is the merging of action and awareness. In the flow state action follows action according to an internal logic that