The aim of the Churchill Fellowship was to investigate cultural perspectives on sustainable social and emotional strategies that can be implemented by secondary school teachers to support mental health and wellness of gifted adolescents.

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Signed

Dated
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INTRODUCTION

For student learning to occur, school leaders must be able to assist and support staff in providing the best possible learning environment. It is well recognised that academically gifted students are a high risk population in terms of mental health, resilience and social and emotional issues. This Churchill study has investigated cultural perspectives and sustainable practices which support the mental health and wellness of academically gifted students in a culturally diverse secondary school context. The students’ primary relationship at school is with the teacher; therefore the central role played by the teacher in providing this support has been explored. The long-term mental health of Australians is crucial as we face increases in mental illness, depression and suicide alongside decreasing funding for programs. Gifted students who develop resilience and coping strategies are more likely to be productive at school and remain resilient long after the school experience. When they leave a supportive school environment our gifted youth need skills and strategies to call on.

This report highlights my interpretation of what I learned through the Churchill Fellowship. As many schools asked not to be identified in terms of their specific concerns, in some cases, rather than commenting on specific schools, I have highlighted their major thoughts and concepts that support gifted learners.

This paper concentrates on two main approaches to supporting the wellness of gifted students. Firstly, through curriculum provision and secondly, through addressing psychological needs. Each section provides a case study school to highlight successful, sustainable implementation of that strategy. These are followed by a summation of useful approaches, collected throughout the travel, that are suitable for sustainable implementation.

Individual sections addressing the crucial role of the teacher, the support needed by parents and the cultural considerations for successful support of gifted young people complete the report.

As the aim of the Churchill Fellowship was to look at practical strategies for teachers, these appear throughout the report. Recommendations for schools and systems appear at the end. The description and analysis are based on my personal observations throughout the Fellowship program.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Lois Joll, Principal, Perth Modern School, who suggested the idea of the Churchill Fellowship to me and continued to mention it until I got around to it. I would also like to acknowledge her continuing support, expertise and encouragement.

I would also like to thank Mary Rohl for being a wise and always available mentor and friend.

Thank you to Peter Holcz for his support of my application despite the fact that he is busier in retirement then as a Director at the Department of Education.

I am appreciative of the many people who hosted me throughout my travels and for their warmth and openness when discussing their thoughts about giftedness and the children in their schools.

I thank the Churchill Fellowship Memorial Trust for providing me with the experience of a lifetime. To be able to examine an area of passion up close for six weeks is an unforgettable opportunity.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Aim: To investigate cultural perspectives on sustainable social and emotional strategies that can be implemented by secondary school teachers to support mental health and wellness of academically gifted adolescents.

Highlights of the Churchill Fellowship 2014

- The schools where bright minds and happy young people were engaged in learning and enthusiastic children who talked about their schools and how their needs were met.
- The welcome, openness and honesty of people as they explained their unique situations warts and all. Although approaches may vary for provision of curriculum or social and emotional needs of gifted, there are people around the world who believe in these young people and are whole heartedly doing their best to support them.
- The papers and discussions at the European Council for High Ability (ECHA) Conference 2014 - Rethinking Giftedness in the Digital Age.

Major lessons learned and conclusions reached

One of the major lessons learned in relation to supporting gifted students is that it is the teacher who needs to have a ‘plan’ and not the child. But the plan needs to be about the child. Quite often teachers will lament the nature and behaviours of gifted students and will often expect gifted students to act maturely and get on with it. However, young people who need the most love and support often ask for it in the most unloving ways. The teacher is the person who needs to be flexible, knowledgeable and encouraging to bring out the best in gifted students.

It was suggested to me that complaining about lack of resources and time – “You can’t ask us; we are too busy” seems to be universal amongst teachers. To meet the needs of the gifted, teachers should take a scientific view of education and support, look at what works, and then replace what they are doing if it is not effective.

With the child at the centre, a balance of curriculum provision, with social/emotional needs met, gifted students can develop long term wellness and resilience along with successful academic outcomes.

The learning from the Churchill Fellowship will be disseminated in following ways:

- Sharing discoveries through formal presentations and informal discussion at my own school in order continue the leadership Perth Modern School provides to Western Australia in this field,
- Disseminating this paper through appropriate channels,
- Contributing, through my role as Associate Principal, to the implementation of best practice at the school and state-wide,
- Sharing my learning with any interested parties,
- Providing professional development for teachers at the school and at conferences,
- Disseminating information through various Gifted and Talented networks for teachers.

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Getting the basics right

“All children deserve a gifted education, but the gifted deserve special attention”

Mr PT Chan. Education Bureau, Hong Kong, 2014

It is possible to read this report and think that the ideas and conclusions apply to all students, and indeed they do. However, it is imperative that gifted students receive special attention in view of their well-researched and recognised cognitive, social and emotional differences.

Teachers have a responsibility to ensure that every child is learning; every single day, and yet many bright minds go to school and are not engaged. A child could be achieving high grades but not actually learning anything. Whilst many gifted students are well catered for, many other gifted students sit in classrooms around the world, bored but obliging, bored and annoying or bored and downright destructive – to themselves and others. Getting great grades does not mean the student is engaged, learning, or is emotionally well. Social pressures may cause gifted students to play down their intelligence and this is thought to contribute to clinical depression amongst the gifted.

Much good work has been done in the provision of gifted education in Government Education in Western Australia, with provision for primary and secondary school students. There is always room for change, however. Programs that are sustainable are imperative, as schools have limited resources. Programs which are embedded are more effective and more likely to remain, as they are less reliant on one individual championing the initiative.

Gifted students tend to search for complexity and connection. Throughout the Churchill Fellowship study, schools and institutes tended to view ‘gifted’ as either an academic construct or as a psychological construct. If gifted is viewed as an academic construct, students are provided with a ‘program’ of work and should therefore perform well. This serves the greater good and is quantifiable, so value for money is clearly seen. If gifted is viewed as a psychological construct, then the need for like-minded peers, emotional intimacy and friendship is given importance. Psychological aspects are much more difficult to measure, and in the short term, serve the individual. Nevertheless, meeting these needs in the long term would serve the greater good. If neither cognitive nor psychological aspects are considered, then academically gifted students are not seen, not heard, and essentially, shut down.

It is important not only to advocate for the academic rigour and challenge needed by the gifted, but also to advocate the special needs nature of gifted students, with a consideration for both academic and social and emotional needs. Educators would not think twice about special provision for students who have been assessed at performing 2-3 standard deviations below the norm in the cognitive domain. Such students would receive special curriculum, special assistance and added special programs. Yet it is interesting that this same consideration is often not given to academically gifted students, sometimes due to an underlying belief that the gifted are lucky, elite, or capable of looking after themselves. Interestingly, such negative responses to gifted people are not generally seen as applying to talents in sport and music.

There is nothing more unequal, than the equal treatment of unequal people.

Thomas Jefferson, 3rd president of USA (1743 - 1826)

Academically gifted educational provision should definitely not be viewed as elitism or special provision. ‘Equity’ and ‘Equal’ are not the same thing. Equal is about everyone getting the same. Equity is about children getting what they need. The ECHA Conference reported that Singapore, for example, recognises the natural resource of people and their talents and the need to develop these for the good of the individual as well as the society.

Taking care of the curriculum

All the schools visited throughout the Churchill Fellowship focussed on academic rigour in order to provide challenge and engagement for students. Not one school had standard curriculum delivery and content, or mainstream expectations of students. Challenge, engagement and enjoyment leading to learning are important aspects of sustainable gifted education, that is, getting it right the first time through curriculum delivery. Research indicates that many of the social and
emotional difficulties of gifted students disappear when their education is adapted to their level and pace of learning. When students are engaged and challenged through learning they are less likely to be disengaged or frustrated and more likely to remain enrolled at school, experience satisfaction, reach their personal best and develop resilience and efficacy through perseverance.

A common theme at the ECHA Conference was that, compared to cognitively less able students, the learning processes of cognitively able students can generally be characterised by a higher initial level, larger ‘learning steps’, more abstract learning, more self-structuring, longer periods of concentration, less repetition, qualitatively richer and faster guidance by the teacher, and willingness and the ability to work independently. Able students tend to be divergent thinkers in that they are creative and often not grounded. They like to follow the novelty of an idea and see where it goes and are able to connect disconnected thoughts. They also have a strong desire to control their learning. When these aspects were not addressed for gifted students through curriculum provision, students tended to become disengaged and learning dropped off. Students could also demonstrate rebellious behaviours in their struggle to gain control.

All schools visited throughout the Churchill Fellowship planned curriculum based on recognised models for gifted provision, which meant focussing on big picture ideas and real-life cases. All schools compact the curriculum to allow for a deeper level of study or a greater degree of enrichment and extension. This meant that students spent less time each week on a subject than a mainstream student would. All schools expected classes to be differentiated for students so that they could work at their own, sometimes much faster, pace. Schools in the United States of America and the United Kingdom made extensive use of acceleration by subject and year. This was not the case in Singapore, Hong Kong or Slovenia. Creating, rather than regurgitating knowledge was an important aspect of schools for the gifted in all countries visited. This was realized in the science field in the USA, UK and Singapore. Singapore and Slovenia also focused on creativity through design and technology. All schools in all countries engaged in extensive enrichment programs through clubs and after school activities to provide a rich learning environment. These schools did not ignore social and emotional needs, rather the emphasis was on the provision of appropriate curriculum to challenge and engage students.

The case study outlined below is a brief overview of a school that highlights the points above as it primarily focuses on curriculum provision to serve the needs of the gifted population.

**Case study: Thomas Jefferson School, Virginia, USA.**

**Ensuring academic rigour to meet the needs of gifted students.**

**Profile:** A top-achieving secondary school for the gifted with approximately 1850 students in Years 9-12.

The primary focus at Thomas Jefferson School was engaging students through a challenging and integrated curriculum. The school was explicit about academic performance and rigour, with no apologies. It was made clear to parents at the enrolment phase that the school aimed students at university entrance. The school had special permission to offer a “TJ Leaving Certificate”. The expectation of this was much higher than the rest of state. The TJ certificate included the requirement that all senior students completed a senior research paper. Junior students completed a junior version. Students commenced the school in Year 9 and generally studied seven subjects each year, but were able to access advanced placement by subject or year, based on self, parent and teacher nominations. The timetable allowed for 3 x135 minute blocks through the week to engage in deep learning, independent projects, mentoring or research in the senior years. Overall, the students spent less time in traditional classes than would be expected. Student leadership was encouraged and a particular feature of the school to encourage this was the 3 x 45 minute ‘period 8’ which was dedicated to cross-year group club activities. Students signed up online for a term and were encouraged to engage in areas of passions and work in cross year groups. Once a year, for the whole afternoon, students held an activities fair and poster session, advertising their activities to others. Club activities were student-led but supported by teachers, and were highly successful.

Subjects were taught by experts, usually people with doctorates, who had worked in the field and had come to teaching later in life. Maths and science were taught at an exceptionally high level, with links to real-world problems that included designing and launching a NASA space probe. The school had received a little additional funding but relied on
sponsorship and partnerships for expensive science equipment. A science fair was held once a year, over two days, with the entire school community invited to this timetabled event.

The school believed in the importance of students and teachers connecting through the curriculum. This ensured students remained engaged with the curriculum and that issues were identified and addressed early. For example, freshmen (Year Nines) were put in a cross curricula (IBET) learning team. This was overseen by three teachers and a counsellor, who worked with about four classes of 20 students at a time. Other classes over the school week were mixed differently so that students met a range of other students through subjects.

From commencement at the school, students were taught explicitly how to advocate for themselves and take control of their learning journey. Advocacy guidelines were given to students and the school actively taught what was expected and what to expect. For example:

- What to do if you have too much homework
- What to do if you have extended absence
- What to do if you have too many tests and assignments (policy was no more than two a day)
- Your rights as a student
- How to plan ahead
- How to ask for help.

Teachers talked to students explicitly about adjustment and feeling out of place and finding one’s own way. The school made extensive use of counsellors for careers advice, emotional support and assessment. Students who were falling behind were given immediate support. Judgements were made after the first report or teachers identified students as early as possible. Case conferences were held with teachers and parents. Approximately 10% of students had issues adjusting to their new school environment and this was usually identified by the end of the first semester. An intervention specialist with a degree in special education worked with these students in small groups, or one-on-one, as required. The school believed this to be a critical role.

Another feature observed as important was that teachers were allocated time on the timetable to collaborate. The whole school had ‘study time’ of one period each week where teachers were required to engage in professional learning communities. Teachers were rotated through duty to cover duty-of-care of students.

Other curriculum based ideas to consider

Co-enrolment at University
Many of the gifted schools encouraged students to take advanced placement courses, including either online or on campus at universities. For example, School Without Walls in Washington DC is located next to George Washington University. Students can be partly or even fully enrolled at the university and still be enrolled at the school. In this way they can gain credit for school and university simultaneously, can receive the appropriate level of challenge and still be connected to their school and peers. Additionally, online options, such as Johns Hopkins Talent Development Centre, challenge students beyond the regular school offerings.

Collaboration is not the only way
Meaningful practice occurs and many good ideas are developed when people work on their own. Working in a collaborative environment may lead to mediocrity as compromises are reached. Nevertheless, there is a place for collaboration - we all need to be able to get along and work together - but there is also a place for silent concentration. The School for Life UK, presentation- Introversion the New Superpower, indicated that many gifted individuals are introverted as there is a high correlation between this and introspection, reflection and sensitivity, all characteristics of gifted students. It is particularly important to strike a balance between working alone and with others. Some studies of eminent people show that they needed imaginative time alone. Silverman discussed the need to practise in private so that gifts may be developed. Music is an example where private, repetitive practice leads to great improvements. As an example, the Raffles Institute, Singapore encouraged students to undertake an independent research project in the senior years. The school provided open ‘drop in’ laboratories and research staff to collaborate with and assist students’, however students were also encouraged to think about and develop their own ideas.
Develop your own diploma
Across all countries, many of the schools observed had developed their own High School Diploma which aimed to signify what was important to that school and to encourage achievement beyond the regular curriculum as well as the development of the ‘rounded’ student. These Diplomas had expectations that were beyond the standard graduation requirements. Students were expected to graduate with a minimum grade average higher than the norm and were expected to undertake individual research and complete a number of hours of community service. This Diploma did not discount students from state-wide graduation, students just needed to achieve more to graduate from that school. This assisted in keeping up the challenge levels through the middle and senior years and to stop students cruising through. A future school in Singapore used the diploma to encourage critical and creative thinking in students. This was a relatively new concept in the educational sector. The Tanglin Trust School, Singapore, had a ‘Tanglin Core’ which consisted of a cross curricula project, community service, and a theory of knowledge through an extended essay. Gimnazija Vic, Slovenia used their Diploma as a way of assisting students to differentiate themselves from the many other high achieving students, when applying for scholarships and university entry.

Differentiate the curriculum
For all students to be learning throughout each and every day at school, differentiation is vital. All schools visited throughout the Fellowship believed this was important; however success levels in this area were varied. At the meeting with the University of Connecticut, it was suggested that this was because teachers were concerned about final results and outcomes. London Gifted and Talented suggested that teachers tended to stick to what they knew in curriculum delivery and were possibly threatened by the capacity of the student. This capacity could be greater than that of the teachers and therefore teachers possibly limited students’ exposure to ideas and possible responses by making the curriculum a little more lock stepped than it need to be.

Many of the schools visited accomplished basic differentiation through individual research projects. The ECHA Conference reported that the process of differentiation could be simplified. Teachers often mistakenly believe differentiating the curriculum means starting over or creating completely different lessons for each topic. Not so! These presenters believed basic differentiation is easier than many teachers think. Teachers could pose the questions, “What can I do to extend his/her learning?” Stretching and challenging the top students encourages all students to strive for their best. Differentiation begins with adapting a lesson by focusing on content, process and product as well as students’ needs, interests, and levels of readiness. Differentiation is not about developing an individual plan for all. It means getting minds switched on at the right level and stretching all students to learn. The use of the higher levels of Bloom’s Cognitive Taxonomy, or promoting a tiered curriculum, would appear to be the way to go. Additionally, matching content, level of thinking and sophistication with the product, process, or assessment to match student or cluster of students’ readiness is the key to successful differentiation. The biggest growth in student learning will occur in the process domain, and teachers can start with one area and build up. Homework also needs to be differentiated. Teachers often don’t differentiate assessments, due to perceived fairness; however, tiered parallel tasks can move from concrete to abstract with the same goal in mind.

Challenge and engagement
Challenge and engagement form the cornerstone of learning. The University of Connecticut suggested the questions we should ask our young people are, ‘What did you enjoy today?’ or ‘What challenged you today?’, rather than ‘What did you learn today?’ Many students and their parents are unwilling to take risks with the child’s learning and want to stick to a known formula for easy results. Many students are used to easily gaining high grades and will often have an emotional crisis when they don’t do so well. It is important that grades do not come easily all the time. If the child is consistently getting 95-100%, then the work is not challenging enough. Students do not learn to develop resilience when faced with a difficult or challenging task if everything is easy, in which case the most important step to take is to help students develop resilience and perseverance when working through difficult tasks. Students need to understand that hard work and effort are essential and promote resilience throughout life. One strategy is to start students with the most difficult aspect of the curriculum first, and move the student on if s/he knows it. Potential Plus, UK indicated it was important not to decrease the challenge, even if students were underachieving. Other support should be provided. Content that is beyond the teacher’s expertise can be outsourced. Josephine Butler Campus, UK indicated that parents need to understand the need for challenge if they are to support their child at school.
Entrepreneurship

Individuals are capable of doing new things and not simply repeating what has already been done. We need to believe that students can develop new knowledge and not just regurgitate old knowledge. It is vital to develop the spirit and mindset of an entrepreneur. Gifted students often have a hidden passion or area of interest and if we fail to look at what students have created on their own, above and beyond lessons and tests, we miss an opportunity to appreciate what is special about them. Many schools visited throughout the Churchill Fellowship encouraged students to undertake innovative research. One Singapore school for example, focused on students creating new knowledge, understanding start-up businesses and developing products. All projects were required to have an element of creativity and innovation. This school in Singapore is considered a ‘future school’. Entrepreneurship and innovation embrace change and adaptability thus preparing students to be able to deal with a changing world in future. In another example, McIntosh Academy, Boulder USA encouraged entrepreneurship through design, construction and deconstruction in a specially equipped maker room. Josephine Butler Campus, UK gave students ten pounds to start a business. Students were expected to make money through a small entrepreneurial venture and pay back the original ten pounds.

Experts in the field

Exposing students to the big thinkers in a discipline is essential to motivate bright minds and encourage thinking and innovation. This includes past and present leaders in the field, interesting current research, and what experts in the field do. For example, ‘What does a scientist do?’, ‘What does a mathematician do?’ Girls and boys should read about eminent men and women. All schools visited utilised mentors and master classes to achieve introduce experts in the field. All schools reported improved outcomes for students by this strategy. Mentors and exposure to experts were considered particularly important for students from low socio economic backgrounds to help develop aspirations where students were often not exposed to a wide range of careers or ideas. Tanglin Trust School, Singapore utilised business leaders and politicians to expose students to experts. Josephine Butler Campus, UK encouraged students to access an extended reading list to take students beyond the curriculum. Additionally, they held working lunches where students attended lunch time ‘meetings’ to engage in expert and mentoring discussions. They also encouraged students to develop and meet with mentors in their area of interest so that ideas could be developed and links for the future made. This included a program called ‘Oxford Shadowing’ where students shadowed researchers and students at Oxford University.

Focus on thinking – critical and creative as well as structured

Metacognition, along with challenge and stepping outside the box, is essential to fire up the brains of gifted students. Explicit thinking skill development and challenge are vital for gifted students. They are less likely to be aware of their thinking processes as they usually have not had to put much thought into them. Students need the opportunity to construct /deconstruct things and knowledge. Underachievement can be pushed back by developing metacognition. Gifted children can have lower metacognitive ability due to the fact they just know the answer and don’t have to think about it. Teachers at Tanglin Trust School, Singapore were required to include explicit higher order thinking strategies in their teaching plans. Parliament Hill School UK, believed that gifted students should be taught to be researchers from an early age. They also focused on divergent and creative thinking. Schools in Hong Kong and Singapore worked at enhancing thinking through a science context.

Invite student feedback

Anyone who has worked with gifted students will know that these students usually have plenty of opinions and plenty to say. Many of the schools visited allowed for extensive feedback from students. Students need to be not only quizzed about how they are going, but also invited to give feedback on how they spend their day doing school work. It is tempting to issue standard surveys which ask, ‘Were the objectives clear?’, ‘Did I teach it ok?’, and ‘Did I give you timely feedback?’ However, in the gifted context, such questions are of limited in value. The ECHA Conference suggested that personal responsibility is not only undervalued but actually discouraged by the
standard classroom model, with its enforced passivity and rigid boundaries of curriculum and time. Denied the opportunity to make even the most basic decisions about how and what they will learn, gifted students may withhold commitment. Schools visited involved students in planning of the curriculum either in review or at the time of development and implementation. This allowed students a voice and a choice and helped set the curriculum at the right level. Parliament Hill School UK for example, involved students in curriculum design through feedback or co-development of programs to ensure appropriate challenge. Teachers hold focus groups with students to gain feedback and they talk together about what makes a lesson ‘great’. Teachers report that it saves time when planning and students report it helps them think about the learning process.

Unstructured time and study not linked to marks and grades

Unstructured time was a common feature in gifted schools across all countries visited. Many gifted students have a passion in a particular area, and such unstructured time allows them to follow their passions without concern for failure or not getting it right. Unstructured time gave students opportunities to find like-minded peers and mentors amongst students and staff. This time could be used with enrichment activities, or to provide mentoring opportunities. As mentioned above, Thomas Jefferson, Virginia USA, made extensive use of unstructured time in the senior years. London Gifted and Talented highlighted a number of high performing UK schools who used this strategy. At one, sixth form students spent two hours per week in small groups with staff members, exploring ideas and areas of interest.

Psychology of the gifted

On a freezing night in Boulder, Colorado, Linda Silverman posed the question:

“Does gifted still exist if we can’t see it?”

Many people are ‘allergic’ to the term ‘gifted’. Often the name changes, but the issues don’t. Gifted is not about a badge and not about potential. Gifted is not a stamp of approval for doing something remarkable. Silverman viewed gifted as a psychological construct. Science says gifted individuals are psychologically different from mainstream students. Years of research says these children have special needs. It is argued that educators need to focus on the demonstrated differences, which are outside people’s control, and not demonstrated achievement, which is inside people’s control.

Silverman outlined that as cognitive capacity increases there is some evidence that social and emotional adjustments are more difficult, with a lower percentage of gifted children appearing to be well adjusted. Presenters at the ECHA Conference described an optimal level of intelligence as between 120-145 IQ, where gifted children are not so different from age peers that they do not fit in. These are generally the children chosen as leaders by their more average age peers. In the higher IQ ranges (160+), gifted children experience enough difference from age peers that they do not fit in. These children may show less social and emotional adjustment. Therefore, it is vital to advocate for students in terms of psychological special needs. Gifted is the mirror image of developmental disability. No one would expect special needs students in the low ability IQ ranges to have a mainstream education without support, yet that is often expected of gifted students.

Gifted students require early intervention and special schools. However, it is important to treat gifted children as ‘they just are’. No one would point out to a low ability student that they are of low ability or have special needs – supportive education would happen in the background. For example, pointing out to a child how ‘smart’ they are can add unwanted pressure. Additionally, schools need to be careful about what they highlight, as this is what is valued. Does the school promote success or integrity? To value integrity, the school must value the gifted child for who they are, not for what they do.

Gifted students can choose not to demonstrate their giftedness for a number of reasons. They may feel like outsiders. Asynchronicity, or uneven development, can lead to a feeling of being out of step with others, as well as within themselves. Additionally, advanced cognition frequently leads to heightened emotions and intensities. Just because a child is being difficult or underachieves, does not mean they are not gifted.
The case study outlined below is a brief overview of a school that highlights and then supports the social and emotional needs of the gifted as the primary focus. Again, this is not to say that academic rigour does not feature but it is not the first priority.

Case study: Academy for Advanced and Creative Learning – Colorado Springs, USA.

Taking care of the intensities of the gifted

“Our philosophy is child-centred: we put the child first. We focus on understanding your child’s inner world (overexcitabilities, emotions, perceptions, relationships, personality, etc.), rather than on his or her potential for success. We see giftedness as a pervasive way of being in the world, not as being “gifted in...”.” Website: Academy for Advanced and Creative Learning

Profile: The Academy for Advanced and Creative Learning is an example of a school putting the social and emotional needs of gifted students at the front and centre of planning. The school has been a charter school since 2010. A charter school is a school which receives public funding but operates independently of the established public school system it is located in. The school has approximately 300 students enrolled from years one to eight. Whilst set up for gifted students, they do not have to be tested to attend. The school made really clear what they did and didn’t do. For some families this school did not work out, but enrolments were relatively stable. The grounds were peaceful, with an outside area which allowed students to ‘take a breath’.

The main focus is on individual students – ‘Who are you as a learner?’, ‘What do you know?’, ‘What do you need?’. The school deals with, and acknowledges, the intensities of the gifted child. Students were encouraged to be their unique self. The school worked at seeing students for who they are. Gifted students often ask a lot of questions, and the teachers are required to tell the student they see them, acknowledge them, and then come back to the questions later, if needed. The students report feeling seen and never shut down, no matter how many questions they ask. The school had fidget trays and wiggle chairs for students who have trouble sitting still. Classes have soft lighting and quiet spaces for students to retreat to when necessary.

Managing the intensities and sensitivities of gifted students can be challenging, as they seem to have an older brain and younger body, and sometimes young or old emotions. When responding to issues, the child and their learning needs are at the centre. Teachers were required to implement low to high responses, making small tweaks to adjust what they were doing with instruction first. They are then required to differentiate the curriculum. Case conferences with teachers were held to discuss what works with certain children. If a student is off task or not doing the right thing, the teacher takes specific steps in a calm way, ‘What should you be doing right now?’ ‘What will happen if I have to ask you again?’ This worked particularly well for dreamy students.

Each teacher was required to focus on engaging students and to be vigilant about this. Each subject was timetabled to occur at the same time so that students could access the level they required, even if this meant going to a different class. It was not seen as going up or down, it just was necessary for that child. One class had a four year old child, who had applied for early entry, explaining complex mathematics patterns to seven year olds.

The school had a scope and sequence to teach explicit life skills. Some examples of these are: character counts and being honest. In response to some students noticing others getting something different at school, the differences between justice and fairness, how to manage your anger, and empathy without being involved, were explicitly taught. Additionally, students were taught how to ask for help.

I noted that student ‘greeters’ spoke positively about the school. They liked the fact that they could ask as many questions as they wanted. The teacher might say, ‘I see you and will talk to you later’, and does, ensuring the student did feel ignored. The school promoted the FISH! Philosophy amongst students, with them echoing ‘Choose your attitude!’ The FISH! Philosophy was inspired by a business that is world famous for its incredible energy and commitment to service—the Pike Place Fish Market, USA. The sixth graders mentored fifth graders and students reported they enjoyed this. They helped the younger students organise their planners and answer questions about school. This provides leadership roles for the older students.
Teachers were selected on merit and this is based on expertise, capacity to be flexible, and ‘heart’. They are expected to be flexible and to make adjustments to serve the students. Families are encouraged to volunteer 15 hours to the school. This assisted in the students feeling highly supported. Parents reported that they were often relieved to have their child at this school, as many had not fitted in to mainstream schools.

Other social/emotional based ideas to consider

Big brain theory
Many presenters at the ECHA Conference explored the brain of the gifted student. There are definite differences in the ‘gifted’ brain compared to the ‘average’ brain. Less activity occurs in the brain of the gifted individual when the brain is engaged in cognitive activity, as it takes the brain less effort. This is why gifted students can do a number of things at once.

Presenters at the ECHA Conference indicated that gifted students need to understand that the brain is not fixed and that they are not born with a certain amount of intelligence. Some presenters considered it important to talk to students about the brain and the gifted brain and that they can make changes. For example, traditionally not many women were good at chess, mathematics and computing, but this is changing as the brain is adaptable and more women are exposed to these areas of study. Furthermore, these presenters considered it important to develop executive functioning and train the working memory of gifted students as these are often underdeveloped. Developing working memory can increase cognitive activity. Some practical ways to do this include origami, mental math, and music. Cognitive challenge can also assist students in firing up the brain to a greater degree. Research is in progress about certain frequencies and combinations of music (mostly classical) but it does appear to activate the most parts of the brain at once. It is thought the right frequency may increase brain capacity.

London Gifted and Talented discussed the importance of talking to students about the brain, the gifted brain and neuroplasticity. Additionally, linking brain development with what students are actually doing was considered helpful. Stress can alter the development of the left and right sides of the brain. It is helpful for students to know why educators focus on the things they do, such as mindfulness. Mindfulness can be defined as the non-judgmental focus on one’s emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment.

Boys behaving badly
It was reported at the ECHA Conference that boys are more likely to demonstrate their frustration at lack of challenge and engagement, or aversion to taking a risk with challenging tasks, by acting out or underachieving. For example McIntosh Academy, USA reported that more boys than girls were enrolled in the school as parents sought an alternative education for them. The staff suspect this is because boys are more likely than girls to misbehave if not engaged.

It was noted at the ECHA Conference that boys have more of a tendency to be obsessive about computers, which also feeds underachievement. Mindfulness was seen as a positive means to deal with computer obsessions.

Underachieving boys were thought to require a deep level of understanding from the teacher who must be able to provide small group support. London Gifted and Talented suggested that teachers do not decrease the level of challenge, but rather use small steps to success in ways that do not embarrass the student. Acceleration may be used as a successful strategy for disengaged boys who have a tendency to need to see the goal post before they put in the effort needed.

Character education and explicit social skills
Gifted students can have strong social justice views and sometimes do not ‘see’ themselves and how they come across. Many schools around the world believed in the importance of character education. However, the means of delivering this was often different. Some issues noted included:

- Interpersonal skills
- How to handled transitions
- How to make friends
- Conflict and negotiation
- Values
- Group work
Goal setting.

Some schools approached character education quite directly by talking about the feelings of the child. This was more common in USA schools. Other schools approached it from a 'one step removed' perspective, using case studies, role plays and animations. This appeared to be more common in Asian schools. A future school in Singapore explicitly addressed character and social development through teaching students how to look after themselves and their belongings as well as how to look after each other. This led to all Year 9 students participating in a one week Outward Bound camp to develop character and leadership.

Children should be really seen as well as heard

Yes, schools should be able to cater for all students, but more often than not, gifted students report that they are left on their own, or told not to ask so many questions. Silverman indicated that many gifted students fell invisible. Everyone needs others to understand and ‘see’ them and this is an important aspect of developing mental wellness. School Without Walls, USA took the view that, “All students should be treated with care, as if they were your own”. Additionally, they focused on each individual student and considered what that student needed to be successful at school.

The University of Connecticut gave a school example where students in a form group could talk about anything, but with a few rules regarding talking about others. The form teacher started off with, ‘What do you want to talk about today?’ They also suggested that Betts’ Autonomous Learner Model is successful in addressing this aspect as well.

Emotional intensity and sensitivity

Sensitivities and intensities to such things as light, sound and textures are well-recognised characteristics of gifted young people. They can’t be cured – they just are. These can be overwhelming for gifted students and it is essential to help young people recognise when they are being too intense or sensitive, but they should not be viewed as wrong. Internal anxiety can exacerbate these characteristics. Teaching gifted students about their nature was considered an important strategy,

McIntosh Academy, USA, explicitly managed intensities as many of their students did not fit the regular classroom as they had extreme intensities along with their giftedness. Fluoro lights had been softened with ‘kite’ fitted over them to help students sensitive to light. Students had wiggle cushions for sensory movement. Classrooms had fidget trays-small things students can fidget with, for example soft balls. Rubber strips were tied around chair legs for students to kick and this helped with movement. Another idea was the use of stand-up desks which students could move to when they felt the need. Each classroom had a quiet space with chair or cushions were students could retreat to. Additionally, the Principal of the school suggested the use a “volcano scale: mellow yellow, to oh orange, to red hot lava”, to help students assess their emotional state. The University of Connecticut also suggested giving the students things to fiddle with. The use of fit balls allowed subtle movement for those kids that need to move to concentrate.

Encourage connections

Overwhelmingly, schools, universities and systems talked about the need for connection. Whether dealing with someone from the same IQ group, different cultural backgrounds, or social and economic environments, connection is a basic human need. The difference between true peers and age peers was regularly highlighted. For gifted children, true peers are probably not the same chronological age; gifted children often seek friendships with older children. Silverman, in her talk, proposed that it is ten times harder for gifted students to find a ‘safe mate’. These pressures often waned in adulthood but may leave a significant negative impact on emotional development.

Teaching students how to make friends has been shown to support students and possibly reverse underachievement. School Without Walls, USA, thought this was particularly important for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. London Gifted and Talented indicated the importance of students having time with true peers, and not just age peers, to find similar interests to share. This school thought that schools need to provide opportunities throughout the school day for students to mix with true peers.

The University of Connecticut specified one school in New York, which allowed one period per day for students to select an activity of interest, a new one each day, so they could work with like-minded peers. Clubs also created a sense of community. A few schools, such as Denbigh High School, UK had longer lunch breaks to allow for club time, and this could be up to one hour in length. Many schools visited used older students to run clubs based on their own passion. This
provided leadership opportunities as well as enrichment activities for younger students.

Down time
Academic rigour and high expectations, whilst considered key to successful programs for gifted students, can lead to stress, burnout and overwork. Schools were conscious of this and focussed on student wellbeing. McIntosh Academy, USA, believed that students needed a break from the intense learning environment. This school had beautiful grounds in a rural setting where students had long breaks during the day and were encouraged to be outdoors. Tanglin Trust School, Singapore, had regular homework free weeks for younger students. The Raffles Institute, Singapore was the most surprising of all, with the school believing in the importance of relaxation and down time. Senior students worked hard and were trusted to manage their time. They had access to ‘nap chairs’ for mini sleeps and DVD’s which they could watch at any time.

Gifted girls: understanding forced choice dilemma
The ECHA Conference reported that gifted girls had a tendency to be wired, overscheduled, under pressure to be popular, conscious and concerned regarding media images and have difficulty with criticism. It was reported that girls often felt strange and out of step with their peers. Generally, girls are good at fulfilling their potential until about the age of 14, and then it declines. Girls underachieve in much quieter ways than boys, and often feel lack of personal control over educational success, attributing success to luck. Underachievement can occur with girls opting out of the difficult courses, so it looks on the surface that they are doing well, but they are not necessarily reaching their potential. Girls often get confusing messages from home about success, politeness, and choices about duty, partners, religious and social issues. Giftedness in boys tends to be encouraged, but not in girls. Research by the University of Connecticut, USA demonstrated that adult women had said they had ‘dumbed’ themselves down, or purposely made errors, to not look so ‘bright’. School without Walls, USA, indicated that in some cultures there may be no expectation for girls to succeed. The ECHA Conference suggested that it was important to de-emphasise being ‘good’ and emphasise risk taking and independence.

Leadership
Whilst there should be no obligation for gifted students to be the leaders of the future, providing genuine opportunities to develop leadership skills was valued by gifted schools across all cultures. This is something that was much more developed around the world than had been observed in Perth. Leadership was seen as a means of students developing control over their learning, an important need for gifted students. As mentioned above, this could be achieved by older students mentoring younger students or leading enrichment activities. Other means of developing leadership include students taking responsibility for and leading charity drives and science fairs. Leading community service involvement was also seen as an important avenue to develop leadership in students. All schools reported that students were more than capable of this level of leadership.

Manage stress for optimal learning
Issues of peer, parent and self-pressure, and the notion of “what is good enough”, along with gifted intensities, can increase anxiety in gifted teenagers. Additionally, Silverman indicated that many gifted students put themselves under pressure as they speed up the learning process.

At the ECHA Conference one presenter suggested that stressed people have the right side of the brain more developed. Monks, who meditate regularly, have been shown to have the left side more developed. The right side of the brain fires up under stress and the left side calms it down. Those not stressed have more balance in the brain and more capacity to operate cognitively; consequently, managing stress is important. The University of Connecticut, USA, suggested that anxiety can be reduced by helping students to remain calm and connected. This can then lead to improved mental wellness and academic performance. All schools visited believed students needed balance and a release from the intensity of school as well as other expectations and pressures.
Preliminary research at the University of Connecticut, USA, demonstrated that lowering stress though Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) and tapping pressure points were very positive. Additionally, guided meditation and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) have shown positive results in reducing stress. A presenter at the ECHA Conference indicated that being in ‘flow’ can also lead to increased wellbeing. Flow comes through deep concentration, particularly around activities and passions we enjoy, hence the need for enrichment activities and clubs. Additionally another ECHA Conference presenter suggested that mindfulness, taking a breath and being in the moment, helps reduce anxiety by minimizing future ‘worries’. Five to six weeks of mindfulness training showed measurable changes in the brain. Mindfulness is particularly helpful in managing emotional intensities. It can also assist with eating disorders and computer addictions. It is essential to assist parents in understanding these techniques. For example, a good activity before sleep is to turn off all technology and practise meditation or mindfulness. This improves sleep and therefore improves mental wellbeing and productivity the next day.

Meaningful and kind feedback to students

There is a big difference between parental and teacher support and parental and teacher pressure. Pressure is not productive. The ECHA Conference reported that gifted young people can have a crisis of confidence and become more conservative or opt out when under pressure. Teachers need to be aware that our gifted students are young people who function as adults. Due to the sensitivities of gifted young people, classroom feedback to students should be couched in a way that is positive and encouraging, allows room for growth and improvement and maintains respect.

Most people are limited by their inner game, not their outer game. Presenters at the ECHA Conference regularly mentioned the use of a coaching strategy, where the teacher is the encouraging guide on the side, rather than the ‘critiquer’, as a useful strategy for gifted young people. This also helps students understand they have control over the learning journey and promotes a growth mindset. If the gifted student has a problem at school with performance or motivation the teacher could ask, “What is your end game? Don’t ask, “Why haven’t you done your homework?”. Ask, “What stood in the way of you doing your homework”....“How could you do it differently?” Don’t say, “Be quiet/pay attention” instead ask, “What can I do to get your attention right now?”

Some sentences that may help, particularly with a perfectionist child include;

- What are you afraid of the most?
- What will happen/not happen?
- If that happens how will you deal with it?
- Are important people angry or just dissatisfied?
- Everyone makes mistakes – have you met anyone who has made a mistake that is a loser?

Coaching, which can be readily embedded and sustainable, has been consistently shown by researchers at the ECHA Conference to have positive effects with gifted students. It supports an adaptable learning style, can motivate underachieving gifted students and nurtures cooperation. Moreover, it encourages healthy development of the self and promotes a model to overcome social/emotional issues at the school level, including low self-esteem and anxiety. Growth coaching is particularly good for gifted students as it focuses on what they can do, rather than what they can’t do. This empowers students to have control over themselves and learning. Coaching involves active participation, listening and powerful questions, which encourages curiosity, creative thinking and lifelong learning by helping gifted students to come to their own solutions. Giving advice and external guidance may demotivate gifted students. Gifted students may display oppositional traits and growth coaching is good for the oppositional student as it helps the student understand that the teacher is on the same side. Coaching is an excellent way to provide feedback on reports, assignments or in person, even at parent meetings.

Mentoring

The University of Connecticut reported that gifted students vary in successful outcomes, despite similar starts. Personality can play a large part, but so can support and mentoring opportunities. Mentoring can be a means of providing stimulating and worthwhile experiences for children of high ability.

London Gifted and Talented suggested that mentoring can help deal with the intellectual overconfidence sometimes found in gifted students by assisting them to see the advantages of an open mind and a broader perspective, as well as developing their skills for effective teamwork and networking. Also, feelings of isolation and anxiety, frequently present in gifted students, can be assisted through mentoring by helping students to develop perspective and a positive view of
themselves. The ECHA Conference reported that both on-line and real life mentoring is of benefit to gifted students, but particularly for those from low socio-economic backgrounds as it can broaden their perspective and provide networking opportunities.

All schools visited throughout the Fellowship reported the benefits of mentoring for gifted students. Some schools provided space in the school day for this to occur. One of the most successful models is for students to be encouraged to find their own mentor. This made sure the ‘fit’ was good.

Mindset to “Get on with your learning”

Growth mindset is similar, yet different, to growth coaching. Potential Plus UK as well as London Gifted and Talented and the University of Connecticut believed in the importance of gifted students understanding growth and fixed mindsets as many have a fixed mindset. Mindset is a belief about oneself and ones qualities, intelligence, for example. A fixed mindset is a belief that we only have a certain amount of intelligence and there is nothing we can do to change it. Success is not about learning but proving you are smart. Winning is important; not developing as a person. With this mindset students are less likely to try something new, take risks with their learning or handle failure. Long term resilience is low. By Year 3 at school nearly 50% of our mindset is fixed.

Growth mindset focuses on the fact that intelligence can be demonstrated with persistence, effort, and a focus on learning. Growth mindset develops our responses to challenges and mistakes, our attitude to effort and the strategies we develop to in order to achieve thus promoting long term resilience and positive self-esteem. Potential Plus, UK, suggested some strategies for the teacher in the classroom to develop a growth mindset include:

- Modelling a growth mindset
- Ensuring appropriate challenge so that effort is required
- Providing opportunities for creativity / productive thought and innovation
- Valuing mistakes as learning experiences
- Encouraging risk taking
- Developing self-regulation skills
- Rewarding effort, not only achievement
- Viewing school ’work’ as ‘learning’ and failure as learning opportunities
- Setting up marking systems and feedback to promote risk taking and a focus on improvement goals.

Praise and rewards

Silverman indicated that telling a gifted child s/he is ‘smart’ is not good for the child. Those who equate their success or failure with their inborn ability, when faced by a difficult challenge, think they have been ‘dumb’ all along. Work ethic, persistence and resilience are at least as important, if not more important, than pure intelligence. It is important to ensure that there is explicit reward for effort and not brains, and on the things we do and not who we are. Persistence, not natural ability, makes a difference to performance, so important to make effort visible, rather than just final results. A focus on metacognition can support a focus on effort rather than results. When students are rewarded for marks and grades only, many will decline to take part in a challenging activity. Additionally, s ECHA Conference reported that enjoyment may decrease when the going gets tough. Strategies for the classroom are to focus on effort as well as the end game. The opportunity for learning and challenge for the sake of it and not linked to grades was seen as important.

London Gifted and Talented reported that gifted students should not be praised or rewarded for just showing up. Culturally, parents and students have different expectations of praise, with some presenters at the ECHA Conference reporting that Asian parents rarely directly praised their child. Parliament Hill School, UK, believed it was important to teach the difference between praise and feedback to parents as well.

Promoting self-regulation

The ECHA Conference reported that a focus on self-regulation and developing it in gifted students is essential. Self-regulation develops self efficacy and self-confidence. Hundreds of articles demonstrate that “helicoptering” or “overprotecting” by parents regulate the child’s emotions for them, thus stopping them from developing their own emotions and appropriate responses to them. McIntosh Academy, USA, and Potential Plus UK promoted the importance of self-regulation. Schools need to ask parents for support in this regard. Encouraging parents to step back so their child can step up was deemed important. If the parent is right there every time something is not to the liking of the child, fighting the
child’s battles, including battles at school, such as with teachers or grades, the child does not learn to self-regulate and the parent takes over.

McIntosh Academy, USA suggested parents and teachers talk through issues with the child and the strategies the child will take, but not to take over. They go on to say, that if parents and teachers give it a second, the student tends to regulate themselves or pick up on the other’s signals and respond appropriately.

Resilience and persistence
Coming across failure and learning to fail can be challenging when the gifted student is used to easily getting things right. Gifted students often lack resilience and persistence as they are not used to having to use them. The ability to repeatedly deal with failure, real or perceived, by using more effort instead of giving up is a characteristic of resilience well-studied in psychology. Resilience can help sensitive gifted students to bounce back. People with resilience and persistence can sustain their motivation through long periods of delayed gratification. This is an important life skill as life does not always have easy answers. Gifted students need to understand that they need to learn to work hard and not just cruise. Perseverance and hard work are important for now and the future.

This is backed up by London Gifted and Talented and Potential Plus UK, who both emphasised the importance of developing resilience and persistence for when things are not working. Gifted students learn this through challenging tasks. Additionally they believe that teachers and parents should not rescue the student at every challenging moment, but be quietly supportive. Moreover, they believe it is essential that teaching staff and parents model resilient behaviours.

Supporting students from mixed economic backgrounds
School Without Walls, USA and Parliament Hill School UK, reported that gifted students from low economic backgrounds can be challenging. They often go home to an environment where education is not valued. Many such students feel that they don't belong when they go home to their low socio-economic background. They often find it difficult to make friends or fit in, as they often don't have same opportunities, suburb of residence, overseas holidays, to name a few.

The University of Connecticut suggests the solution is to work hard to help gifted students develop friendships with similar interests. School Without Walls, USA works on and builds up the positives about why the student is at the school. They also talk openly about who has dealt with similar issues before and believe it is important to develop aspirations for low social economic students through mentoring, university billets and career guidance.

Teach students to advocate for themselves
In terms of teaching students to self-regulate it is important to explicitly teach students how to advocate for themselves. Additionally, the capacity to advocate supports the need for gifted students to feel control over their learning journey. Gifted students will often have a strong point of view, so they need to learn explicitly how to argue or disagree constructively. Some schools throughout the Fellowship did this upfront and explicitly, others did it as the need arose. USA schools such as Thomas Jefferson, McIntosh Academy and School Without Walls, USA, believed it was important to give students proactive strategies to manage their learning process. For example, School Without Walls, encouraged students to "Demand their education". Students were explicitly taught what to do when they had too much homework or too many tests. There was also an explicit focus on what to do if they needed help, either academically, socially or emotionally. London Gifted and Talented suggested a question for students to explore is, "What do you do when you don't know what do?" They believed this was important as gifted students often became anxious when this was the case.

The twice exceptional
Supporting gifted students with identified learning disabilities, such as Asperger's Syndrome, high functioning Autism, or Semantic Pragmatic Disorder, often requires specialised assistance, but there are still things schools and teachers can do to help. The ECHA Conference reported that many times teachers of gifted students struggled to understand the needs of these students and often did not see the need to address them or did not see the students as gifted. Quite often these twice exceptional students were ridiculed by teachers. Promoting confidence and self-esteem in these students is vital. It was suggested that the first step is to try to understand the specific needs of these students. They generally do not 'get' jokes or sarcasm, which is the opposite of many gifted students. Emotions can be difficult to control for these students. Many do not make obvious links or connections or understand social cues. Teaching twice exceptional gifted students requires explicit links, which, again, is the opposite of what is considered important in gifted education. They may also take things literally. Often they don't see the big picture and don't infer what is going on. This can be difficult with assignments that ask for inferences. Many twice exceptional students require social or life skill training, and even with
social training, many do not internalise the skills. More often than not more than one issue is present. Asperger’s Syndrome is often tied to difficulty with handwriting and dyslexia, for example.

The issue for many schools is that ‘twice exceptional’ students may remain undiagnosed. Twice exceptional boys tend to be obsessive about computers and are more likely to act out. Children with ADHD, characteristics of which have a striking resemblance to giftedness, are most at risk if IT addiction if not addressed. Twice exceptional girls will tend to be obsessive about shops and makeup rituals. Anorexia is thought to have the same rigid patterns of behaviour as Asperger’s syndrome. Some strategies a teacher can try in the classroom include:

- Use picture cueing
- Move close and remain calm when issuing instruction
- Make instructions explicit, with no hidden meaning
- Be observant and proactive in the use of time out
- Use routines
- Avoid sarcasm.

Underachievement

Children may not be demonstrating their potential for a variety of reasons. Early identification and support is crucial as the earlier issues are addressed the more likely they can be reversed. It is important to make sure there are no physical barriers to achievement. For example the ECHA Conference reported that a high level of underachievement was linked to hearing problems with students having difficulty with attention and motivation and underperforming in maths and spelling. Additionally, it was suggested that students who had difficult births were at higher risk of processing disorders.

All schools had a focus on early intervention. One school described it as being “on to it like a pit crew at a Formula One race”. School Without Walls, USA reminded students about why they came to that school when they fell behind. This was to help them understand what they were working towards. They also believed there was a need to teach executive functioning skills explicitly as they did not come naturally to many gifted students as they have not been required to be organised or juggle many complex tasks before. Tanlin Trust School, Singapore, identified students who may struggle and provided support early on. The ECHA Conference reported that we can push back underachievement in gifted students by developing metacognitive strategies. Gifted students can have less metacognitive abilities due to the fact they just know the answer and don’t have to think about. Additionally, unmotivated students are often motivated and did better with career guidance and counselling. Underachievement can have a habit of cycling downwards. London Gifted and Talented indicated that the essential message was to provide support early on – whatever is necessary – but not to decrease the challenge.

Understanding ourselves

Silverman reported that the psychological reality of the gifted student may make the individual feel different. The University of Connecticut indicated that it was important for both parents and gifted students to understand the psychological nature of giftedness. The ECHA Conference reported that self-awareness is an important aspect of the holistic development of gifted students. Parent and students will often have a sense of relief that they are not alone when they understand themselves and others. One school suggested we are not doing gifted students any favours by not talking about their nature. They often feel out of step, and talking about giftedness can help reduce anxiety.

Schools were mixed in their beliefs about approaches to teaching students about their gifted nature. Some schools taught this through animation, others more directly. ‘Who am I?’ ‘What are my talents and gifts?, are important questions for students to consider.

Parents on side

Schools in general often lament the lack of parent involvement. Yet many of the schools visited throughout the Churchill Fellowship commented that they dealt with issues of parents being too involved. It is necessary to strike a balance. Silverman suggested not much attention had been given to issues of parenting the gifted and that there is a fine line between advocacy and being ‘pushy’. She suggested that many parents of gifted students felt dismissed or put down by schools over the course of their child’s school life and indicated that schools need to have the view that parents have genuine concern for their child.
London Gifted and Talented indicated that the most important task, after getting the curriculum right, was to educate parents about ways to support the school and their child in it, about not ‘rescuing their child’ but being quietly supportive and letting the child sort things. The importance of a child being challenged and applying effort was discussed. The main issue arises when parents do not want their child to fail and then intervene too early if they perceive the situation is too challenging. If the child is consistently getting 95-100% the work in not hard enough so parents should be encouraged to advocate for their child and ask for harder work or acceleration. Schools need to teach parents how to advocate for their child appropriately. Furthermore, they indicated the importance of teaching parents about why we do what we do, for example the research regarding metacognition, resilience, challenge and engagement. London Gifted and Talented indicated that it is essential to teach parents about praise and feedback and to provide them with the skills to not mix praise and feedback. Feedback is specific to an outcome. Praise is often about being a ‘good’ person. The first encourages a growth mindset and an understanding that effort leads to rewards. The second promotes a fixed mindset and often encourages an understanding that hard work is not required. It is what we do with our capacity that ultimately counts.

One presenter at the ECHA Conference proposed that parents need to manage their own anxieties, sensitivities and expectations. Parents are often bringing their own exasperating past school experiences to the current situation. Perfectionism, which can be healthy or unhealthy, tends to be inherited from parents. Unhealthy perfectionism generally leads to lower grades. Healthy perfectionism and parenting tend to give the student more freedom and choice. This can be difficult in different cultural groups. Parents need to recognise that what they see in the child is often one of their (gifted) characteristics. The University of Connecticut recommended teaching parents key strategies such as mindfulness attention training so that these could be practised and reinforced at home.

Tanglin Trust School, Singapore, and School Without Walls, USA both held regular parent briefings and meetings to inform parents about what the school was trying to achieve with their child. Thomas Jefferson School, USA welcomed parent involvement. They talked explicitly to parents about letting go and ‘trusting’ the school to look after their child. Another strategy suggested by Potential Plus, UK, is to teach parents about the nature of the gifted child and how they can support him or her. Many schools also found it helpful to provide parents with an extended reading list regarding giftedness so that they better understand the issues surrounding their child. Schools can also develop strategies to encourage positive and constructive parent involvement through volunteering and fundraising.

The teacher is the heart of the matter

Teachers of the gifted play a crucial role in successful outcomes for many of these sensitive students. Gifted students can be challenging. However, it is the teacher who needs to have a ‘plan’ for success, not the child. Students have reported that teachers in schools for the gifted can be impatient, occasionally arrogant, and very often condescending. Schools need to be about the child. The teacher needs to be the one that is flexible. There may be an issue with the teacher not being comfortable with students being smarter than they are, in which case they may directly or indirectly put students down. It can be very confronting and teachers may react out of self-protection. The University of Connecticut stated that teachers need to be mindful that sensitive children pick up on indirect or unintentional feedback and that good eye contact and positive body language are essential. Additionally, it was suggested that teachers need to be mindful of how students are singled out, even for good work, as they may inadvertently place pressure on the student.

Many schools visited remind teachers regularly that their role is to observe social and emotional wellness, and to bring observed changes to the school’s attention immediately. Teachers were required to attend case conferences and implement agreed strategies. The Raffles Institute, Singapore, explicitly trained teachers in how to identify signs of stress in students and how to talk to students about it. One idea presented by the University of Connecticut was the idea of “SAER rounds”. At staff meetings teachers looked at one child in detail and brainstorm what has been tried, and what could be tried, to help a student at educational risk. A problem solving model is used to explore why the child is functioning in some situations and not others. This way, best practice and progress are shared amongst teachers, and teachers can develop a range of strategies to support students.

Teaching can be an exhausting and thankless task. However, teachers need to consciously work on being relaxed to set an example for students, and not add to the anxiety students may feel. The Academy for Advanced and Creative Learning, USA, asked teachers to consciously work on being relaxed and setting an example for students. Teachers were
expected to look after themselves and their relationships. This was their responsibility and they needed to do this to be a good teacher. Teachers must manage their lives, health and emotions so that they are ‘there’ for their students.

*London Gifted and Talented* proposed that teachers of the gifted should model the same dispositions expected of gifted students. Some examples include:

- Resilience, risk taking, divergent thinking
- Behaviours of the expert in that field
- Innovation and entrepreneurship
- Lifelong learning and a culture of excellence
- Curiosity.

They also suggested that teachers be asked what would help them develop competence and confidence in teaching gifted students. One suggested strategy was to give a list of ideas to teachers to rank. Teachers could add to this, but had to be specific. They were asked to base ideas on research, for example, class sizes did not make much difference to outcomes, so there was little point adding it to the list.

All schools visited throughout the Churchill Fellowship indicated that teachers need to have training in and understanding of acceleration and advanced placement strategies. One presenter at the *ECHA Conference* stated that the most successful programs for the gifted were based on acceleration and that this was a well-researched support strategy for gifted students although many teachers argue strongly against it based on perceived social/emotional needs. These reasons are not so appropriate if considering the true peer/age peer dichotomy.

**Cultures within cultures**

This section of the report is based on my visits to Singapore and Hong Kong. Additionally, presenters from Singapore and China reported at one session at the *EHCA Conference*. This section is a summary, generalisation and synthesis of information as told to me throughout the Churchill Fellowship in these countries and at the *ECHA Conference*.

Multicultural aspects of giftedness are easier to consider when that culture is in the majority, for example, Asian students in Asia, because the context surrounding the culture exists. It is harder when that culture exists within another framework, for example in Australia where the people looking in have a different cultural paradigm.

When comparing Western students to their Asian counterparts, it seems that to be labelled ‘gifted’ appeared to be more of a risk factor in Western communities than in Asian communities. Asian students were happy to be identified as gifted. It was a source of validation and they felt good about being in a school for the gifted. Their culture did not allow students to opt out.

Beliefs about education and cultural capital regarding how much education is valued play a vital part in school provision of gifted education. It would appear that White Anglo Saxon Australians, as a big generalisation, tend to focus on the importance of age friendships and ‘mateship’, which can be considered more important than achievement. I was told by one Singaporean presenter at the *ECHA Conference* that Asian students tend to have a Confucian philosophical base. Parents tell children the “Singapore Success Story” from an early age: study hard, go to a good university, get a good job, work hard and have a good life. This story appears to be perpetuated in Asian society. Expectations of high achievement are modelled by parents.

Positive self-concept and positive self-esteem are good predictors of success in gifted programs. Compared to Western girls, Asian girls’ self-esteem and self-concept appeared not to take a dip when entering a gifted program. Generally, Asian girls seemed to be more optimistic that hard work would lead to high outcomes. It is well researched that Western girls may experience a dip in self-esteem when entering a gifted program. High optimism leads to less stress and anxiety and higher academic outcomes. Western students often report pressure from hard work. In the Asian context examined throughout the Churchill Fellowship, it was explained to me that Asian students did not feel or see much pressure. It was just expected, the ‘rules’ were known and students reported they did not mind hard work.
One Singaporean speaker at the *ECHA Conference* proposed that Asian girls generally do not experience the same degree of forced choice dilemma or gender role conflict that Western girls experience. They know what was expected and their achievement was celebrated. High achieving Asian girls have a high self-concept and achieve well. It was suggested only the top Asian boys have the same high self-concept. Asian boys, whose achievement is lower, may not have such a positive self-concept. Selective schools for Asian girls generally have very positive outcomes. For boys it tends to be mixed, with middle to lower ranked boys struggling with self-esteem issues.

At one of the Singaporean Schools, it was suggested that Asian students generally have a high level of social responsibility. Being gifted and attending a school for the gifted in Asia means that the student has a responsibility to society. There is an expectation that they will go on to improve the lives of others around them. This is a more collective way of thinking as students are expected to contribute to the collective. In Western culture, which tends to be more individualistic, there was no such expectation. It is more about students developing their own potential. The notion of personal best being encouraged amongst students may be jarring to an Asian student in a western context. A focus on collective achievement possibly would benefit Asian students in the Australian context.

Importance of family

It was suggested to me in the Hong Kong context that filial piety, or the importance of family, is an important Asian concept. Family and a sense of belonging are important. You belong to your family first and your community second. It was explained that Confucian beliefs about respecting self and family and elders are of high importance. The family structure and high expectations of children were clear and many educators in Singapore and Hong Kong believed this reduced stress for students. Education is valued by families and one school in Singapore stated ‘parents have ‘deep pockets’ when it comes to their child’s education and are prepared to pay for quality education”. ‘Giftedness’ is seen as a badge of honour.

Some teachers expressed surprise when Asian parents expressed disappointment in what the teacher perceived to be high grades. One Asian presenter at the *ECHA Conference* indicated that Asian parents looked at areas for improvement in their child’s tests and assignments and often asked about the lost marks and areas that needed improving and then drilled these at home.

One Asian presenter at the *ECHA Conference* indicated that Asian students believe that if they work hard, rewards will come. Asian parents believe that students should work hard for success, and rarely praise their child. Children were expected to do well. Some Asian schools are working on teaching parents to praise more often. It was suggested that the gaming culture amongst young people had changed the expectation of Asian students regarding feedback and praise as computer games gave regular feedback.

Valuing education

It was described to me that countries such as Singapore see human capital is the only natural resource, so take human development seriously. As a result, Singapore had provision for gifted students. Gifted classes generally existed in mainstream schools, but some schools now specialised in gifted education. Students are tested at the end of primary school across the board and then offered a place in various programs.

It was explained to me that Confucian philosophy is to teach students in accordance with what they need. Children study hard and schools were very competitive. It was suggested that Singaporean teachers tended not to buy into, or humour, social/emotional issues to the degree that Western teachers did.

Asian schools traditionally use a lot of memory and rote. Singapore and Hong Kong are working towards allowing students to excel as an all-rounder, not just in academia. New schools, such as a future Singapore Schools, were moving towards developing thinking and deep learning in students. Hong Kong was also moving towards this and believed they needed to educate parents to gain the parents’ confidence in these new systems.
**Conclusion and recommendations**

“I can’t make anyone learn – all I can do is create the environment in which people are challenged to learn”

Albert Einstein

Many of the strategies throughout this report overlap. What is essential is a deep understanding of the gifted child. Yes, they are just children, but yes, they have special needs that must be recognised and addressed, not only for the benefit of the whole community and economy, but for the wellbeing of the individual child. With the child at the centre, a balance of curriculum provision, with social/emotional needs met, students can develop long term wellbeing, resilience and successful academic and whole-of-life outcomes.

**Recommendations**

1. Students are advocated for as special needs students, but treated ‘just as they are’.

2. Gifted students are provided with early intervention and specialist schools. Taking care of the small community of gifted students takes care of the wider community in that they are less likely to underperform, drop out of school or engage in at risk behaviours.

3. Investigation into the possibility of providing schools for gifted students from primary age occurs. Start with the young, before they become disengaged.

4. Acceleration is promoted as a viable option for gifted students and an early entry program is available for those gifted students who need it.

5. A balance is developed between viewing ‘gifted’ as a psychological construct and ‘gifted’ as an academic construct, with holistic principles for taking care of the gifted considered.

6. The need for time with true peers and not just age peers is recognised and opportunities for this to occur are provided.

7. Teachers, both pre-service and in-service, are provided with professional learning about the specific needs of the gifted, including differentiating the curriculum and extending the learning of highly able students.

8. Teachers are provided with professional learning about cultural paradigms so they may better understand their culturally diverse gifted students.

9. Schools embrace parent involvement and work with parents to communicate the best ways in which they may support their gifted children at school.