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Beyond Ability: Leveraging Social Support to Enhance Outcomes for Gifted Students

Carolyn Prince - carolyn.prince@griffithuni.edu.au

Queensland Australia

Make it matter

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I support gifted learners by…

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My contention of today...

Gifted learners don't disengage because they lack ability.

They disengage when the **support system fails**.

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The questions of today...

Who am I in the support system?

What can I put in place to make meaningful change for my gifted learners?

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Introduction

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Student

Went through school with the title 'gifted', in streamed classes where high performance = gifted

Secondary Teacher

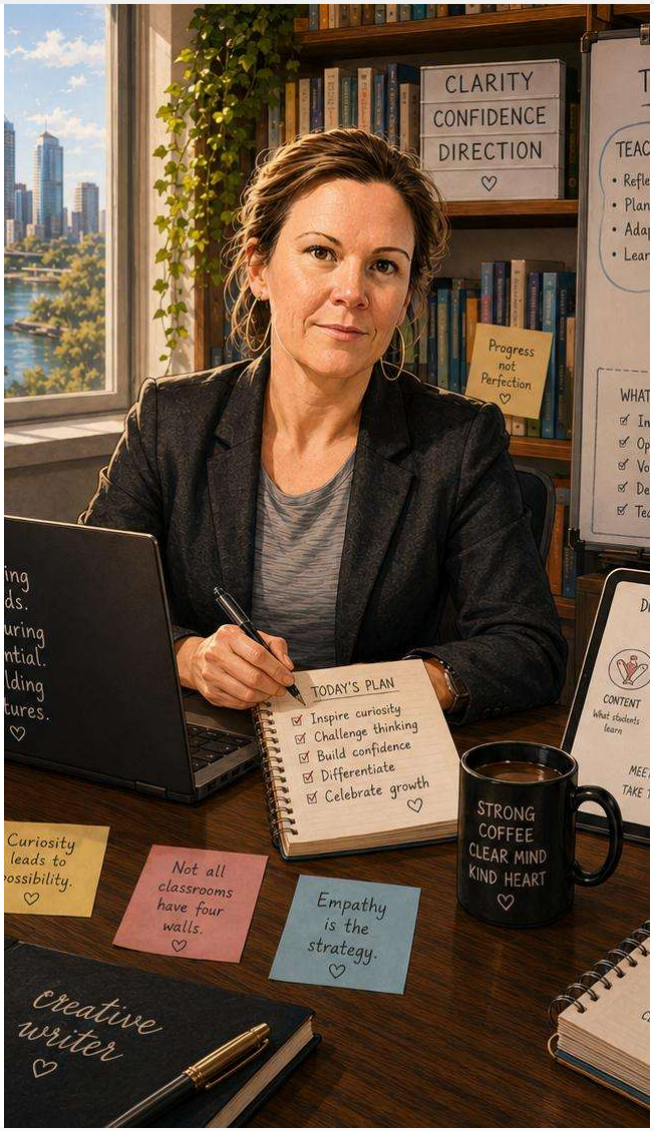
Learning about giftedness 10 years into my career drew me into the role of Gifted Coordinator

Masters of Education: School Guidance & Counselling

Realised that gifted learners had distinct experiences that needed genuine support & attention

Masters of Education and Professional Studies Research (MEPS-R)

“A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Underachieving, Gifted, Early Adolescents”



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My Research Focus

My research focuses on understanding how different **types and sources of social support**—from teachers, parents, peers, and friends—shape the **educational experiences of gifted high school students in Australia**.

Specifically, I'm interested not just in *what support exists*, but in how gifted students themselves **perceive, value, and experience that support** in their day-to-day schooling.

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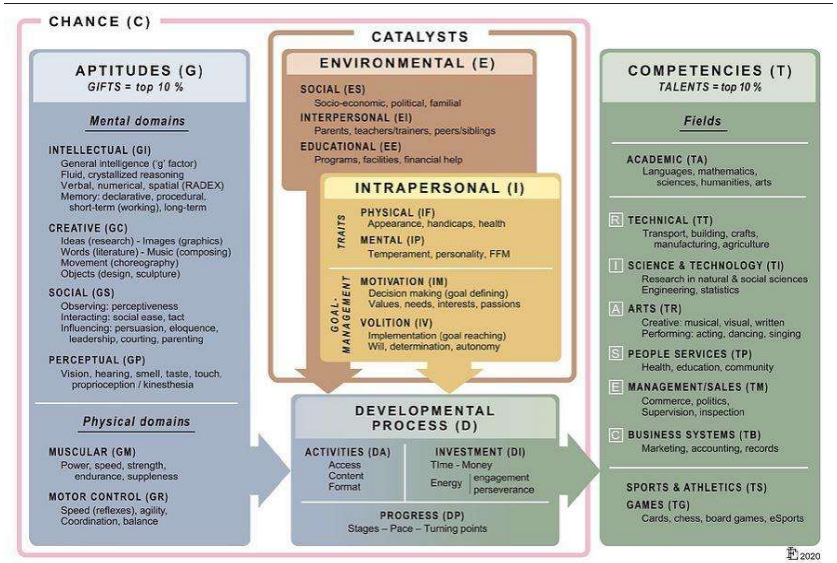
Why do we need to be talking about it?

In gifted education, we often focus very heavily on cognitive ability—on what students can *do*. But the research is very clear: **ability alone is not enough to ensure success.**

- Giftedness is **potential**, not guaranteed achievement
- The development from aptitude to talent depends on:
  - Environment
  - Relationships
  - Opportunities beyond the individual



In fact, models like Gagné's DMGT remind us that **external supports and relationships are essential catalysts** in whether gifted potential is actually realised.

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What can we do about it?

Without appropriate supports, gifted students are not immune to struggle—in fact, they can be particularly vulnerable.

- Underachievement
- Dropout
- Maladaptive perfectionism
- Anxiety, depression & isolation

What's striking is that many of these challenges are directly connected to social support and belonging.

So, while gifted students may have the cognitive capacity to succeed, their outcomes are deeply shaped by something less visible – the quality of the relationships and supports around them.

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Social Support System

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Teacher Support

Emotional Support

- Quality of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, including warmth care, trust and absence of conflict
- Positive expectations that accompany challenging work promotes participation and confidence
- Strong predictor of engagement (behavioural and emotional) and creates sense of belonging + motivation to learn

Instructional Support

- Teacher behaviours that support learning processes, including explanation of content, scaffolding, monitoring, skills taught & learned
- Builds confidence, persistence, motivation and develops study behaviours

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Peer Support

Emotional Support

- Peer relationships offer support through emotional, social and academic interactions
- Strong predictor of engagement and belonging
- Like-minded peers enhance motivation and enjoyment and provide challenge and intellectual stimulation
- Hold significant influence and exert pressure on decisions and behaviours (for better and worse)

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Family Support

Appraisal Support

- Parental involvement / engagement in their child's education is evidenced through expectations, help and encouragement
- Can set value of education and learning, encourage participation, develop learning strategies
- Advocacy of gifted learner needs

Instrumental

- Opportunities to develop educational capital
- Identification and access to resources, programs, networks, etc

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School & Community Support

Instrumental Support

- Educational capital (resources from the environment that support learning) often comes from school and community offerings
- Schools operate as gatekeepers for much of this in how, when and to whom they offer things such as gifted programs, transition supports, mentoring, tutors
- Flexibility and willingness around differentiation, acceleration, alternative tasks, to offer gifted learners genuine challenge and growth opportunities

Instructional Support

- Programming that covers things often missed in KLAs – executive function skills, study skills, personal and social skills

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The questions of today...

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What the literature says

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Relationships Drive Engagement

When students experience **warm, supportive relationships with their teachers**, we see:

- higher engagement
- greater participation
- stronger emotional connection to learning

But here's the important flip side:

- **negative or conflictual relationships don't just reduce engagement—they actively increase disengagement**

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Peers Shape Identity

Peers play a major role in:

- whether students choose advanced / academic pathways
- whether they remain in them

Academic decisions are not made based just on ability. They are influenced by:

- social acceptance, stigma or isolation
- peer norms
- Identity and belonging

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Family = Foundation

Families shape not just what students *can do*, but what students *believe they should do* and what they are actually able to access.

Families:

- are the foundation of expectations and identity
- act as advocates and gate-openers
- provide motivational and emotional support

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Support Must Be Internalised

External support alone is **not enough.**

Students can have:

- great teachers
- strong families
- good opportunities
  → but still not succeed if that support doesn't become internal.

This as the difference between:

- **educational capital (external support)**
- and **learning capital (internal capability)**

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In application...

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"I learned early that being smart made people uncomfortable, so I tried to become smaller."

"Academically it's great, beautiful, but socially, it's like *Why can't I be normal?*"

"I've got plenty of free time in class, so I might as well have fun with it."

"I have a lot of friends but like the people I talk to most, I would say are definitely the smarter ones."

"Last term we were supposed to read a book in class and then do a persuasive speech on it. I didn't even read the book and I still got an A."

"I didn't learn what study is or how to study until I was in Grade 7. I still don't really know how to."

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Think, Pair, Share

Think

Fill out page 1 of "Social Supports for Gifted Learners – Action Plan"

Pair

Discuss with a partner:

- Which ideas feel most achievable?
- What barriers might exist?
- What change might be brough about by this?

Share

Photo by Zainul Yasni on Unsplash

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Multidisciplinary team approach

- Find people in the room who offer a different primary source of support that you do.
- Aim to create a group of 3-5 people covering at least 2 primary sources of support (e.g. teacher, parent and deputy principal).
- Work together to fill out page 2 of the "Social Supports for Gifted Learners – Action Plan" document. Be as thoughtful, specific and realistic as you can be!

REMEMBER:

Gifted learners succeed or disengage not because of ability alone—but because of **how effectively the support system around them functions and connects.**

- Support is **multi-layered (family, peers, teachers, systems)**
- Relationships are **central drivers of engagement**
- Support only matters when it becomes **internalised into motivation, strategies, and identity**

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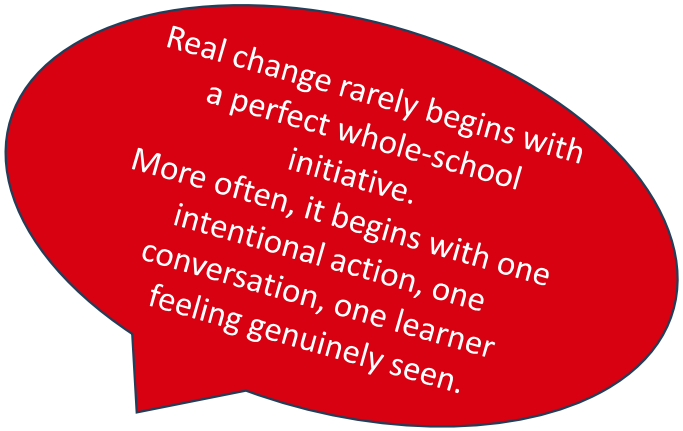
Your Personal Commitment Pledge

What will I do differently after today?

Commit to:



Timeframe	Focus	Prompt
Within 3 Days	Start Small	What is one immediate action you can take?
Within 7 Days	Build Momentum	What conversation, adjustment, or strategy can you begin?
Within 30 Days	Create Sustainable Change	What longer-term support or structure could you establish?

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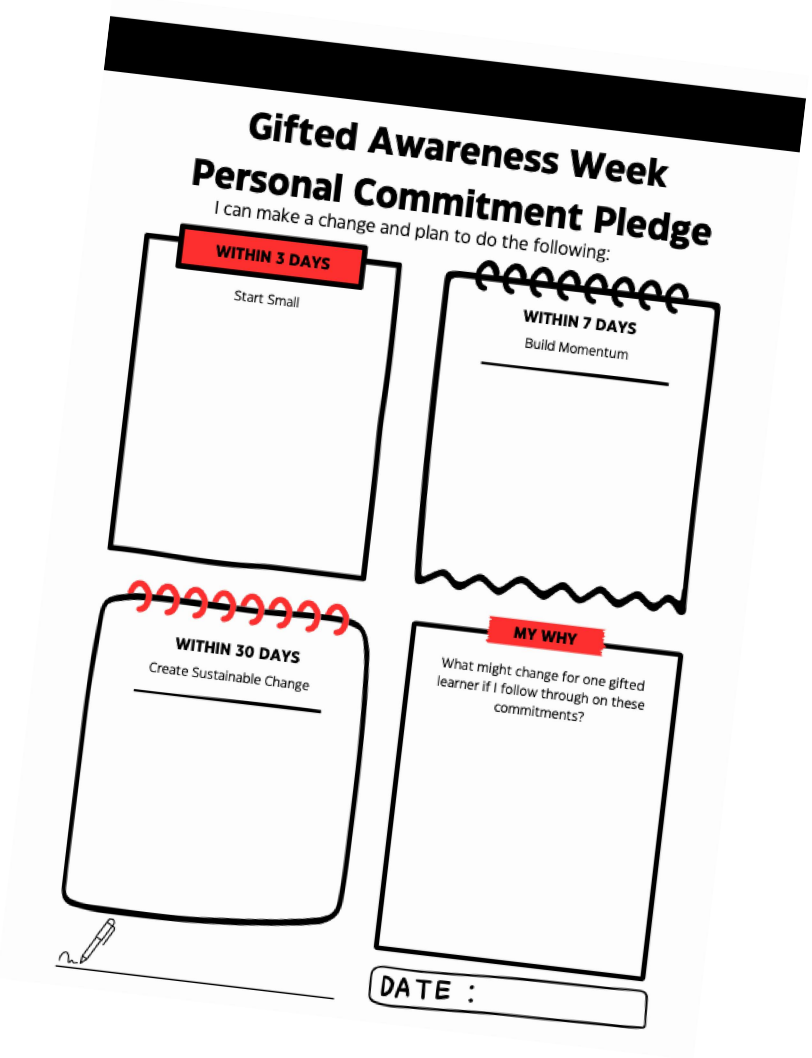
Your Pledge

We invite you to make a pledge based on your engagement and learning here today!

- Take a photo with your pledge
- Share it on LinkedIn
- Tag Carolyn, Anna and your favourite partner in crime
- Set a calendar reminder for 3, 7 and 30 days to check in on your progress



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Do not edit
How to change the design

My key take-away from today is…

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ⓘ The Slido app must be installed on every computer you're presenting from

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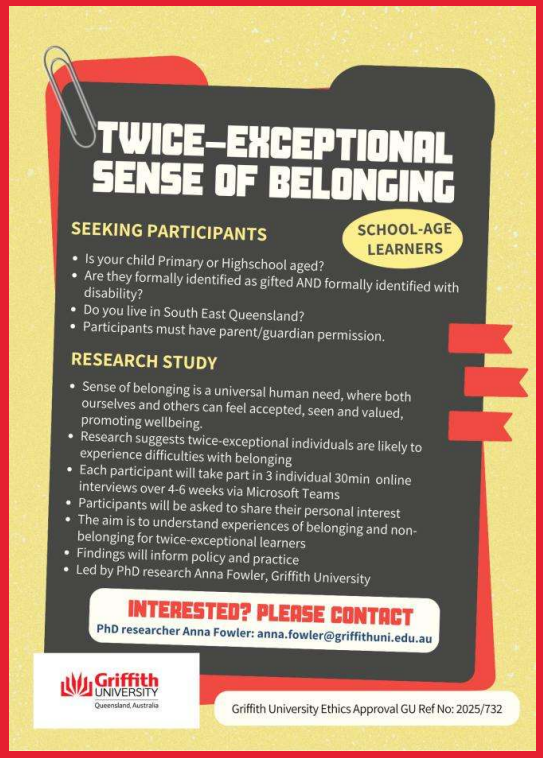
Want more contact?

Anna Fowler

- Anna.Fowler@griffithuni.edu.au

Carolyn Prince

- Carolyn.Prince@griffithuni.edu.au



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