Case study of an underachieving gifted student at school

This account of the school experiences of a gifted student is based on an article that was written by his mother (Tully, 1999, pp. 21–22).

Jon is 14 years old and was getting progressively more disengaged in his learning at school. He had a reputation for talking and minor disruption in class and was bored and underachieving for several years. In the classroom, Jon was distracted by anything happening around him. His hearing is acute and he could not resist participating in any conversation he heard. The pace of learning was too slow for him and he frequently missed important information because he was daydreaming.

At home Jon was become lazier and less willing to learn anything that was not specified exactly by his teacher. He seemed to have become highly teacher-dependent, needing to know exactly what the teacher expected and learning exactly that. He is a perfectionist and refused to take risks in his study, becoming anxious if he was encouraged to include any information in his work that was not obtained directly from the teacher.

The school Jon attends has a commitment to providing for intellectually gifted students and there has been an enthusiastic full-time coordinator of gifted education at the school for two years. One of her greatest challenges has been educating teachers about the idiosyncrasies and identification of gifted learners, especially those who are non-compliant and underachieving, like my son. Last term, the coordinator arranged for two teachers to go to the conference on gifted education in Sydney; one from the junior school and one from the high school. It was hoped that the two teachers would be able to teach and/or model ideas about curriculum differentiation to other teachers in the school.

One of the teachers sent to the conference had Jon for three subjects, including English and History (Year 8). This teacher no longer teaches didactically and the kids can move at their own pace. The students work from a text that has units that include comprehension, spelling, literature, creative writing, punctuation, poetry and grammar. The units to be covered in a term are listed on the Independent Learning Program (ILP) handout sheets. There are also handouts with a list of questions to be answered relating to the current unit of study, and details of the work to be completed, the dates on which it will be assessed and how it will be assessed. The students fill in
a daily lesson log that includes the date, subject and a brief description of the work covered. One period has been set aside for reading in which students can read the set text or anything else if they have finished the text and Jon loves this time. The students have been working cooperatively (by choice) and there seems to be more conversation but less noise in the class. Jon has talked about the interesting and sometimes energetic debate that now happens in these groups. There has also been time allocated for impromptu and planned debates.

This system was instigated for the last few weeks of Term 3 and Jon finished the set work for his subjects for the term very quickly, as did many others. He loves the changes and his teacher commented to me that all the students have covered the material to a much greater depth than they had expected or than would have been taught if the teacher “spoon fed” them. The teacher has less preparation and less pressure and is free to act as a facilitator. Where needed, he is acting as a specialist guide/mentor. Apparently the teacher chose to try this more relaxed approach because there were some brighter students whom he felt he was “losing”, though he had some initial doubts about how well this would suit all the students. By the end of Term 3, the teacher felt the new approach was working for all the students, not just the brighter ones. Most of the students were highly teacher-dependent and the move to taking more control over their learning has been uncomfortable for some and this group needed extra support, encouragement and reassurance as they adapted to the new system.

Jon is very happy with the change and commented that he is actually expected to think for a change and he is starting to explore all sorts of other areas and ideas in both his free time and in class. … He is enjoying working this way so much that he is motivated to work on it in his time at home. This is the boy who was incredibly bored, under-motivated and apathetic about two months ago. The increased energy and enthusiasm is washing over into all aspects of his life.

References