

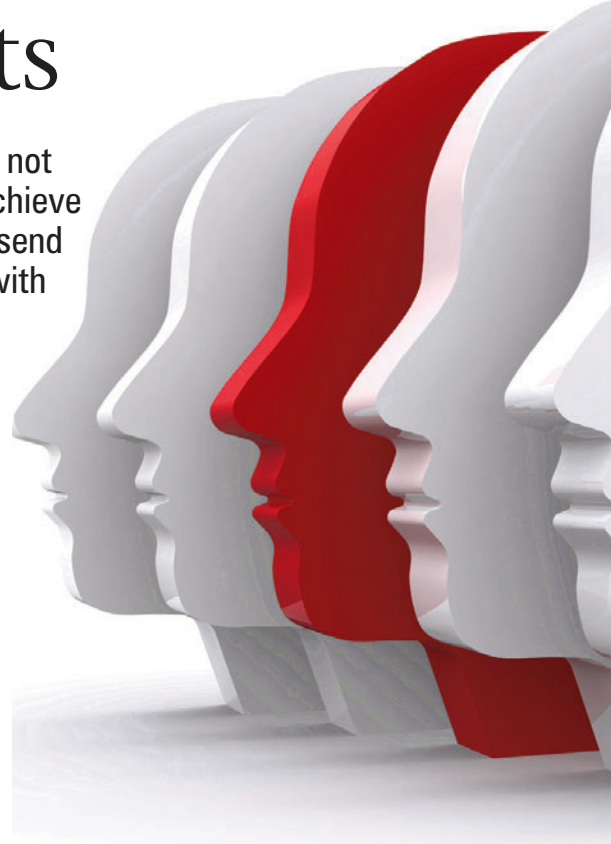
# Wasted talents

Why are so many people with high IQs not recognised in childhood and so underachieve at school and in life? Anne Favier-Townsend conducted a PhD study into the issue with the help of Mensa members.  
Interview by Robin Healey

In a previous interview with Anne Favier-Townsend, principal lecturer in the School of Business Studies at the University of Hertfordshire, I asked her about her concerns regarding the academic underachievement of people who were subsequently found to have high IQs. Back then, she had only just conducted preliminary research with a view to later registering for a PhD in the field. Several years on, and with the research complete and the PhD awarded, she reflected on the rather depressing findings of her survey in an area that hitherto had attracted little or no interest, but which she now feels ought to occupy the minds of everyone in education and government.

Favier-Townsend arrives for our meeting—a tiny figure almost collapsing under the weight of her bulky-looking thesis. She has warned me that she is only qualified to discuss the thrust of her research—not any psychological and domestic issues that may arise from it. I began with her interest in the field. When did it begin?

“I started on it long before I began my PhD research. I had a natural interest in the subject as my own son had been failed by the system and I wanted to understand the extent to which the problems he had encountered as someone whose high IQ had only been discovered later on in his educational career were shared by others with high IQs. Also, I was myself a gifted child who was accelerated by two years and benefited from being advanced in this way. So, I began by reading a lot about the problems children faced in education. This was in 2007/08 and I started the PhD in 2009.”  
For someone whose professional interests lay way outside the field of educational psychology this was an impressive ambition, I felt. Was she daunted by the prospect of undertaking such research?



“Not really. I didn’t set out to do a PhD; I just fell into it after some colleagues suggested that I do it. It seemed important because whoever I talked to on the subject seemed fascinated by it. The fact that these children were gifted intellectually but failed to fulfil their potential seemed to draw a lot of interest from a lot of people. I thought it was a topic that deserved serious research. And although I had no academic qualifications in education I didn’t feel I needed to convince anyone of my fitness to go ahead with it.”  
What people in the field did she consult? “Colleagues at my university and also those at conferences, friends, family – all sorts of people. I joined Mensa because I thought that here I would find a body of highly intelligent people who might be willing to respond to my questions. I also talked to people in European Mensas and at other Mensa events.”  
I was aware that the educational establishment was, and still is, generally hostile to research into high IQ children. Did she encounter such hostility herself?  
“Yes, teachers are hostile here in the UK. I don’t know whether this is true elsewhere. Teachers and educationalists are very much against labelling

children with tags like 'low IQ' or 'high IQ'. They feel that IQ is not everything and they are absolutely right, but if you have a high IQ and you do nothing with it you tend not to succeed.

"This hostility from teachers is very covert. The schools don't say that they rely on IQ, yet they use all sorts of tests and the children are streamed – for instance, those who are good at maths go into separate groups. However, some children are very unlucky because some teachers believe in mixed ability."

I was curious as to whether educationalists in the United States had a different attitude to nurturing those with a high IQ. Favier-Townsend nodded.

"A very different attitude. For instance, if I wanted to find a conference where I can talk about my topic in the UK there is virtually nothing.

"Academic conferences on the gifted are non-existent here, whereas in America you just need to type in the relevant keywords and you'll find ten a month all over the country. So, it's a completely different attitude. It is recognised that a high IQ makes a child learn differently and these children need to be identified. Over there it is very easy to have papers accepted for publication. Over here there is a lot of publication regarding children at the other end of the spectrum – those with special needs because of their learning disabilities, but not those with needs that arise because of their high IQs. Educationalists don't care what happens to these people after they leave school and therefore there is no research into the damage that this neglect of high IQ pupils does both to society and to the individuals concerned."

I wondered if she was surprised at this. She was.

"Before I began my research I had no assumptions, but by the time I had completed my investigation I was surprised that there was no research into what happened to these people with high IQs after they had left school. There was, however, quite a lot of research on pupils with identified high IQs who had performed well while at school, but who had not fulfilled their promise later on."

I then asked if it was correct to assume that it was the lack of time during classes that was offered as the main reason why a teacher who might have suspected that a certain child has gifts, could not nurture this child. Favier-Townsend felt that this was not the main reason. "It's not normally a lack of time that is the problem – more knowing what to do to help a child.

"Usually they give them more work, rather than more challenging work. This could perhaps be more maths exercises which can be totally counter productive, because a child gets even more bored through having to repeat the same type of work.

"This is what those who responded to my questionnaire told me, time after time."

Perhaps it was the case that a poor teacher faced with disruptive children would be unable to select out the high IQ children who disrupt through boredom from those who are just wilfully destructive because they can't understand what they are being taught.

"I don't know, but what I do know is that I wouldn't want to be a teacher in a secondary school today, mainly because of the amount of work that is demanded of them by those who run the system and the lack of support given to them in order for them to cater to all the children. The worst aspect of classroom education is the mixed ability classes.

"It is impossible to cater for five different levels of ability in one class and this is what is favoured by comprehensive schools."

There has been a lot of debate recently about the return of the grammar school system. Did she favour this as an alternative?



“In principle I favour any system that places children of the same ability in one class. Otherwise, those who are bright get bored, and those who are less bright can’t cope.”

One of the saddest aspects of her research is the serious depression that many of her respondents admitted to. How did this come about, I wondered. “These, after all, were Mensans who felt that they had underachieved. Many mentioned that they were unaware of their high IQ. For many years they thought and behaved in a way that did not fit in with how other, less intellectually gifted, behaved. Naturally, this caused problems of adjustment – perhaps with their family or their schoolfellows – and later with their work colleagues. Consequently, in their twenties and thirties many suffered from depression; there seemed to be a strong correlation.”

I was curious as to why this depression occurred and how it manifested itself. Favier-Townsend explained. “Because they weren’t aware that they had always had a high IQ, taking the

Mensa test was a sort of watershed in their lives. All of a sudden, having been unsuccessful in their careers, they realised that having this high IQ they ought to be doing better

than they were doing. It’s this sudden realisation that triggers the depression. By depression I’m not referring to the low spirits that results from a disappointment or a crisis, or whatever, which is usually the short-term depression that afflicts most of us in our daily lives. I only talked to those who were being treated for clinical depression which is a much more serious condition.”

I asked if the people she was referring to were those who were stuck in a job that didn’t test their mental gifts. Favier-Townsend told me that some in this category couldn’t get jobs at all. This was disturbing. What did respondents tell her about their frustration at work? And did this frustration arise because they could not help compare their own career trajectories with those of their fellow workers or superiors who manifestly were less intellectually gifted?

“Many thought they were cleverer than their boss. They were working with colleagues who had a degree, but they themselves had nothing to prove that they were the intellectual equal of these colleagues, or even

superior to them. This is why some decided to take the Mensa test. Sixteen per cent thought that they might be bright and wanted to find out. Twenty-one per cent took it because others thought they might be bright.” Underachievement was the prime focus of her research, but surely this is a subjective notion. Along with those who left school without an O Level because they were bored with the teaching, it is possible that a few who did manage to achieve the exam results required to gain a place at university also felt that their poor performance while there was also down to their neglect at school. So a mediocre undergraduate degree or even an unfinished Ph D thesis were seen as signs of underachievement. Was she surprised at this attitude?

“It was unusual, certainly, but underachievement is a very personal thing. To someone with a low IQ obtaining a GCSE might be accounted a great achievement, whereas to someone with a high IQ an abandoned PhD could be a dreadful underachievement. It’s falling

short of expectations.”

Did these people tend to blame others for their failure, or themselves?

“No, most put it down to laziness, which is a fairly typical reaction. You see, if from the very first

“*Because they weren’t aware they had a high IQ taking the Mensa test was a watershed*”

years at school you are able to do anything with very little work, as most of these high IQ students did, you don’t learn the relationship between effort and achievement. The two people who failed their PhD just blamed themselves, no-one else.”

To me the whole notion that study and exam-passing demands skills that have to be learnt is a fascinating one. I myself never managed to acquire these skills, because I was lazy and also because I decided that I knew better. Perhaps the same was true of those interviewed by Favier-Townsend. It was.

“Take children with high IQs in the very early stages of education. If they are presented with an exercise, chances are they can solve it without having to study for it. This works at a certain stage in their school career, but at the age of 13 or 14 the tests become more demanding. However, because in the past they have not had to study to pass exams, they don’t perform as well.”

So what marked off those high IQ children from their less gifted fellows students?

“Essentially, they grasp a concept very quickly. I’m not a neuroscientist, but what we’ve discovered recently with the use of MRI scans is that the connections between neurons is very much faster with those that have high IQs and they are often able to make connections between disparate disciplines, often across the sciences and the humanities, which is not the way the conventional school curriculum works. Here, separate subjects are taught, which to many with high IQs is an obstacle to their intellectual development. Of course, most of these children made up for the lack of advanced education in their schools by reading widely and deeply outside the classroom. “All described themselves as voracious readers.”

I could understand why such children might encounter problems in class. Boredom would be a natural product of this failure to offer them un-challenging work, and disruption could result in a few cases. I was curious as to whether those questioned specified certain instances when teachers downplayed any perceptive remarks they made or discouraged them from making unusual connections between different fields, something that those with high IQs are noted for. Were they, for instance, slapped down in class for showing off their superior abilities?

“I cannot recall pupils saying this specifically; however, they did mention that not just in school, but in life in general, they could see connections between things that no-one else could see and that therefore they had to stop their conversation because their train of thought was not being followed by the other person. Some remarked that they were clearly well in advance of

## ALL ABOUT...

Mensan Dr Anne Favier-Townsend was brought up and educated to Master’s level in France,



came to the UK as part of her university studies and ended up spending all her adult life in the UK.

Her whole career has been in higher education, but evolved over the years as she obtained various post-graduate qualifications enabling her to first lecture in French then Marketing and currently Cross-Cultural Management. Her PhD research was not related in any way to her day job. It was motivated by her son’s negative experience of the education system and a desire to understand to what extent his predicament was common or not amongst high IQ individuals and what solutions there may be for the way forward. From registration to completion took five and a half years of studying part-time – mostly between 3am and 6am – while holding a demanding full-time job. Hard but fascinating and rewarding work!

Anne is hoping to retire soon for half the year to her native France with her husband, a Francophile, and to enjoy a quieter life of reading, cinema-going, travelling and playing poker when not entertaining children and grand-children.

other children in the class but that the teacher did not want the other pupils to see this.

“There is evidence that teachers did pick up some of those with high IQs and give them more testing work, but those I questioned all recalled their miserable time at school. No-one said anything or suggested that this intellect must be nurtured. And it should be noted that my respondents came from all sorts of schools, inner city comprehensives, posh private schools, public schools – schools which you might have expected would be able to recognise those with high IQs. It doesn’t matter which school they attended, the problem was the same in all cases.”

What did those questioned say they might have done had they been informed of their high IQs early in their school career? “Many told me that if their IQs had been measured at an earlier age they would have pursued qualifications that could have brought them more rewarding careers and more money, better pensions – this applied to almost all of them.”

So problems that beset those whose high IQs are not recognised at school have at last been identified and discussed. What, I asked, are the solutions?

“Acceleration is one obvious solution. It’s something I have experienced myself, although I didn’t know it at the time. Wherever it’s been tried it’s been pretty successful, although for some pupils studying with children two years older can be a problem. Enrichment is another option.

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“This involves studying a subject in much greater depth. For instance, if the subject is the solar system students, for example, will want to know something about the geology and chemistry of different planets. Teachers will need to go deeper and faster. This is impossible in the normal classroom, mainly because the teacher will not have the required knowledge – I’m talking about primary schools here. Primary school teachers have to teach everything, after all. “The problem of acceleration could be solved using computers. That high IQ child would have the benefit of access to the whole National Curriculum without having to be moved two years forward in the school. And enrichment through the same use of computers would ensure that the high IQ pupil would not be frustrated by having to wait for the less able pupil to catch up – the defect of the system – which leads to underachievement by these gifted children. Moreover, children even at primary school level nowadays, have a wonderful understanding of how information can be accessed in this digital age. “Using these methods it ought to be possible for gifted students to do their GCSEs three years earlier, to reach their potential, rather than being kept below their potential. “Something like this programme, at a time when the government is always protesting that funding is limited, would also be cheap. It would also be an educational resource – a bit like the Open University – that students could dip in and out of. After all, 50 per cent of those questioned who told me that they had gone back to education later in life said they had chosen the Open University, principally because it was flexible and demanded no formal educational qualifications.”

But can she do what so many other campaigners have failed to do and convince government that her conclusions regarding the special needs of high IQ children must be addressed as a matter of urgency? “The only approach is to emphasise the significant economic loss that must inevitably result from the mental problems, such as depression and stress, that afflict gifted children who underachieve at school. Only by stressing the wider effect on the economy and on society, will government be forced to listen.”

*Anne’s full thesis is now available on line.*

*You can read it at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2299/16520>*

## Dixie’s best supporting actress (that’s her mum!)

Ann Clarkson on the remarkable story of a mother’s fight to help her daughter become a success

**A**t the age of just 10 Dixie Egerickx has a stellar IQ and is a talented West End actress, so she must have a pushy mum, right? Well yes, but mum Fiona Barnett wasn’t pushing for Dixie to be advanced at school or to get a part in the latest blockbuster.

She was fighting for her child to get a fair education – and for her very survival.

Dixie has spent this autumn playing Iphigenia in the surprise theatrical hit of the year, the Almeida’s production of Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia*. She joined the company when the show transferred to the Trafalgar Studios after rave reviews at the Almeida. But Dixie’s route to the West End has not taken a straight path – she has never had an acting lesson for a start – and it could all have been very different if mum Fiona had not been so persistent when she was a tiny baby. Fiona said: “Dixie was born on Halloween 2005, 11 weeks early weighing 2lb 8oz.

“The first three months of her life were spent at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital and we brought her home in January 2006.

“She struggled with a hole in the heart until she was nine months old, when she had a closure operation at the Brompton Hospital.”

Fiona said Dixie had really battled to thrive, taking a cocktail of drugs to prevent the fluid on her lungs and struggling to keep food down.

“I fought very hard to get Dixie moved up the waiting list at the Brompton, calling on a daily basis and telling them that my baby was not thriving and really needed the operation.

“Such ‘pushiness’ paid off, one day I got a call and the next day she was in having the op – we have never looked back.”

Because she had been so premature, Dixie had several