

**“Help! I am gifted”**  
**The development of self-concept (self-theory)**  
**and self-esteem amongst gifted students in**  
**English secondary schools and the influence of**  
**school culture**

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# **“Help! I am gifted”**

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self-esteem amongst gifted students in English secondary  
schools and the influence of school culture**

**Andrea Zschaler**

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been  
offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

This thesis contains 72,482 words, which does not exceed the  
permitted maximum.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ *Zschaler*

# Abstract

How do students, who have been identified as gifted and talented, experience their time at secondary school? What elements of their school's culture help or hinder their personal and academic development?

This longitudinal study focuses on the lives of five students in an English secondary school, who had been identified as gifted and talented, and on how they developed personally and academically during the 4 years I observed them. Their interviews tell a compelling story about what it meant for them to be labelled as gifted and what aspects of their schooling either helped or hindered their personal and academic development. One of the key findings of my research is that a Formal school culture, which is mainly concerned with examination grades and progress, seems to discourage students from being enthusiastic about learning and thus fully engaging in lessons. Further, this academic disengagement hindered some students to learn how to study independently and how to revise for tests and examinations effectively.

Influenced by the work of Dweck (2000) this study explores how self-theories of gifted students develop in the setting of an English secondary school in connection with the school culture and how this influences their academic engagement. My research is based on a typology of school cultures developed by Hargreaves (1999) which embraces academic as well as social-emotional aspects of schooling thus complementing my research questions well. The study follows a mixed methods

approach and includes data from semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and informal observations. To track the educational journey of the students I used a visual tool called the Blobs which enabled me to illustrate changes in students' perceptions of their personal as well as academic situation in school.

The main findings of this study centre around the difficulties some of the observed students had in developing a positive self-theory in respect to learning and academic engagement to be able to fulfil their academic potential. Also, students shed some light on what kind of learning environments they liked and what aspects of a Formal school culture seemed to hinder their personal but also academic development. Especially, a focus on grades only, as well as not very engaging and challenging lesson content on a regular basis, seemed to lead to a coasting approach to learning and to school, which slowed academic progress for some of the students. My data suggest that labelling some students in a school or class as gifted or talented can be counter-productive and in most cases did not have many positive connotations for the students observed. Rather, it seemed that on occasions it actually led to more struggles and negative experiences with peers as well as teachers.

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When I started my PhD journey in October 2011 I never thought I would see the end of it, but, against the odds, I did. This is mainly due to the support I received from so many people around me.

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Another thank you goes out to my colleagues at St. Paul's Secondary School, who were willing to be interviewed and shared their views about their school with me. It was an invaluable experience and great privilege to be entrusted with their opinions, beliefs and perceptions.

Of course, without the support of the headteacher at the time and his consent for St. Paul's to be my main research site nothing of this could ever have taken place. Thank you.

I would also like to thank the teachers and students at Highfield Secondary School and Newton Sixth Form College for their time, engagement and enthusiasm, which has made this study so much richer and deeper.

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# Contents

<b>List of Tables</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 The personal context of my research interest . . . . .	1
1.2 Secondary schools and giftedness and talent . . . . .	4
1.2.1 Education policy in England with a view on giftedness and talent . . . . .	5
1.2.2 The current educational policy situation of giftedness and talent in English secondary schools . . . . .	9
1.3 Situating my research questions . . . . .	11
1.3.1 Statement of research problem . . . . .	11
1.3.2 Research aim and questions . . . . .	14
1.4 Operational definitions . . . . .	16
1.4.1 Giftedness and talent . . . . .	17
1.4.2 Culture . . . . .	18
1.4.3 Social development . . . . .	20
1.5 Structure of the thesis . . . . .	21
<b>2 Situating my research in theoretical and research literature</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1 The concept of giftedness and talent . . . . .	28

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2.1.1	Theoretical and research literature . . . . .	28
2.1.2	Educational policies . . . . .	41
2.2	The concept of (school) culture . . . . .	43
2.2.1	What is culture? . . . . .	44
2.2.2	What is school culture? . . . . .	45
2.3	The concept of practices . . . . .	51
2.3.1	Educating the gifted . . . . .	53
2.4	Social development . . . . .	60
2.4.1	Developing self-concept (or self-theories) and self-esteem . . . . .	60
2.4.2	The social challenges for very able students . . . . .	71
2.5	Summary . . . . .	73
<b>3</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>75</b>
3.1	Philosophy of social science . . . . .	75
3.1.1	Mixed methods . . . . .	78
3.1.2	Case studies . . . . .	80
3.2	Data collection . . . . .	85
3.2.1	Main research site . . . . .	85
3.2.2	Additional research sites . . . . .	93
3.3	Data analysis . . . . .	95
3.3.1	Quantitative (statistical evaluation) . . . . .	95
3.3.2	Qualitative (content analysis) . . . . .	96
3.4	Use of data in this thesis . . . . .	97
3.5	Ethical issues . . . . .	97
<b>4</b>	<b>Findings: St. Paul's Secondary School - the cultural audit</b>	<b>101</b>
4.1	St. Paul's Secondary School - the cultural audit . . . . .	102
4.1.1	The student questionnaire . . . . .	103
4.1.2	Staff interviews . . . . .	125
4.1.3	The school culture of St. Paul's Secondary School . . . . .	138



---

4.1.4	The understanding of the terms ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’ at St. Paul’s Secondary School . . . . .	142
<b>5</b>	<b>Findings: the gifted and talented students at St. Paul’s Secondary School</b>	<b>150</b>
5.1	Edward . . . . .	151
5.1.1	Who is Edward? . . . . .	151
5.1.2	Edward’s educational journey . . . . .	153
5.1.3	New beginnings: college and beyond . . . . .	162
5.2	Natalie and Keith . . . . .	166
5.2.1	Who are Natalie and Keith? . . . . .	166
5.2.2	Natalie’s and Keith’s educational journey . . . . .	172
5.3	Dumbo and Bob . . . . .	186
5.3.1	Who are Dumbo and Bob? . . . . .	186
5.3.2	Dumbo’s and Bob’s educational journey . . . . .	192
5.4	Additional research sites . . . . .	202
5.4.1	Highfield Secondary School . . . . .	202
5.4.2	Newton Sixth Form College . . . . .	207
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>212</b>
6.1	My research questions . . . . .	213
6.1.1	‘Giftedness and talent’ - What do these terms mean? . . . .	213
6.1.2	What practices did gifted and talented students encounter? .	216
6.1.3	What is the culture with a focus on giftedness and talent? .	219
6.1.4	How do practices and culture influence the students’ self-theories? . . . . .	221
6.2	Contributions to the research body . . . . .	226
6.2.1	Examinations and the golden ‘C grade’ . . . . .	229
6.2.2	Effort in and out of lessons and physical symptoms . . . . .	231
6.2.3	Self-theories . . . . .	233

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6.3	Methodological contributions . . . . .	236
6.4	Limitations . . . . .	238
6.5	Outlook . . . . .	239
<b>7</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>242</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>Interview Edward</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>Coded interview Edward</b>	<b>257</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>Learner survey</b>	<b>260</b>
<b>D</b>	<b>Student questionnaire St. Paul's Secondary School – full data</b>	<b>265</b>

# List of Tables

2.1	Developmental stages based on Erikson (1980) . . . . .	64
3.1	Methods used during data collection . . . . .	77
4.1	Scaled answers according to school type . . . . .	106
4.2	School characteristics . . . . .	114
4.3	Top 5 School characteristics according to year group . . . . .	115
4.4	Distribution of Blob responses according to year groups . . . . .	116
4.5	Blob counts . . . . .	124
4.6	Staff interviews St. Paul's Secondary School: details of participants	126
4.7	Coding categories of staff interviews ordered by type . . . . .	129
5.1	School characteristics of Highfield Secondary School . . . . .	204
5.2	Changes between secondary schools students used to attend and perception of Newton Sixth Form College . . . . .	210

# List of Figures

2.1	Literature overview . . . . .	25
2.2	The Concept of Critical State (Ziegler and Heller, 2000) . . . . .	32
2.3	Developing-Expertise Model (Sternberg, 2000) . . . . .	57
3.1	Tool developed by Hargreaves (1999) to explore a school’s culture .	87
3.2	Illustration of the multi case studies and the associated timeline . .	88
3.3	Illustration of the adopted convergent parallel design (Creswell, 2014)	90
3.4	Image detail of visual tool used with individual gifted and talented students . . . . .	93
4.1	Student answers to scaled question about silly behaviour in school .	109
4.2	Student answers to scaled question about teacher strictness . . . . .	110
4.3	The four most-commonly reported Blobs of the whole school cohort	117
4.4	The Blobs chosen by a Year 9 girl . . . . .	121
4.5	Grid sheet outcome for St. Paul’s Secondary School (Hargreaves, 1999) . . . . .	127
4.6	Teacher focus group: thoughts about gifted and talented students expressed in a drawing . . . . .	147
5.1	Edward’s educational journey expressed in Blobs . . . . .	154
5.2	Natalie’s educational journey expressed in Blobs . . . . .	172
5.3	Keith’s educational journey expressed in Blobs . . . . .	173
5.4	Blobs referred to during discussion about how to best help others .	175

---

5.5	Dumbo's educational journey expressed in Blobs . . . . .	190
5.6	Bob's educational journey expressed in Blobs . . . . .	191
5.7	Blob's chosen by gifted and talented students at Highfield Secondary School in 2015 . . . . .	204
6.1	Diagram summarising Edward's perceptions of life at college . . . .	222
6.2	Diagram summarising Edward's perceptions of life at St. Paul's . .	224
D.1	Scaled questions student questionnaire . . . . .	266

# Abbreviations

**A-level** Advanced level

**AS-level** Advanced Subsidiary level

**BC** Before Christ

**ESRC** Economic and Social Research Council

**FSM** Free School Meals

**G&T** Gifted and Talented

**GCSE** General Certificate of Secondary Education

**ICT** Information and Communications Technology

**IQ** Intelligence Quotient

**IT** Information Technology

**KS** Key Stage

**LEA** Local Educational Authority

**MA** Master of Arts

**MFL** Modern Foreign Languages

**MidYIS** Middle Years Information Scores

**NAGTY** National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth

**NC** National Curriculum

**NQT** Newly Qualified Teacher

**PE** Physical Education

**RE** Religious Education

**SAT** Standard Assessment Test

**SEN** Special Educational Needs

**UK** United Kingdom

**USA** United States of America

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*It's a funny thing about mothers and fathers. Even when their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine, they still think that he or she is wonderful.*

*Some parents go further. They become so blinded by adoration they manage to convince themselves their child has qualities of genius.*

*(Dahl, 2010)*

### 1.1 The personal context of my research interest

“I am special” – was a phrase with which I became very familiar during the interviews for my Master of Arts (MA) dissertation in 2010/2011 (Zschaler, 2011) when interviewing 18 gifted and talented primary school children across three different schools. What was unanticipated was that in each school the children had a different way to label and identify themselves: in one school students mentioned that they felt special; in another school an often-heard phrase was “They don’t understand me”; and in the last school the most important message the children wanted to get across was “We’re normal.” Of great research interest for me was the fact that two of the schools had a rather similar provision (a number of pull-out classes,



differentiation in lessons as well as special trips) for their identified gifted and talented students, but this still led to rather different understandings of what being gifted and talented meant for the children themselves. Using Dweck's (2000) idea of self-theories, meaning '*people's beliefs about themselves*' (Dweck, 2000, p. xi), a working hypothesis is that the children in the three different schools had very different self-theories, but that in terms of their gifted and talented label students within the same school shared similar beliefs. Based on the research for my MA, I became intrigued about where these different beliefs came from, as two schools had a similar approach to teaching and nurturing their gifted and talented students, but the outcome was very different. For example, one of the research schools offered pull-out classes and also nurtured their gifted and talented students in lessons but also had very high expectations of their students overall; learning was highly valued. In this school context the children I interviewed described being gifted and talented as being special and they liked this feeling. In another primary school, even though provision was very similar, students said during the interviews that they felt like the odd ones out, that other students as well as staff did not understand them. The biggest difference between the two schools was what might be regarded as their school culture which was based on their intake of children as well as the understanding of the head teachers to some extent but more importantly what classroom teachers thought about the concept of giftedness and talent (for more information see Zschaler, 2011).

But then there is the aspect of being a teacher myself and having a different kind of insight into the workings and expectations of the current educational system. I know how high expectations and pressure are to always deliver the best possible lesson, to cater for the Special Educational Needs (SEN) students in the same way as you challenge and stretch the most able within a class as well as within a subject area (Ofsted, 2015). But I also know how many other things teachers have to do, like marking books and assessments, writing reports, attending meetings and offering after-school sessions. Having to juggle all these things leaves little

room for extensive lesson planning and thus creating opportunities for students of all ability levels to thrive in a lesson. But planning lessons to cater for the different needs of students present takes time as it is not just about having a lesson plan but also appropriate materials for students to work with and if faced with a variety of needs a variety of materials might be necessary. As one teacher put it:

I don't have the time to plan 5 lessons in 1 every day for 5 lessons. I never have differentiated and never will.

(Encounter with a teacher at St. Paul's Secondary School<sup>1</sup>, December 2015)

Taking the above-mentioned points into account, I wonder whether there might be a solution: for teachers, a manageable way of teaching and educating very able young people in an educational setting, in my case a secondary school, which would lead to them having a positive experience at school and more importantly develop their skills and abilities further.

Another equally important reason for pursuing this research goes back many years and is also very personal. The first time I encountered the concept of giftedness and talent was when I started training and working as a teacher and youth worker. During those years, I met a young man who had perfect hearing and at primary school level showed great promise and ability in music, art, but also other subjects. During his transition to secondary school, something happened and he lost interest in learning and eventually left the German grammar school (a Gymnasium) and only just managed to secure the German General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) equivalents. This young man's story always made me ask what went wrong and how school could have helped him to stay academically engaged and support him in developing his talents.

Further to the above, when I married into a family of academics where every single

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<sup>1</sup>Name has been changed to ensure anonymity.

member had a PhD to their name, the question emerged, what my children would be like. Would they also show high ability? Was giftedness and talent therefore something which one was born with? Or does it develop over time?

At the beginning of my research journey, I felt rather sure that some people have been born with a high intelligence quotient (IQ) which somehow sets them apart from others. For me, giftedness included very high academic achievements leading to good grades and degrees and/or showing exceptional talent in the arts or sports. This was to some extent linked to the idea that a good and stable family life as well as intelligent parents produced these little geniuses. Of course, I thought, sometimes nature can undermine this process by giving someone exceptional intelligence which leads to genius without the academically able parents. Giftedness and talent were thus concepts which, if identified, should be supported and nurtured, possibly even with a special school system to allow them to work to the best of their ability. And, of course, with the right education, students identified as gifted and talented would be fine and achieve greatness. Everything seemed quite clear and straightforward. I shall turn back to these notions at the end of my thesis to evaluate what has become of them.

## **1.2 Secondary schools in England in the context of giftedness and talent**

Before taking a closer look at the specifics of giftedness and talent in the context of my research, I will first set the scene regarding gifted and talented students within the English school system and, to be even more precise, the secondary school level.

The key element of educating students in schools is what governmental policies highlight as the ‘must do’s’. Following this line, it is important to understand where gifted and talented education stands within English governmental policy to

get a clearer view of what happens in English secondary schools and why.

I will split this sub-section into two parts, one of them looking at educational policies from the mid 1990s up to about 2011, and the second part focusing on more recent educational debates in 2015 and 2016.

### **1.2.1 Education policy in England with a view on giftedness and talent**

When expressing his educational views and ideas in 1996, Blair (Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (UK) from 1997) strongly emphasised the importance of *'helping every student develop as an individual'* as well as stretching *'the best to achieve all they can'* (Blair, 1996). The motivation behind that was to achieve economic success and social cohesion. In line with his opening speech at Ruskin College, the education of gifted and talented students was at the heart of many educational policies during the period of office of the Labour government between 1997 and 2010. This becomes apparent when reviewing educational policies of the then Labour government: *The Excellence in Cities Programme* (DfEE, 2001), *Excellence and enjoyment: A strategy for primary schools* (DfES, 2003), *Aimhigher* (DfEE, 2000; HEFCE, 2003) as well as the 2005 White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools For All: More Choice For Parents And Pupils* (DfES, 2005). It is interesting to note that in all those policies very able students are labelled as gifted and/or talented with the latter terms being used throughout policy papers. All of these policies and papers identify gifted and talented students as learners who need extra educational provision in schools and outside of schools to develop their full potential. These policies were informed by two prior publications. The first of these publications was a report commissioned by Ofsted in 1998 analysing current research at that time in the field of gifted and talented education (Ofsted, 2001). The second one was an inquiry initiated by The House of Commons and Employ-

ment Committee in 1999 into the provision for gifted and talented students (House of Commons, 1999).

But this focus on gifted and talented students was not to last. With the government change in 2010 educational strategies introduced and implemented under the Labour government were evaluated, including educational policies. In 2011, a report was published by the Department of Education evaluating the impact of the National Strategies (listed in the previous paragraph) from 1997 to 2011. Gifted and talented education is looked at specifically with the following outcomes identified across schools in England in December 2010 (DfE, 2011):

- Most schools identify gifted and talented students (88% of primary schools, 98% of secondary schools).
- There is a small increase in the identification of gifted and talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds (*'6.2% primary pupils and 7.5% of secondary pupils entitled to FSM [free school meals] were identified as G&T [gifted and talented].'* (DfE, 2011, p. 32).
- Students' were achieving higher attainment levels and exceeding progress expectations (compared to 2003, about 30,000 more students nationwide achieved level 5+<sup>2</sup> in English and mathematics; compared to 2006, 30,000 students made more progress than expected in English and mathematics).
- And looking at students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the gifted and talented programme seems to have made a difference as well: *'external evaluation indicates raised expectations and accelerated progress for disadvantaged underachieving students in some of the most improved schools in the country.'* (DfE, 2011, p. 32)

One of the last points made is that good provision for gifted and talented students

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<sup>2</sup>An English National Curriculum level indicating high ability in primary school students.

also improves learning for all students in schools (DfE, 2011).

Since 2009, and also with the Government change in 2010, educational outlooks for gifted and talented students have changed. For example, in 2009, based on the *New Opportunities* White Paper, the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions was established to develop ideas of how to widen access to high status professions to young people of every social group (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). One of the key aspects of the approach was the reforming of the existing gifted and talented programme and to use it as a way to recruit more gifted students from disadvantaged (low socio-economic background) but also middle class backgrounds, meaning those with average household income. In the report, three weaknesses of the gifted and talented programme were highlighted:

- Lack of direction as to how resources should be spent.
- Limited resources<sup>3</sup> being too widely spread over numerous schools and pupils.
- Lack of support from many schools and colleges, particularly for the ‘gifted’ [concerned with academic ability opposed to ‘talented’ which supports students who excel at sports or artistic domains] parts of the programme.

(The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p. 52)

Based on these weaknesses, the panel proposed the following changes to the existing programme:

Rather than trying to identify gifted children and tagging them as such, the new programme – perhaps called ‘Raising Aspiration’ – should be

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<sup>3</sup>The financial resources available for the gifted and talented programme nationwide summed up to about £10–15 million per year which needed to be distributed between all primary and secondary schools in England. This meant that a school which identified and registered their top 10% with the government received a few hundred pounds per year to be spent on the education of their gifted and talented students.

open to all pupils who could benefit from help building up skills such as:

- Oral and written communication skills and personal confidence
- Dealing with information, information technology (IT) and technology
- Developing the right attitude to success.

(The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p. 53)

In addition to these content and definition changes, the Panel also proposed to reallocate about £2 million from the gifted and talented budget (which totalled about £10-15 million). Even though the proposal had not been put into practice fully, the idea of strengthening social mobility was definitely considered in terms of a move forward (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). Another indicator for the declining interest in the provision for gifted and talented children was the closure of The National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (Henry, 2010). The money saved through that move did not go back into the gifted and talented budget but was to be spent otherwise and was reallocated for the funding of ‘social mobility’:

The U-turn will see much of the academy’s £20 million funding targeted instead on deprived teenagers as part of the Government’s bid to improve social mobility and get more poor students into top universities.

(Henry, 2010)

These changes lead to a number of questions which I will not be able to answer as part of this thesis due to its focus and scope, but which are worth exploring in further research:

- How do these changes impact the gifted and talented students from disadvantaged but also affluent backgrounds in schools?
- What does it mean to have a ‘Raising Aspiration’ scheme which supports students from middle and working class backgrounds to gain access to top universities but flattens the support for high achieving students in schools from other social backgrounds?

The next sub-section will outline the current educational policy situation concerning giftedness and talent in English secondary schools.

### **1.2.2 The current educational policy situation of giftedness and talent in English secondary schools**

The current Conservative, as well as the previous Coalition, governments have introduced a number of changes to the educational landscape. One of the more pronounced changes is the introduction of academies which make schools directly accountable to the government and leaves the Local Education Authorities (LEA) without power to support local schools. Secondly, there have been major reforms to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) syllabi as well as the grading system at examination levels. With the national curriculum levels abolished, schools have had to define their own measures of student progress, with many secondary schools adopting the new GCSE grading system of numbers 1 to 9 (DfE, 2015). Lastly, to measure the effectiveness of a school and the attainment of its students, evaluating GCSE grades is not enough anymore. In 2015, a new measure was introduced called Attainment 8 and Progress 8. This means that students in secondary schools across England are expected to make certain levels of progress during their time in an educational institution. These levels are, at the end of their period of schooling, compared to the average progress nationally, and if students achieve their target levels and fall within the average national score, a



zero score is recorded for the school; students not achieving their targets will be linked with a negative score, showing they are making progress below the national average and anyone exceeding targets will be awarded a higher than zero score. This is done for 8 subjects, with the aim that a school should at worst achieve a zero score overall, but ideally a score above zero shows that students in that school have exceeded expectations and targets and achieved beyond the national average. Therefore, schools who can teach their students in a way that will lead to higher than expected examination grades at the end are seen as very good or outstanding schools. The subjects considered for the Attainment/Progress 8 are core subjects as well as those considered for the English Baccalaureate. All of these academic subjects are deemed as rigorous and promoting better chances for pupils in pursuing valuable careers; for example, English, mathematics, science, computer science, history, geography and languages (DfE, 2015). Additionally, schools whose students show an above national average Progress 8 score (+1.0 or above) *'will be exempt from routine inspections by Ofsted in the calendar year following the publication of the final performance tables'* (DfE, 2015, p. 8).

With the new White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (2016b), the governmental proposals, including devolution and boosting the standing and professionalism of teachers and teaching, brings in an old idea in new garments: excellence for all includes those students who have been *'neglected by the previous curriculum and accountability systems'* (DfE, 2016b, p. 21) and who are named as students with SEN or disabilities, those who are low attaining, students in alternative provision (special schools for students with physical or severe learning difficulties, and pupil referral units which offer education to students who cannot attend a mainstream secondary school generally or currently, sometimes associated with being permanently excluded or waiting for a place in a mainstream secondary school) and last but not least the *'most academically able pupils'* (DfE, 2016b, p. 21). As discussed earlier, the notion that very able students deserve to be targeted specifically was prominently highlighted under the Labour government

in the 1990s and 2000s. Although the current government policies do not go so far as to introduce a specific policy for those students seen as very able or talented in a certain subject or domain, they do, however, acknowledge that these students need to be stretched. Interestingly, the terms gifted and talented have completely disappeared from the governmental language used in the wave of educational policy papers issued in 2015/2016 (DfE, 2015; 2016a; 2016b) and so has the notion of students being talented, meaning achieving exceptionalities in areas of art, performing arts, sports or music. *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016b) focuses on academic ability and excellence only and does not mention talent at all, not even clad in different words. The main message is that we need a *'knowledge-based curriculum as the cornerstone of an excellent, academically rigorous education up to the age of 16'* (DfE, 2016b, p. 20). These policy papers argue that when you pair academic rigour, and the right character and being resilient, then education prepares *'children for adult life, giving them the skills and character traits needed to succeed academically, have a fulfilling career, and make a positive contribution to British society'* (DfE, 2016b, p. 20).

So, although the new governmental strive is bringing an advantage to the most able students in English secondary schools, it also puts aside the non-academic excellence, and by this almost belittles students and their achievements in those areas.

## 1.3 Situating my research questions

### 1.3.1 Statement of research problem

With the introduction of the new White Paper (DfE, 2016b), schools are now asked to not just cater for their SEN students and the sometimes called C-D-border liners, but also to cater for the academic top range of their students. Before

the introduction of the new policy many schools would especially target students who were just short of a C or pass grade in their GCSE subjects with a focus on English, mathematics and science or those students who were on the SEN register. Now, schools have to widen their approach to all those who have not made enough progress. For example, students who joined a secondary school in Year 7 (at 12 years of age) with a National Curriculum (NC) level of 4 in English are now expected to achieve a grade B in their English GCSE in Year 11. Therefore, any student who joined in Year 7 with a level 4 in English who is now not achieving Bs but Cs in their examination subjects will be supported with special interventions or extra revision sessions to maximise the chances for this student to achieve their target<sup>4</sup>.

This means that schools are also being held accountable for the achievements of their most able and have to make sure that they also achieve their sometimes very ambitious targets. The question remains as to how schools are going to tackle this: will schools introduce special interventions for their most able in general? Will they only focus on those students who do not work on their target grade? Or will they continue working as they do, still focusing more on students with lower ability levels rather than supporting their most able achieving straight As or A\*s? For me as a teacher, there is also another question: how do I support very able students? Do they need pull-out lessons or do I have to differentiate every lesson now, including a number of different difficulty levels? Moving forward in educating the most able students in schools these questions are worth exploring in future research, but given the scope and focus of my thesis I cannot facilitate a discussion here.

Based on my MA research (Zschaler, 2011), there seems to be another dimension though - another aspect of schooling which is not necessarily linked to what hap-

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<sup>4</sup>Since the introduction of new progress measures in 2015 (DfE, 2015) the education system in England now uses numerical GCSE grades from 1-9. Therefore, what used to be a grade C is now represented by number 4 which is a standard pass. Grades A and A\* are now represented by grades 7 and above

pens in lessons with the gifted and talented students or whether they are being taken out for enhancement lessons. In my MA dissertation I labelled it as the ‘culture of the place’, with a focus on how gifted and talented students were viewed by their teachers and peers and thus how working hard and achieving good grades was generally viewed within the school.

The notion that provision alone may not necessarily be the most important dimension of educating gifted and talented students aligns with findings from a number of researchers (Francis et al., 2012; Dweck, 2000; Nunn, 2014) as well as the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY), an institution which was set up in 2002 at the University of Warwick and funded by the government (Brady and Koshy, 2014). In a hearing before the Children, Schools and Families Committee of the House of Commons (House of Commons, 2010), Deborah Eyre gave evidence about findings of the NAGTY concerning the impact of the Government’s Gifted and Talented Programme. Part of the research NAGTY was asked to do, involved the identification of best practice in schools. For this purpose a group of so-called ambassador schools were selected and their approach to teaching their gifted and talented students was evaluated. As Eyre noted:

It is really interesting that there wasn’t one model in those schools – and some had no identification at all – but they did have outstanding practice and very satisfied, happy parents and very high performers.

(House of Commons, 2010, p. 7)

Eyre further discussed that those schools deemed successful did not necessarily focus on identifying the most able students in their school and offer extra provision, but had a distinctive whole school approach; a school ethos which set different priorities. The schools were looking at what learners needed in terms of skills and characteristics to succeed:

Hence the schools that are most successful, [...] are the ones that

look at the provision that they make and are really focused on what makes an outstanding learner, what characteristics we are looking for and how we make that happen in our schools and classrooms in terms of expectations.

(House of Commons, 2010, p. 7)

My previous research suggested similar patterns: even though provision in two of the schools was very similar, the school ethos, how teachers viewed the concept of giftedness and talent in the context of school culture, was extremely different between the two.

These findings connected to my professional experience and led to a closer look at my own secondary school and how gifted and talented students were seen and educated there. As I am part of the school and thus the school culture, I have had almost unlimited access to students and teachers alike and was thus able to take a close look but also track changes and developments over a number of years.

One teacher summarised the situation as follows, and with that, probably speaks for many professionals in the field:

Teachers know what they should do with very able students but it's grades they have to get. So if they're [very able students] working fine then as a teacher you can deal with other issues.

(Encounter with a teacher at St. Paul's Secondary School, July 2015)

### **1.3.2 Research aim and questions**

Based on the above and gaps within the research literature, which I will explore in depth in the next chapter (see Chapter 2), my overarching research aim is to establish how staff in an English secondary school construct and use the concept

of giftedness and talent and how this impacts on the (academic) self-theories of young people labelled/identified as gifted and talented. To explore this focus, I use the following research questions:

- How do teachers and students understand and construct the terms ‘giftedness and talent’?
- What are the routine practices associated with these conceptions in an English secondary school?
- What kind of school culture is thus created with the focus of giftedness and talent?
- How does this culture manifested through these practices impact on the self-theories and academic engagement of gifted and talented students?

Having been able to follow the construction of the concept of giftedness and talent in one English secondary school over a period of 5 years, I will illuminate the way in which teachers constructed and also used the concept of giftedness and talent and how this impacted on the gifted and talented students in their care. My research will provide a starting point in looking into how the construction of the concept impacts on the personal development of the most able students in a school and how this might help or hinder them achieving their full potential.

My research might be viewed as a longitudinal study, of which there is a lack, in the field of gifted and talented education (House of Commons, 2010). Research literature offers a rich insight into what kind of education very able students need to achieve their potential (Brady and Koshy, 2014; Hymer and Michel, 2002; Stephen and Warwick, 2015; Ziegler and Heller, 2000), what social issues they encounter which differ from peers who are not as able (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2012; Gross, 2004), but only a few studies do this for a prolonged period of time (Freeman, 2010; Gottfried et al., 1994; Gross, 2004). Furthermore, exploring

the link between the concept of giftedness and talent within a secondary school and its impact on school culture as well as the personal development and well-being of identified gifted and talented students, has not featured strongly in the research literature before which I will discuss in the literature review (see Chapter 2). In many cases, surveys show (House of Commons, 1999; 2010; Ofsted, 2001; 2009) that the education of the most able students in English secondary schools still is inadequate.

But why is it important to enable very able students to do even better? In the past, there has been a lot of discussion about the issue of elitism and the notion that by supporting one group of students more than others a mismatch is created which does not support the idea of equal opportunities for all. Even teachers do not necessarily agree with the practice (House of Commons, Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2010; Radnor et al., 2007). So on top of feeling pressurised to achieve set targets in their subjects, not all teachers are sure about what giftedness and talent really means, and question whether it really is necessary to support them as these students do quite well anyway. This view was well captured in an informal discussion I had with the head teacher of St. Paul's, who suggested that the gifted and talented students at St. Paul's were doing well so provision must be good. In his view, achieving A\*s and As maybe Bs in their GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11 was doing really well.

## 1.4 Operational definitions

In this sub-section I will briefly clarify key terms used throughout this thesis and their meaning as I use them.

### 1.4.1 Giftedness and talent

Under the New Labour Government in the late 1990s the words gifted and talented were introduced, and used widely in many school policies and documents. For the New Labour Government, the meaning behind those two terms was:

‘Gifted’ refers to those with high ability or potential in academic subjects and ‘talented’ to those with high ability or potential in the expressive or creative arts or sport.

(Ofsted, 2001, p. 2)

Gifted and talented learners are defined as those children and young people with one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with potential to develop those abilities).

(DCSF, 2008, p. 6)

As discussed above, with the new educational policies introduced in the last 3 years, these terms have vanished and new ones have been established. In the 2016 White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* the terms used are: *brightest pupils, most academically able, high attainers*; all of those support intellectual and academic ability rather than excellence in sports, art or the performing arts.

A definition which satisfies my scope and requirements for this thesis is that by Subotnik et al. (2011) as it embraces domains in the academic as well as the art world and shows that giftedness is a journey rather than a state of being:

Giftedness is the manifestation of performance that is clearly at the upper end of the distribution in a talent domain even relative to other high-functioning individuals in that domain. Further, giftedness can be viewed as developmental in that in the beginning stages, potential is the key variable; in later stages, achievement is the measure of giftedness;



and in fully developed talents, eminence is the basis on which this label is granted.

(Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 3)

In this thesis, however, I had to reconcile my own understanding with the workings and understandings of my research sites. Thus, when selecting students for my research, I followed the understanding of the individual schools and selected students from their cohort of gifted and in some cases also talented students. I shall explicitly highlight the understandings in the Findings section (see sub-section 4.1.4).

Lastly, in this thesis I will use the terms gifted, very able, most able and highly able synonymously but all referring to the students generally who stand out in a classroom or school because their academic ability or ability in the arts and sports exceeds that of their peers. When referring to students as exceeding their peers within my research sites, it is a relative understanding, as intake and attainment levels were different in all my research schools.

In terms of handling giftedness in schools, the research of my MA showed links between the self-theories of students and the culture of their schools which is why I will now explore the concept of culture in general and that of school culture in particular in more depth.

## 1.4.2 Culture

What is culture? What does culture mean? Within the literature (Geertz, 1973; Highmore, 2016; Jenks, 2005; Johnson et al., 2008) a number of understandings and meanings of the term can be found which are all grounded in various and differing philosophical notions. The term 'culture' has undergone a number of changes in meaning and how it is interpreted over time. When it first appeared in

the literature it was mainly concerned with agriculture and horticulture, the art of growing plant cultures which would lead to better crops and plants which in turn would mean more and better food for people or in the case of horticulture creating gardens and landscapes for the leisure of individuals or the public. With developments in science, ‘cultures’ were defined as the experimental clusters of cells put on a petri dish and their reactions to differing environmental conditions examined. It was not until the 16th century that culture was being used in the context of humankind and to be more specific in an educational sense involving the cultivation of people; meaning the ‘bettering’ of people, their knowledge and understanding of the world and their manners (Highmore, 2016; Manganaro, 2002). The two main understandings of culture we still find nowadays did not surface until the 18th/19th century. Culture then was concerned with the cultivation of the human mind and intellect and referred to the artefacts of a society deemed to enhance the standing of a person in the eyes of society; artefacts included, for example, music, books and pieces of art. Parallel to this notion another developed which took a wide approach and saw culture as the ‘way of life’ in the widest sense with national differences as to what was included in this ‘way of life’ (Highmore, 2016).

Jenks (2005) further divides the latter two notions of culture into four types:

1. Culture as a cognitive category celebrating and embracing human perfection and focuses on high human achievement. In this type culture is understood as a ‘*general state of mind*’ (Jenks, 2005, p. 11).
2. Culture as a collective category looking at the intellectual as well as moral development of a society as a whole. It links culture with the classical idea of civilisation distinguishing between those ‘barbarians’ living without the healthy regulations of a state and the members of a civilisation who belonged to a collectivity which was associated with certain qualities.

3. In the most common sense culture refers to concrete products of art, music, architecture, or literature which represent the achievements of a society. They convey messages and contain the symbols of a society and time (Manganaro, 2002).
4. Lastly, culture can be understood as a social category where the focus is on *'the whole way of life of a people'* (Jenks, 2005, p. 12).

The latter type links back to Geertz's (1973) definition (for Geertz's definition see sub-section 2.2.1) and represents my own understanding and use of the word culture in this thesis the best.

### 1.4.3 Social development

The third concept which flows throughout my thesis is that of social development of gifted and talented students with a view on their specific challenges in an educational setting. Of course, social development is a wide field and includes many different aspects; therefore, I would like to specify and define the aspects of social development I shall be exploring.

The first is self-concept which can be defined as one's own understanding and interpretation of personal abilities, strengths and responsibilities. Dweck (2000) refers to this as self-theories and defines it as *'people's beliefs about themselves'* (Dweck, 2000, p. xi). The second, self-esteem, is seen as the value one gives to oneself and one's actions based on feedback received from important people in one's life, for example parents, teachers, and friends (Gross, 2004).

Across the literature, for example Dweck (2000), Gross (2004), Hymer (2014), these two concepts seem paramount in the development of gifted and talented students and the realisation of their potential which is why I shall focus on these two aspects of social development in my thesis.

## 1.5 Structure of the thesis

This thesis has been organised in six chapters.

Chapter Two is the literature review indicating current research in the field with a focus on the concept of giftedness and talent, (school) culture, practices and especially a view on how very able students are being educated, and lastly the social development of young people with the main focus being on the ideas of self-concept or self-theory and self-esteem.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology of this thesis including philosophical as well as practical considerations about how best to investigate my research questions. In this chapter I will also explain how I generated and analysed the data and will discuss ethical issues involved in doing research in a secondary school as well as conducting insider research.

Chapter Four discusses the findings about the school culture of the main research site and includes data from a whole school questionnaire as well as interviews with members of staff.

Chapter Five follows the educational journey of five gifted students at my main research site and explores their joys and challenges of being labelled as gifted in an English secondary school. The chapter also links their experiences with the findings from Chapter Four about the school culture of their school. Lastly, in this chapter I will also make connections between the experiences of the gifted students at my main research site and will compare them to students' experiences at another secondary school.

Chapter Six draws together the findings and answers, tentative at times, to the research questions I set out with. It also includes a sub-section analysing the data from my third research site thus enriching the data gathered at the main research site and conclusions to be drawn from my research.

I will now turn my focus to the theoretical and research literature in my field.

## Chapter 2

# Situating my research in theoretical and research literature

*Matilda's brother Michael was a perfectly normal boy, but the sister, as I said, was something to make your eyes pop. By the age of one and a half her speech was perfect and she knew as many words as most grown-ups. The parents, instead of applauding her, called her a noisy chatterbox and told her sharply that small girls should be seen and not heard.*

*(Dahl, 2010)*

In this chapter I will review literature concerned with my research field to lay a basis for as well as taking a critical view on the topics involved in this study. The choice of concepts to explore was firstly led by my research questions (see section 1.3) and refined by my first wave of interviews and succeeding analysis which pointed out areas which seemed to play a part in the topic researched. Thus, the concepts I will discuss and review in this chapter are the following (also see Figure 2.1):

1. I shall review views on the concept of giftedness and talent in general and then take a closer look at how this translates into gifted and talented views within education and schools.

2. As giftedness and talent is not discussed within a void, I will take a closer look at what culture means or stands for and in particular what views there are concerning school culture, which is often viewed as a special type of culture, as this is the context in which I am studying giftedness and talent.
3. Given that practices are at the heart of students' experiences within an educational setting I will explore the different notions about practices and especially how this is realised within the education of gifted and talented students in schools in general.
4. The social development of students within a school setting influences not just who they are as a person inside and outside of school but also how they view their own abilities and thus apply themselves in their educational journey. So, in this last section I shall take a look at general developmental notions about adolescents and in particular highlight any special issues raised by the literature about gifted and talented students in particular. My focus is on the development of self-theories and identity as part of the social development.

When reviewing the literature I started with my University's library catalogue using Onesearch. In the beginning I used the search terms 'gifted' (37 results of which 16 were relevant for my topic<sup>1</sup>), 'talented' (37 results of which 4 were relevant for my topic but already included in the 'gifted' literature) and 'giftedness' (41 results of which again 3 were relevant for my topic and had not been included in previous searches). I limited the literature from 1990 up to the current year and focused on books only to start with (journals are discussed in the next paragraph). This was guided by the decision to look at current literature and discussion to get a better feeling and understanding of current debates and research questions. My literature search also showed the spread of literature in the field and led me to

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<sup>1</sup>In this context relevance was determined by the focus of my research. I therefore did not include literature focusing, for example, on giftedness and talent in the arts or other specific domains as well as novels focusing on gifted characters as they yielded little further information for my research.

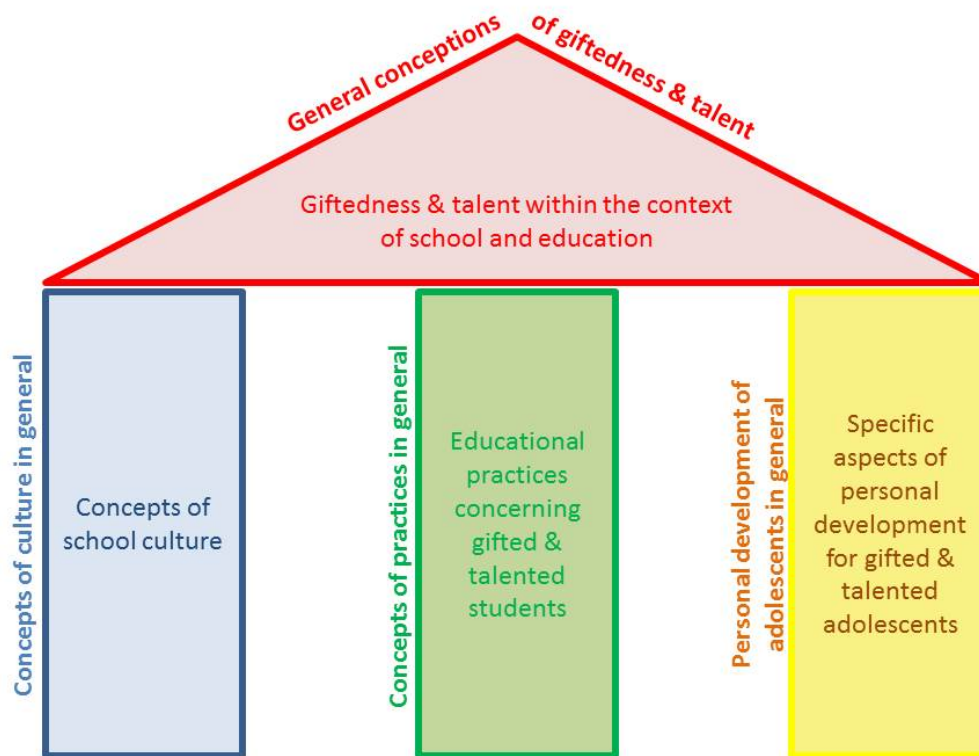


Figure 2.1: Literature overview

narrow it down as some topics were too specific and did not add much information to my focus. The latter included literature which, for example, looked at gifted and talented students with special educational needs (Montgomery, 2003; Kennedy et al., 2011) or domain specific research like giftedness in mathematics (Singer et al., 2016) or practices within higher education (Wolfensberger, 2015). Although fascinating, the focus on SEN paired with giftedness did not relate to my research as neither of the students interviewed fell into this category which is why I did not follow this branch of the literature. Lastly, a number of literature items came up but were either not at all or only slightly related to giftedness and talent, for example creativity in teaching (Baer and Kaufman, 2012) or special education in general (McCollin, 2011).

I started out with the above indicated literature and scanned it for relevance for my research. In addition, I also searched for journals using the same search terms as above finding 10 which were solely dedicated to publishing articles concerned



with gifted and talented students which built the starting point for my literature review. These sources then led me to further books or articles which I incorporated into my literature review looking for new points or references. On this journey I also received suggestions from other academics or educationalists who crossed my path, thus I also started looking at the works of, for example, Dweck (2000), Hymer and Michel (2002), Seaton et al. (2009) and Francis et al. (2012).

Reviewing the literature on ‘culture’ was much more of a challenge as the initial search in my University’s library catalogue returned 607 results (focusing initially on books only from 1990 up to the current year). As I was studying away from University I added the criterion ‘available online’ which narrowed down the results to 229. I then checked the first 30 results individually for relevance. Based on the focus of my research I was looking for literature exploring the development and meaning of the concept ‘culture’ in the widest sense. Some results were too narrow in focus, for example specific groups and their cultural challenges (Cruz, 1999; Johnson, 2013*a*; Berressem et al., 2017) or media culture (Wilkie, 2011), and I therefore did not include them. The narrowing down of ‘culture’ to ‘school culture’ only returned 6 results (criteria used were books only from 1990). Two of the books were too narrow in focus and I therefore dismissed them. One was about experiences of newly qualified teachers (Schuck et al., 2012) and the other about teaching English as a subject (Davison and Moss, 2000). However, when widening the search criteria to the terms ‘school ethos’, ‘school mission’ and ‘school values’, the return of results was much higher and offered a wider range of texts and articles concerned with evaluating and observing the effectiveness of schools and education.

I approached the terms ‘practices’ and ‘social development’ in a slightly different way. With regards to ‘practices’ my interest and focus was mainly about the education of gifted and talented students and therefore literature relating to this aspect of giftedness and talent was already included in my initial search of the key

terms ‘gifted’, ‘talented’ and ‘giftedness’ (19 books were relevant for this aspect of giftedness and talent). In addition to the giftedness focus, I also included literature which was influenced by my MA studies as well as suggestions by my supervisors, namely Lave and Wenger (1991) and Saunders (2011), to add a more general view about practices and their significance. As with all the concepts of this thesis, with evolving research and thus new questions and aspects emerging I scanned the literature afresh to illuminate certain details.

Lastly, my initial literature search on giftedness also included references to the social development of gifted and young people and thus was a good starting point. However, to gain a better understanding of the general developmental tasks of a young person I additionally scanned the literature available in the psychology section of my University’s library about child development with a focus on social development. Furthermore, studies like Francis et al.’s (2012), Gross’s (2004), and Warin’s (2010) also yielded information about the social development of children and young people in general which I included in my literature study.

When looking at educational policies my search started with governmental websites searching for ‘gifted’, ‘talented’ and ‘giftedness’, firstly focusing on educational White Papers outlining general educational drives in English (secondary) schools and moving on to specific policies concerned with the education of gifted and/or talented students. This group of literature also included evaluation reports from, for example, Ofsted or the House of Commons.

One aspect which was important throughout my literature review was to sample different views on the same concept or issue to be able to understand and, for myself, evaluate the different notions and find my own point of view and understanding. Therefore, references in this thesis resemble the works directly used within my thesis but do not represent all literature reviewed and read in the whole thesis process.

## **2.1 The concept of giftedness and talent**

The understandings and thus definitions of the terms ‘giftedness and talent’ or ‘gifted and talented students’ are manifold. Therefore, in this section I shall explore conceptual developments in general as well as how these conceptualisations have been translated into educational processes and lastly how educational policies in England have dealt with this phenomenon.

### **2.1.1 Theoretical and research literature**

What is giftedness and talent? This is a question which has been asked for many decades and which has been answered in a number of ways. But more importantly than knowing what it is, is the phenomenon that exceptional abilities seem to have preoccupied whole societies and cultures from very early on. One example would be Ancient Greece going back to the era of 300 to 400 Before Christ (BC) with Plato’s works and the establishment of, although elitist, nevertheless, educational institutions where promising intellectual as well as artistic and physical ability in young men was nurtured and developed (Tannenbaum, 2000).

Before focusing on the translation of the concepts of ‘giftedness and talent’ into the educational context I would like to highlight a number of different understandings which have prevailed throughout the last century and in one form or the other are still present today. These different understandings, of course, shape how the concepts of ‘giftedness and talent’ have been used.

During an evidence session at the House of Commons (2010) Eyre summarised the different understandings of giftedness and talent in three paradigms:

### 2.1.1.1 Paradigm 1

The first is the concept that gifted and talented children/young people are the ones who are *'completely different from the rest of us'* (House of Commons, 2010, p. Ev 7). This model is grounded in Intelligence Quotient (IQ) testing and the psychological profile of someone and is described by Eyre as psycho-medical. It suggests that being gifted and talented is based on innate ability which is revealed in, for example, a high IQ score and thus is more of a fixed view which does not allow for growth or development (Subotnik et al., 2011).

### 2.1.1.2 Paradigm 2

The second concept is strongly identified with developments in the United States post-1970 which saw people who were different but shared certain characteristics be put in cohorts and researched. The cohort of gifted children, meaning those children and young people having a high IQ score, was labelled as *'qualitatively different beings and [...] highly sensitive'* (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 5), an idea also highlighted by Freeman (2010).

### 2.1.1.3 Paradigm 3

The last concept is a more recent development and explores the notion that expertise and exceptionality in specific areas seem more strongly linked with settings and environments people grow up in than, for example, a high IQ. These paradigms can also be seen in the literature although with some differences. Scholars like Renzulli (2012), Gagne (2000), or Ziegler and Heller (2000) represent something of a bridge from the previous to this third paradigm, moving away from pure focus on innate ability to giving other environmental factors more emphasis without losing the element of the 'gift' although the latter takes different forms within the different views.

For example, Renzulli (2012) advocates that ability is not the only factor which is needed to realise high achievement. In his concept of giftedness he first distinguishes between two different types of giftedness. One is based on one's ability to learn well in lessons and reproduce this knowledge in school settings; what he calls '*schoolhouse giftedness*' (Renzulli, 2012, p. 151). The other type of giftedness is associated with the personality traits individuals apply in their specific domains which lead to creative productivity. Based on the latter definition of giftedness, Renzulli (2012) developed the so-called 'Three Ring Conception of Giftedness' which illustrates the interaction between three different traits and their impact on performance:

- Above Average Ability: This refers to general cognitive areas like reasoning and memory as well as domain specific knowledge and ability like biology or dancing. Renzulli (2012) argues that this ring is the most constant one out of the three as it is linked to the traditional realms of cognitive ability or traits. The emphasis in his theory though is in the 'above average' reference. This is to highlight that research shows '*minimal criterion validity between academic aptitude and professional accomplishments*' (Renzulli, 2012, p. 153). So whether a gifted student will be able to translate high ability into a professional career does not depend so much on how much above average his or her IQ is but whether this ability can be translated into outcomes or performance.
- Task Commitment: This is one of the elements necessary to translate ability into productivity according to Renzulli (2012). It includes personal traits like perseverance, positivity and determination to approach a project and stick with it also through hard times and to come out on the other side with a product.
- Creativity: This factor embraces originality, curiosity as well as '*a willingness to challenge convention and tradition*' (Renzulli, 2012, p. 153).

This conception offers interesting approaches as to which personality traits are important in translating high ability in students into productivity and thus which skills should be taught within educational settings or to be more precise within programmes addressing the needs of gifted students. An issue which arises from this conception though is Renzulli's (2012) assumption that gifted individuals of today are the leaders of tomorrow, whether in a political, scientific or cultural sense. It leaves me with the question whether burdening children and young people with the expectation that they will be specifically educated to serve their country later on in life really should be the goal of education aimed at gifted individuals.

A similar understanding is put forward by Gagne who identifies '*learning opportunities, a high level of motivation, and a supportive environment*' (Ziegler and Heller, 2000) as paramount but in the same way as they are sufficient they are also unnecessary. Frequent access to a variety of learning moments, a strong motivation and thus drive as well as a supportive home and educational background do not necessarily equal exceptional performance. Gagne also distinguishes between 'giftedness' being the natural abilities people have in one or more domains and which place them in the top 10% of their age peers. 'Talent' on the other hand he describes as the trained abilities one possesses in a certain domain and which place him in the top 10% of the cohort of age peers who have been studying the same domain (Gagne, 2000). The 'gift' in his theory is the innate abilities and aptitudes one possesses which take one to the top of the age group.

Although this makes giftedness less innate and more modifiable it still places great emphasis on natural abilities and aptitudes. Although Gagne's (2000) theory extends these abilities beyond academic aptitude, it still is a prerequisite and as such one which needs to be developed to a rather high level (within the top 10% of an age group) before it can be seen as 'giftedness' and be developed into 'talent'. From an educational perspective the issue remains that if the 10% of an age group are seen in relation to general standards and not relative within a peer group, students

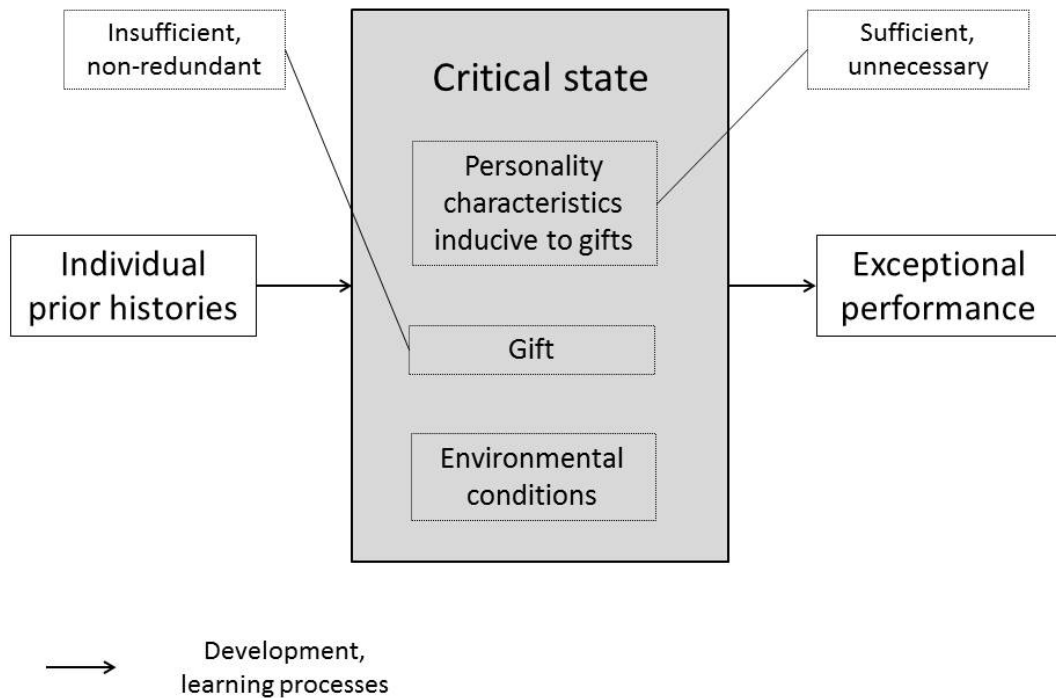


Figure 2.2: The Concept of Critical State (Ziegler and Heller, 2000)

in some schools would not be included in this understanding as their performance might be outstanding within their educational peer group but not in relative terms if looking at, for example, a national cohort. This means educational processes and practices would not necessarily be targeting them and therefore educational outcomes might not be as high as they could have been with the extra support.

In a similar way to Renzulli (2012) and Gagne (2000), Ziegler and Heller (2000) have proposed an understanding of 'giftedness' which again is based on the assumption that a gift is a factor which in the togetherness of environmental processes and personal traits is the element which leads to achievement eminence. The latter is realised in the so-called critical state - the idea that once the critical state for a gifted person is reached, exceptional performance is the outcome (see Figure 2.2).

This concept poses an interesting take on giftedness as it incorporates the notion of learning processes and development which are a vital part in displaying

exceptional performance. Thus, education and learning are necessary factors to enable high achievement which within education could be substituted for outstanding grades and examination results. This understanding would support the notion that if schools do not provide adequate educational support for their most able students then exceptional performance, or outstanding examination results, cannot be achieved (Mazzoli Smith and Campbell, 2012). The only issue within this system again is the question of what the 'gift' is. If it is a purely high academic ability, for example a high IQ score, it would not explain exceptional performance achieved by students with only average or slightly higher than average ability (Dweck, 2000). It also does not address the question if the gift is unchangeable or inherited because if it is a static factor it is hard to prove and if it is inherited it does not account for those students who are doing exceptionally well academically in school or careerwise later on in life but who come from a low socio-economic background.

Heller (2005) further developed the idea of the Critical State. In the so-called Munich Model of Giftedness new aspects have been added which seem necessary to translate potential into excellence. Heller (2005) includes not just talent factors like intellectual, creative and artistic abilities or social competence in his model but also non-cognitive personality traits which he calls moderators. These moderators include learning and working strategies as well as coping mechanisms in stress situations and achievement motivation. Additionally, environmental conditions like quality of instruction as well as classroom and family climate have been included in the Munich Model. Thus, this model builds a bridge between psychometrically-based approaches and more process-oriented ones. The notion that ability alone does not make excellence is also supported by Freeman (2010; 2012). Her study of gifted children from childhood through to adulthood is one of the few longitudinal studies in the field. Her research strongly suggests that children who showed great potential in their early years did not necessarily raise to fame during their adult years. The key, she believes, is the personality of a person and not their intelligence.



What can you expect from life if you are gifted? If you have sturdy self-confidence, enough creativity to make plans, the tenacity to stick to them and a spot of luck, the world is your oyster.

(Freeman, 2010, p. 278)

An outlier surpassing in some ways the third paradigm proposed by Eyre (House of Commons, 2010) in this discussion are those scholars who support the notion that giftedness is all about '*practice and unequal access to opportunities*' (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 5) and not linked to ability whatsoever. Especially when focusing on the field of music and sports the key seems to be the hours of practice put in to become an expert or master of a field and not some natural ability within a domain. Although this view widens the understanding of 'giftedness and talent' it still falls short to account for those examples of people who seem to be able to surpass the performance of their peers with similar hours of practice and similar levels of instructions.

Current research by, for example, Dweck (2000), Gross (2004) and Hymer (2002; 2014) support the third paradigm shifting the focus from innate ability to ability which develops and is shaped by educational provision as well as attitude and personal characteristics. In her work, Dweck (2000) discusses the impact of self-theories on self-esteem and links this to intelligence, and the ability to achieve set goals. Self-theories in her view are '*people's beliefs about themselves*' (Dweck, 2000, p. xi).

Similar to Dweck's idea, Gross (2004) also focuses more strongly on the idea that giftedness and talent are not purely based on high intelligence. In her book *Exceptionally Gifted Children* (2004) she discusses different theories about the link between self-esteem, self-concept and motivation. In this context self-esteem is defined as what you think of yourself based on feedback you have received from important people in your life, this being parents, family, friends and teachers. The

received feedback is then turned into an attitude towards yourself either seeing yourself and your actions as worthy and valuable or the contrary. Self-concept is understood to be your own perception and ideas about your abilities, responsibilities and strengths. In reviewing different theories and studies, Gross (2004) highlights the importance of self-concept and self-esteem of being the deciding factors in terms of engagement and thus the key to achieving or not achieving well. This understanding is also reflected in Hymer's work.

Hymer and Michel (2002) argue that every child or young person can achieve exceptional things if given a variety of opportunities to explore their interests and special gift(s). The key to unlocking giftedness and talent is a learning environment which creates opportunities and encourages every child to be the best they can be (Hymer and Michel, 2002). This links back to Eyre's work with the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY). NAGTY was a government funded project which was aimed at offering out-of-school learning opportunities for gifted and talented students aged 11 to 19 years as well as evaluating best practice in schools concerning the education of their gifted and talented students. It was established in 2002 and was closed in 2010 (House of Commons, 2010). The significance of NAGTY lies in its support of gifted and talented students throughout England, creating opportunities of subject enrichment in an out-of-school context and gathering data as well as conducting research concerned with the education of gifted and talented young people. As explored in the introduction, schools which did exceptionally well in educating their students, including those who were, or in some cases were not, identified as gifted and talented, did not necessarily offer a varied provision for their most able students but adopted a positive and engaging whole school approach (House of Commons, 2010).

In their discussion of conceptions of 'giftedness', Ziegler and Heller (2000) conclude with a summary of the, one might say, dilemma of giftedness research: the initial problem is that of application. In which domains can one actually see and assess

different achievement levels and pitch it against a standard of excellence? Naturally people are inclined to lean towards academic or scientific achievements as well as those works of art and music which are viewed as extraordinary. But who decides about what is seen as extraordinary especially in the arts? How much of it is personal taste or current culture? This points to the next problem; once a domain has been agreed on in which achievements can be assessed the search begins for a standard of excellence. In many domains these standards are not available and thus have to be developed and put together and once that has been achieved they have to be agreed on by members of the concerned domain. This process brings with it debate about whether a standard can actually be applied in the domain and if so what aspects to focus on. But even if a standard of excellence exists for the domain in question the issues continue. The next one is the problem of reference. When applying the standard of excellence the question remains what norm to pitch it against and who decides about this 'norm-point'. Ziegler and Heller (2000) refer to three different norm dimensions which all lead to different assessments and thus outcomes: criteria-based (norms are defined by a list of criteria which have to be met before performance can be classified as exceptional); inter-individual (norms are developed by comparing the achievements of different individuals, within an age group or even within a certain domain); and intra-individual (performances of one individual are evaluated used as the norm, anything standing out from that is seen as exceptional). Lastly there is the problem of significance. What level of achievement can be considered worth including in research on giftedness? The top 10% of a domain or those performing significantly above age average?

Although this leaves a bleak outlook, I still believe that it is important to illuminate this field of uncertainty especially in the context of education. The current status is that some English schools are identifying their gifted and talented students (Ofsted, 2001; 2009) and have agreed upon domains, standards of excellence, norms and references; these latter points are mainly influenced and to some extent dictated by governmental guidelines and their evaluation (for example DfE and

Ofsted). Thus, most schools look at key stage (KS) 2 Standard Assessment Test (SAT) results (examinations taken by students in England at the age of 11 years, at the end of their primary schooling; tested subjects are mathematics, English and science) and Middle Years Information Scores (MidYIS - an ability test sometimes administered at the entry of secondary schooling in England at the age of 11/12 years. It measures abilities within four different domains: vocabulary, mathematics, non-verbal and skills (Forster and Metcalfe, 2010)) to determine who should be on the list of 'gifted and talented students'. Some schools also operate a system whereby individual departments of schools create their own standard of excellence which is used to identify the most able. Further, the educational threshold of giftedness is the top 5% of a given cohort in a school; meaning that the top 5% of a subject in terms of achievement are labelled as 'gifted and talented'. Often schools will base the 5% on KS2 SATs results and/or MidYIS making the top 5% an academically able cohort. This was identified by Ofsted to be a relative understanding of the terms 'gifted and talented' and thus locates exceptionalism within a certain school intake (Ofsted, 2001). Thus, as schools are identifying their gifted and talented students it is important to clarify understandings of the terms 'giftedness and talent' to ensure that educational support is given to all those who need it, including those who often get overlooked in the above mentioned processes, namely underachievers and those with gifts and talents other than academic subjects (Eyre, 1997; Hymer and Michel, 2002).

Some of the above-mentioned issues also resonate with critique in the field of gifted and talented research. One of the scholars promoting change is Borland (2003; 2014). His criticism is not centred around the necessity of excellent education for very able students to achieve their potential but the elitist and exclusivist approach which is adopted, especially in the United States of America (USA). His criticism can be summarised in the following way:

What was being criticized - the tendency for gifted programs to over-

enroll White middle-class and upper-middle-class students; the educationally and ethically questionable nature of reserving such things as technology, instruction in higher-level thinking, and field trips exclusively for students in gifted programs; the use of gifted programs in some localities to reinstitute the upper level of a tracking system or to create a mostly White enclave in a diverse educational system.

(Borland, 2003, p. 1-2)

Therefore, Borland (2003; 2014) argues for gifted education, meaning excellent, enriched and differentiated education, for all students. At the core of his argument is the notion that labelling students as gifted also means labelling others as non-gifted and, for him, the aim should be to provide the best education possible for ALL students and not just for some. Further, Borland (2014) questions the use of simply standardised tests to identify gifted students, as in his view most students are in one way or another full of promise and thus deserve adequate education.

Sapon-Shevin (1994; 1999) also questions the practice of labelling some students as gifted and therefore some students as not gifted. Some of her research has centred around understanding how the process of labelling students in one way or another impacts on their interactions with teachers, their peers, as well as on their own beliefs about themselves. Similarly to Borland (2003; 2014), Sapon-Shevin (1994; 1999) puts forward the notion that any student can benefit from a rich curriculum, extra-curricular opportunities as well as child-centred provision. In her eyes, education is about equity and not serving specific labels, and about creating a caring and supporting social climate within schools to facilitate excellent education for all students in the classroom. Similarly to Borland (2003), Sapon-Shevin (1994) sees the dangers in separating children from each other based on their academic or other abilities and to create discrimination as well as inequities under the umbrella of wanting the best for the best. Her critique was not very well received in the circles of gifted and talented research, as gifted programmes in the USA are run in

a business-like way, promoted through selling their offers, especially to parents, by suggesting that the gifted children of today are the leaders of tomorrow (a notion which I already explored in some detail earlier in this section). The feeling which remains in her view is:

Separation of the strong and the weak, the agile and the slow, the big and the small was the unavoidable outcome. Exclusion was sad but natural, lamentable but inevitable. And it was not to be discussed.

(Sapon-Shevin, 1994, p. 236)

This view is also reflected in the work of Mazzoli Smith and Campbell (2012). Their study of four working-class families explored how the label of giftedness shaped the educational experiences of the children identified, as well as the understanding parents had about the concept. One issue which was pointed out in the study was that, although the education of the most able is supposed to be part of mainstream schooling, the reality is that grammar and independent schools have found themselves a niche and have taken a high proportion of the most able under their wings. Thus, the authors found that state schools gave out the label but did not offer any provision to support the development of potential into excellence:

The data suggested that the weight of expectation for provision generated by labelling a child as gifted, despite its being seen as merely confirmatory, exceeded anything anticipated by policy-makers or educationalists; unmet, it proved more damaging, in terms of negative feeling and a lack of support for national initiatives, than not labelling at all.

(Mazzoli Smith and Campbell, 2012, p. 149)

Furthermore, Mazzoli Smith and Campbell (2012) highlight the flawed identification system which leads to a disproportionate number of identified gifted students

in higher socio-economic classes. With this in mind, Mazzoli Smith and Campbell (2012) call for '*recognition and celebration of cultural variety and diversity in concepts of giftedness, related to social context*' (p. 163).

Before taking a closer look at how educational policies in England have addressed the issue of gifted and talented education within schooling I will offer just a few words about the impact the different conceptions of schooling have had on the development of understandings of the concepts within English education.

Following the lead of the first paradigm many educators argue that if students are gifted with a high IQ and thus are already doing very well in school there is no need to support them even further; this can also go hand-in-hand with a school ethos which does not cherish and thus nurture highly able students (House of Commons, 1999). Further, there seems to be an elitist view associated with gifted and talented education and the notion that the achievements of an already privileged group of students are enhanced even more. This, for some educators as well as teachers, seems to be contrary to the ideals of schooling and education which are based on the understanding that each student should be given equal opportunities (Brady and Koshy, 2014; House of Commons, 1999). When seeing this paradigm through it often leads to no or only limited provision for those students in a school who could be labelled as gifted and talented or very able as some, especially teachers, prefer (Brady and Koshy, 2014).

In the same way, and interestingly this does not have to be a negative approach, when following the notion of paradigm three, which highlights that the path to success and in this context high achievement or performance is not just based on high IQ and innate ability but also environmental influences, some schools abandon the whole approach of identifying their most able but rather create a whole school approach and culture which nurtures everyone's strengths and offers opportunities to all students to explore and nurture their strengths and gifts (House of Commons, 2010; Hymer and Michel, 2002). Some research suggests that what

works for the most able in a school often also has a positive impact on the general educational outcomes in a school (House of Commons, 1999; 2010).

However, when conducting my research in schools the two secondary schools I worked with had based their school interim definitions largely on the understanding advocated by governmental policies. Thus, as I worked with students labelled as gifted and talented by their schools my working definition follows these governmental proposals:

‘Gifted’ refers to those with high ability or potential in academic subjects and ‘talented’ to those with high ability or potential in the expressive or creative arts or sport.

(Ofsted, 2001, p. 2)

Gifted and talented learners are defined as those children and young people with one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with potential to develop those abilities).

(DCSF, 2008, p. 6)

### 2.1.2 Educational policies

When assuming his post as Prime Minister in 1997, Blair put a strong focus on education, including those students who were doing exceptionally well. Blair’s motto, which he had already laid out in his Ruskin Speech in 1996 and started putting into practice once Prime Minister, was *‘helping every student develop as an individual’* and stretching *‘the best to achieve all they can’* (Blair, 1996). That gifted and talented learners were part of this understanding became apparent in the developing educational policies of the then Labour government: The Excellence in Cities Programme (DfEE, 2001), Excellence and enjoyment: A strategy for primary schools (DfES, 2003), Aimhigher (DfEE, 2000; HEFCE, 2003) as well as



the 2005 White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools For All: More Choice For Parents And Pupils* (DfES, 2005). In all of those policies gifted and talented students are identified as needing extra support and help to fulfil their potential. These educational policies led to a core change at the basis with many schools focusing more on their high ability students and creating educational but also social opportunities for them to shine.

However, with the government change in 2010, the focus on high ability learners was removed, along with the funding that was allocated for this purpose. The funding was now to be spent on widening participation for young people from deprived or under-represented social groups (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). Another aspect of these changes was to reform the existing gifted and talented programme and to use it as a basis of raising aspirations amongst disadvantaged children in general with a further focus on the *'cohort of bright, disadvantaged students'* (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p. 53).

During the evidence session in the House of Commons (2010) Eyre described these educational policies as a step in the right direction but also said that they are *'inconsistent and incoherent'* (House of Commons, 2010, p. Ev2) and, as Mordecai puts it, *'with a lack of ideological and philosophical underpinning and research behind some of the events and programmes'* (House of Commons, 2010, p. Ev1 and 2).

The issues highlighted by different stakeholders (House of Commons, 2010; Ofsted, 2001; Ofsted, 2009) have hardly changed over the period of 10 years of educational policies:

- Teachers are still reluctant towards labelling and identifying children or young people as gifted and talented for several reasons. One reason has to do with a lack of understanding of what being gifted and talented means and what these students need (Brady and Koshy, 2014; Eyre, 1997).

- Secondly, to label some and not others kindles the debate of elitism which is often crushed by the idea of equity (Eyre, 1997; House of Commons, 2010).
- Schools which received funding were more inclined to invest the money and time to set up a programme for their more able students. Thus, the withdrawal of funding led to a halt of gifted and talented programmes and support of students in many schools (Brady and Koshy, 2014).
- Supporting the less able students, those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), is also more important as it is directly measured by Ofsted and plays a vital role within the judgement of a school (Brady and Koshy, 2014).
- Lastly, schools are more worried about how many of their pupils are achieving 5 A\* to C with C being the key factor. Supporting students to achieve Cs rather than Ds is more of a priority than challenging students to achieve A\* rather than A grades (Brady and Koshy, 2014). (A\* was the highest possible examination grade in the then established examination system. C was the then threshold grade which separated a pass from a fail. In recent years, sufficient numbers of GCSEs had to be achieved by students to be able to access college courses and results had to be within the A\* to C range to secure a place.)

## 2.2 The concept of (school) culture

One of the concepts which strongly influenced my research questions and thus the data generation is that of culture or to be more specific the phenomenon of school culture. During research I conducted for my MA prior to my PhD studies the concept of culture and to be more specific school culture came out of the data as one important factor when evaluating the social-emotional wellbeing of primary school children identified as gifted and talented. It seemed that a positive

interpretation of the terms giftedness and talent underpinned educational offers in lessons as well as outside of formal lessons which led to students feeling valued and encouraged. Very able students who attended a school where high achievement was highly valued and praised also had a more positive view about themselves and their abilities and seemed even more engaged in their education. The key point seemed to be that if students felt they were accepted for who they were, for example very able, they had a more positive academic self-theory and did even better in school.

In this section I am going to explore different concepts and meanings of culture in general and school culture in specific to understand and evaluate its impact on the educational experiences of students in an educational setting.

### **2.2.1 What is culture?**

When exploring culture, a powerful starting point is Geertz's (1973) evocative depiction in which he states:

The concept of culture I espouse [...] is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take cultures to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.

(Geertz, 1973, p. 5)

For me, this quote highlights a number of things which can be said about culture:

1. Culture is man-made; it is not something which happens but is created by members of a group however big or small this group may be and however we may call this group, may it be society, a nation, a church community or employees of an organisation (Jenks, 2005).

2. In most cases people are part of many webs, each one of them connecting them with a different group and thus set of people (Hargreaves, 1994).
3. Being part of these webs gives meaning and understanding to individuals as well as groups (Highmore, 2016; Johnson et al., 2008).
4. Becoming part of a culture or spinning webs around oneself often happens subconsciously and therefore some strings might even be unknown to oneself and only become apparent within evaluative contexts (Johnson et al., 2008).

This also highlights how multi-layered the meaning and use of the term is. As discussed in section 1.4 the use of the word has changed over time and only in recent centuries has it been used for referring to the *'plurality and contradictions of meanings, feelings and practices that circulate in the world and, crucially, to their orchestration'* (Highmore, 2016, p. viii).

Recent decades have seen a rising interest in culture and its qualification in different domains; one of those is the domain of school culture. In the next section I will look at the specifics of school culture and its importance when investigating and evaluating the educational experiences of students labelled as gifted and talented.

### 2.2.2 What is school culture?

As my research is focusing on life within educational settings I would like to qualify the idea of culture further by using Prosser's (1999) operational definition of school culture stating that it is an:

[...] unseen and unobservable force behind school activities, a unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and mobilisation for school members.

(Prosser, 1999, p. 14)

Over the decades different approaches have been adopted in viewing and researching the phenomenon of school culture. One of the interesting shifts within the field happened between the 1960s and 70s where schooling was second in line to a student's family background when it came to determining a student's academic achievements (Prosser, 1999). Whether a student would get good examination results depended more on their family background and where they came from than which school they attended. This changed in the 1980s when the effectiveness of a school and its education was linked to school atmosphere and climate and when school culture was perceived as an important factor in the strive to improve and change school provision (Prosser, 1999; Houtte, 2005). This shift also pushed education into the spotlight when it came to determining a student's educational achievements and family and home context took a step back. Today, what a school's culture is like is still seen as an important factor in improving the educational experience and thus achievements of students (Hargreaves, 2001; Nunn, 2014; Whalan, 2012).

Additionally, over the years, a number of terms have been introduced and discussed when it comes to evaluating the educational experience of students. Some of them are 'school ethos', 'school mission' and 'school values'. All of these terms embrace the idea that not just the apparent practices and routines within a school setting shape how students perceive their time at school, but also those underlying values which influence how students and staff interact with each other and what is seen as the real purpose of education. For example, it has been acknowledged in research that school improvement is driven by a positive school ethos (Graham, 2012; Striepe et al., 2014). Further, research in this area has shown that investigating 'school missions' and 'school values' helps to gain a better understanding as to what the purpose of education is (Steinler et al., 2011) and thus a country's overall goal for its citizens (Chapple, 2015). Research in this area also establishes links between the feel of a school and the general well-being and mental health of students (Warin, 2017) linked to student achievement (Allen et al.,

2017). And lastly, the understanding that the values promoted in a school can have a longer lasting effect on students and their general outlook on life has also been discussed (Daniel et al., 2013; Nunn, 2014). Where my study is concerned, I shall focus on school culture and the understanding contained within that concept to keep my research focus aligned to a conception that has been used by other researchers as a means to identify key factors concerned with these rather intangible background features. For that reason, I shall base my evaluation of educational processes within secondary schools on Hargreaves's (1999) typology of school culture, even though other researchers have also proposed categories for educational institutions (Daniel et al., 2013).

Similarly to school ethos, values and missions though, school culture is not a social net which simply connects people in a static way nor can it be seen as a one-dimensional construct. As discussed in literature the culture of a school (or organisation) is often layered and influenced by different stakeholders (Johnson et al., 2008; Prosser, 1999). On the one hand there is the leadership team of a school which has its agenda and wants to move school in a certain direction. They often make the decisions and whether teaching or other members of staff are consulted depends mainly on the leadership style of the head teacher. On the other hand are the teachers who have to execute the decisions made by the members of the senior management team but also have their own personal reasons for being a teacher and therefore will not always support decisions made by a school's leadership team (Hargreaves, 1994). This often leads to a distinction between a teacher's culture and how a school wants to present itself to the outside. Further stakeholders within a school are the support and administrative staff who play a vital role but see the school differently, not from a classroom perspective. And last but not least there are the students who again have a very different viewpoint and often do not have reasons to follow the school's lead but create their own sub-culture which might share some of the school's ideals and underlying principles but often add their own. So amongst these different participants a

culture is forming which consists of different sub-cultures which together form an overarching feeling of a school; it is about shared norms and values, collaboration and public practices (Peterson and Deal, 2002; Schoen and Teddlie, 2008; Whalan, 2012). However, one aspect which seems to reconcile all different parties is a mission. As Hargreaves (1994) says:

Missions mitigate the guilt-inducing uncertainties of teaching by forging common beliefs and purposes among the teaching community. [. . .]  
Missions build motivation and missions bestow meaning.

(Hargreaves, 1994, p. 163)

But of course within an organisation which holds hundreds of members, whether teachers, support staff or students, all of them supporting a mission or to be more precise interpreting an organisational mission in only one way is almost impossible. Hargreaves (1994) highlights that missions work for some, especially those who were part of its development and establishment. Those members of a community who joined later or might simply have a more critical outlook on things might not necessarily share the same views about a mission or even criticise it which can lead to tensions between members of a community but also shape the feeling of a place and thus the shaping of the school culture including all its sub-cultures (Hargreaves, 1994). It could be argued that having different views and perceptions can slow down change or even hinder it but in the same way it can be argued that different views and new perspectives are necessary and vital to develop the culture of a school. And the culture of a school seems to have quite an impact on how students in general but those identified as gifted and talented in particular fare in it.

Teacher culture is at the heart of teaching and thus has an immense impact on how things are done and what kind of education students receive. The way teachers feel when at work shapes their behaviour with feeling positive leading to more

productivity (Brady and Koshy, 2014; Peterson and Deal, 2002), and if teachers believe in their own competence (positive self-theory) it will also shape the prevailing school culture (Whalan, 2012). These influences can be seen in two ways: on the one hand the focus is on content and how things are taught or even viewed. The latter often includes perceptions of certain students and how they should be taught. This sub-form of school culture is influenced by individual teachers, their experiences and views but also the wider school context such as the driving force, e.g. good pass grades at GCSE or developing independent students, promoted from a senior management perspective (Hargreaves, 1994). On the other hand there is the form or way teachers work together. This is not so much about content but about whether or how people work together; in schools where there is a strong sense of everyone working together also within the classroom, attitudes and approaches to teaching will be much more coherent than in schools where the focus is promoting different subject areas and creating a sense of competition among teachers (Hargreaves, 1994; Peterson and Deal, 2002; Whalan, 2012). This sub-culture inevitably shapes how values about teaching certain groups of students is passed on and promoted, too. For example, St. Paul's Secondary School, one of my research schools, is strongly driven by good GCSE results on the one hand but the Christian belief about everyone being made in the image of God and thus deserving respect and a real chance within education on the other. Although not outwardly, this Christian motto seems to subconsciously strengthen the understanding that St. Paul's is an inclusive school and the extra mile will be walked to help a student to find their feet (for a more in-depth discussion see section 4.1). This can be seen, for example, in a very strong SEN department as well as a multi-layered pastoral system including a chaplain as well as tutors and heads of years. However, although this care system was implemented it was not necessarily viewed similarly by all members of staff. During interviews it became apparent that some, especially classroom teachers, strongly supported the caring aspect whereas senior management saw the care as a way to improve examination



results for the individual but therefore the school as a whole.

But how does this reflect on the educational experience of gifted and talented students in a school? Although teaching very much depends on the individual teacher it is also influenced by the teacher culture; meaning that if a general understanding in a school is that very able students need support to fulfil their potential it is more likely that teachers follow this lead (Mazzoli Smith and Campbell, 2012). This attitude will often be shaped in discussions between colleagues and if more senior teachers pass on their views and teaching practices to new teachers within a department, for example, these notions are also passed on. As discussed above, teacher culture does not stand alone within a school but is in some ways spearheaded by senior leadership teams (Peterson and Deal, 2002). Therefore, if a positive and supportive attitude towards bright students is reinforced by members of the senior management level it also becomes expected classroom practice. Studying and teaching in this kind of school environment will create different outcomes, academically and social-emotionally, for students compared to a school where the main focus is pass rates at GCSE level and the highest GCSE grades are not pursued as much. This also resonates with findings Eyre (House of Commons, 2010) discussed in the hearing before the House of Commons. She signposted good practice in schools which was driven by a whole school approach which focused on high achievement for all and thus teaching and classroom practices were designed to deliver just that. Her research suggests that this kind of whole school approach was beneficial for all students including those some might identify as gifted or talented. The finding that school culture has a substantial impact on academic performances but also self-theories of students has also been advocated by a number of other scholars (Hargreaves, 2001; Nunn, 2014; Peterson and Deal, 2002).

Hargreaves (1994) points out the difficulties teacher culture can cause but in this also shows a way in dealing with change and improvement within an educational

setting:

In the micropolitical perspective, the differences between groups in an organization are highlighted more than the similarities. The ways that some individuals and groups can realize their values at the expense of others, or have the power and influence to shape other values in the image of their own, is a key concern.

(Hargreaves, 1994, p. 190)

Yes, the difficulty with school culture is that some members of the organisation have more power than others and can therefore overrule other views, opinions and working practice. But in the same way this can also be understood in the way that groups of people within a school, for example subject leaders or heads of faculties, can shape working within their respective areas. Of course, all of this depends on the power structures within a school, an issue I will highlight in more detail in the findings chapter (see section 4.1).

## 2.3 The concept of practices

Practices can be described as the things people do; their behaviours and actions which are often unconsidered; additionally, these behaviours and actions are an expression of people's values and beliefs (Saunders, 2011). So by studying practices one can also learn about underlying values and beliefs which manifest in practices often unintentionally by the actor. This links back to the concept of culture which is intertwined with practices:

Practices are inherently social and evolving. They are nested in cultures that form a major part of the intellectual, moral and material resources on which the practices themselves depend: cultures and practices constitute one another – they are not separable.

(Saunders, 2011, p. 3)

Social life can therefore be seen as *'a series or clusters of practices'* (Saunders, 2011, p. 2) and set in a community or social group are sometimes called communities of practice.

The concept of communities of practice was originally developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) based on their observations of learning within the context of apprenticeships. They noted that when someone new joins a community of practice they often assume the position of an observer and only gradually become a full member of the community by completing tasks with increasing levels of responsibility (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In addition to learning their craft, apprentices also have to learn about the social and cultural practices of the community such as *'how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it'* (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 95). As part of a community you have to learn the unwritten rules, the hidden agendas and hierarchies amongst members to become a full member and be considered part of the community and the culture. This also applies to practices within a school or to be more precise teaching community which is also supported by a broad definition of communities of practice given by Lave and Wenger (1991):

It does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities. [...] A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.

(Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98)

The question is what kind of practices are associated with working with very able students.

### 2.3.1 Educating the gifted

Amongst many others, the classic answers on how to teach very bright students seem to be acceleration and enrichment (Stephen and Warwick, 2015). The first approach can sometimes include grade skipping but this seems to be the rarest way of supporting very able students (Gross, 2004). Therefore, acceleration is sometimes realised in streamed or set groups where curriculum content is taught to a higher standard compared to the ‘normal’ class. As this form of support for gifted and talented students needs a lot of commitment from the school in the form of having in some cases additional teachers as well as rearranging classes for different subjects, not every school does it which leads to very able students being taught in mixed ability groups and relying on the class teacher differentiating work to meet different levels of need in the classroom (House of Commons, 2010). The second approach focuses not so much on moving bright students on in their learning but to deepen and widen their understanding of a specific topic which often lies within the curriculum; in rare cases students are allowed to also explore an area which is of interest to them and which might not feature in the standard curriculum (Gross, 2004).

Different research shows that both of these approaches have an impact on the academic as well as social-emotional well-being of bright students. In this subsection I will focus on the practices and their influence on the academic side of things.

Gross (2004) conducted a longitudinal study of 18 exceptionally gifted children in Australia taken from a nationwide study comprising 60 students. Students who took part in this study had an intelligence quotient (IQ) of 160+. One issue Gross (2004) mentions early on is the confusion about equal rights to development of academic ability compared to equal development. Often people take equality in education as everyone being the same and achieving similar grades and

thus the overall aim focuses on the same standards for all (House of Commons, 2010). Gross (2004), however, advocates the view that inadequate education for the highly able will actually have a negative impact on academic, personal and social-emotional aspects of their development. The argument here is that equal outcome or development is not realistic as all children and young people are different and thus can achieve different standards in education as well as other areas (Gross, 2004).

When focusing on acceleration, Gross (2004) highlights two issues raised by educators about the process:

- Acceleration leads to difficulties in the social and emotional development of children and does not prepare them adequately for life in the real world where a great variety of views, abilities, and characteristics is the norm.
- It also leaves academic gaps in their development which will slow them down in their academic journey later on.

Research does not necessarily support these worries. Socially being accelerated can actually have a positive impact on the child or young person especially if their chronological age is below their academic ability and can help them establish better and more satisfying social relationships (Adams-Byers et al., 2004) based on mutual understanding and not the stress of not fitting in:

The children's reading interests, their hobbies and enthusiasms, their play preferences and their friendship choices were so incompatible with those of their classmates that from their first weeks at school the majority of the subjects experienced extreme difficulty in establishing positive social relationships with other children of their chronological age.

(Gross, 2004, p. 139)

Concerning the second point, students report a higher level of satisfaction within

accelerated subjects and over time gain a better and even deeper understanding of the subject topics studied (Adams-Byers et al., 2004).

Introducing ability or streamed groups is often seen as a compromise to offer more challenging work to gifted students if grade skipping is not an option. Academically interventions based on this notion seem to have better pace in lessons, not as much repetition as in mixed ability classes and a higher level of challenge (Adams-Byers et al., 2004) which gifted students appreciate. However, this kind of practice brings with it certain challenges which students might identify as disadvantages. In a study by Adams-Byers et al. (2004) students identified the following points as disadvantages of homogeneous groups:

- Working with peers who are of similar or higher academic ability creates stress as a student suddenly is not the smartest any more; or in other words the ‘Big-Fish-Little-Pond’ effect (Seaton et al., 2009).
- Similar ability also leads to academic competition which students coming from mixed-ability settings often have not encountered before and which therefore throws them into anxiety and stress (Adams-Byers et al., 2004).
- Lastly, being overly ‘*opinionated and overbearing in academic discussions*’ (Adams-Byers et al., 2004, p. 11) also seems to be seen as an undesirable side effect of homogeneous groups.

The debate among scholars has been vivid regarding the issue of how to best educate the most able students within an educational setting. For some educators supporting privileged students even more is seen as elitist and not in the spirit of education for all which strives to give everyone the same chance in life (Radnor et al., 2007; Stephen and Warwick, 2015). Similar to that is the notion that students who have high ability and do well in subjects anyway do not need extra support as they are fine on their own (Subotnik et al., 2011). And of course there are those researchers who make a stand for the gifted and talented students and

highlight their needs arguing that without support very able students will not do as well as they could (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Gross, 2004; House of Commons, Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2010).

Some even take it a step further and advocate special education for gifted and talented students. Two of those many scholars are Sternberg (2000) and Subotnik et al. (2011) whose suggestions give a glimpse of the variety, chances but also difficulties a special educational approach for gifted and talented students would entail.

Sternberg (2000; 2005) offers an approach which is called the Developing-Expertise Model and works on the assumption that high ability is a form of expertise that is highly valued and therefore tested and looked for. Also, academic ability, or scoring highly on ability tests, is often linked with achievement as well as good grades in an educational setting. Sternberg (2000) also underlines that expertise is not an endpoint but a continuous developmental stage which would explain that some children are being seen as gifted but seem to 'lose' their gift; he argues that what actually happens is that gifted children did not have the opportunity to further develop their gift into expertise recognised at a later stage in their life as such. His ideas about ability and expertise also include the notion that abilities in themselves are actually a form of developing or developed expertise therefore saying that abilities are not a fixed trait but can be trained and developed, just like expertise. And *'it therefore follows that giftedness can be developed'* (Sternberg, 2000) which leads to his model of gifted education.

In some ways, Sternberg's (2000) approach to educating gifted students shows many parallels to the notion of communities of practice advocated by Lave and Wenger (1991). The whole model works to the aim of developing expertise in a certain domain and that the *'main constraint in achieving expertise is not some fixed prior level of capacity, but purposeful engagement involving direct instruction, active participation, role modeling, and reward'* (Sternberg, 2000).

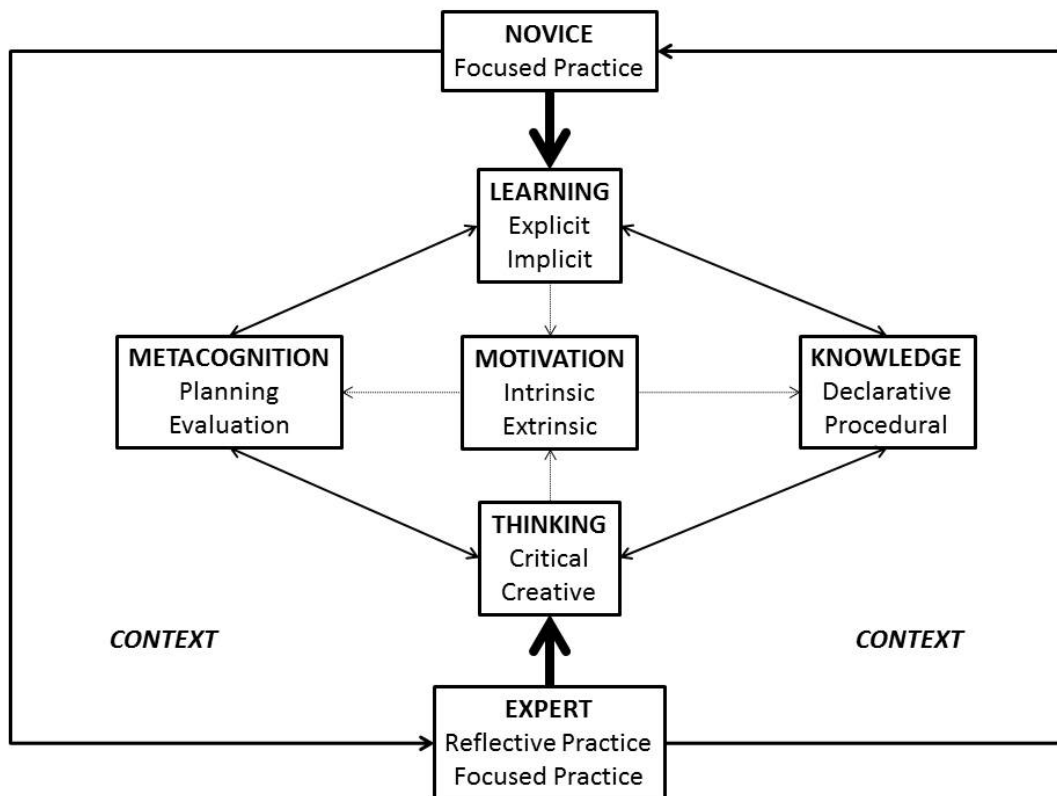


Figure 2.3: Developing-Expertise Model (Sternberg, 2000)

His model (see Figure 2.3) is combining five elements which have been associated with giftedness either individually or in various combinations over the years. Sternberg (2000) brings these elements together in an interactive model showing their direct as well as indirect interdependence. The following five elements he sees as key elements in developing expertise but does not claim it to be an exhaustive list:

- Metacognition: being able to understand and control one's own cognition. Some of the skills included in this element, and which are seen as important, are recognising and defining a problem, presenting a problem and articulating a strategy to solve the problem.
- Learning: this includes the explicit efforts of developing one's knowledge and gaining more insights as well as the implicit learning on the way without effort. Skills which are invaluable in this element are being able to distinguish



relevant from irrelevant information, combining new information as well as relating new information to information already stored in memory.

- Thinking: Sternberg (2000) includes critical (or analytical), creative and practical thinking skills in this element of his model claiming that *'they are the first step in the translation of thought into real-world action'*.
- Knowledge: in this model, the two types of knowledge necessary within the domain of being gifted and developing expertise are declarative and procedural knowledge. Knowing the what first and then the how to, for example, use it.
- Motivation: similarly to Dweck (2000), Sternberg (2000) highlights the importance and necessity of motivation to develop expertise but also points out the different types of motivation which will lead to different outcomes. On the one hand he talks about achievement motivation which leads to people staying in the middle of the road not attempting too easy tasks but also avoiding tasks which seem too risky. On the other hand there is the so-called competence or self-efficacy motivation *'which refers to persons' beliefs in their own ability to solve the problem at hand'* (Sternberg, 2000).
- Context: this element somewhat stands out as it is not a characteristic of the gifted student but reflects the understanding that giftedness only becomes meaningful within a context. This links not just to ideas discussed earlier (Gagne, 2000; Renzulli, 2012; Ziegler and Heller, 2000) but also entails the acknowledgment that if giftedness is purely based on test scores it falls short of incorporating contextual facts like *'native language, emphasis of test on speedy performance, importance to the test taker of success on the test, and familiarity with the kinds of material on the test'* (Sternberg, 2000) which this model of educating the gifted does.

The beauty of this model lies for me in its advocacy of developing expertise and

thus being an expert in a certain domain. In putting it to the test in a teaching environment the advantages would be that it gives clear skill sets one needs to work on or which need to be developed in order for someone to reach a good or even exceptional level of expertise (Sternberg, 2005). Thus, this model could be used within a school-wide context and would not just benefit the very able students but a whole school cohort. It also moves away from labelling anyone as gifted or exceptional or simply different but encourages everyone to work to be the best they can be and on the way explore new strengths of oneself.

For various reasons (including, perhaps, genetic as well as environmentally based differences), not all individuals will equally engage or engage equally effectively, and hence, individuals will not necessarily all reach the same ultimate level of expertise. But they should all be given the opportunity to reach new levels of competence and perhaps even giftedness well beyond what they, and in some cases, others may have thought were possible for them.

(Sternberg, 2000)

This model raises a number of challenges.

One difficulty which might arise is the anxiety of teachers who might feel undermined if they are helping students to reach high levels of expertise which might surpass their own as well as being unsure whether they can actually help students once they have passed a certain level of expertise (Radnor et al., 2007).

Another challenge would be to find the right balance between having to pass examinations at the end of secondary schooling and allowing students to deviate from curriculum content and explore other areas. This is closely linked to also having to challenge and change teachers' perceptions as the model above asks for a very different mindset which is needed to teach students.

And lastly, if this model would just be applied to gifted and talented students within the school it would create an organisational challenge as well, as students might have to be pulled out of normal lessons to facilitate an environment which can offer all the elements outlined in Sternberg's (2000) model.

## 2.4 Social development

Lastly, I shall take a look at prevailing ideas about the social development of young people and gifted and talented students in particular. Exploring the ideas of developing identity and self-concept will illuminate the intricate nature of teaching young people but also highlight the even more complex developmental tasks very able students have to solve.

### 2.4.1 Developing self-concept (or self-theories) and self-esteem

Before focusing on self-concept and self-esteem, I offer a few general framing statements about development of children and young people in a social context.

Developmental models can be organised into four different categories (Sameroff, 1991):

1. Passive person - passive environment: Events and happenings are imprinted into the developing mind. A number of learning theories are based on this understanding as '*factors such as the continuity, frequency, or recency of stimuli determine*' (Sameroff, 1991, p. 167) the extent to which the child or young person is influenced by the experienced.
2. Passive person - active environment: In this model behaviour can be changed actively by changing environmental stimuli. This is also known as condition-

ing which eventually leads to learned behaviour which will be displayed in a certain situation. The person does not contribute in the process or to the outcome. One of the leading figures of this idea is Skinner (Sameroff, 1991) and his experiments of conditioning behaviour in, for example, dogs.

3. Active person - passive environment: Based on ideas by Piaget and Chomsky this model sees the '*person as an active constructor of knowledge based on experience with the environment*' (Sameroff, 1991, p. 168). An environment is necessary in this understanding but does not get actively involved.
4. Active person - active environment: The last model draws from Marx's idea of development being a dialectical process; it has to be a two-way process. Through the interaction between a person and the world both change over time. Sameroff (1991) also argues that neither the characteristics of the child or person nor that of the context bear any influence on development but just the pure interaction between those two entities - a person on the one side and the environment or world on the other.

Of course, depending on which model one follows will determine how one views the way to alter development. For example, in the last model, characteristics of the child or the environment are not vital but there have to be plenty of interactions between the two which will lead to a changed outcome. This links in with the ideas about giftedness and talent in the third paradigm constituting that innate high ability is not necessarily the key to doing well in later life academically or in terms of achievements (Dweck, 2000; Eyre, 1997; Gross, 2004).

Following the fourth of the above development models Sameroff and Chandler (1991) propose a so-called Transactional Model which explores the relationship between an active child and an active environment further. The key understanding within this approach is that development is a continuous process and is the product of ongoing and dynamic interactions between the child and the environment. The

emphasis is on dynamic interaction which Sameroff (1991) qualifies as the *'effect of the child on the environment, so that experiences provided by the environment were not independent of the child'* (Sameroff, 1991, p. 173). The environment does not just hold experiences but also functions as a regulatory system, namely society, which provides a cultural code which in turn shapes the environment and thus the experiences and interactions with it of children and young people growing up. In this context, cultural code is understood as *'the social regulatory system that guides children through their development and buffers them from those aspects of the broader environment with which they are not yet able to cope by themselves'* (Sameroff, 1991, p. 180).

The regulatory functions of society and its cultural code can be seen on three different levels:

- Macro-regulations: this includes a culture's developmental agenda meaning the restructuring of the environment to provide different as well as certain experiences at specific times. This includes questions about the age of weaning or toilet training as well as the start of schooling, initiation rites or when it is appropriate to get married.
- Mini-regulations: these focus on the caregiving activities within a family and include, for example, feeding children, keeping them warm or changing a wet nappy in the early stages.
- Micro-regulations: interactions between a child and the people around her, for example, the smiling response to an infant's smile or the vocal and movement match between a child and her carer.

Changes in a child's ability will also trigger a change in these regulations as older children are expected to behave differently to younger children and are also asked to take more responsibilities in certain areas. Thus, this change will also lead to a change in the development of a child (Sameroff, 1991).

Of course, this model also includes a number of risk factors; one of the major ones is that of social status which includes aspects like family characteristics (number of family members, minority status), marital status and education levels of parents, stressful events which occur in a child's life and lastly the coping skills of parents within the cultural system. The latter refers to psychological variables, like mental health of parents, parental perspectives as well as parent-child interaction patterns (Sameroff, 1991).

But what are the developmental tasks children and young people have to master in order to navigate through life and society? And what role do self-theories play in this context?

In the late 1950s Erikson (1980) took a fresh look at the development of children and young people exploring the natural order of things and how socialising with peers influences the social development of children in general and that of a child's self or identity in particular. Linking it back to the previous section, he looked at the changing cultural code and what developmental tasks this entailed for the growing-up child or young person. Erikson's (1980) work advocates different psychological stages which are stepping stones to a healthy self-concept and acquisition of basic skills needed to manoeuvre through life and solve future crises one will inevitably encounter (see Table 2.1). He based the stages on naturally-occurring dilemmas children and young people have to face in their development and which will lead to the development of one of the basic skills or virtues necessary for later life. Although Erikson developed eight stages leading up to adult life I shall here focus on the first five stages only, given the age scope of my research (Erikson, 1980).

Focusing again on the age range of the students I interviewed and followed over the past 4 years I shall explain Stage 4 and Stage 5 in more detail.

Stage 4 - Industry versus Inferiority - Between the ages of 5 and 12 years children

Table 2.1: Developmental stages based on Erikson (1980)

Stage	Crisis	Basic virtue	Age
1	Trust versus Mistrust	Hope	Infancy (0 to 1.5 years)
2	Autonomy versus Shame	Will	Early childhood (1.5 to 3 years)
3	Initiative versus Guilt	Purpose	Play age (3 to 5 years)
4	Industry versus Inferiority	Competency	School age (5 to 12 years)
5	Identity versus Identity Diffusion	Fidelity	Adolescence (12 to 18 years)

learn to master many skills, like reading, writing, adding and subtracting, to name just a few. Thus, the teacher becomes a very important person in the child's life as does the child's peers. Ideas others have, like teachers and peers, about a child directly influence the development of self-esteem and what the young person thinks about themselves. Thus, approval and the sense of achievement and acceptance are essential to develop confidence in their abilities and the courage to go forward in approaching goals. Failure of achievements to be recognised and valued can lead to a loss of confidence and a feeling of inferiority potentially hindering the full development of a child's potential (Eyre, 1997).

Stage 5 - Ego identity versus Role Confusion - From the age of 12 years children become more and more independent and move away from their parents and are looking at their own future including relationships and career paths. In both instances it is all about knowing who one is and what one wants to establish positive and strong relationships as well as striding forwards in an academic or career sense. This stage in life goes hand-in-hand with exploring different possibilities of life and how to live it; this includes lifestyle and the way a young person looks as well as ideological views.

Although Erikson's work offers a descriptive understanding of social development it does lack theoretical facts about how one gets successfully from one stage to another and what kind of experiences are necessary for a smooth transition. Also, although ages are allocated to the individual stages they cannot be seen as fixed as

development is a highly individual process. And as explained earlier, development is guided and framed by the cultural code which varies between cultures as well as times (Sameroff, 1991).

But what about the development of self or self-concept? How does it work and why is it important to explore this notion?

In her book *Stories of Self* Warin (2010) highlights the link between self or identity and well-being and how this has been a strong focus among scholars in the past decade. One domain which has incorporated well-being and self-knowledge is that of positive psychology; but even before, identity and mental health have been linked. The development of self or self-concept for that matter also has an influence on how students learn. This can be linked to the works of Dweck (2000), Gross (2004) and Hymer and Michel (2002). Warin (2010) also underlines the importance of self in a daily but also educational context:

Identity is not only an underpinning of wellbeing, it is also the lens through which we see and interpret the world around us. Our beliefs about self operate to select, filter and organise our perceptions of everything we encounter, and influence our making of meaning.

(Warin, 2010, p. 32)

Thus, developing a strong sense of self will help manoeuvring of social encounters as well as striving for a goal. In the same way self or self-concept is formed through social interactions and is not happening outside of these (Warin, 2010). Only if we can experience what effect our behaviour has on others can we learn and adapt it if necessary if the reaction was not what we expected. This highlights the importance of a supportive environment in developing one's potential which is vital for every person but especially for gifted and talented students as sometimes it is seen that they will be fine wherever they are and whatever they do. Following this idea of self-concept would oppose this view.



Another critical point in this debate is of course the balance between individuals and the group and linked to that the standing of self-esteem. Warin (2010) discusses in her book the different arguments as well as difficulties the concept of self-esteem holds. Self-esteem is portrayed as a wide concept with frayed edges which makes it easy to use. It is also sometimes seen as the cure for psychological as well as educational difficulties but nevertheless there does not seem to be a coherent understanding of what it means and is. This becomes clear when looking at Warin's (2010) suggestion that *'self esteem elevates the individualistic aspects of self formation and under-emphasises the social'* (Warin, 2010, p. 36). In my view, this stands in contrast to Dweck's (2000) idea about self-esteem which is referring to the beliefs one has about oneself but based on experiences one had with others. In this context, self-esteem is a social construct which clearly highlights the impact other people, whether it be called society or culture, have on the development. Closing this debate I would like to look to Dweck's (2000) notion about fixed and incremental self-theories. Her work suggests that, leaving the discussion about terminology behind, having a view about oneself, whether it is based on interactions with environment in general or other people in particular, which is flexible and can adapt to new situations and develop within them, leads to us being able to remake ourselves if necessary and deal with challenges or throwbacks, to use a more negative connotation. This is a skill needed to grow as a person and learn new things without worrying too much about holding on to the old (Dweck, 2000).

And bringing together the last two ideas I would like to end with Warin's (2010) words which also ring true with my interview experiences of the last 6 years.

Our energies as teachers and carers of the next generation should be focused on facilitating a capacity for telling a story rather than creating a strong sense of self. This is a subtle but important difference. It emphasises adaptability and the chameleon-like nature of the self as

it changes according to the social context. However, it also suggests a value for the ability to integrate different selves into a coherent and continuing narrative.

(Warin, 2010, p. 39)

Integral to this developmental process and the telling of a story of one's self are of course friends and as highlighted by Gross (2004) and Francis et al. (2012) this is also an area which poses challenges for gifted and talented children (see the next sub-section about social challenges for gifted and talented children and young people, sub-section 2.4.2).

When becoming an adolescent a number of tasks have to be accomplished (Berndt, 1999):

- One is to find companionship. This is dictated by the fact that young people increasingly distance themselves from their family circles and actively look for people who can replace the emotional stability and support provided by it.
- Another is to develop a sense of belonging within the social world and not feel like the odd one out (Francis et al., 2012).
- As mentioned before, developing an identity and understand 'Who am I and what can I do' is essential to find a way through society. During adolescence this is much more influenced by friends than family, and young people will either be supported by their friends about certain understandings or be challenged about them. It is also the stage when young people will become obsessed with comparing themselves to others without necessarily evaluating the impact it has on their self-concept as well as behaviour.
- Furthermore, there is the challenge of shaping one's ideas about society, including views about other people, social organisations or principles, legal

and political systems.

One key characteristic of friendships during the adolescent years is the distinction between friends and best friends. Often, the phrase is best friends rather than just one which creates a safety net should something go wrong, like a best friend moving away or if there is a conflict in a friendship group. A number of best friends allows for these natural occurrences to be dealt with rather than them leading to social isolation. These structures also give every young person a place where they can belong and develop their ideas about the world and themselves (Berndt, 1999).

Further, friendship groups are often defined by similar interests, age, gender and to some extent social class. One wants to feel part of the group and not stand out too much. This also reflects partly the structure of the social world young people grow up in. In this case the social context one lives in defines possible social encounters and thus the friends one can make, for example in school, the neighbourhood, and church (Berndt, 1999). This, of course, has changed in the last few years to some extent due to the internet and the opportunities young people have through that medium. Nevertheless, when focusing back on the context of my research the focus is more on actual friends young people have or have not in school as this determines to some extent their educational experience.

Another basis for developing friendships is a similarity in academic achievement as this suggests similar ability. In a school context, students with similar abilities are often put in the same classes or if in a mixed ability group seated together to differentiate teaching and challenge students based on the academic level they are on. Of course, being put into the same classes with the same people leads to more interaction and thus friendships can develop. Furthermore, friendships are often based on the equality of partners as this is another characteristic of friendships (Berndt, 1999).

Developing identity (or self-concept) and self-esteem are also closely linked to one's

reputation and this of course depends on your group of friends and *'belonging to a specific group can limit an adolescents ability to make friends with adolescents in different groups'* (Berndt, 1999, p. 54); a phenomenon also observed by Francis et al. (2012) in their study of high ability students. This sometimes has the effect that young people purposefully try to engage with a different set of friends in order to break out of their place in society and change their reputation and thus standing in the social hierarchy.

Thus when adolescents make friends they strike a balance between seeking friends similar to themselves and seeking friends whom they perceive as different from themselves in desirable ways. How they strike this balance is critical to their social lives, because it determines their position in the social world. It is also critical to their self-concept and, therefore, to their personality development.

(Berndt, 1999, p.55)

In the same way as stable and functioning friendships are an indication of good integration into the social system, so is a lack of stable and long-term friendships and a regular change of friendship groups a sign of difficulties in finding one's place in society as well as social and psychological problems (Berndt, 1999). So in that sense the quality of friendships has a greater impact on the social and psychological development of a young person than, for example, the number or stability of friendships.

But what are the positive influences a friendship can have on the social development of a young person, and where are the issues?

### ***Positive qualities***

Intimacy is one of the positives of friendships as this provides the opportunity for good and intimate chats among friends which can provide practical advice as well

as emotional support which in turn enhances self-esteem and the ability to cope with difficult situations as one is not alone. Also, it gives adolescents a better understanding of other people and the world around them (Berndt, 1999).

So in a nutshell, intimacy equals trust, self-disclosure, understanding and emotional support which in adolescent years becomes more important compared to children given the developmental tasks which have to be accomplished. Furthermore, friends support the development of prosocial behaviour like helping and comforting others as well as sharing. Through praise and encouragement friends also support self-esteem which in turn is important for the development of self-concept. Lastly, loyalty within friendship groups embraces the sticking up for each other, not talking behind the back of others, and to not leave for someone else. If these positive qualities are realised among friends, young people are less likely to suffer from loneliness, anxiety and other emotional problems (Berndt, 1999). They also tend to be more generous, helpful and have a more positive attitude towards school; levels of academic achievements are also higher.

### *Negative qualities*

On the other hand, friendships can also have a negative effect on an adolescent's emotional health. For example, although conflicts have their positive sides and encourage learning experiences, if conflicts are dominating a friendship then positive feelings like feeling supported and accepted will not develop as much. Another aspect is competition, which, in the right dose, can enhance friendships and one's personal development, but if it takes over often leads to conflict which then can lead to young people being more likely to get in conflict with teachers or other significant adults around them (Berndt, 1999).

And of course there is the whole aspect of peer pressure. If a member of a friendship group is forced into conforming to certain behaviours or views and does not have the chance of opting out, the positive quality of sharing ideas and discussing them

is lost and fear and hierarchy take over intimacy and equality (Berndt, 1999).

Friendships for adolescents are a vital part in developing self-concept and self-esteem, thus, any struggles in that area will have a massive impact on the social-emotional well-being of young people, which I will highlight further in my Findings chapter (see Chapter 5).

But how does this relate to gifted and talented children or young people?

In some contexts (see discussion of the different understandings of the concept of giftedness and talent in sub-section 2.1.1), children who have been identified as gifted and talented are seen as different, as ‘the others’. This perception, of course, will change how the environment interacts with those children and in turn affects their development. Sameroff (1991) summarises this challenge as follows:

The caregiving environment has evolved to provide normative experiences for the normative child. Should a child be born who does not fit the normative patterns, then new regulations must be made to restore the child to the appropriate developmental trajectory. The activation of these new regulations requires transactions in which the environment is sensitive to individual differences in the children raised in that environment.

(Sameroff, 1991, p.179)

With this in mind I will now turn to the specifics of very able children and their developmental challenges.

### **2.4.2 The social challenges for very able students**

When looking at the same developmental tasks discussed above but within the context of gifted and talented education a number of issues arise which Gross (2004)

explored in her longitudinal study of exceptionally gifted students. Although her findings are focusing on a specific group within the cohort of gifted and talented students, her points still should be considered when investigating gifted and talented students in general. When schools identify students as gifted or talented a label is given to the student which they then have to deal with. From this perspective it is not important whether the student labelled is gifted in the context of his class, school or in a national context; the key is that a label has been given and therefore the student has been selected as different and that will have an impact on his social interactions in school and thus, his development of self-theory and self-esteem. But first I will have a look at Gross's (2004) findings.

Firstly, Gross (2004) found that there are huge differences between exceptionally gifted children and their peers, with exceptionally referring to students with an IQ between 160 and 179. Students achieving highly in an educational setting were picked out and perceived as different by their peers even though some very able children decided to deliberately underperform to fit in. This resonates with Francis et al.'s (2012) research which highlights the fact that students who achieve highly stand out and have to manoeuvre the field of achieving but also being seen as popular in school.

Further, some of the gifted students struggled in '*establishing positive social relationships with their classmates*' (Gross, 2004, p. 177) because they had different ideas and perceptions of friendship. Even acceleration did not always help gifted students to be with 'peers' of their intellectual or emotional level. Part of this issue is the struggle some (exceptionally) gifted children experience when conveying their ideas to peers as they do not understand them.

Consistent with other research, for example Dweck (2000), academic underachievement is also linked to low self-esteem; some gifted children and young people are struggling with the problem of misjudging their potential and think very lowly of themselves. As a person's self-esteem is based on feedback received from sig-

nificant others this suggests that underachieving students have had some sort of negative feedback regarding their ability or potential by important people in their lives. This links back to Erikson (1980) in the sense that the developmental task of competency was somehow not fully achieved.

Part of this latter point is, of course, family relations which play a big role in the development of self-esteem in a child or young person. A caring environment at home with clear rules about behaviour as well as responsibilities at home seem to have a positive impact (Gross, 2004). Strong self-esteem also seems to support the development of good and intimate relationships (Gross, 2004).

Lastly, Gross (2004) discusses the role self-concept and self-esteem play in displaying motivation. She argues that motivation is not something people are born with but is a personality trait which develops and manifests over many years of training. A similar notion has been investigated and advocated by Dweck (2000). Thus, if following this understanding, developing motivation in young people comes with supporting a strong and healthy self-concept and self-esteem.

## 2.5 Summary

What have I learned from this literature review? Defining the terms ‘gifted and talented’ is a difficult task, mainly, as there are many different ways of understanding its origins (Gagne, 2000; Gottfried et al., 1994; Howe, 1990; Johnson, 2013*b*; Kaufman, 2013; Renzulli, 2012; Shavinina and Ferrari, 2004; Tannenbaum, 2000), which leads to various views about how they should be educated to fulfil their potential (Brady and Koshy, 2014; Hymer and Michel, 2002; Stephen and Warwick, 2015; Ziegler and Heller, 2000). This is represented in a high number of literature sources which keep the definition and provision debate alive. A number of studies also look at evaluating existing gifted and talented programmes and better understanding the experiences of highly able students within these educational



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systems but often based on short-term studies (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Brady and Koshy, 2014; Francis et al., 2012; Radnor et al., 2007; Mazzoli Smith and Campbell, 2012). What there seems to be a lack of is longitudinal studies which follow gifted or talented individuals for a number of years regularly, making contact and observing their educational as well as personal development to be able to get an even better understanding about the challenges gifted and talented students face (Freeman, 2010; Gottfried et al., 1994; Gross, 2004). Lastly, with a number of scholars highlighting the importance of self-theories (or self-concepts) in the context of gifted and talented education (Dweck, 2000; Francis et al., 2012; Gross, 2004; House of Commons, Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2010), the question which has not been explored thoroughly yet in the literature is that of how school culture influences the development of the mentioned concepts. With school culture meaning more than educational practices and structures, but looking at the underlying values which influence the educational experiences as well as social development of gifted and talented students.

In the next chapter I will explain how I conducted my research and what data were generated.

# Chapter 3

## Methodology

*Matilda, who was perched on a tall stool at the kitchen table, ate her bread and jam slowly. She did so love these afternoons with Miss Honey. She felt completely comfortable in her presence, and the two of them talked to each other more or less as equals.*

*(Dahl, 2010)*

### 3.1 Philosophy of social science

In some circumstances it is almost axiomatic to say that within a social context people follow certain rules and behave in a certain way. They are not always aware of why this is, but when they join, for example, a new workplace, they adapt and learn the new rules and will start to do things differently. This also applies to working within a school setting. Schools are organisations which are not only defined by governmental policies and regulations, but also by the people who work there and their underlying practices and views (according to Hargreaves (1994), Johnson et al. (2008), and Peterson and Deal (2002)). Thus, to get the best possible outcome for this study I adopted a social constructivist perspective to understand people's constructions and interpretations of the world and the social processes

they are involved in better, which also resonates with other research done in the field (Mazzoli Smith and Campbell, 2012). The choice of methods has been guided by ethnomethodology which in this context means *‘studying social life that concentrates on the unwritten rules that make ordinary everyday social activity orderly, and tries to spell out these rules’* (McNeill and Chapman, 2005, p. 129). But as these rules develop in a social context and are not free of institutional or cultural pressure, one also needs to evaluate how people develop certain practices and base them within the process of social construction:

People’s constructions of the world and self are essential to the broader practices of a culture – justifying, sustaining, and transforming various forms of conduct.

(Gergen, 2004, p. 184)

To be able to capture these practices, for example, how students are being taught, what the power structures are within the school, and what the main aim for the educational journey of the students at St. Paul’s Secondary School is, as well as the underlying rules, I will adopt ethnomethodological methods to acquire thick descriptions into the social construct of school culture (Cohen et al., 2007). The best way to achieve this and to combine the advantages of qualitative as well as quantitative data is to use mixed methods research as a means of gathering data to allow for the development of these thick descriptions mentioned above. In making these methodological decisions I also follow research in the field which has focused on understanding the world of gifted and talented students in more depth on the one hand (Francis et al., 2012; Gross, 2004; Mazzoli Smith and Campbell, 2012) and has tracked the personal development of children and young people over time (Gross, 2004; Warin, 2010). Table 3.1 gives an overview about the different methodologies used in the research sites.

Table 3.1: Methods used during data collection

Method	St. Paul's Secondary School	Highfield Secondary School	Newton Sixth Form College
Semi-structured interviews	<p>March to July 2013 - Members of staff (N=11, six individual interviews, one group interview); May 2015 - Focus group with staff (N=5). July 2013 to June 2016 - Gifted and talented students (N=5); one student was interviewed individually three times over 4 years, one pair of students interviewed together three times over 4 years, one pair of students interviewed together 2 times over 4 years.</p> <p>Given that this was also my teaching school I had numerous chances of observing lessons during my training time there thus had a feeling about teaching in school including teaching in so-called top sets.</p>	<p>February 2015 - Gifted and talented coordinator; June 2015 - Members of staff (N=5, group interview). June 2015 - Three gifted and talented students (one individual interview and one with two students).</p>	<p>January 2015 - Headteacher. January 2016 - Five students (group interview).</p>
Semi-structured lesson observations	<p>Given that this was also my teaching school I had numerous chances of observing lessons during my training time there thus had a feeling about teaching in school including teaching in so-called top sets.</p>	<p>February 2015 - Three lesson observations, June 2015 - Two lesson observations.</p>	<p>January 2015 - Three lessons and break time observed.</p>
Questionnaires	<p>March to July 2013 - Whole school questionnaire from Year 7 to Year 10, N=399; part of the cultural audit.</p>	<p>June 2015 - Questionnaire amongst sample of one mixed ability class from Year 7 through to Year 10, N=90; part of the cultural audit.</p>	<p>January 2015 - Whole school questionnaire amongst one year group (only one at the time as it was a newly opened Sixth Form), N=32.</p>

### 3.1.1 Mixed methods

Mixed method research is becoming more and more popular amongst educational researchers as it can unfold a social phenomenon, in my case the culture of a secondary school, and its impact on a specific group within the school, in much more depth than using either quantitative or qualitative approaches (Bryman, 2016). As Creswell (2014) discusses, both *'methods, in combination, provide a better understanding of the research problem and question than either method by itself'* (p.565). Also, my study poses an additional challenge as I am part of the school culture of my main research site and therefore depend on adding different aspects and views as counterparts to my own. Choosing a mixed methods approach can thus support but also enrich my own experiences but might also contradict them, which can lead to a more critical and thorough analysis of the data and therefore any outcomes (Warin, 2010). Lastly, school culture is not a coherent system within an institution. Culture is always a layered and very complex system by which the whole institution, for example a school, is one organism but in this unity is split into different sub-cultures which share some of the characteristics of the overarching organisational culture but are also distinct from it (Hargreaves, 1994). For example, there is the student culture which is influenced by the culture of the whole school but also the individuals who make up the student population; changes in intake and catchment will therefore change what the student culture is like. And of course there is the teacher culture which often presents itself quite differently to what the school leadership team would like the school to look like. To really be able to see these different layers of culture and identify their characteristics and views, generating only quantitative or only qualitative data would not be sufficient and not enable a real glimpse of what the institution, in my case a secondary school, is like. Thus, a mixed methods approach supports my overarching research aim as well as underlying research questions much better than a single method approach (Francis et al., 2017; Gross, 2004; Mazzoli Smith

and Campbell, 2012).

However, mixed methods designs have often been critically reviewed as for some educationalists combining quantitative and qualitative methods leads to clashes between different worldviews (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014). As mentioned earlier, I have adopted a social constructivist stance paired with ethnomethodology which in itself supports the idea that a social phenomenon is not something which can be captured simply and objectively. School culture cannot be seen through just one pair of eyes; one needs many eyes looking at it from different angles to recreate the essence of the culture but also highlight the differences which bring, for example, a school to life. Choosing a mix of quantitative surveys as well as qualitative semi-structured interviews and semi-structured observations will be suited to achieve this and thus follows a number of other studies which have been concerned with capturing personal experiences as well as the development of individuals over time (Francis et al., 2012, 2017; Gross, 2004; Nunn, 2014; Mazzoli Smith and Campbell, 2012; Warin, 2010).

When adopting a mixed methods approach I also chose an evaluative stance as I believe that research should not merely paint a picture of a situation but also move things on and transform situations. This shows in the design I used throughout my study. Based on Creswell's (2014) typology of mixed method designs this study follows a mixed methods longitudinal transformative design with the first phase being convergent parallel with a stronger focus on the quantitative data and the qualitative data being used to highlight certain issues and findings and to add further viewpoints.

Further, to gain insight into my research questions I have chosen a longitudinal approach to capture the complicated and evolving nature of school culture at St. Paul's Secondary School and to utilise the data to depict how teachers construct the concepts of giftedness and talent and evaluate the impact this has on the self-theories and academic engagement of some selected gifted and talented students.

Further, a longitudinal approach will offer me a rich insight into people's feelings, thoughts and experiences in or with a certain situation. It should also allow the data and thus the situation under observation to speak for itself (Cohen et al., 2007; Warin, 2010).

### 3.1.2 Case studies

The research design uses case studies to group, analyse and evaluate data and compare outcomes between the main research site and two supporting research sites. This allows me to look at contemporary issues with the aim of illuminating and understanding them as well as seeking *'to answer focused questions by producing in-depth descriptions and interpretations'* (Hays, 2004, p. 218); it is also about studying a social phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2007). In my case the social phenomenon under observation is the construction of the concept of giftedness and talent amongst the teachers and how this is reflected within the school culture and routine practices in an English secondary school.

Hays (2004) highlights further characteristics of a case study which makes it well suited for this study. One of them is that a case study, unlike ethnographic studies, *'seeks to answer focused questions by producing in-depth descriptions and interpretations'* (Hays, 2004, p. 218). Cohen et al. (2007) generalised the questions which are intended to be addressed by a case study as the following three:

- What are the characteristics of a social phenomenon?
- What are the causes of the social phenomenon?
- What are the consequences of the social phenomenon?

(p. 169)

In my case the social phenomenon under observation is the school cultures of two

different secondary schools including sixth form as well as that of a specialist sixth form college. I wanted to know who is really shaping the culture of the schools and what could the culture be described as. And lastly, I was interested in finding out about the impact the phenomenon school culture had on the personal development of the gifted and talented students in the individual schools (Cohen et al., 2007).

Other reasons for choosing a case study approach were access and feasibility. To be allowed into school settings can be very difficult as daily life in a school is extremely busy and teachers mostly have enough on their plate already without taking part in research. Being a teacher myself, access is slightly easier to manage but feasibility is difficult as I am working during normal school hours. Due to these circumstances I made the decision to use my own school as one research school, even though this comes with certain difficulties, and found another school close by which was very willing to take part. Lastly, I was also able to gain access to a specialist sixth form college which focuses on A-levels (further educational qualification post-GCSE, normally a two year course) in the domains of mathematics, further mathematics, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and physics. The latter was especially useful to triangulate my findings from the other two schools as well as looking at an educational setting which was aiming at educating the very able and thus had a different stance to teaching the young people in their care (Bryman, 2016).

If one wants to observe real situations and understand about causes and effects the most obvious approach is a case study (Gross, 2004). It also is a good opportunity to emerge oneself in a situation in order to really understand it. This is also important in this study as I am already part of St. Paul's Secondary School and cannot entangle myself fully from being a teacher and tutor there as well as a researcher. A further advantage is it presents outcomes in an easier to understand form:

It provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling



readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles.

(Cohen et al., 2007, p. 253)

Further advantages are that case studies are taken from practice and can easily feed back into the same system by sharing insights and findings which can be used as feedback within the setting, an evaluation or be used for future policy-making. This, of course, links back to the transformative mixed methods design discussed above (Creswell, 2014). As a case study offers differing points of view it can also help to gain an overview and look for alternative interpretations (Cohen et al., 2007).

Lastly, a case study allowed me to explore the social phenomenon over a prolonged period of time which led to a more in-depth understanding as well as opportunity to observe trends and patterns (Bryman, 2016; Gross, 2004; Warin, 2010). Given my part-time study mode I had 4 years to gather data which I used and therefore conducted the case studies in a longitudinal manner. As mentioned above this allowed me even better to draw conclusions about causes and effects and draw an even better and more in-depth picture about the cases and the developments of the participants (Cohen et al., 2007; Gross, 2004; Warin, 2010).

Some weaknesses which have been pointed out repeatedly in the literature are the following (Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2007; Gross, 2004; Hays, 2004):

- The trustworthiness of case studies is sometimes questioned as outcomes are often not generalisable. Hays (2004) argues that this can be turned around when multiple cases are used to study the same phenomenon. Further, triangulation of methods and sources strengthen the acceptance of case study outcomes.
- As cross-checking outcomes is difficult in case studies they are prone to bias

and subjectivity.

- Lastly, as a vast amount of data is gathered it is solely down to the researcher to decide which information and events to include and which ones to exclude. This makes it a very subjective process in which the reflexivity of the researcher is strongly needed.

As for the first point, I have addressed this by adopting the mixed methods approach as well as triangulating my findings from one research site with those of the other two (Bryman, 2016). Points two and three ask for a thorough and transparent data analysis which I will come to later in this chapter.

To finish off this section I am now going to highlight the different methods I used to generate data throughout the study.

The basis for all the case studies was a questionnaire which was administered on a whole school level involving, wherever possible, a representative sample of students from each research site. Questions were a mixture of scaled answers, open-ended questions including illustrations, as well as the identification of a certain number of characteristics of the school (see Appendix C). The scaled questions were based on Hargreaves's (1999) school typology to allow for clear comparison between the different research sites. It also enabled me to use the same questionnaire in all schools which increases reliability and compatibility. This also enabled me to compare findings and use statistical analysis (Cohen et al., 2007). (For further details regarding the data analysis see section 3.3.) As parts of the questionnaire were also based on open-ended questions and asked for reasons for certain choices it still gave participants the opportunity to raise their voice and shed a bit more light on why they chose this illustration rather than the other.

The outcomes from the questionnaire then informed the next steps which included semi-structured interviews as well as observations.

As a means to gather further qualitative data, I used semi-structured interviews with members of staff and very able students to follow up questionnaires and observations to illuminate certain points as well as to get a deeper insight. The semi-structure allowed for comparability on the one hand as I covered the same areas with all interviewees but also freedom to explore issues which surfaced during an interview on the other (Cohen et al., 2007).

Parallel to interviewing very able students as well as members of staff I also observed lessons in all 3 schools. This allowed me to see how gifted and talented students were taught in the different schools, what practices prevailed, and how the students were socially integrated (Gross, 2004). Before each lesson observation I identified the gifted and talented students wherever applicable and observed their interactions with their peers as well as the kind of work they were given. The lesson observations were again semi-structured: I observed interactions in 10 minute intervals and focused mainly on the gifted and talented students in the room, but was also able to get a general idea of how the classroom was set up and how the lesson worked. Thus, data generated did not only include numbers but also parts of conversations between students and teacher, phrases used in the educational setting as well as pure impressions I as an observer had. This approach allowed for comparison as well as exploration of specifics within individual schools and lessons. This allowed me to observe situations linked to my agenda as well as picking up other happenings which often clarified situations and dynamics within a certain setting (Cohen et al., 2007; Francis et al., 2012). The latter also gave a clearer picture of how things were done in an educational setting opposed to what is written in official documents and thus highlighted what the culture of the place was like or what the underlying rules of an institution were (Hargreaves, 1994; Nunn, 2014).

## 3.2 Data collection

In this section I am going to outline the data collection for the different research sites. Just to clarify terminologies: St. Paul's Secondary School was my main research site and will also be labelled as such; Highfield Secondary School and Newton Sixth Form College were supporting research sites and were developed as individual case studies to triangulate, support, question and enhance the data gathered at St. Paul's.

### 3.2.1 Main research site

St. Paul's Secondary School is situated in the south of England and at the time of research had about 650 students enrolled in Years 7 to 13. It is generally located in a very affluent area, but the catchment area of St. Paul's includes some very socially deprived neighbourhoods. This creates an interesting contrast as it leads to a high percentage of SEN students with the interesting mixture of some very able young learners who are also on the SEN register; so overall a mixed intake with a number of challenging family backgrounds.

Having been working at St. Paul's prior to starting my research I have had the privilege of observing my surroundings even before starting my PhD. As the then gifted and talented coordinator was also working within my faculty I had very good access to information regarding the education of gifted and talented students at St. Paul's.

Due to my research interest and to support the gifted and talented coordinator, I conducted a learner survey in May 2012 where I invited all the identified gifted and talented students to complete a questionnaire. Out of the cohort of 74 students, 64 completed the questionnaire.

Between March and July 2013 I conducted a cultural audit which involved a whole

school questionnaire administered to students in Year 7 through to Year 10 (this included students from the age of 11 years to 15 years). This whole school scope was undertaken because the school invited me to do so. When I started the questionnaires I focused on one year group, but when the first results emerged from the data, the senior leadership team became interested in my findings and asked me to conduct the questionnaire on a whole school level. Subsequently, I also presented some of the main outcomes from the questionnaire to the senior leadership team to give them a clearer idea about what students at the time thought about St. Paul's. I also interviewed members of staff including the school's principal, the then gifted and talented co-ordinator, an assistant principal, one support staff member, one faculty leader, two members of the office staff and four classroom teachers. The members of staff interviewed were either volunteers who approached me after a general email was sent out to all members of staff of the school, or were members of staff I approached so as to have a mixture of classroom teachers as well as members of the middle and senior leadership level as well as non-teaching staff. During the interviews I also used an adapted tool which was developed by Hargreaves (1999) to help practitioners explore their school culture. So, in addition to the spoken words of the interviewees, I also gathered numerical data to locate St. Paul's Secondary School within a grid pinpointing the four different school types as advocated by Hargreaves (1999) (see Figure 3.1).

Leading on from the cultural audit I interviewed a number of students in July 2013 who had been identified as gifted and talented (one Year 10 – a boy; two Year 7s – one boy and one girl; two Year 8s – one boy and one girl).

In January 2015 I again met up with the Year 10 boy (aged 15 years) who by then was in Year 12 (aged 17 years) and at college to see how the past almost 2 years had been for him in terms of, for example, how he had felt at school, how challenging lessons had been, how he had coped with his GCSEs, and how friendships had developed, especially during his last year at St. Paul's. In July of

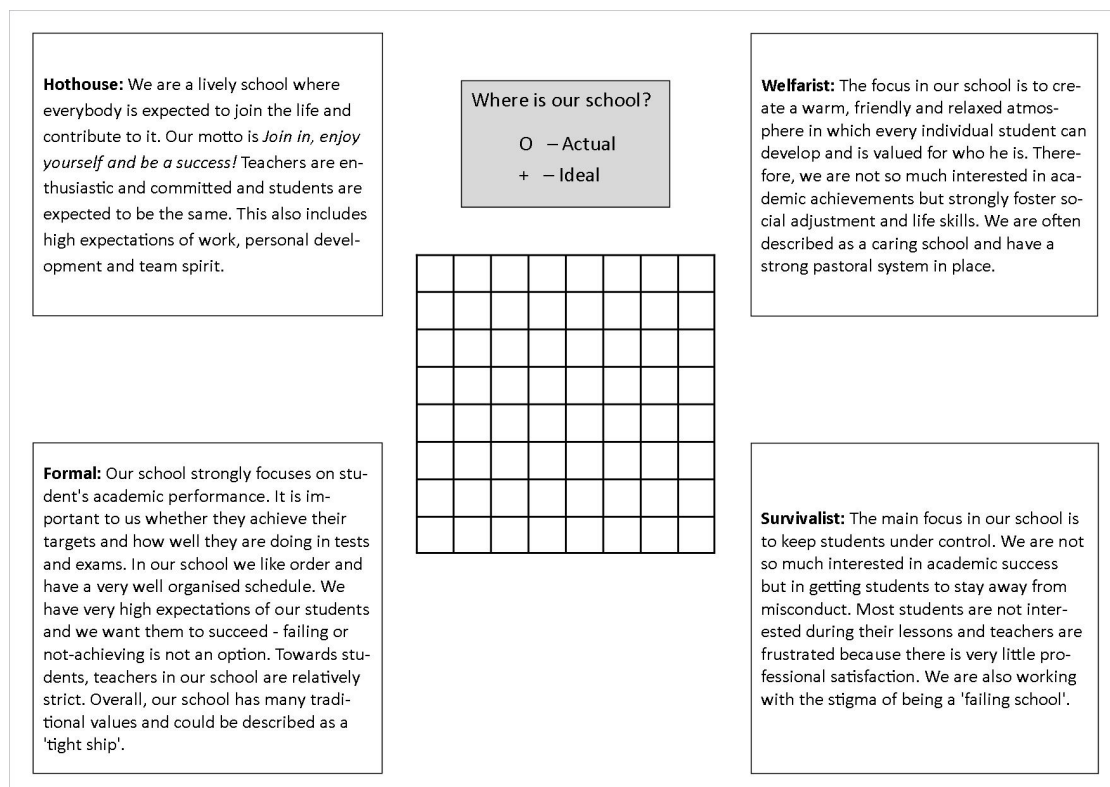


Figure 3.1: Tool developed by Hargreaves (1999) to explore a school's culture; adapted and used as part of the cultural audit with members of staff in all three research sites

the same year I re-interviewed the other 4 students who were then in Year 9 and Year 10 (aged 13-15 years) respectively. These interviews were also looking back at the past two years and I was looking for changes in academic experiences as well as changes in personal viewpoints.

In May 2015 I also led a focus group at St. Paul's Secondary School to find out about views newly qualified teachers held about students who were labelled as gifted and talented. As they were all new to the school it created the disadvantage that they had constructed their understanding of what giftedness and talent means in other schools and thus from other experiences, but in the same way it also gave me a realistic picture of how these new teachers viewed the concept and more importantly how they dealt with it.

Figure 3.2 shows the multiple case studies and includes a time line to clarify when data were generated.

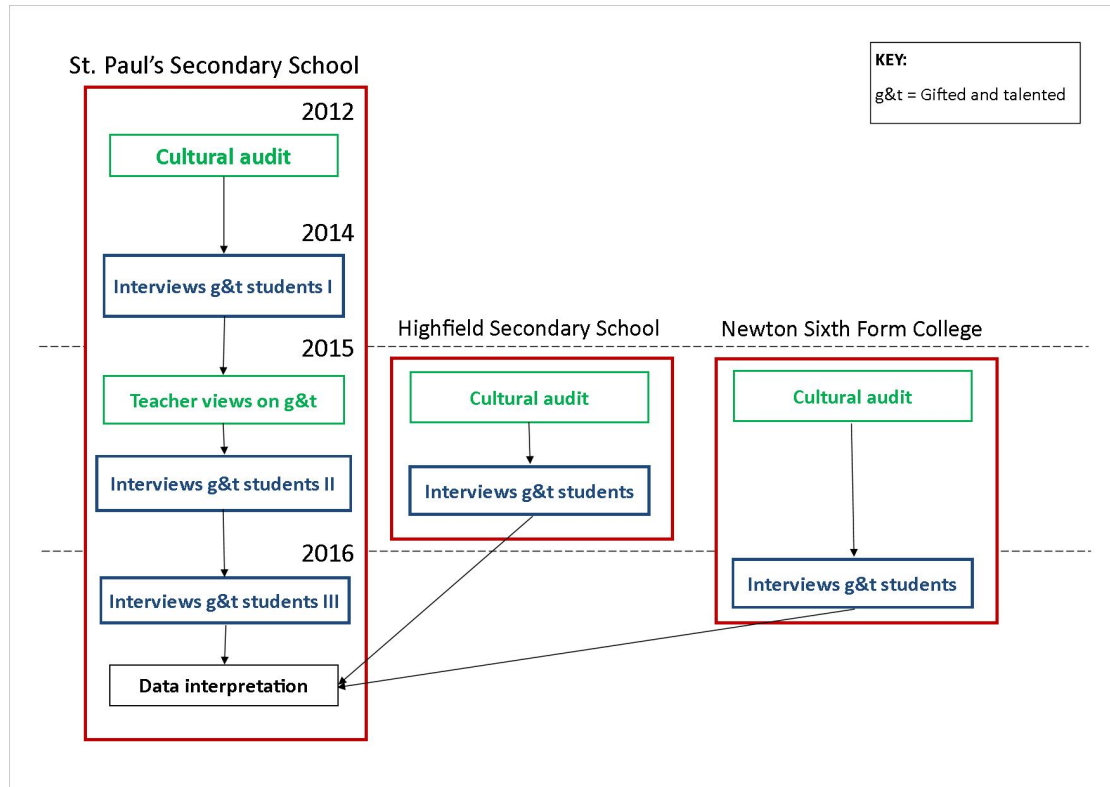


Figure 3.2: Illustration of the multi case studies and the associated timeline

### 3.2.1.1 School culture

The construction of understanding does not happen in a void as discussed earlier in this chapter. People make sense of concepts and ideas within a social setting and often subconsciously adopt views and practices from the people around them (Hargreaves, 1994; Johnson et al., 2008). This is also true for teachers working in an educational setting. Thus, before exploring the explicit views of teachers and students about the concept of giftedness and talent, I decided to first take an overall look at the culture of St. Paul's to gain a better insight into the ways the workings of the school were perceived.

In exploring school culture I followed Johnson et al.'s (2008) idea of an institutional culture which shapes many aspects of daily life, like routines, values and beliefs, in an institution, in my case an educational setting. (For further details see section 2.2.)

To explore the layered construct of culture proposed by Johnson et al. (2008) I used the cultural web which they developed as a means to manifest the values, beliefs and behaviours of an organisation and thus be able to identify the underlying paradigm. The cultural web consists of seven aspects with the paradigm at the core of the other six: stories, symbols, power structures, organisational structures, control systems, and systems and routines.

By starting with a whole school questionnaire which elicited perceptions of students, I was able to set the scene based on their understanding to be followed by a more targeted and focused approach in the following semi-structured interviews and to hear the stories behind the phrases, pictures and keywords of the whole-school questionnaire. This follows the convergent parallel design identified by Creswell (2014) which is a mixed methods approach merging the strengths of quantitative and qualitative data (see Figure 3.3). In the case of this study, the questionnaire provided numerical data which allowed for generalising student views about their school and what it was like. It also showed differences between year groups which indicated differing cultures between the year groups but also an overarching theme or paradigm which often is described as the culture of the setting (Johnson et al., 2008). Complementing the numbers, which can show pattern but without explanation, I included some open-ended questions in the questionnaire to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons for student choice. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews with staff allowed for a richer and more in-depth understanding of the context to supplement but also contradict the students' views. In comparison and combination this design allowed the data to unfold even more and reveal differences but also similarities in views and perceptions (Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2007).

Lastly, as I was not only researcher but also teacher and tutor at St. Paul's Secondary School, I also included my experiences, informal observations and perceptions to round off the picture of what St. Paul's is like and how things are done



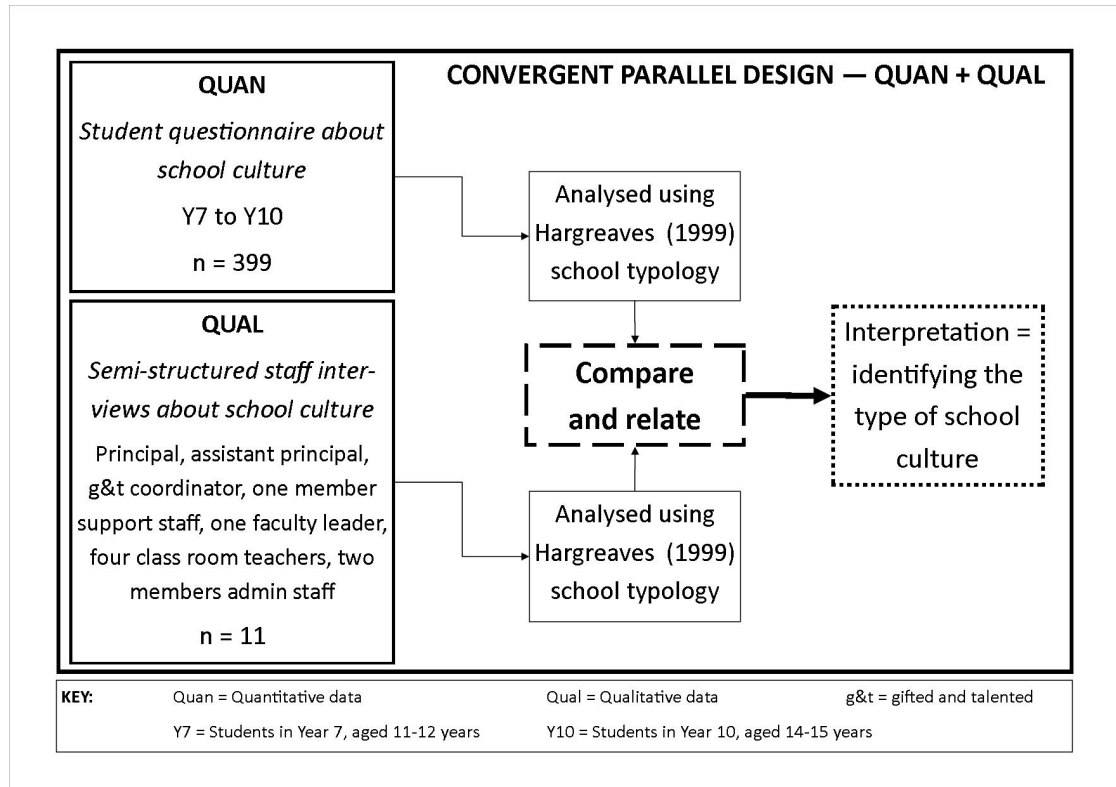


Figure 3.3: Illustration of the adopted convergent parallel design (Creswell, 2014)

there, thus revealing the ideas, beliefs and understandings of the people behind the culture.

### 3.2.1.2 Individual students

After establishing a better idea about the culture of the main research site I invited 8 students of St. Paul's who had been identified as gifted and talented to participate in the next phase of the research which focused on the impact the school culture and its associated practices had on the individual students. The students I invited were all taken from the gifted and talented register. I also discussed my choice with the gifted and talented coordinator to establish individuals who were not only identified as gifted and talented but whose academic achievements were very good to outstanding. This choice was based on the fact that from my experience and observations teachers perceive students as very able if they also achieve high grades (Bryman, 2016). As I wanted to find out about the practices

put in place for those very able students, I wanted to interview students who would also be perceived as very able by teachers hoping to see interventions put in place to support the academic development of those students. Five students agreed to take part and so I interviewed them for the first time in July 2013. Names used throughout the thesis have been changed for reasons of anonymity and in the case of the students were also chosen by themselves.

Edward: When I interviewed Edward in July 2013 he was at the end of Year 10 and 15 years of age. Edward is one of 3 siblings with his sister being 3 years younger and at that point was in Year 7 at St. Paul's. As I was also his tutor we had almost a year to get to know each other and build rapport. This of course made the interview process much easier as a positive relationship had already been established and conversations seemed very relaxed. His key interests were in mathematics and the sciences. During this first interview, Edward had sat his mathematics GCSE just a few weeks prior and was waiting for the results. Edward was often described as a polite, friendly and mature young man who liked to make jokes but was also working hard.

Keith: In July 2013 Keith was in Year 8 and 13 years of age. I taught him briefly in Year 7 but from conversations with other colleagues it became apparent that he also was a polite and friendly young man who did very well especially in mathematics and science. His older brother was also attending St. Paul's and showed high ability in mathematics and science. Apart from being interested in academic work Keith was also a very sporty young man. In spring 2015 he and another student went to a rugby event where they met professionals as well as designed a rugby shirt especially for St. Paul's. Seen within his year group, he was a well-liked and popular student.

Natalie: In the same year as Keith, Natalie was also 13 years of age when I interviewed her in July 2013. She was one of three siblings and had a younger and an older brother. Natalie was often seen as the perfect student as she was always

polite and friendly and also worked very hard. In addition she also achieved very good grades across the board. During our second interview in July 2015 I asked her about winning a spelling competition in Year 8, as her winning picture was still displayed in one of the school's corridors and I saw it basically every day. When reminded about that she was immediately quite embarrassed as she was not too keen on a lot of attention and although she seemed proud of her achievement did not seem too happy about it being shared with the whole school community.

Dumbo: Dumbo is the younger sister of Edward and I taught her in Years 7 and 8. In lessons she would often be quiet and not participate too much, which became more pronounced over the next years. Even though she was friendly she could also be withdrawn and introvert at times which made her seem arrogant. Based on discussions with her tutor in July 2015 as well as the interview with Dumbo the same month, it became clear that she did not necessarily enjoy putting a lot of work and effort into homework or lesson tasks and that sometimes, if she felt the tasks were too easy, would not complete them at all. So although she is Edward's sister she had a very different character and thus was also perceived differently by teachers. Lastly, her interest was also with mathematics and science and not so much with humanities subjects.

Bob: Again, I taught Bob in Years 7 and 8 and tried to find ways of engaging him in lessons as he would often switch off and just read in his book. His passion was mathematics, science and ICT which was also apparent in his very high grades surpassing most of his peers and putting him in the top 5 of his year group at the time. Similar to Dumbo, Bob was not overly keen on working hard in lessons or putting too much effort into his homework. Teachers sometimes described him as withdrawn or not interested. This became apparent a few months into Year 7, and from then on his parents got involved to get him back on track. Overall, Bob was always perceived as friendly and polite and although not always displaying great enthusiasm for certain subjects he certainly made up for it in the mathematics

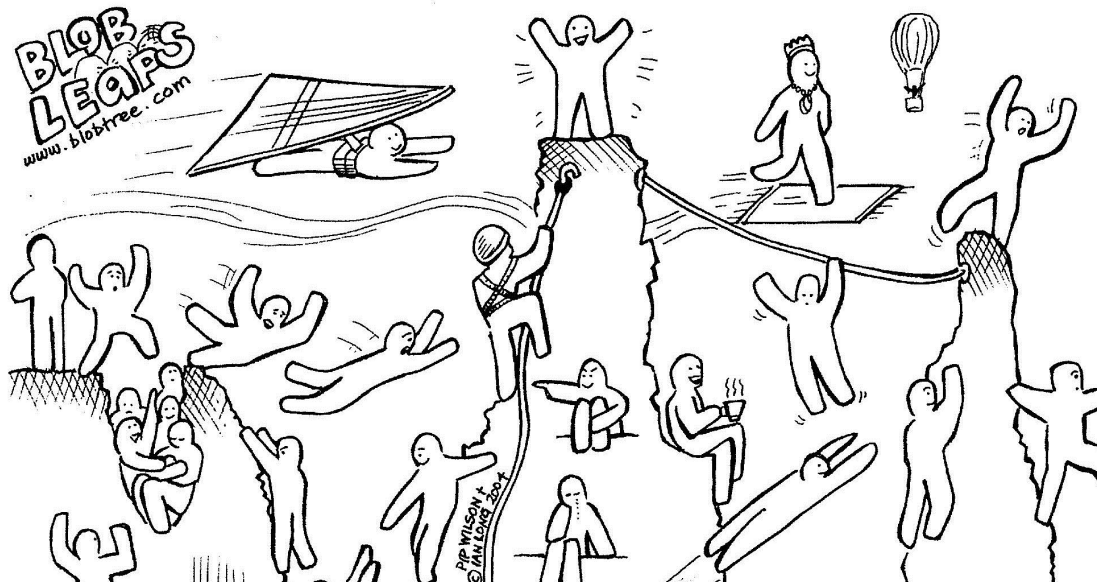


Figure 3.4: Image detail of visual tool used with individual gifted and talented students (copyright Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2004), [www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com))

and science fields.

After the initial interviews I caught up again with them in 2015 and again in 2016 to be able to review changes in their well-being as well as changes in their attitudes and experiences. To track and illustrate their individual journeys I used a tool developed by Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2004) which helps children, young people as well as adults to talk about their feelings. The so-called Blobs also helped to start interviews as it was an easy and fun way to talk about feelings as also experienced by Warin (2010). Secondly, it also gave me a visual way of monitoring the student's emotional journey over the three years (see Figure 3.4).

### 3.2.2 Additional research sites

To be able to triangulate my findings and reflect on bias, due to my involvement at St. Paul's, I was able to secure two other research schools (Bryman, 2016). I started the cultural audit at Newton Sixth Form College, which is a specialist school offering mathematics, physics and ICT A-levels, in January 2015. The following data were generated:

- Student questionnaire January 2015; whole school cohort at the time (only one year group) (N=69); 32 students took part in the survey but some questions were not answered by all, which I will point out where necessary.
- Interview with the headteacher on 13 January 2015.
- Three lesson observations as well as observations during break time on 13 January 2015.
- Group interview with five Year 12 students (their first year at Newton Sixth Form College) on 28 January 2016; students were aged 16 to 18 years. The focus of the interview was about what they liked about Newton Sixth Form College, whether they felt challenged and how it compared to their prior secondary school.

As this is a sixth form college targeting a very specific group of young people, I secured another state secondary school to be able to triangulate any findings from St. Paul's concerning key stages 3 and 4, so Year groups 7 to 11 (11 to 16 years of age). Highfield Secondary School is a state secondary school slightly bigger than St. Paul's but in the same town (whole school cohort at the time approximately N=800). At Highfield Secondary School the following data were gathered:

- February 2015 three lesson observations.
- February 2015 interview with the gifted and talented coordinator.
- May 2015 online questionnaire amongst a sample of 90 students from Year groups 7 to 10 (11 to 15 years of age); whole school cohort at the time approximately N=800.
- June 2015 two lesson observations.
- June 2015 interview with three gifted and talented students. The students I interviewed were a Year 7 boy (aged 11-12 years), a Year 8 girl (aged 12-13

years) and a Year 9 boy (aged 13-14 years). The first two students I also observed in one of their lessons that day and the Year 9 boy I had observed in a lesson in February 2015.

- June 2015, I led a group discussion with five teachers of the school, three women and two men; they had been working at Highfield Secondary School between 4 and 15 years.

## 3.3 Data analysis

### 3.3.1 Quantitative (statistical evaluation)

In all schools, a questionnaire amongst students was the first step to gather data looking at the culture of the school, which included a number of scaled questions as well as identifying characteristics based on images combined with explanatory titles/labels. In these cases, what I wanted to know were firstly descriptive outcomes to be able to see tendencies and trends; I wanted to identify the school type(s) which was/were mentioned most (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the mode and median were my starting points for the descriptive analysis as they would allow me to identify what the majority of students thought as well as finding where the middle score was and from there see also the range of the answers given (Cohen et al., 2007). Further to that, I also included the variance to get a better idea of the distribution of answers. As I used a number of questions for one type of school I also used summed scores to give a clearer picture of what a student's thoughts were about the culture of their school. As Creswell (2014) discusses *'this summing occurs because individual items may not completely capture a participant's perspective'* (p. 198).

### 3.3.2 Qualitative (content analysis)

With conducting interviews as well as semi-structured lesson observations a lot of qualitative data were generated. To analyse these data appropriately, I considered grounded theory against content analysis but the latter one seemed to be the more appropriate for my approach.

Grounded theory is based on the idea that the theory is emerging from within the data rather than the other way around (Cohen et al., 2007; Glaser, 2007; Kelle, 2007); core categories should come out of the data and not be forced upon it. In my case I was already looking for certain terms and categories which contradicted the grounded theory approach and therefore would not be the most appropriate way of analysing the data. Based on these points and having used it in other studies before I therefore decided to use content analysis to code and further analyse the data (Cohen et al., 2007). Content analysis allowed me firstly to use categories derived from my research interest but secondly it also gave room to modify and adapt them according to the empirical data.

Of course, adopting a mixed methods approach also led to merging and comparing quantitative and qualitative data. The cultural audit, a convergent parallel design, especially asked for a slightly different analysis approach given that the student questionnaires generated mainly quantitative data and the semi-structured staff interviews mainly qualitative data. Creswell (2014) suggests a number of approaches: quantifying qualitative or qualifying quantitative data, comparing or consolidating results. As mentioned before, the student questionnaires as well as the staff interviews centred on Hargreaves's (1999) typology of school cultures. Due to this, I used the four different types as categories and analysed questionnaires as well as interviews, coding them under the definitions of the four types (see Figure 3.1 for the explanation of the typologies and Table 4.1 for an example of coding based on the typologies).

### **3.4 Use of data in this thesis**

Throughout my thesis I will use St. Paul's and its associated data as my main case study to explore in depth how teachers constructed the concept of giftedness and talent and how this showed in their routine practices. In a second step I evaluate what impact these practices had on the students identified as gifted and talented and their self-theories. For this I used field observations as well as interviews. Findings from my own research I intertwined with current research to elicit any new aspects emerging from my work.

### **3.5 Ethical issues**

Being an inside researcher brings with it a number of issues but also advantages, which I discuss in this section.

The issues of insider versus outsider research have been discussed in the literature and views are manifold, of which Mercer (2007) gives a good overview. Some of the issues are fuelled by different understandings of what insider and outsider research means and thus some scholars consider insider and outsider research as being two separate approaches which cannot be reconciled, to a much more fluid view seeing them as two ends of a scale on which researchers move between points and thus assume different positions during a project and sometimes even within an interview (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Mercer, 2007). Similar to Mercer (2007), I have experienced different levels of being an insider as well as outsider during interviews. Edward, one of the gifted and talented students at St. Paul's, was not just a student to me but also a tutee which meant that we already had a rather good rapport prior to our interviews which led to some parts of our interviews being much more open and honest revealing more about how he felt than for example the 2013 interviews with the Year 8 students whom I did not know as



well.

Further issues often associated with being an inside researcher are that *'only the neutral outsider can achieve an objective account of human interaction, because only he or she possesses the appropriate degree of distance and detachment from the subjects of the research'* (Mercer, 2007, p. 5). Only if you are not personally involved can you view events and happenings without prejudice, bias and ignorance. In the same way it has been discussed that being an outsider can also lead to issues, for example the inability to understand certain cultural aspects of the researched institution due to the lack of empathy for the situation researched (Mercer, 2007). This is also true about researching in educational settings. A school is a grown structure with stories and hierarchies not apparent to an outsider; as an insider one knows potentially more details about the organisational culture, how things are done and who to talk to. Additionally there is the jargon used which outsiders might not be able to decode and, of course, there are all those little things happening on a daily basis which I, as an insider, see and hear about but which would not be discussed with an outsider (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Thus, being an insider can create certain difficulties; for example, not asking certain questions, not touching certain contagious topics or not challenging views, but it can also enhance the research and can lead to richer insights.

Leading on from these contentious issues there are also ethical issues which need to be considered. First of all there is the question of how much information one should pass on to participants in a research study (which obviously is a general question and does not solely apply to insider research). However, as an insider, I am in many cases closely acquainted with participants and might want to give an honest rationale of my study but in the same way this might influence what participants are saying. For example, when talking to colleagues about how they view the ideas of giftedness and talent it is then difficult to move on to talking about the aspect whether how they teach the gifted and talented students has an impact on

the development of their self-theories and thus their academic engagement. Points like that can be seen as criticism and could lead to colleagues starting to defend themselves rather than just sharing their views (Mercer, 2007).

A few other points I would like to mention are those of anonymity, the sharing of findings and making field notes. The first two points are closely related: when sharing findings within a research setting, especially as an insider, it can be hard to truly anonymise comments and to reduce a person to minimal facts in order for others to not know who the interviewee was. This can create frictions as participants sharing their views might not want their views to be known, especially to the senior management team of an educational setting. Another issue lies in sharing findings within the researched institution as I, as a researcher, do not want to criticise my own employer and risk being perceived as an accuser but in the same way might find shortcomings which need addressing or challenges which have to be faced. Closely entwined is the analysis of data and the eliciting of findings as this can be led by one's own understandings and interpretations rather than those of the interviewee or participant in general (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Lastly, being part of the school culture and a colleague, and in some cases a friend, it is a fine line between gathering field notes and giving a rich picture of the researched setting versus the difficulty of sharing information which should not be shared due to their delicate nature (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Mercer, 2007).

For my own research, I follow Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) lead who argue that being a qualitative researcher automatically leads to involvement as personal stories conveyed in interviews will not leave us untouched; I am a vital part of my research and its process and most importantly have to be aware of it.

Being a member of the group under investigation does not unduly influence the process in a negative way. Disciplined bracketing and detailed reflection on the subjective research process, with a close awareness of one's own personal biases and perspectives, might well reduce the

potential concerns associated with insider membership.

(Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 59)

I will now move on to discuss and evaluate the data outcomes about the school culture at St. Paul's Secondary School.

## Chapter 4

# Findings: St. Paul's Secondary School - the cultural audit

*But Miss Honey was determined to have her say and she now began to describe some of the amazing things Matilda had done with arithmetic.*

*'So she's learnt a few tables by heart, has she?' Miss Trunchbull barked. 'My dear woman, that doesn't make her a genius! It makes her a parrot!'*

*(Dahl, 2010)*

In this chapter I shall take a closer look at St. Paul's Secondary School and how the school is being described and experienced by students as well as members of staff. The aim is to describe the more detailed scene in which the students have acted during the time I followed their development. Furthermore, this will illuminate underlying issues the gifted and talented students experienced and allow for links to be made. In the next chapter, I shall then elaborate on the experiences of the five students I worked with at St. Paul's and share their stories. Lastly, woven into Chapters 5 and 6 I shall take a look at the other two research sites and how data collected there show differences as well as similarities in comparison with St. Paul's. The aim is to highlight some of the experiences gifted and talented

students have in different settings and what might be an explanation for that.

## 4.1 St. Paul's Secondary School - the cultural audit

In their work, Johnson et al. (2008) illuminate how important organisational culture is to understand an organisation, how it works and, maybe more importantly, how processes and routines can be changed to achieve improvement within an organisation leading to better performance and outcomes. Understanding how a school works, what roles different people have, what really matters in terms of routines and traditions, who really has the power in the place to change or influence things, and who the quiet heroes are one needs to know and whose contributions need to be acknowledged, will help one to see through the outer shell of a school and get a better understanding of what is happening and why and how improvements can be made. To make some of these invisible rules and ongoings visible, Johnson et al. (2008) suggest using the Cultural Web which I discussed in a previous chapter (section 3.2.1.1). Johnson et al. (2008) propose that by looking at six aspects of an organisation, the paradigm of an organisation will become apparent. The term paradigm in this context means a '*set of assumptions held in common and taken for granted in an organisation*' (Johnson et al., 2008, p. 195). A paradigm gives employees of an organisation or institution a shared experience whether they support it or oppose it by thinking outside the set assumptions (Hargreaves, 1994, 2001). What becomes clear from the reported experiences is that the paradigm does affect employees in an organisation in one way or another as it is woven through day-to-day life. Therefore, Johnson et al. (2008) propose that the paradigm of an organisation cannot be found in official documents but only becomes apparent for employees working there. Based on Johnson et al.'s (2008) understanding, the aspects which make the paradigm visible are the stories be-

ing told in the organisation, the symbols present, the power structures as well as organisational structures, what kind of control systems are in place, and general systems and routines to make the organisation flow (Johnson et al., 2008). If one can make a paradigm visible it also becomes easier to work with it or, if necessary, change it. For example, one would assume that the aim of a school is to educate the children or young people in its care and to equip them with the necessary skills and individual behaviours to lead a successful life. But when taking a closer look and unearthing the actual goal within an educational setting it is often not so much about equipping students for their life after education and in employment, but much more about getting a good Ofsted report and thus making sure students achieve good examination results (Francis et al., 2012; Hargreaves, 2009; Peterson and Deal, 2002) (for a more in-depth discussion of these points see section 4.1.2).

As discussed earlier, to categorise my findings and in some ways also paradigms prevailing in the schools under scrutiny, I chose Hargreaves's (1999) typology as it pinpoints the extreme points on a grid in which schools work and considers achievement and grades as well as the focus on well-being of students and their development in non-academic areas. This will complement my research and helps me to structure it.

So, what is St. Paul's like in terms of its culture?

#### **4.1.1 The student questionnaire**

The student questionnaires paint an interesting picture regarding how students perceive and experience the school.

#### 4.1.1.1 Scaled questions

The first part of the questionnaire asked 15 scaled questions which were led by Hargreaves's (1999) typology. Statements included, for example:

- Overall teachers in my school seem warm and friendly.
- Overall there is high pressure to work hard and reach set targets in my school.
- Overall academic success is recognised and praised more than anything else in my school.
- Overall my school is very caring.

The individual questions derived from one of the four typologies developed by Hargreaves (1999), namely Formal, Hothouse, Survivalist and Wellfarist. Table 4.1 shows the allocated typology for each question as well as the answers given. Thus, answers given to these scaled questions were used either as evidence for or against a certain school type. For example, a positive response to the statement '*students in my school get away with silly behaviour*' suggests issues with behaviour and thus a trend towards a Survivalist school type. But in the same way, a negative response to the statement '*there is high pressure to work hard and reach set targets in my school*' would suggest that the school is focusing either on other things more, which would support the Wellfarist type, or cannot focus on the work of students as they have other problems, which would suggest a more Survivalist type.

Table 4.1 also shows counts for each of the questions. To simplify comparison as well as analysis I combined counts for 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' as well as 'Disagree' and 'Strongly disagree' in the table. Furthermore, if answers on either side were above 55% I neither included the opposite side nor the 'I don't know' option. This was done to give a clearer view on how many students of the cohort supported a certain view and to highlight rather straightforward answers. (For a

more detailed overview see Table D in the Appendix D.)

Overall, answers given to these questions paint, as would be expected, a diverse picture of St. Paul's and how students view the school. Some of the elements experienced by students suggest a rather Formal school with some elements of Hothouse and Wellfarist as well as a hint of the Survivalist type. The latter becomes especially obvious when analysing questions about behaviour as well as engagement in lessons.

The answers which received over 80% of 'Agree' counts were *'there is high pressure to work hard and reach set targets in my school'* as well as *'teachers in my school want me to do well and succeed'*. Both of these statements support a Formal school type as it is all focused on achievement and good grades. This is further supported by 64% of students saying that *'school rules restrict me in being me by being strict about, for example, uniform, appearance and punctuality'*, another indicator for a formal approach to education. Francis et al. (2012) found similar notions in their research linking the drive of schools to high achievement, or in other words good grades, to a strict policy on school uniform especially. Francis et al. (2012) argue that this strict focus on school uniform shifts the worries about how one looks to being able to concentrate on learning and achieving. Taking away the need to be concerned and preoccupied about looks and being accepted within a school setting based on other merits like achievement or academic ability or interests does, on the one hand, create space to pursue one's interests and enjoy learning. On the other hand, and this is also supported by the 64% of students who feel that they cannot be themselves due to the things they have to wear, it can create a barrier within school which can get in the way of learning as students are too preoccupied feeling unhappy in their school uniform and not being able to express who they are and what they believe in a way they want and like. As we will see in the interview data with the gifted and talented students from St. Paul's, being able to be themselves and not hide who they are seems to be one of the bigger issues



Table 4.1: Scaled answers according to school type; N given for individual questions out of a total whole school cohort of N=399

School type	Question 'Overall...'	Agree	Don't know	Disagree
Formal	...teachers in my school want me to do well and succeed. (N=369)	84.6% N=335		
	...there is high pressure to work hard and reach set targets in my school. (N=396)	80.1% N=317		
	...school rules restrict me in being me by being strict about, for example, uniform, appearance and punctuality. (N=394)	64.2% N=253		
	...my school has too many rules about behaviour. (N=394)	45.4% N=179	25.1% N=99	29.0% N=114
	...teachers in my school are very strict. (N=398)	42.7% N=170	35.2% N=140	20.8% N=83
	...academic success is recognised and praised more than anything else in my school. (N=394)	38.6% N=152	37.6% N=148	23.6% N=93
	...my school is a very lively school with lots of things happening after school (for example, after school clubs, trips, special events) (N=397).	67.3% N=267		
	...teachers work hard to make lessons interesting. (N=392)	46.7% N=183	30.9% N=121	21.4% N=84
	...there is a good learning atmosphere in my lessons.	45.6% N=181	30.0% N=119	23.6% N=94
	...students in my school work hard in lessons. (N=394)	32.0% N=126	36.8% N=145	29.7% N=117
Wellfarist	...lessons in my school are fun. (N=395)	29.1% N=115	29.1% N=115	40.2% N=159
	...there are lots of ways that my school makes sure I am safe and well (for example, they offer counselling, we have a chaplain and other people I can talk to if I have a problem). (N=395)	62.5% N=247		
	...teachers in my school seem warm and friendly. (N=397)	59.7% N=237		
Survivalist	...my school is very caring. (N=392)	46.6% N=184	32.4% N=127	20.9% N=82
	...students in my school can get away with silly behaviour. (N=395)	44.8% 177	20.3% N=80	34.4% N=136

in their school career and one which does not only seem to hinder personal but also academic development. So, although strict rules about school uniform and appearance have their merits, they also seem to create difficulties.

Further to the aspects mentioned above, there is also a group of statements which scored 60+% in the 'Agree' categories. So although not as many students perceive St. Paul's like this there still is a considerable amount of students in the school for whom these statements describe their educational experience:

- *'... my school is a very lively school with lots of things happening after school'* with 67.3% suggesting aspects of a Hothouse culture where people are enthusiastic about what they are doing and are joining in.
- There are two aspects highlighted from the Wellfarist school type also. The first is concerned with students feeling safe and having support from, for example, a school chaplain as well as a counsellor; this aspect is supported by 62.5% of the responses. And although slightly under the 60% threshold with 59.7% still indicating it to be a smaller majority is the notion that *'teachers in my school seem warm and friendly'*.

Although students feel safe and well at St. Paul's they do not seem to experience their school as caring though. Answers amongst the whole school cohort (N=392) about this notion are diverse, ranging from 46.6% (N=184) agreeing to 20.9% (N=82) of students in the sample disagreeing and 32.4% (N=127) saying that they do not actually know. Reasons for that could be manifold: some students might not have needed support through school (thus the lack of experience of this caring side) or they might not have received support during times of struggle. A third reason could be that, for some students, the care on offer is not the care wanted or needed in their eyes, thus them disagreeing with the statement. However, as we will see when looking at the interview data from members of staff, although St. Paul's has a strong pastoral structure and therefore care about the students

in the school is a big concern, this care does not extend towards the running of the school, for example, to put social adjustment and life skills before academic achievements as would be the case in a more Wellfarist school. The difference between caring to a certain extent but not putting the welfare of students first is quite pronounced, especially when looking at the ideas from a senior management level which I will analyse in a later section in more detail.

To some degree, the Survivalist school type becomes apparent in the 'silly' behaviour question. From my own experience at the time of the questionnaire there were, on the one hand, issues with low level disruption, for example, calling out during lessons, not doing the work, or generally not listening and chatting while the teacher is giving instructions to the class. On the other hand, in some classes, behaviour had evolved from that and become disruptive and defiant which made it very hard to teach some of those groups. I shall illuminate this aspect in more detail when analysing what teachers had to say as it is an aspect which was commented on quite frequently. Going back to the students, 44.8% (N=177) of the whole school cohort (N=395) said that people get away with it. Interestingly, there is a difference between year groups. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show two bar graphs detailing the year group specific answers about '*Silly behaviour*' and '*Teachers being strict*'.

The first graph shows that the majority of students in Year 7 and Year 8 do not support the idea that students can get away with silly behaviour (Year 7 counts: 48 disagree, 38 agree; Year 8 counts: 54 disagree, 43 agree); it seems that many of them can see that behaviour is being challenged and dealt with. This is different to how Year 9s and Year 10s view this statement. In Year 9, 40 people agree that silly behaviour is not being challenged whereas only 23 students feel that this is not the case. Year 10 even more strongly agree that silly behaviour is not dealt with (55 students agree, only 11 disagree).

A similar pattern becomes apparent in the statement about '*teachers being strict*'.

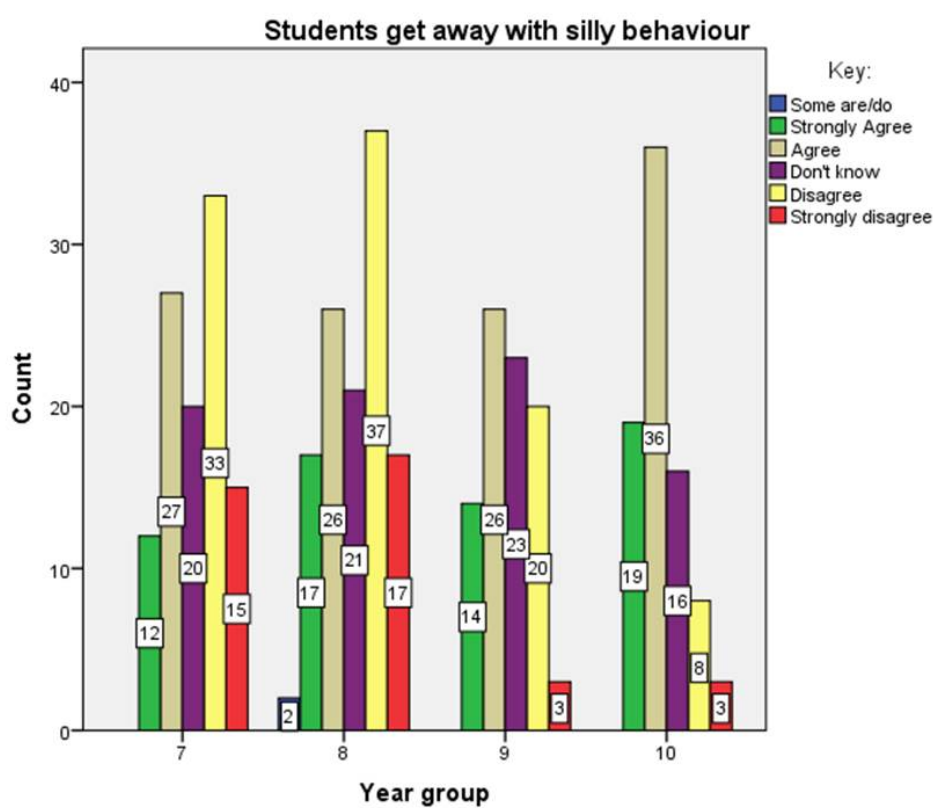


Figure 4.1: Student answers to scaled question about silly behaviour in school; Whole school cohort, N=395

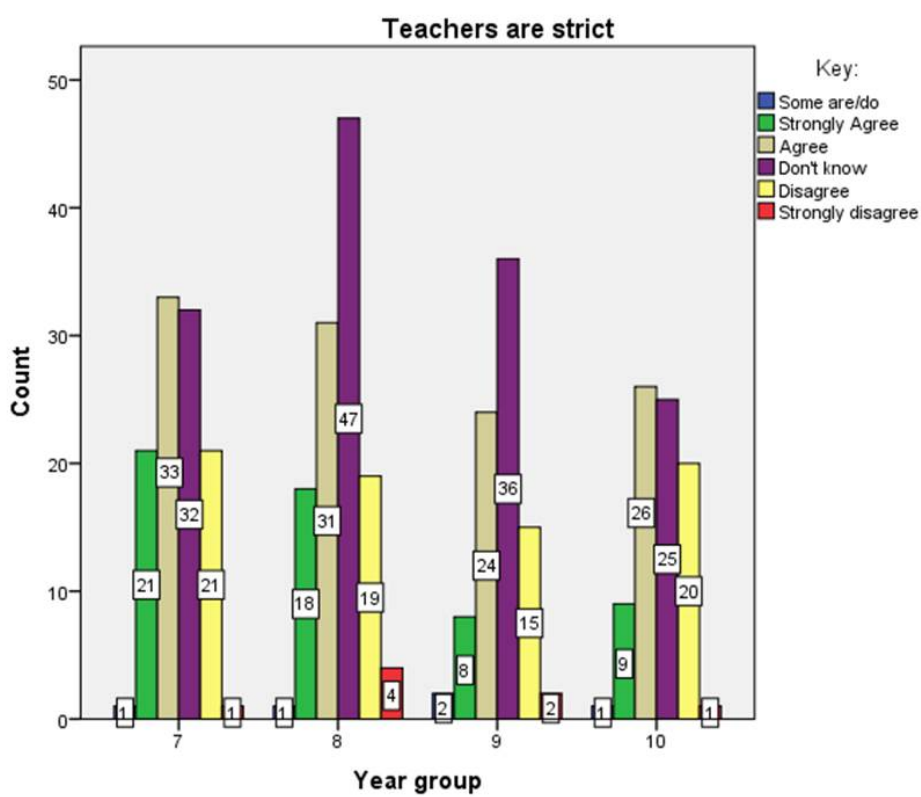


Figure 4.2: Student answers to scaled question about teacher strictness; Whole school cohort, N=398

Students in Year 8 are clearly not sure as the 'Don't know' category has the highest counts in all categories across year groups. However, adding together 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' still more students in Year 8 see their teachers as strict (n=49) and only 23 students would disagree. In the other year groups a similar picture emerges with many of the students not being entirely sure whether teachers are strict or not. One reason for this indecisiveness might be that strictness varies between teachers. Across the whole cohort, 5 students decided to add a category in answering this question which says 'Some are/do', suggesting that although behaviour is being dealt with teachers are not necessarily seen as strict. This is an interesting combination as it could mean that strictness is for some students not the key to dealing with behaviour (Year 7 and Year 8), whereas for others, teachers have to be strict to deal with behaviour (Year 9 and Year 10).

The different year group perceptions of teacher strictness and behaviour management give a glimpse of the school which St. Paul's used to be. According to staff interviews, especially of staff who had been at St. Paul's for a number of years and who had seen 'the old school', issues with behaviour were very real. Members of staff mentioned the need to be strict with some groups and teachers being responsible for behaviour in their classes. In the same way the data about strictness and behaviour reflect ambivalent experiences of students which can be explained as they are obviously taught in different groups and sets and thus will have very different experiences of behaviour and behaviour management in the classes.

One statement which caught my attention was that of '*Overall lessons in my school are fun*' as there are, again, big differences between year groups. This supports the idea that school culture is actually divided into sub-cultures with each of the sub-cultures developing their own interpretations of what their school is like. Year 7 stand out because of their high counts of agreement about lessons being fun (51 counts, year group participants N=109). Year 10 are at the other end of the scale with 36 students disagreeing about lessons being fun (year group participants

N=81). Year 8 and Year 9 are not sure about lessons and the 'Don't know' category features highly. Reasons for that could be that the longer students have been in education and the closer they get to their GCSE examinations, the more they feel the pressure to do well and work hard. Therefore, lessons become more and more focused on preparing them for their GCSEs and in examination skills; a notion which resonates with findings of other researchers in the field (Hargreaves, 2001, 2009; Francis et al., 2012).

Putting together the two statements about lessons being fun and the learning atmosphere in lessons, elements of the Formal school type are highlighted. It is about learning and achieving but not so much about teachers and students necessarily being enthusiastic about and engaged in lessons. During the interview with the headteacher we also discussed the question whether learning can be fun, enjoyable, and challenging. His view was that having fun in lessons AND achieving would be great, but that often enjoyment rules out progress as students do not get challenged as much. For him, not getting pushed academically as much in lessons will have a detrimental effect on examination grades which he would see as a failure (I shall discuss views of members of staff in more detail in sub-section 4.1.2).

So far the data suggest that St. Paul's Secondary School could be described as a mainly Formal school with some elements from the Wellfarist as well as Hothouse type. It firstly becomes apparent when analysing the answers to the scaled questions (Table 4.1). The two questions which received the most support across year groups were both describing a Formal school type. In the same way, the scaled questions support the notion of St. Paul's also being a Wellfarist school as all questions describing that aspect found support amongst the students. The Hothouse aspect of a lively school which offers many extracurricular activities also found support across the year groups. Lastly, Survivalist notions are coming through in some statements and in certain year groups. This can also be seen in the staff

interview data from 2013 as they reflect the focused work of the headteacher as well as members of staff to turn around St. Paul's from a satisfactory school in Ofsted terms (Grade 3 awarded during Ofsted Inspection May 2010) to a good school which is first choice for parents in the catchment area and especially within the Christian community.

Just by looking at these scaled questions it becomes apparent that views and thus experiences vary between different groups within the school. This supports points made elsewhere in the literature suggesting that the culture of an institution is never a linear and all-encompassing one but that under the umbrella of organisational culture many sub-cultures are actually being combined (Hargreaves, 1994, 1999; Johnson et al., 2008). This means that educational experiences of students within the same school can be very different and thus their personal as well as academic development can differ greatly.

#### 4.1.1.2 School characteristics

When looking at the data, it is hard to say what the cohort thinks the main characteristics of St. Paul's are, as there are big differences between year groups. For example, '*Making progress*' is strongly advocated by Year 8 and to some extent Year 7 but not Year 9 or Year 10. Year 10 responses are commonly in the '*Stress*' category. '*Happiness*' is mentioned by Year 7 and Year 8 but not so much by Year 10. But as Year 10 are in the middle of their GCSEs, at the time of the questionnaire Year 10 had already sat their science and religious education examinations, they really felt the pressure to work hard and do well. This sense of having or wanting to work hard and do well, and the associated stress with that, decreases with lower year groups; a phenomenon one would expect given that the further students move up in a secondary school the more the talk and pressure of GCSEs rises.



Table 4.2: School characteristics

	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
Making progress	<b>45 (41%)</b>	<b>69 (58%)</b>	<b>29 (33%)</b>	<b>30 (36%)</b>
Achieving	<b>36 (33%)</b>	<b>46 (38%)</b>	<b>30 (35%)</b>	<b>25 (30%)</b>
Feeling happy	<b>35 (32%)</b>	<b>34 (28%)</b>	<b>29 (33%)</b>	14 (17%)
Having fun	<b>32 (29%)</b>	<b>35 (29%)</b>	22 (25%)	16 (19%)
Feeling supported	<b>32 (29%)</b>	28 (23%)	15 (17%)	19 (23%)
Being bored	25 (23%)	<b>36 (30%)</b>	<b>40 (46%)</b>	<b>21 (25%)</b>
Feeling welcome	25 (23%)	21 (18%)	11 (13%)	9 (11%)
Working together	22 (20%)	26 (22%)	10 (12%)	10 (12%)
Being proud	17 (16%)	15 (13%)	10 (12%)	8 (10%)
Stress	16 (15%)	31 (26%)	<b>28 (32%)</b>	<b>33 (40%)</b>
Exams, exams, exams	13 (12%)	31 (26%)	26 (30%)	<b>33 (40%)</b>
One amongst many	12 (11%)	9 (8%)	9 (10%)	14 (17%)
On my own	8 (7%)	12 (10%)	5 (6%)	3 (4%)
Feeling low	6 (6%)	10 (8%)	6 (7%)	7 (8%)
Failing	5 (5%)	10 (8%)	7 (8%)	9 (11%)
Fear	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	0	5 (6%)

What are the top five characteristics of the school according to the students of St. Paul's? In words, it would be '*Making progress*', '*Achieving*', '*Being bored*', '*Feeling happy*' and '*Stress*'.

Table 4.2 gives the frequencies of the characteristics within the individual year groups. Percentages relate to the year group and how many chose it as opposed to not. Therefore, '*Fear*' being picked by 4% means 96% of the year group who filled in the questionnaire did not pick it as a characteristic.

These frequencies paint an interesting picture as, again, different year group cultures surface as well as an overarching feeling about the school. Each year group's individual top five characteristics have been highlighted in bold in Table 4.2. Table 4.3 shows the top five for each year group in order.

Interestingly, the top 5 according to year groups show similarities between Years 7 and 8 where '*Making progress*' and '*Achieving*' are the top two characteristics. Especially in Year 8, '*Making progress*' is the most commonly reported characteristic with 58% of the counts. Given this high frequency, it clearly seems to

Table 4.3: Top 5 School characteristics according to year group; numbers in brackets indicate that characteristics received same number of counts and therefore share a place

Year group	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
7	Making progress	Achieving	Feeling happy	Having fun (4)	Feeling supported (4)
8	Making progress	Achieving	Being bored	Having fun	Feeling happy
9	Being bored	Achieving	Feeling happy (3)	Making progress (3)	Stress
10	Stress (1)	Exams, exams, exams (1)	Making progress	Achieving	Being bored

be something most of the students in that year group experienced or saw at St. Paul's. Further to that, '*Achieving*' also featured very highly with 41% in Year 7 and 38% in Year 8. Year 9 perceive St. Paul's very differently, as 46% of the counts say that students feel bored in school; the second characteristic '*Achieving*' was reported by 35% of the respondents which is substantially less and only of a third of the year group's participants agreed on that. And lastly, Year 10 clearly see '*Stress*' and '*Exams, exams, exams*' when they think about St. Paul's as both received 40% of the participants' responses respectively. So based on these school characteristics, again, the Formal aspects seem to be most commonly reported with a focus on students achieving good grades, making progress and a strong focus on examinations which is also reflected in the category of '*Stress*'.

#### 4.1.1.3 The Blobs

As mentioned above, to gain a deeper understanding of how students felt at school I used a tool developed by Pip Wilson and Ian Long called the Blob tree and asked students to identify the ones which best represented how they felt in school. The task asked them to pick their top three maximum. When analysing I found that

some students had chosen three Blobs, others only one or two and others more than three. When analysing I kept the Blobs linked to the participant but when generating frequencies the number of Blobs mentioned are of course higher than if students had followed the maximum 3 Blobs rule. However, as one Blob cannot be mentioned more than once by a student, frequencies for individual Blobs still give a good picture about how students feel in school. Therefore, when focusing on the Blobs, and even more so the comments students assigned to their choices, it is still meaningful as they give an explanatory insight into life at St. Paul's which is of a qualitative nature rather than quantitative.

Figure 4.3 shows the four Blobs with the most student responses and Table 4.4 shows the distribution of the responses according to year group.

The four most reported Blobs are all situated in the middle of the whole picture and, supported by student comments, for most represent academic stability and being with friends. Especially the latter highlights the one thing young people aim for: to be with friends. This notion is supported by various studies which show that friendship is vital for the social development of adolescents but also their well-being (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Berndt, 1999; Francis et al., 2012; Gross, 2004).

The importance of friends and friendship also shows in the explanations students gave for choosing these top four Blobs. When looking at these most commonly reported four Blobs, 330 comments were made giving an explanation as to why

Table 4.4: Distribution of Blob responses according to year groups

Blob number	Total counts (N=399)	Year 7 (N=109)	Year 8 (N=120)	Year 9 (N=87)	Year 10 (N=83)
Blob 11	140	38	35	35	32
Blob 10	135	30	49	36	20
Blob 15	105	31	26	23	25
Blob 14	78	19	25	26	8

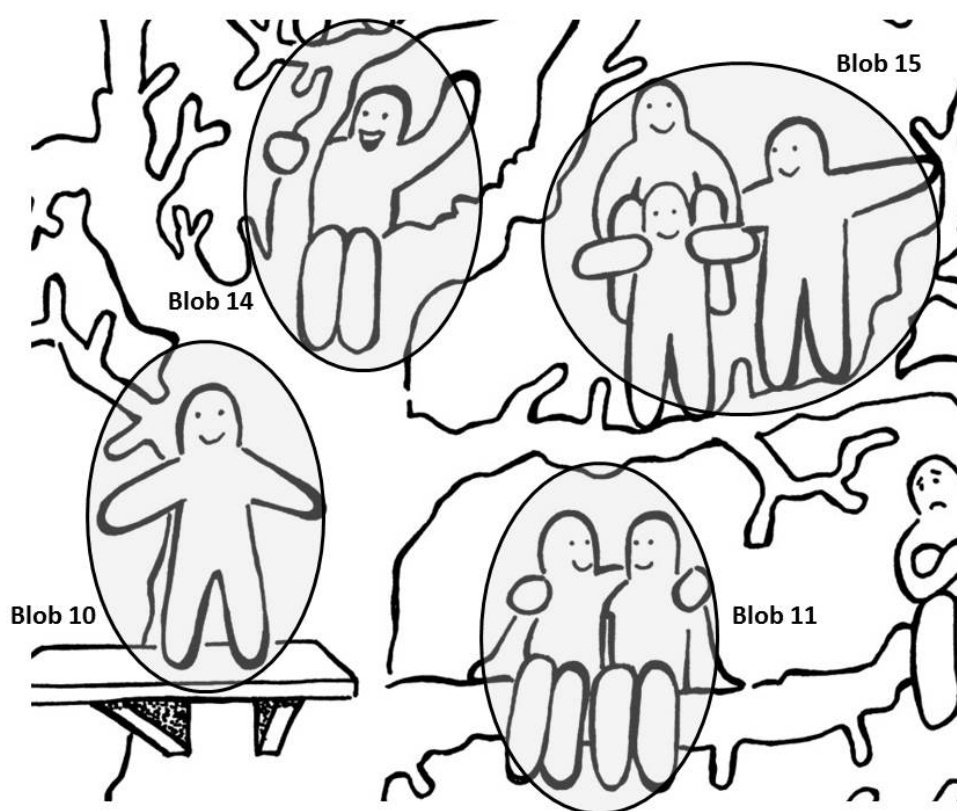


Figure 4.3: The four most-commonly reported Blobs of the whole school cohort (n=399) (copyright Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2005), [www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com))

the Blob was chosen. While coding these comments, different categories emerged. One of them was school being associated with social aspects like being with friends or liking it due to liking teachers; another category emerged which highlights the importance but also enjoyment of school work, progress, grades, and lessons, so more the academic aspects of school; the third category entails the mentioning of feelings like 'happy', 'safe', 'confident' but without identifying the reason for it. Outliers are those comments which stood out to me because they add a very different tone or touch a topic very new and different to the others mentioned above.

Each comment was coded and put in at least one if not more categories depending on the content. For example, a number of comments included social and academic aspects so this comment appears in both categories. Further to that, some students wrote one lengthy explanation for the two or three Blobs they listed; I therefore included this explanation twice or thrice, once for each Blob. This leads to a total of 330 comments made about why a student chose the Blobs but it led to 403 tags being generated. When analysing these 403 tags, 47% of the students in the cohort associated school with being around friends and school being a social place. Twenty-six percent of the comments clearly indicate that academic achievements are an important part of schooling; this is also reflected in 77 students choosing Blob 16 which is right at the top of the tree where they feel they are. Also, I asked students about how they would like to feel about school to see a trend in terms of what it is they actually want to get out of school; in this question, 179 students (45% of the whole cohort) would actually like to be at the top of the tree feeling they achieved all they wanted (Blob 16).

Going back to what students said, some of the comments and explanations given by students about their choice of Blob offer some explanation and thus qualitative layer to this question. Given the wealth of data, I shall here mainly focus on the two Blobs with the most responses within the whole school cohort (N=399) as

they are shared by all year groups in the cohort.

- Explanations given for Blob 11, which generated most responses in the whole school cohort; 101 comments given overall with 85 comments in the social category, 17 in the academic category, 16 just mentioning 'stable', 'happy' and 'safe' and one outlier:

Me and my friends are very close. We have been friends since nursery. (Year 7, female)

In this school I have found best friends that are always there to help me. (Year 7, female)

Because I have lots of friends and like to help others. I also chose it because I don't feel left out. (Year 7, female)

I feel like I can work together with my friends well and feel happy about it. (Year 7, female)

Because I have lots of friends and I am trying to reach my targets. (Year 8, female)

I love being with friends and have good times make school a social place! (Year 8, female)

I feel like I am getting fairly high grades and on a steady track with lots of friends. (Year 9, male)

I'm annoyed/upset/angry at some people in the school because they are really annoying and some teachers as they ignore the quiet kids but listen to the loud ones. (Year 10, male)

The selection of comments focuses on the social aspect but also shows how closely intertwined social and academic aspects are for students. Again, the understand-

ing that school is not just about friends and being social but also about making progress and achieving shines through. A notion which was also discussed by Francis et al. (2012) argued that education in today's world is about building a foundation for one's future and thus the necessity of a good education to be able to acquire a good job because increasingly, a bright future means a good job which brings good money which in return sustains a good quality of life.

In this context I would also like to point out the so-called outlier for Blob 11. It is a comment made by a Year 9 girl about Blobs 8, 9 and 11 (see Figure 4.4):

Despite having friends and a few good lessons sometimes I feel lost and confused. When school restricts me from expressing myself, I'm angry, backwards and plain, school shouldn't focus on their reputation and looks, it should be our education that's important.

Firstly, her chosen Blobs except one represent a very different view about her school as two of them clearly indicate her struggle. Secondly, her comment also unfolds a different story. As discussed above, the feeling that school restricts students in being themselves is also supported by the scaled answers. This comment, however, gives a unique, and I feel very honest, insight and perception of strictness about school uniform. To be able to express who you are, what you like and find your place within school, looks and thus fashion are quite important (Francis et al., 2012). If school puts a rather strict limit on what students are allowed as part of their school uniform it limits students' freedom and, as I have seen at St. Paul's, disputes between students, parents and the school can ensue about school uniform details like school shoes and even hair styles. As this Year 9 girl mentions, should a school's focus not be on educating students rather than stopping them from expressing themselves? In their study, Francis et al. (2012) have found that schools who had stricter rules about school uniform and behaviour also often had better results. Explanations given were that because of this strictness on uniform students can concentrate on academic achievement and do not have to worry so much about

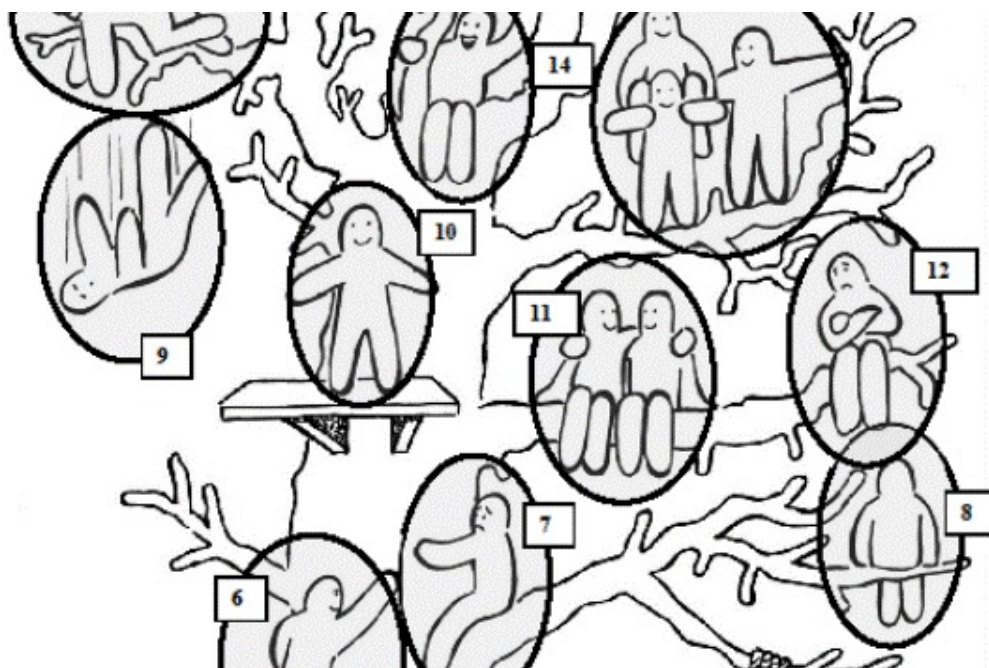


Figure 4.4: The Blobs chosen by a Year 9 girl (copyright Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2005), [www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com))

social status and standing. However, this one quote above summarises how this can affect the well-being of a young person.

- Explanations given for Blob 10, which received the second most student responses in the whole school cohort; 103 comments given overall with 29 comments in the social category, 51 in the academic category, 45 just mentioning 'happy' and 'safe' and one outlier:

I am usually quite stable at school and don't really need to do much to stay where I am. (Year 7, male)

I feel really happy I get to hang out with people. (Year 7, female)

Sometimes school can be fun and when I get good grades it's good. (Year 7, male)

Because I am not the most popular person in the school but I am happy how I am and with my friends. (Year 8, male)



Because I have caring friends at the school but sometimes I feel as though no one cares. (Year 8, female)

Because I've made new friends. I help out my friends and I feel independent. (Year 8, male)

There are few people who are not selfish and have similar interests. People think that they are mature because they can mock other people. (Year 9, male)

Because I am generally happy and stable at school with my friends. (Year 9, male)

When I do well I feel good and I have achieved something. (Year 9, female)

I work a lot better with my friends because they help me a lot. I find it easier to work in group because it helps me hearing others ideas. I feel quite happy with how I'm doing in lessons. (Year 9, female)

These few comments show a number of perspectives on the social aspect. There is the aspect of 'not being alone' and 'having friends around you' which for many young people is an important facet of being a teenager. Some of the more surprising ones actually evaluate the characteristics of people and how that has an effect on a person. For example, the Year 9 boy who comments on the immaturity of some people in his year group but also acknowledges that there are a few who are not selfish and have similar interests to him. A similar theme is touched by the Year 8 boy who ranks himself as not the most popular but shows how this does not matter as he is happy with himself and his friends. These comments give a small glimpse into the social challenges students have to master during their time in a secondary school. Firstly it is about fitting in and finding friends but secondly

it is about finding your place within the whole setting. In their study of high achieving students, Francis et al. (2012) take a very close look at this balance of being popular but also doing well academically. One of the challenges seems to be to either be popular and manage high academic achievements on the one hand or not being popular and being seen as a 'nerd' or 'boffin' on the other, to choose just two of the terms used. Their study suggests that being labelled as a 'nerd' or 'boffin' is not desirable although trends are changing and being a 'nerd' is becoming more socially accepted given the rise in media figures which fulfil the criteria of a 'nerd' meaning high intelligence and ability but somewhat an unorthodox sense of social behaviour. However, ideally, students want to be individuals but also popular as this helps them to belong somewhere and become an independent person (from parents) (Berndt, 1999). The last comment shows the combination of the social as well as academic category as being with friends is also associated with working with them and thus doing better in school. Again, this is an aspect which has been highlighted also with gifted and talented students who enjoy and, in some cases, prefer working in groups with students of similar ability (Adams-Byers et al., 2004).

Lastly, I will take a look at the outlier for Blob 10. A Year 9 boy makes an interesting observation as he feels *'the school has improved and became a lot better from where it was.'* At this point he would have been at St. Paul's for almost 3 years assuming that he joined in Year 7 and he would have seen some of the old year groups causing difficulties as well as a change in building and a steady improvement of school results as well as behaviour. This comment resonates with what teachers notice about St. Paul's and what also the vision of the headteacher is, to make it a good if not even outstanding school according to Ofsted criteria.

As with the data from the scaled questions and the school characteristics, the Blobs show some form of shared experiences between students as well as differences between year groups. Focusing on the individual year groups, Table 4.5 shows the

Table 4.5: Blob counts

BLOB number	Counts whole cohort (N=399)	Counts within individual Year groups			
		Year 7 (N=109)	Year 8 (N=120)	Year 9 (N=87)	Year 10 (N=83)
11	140	38	35	35	32
10	135	30	49	36	20
15	105	31	26	23	25
14	78	19	25	26	8
16	77	28	19	12	18
2	76	30	19	12	15
3	27	11	11	1	4
13	16	9	5	1	1

four Blobs with the most responses according to year group as well as the two Blobs with the lowest responses.

The data, the scaled questions and the school characteristics, highlight some shared experiences as well as year group specific perspectives on St. Paul's:

- The three most reported Blobs in Years 8 and 10 are the same as those of the whole school cohort, namely Blob 11, Blob 10 and Blob 15.
- The third most reported Blob in Year 9 is Blob 14 which is different to the whole school cohort.
- Year 7 responses show the same counts for Blob 10 and Blob 2 which is a deviation from the whole school cohort responses.

Table 4.5 also includes the Blobs with the least responses to complete the picture. In the same way as it is important to see how students experience their school, it is also interesting to see what they do not seem to experience. Blob 13 received the lowest responses in the whole school cohort. It is hanging over a branch trying to help another Blob which is falling, one could say a view of failure and not being able to help others. Data suggest that this is a perspective on St. Paul's not many students share. In the same way, standing under the tree and just watching also

does not seem to be an association students share about their schooling, especially Year 9 as Blob 3 only received one response in that particular year group.

So, what I learned from the student questionnaires is that school is a social place for students which enables them to be with friends and meet new friends, to interact with students of both genders and thus establish their own understanding and take on who they are. But it is also about academic achievement and progress as this also boosts self-confidence and self-esteem, the notion of having bettered oneself.

As part of the developmental journey of its students, St. Paul's offers a platform to meet and be with friends and feel looked after as well as making academic progress. However, academic progress as the aim of their schooling does seem to overshadow the social aspects at times, especially with older students. This is reflected in the two most reported school characteristics which change from '*Making progress*' and '*Achieving*' in Years 7 and 8 to '*Stress*' and '*Exams, exams, exams*' in Year 10. It also shows in comments about the most commonly reported Blobs as discussed above; Blob 10 received 103 responses, 51 of which commented on the academic side of things. Lastly, answers to scaled questions also support the associations of '*high pressure to work hard*' and '*succeed*'.

In the next section I look at what teachers have to say.

#### **4.1.2 Staff interviews**

In early 2013, when I sent out an invitation to all members of staff at St. Paul's Secondary School, five female members replied and volunteered to take part in an interview. They were either non-teaching staff or classroom teachers. None of the volunteers held a middle or senior managerial position within the school. So to complement the picture, I approached a number of middle and senior members of staff as well as another member of non-teaching staff. Table 4.6 gives an overview about the participants.

Table 4.6: Staff interviews St. Paul's Secondary School: details of participants

	Gender	Years in teaching	Teaching/non-teaching	Position	Subject area
1. MJ	Female	2.5	Teaching	Classroom	Science, technology
2. SK	Female	8	Teaching	Classroom	PE, arts
3. MK	Female	20+	Non-teaching	Administration	Examinations
4. GL	Female	12	Teaching	Classroom	English, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)
5. WF	Female	5.5	Non-teaching	Senior management	Finances
6. CR	Male	2	Teaching	Classroom	Science, technology
7. BN	Female	19+	Non-teaching	Classroom	Cover
8. TC	Male	6	Teaching	Middle management	Humanities
9. WK	Female	6	Teaching	Middle management	Mathematics, informatics
10. GS	Male	7	Head teacher	Senior management	Mathematics, informatics
11. RP	Male	8	Assistant head teacher	Senior management	PE, arts

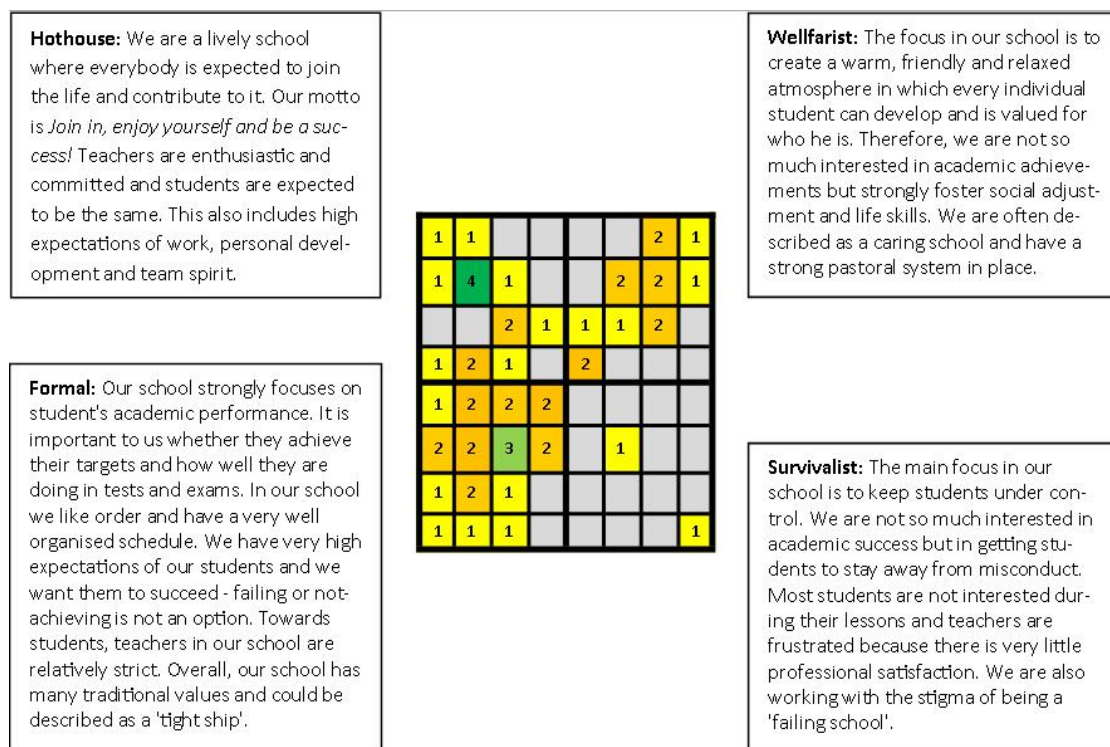


Figure 4.5: Grid sheet outcome for St. Paul's Secondary School, 11 participants (Hargreaves, 1999)

I conducted seven interviews, one of which was a group discussion with the five volunteers and the others were individual ones. As part of every interview participants were asked to fill in a grid sheet locating St. Paul's between the four school typologies (Hargreaves, 1999). Figure 4.5 shows the outcome of that. Participants were asked to use one cross to locate the school but some used more. Therefore, there are more crosses than participants, but this larger number of responses still gives an impression as to where interviewees thought St. Paul's was.

There is an overwhelming number of crosses in the Formal corner ( $n=23$ ), followed by the Hothouse one ( $n=15$ ) and the Wellfarist ( $n=14$ ). Survivalist is only represented with 2 crosses. This staff view of St. Paul's is very similar to that of the students; the school is seen as strongly Formal with elements of Hothouse as well as Wellfarist. Although some elements come through suggesting Survivalist trends, it is only minimal. When taking a closer look at the interviews this impression is strengthened and supported by various comments.

I coded the interviews using Hargreaves's (1999) typology and identified interviewees' comments linked to certain categories. Table 4.7 shows which categories I identified based on the typologies as well as how many comments were made in each category. Not all comments support the type but generally refer to or discuss it.

Moving away from the numbers into the comments themselves, a very layered and in some places intriguing picture of the school emerges. I shall firstly take a look at the Formal category and its counter point, the Wellfarist type, as they seem to be strongly entangled in some ways.

There is no denial from the responses about the Formal nature of St. Paul's with a strong focus on achieving high grades and doing well in examinations. However, when taking a closer look, it seems that meeting particular grades and targets is driven by Ofsted expectations and a certain percentage of students reaching *'the golden C grade'*. This also leads to a constant worry of teachers about getting students to a certain grade whether they are capable of doing so or not: *'I look at my marking criteria it's so grey and vague and ridiculous that you'll end up ... I'll end up down here [pointing to Formal type] [...] we're down here [pointing to Formal type again] because Johnny has to get a Level 8, on what planet?'* (MJ, classroom, teaching, female). This teacher expresses what most teachers probably feel, teaching is not about the children any more but about the numbers. A similar picture is supported by the following quotes:

[...] I have spreadsheets and I have numbers and it is about identifying which kids. So for my job we are very formal because it is about focusing on their performance, making sure we reach their targets and that is my head of faculty job. (WK, middle management, teaching, female)

It's very political, it's very political in the school and the whole thing

Table 4.7: Coding categories of staff interviews ordered by type

School type	Category	Comment counts
Formal (Total comments n=59)	Doing well in tests and exams	21
	Main aim: students' academic performance and to achieve targets	20
	Tight ship	18
	High expectations for students to succeed	11
	We like order, well organised schedule	8
	Failing or not achieving is not an option	7
	Strict teachers	7
	Traditional values	7
Hothouse (Total comments n=40)	Team spirit	15
	Enthusiastic and committed teachers and students	14
	Everybody is expected to join in and contribute	5
	High expectations for work and personal development	4
	Lively	2
Survivalist (Total comments n=35)	Keep students under control	11
	Failing school	11
	Students not interested in lessons	8
	Teachers are frustrated, little professional satisfaction	3
	Not so interested in academic success but keeping students away from misconduct	2
Wellfarist (Total comments n=31)	Caring and strong pastoral system	19
	Warm and friendly atmosphere	7
	Focus on social adjustment and life skills	3
	Individual students can develop, they are valued for who they are	2



about education is political now. [...] The last thing they think about is the children. (BN, classroom, non-teaching, female)

We're teaching to targets. (GL, classroom, teaching, female)

Ofsted I think. I think Government targets are what drives it. Certain senior leaders that push for targets to be met and for A\* to C ratios. (CR, classroom, teaching, male)

We have proved to those parents over the last three years that we are capable of taking their children and moving them on a lot further than they would expect to be moved on. However, for some of those children, even though the distance travelled is great, the academic achievement is still below the standards that would be expected in what is called mainstream education. (RP, senior management, teaching, male)

Our client base isn't the children, it's the parents. [...] raise the parents' expectations so that we can find what we see as our core niche, and our core niche is this first choice of a Christian education. (RP, senior management, teaching, male)

Meeting certain targets and making sure that students achieve well in their examinations means for some teachers that they cannot teach the content that they would like to teach but rather just content which is part of the GCSE syllabus. In the same way, as there is a lot of content to get through in a two-year GCSE course, adding topics of interest is limited. Another point which shines through is that everything taught has to be linked to the GCSE examinations to make sure students can use facts in the correct way. Therefore, during interviews, teachers expressed concern and dissatisfaction with the situation as it is not perceived to be about education and developing young people personally and academically. It feels for some like one cannot study a topic just for fun or out of interest but it has to lead to some form of examination practice. In the same way, independent

learning has to step aside as students *have* to reach their targets. In conversations with colleagues it became apparent to me that for some of them telling students what they need to know is quicker and easier in their eyes than to equip the young people with the necessary skills to find out things for themselves. This becomes especially obvious in Year 11 when students are preparing for their GCSEs. At St. Paul's there is a rather well-organised revision schedule in place which includes an additional revision lesson every day for Year 11s in the weeks leading up to their mock examinations and then the GCSEs themselves. Study leave is kept to a minimum and even students who are on or above target have to attend these sessions. As one colleague said in the interview, at St. Paul's students are being spoon-fed as they are not being trusted to do well on their own accord and school wants to control them and their grades (TC, middle management, teaching, male). However, embracing independent learning would also mean to encourage and factor in failure and mistakes on the way which, in the face of Ofsted and having to reach certain targets, is not seen as a possibility for the school. St. Paul's as an institution has to make sure that examination grades at GCSE level are improving:

[...] a lot of talk about academic performance but I think it's aimed at hitting targets rather than developing intelligence or creativity. I think individual teachers work towards developing of creativity but I don't think the school is geared up for it at the moment. (CR, classroom, teaching, male)

[...] it's a necessity with where the school's coming from. Put in a basic 'You need to know this' kind of progress. (CR, classroom, teaching, male)

But because of the criteria, because of the kids we're dealing with, our low ability kids we're trying to enthuse. We're spoon feeding them almost to get them to the next level. (MJ, classroom, teaching, female)

Maths GCSE in year 9 and then they've taken it as the final in year 10 and then if it's bad they then resit it in year 11. (WK, middle management, teaching, female)

Another aspect surfaces in the comments which puts students even more into the background. Senior management is strongly focusing on becoming a sought-after school for more parents. As the interviewee (RP, senior management, teaching, male) above mentioned, it is about proving to those parents that St. Paul's is a school which can move their children on academically and better than any other school. Another member of the senior management agreed and said about the formal character of the school *'because that probably represents best education for the children. That would probably be an optimal school in terms of qualitative education, most people would probably choose'* (GS, senior management, teaching, male). From a management perspective, school is about hitting targets and satisfying parents as well as Ofsted criteria; for classroom teachers the agenda, although overshadowed by the push for grades, is much more student-centred. Especially the latter came through in the group interview. The comments below highlight the drive for being a teacher and putting all those hours in:

But I am so fond of this catchment and these children that I feel, what do I feel? GS said something about being called. I'm not sure that I have his depth of faith but I think possibly there's a bit of that isn't there sometimes, and you think, probably I'm here for a purpose. So when I'm just ripping into those two year 11s that I've just done or I'm dealing with the boy before with some terrible child protection issues that I, someone's got a bigger plan than me, so that's probably it. Which is very difficult to put in a PhD thing isn't it because religion tends not to sit well with PhD research, but conviction I think does, conviction, a belief that you make a difference, the fact I can walk into [town] and park my car in front of [...], some of the notorious bad

boys and they go, all right sir? That's still there that they bring, the terrible girls bring their children to see me in their pushchairs and they go, do you remember, I was a right shit and you go, yes you were. But to still have that relationship with those kids is fabulous and you can't buy that. (RP, senior management, teaching, male)

[...] caring side of school. I see it in the exams environment [...] ethos of actually if that is what the kid needs we'll do it. (MK, examinations, non-teaching, female)

People say lots about this school [*pointing to Wellfarist*] I hear a lot. And people say 'Oh I've heard you're a very caring school.' And I'd be devastated if we didn't get talked about us in that way. (WF, senior management, non-teaching, female)

To get our grades up to a point where we can become outstanding I think is asking an awful lot [...] for some of our children. And at the end of the day they are our children and I think that is more important, they are our children. (GL, classroom, teaching, female)

The first quote gives a sense of the difficult family backgrounds some students had which members of staff at St. Paul's had to work with in the past and to some extent still had to at the point of the cultural audit. Although the more difficult year groups were moving up in the school and did not define the feeling in school as much, a sense was still there and reminded of the previous rather difficult years.

The last of the above quotes summarises what many a teacher probably thinks when they get up every morning to go to work '*they are our children*'. The teacher making this comment also mentions in another part of the interview that she spends approximately 11 hours at work every day. Most of it has to do with marking work but it is also about wanting to help '*our kids*' as much as she can.

As much as some members of staff experience St. Paul's as a Wellfarist school and are adamant about the importance of it, there also is a different tone amongst staff which indicates that *Wellfarist* is important but not to the detriment of achievement and progress and certainly not in a 'fluffy' way. In that sense, St. Paul's, although interested in the individual student and investing in a strong pastoral system, does not put personal welfare or well-being before good grades. It is basically about keeping students well enough so they can achieve and perform well, it is not about a holistic approach aspiring to an education which helps students to develop necessary life skills and adjust socially to be able to survive in society. As one of the senior members of staff said:

[...] we're not warm and fluffy, we're not cuddly. We care because we're Christians and we care and try and live and use that as a model, but we're not a soft, warm and friendly, we're not welfarist, that's not part of really of who we are. We're not survivalist either. We are somewhere between formal and aspirationally hot house, and it's aspirationally. It is our wish to place ourselves as first choice for the families [in the catchment area].

(RP, senior management, teaching, male)

To achieve this status it is necessary for a school to drive results up. Or in the words of the headteacher at the time:

You can't take your eye off the ball of exam results because that is how you're judged and that's how parents judge you. And ultimately it is good for the children, if you care about a child you care about a child's exam results because that enables him or her to move on to their chosen course or employment. So unashamedly we are focused on exam results and, yes, that's probably the right decision.

(GS, senior management, teaching, male)

Already different ideas and agendas are emerging. Senior and middle management are strongly focused on getting higher examination results as this will grant a better status in the eyes of Ofsted as well as parents. Thus, St. Paul's will become a sought-after school and therefore the intake is expected to change. Teachers who are purely based in the classroom do their best to keep on top of their workload as well as trying to do what they regard as the impossible which is getting some of the students in the school at least a C grade at GCSE and in some cases supporting them to hit a target which for some seems pretty much out of reach. Interestingly, although some participants identified Wellfarist elements within the school and felt very proud about them (see interview quotes above), for other participants, namely senior management, it was not so much a set of characteristics they saw at St. Paul's and also were not keen on pursuing them (see interview quotes above).

The last two school types also feature in the data. Within the grid, the Hothouse type (n=15) received only one cross more than the Wellfarist type (n=14). Although Hothouse features highly and there are a lot of references in the data about elements of the Hothouse type, they are mostly negative and actually argue that there is not much enthusiasm and working together happening at St. Paul's. The main hindrance is identified as the senior management team which tightly lead the school with a clear vision of improved results.

I think that the teachers in this school, teaching staff and support staff and everybody in this school given enough space have definitely got the enthusiasm and the skill, the passion to make this work. In my opinion I really think that they do. (MJ, classroom, teaching, female)

[...] but actually there's one person who does it and that is GS. GS absolutely drives the school and he may give the impression that it is a team and he may give the impression that it is, that things come to us and we can decide it. There is absolutely no movement at all [...] he's the person that drives it. So if he doesn't want it to happen, it

will not happen and he likes people to think that it is a group choice.

(WK, middle management, teaching, female)

Or as these two teachers put it:

MJ: [...] risk for the [Senior Leadership Team (SLT)] to say 'You know what, let's just jump and see what happens.' Cause I think it would be amazing. I think there is enough strong, enthusiastic staff and things [...] And then we drop for a short time and the kids will be having so much fun that they are learning and they'd be really progressing. But the behaviour issues would drop and I think the results would climb even higher and even faster. If we had space.

WF: I think you could keep a lot more teachers who are fed up with it if you were able to teach like that, wouldn't you?

(MJ and WF, both classroom, teaching, female)

Another aspect is that of structure which seems to make collaborative work harder and a sense of whole school community more difficult. Effectively, St. Paul's Secondary School is divided into five separate schools which are called faculties. Each faculty is led by a faculty leader who is responsible for the teachers working there. This structure is not just used as a means of organising subjects and delegating responsibilities, but also to create a sense of competition between individual faculties. Although it can be a positive motivation, competition can also lead to a loss of community and reduced interest in collaboration amongst different subjects and members of staff as members of a faculty are more interested in improving their own examination results.

As a team, I think we are very fragmented [...] took me a good two years before I actually knew my staff because no-one really talked.

(WK, middle management, teaching, female)

*[Answer comes very quickly and confident]* I don't think there is a team at St. Paul's teachers. I think some staff work well together ahm some don't and I think you'll get that everywhere but I don't feel like there's a whole staff drive pulling together for the good of the school. I think there is a lot places where people are looking to for their own individual sake or even their own subject areas sake rather than what is good for the whole school I think it was [...] When I first started there was more of a unity then there is now. (TC, middle management, teaching, male)

I think the faculty structure should be an administrative tool rather than a sort of 'this is how everything is set at all'. I think if you gonna have different faculties or different groups working on different aspects of school they should be cross-faculty rather than one faculty work on this cause they will always represent understandably their own point of view on stuff. Ah, I think praise and competitiveness as well which within a school I think can be harmful. (TC, middle management, teaching, male)

Lastly, the Survivalist aspect. Although it did not appear in the grid as a feature of the school many a conversation touched on the issue of, especially, behaviour. And although there is a real sense and understanding that things have changed a lot in the past years there still is the reminiscence of the old school and a shadow still overhanging the new school.

You can take the school out of the estate but you can't take the estate out of the kids. (Member of staff during another interview, classroom, teaching, female)

All I see is a lot of figures and I do see all the work that goes on behind 6 children and it's so frustrating [...] the real GS and KS [deputy head]



spend on 6 children or 8 children to the detriments of the majority of just normal kids who just want to come to school who are a bit naughty sometimes, a bit good other times and that is very frustrating. (WF, senior management, non-teaching, female)

We are in the middle of a run-down council estate where a lot of the children and their parents and their parents' parents have no expectations for their lives; for their own lives or the lives of their children. (GL, classroom, teaching, female)

Some classes, some low achieving classes are very survivalists. Sometimes it's just getting to the end of this class and make sure they complete the tasks without kicking off. Ahm but I think it is consigned to different classes. (CR, classroom, teaching, male)

### **4.1.3 The school culture of St. Paul's Secondary School**

So, what is St. Paul's Secondary School like in terms of school culture? To summarise I shall use Johnson et al.'s (2008) proposed cultural web as a structure to conclude this cultural audit with what seems to be the paradigm of my main research site.

- Stories: Throughout interviews the big story related about St. Paul's were two destructive incidents and how it served a difficult catchment area; as well, the inadequacy of the school was reported. Throughout all of the interviews conducted, these points came up. There seemed to be an understanding that the school is located in a 'rough' and deprived area of the town and that many students joining the school would be 'hard work' and difficult to manage behaviourally. The stories of destruction were the culmination of it: within three months, two buildings of St. Paul's predecessor school were destroyed. Educational materials of two decades were lost and enthusiasm

of staff as well as students was crushed. Although the people responsible for the damage were known to the police, not enough evidence could be collated for a prosecution. On top of this, the school struggled with a bad reputation regarding its educational outcomes. The latter was supported by its Ofsted report which labelled it as a '3' or inadequate.

- Symbols: With the founding of St. Paul's the old school ceased and with this fresh start new hopes were born. The biggest change related was the move into the new building which, amongst staff, is still an important event as it physically brought staff together in one big school rather than being distributed across a number of buildings. Further to that, the quality of the building and its new technical equipment very much changed the atmosphere in lessons and around school in general.
- Power structures: Very clearly, the power at St. Paul's is in the hands of one person and one person only. The headteacher has moved St. Paul's from an inadequate to a good school and many members of staff are thankful for that. However, what also becomes apparent from interviews is the control the headteacher is exerting and how little power classroom teachers perceive they have. Even faculty leaders support the view that they are being told what to do and only have very little leeway in organising their work areas or implementing change.
- Organisational structures: Organisationally, St. Paul's has a pyramidal structure with the headteacher at the top. He leads a senior leadership team which has different responsibilities and deals with the daily running of the school. The next level down is the heads of faculties, each responsible for a team of teachers in their faculty subjects who are spearheaded by a head of department. There is, for example, Humanities which includes History, Geography, and Religious Studies, or Communications which includes English and Modern Foreign Languages. Across this system of subjects spans the

pastoral net which includes heads of years as well as tutors who are being supported by a school chaplain as well as pastoral assistant who deals with behavioural issues around school.

- Control systems: Driven by the goal of turning St. Paul's from an inadequate to a good and then outstanding school the senior leadership team scrutinises each faculty once a year with the headteacher observing every member of teaching staff once, and other members of the leadership team evaluating academic data within subjects and following through a work scrutiny which includes checking marking in students' books. Although this is often said to be a collegial process meant to support faculties and members of staff in their professional development, most perceive it as a mini-Ofsted inspection in place to make sure the school is moving forward to improve educational practices which shows in the form of better examination results.
- Systems and routines: A normal school day starts for the students of St. Paul's Secondary School with lining up in their tutor groups outside on a sports court. They are then being checked for correct uniform before being sent in with their tutors who will lead them to their tutor rooms. After registration three days a week students will attend an assembly, either as a whole school, a key stage, or a year group. The day ends with tutor time in tutor rooms and is often used by faculty leaders to collect students for after-school detentions. As one member of staff described it in an interview, students at St. Paul's are not given much space to move in as an attempt to reduce misbehaviour. It is all controlled and supervised and thus many a system or routine can be found at St. Paul's to facilitate exactly that.

#### 4.1.3.1 The paradigm

St. Paul's is a Christian school which is tightly led by the headteacher whose aim is to turn it into an outstanding school. To achieve this, the main focus is on improving examination grades and results and so, depending on governmental expectations and measurements, certain target grades are being prioritised. (At the time of the interviews the main measure of the efficiency of a school was how many percent of students in Year 11 achieved five GCSEs at A\* to C level including mathematics and English. This drive becomes apparent in most interviews conducted.) Thus, students who are C/D border-liners are being favoured in lessons and in terms of interventions, as they are doing well, achieving at least a C grade, will benefit school the most. This means that high achievement is not necessarily focused on, and as long as students are doing adequately as judged by their classroom teacher and/or head of subject they will not be supported educationally. As the headteacher mentioned during the interview *'if you care about a child you care about a child's exam results because that enables him or her to move on to their chosen course or employment'*. For him this also means that personal problems of a student are dealt with so they can achieve good examination results not necessarily that they feel better and can develop self-esteem and a positive self-theory.

But how have students experienced this environment and what impact did this educational approach have on the development of the self-theories and self-esteem of gifted and talented students? Before taking a closer look at the five students I have been working with for 4 years, I will explore how teachers' personal understandings of giftedness and talent influence student experiences.

#### **4.1.4 The understanding of the terms 'gifted' and 'talented' at St. Paul's Secondary School**

Research has shown a number of issues surrounding the education of gifted and talented students as discussed in sub-sections 1.2.1 and 2.1.2 (Brady and Koshy, 2014; House of Commons, 2010; Ofsted, 2001; 2009).

- Teachers are not very forthcoming in identifying students as gifted and talented as they often have a limited understanding of what gifted and talented means and thus who they should include in the gifted and talented cohort.
- Support and provision for students with SEN is very strong at St. Paul's as it again plays an important part in the league table ratings as well as potential new parents.
- Students who are on the borderline between a D and C grade are the top priority of the school as their examination results will determine the 5 A\* to C ratio including English and mathematics and are therefore a guideline for potential new parents.

The understanding of what being gifted and talented means at St. Paul's has changed over the years. This is due to changing gifted and talented co-ordinators but also educational policies. I joined St. Paul's in 2011 when the number of identified gifted and talented learners in Years 7 to 10 was 74 out of a total of 487 which is 15%. The register was put together based on students' overall MidYIS scores which have to be 125 or above and their KS2 results. The gifted and talented co-ordinator at the time had written a new school policy a couple of years previously and had based how to identify gifted and talented students mainly on governmental policies. Thus, all those students who fitted the criteria mentioned above (MidYIS and KS2 results) were reported to the Local Education Authority (LEA) as was requested by policies. When a new gifted and talented co-ordinator

took over in September 2012 the number of gifted and talented learners was reduced slightly to 13% of the whole school cohort of 611 from Year 7 to Year 11. What had changed in that time was that identification was not just based on attainment and MidYIS scores but also identification through departments which therefore also included a high number of talented students who were high-achieving in art, physical education (PE), drama or music. At this point educational policies on a governmental level were not in place any more so the area of gifted and talented education became a solely school matter. The last gifted and talented register was put together in 2013 and again contained about 13% of the whole school population (n=606). Identification since 2013 has somewhat improved and seems more transparent although most teachers do not seem to know where to find the register and thus do not know the specific area of giftedness and talent. However, provision in general and differentiation in particular are still weak points at St. Paul's which will be discussed in more detail in this section.

In May 2015 I led a focus group with five teachers at St. Paul's. They were all trainee teachers or were completing their first year as a newly qualified teacher (NQT). The discussion focused around giftedness and talent within the school and personal approaches to teaching very able students which inevitably reflects on the students' experience. The following points stood out:

- There was consent among participants that they did not know where to find the school's gifted and talented register and thus were not able to access the information about the identified students. Especially, whether they had been put on the register by a particular subject area or due to their high performance at primary school.
- There was also a discussion about what being gifted and talented actually means. Again, answers suggested uncertainty and being unclear or having very individual expectations as the following vignette illustrates: the background was a list of learners which were to go on an English trip. The

gifted and talented co-ordinator had organised it and asked another English teacher whether she would like to add any names. The teacher asked felt that she would not have included half of the students *'because they don't achieve what I would expect them to achieve if they are G&T'* (Teacher focus group, May 2015). Although she did not make a reference to what she meant by that, there clearly is the assumption that gifted and talented means high achievement.

- Catering for the high ability students also is more of an ad hoc decision rather than something planned long term. The teachers in the focus group mentioned interventions which they think of in lessons, like questioning, encouraging more depth in answers, giving them an A-level question to stretch them, or using answers from high ability students to encourage the lower ability students. Only in some cases did teachers mention a planned approach to differentiation, for example, by planning a group task and putting the high ability students in charge of the group and then differentiating around them. Another example included very able students in an SEN environment who were asked to give a short talk at the end of a lesson to summarise what they had learned that day. In PE the able students were given a bit more responsibility and were also being put in charge of certain things like organising the warm-up or officiating. However, most of the approaches sounded sporadic and unplanned. One teacher confessed that *'[...] I find it really difficult to incorporate G&T stretch activities, I'm just useless... at times'* (Teacher focus group, May 2015).
- Interestingly, when sharing their experiences with open differentiation, e.g. with different worksheets or tasks, teachers identified a number of issues. One was that some very able students would not touch the harder work and just do the easy task, a tendency which Francis et al. (2012) as well as Dweck (2000) mention in their research, linking it to a fixed or growth mindset and

how confident students are in their ability and how much of it just depends on wanting to look good in front of peers and not wanting to fail.

- This previous point sparked a discussion about those students who did not put a lot of effort in but still did rather well. Figure 4.6 shows the drawing of one of the teachers and her thoughts about gifted and talented students. The picture suggests that doing well is achieving an A/B grade and that is without putting much work in. Opposed to that are the A\* candidates who, in the teachers' views, clearly were working hard.

The last point I shall raise in this context is linked to a teacher focus group which I led in 2013. Amongst the five members of staff a discussion developed which centred around gifted and talented students and the notion that classroom teachers know what to do in theory but do not have the actual time to prepare differentiated lessons for all. Amongst all the marking and teaching lessons, differentiation was one of the last things teachers in that focus group thought about, especially if it was for the higher ability students as they tended to be well behaved and did not cause any behavioural issues. As one teacher explained:

I think most of us who had a bad day on the teaching side it's because you had a class of 30 and you haven't taught 30 you dealt with three who haven't learned anything at the end of the lesson. You've just dealt with their disruption, their behaviour and you had to ignore the other 27 in the meantime. So instead of having 27 who have learned something you end up with nobody learning anything because all you focused on was those 3.

(SK, classroom, teaching, female)

In an environment where misbehaviour of a few limits the education of the majority focusing on the very able students in a class is difficult as they tend to get on with things and allow the teacher time to deal with the misbehaving few. Also, given



the strive for C-grades students who already have achieved a C-grade or above are not a target group. This latter point also seems to hinder the implementation of a teaching style which would nurture curiosity of students and enable them to become independent learners which studies suggest is one of the keys to enable students to develop their skills to an exceptional level (Dweck, 2000; Garn et al., 2010):

I think we're also making a very strong reliance on the small, the relatively small minority of students who are not from the estate. You know we've got some kids who come from a middle-class background who if there had been funds may well have gone to a different school [...] not the church school here. They've got good support at home, they've got all the right things, all the right recipe for good grades. But we're kind of pressuring them sooo [strong emphasis on the word, o very long] much to carry us through whilst the majority, let's face it, need BTec and need smaller class sizes and need practical subjects and need to be told that actually it's ok we know you can barely read but we gonna get you an E. Do everything in our power but an E is not good enough. So we try and rely so heavily on our C/D borderline our As and Bs are just [dismissive hand gesture] [...] But I just sort of think, I think the ideal is to be able to have this kind of fun idea [...] fun idea of kids coming in and learning and taking responsibility for their own learning and being independent learners which is fantastic and it works if you've got freedom to do it. I mean I don't know about you [pointing to SK, another classroom teacher, female] but if I had double lessons I could do so much more to achieve. Because I had the time to let them be independent, to let them make a mess, to let them do whatever they need to do to be independent learners. But because of the criteria, because of the kids we're dealing with, our low ability kids we're trying to enthuse we're spoon feeding them almost to get

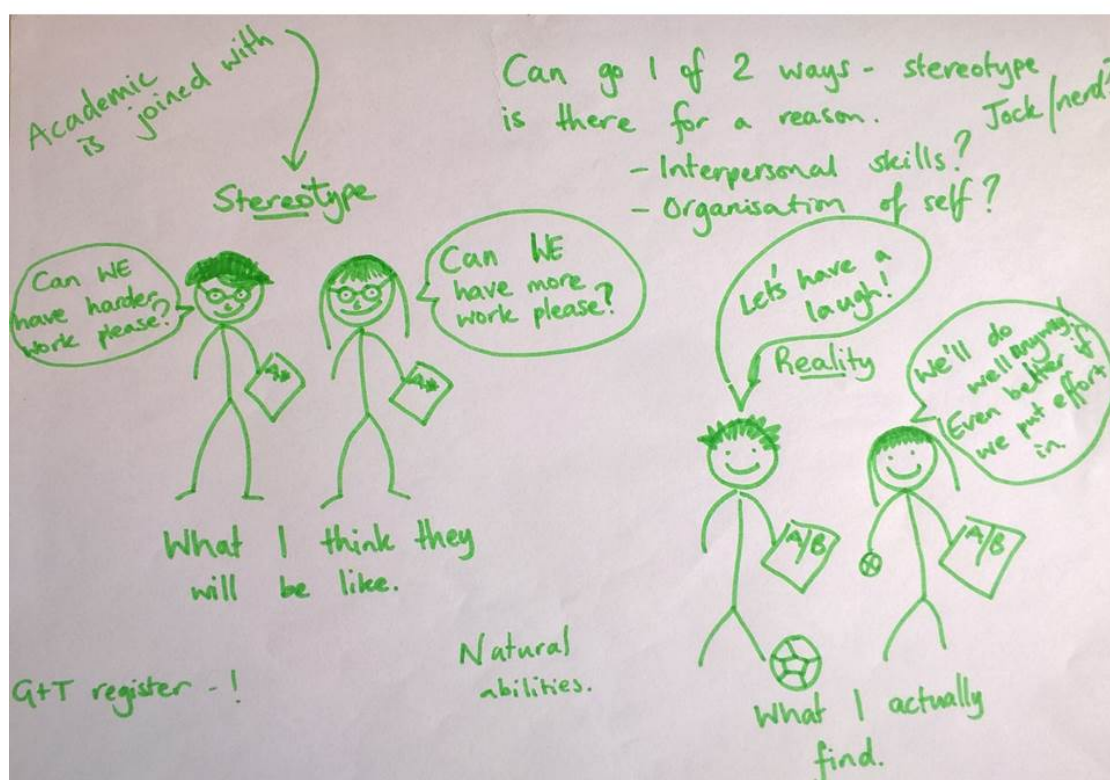


Figure 4.6: Teacher focus group: thoughts about gifted and talented students expressed in a drawing

them to the next level so we can't.

(MJ, classroom, teaching, female)

Before finishing this section I will take a closer look at the understanding of the teachers about what being gifted and talented means to them as this directly impacts on students' experience.

As explained above the teachers present in the focus group all had a slightly different idea about what it meant to be gifted and talented and all had different students in mind when talking about it. Figure 4.6 shows what one of the teachers in the focus group thought about gifted and talented students. Interestingly, she referred to two different ideas, the stereotypical gifted student who works hard and wants more and the 'real' gifted student who does not work very hard because he or she can do it anyway.

Another participant was a PE teacher and explained that she does not look at the gifted and talented register as it does not always hold the relevant information for her subject. She will assess the students almost lesson-by-lesson or sport-by-sport and identify those students doing really well in particular sports. Those students she will challenge and push by giving them more responsibility. In her area she understands being smart as *'knowing your environment and responding accordingly as such; specifically to PE the tactics, being able to be told a tactic as such and go into a game and be able to implement it without much more guidance as such. So being able to adapt and apply to what the situation asks'* (Teacher focus group, May 2015). A positive outcome of this approach, as reflected by the teacher herself, is that often those students doing well in sports are not so good academically; being given responsibility boosts their confidence as they can feel the trust given to them - a positive experience which helps them develop confidence and positive self-esteem.

Another aspect of gifted and talented students was that of confidence versus complacency. Four of the five teachers had noticed that some very able students did not necessarily contribute to lesson discussions, maybe because they might be too shy or just bored. One teacher mentioned that there also was an air about being very able which led to it being perceived as 'uncool' by other students. Therefore, a strategy which helps very able students to fit in and not stand out is to not participate actively in lessons, a coping strategy which is also supported by my interviews with gifted and talented students at St. Paul's but also other research studies (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2012). Another participant mentioned that it seems that gifted and talented students do not have to work hard and do well anyway, naturally. This was felt to lead to the habit of coasting and not wanting to put too much work in and developing, from a teacher's perspective, into outright lazy individuals. When I asked the teachers why they thought this happened, students labelled as gifted and talented being lazy and not actually doing so well, two very interesting points were raised.

- Being lazy was a habit that stemmed from lessons where very able students do not necessarily get differentiated for and thus develop a culture of coasting and not putting much work in as it is not necessary for them to achieve good grades.
- The second point was raised by one of the teachers talking about her experience of being labelled as gifted and talented just before her GCSEs:

I don't think it helped with my further education when I was told at GCSE that I was gifted and talented. I rarely focused in lessons and I didn't think I needed it. Although I did loads of revision before my exams. And then in 6th Form I had the shock of my life and I nearly dropped out of 6th Form in my 1st year because I had to put so much more work in when it wasn't so natural. So being branded as gifted and talented doesn't really give them the chance to develop the skill that they are going to need for further education. It definitely didn't help me at 6th Form or uni because I think if I hadn't been branded and I did think I had to work more at GCSE, I had prepared much more.

(Teacher focus group, May 2015)

This teacher says that being labelled meant that she did not develop the skills needed for further education like revising effectively and working independently, a view which also is reflected in Dweck's (2000) work.

Bearing in mind these two points, the next chapter will look very closely at the experiences and perceptions of five students at St. Paul's who were on the gifted and talented register.

## Chapter 5

# Findings: the gifted and talented students at St. Paul's Secondary School

*'It is my opinion,' Miss Honey said, 'that Matilda should be taken out of my form and placed immediately in the top form with the eleven-year-olds.'*

*'Ha!' snorted Miss Trunchbull. 'So you want to get rid of her, do you? So you can't handle her? So now you want to unload her on to wretched Miss Plimsoll in the top form where she will cause even more chaos?'*

*(Dahl, 2010)*

In this chapter I will focus on the five students I followed at St. Paul's Secondary School. One of the students, Edward, left St. Paul's after Year 11 but I was fortunate to be able to stay in touch and do a further two follow-up interviews after he had left. The focus of this chapter is to explore how these individuals coped with being at St. Paul's and, in Edward's case, what changed when he moved to college and how he experienced his time there. Personal information included in this chapter about the individual students adds points to the information already

given in sub-section 3.2.1.2.

The last section of this chapter will look at the two additional research sites and the data generated there, and highlight differences as well as similarities between them and St. Paul's Secondary School.

## **5.1 Edward**

### **5.1.1 Who is Edward?**

I first met Edward when starting to work at St. Paul's Secondary School in September 2011. Given my interest in gifted and talented students, he soon was pointed out to me as a very bright and gifted student with a special interest in mathematics and science.

On a personal level, Edward was seen by teachers as a friendly, polite and humorous student. He was strongly involved in Scouts as his mother was a scout leader and thus had spent many a summer on camps exploring the world around him from a very young age. He was generally very interested in the world and how it works and had always been a curious person. Edward is also the oldest of three siblings and his sister as well as brother showed similarly high ability based on their MidYIS scores as well as KS2 results and were both enrolled at St. Paul's. There seemed to be a very close bond between him and his younger brother. Edward talked about him as a twin who seemed to go through similar struggles as he did; the two of them struggled to make friends and they both disliked primary school which led to both of them at times truanting primary school (Interview Edward, 22 July 2013).

Moving on to academic achievements, Edward's KS2 results came in as English 5C, mathematics 5A and science 5A. The majority of students joining a secondary

school in Year 7 work at a level 4 so his high levels suggest high academic ability. When looking at Edward's MidYIS scores a similar picture evolves. His overall score was 136 which places him in the top 2.5% nationally and thus classifies him as gifted in traditional terms referring to high academic ability (Forster and Metcalfe, 2010). Linked to the scores are also letters A to D. Edward achieved As across the four individual sections with the highest being Non-Verbal followed by Skills, Vocabulary and then Mathematics. The letter A identifies Edward as part of the top 25% of a representative national sample (Forster and Metcalfe, 2010).

Edward comes across as a very mature young man who is very aware of what is happening around him and how his actions impact on others. This becomes apparent when talking about his high expectations of himself.

Interviewer: So what is bad for you? So what grade is 'not doing as well'?

Edward: I think it's going back down a grade. I mean...

Interviewer: So A rather than A\* or...

Edward: Or B instead of an A, yeah. Sometimes that's the case. But I mean it's quite hard to say that openly to the teacher or to express that when you know you've still done better than most in the class. Because you can't say 'I did really bad in this test' and yet you're still ahead of everyone. I mean you can't say that it's just not on.

Interviewer: Why can't you say that?

Edward: Because people like [say] 'Stop being an arsehole Edward'. I mean you can't. I mean it's very demoralising if someone says. I mean I don't want to say that 'Actually if I did badly you must have done really badly' when I know they've actually put in a lot of effort and they done really well. But they don't necessarily see that themselves.

That's what I'm trying to say.

(Interview Edward, 22 July 2013)

Linked to this is also his dislike of being seen as an academic marker for others as well as his worries as to what his friends will think about him if he, for example, does not get the highest mark in a test. This fear is reflected in his coping mechanisms adopted at school and will be discussed in more detail later on in this section (5.1.2.3). Even though he works hard in some subjects, like science and mathematics and would like to be pushed a bit more, he also likes the times when he can relax in lessons and lean back. Another characteristic of Edward is his love of independence and his general dislike of large social groups. Interestingly, in his eyes, the latter seems to be connected to his high ability which gives a glimpse of his understanding of being gifted and talented:

I'm quite introverted as well. I think a lot of people like me struggle because they don't really like to be in large social groups, I really struggle with that sort of workings.

(Interview Edward, 22 July 2013)

## **5.1.2 Edward's educational journey**

### **5.1.2.1 Beliefs about himself**

But what were Edward's beliefs about himself over the course of the 3 years? To find out about Edward's beliefs about himself I used a visualisation aid in all three interviews which is called the Blobs as described in sub-section 3.2.1.2. In this sub-section of the paper I will concentrate on the individual Blobs chosen by Edward to describe how he felt (see Figure 5.1).

When first interviewed in July 2013 Edward picked two Blobs showing how he





felt. The first one was a Blob at the top of the picture, seemingly proud and raising its arms into the air and a big smile on its face. Overall there seems to be a positive feeling associated with this Blob and when talking to Edward about it, it became apparent that being there was a good and enjoyable place to be. He seemed happy and proud about his grades and the Blob reflected his feelings about his achievements (Interview Edward, 22 July 2013). The second choice was a Blob half way up a mountain, relaxing and having a cup of tea, again, with a big smile on its face. For Edward it represented the feeling of *'you've got where you've wanted to be and now you can kind of sit down and take it a bit easy'* (Interview Edward, 22 July 2013). This also reflected his perception of not having to *'push yourself much further'* or *'not being pushed much further'* (Interview Edward, 22 July 2013). During the course of the interview it became clearer that there is on the one hand the feeling of sometimes needing a bit of a rest and not wanting to work hard all the time; a bit of recreational time. On the other hand Edward also talks about the fact that lessons are not very challenging and that there are times when he just sits around not doing any work. Overall though, both of the Blobs have smiles on their faces and seem happy about their place in the world, a view which also shines through in how Edward talked about his life at school.

During our interview in January 2015 I asked Edward about his experience of Year 11. The Blob he chose was at the bottom of the sheet almost drowning, the facial expression clearly unhappy and despairing (shown in Figure 5.1, labelled 2014). As discussed in our interview in January 2015, his last year at St. Paul's was a very difficult and dark one. He felt depressed, did not have a lot to do especially during revision lessons but more importantly felt vulnerable and lost his confidence in himself and his abilities which dragged him down even further.

Further to the Blobs described above, Edward also used two others to illustrate in our 2013 interview how he felt at St. Paul's in terms of academic support. The one he chose first was a Blob free-climbing up a steep mountain, on its own with no

support whatsoever. The facial expression seemed not too unhappy though. His second choice was a well-equipped climber with rope, helmet and harness; clearly supported and not alone. His perception was that he was not *'given as much support rope than anyone else'* (Interview Edward, 22 July 2013) but immediately added that it was not a bad thing necessarily. Edward explained this based on his intelligence and ability to study independently and reassured me that it was not a big problem for him and that he actually preferred it that way. However, he also finished talking about the two Blobs by saying *'I've adapted'* (Interview Edward, 22 July 2013). When questioning him about it further the answers mainly reflect the fact that during lesson time when he had finished his work he sometimes got extra reading or work to do which was not too strenuous. When I met Edward again in 2015 we actually came back to these Blobs and without remembering he picked the very same Blob which was well supported on its way up the mountain as the one representing how he felt at college then. In the course of the 2015 interview Edward explained that at college he had peers as well as teachers to talk to. Especially the approachability of teachers seemed to have changed quite substantially. Edward mentioned that due to a lower teaching load, college teachers were available for questions and would also give out work to challenge the most able within the course. Even though Edward did not mention it as a struggle during his last two years at St. Paul's, according to the interview and the development of the Blobs, it seems to be something which he treasures at college.

During our last interview in 2016 we returned to the Blobs and firstly he chose *'the cheeky one, up in the air balloon'* (Interview Edward, 07 July 2016). For him this Blob represented the feeling of freedom and elation of having finished college and being then able to just enjoy life for eight weeks and do things he enjoyed doing, like going away with the Scouts. Secondly, looking forward to September and starting university he chose the hang glider Blob. Interestingly, Edward mentions all the hard work coming his way and him not being on a magic carpet and it just all happening but him being excited about it, he wanted to do it. He also

mentioned that when he left St. Paul's he did not necessarily know where to go whereas at college he knew and felt confident about it. I also could sense pride in his words when he talked about the fact that he had to climb up the mountain to then be able to take off into new adventures.

Overall, Edward's emotional journey through secondary school and college was varied over the reported 3 years. He started out at the top feeling good about himself and his achievements. Edward again reached that point of pride about his achievements and enjoyment of learning at college but in-between went through a very difficult and dark time where he lost confidence in himself as well as his ability. In the next sub-section I am going to take a closer look at what his struggles were and consequently how he dealt with them.

#### **5.1.2.2 What difficulties did he encounter?**

When I first interviewed Edward at the end of Year 10 we talked a lot about his primary school time as he did not like the atmosphere there as well as the structure of mixed ability classes, name calling and not being able to spend much time with his friends during lunch time. This resulted in him developing anxiety and at times refusing to go to school. He would feign illness to be able to stay at home. In his looking back he again reflected in a very mature way about his experiences:

My parents knew, my teachers knew but there is not much you can do. I felt that was the case. Certainly the teachers I felt weren't doing enough. Now I realise that maybe I didn't. Maybe I had the premonition that it was going to be awful so it was awful. But it wasn't necessarily that bad but I had the fear, there was a lot of fear. That was not necessarily well placed.

(Interview Edward, 22 July 2013)

However, when he moved on to St. Paul's he said things got better. Due to set ability classes and meeting new friends he was able to fit in better and enjoy time in school more.

When taking a closer look at the interviews a few issues arose. Significantly there was quite a change in tone from the 2013 interview to the one conducted in 2015.

When first interviewed, Edward mentioned the following struggles:

- Too much work: Edward mentioned that teachers always expected high grades from him but did not bear in mind that it still was a lot of work for him which created a lot of pressure for him.
- Scared of failure because of what friends would think.
- Feeling pressurised because he was used as a marker by other students.
- Others having wrong views about him which resulted in teasing or unpleasant comments.

In the follow-up interview in 2015 we also talked about his last year at St. Paul's which was when things changed quite dramatically. Throughout Year 11 his attendance dropped significantly. Many a day he would not come into school as he felt depressed. When talking about the issues which led to his dislike of being in school they were on the one hand related to his academic studies and on the other due to bullying becoming more severe.

Edward mentioned in our conversation that *'I get ill when I'm not working'* (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015) which obviously became worse the further he ventured into Year 11. The aspect he struggled most with was once lessons were purely about revision especially in mathematics. Having done his mathematics GCSE in Year 10 already, there was *'not a lot to do'* (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015) in Year 11 so a lot of the time he just sat around not doing a lot. In our last interview in 2016 we went back to his words about getting ill and he explained

that being able to study and learn helped him to cope with his depression and thus, coming into school where he felt studying and learning was not happening had a detrimental effect on his social-emotional well-being.

Another struggle during his last year at St. Paul's was the lack of praise and recognition of his successes. Edward recalled teachers belittling his test results by referring to them as 'Oh Edward, only 80%' rather than saying 'Well done, that's an A/A\*'. This lack of praise and encouragement led to him losing confidence in his own ability which also had a negative effect on his self-belief and thus self-theory. Added to this emotional stress he was also used as a marker for other students so whenever someone would get better marks in a test than him they would indulge in it and tease him (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015).

Lastly, Edward lost a lot of friendship support during his last year at St. Paul's. He said in our conversation that people changed in Year 11, some were not so good in dealing with the pressure and stress put on them and thus retaliated by picking on others who did better than them. During the course of Year 11 he also felt less supported by the pastoral team of the school. On one occasion he was tripped and pushed by another student when going down the stairs. One of the science teachers saw it and referred the issue to his tutor leaving it in his hands to sort out. Unfortunately, the issue was not dealt with as the person pushing Edward had back up from other students saying 'Edward barged in in front of us' and thus the tutor having word against word left it at that. Significantly, Edward said that this was a point where he felt vulnerable, something he had not experienced at St. Paul's before and which led to him being absent for a few days after that (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015).

### 5.1.2.3 How did he cope with the difficulties?

When coding Edward's interviews three main coping mechanisms became apparent which he used during his time in school. The three coping mechanisms which I will discuss in more detail in this sub-section are:

- Non-participation in lessons
- Hiding who he really is
- Truancing school

#### *Non-participation in lessons*

One way of dealing with his feeling of being different and not wanting to stand out in a class was to either not participate in lessons, e.g. not put his hand up even though he knew the answer or to give inappropriate answers to break with expectations and rules. One of the examples he mentioned refers to a science lesson:

I don't necessarily want to stand out for saying the right answer or saying something. So sometimes I'll shout out answering the question or I answer the question by shouting out or I'll say things not necessarily very appropriate either. So the other day in Physics sir asked the question 'What's the difference between a nuclear reactor and nuclear bomb?' And my answer was 'Why I don't have a nuclear reactor at home.' So it's things like that that sometimes come out.

(Interview Edward, 22 July 2013)

In this context he also talked about others as well keeping quiet in lessons because they did not want to seem uncool and being intelligent seems to be part of not being cool.

*Hiding who he really is*

Edward also mentioned wearing masks in school to hide his true self and to fit in better. Again, for his age he had a very strong awareness of how his actions impacted others and that sometimes adjusting what he said and how he behaved made life easier for him:

Yeah because it's sort of a mask I wear. Sort of trying to hide everything which is quite useful because if you're sad you could smile and joke and then people leave you alone. Cause I never liked people smothering me when I was upset or angry.

(Interview Edward, 22 July 2013)

In addition to wearing masks Edward also avoided talking about his test results or work in general. This was to avoid other students pouncing on him and teasing him about his achievements as well as his fear of what his friends would think about him (Interview Edward, 22 July 2013).

This became more of an issue in Year 11 as teachers would more openly refer to his results or ability in front of the class. One example was that of a science lesson in Year 11. The whole class was given homework and the teacher said that she would of course expect excellence from Edward. Thus, by exposing him in front of the class and setting the expectations very high Edward felt pressurised which, paired with his decreased confidence, did not go well. Again, this would give other students the opportunity to use him as the marker hence his reluctance to talk about his grades or work and of course his aversion to being exposed in front of the whole class (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015).

If all other strategies failed Edward would then often use his last option which was just not coming into school.

*Truantiing school*



Lastly, as one major coping mechanism Edward truanted school. As discussed before, not going to school and feigning sickness was one of his ways to avoid the difficulties at primary school. After things had improved for him at secondary school he fell back into that old pattern in Year 11. After a few weeks into the new academic year Edward started to miss lessons and this got worse after his mock examinations and when revision lessons started. Home and school worked closely together to bring him in and give him space. I recall one conversation during spring 2014 when I asked him how things were. He did not say much apart from ‘Not so good.’ When I asked him what the worst part was he replied the coming into school for revision sessions which were pointless for him. In our interview in January 2015 we went back to that time and he shared some interesting thoughts with me. As mentioned in the previous sub-section, he did not feel well supported by the pastoral team of the school and thus felt vulnerable. His only way of dealing with it seemed to be the staying away from school. Some of the issues he faced like being bullied or misunderstood he countered with walking away and turning his back (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015).

### **5.1.3 New beginnings: college and beyond**

Since Edward started college, life was very different. In our interviews in January 2015 as well as July 2016 I could hear in his voice if he was talking about St. Paul’s or college. He was much happier, felt more at home there and had finally challenging work to do.

One of the key changes seemed to be that he was treated like an adult. He was given responsibility and was granted independence in his studies. In addition to that, he mentioned that the learning atmosphere was very different at college as the people who were there wanted to be there. The A-levels Edward was taking were mathematics, further mathematics, physics and chemistry. In 2015 he mentioned that he was now also working with people who were of similar or same ability and

had the same interests and thus they got involved in discussion about work:

Interviewer: How is that, because obviously like at St. Paul's you were top of class and now suddenly someone's saying to you, actually now you have to work even harder, how is that for you?

Edward: I love it, I love it, I love it, I really do and having people who are similar ability or up there, a) just to talk to about problems and b) just to push you, I mean just to say, you know, here's this problem that I've found, what do you think of it, how would you go about it. What was it, in break, me and *Tom*<sup>1</sup>, one of my really good friends, *Tom's* a similar ability, brought a very funny video. So there's a C3 exam that happened a couple of years ago and it's somewhat infamous for being one of the hardest exams that anyone has ever seen and has nothing to do with the syllabus so everyone was furious about it. It's a very funny video, sort of a spoof of this scene from 'Mein Führer' going through, it's like, what do you mean there was [LAUGHS]. Oh very funny.

Interviewer: That sounds like you also find people around you who you can work with and so, are you the odd one out or not really any more?

Edward: I'm still somewhat the odd one out but it doesn't feel as pronounced if that makes sense and it doesn't feel the odd one out in the wrong way, it feels that these people are equally sort of nerdy and willing to be openly nerdy and not sort of you know, see that as a bit of a weird thing.

(Interview Edward, 20 January 2015)

What he also cherished was the fact that he could then be openly nerdy and it

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<sup>1</sup>Name changed

was acceptable as there were others who were similar to him. Being able to openly enjoy mathematics and have discussions about mathematical problems seemed liberating for him and also pushed him further academically. Working with people of similar ability and suddenly not always being the best anymore also helped Edward to make much more progress and feel at peace with working even harder and pushing for even better grades. Edward was also very excited about his future plans which now involved wanting to study mathematics at Cambridge University (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015). During our 2015 interview he told me that he had applied for summer school at Oxford University and when we caught up again in July 2016 he told me that he had been invited to two summer schools the year before, one of which was based on academic ability and he was one of 30 students who were chosen from 3,000 chemistry students. Again, compared to the conversation we had in July 2013, there was a change in attitude, much more positive and work focused.

Further to this, when meeting Edward again in January 2015 there was a real apparent change. He was buzzing again about his academic work. He was proud to be talking about wanting to study mathematics and aiming for a place at a highly-rated university. Edward also was not ashamed of his ability and interests anymore but celebrated and shared them with fellow students as well as teachers. He also relished the harder work and being challenged academically. One of the most significant changes he mentioned himself '*I can tell jokes again*' (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015) which is something he lost during his last year at St. Paul's.

But what were the biggest changes for him at college? It seems that having supportive teachers who were able to challenge him academically as well as point him to the work he needed to complete in order to get into Cambridge University. Also, having friends of a similar ability level spurred him on in his academic work and achievements and it suddenly was normal to talk about mathematical

or scientific problems or issues without being seen as strange (see the interview excerpt above). Edward also mentioned in the 2015 interview that he had a better understanding of himself and who he was because he was now able to share it with friends and other people without having to hide who he was. Realising who he was led him to accept himself for the things he liked and this of course had a positive impact on his self-theory which is the key to working hard (Dweck, 2000).

Interviewer: [...] Is there also something which helped you to maybe be more you, which, thinking about the depression, isn't that the biggest part and the biggest problem to accept who you are and to come to yourself?

Edward: Yeh, no, I really felt that, it was really having something that, sort of realising that this was kind of my hobby, what I like doing. You know everyone else has their hobby and it's a bit, oh I really like working, it's a bit sad isn't it. But actually saying, no damn right, that is exactly what I love doing, I'm really interested in this stuff, this is my passion, you know. And being able to say that and being able to share that with people at college who were actually interested, genuinely you know, in what I had to say I think.

(Interview Edward, 07 July 2016)

What have I learned from Edward's journey through secondary education and then college? Finding his place at college amongst peers, being REALLY challenged academically and finding a supportive environment made a huge difference to Edward's academic achievements but more importantly to his social-emotional well-being. At the end of Year 13, at the age of 18 years, he was cheerful again, had learned different ways of coping with his depression, namely to embrace who he was and what he liked, and overall had peers and teachers along the way supporting and challenging him. Edward also had a dream he was pursuing and a

college which was equipped to support him along the way. Importantly though, the teachers at college pointed him in the right direction, provided additional work but at no point spoon-fed him, a notion which Edward very much cherished while being there because it is *‘a much more adult approach to learning and to have a lot more trust put on you’* (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015).

I will finish this sub-section with an email I received from Edward on 20 August 2016, just after he had received his A-level results:

I thought it would be nice to tell you my results

i got four A\*s and met my offer for Cambridge.

thank you for your time these past years,

Edward

His secondary education and college journey had come to a very positive end and his future appeared shining brightly in the distance, a wonderful end to his at times dark moments along the way.

## 5.2 Natalie and Keith

### 5.2.1 Who are Natalie and Keith?

I first met Natalie and Keith when teaching their Religious Education (RE) group in the summer term of 2012. They were in Year 7 and the teaching group was a top set including the most able students of the academic year, based on their MidYIS scores, as well as those who had achieved well in their Year 6 SATs. I interviewed both students in July 2013 at the end of Year 8 (13 years of age) and again in July 2015 at the end of Year 10 (15 years of age).

Keith especially was pointed out to me as he had an overall Midyis score of 143 which was at that point the highest score in the whole school. He had also achieved Level 5s at KS2 in all core subjects (English, mathematics, science). When I taught him he came across as a polite and very mature young man. Keith had many questions and showed a very good understanding of the topics at hand. He was also able to link knowledge from previous lessons to new content. Further, Keith was a very humble young man who did not like to boast about his achievements or abilities. Favourite subjects Keith mentioned in our first interview were mathematics and science as well as the humanities. Although he did not mention it, he was also quite a keen sportsman representing the school on numerous occasions. One of the key events was when Keith and another friend were able to meet with national rugby players to train and design a rugby outfit for the school. I remember the two of them reporting about their experience during a whole school assembly and the joy about the experience was still shining through.

Keith's humble nature shone through during our first interview when we talked about being praised for his achievements:

Interviewer: [...] Do you mind being in the spotlight for achieving really well?

Keith: Not really, I'm pretty content with it. It's not great to be the one though standing in front of the whole school because it just feels a bit[...]

Natalie: Intimidating.

Keith: Yeh that's right intimidating, that's a good word.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013)

This view of not being too keen on praise and feeling intimidated by it also came up in the 2015 interview but with a slightly different perspective. We were talking

about the end of year tests, a feature of St. Paul's which intended to prepare students on a long-term basis for examinations including the revision phase as well as the structure of examinations in terms of being taken in a big hall in silence. These end-of-year tests were used by teachers to assess the progress of a student over the academic year and were also used as an indicator as to where students needed support or had to be moved into a different teaching set especially in the core subjects like English, mathematics and science. At the end of Year 10 Keith received mainly Bs, an A\* in biology and an A in English. His score in Spanish was not as high, but it did not seem to be one of his favourite subjects. When asked about how much revision he put into it he said 'none' which led to a discussion about not putting any work in but still getting pretty good grades:

Interviewer: Can you tell me really honestly something, you're not putting any work in and you're getting pretty good results, how does it make you feel?

Keith: Guilty. You see a lot of people that put a lot of effort in and don't always get the high marks.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 21 July 2015)

Although doing well in his end-of-year tests he did not feel good about it but 'guilty'. He was fully aware of the fact that some of his peers were putting in a lot of work and were still not getting the grades he was getting which was not sitting well with him. This also links in with Keith's beliefs about himself which shone through in the 2013 interview when he mentioned that he was surprised about being put on the gifted and talented register as he never thought of himself as exceptionally better than others.

The issue of revision or to be more precise not revising in the light of upcoming examinations or tests was quite a big topic in both interviews and I shall explore it in more detail in the next sub-section.

As mentioned before, one of the qualities often associated with Keith was a maturity beyond his years. In conversations he would show great insight into life in general and especially about his aspirations. Even during our first interview he already had thought about the future. This was partly inspired by his older brother who attended St. Paul's at the time and was in Year 11 (16 years of age) but also showed his thoughtfulness, a characteristic often associated with gifted and talented children (Gross, 2004). When asked about whether he had thought about his future yet and what kind of courses he might be interested in, Keith answered:

Probably the normal core subjects course that I'm doing at the moment, probably science and maths and probably another one like philosophy or something would be quite nice to do, because my cousin did it in university and said it was very interesting and just thought provoking and one of the subjects that isn't always going to help you too much but it's always just, it makes you grow as a person thinking about life in a different way. [...] Become a better person, have a better outlook on life.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013)

Natalie was also part of the above-mentioned top set RE group. Her overall MidYIS score was 122 which from an academic perspective places her in the top 25% nationally. Her mathematics score was slightly higher at 130. Her interest and aptitude for mathematics also became apparent during our interviews. Further to that she had achieved levels 5 in English and mathematics at KS2. Natalie was very quiet in lessons and always seemed very shy. Therefore, it came as somewhat of a surprise when she won the Year 8 Spelling Bee, a school spelling competition amongst all Year 8 students which happened in different stages with one overall winner at the end. This surprise was also mirrored by peers who were not aware of her academic achievements and abilities indicating that she was good at not



showing it:

Natalie: Er I think because I never contribute, people sometimes are surprised that I get good grades, cos say not this year but last year we did like pre mock English and someone came over to me and they'd got an A and they weren't really happy about that and they said, what have you got, Natalie and I said, I've got an A star and she was just like and then a few people were like, **you** got an A star.

[...]

Interviewer: So they aren't actually aware of how well you're doing are they in some subjects?

Natalie: Not in most.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 21 July 2015)

Similarly to Keith, Natalie liked mathematics and placed herself in the middle of her English group. When asked about winning the spelling competitions she just said '*Spelling is just like so you can remember*' (Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013). For Natalie it had nothing to do with ability or hard work or being very good at something, for her it was just about 'it being there'. The winning of the competition had, in her eyes, not changed her ranking within her English class. This highlights Natalie's dislike of being put on the spot or being recognised by other people for her achievements:

Natalie: Well, first like for my spelling like, got a photo outside my English room which I don't like.

Interviewer: Why don't you like it?

Natalie: I'm not very confident at all and in class I don't like it when anyone recognises me and stuff. [...]

Interviewer: And you don't like that, that people recognise you and know that you're the one who?

Natalie: Well it's ok like my year group knows but the whole school it's just like too many people.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013)

Both students were part of strong friendship groups. When asked about their friends in the 2013 interview both described them as students of similar intellectual level as well as similar interests. They also mentioned that they had known some of their friends for a very long time, had grown up with each other which had also contributed to similar interests. Natalie and Keith seemed very well settled in that respect and also did not mention any unpleasant comments from other students about their achievements. One notion which is also supported in the literature (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2012; Gross, 2004) is the fact that working with peers of similar ability can on the one hand boost academic development as a competitive element is added but on the other hand students mention that they feel amongst equals and that the other students just understand them better.

Interviewer: And do you sometimes, if you had to do a group work in a lesson, and you're with them [your friends], do you tend to work with them if you have the chance?

Keith: Yeh if I can I'll try and work with my mates.

Natalie: Most of them yeh.

Interviewer: So, obviously you're saying they're on a similar level so you can-

Keith: So it's a bit easier you know, you can have a bit of fun but you

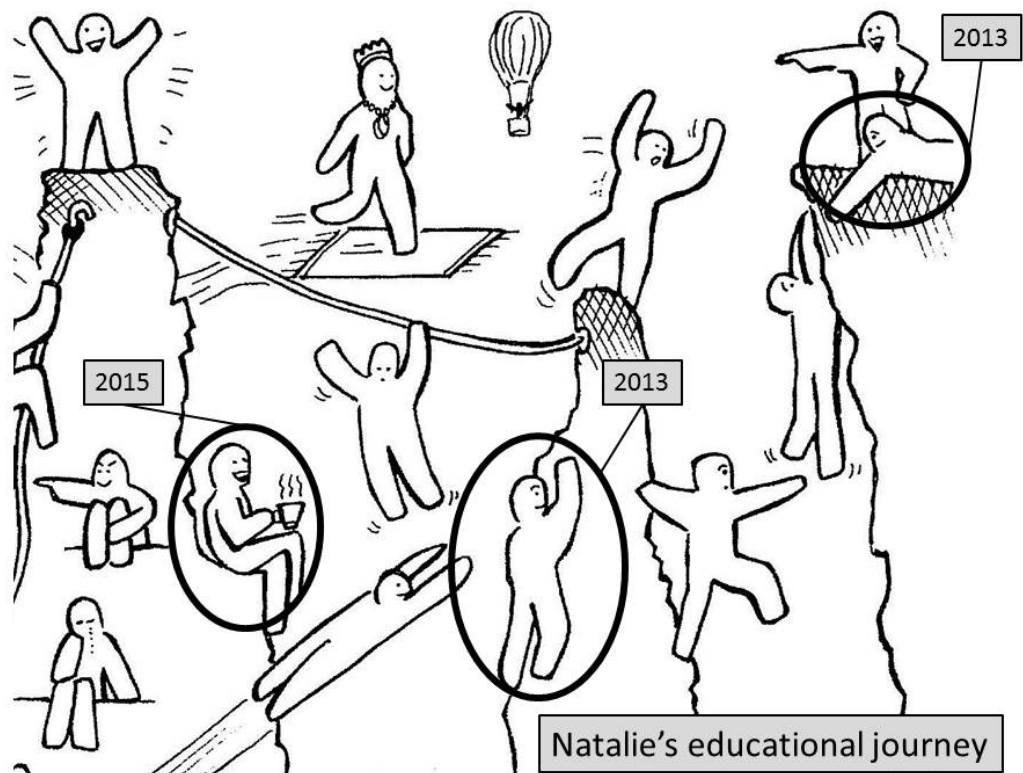


Figure 5.2: Natalie's educational journey expressed in Blobs (copyright Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2004), [www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com))

can work well as well.

Natalie: Yeh, doing group work is normally ok and stuff.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013)

After this introduction I will take a closer look at their educational journey and how they experienced life at St. Paul's.

## 5.2.2 Natalie's and Keith's educational journey

### 5.2.2.1 Beliefs about themselves

Overall, Natalie's and Keith's experiences seemed very different compared to Edward's. Although they went to the same school and thus experienced the same

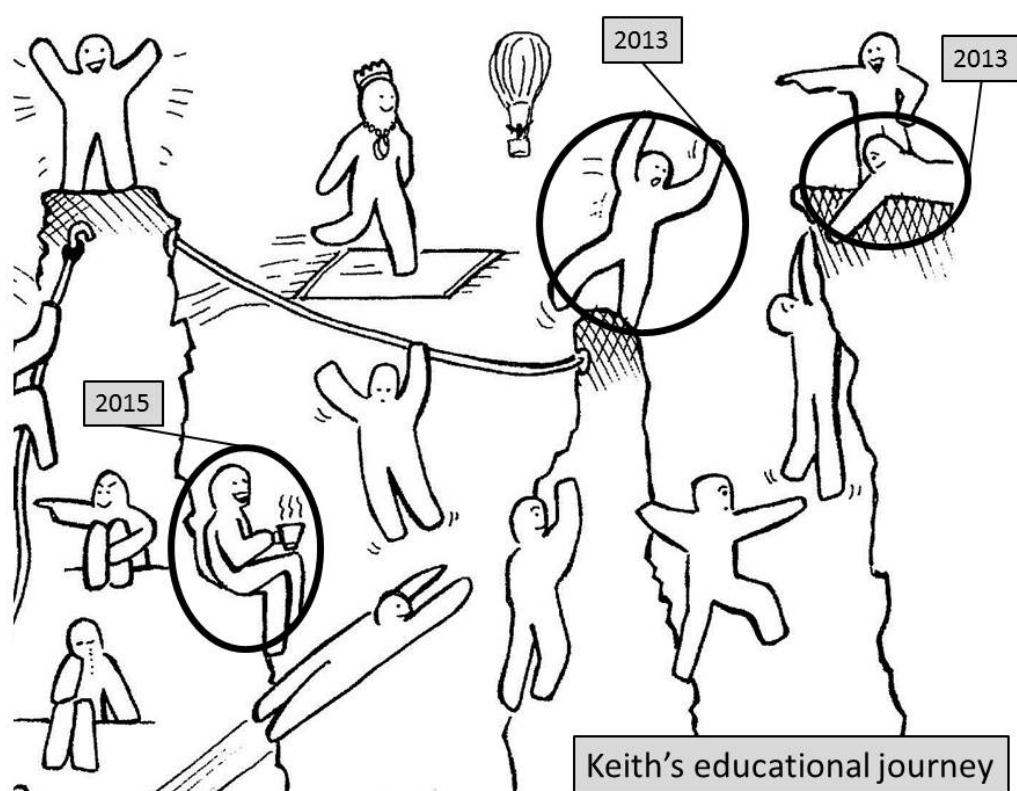


Figure 5.3: Keith's educational journey expressed in Blobs (copyright Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2004), [www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com))

environment there were a number of pronounced differences (see Figures 5.2 and 5.3).

Starting with the Blobs, for both students the Blobs are all located in the top half of the picture. Keith's choice in 2013 (the one Blob standing on the mountain peak that is slightly lower than the highest mountain peak) was linked to the idea of being high up but not quite on the highest peak at the stage yet of flying away. For him, this idea was linked to still having to work hard to get the GCSE grades he needed to get into his preferred A-level courses. For Natalie it is a similar situation as her Blob shows the working its way up but not being quite there yet. There is still some way to go before reaching the top. When asked about why she thought that she is not quite up there yet her answer was simply *'just the things that other people are doing is better than me'* (Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013). This was another indication of her humble view about herself and her academic abilities.

In 2015, at the end of Year 10, there was a slight change in their Blobs as they both chose the one sitting halfway up the mountain having a little break. In both cases the idea behind it being that they felt they were doing well but they were not putting a lot of effort in. Natalie added that she was not at the top but then she also did not revise. As mentioned before, this was a view which kept coming up throughout the two interviews I conducted with them. At no time did these two students feel that they were working to the best of their ability even in Year 10 which was only a few months away from their GCSE examinations. Interestingly enough, looking back to 2013, Keith was highlighting the need to work hard to get to the top and most importantly wanting to be there. Two years later although the aspirations were somehow still there it had not translated into actually working harder in lessons or preparing for examinations (Interviews Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013 and 21 July 2015).

During the 2013 interview a very interesting discussion unfolded around the Blob

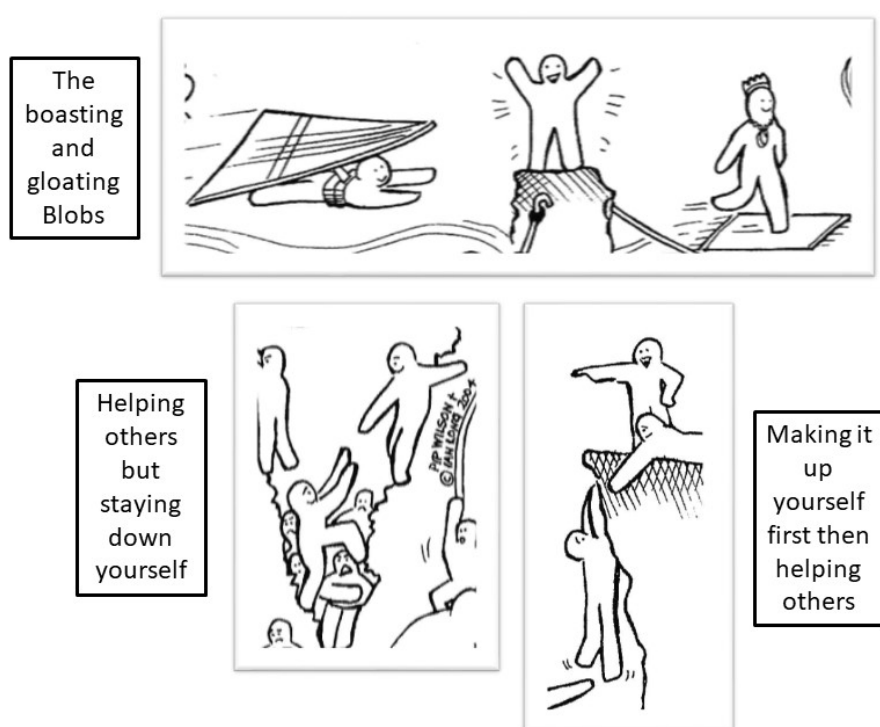


Figure 5.4: Blobs referred to during discussion about how to best help others (copyright Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2004), [www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com))

lying on the mountaintop on the right-hand side. It also said a lot about Natalie and Keith and their understanding of themselves and making progress. Figure 5.4 shows the Blobs Natalie and Keith referred to during the discussion:

Interviewer: Ok, they're just floating above everything? [Comment about the Blobs on the flying carpet and the glider.]

Keith: Yeh they're just not trying whereas someone like that [Blob lying on the mountaintop] they've obviously worked hard to make it up to the top and now they're helping others, so I'd quite like to be that one.

Interviewer: Hard work which gets you up to the top and then you can help the others up too?

Keith: Help others achieve.

Natalie: Cos this person's still down but he's trying to help other people at the same time so that might be harder for him to go farther up if he's trying to help but if you're already at the top you can help more and you can, like you're focused on your next time.

Interviewer: I love it, yeh, so once you're up there you've got the stable position so you don't, you're not falling, you've made your progress and-

Natalie: Yeh and you can help people more.

Interviewer: Whereas the one down here he is helping but it means he is not moving up is he?

Natalie: No.

Keith: He's putting others before himself.

Interviewer: Do you think that's not a good thing?

Keith: I think it's good-

Natalie: In some circumstances.

Keith: -but he's got to think about himself-

Natalie: -as well.

Keith: Cos once he is up there he can help people more can't he. Now he's got say this person trying to help others, whilst he works himself up to the top, he has more knowledge and more power to bring that person up with him.

Natalie: Yeh if he's going to be completely selfless then this person is going to go higher than all these other people and he's just going to be stuck in a low ditch.

Interviewer: So you think he'll be left down there, all the others move up, he's helped them and they'll just move up and leave him behind.

Keith: Mm.

Natalie: Yeh.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013)

This interview excerpt clearly shows Natalie's and Keith's worries about helping others and therefore not reaching the top themselves, an idea which they both find hard to entertain. Firstly, you yourself have to reach the top and master things before you can actually help others to climb up. Although they do not explicitly mention it, what is also shining through here is the idea that if you help others you cannot make progress and learn yourself. Keith also mentions that once you move up the mountain you gain power and knowledge and you will therefore be



better equipped to help others.

But this conversation also highlights another aspect of Natalie's and Keith's beliefs about themselves: *you must not boast or show off*. As Keith says in the excerpt above, if you are getting good grades but you are helping people then you are not boasting about your achievements and that is acceptable. This discussion almost seems like an explanation of why it is reasonable to do well in lessons and get good grades because then you can help others. During the 2015 interview Natalie and Keith used one of their fellow students to illustrate how annoying it is if people think too highly of themselves and that they come across as arrogant and definitely not a good role model. Again, Natalie and Keith agree on the fact that they do not want to be seen like this peer who tries to correct teachers in lessons but actually gets it wrong himself. As Francis et al. (2012) observed in their study, many high-achieving students do not want to be associated with being gifted and talented as it would reflect badly on their reputation. They might be seen as a 'nerd' or 'boffin' and that, of course, would make social integration and acceptance within a school much more difficult. But as Berndt (1999) argues, the whole aim of adolescence is to find your place within wider society and become an independent person.

### 5.2.2.2 What difficulties did they encounter?

Although Natalie's and Keith's journey through St. Paul's was very different compared to Edward's, there are still some issues which keep coming up in the interviews:

- Overall, Natalie and Keith rated most of their lessons as boring and not very challenging. Apart from mathematics, no differentiation or extension work was mentioned during our two interviews.
- This habit of not having to work hard in lessons developed to not revising

or preparing for end of year tests and only minimal revision was mentioned for the RE GCSE which they took at the end of Year 10.

- Not wanting to be seen as showing off or gloating about good test results.

When talking to Natalie and Keith it becomes apparent that actually the third point is the one influencing all the others. When we talked about differentiated work in lessons in the 2013 interview, both would have liked to have different and more challenging work but as Keith said *'guess you don't really want to single people out in the classroom'* (Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013). The singling out does apply to anyone in the class, not just the low but also the high ability students. The reasoning behind this approach is based on damaging students' confidence in themselves and their abilities:

Keith: I don't think it would be great in classes to say this person is better so they're doing different work, I don't think it would, that wouldn't be good.

Natalie: Yeh that wouldn't go down well.

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Natalie: Well cos people would feel like they're like not that good as other people and some people would be like the people who get the harder work just might find it too hard.

Keith: It might damage their confidence in the lesson-

Natalie: Yeh.

Keith: - cos they might start, say they were doing well but they weren't doing really well in any of their tries.

Natalie: Start doubting themselves.

Keith: Yeh exactly start doubting themselves, lose confidence in doing it themselves.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013)

In this excerpt another story is hidden which goes back to a mathematics lesson where high-achieving students were given a harder test. Keith described that the biggest problem was not the test but the knowledge of it being harder. So rather than concentrating on doing the test well both students agreed the phrase ‘it’s a harder test’ got to their heads and preoccupied them so much it was basically distracting them from the test. Again, this is an interesting perception which highlights the power words can have on the attainment of students and to be more precise, how, in this example, words let students doubt their ability and thus their self-theories which in turn can lower the test outcomes (Dweck, 2000).

Further, this interview excerpt suggests lessons also being social situations in which it is important to project who you are in a socially acceptable way to be part of the peer group and fit in (Francis et al., 2012). One example which highlights the social importance of lessons was the discussion Natalie, Keith and I had about one of their peers (see the previous sub-section). This peer perceived himself as very able and superior to peers as well as teachers at times. He would demonstrate his superiority in lessons by, for example, pointing out mistakes the teacher apparently had made. Natalie and Keith both expressed annoyance about this kind of behaviour and clearly distanced themselves from it labelling it as ‘arrogant’ and said they would not want to be seen as that. Lessons are not just about learning and making progress but also about being seen in the right light by peers and teachers. Boasting or showing off, appearing as arrogant are characteristics which will not help to be accepted and liked and therefore behaviour is adjusted accordingly to be accepted within the class or wider peer group.

Another struggle which became apparent during the interviews was the unchal-

lenging lessons. Natalie and Keith mentioned on a number of occasions in the 2013 as well as the 2015 interview that most lessons could be described as boring, especially revision ones. Revision was described as going over content, over and over again till everybody understood which often meant for Natalie and Keith that they had understood but still had to listen as some others in the class still had not quite understood the content at hand. This approach led to a slowing down of progress with the measure seemingly being the ones who struggle:

Keith: I don't think in other subjects you get, I think you don't get separately pushed I think the teacher tries and moves everyone at a steady pace so that they don't struggle too much. Cos you're teaching a whole class and sometimes it's difficult to single out certain ones who are struggling a bit more you need to go a bit slower, but some people want to go a bit faster. I see how that can be a bit difficult, so.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2013)

This is a similar concern to one raised by Edward; teachers cannot cater for the different needs of students and they cannot accelerate some students too much as it becomes very hard to manage. This is also shown in the 2015 interview where both students described a biology lesson where they wanted to know more but were told there was not enough time for it and GCSE was not the place for A-level content:

Keith: I don't know, say sometimes in biology they'll use an analogy to explain something. Sometimes you think, well how does that actually work and then you get told, that's A level so we won't go there.

Natalie: When you don't understand what happens you're just told that this happens but you want to know why.

Interviewer: And you don't get the answers.

Natalie: No, it's we don't have time for that now, we have to do this.

Interviewer: How does it make you feel being told that you don't need to know now?

Keith: It's just a bit annoying.

Natalie: It's like frustrating cos what if you want to take that A level, you don't know at all what's in the A level syllabus cos you don't do anything to do with that at all.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2015)

This interview excerpt again underlines the focus on examinations at St. Paul's. Teachers feel the pressure to focus purely on getting higher GCSE results and this means to go through topics again and again till everyone in a class has understood and is therefore able to get at least a C grade in their examinations. For able students who often understand things quickly, lessons like that can be boring and as we heard above, annoying and frustrating. When revision lessons are the only lessons happening this feeling would prevail for 5 or even 6 lessons a day which towards the end of Year 11 is very much the norm. As we saw with Edward earlier on, constantly being asked to go over something one has understood is tedious and discourages engagement rather than the opposite.

Inactivity during lessons as well as getting good grades without revising for tests also seems to have another result which is developing an inability to revise and learn independently which became apparent a number of times during the interviews; here is one example:

Interviewer: In year 11 there will be a lot of after school sessions where you have to attend. How do you feel about that actually, having to stay in school for six lessons a day?

Natalie: I see it as actually better because then you have to revise so you don't just procrastinate and not revise, you actually do it and do the work.

Keith: I think whilst there is a certain element of you think, oh I'll learn better on my terms I think it is, once there is this there's no way of getting away from it, there's no, oh but I could do this instead. There is that extra push if you have to, it's better for you then.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2015)

By the end of Year 10, Natalie and Keith identified revision as a big issue as both realised that preparing for examinations was paramount but they also had not established a habit of revising and learning. Therefore, both planned to revise more for their GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11 but they both acknowledged that it still might not happen. The only hope was the compulsory after-school revision sessions which took away the students' initiative and placed success and failure in the hands of the teachers and thus the school (a characteristic of St. Paul's discussed before in sub-section 4.1.3).

### 5.2.2.3 How did they cope with the difficulties?

Because being seen as showing off or gloating about good grades was identified by Natalie and Keith as the thing not to do, most of their coping mechanisms focused on hiding their high ability. Based on their two interviews their main coping mechanisms at school were:

- Non-participation in lessons
- Hiding who they really are
- Not putting enough effort in

The first point is linked to not volunteering answers in lessons at all for Natalie or only occasionally for Keith. The non-participation in lessons was concerned with two reasons for Natalie, one was about not wanting to fail in front of others and the other was going back to not standing out:

Natalie: If you don't know the answer or you're not sure about it you don't want to put your hand up, just in case you get it wrong. But if you know it and you're sure of it and you know basically everything in the subject, you don't want to keep putting your hand up because it would just be, you'll be the only person in the class who-

Interviewer: Knows the answers.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2015)

This approach led, especially for Natalie, to most peers not realising how well she was actually doing in lessons (see sub-section 5.2.1). Thus, she could keep up appearances and was not seen as the one saying '*Look at how well I did*' (Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2015).

Keith would even go a step further and pretend he revised for a test when he did not: '*I usually bend the truth a bit and say I did revise*' (Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2015). The reason for doing this was because there was this feeling of guilt or wrongness about not working for it and still getting good grades. Both students expressed that they felt uncomfortable about it and said that hard work leads to good results which in their example was not the case.

Keith: Um, I don't know, I think it just goes back to like the, you're doing well but you don't think you deserve it really for me.

Interviewer: Why don't you think you deserve it?

Keith: I don't know, cos like you think you haven't put the same effort

in as a lot of people.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2015)

And lastly both students stopped working hard or putting effort in. As mentioned earlier in this section, neither of the students felt at any time in their schooling did they work to the best of their ability. When asked about whether they felt school was supporting them in working to the best of their ability Natalie responded:

Natalie: Maybe the school doesn't do enough for, but I don't think we do either, we don't put enough effort in to reach our full potential either, so.

(Interview Natalie and Keith, 22 July 2015)

What have I learned about Natalie's and Keith's journey through St. Paul's? Although neither of them talked about losing friends or being teased or subject of nasty comments, their time at secondary school influenced the development of their self-esteem and self-theories. Throughout the two interviews I conducted with them it became clear that being very able especially in mathematics and science was not necessarily something either of them embraced but rather tried to hide. For both of them it was important to fit into the social system and not stand out or appear as boasting, gloating or showing off. The latter was a behaviour displayed by others who saw themselves as gifted and talented and clearly a behaviour neither Natalie nor Keith approved of. In their efforts to be part of the social system and not stand out they did not, however, develop the skills necessary to work, learn and revise independently which they did comment on during the interviews and which was something they were afraid of when moving forward into A-level studies. Although their motivation seemed mainly social there also was a cultural perspective. In both interviews Natalie and Keith mentioned that they wanted to know more and move at a quicker pace but were denied that by teachers and the system as a whole. This inactivity seemed to have altered



their ideas and beliefs about themselves which in turn hindered them to fulfil their potential. It seems these two students experienced the mainly Formal school culture of St. Paul's as not supportive of their academic development.

## 5.3 Dumbo and Bob

### 5.3.1 Who are Dumbo and Bob?

I first met Dumbo and Bob when they joined St. Paul's in Year 7 (aged 11 years). I taught them both in the top set RE class throughout Year 7 and Year 8. As I was Edward's tutor at the time, I knew that Dumbo was his younger sister. I interviewed the two students three times during their time at St. Paul's, first in 2013 at the end of Year 7 (12 years of age), again in 2015 at the end of Year 9 (14 years of age) and lastly in 2016 at the end of Year 10 (15 years of age).

Dumbo's overall MidYIS score was 134, again placing her academically in the top 25% nationally. In mathematics, English and science she had achieved level 5s in KS2, all indications of high academic ability. In lessons she often was quiet and some teachers described her as disengaged as she would hardly contribute to lesson discussions. When we talked about lessons she said that she often found lessons and subjects easy, possibly too easy and therefore did not see the point in working too hard as she got, in her eyes, good results anyway. Throughout her time at St. Paul's, Dumbo has been part of a close friendship group. Although there was a bit of a shuffle in Year 8 they all came back together. She described her friends as most of them being in the top set and thus also being of higher ability. A number of her friends she had known from primary school and had kept at secondary school. Her friends seemed to be joking about her good grades at times saying *'oh you're clever, you're a bit of a nerd'* (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013). Dumbo did not seem to take these comments seriously though as

it was her friends doing it and they were joking in a friendly way. Interestingly though, Dumbo mentioned that *'they're fine with it as long as I will occasionally help them'* (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013). Similarly to Natalie and Keith, getting good grades is acceptable as long as one helps others who are not doing as well. In terms of hobbies Dumbo enjoyed doing dance which seemed to be her only pastime outside of school. Due to her mother being a scout leader she also did join in with scouting but it was not necessarily out of her own choice, but dance was the thing she really enjoyed: *'I mean I do scouts but that's just sort of a thing I've always done but I really enjoy dance'* (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013). When I asked her about dance competitions she replied that she did not do them because *'the dance competition was ridiculously competitive and there are some amazing people out there'* (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013). Not being very keen on competition, implying that one has to put hard work and effort in to be able to achieve something, is a theme which kept coming up at different points during our interviews. Often the aversion of putting effort in was based on the experience that lessons and lesson content was so easy that without any effort she would still get very good grades or was able to complete tasks so why bother in doing more. The same was true for Bob who agreed with Dumbo in terms of why put effort in if I get good grades without:

Interviewer: So the things that you're doing in maths at the moment, how do you find it, are they easy, are they hard?

Dumbo: Just all right, I can do them, don't really have to think about them too much.

Interviewer: How about you Bob?

Bob: Pretty much the same as Dumbo.

Interviewer: Do you think in maths at the moment you are actually working to the best of your ability?

Dumbo: No.

Interviewer: So what do you do, if obviously you're not working to the best of your ability at the moment and you're still kind of getting there, so what?

Dumbo: Well if I don't have to do the work, why bother.

Interviewer: That's a good question, why should you bother. What levels are you actually on in maths and science?

Dumbo: Maths I'm 8C.

Interviewer: And science?

Dumbo: 7A.

Interviewer: Bob?

Bob: 8C in maths, 7A science.

Interviewer: So you're pretty much at the top of the ladder, aren't you?

Dumbo: Yeh.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 15 July 2015)

At the end of Year 9 both students already achieved GCSE grade equivalents of Cs and Bs in mathematics and science, grades normally expected at the end of Year 10 or Year 11.

When Bob started at St. Paul's academically he had a similar starting point to Dumbo. His overall MidYIS score was 132 and he as well had achieved level 5s in all core subjects at KS2. I remember Bob as a quiet boy who would often read in lessons rather than participate or even do his work. However, there was a change towards the end of Year 7 when Bob started to be more engaged. When

asked about it he said it was a choice to get more involved in lessons because *'I just felt like I needed to do better'* (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013). Similarly to Dumbo, Bob had a good friendship group throughout his time at St. Paul's. In Year 7 there was a real mixture of friends with some of them also being in the top set but others in middle or lower ability classes. By the end of Year 9 that had changed to all of his friends being in top sets and only one who was not. As an explanation, he agreed with Dumbo who had said it was just a matter of spending a lot of time together and thus becoming close friends. Bob also did not mention any mean comments from friends or peers about his good grades just the occasional teasing but nothing upsetting. In the 2013 interview regarding his academic achievements he even said that *'most of friends are just fine with it because they consider themselves nerds'* (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013). In that way Bob had found friends with similar interests and as a group they were content and openly labelled themselves as 'nerds' which did not seem to cause them social difficulties within the year group. As observed by others (Francis et al., 2012), the label 'nerd' has experienced a change in connotation and has almost become an honourable label. This is also supported by a comment Bob made when asked about his future aspirations. Although only in Year 7 he had an idea about where to go and why:

Interviewer: What about you Bob? Do you think about the future?

Bob: Yes I do, I know vaguely what university I want to go to.

Interviewer: Which one?

Bob: Cambridge or Harvard. Because they've got the science and they just produce lots of academic super heroes.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013)

Apart from his academic interests Bob also had hobbies outside of school. On the

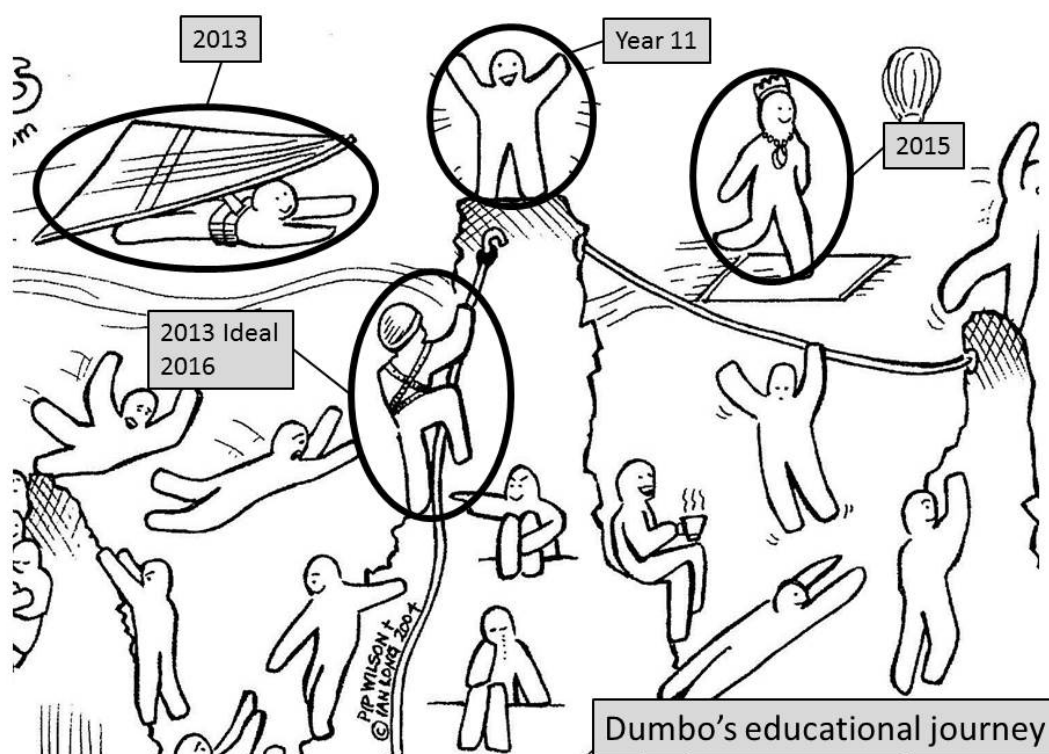


Figure 5.5: Dumbo's educational journey expressed in Blobs (Copyright Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2004), [www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com))

one hand he mentioned judo, swimming and cricket and then there was the world of computer games which Bob enjoyed diving into as it was a competitive world and he was good at it (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 15 July 2015). When I asked him again about his computer games in 2016 there was a decline in playing as he preferred to go outside and cycle. In 2013 he also mentioned spending time with his friends and creating mechanical things in his garden.

What is notable about both students is a clear aptitude and interest for mathematics as well as the sciences. In both of these subjects they achieved grades beyond their peers and showed real interest.

I shall now take a closer look at their experiences at secondary school.

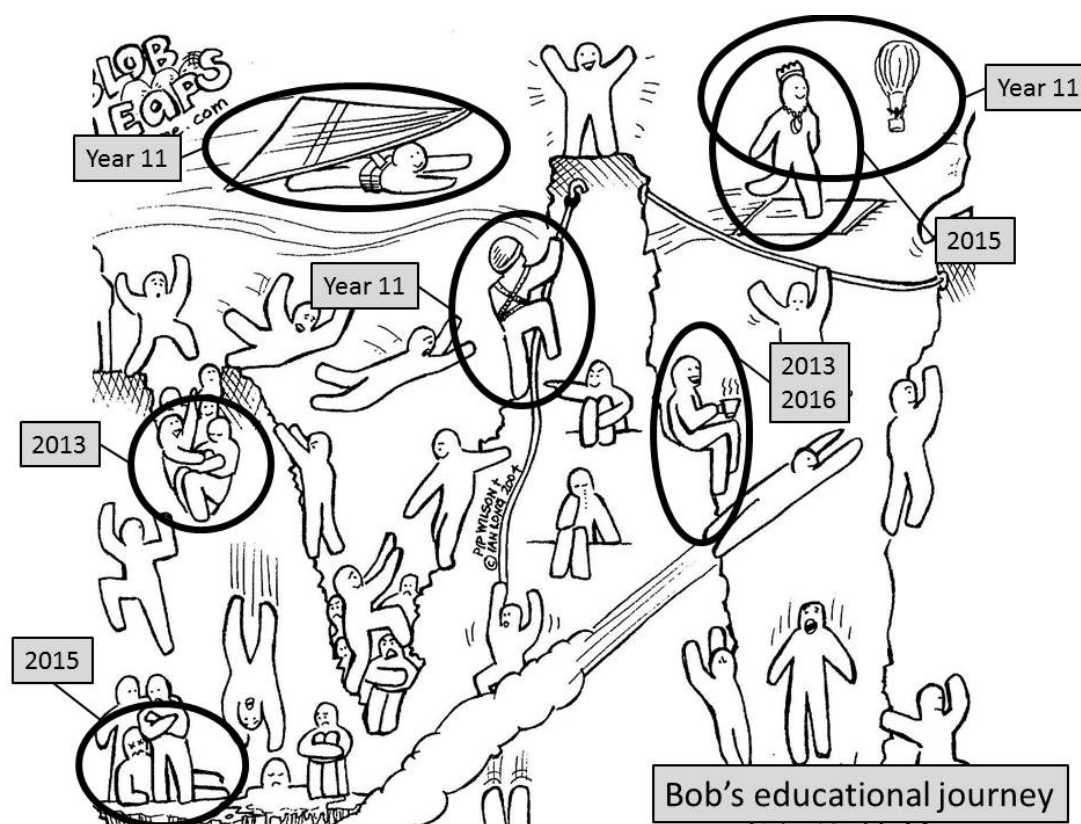


Figure 5.6: Bob's educational journey expressed in Blobs (Copyright Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2004), [www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com))

## 5.3.2 Dumbo's and Bob's educational journey

### 5.3.2.1 Beliefs about themselves

Figures 5.5 and 5.6 show how Dumbo and Bob experienced their time at St. Paul's. Similarly to Natalie and Keith, Dumbo's Blobs are all located in the upper half of the picture with most of them very much at the top. Bob's educational journey shows more of a variety and Blobs span from the very top to almost the very bottom. But what did they say about their choices?

Dumbo's main Blob in 2013 was the gliding one. School did not present her with any challenges so it was plain sailing. When asked about how they would like school to be Dumbo chose the one climbing up:

Dumbo: I'd like to be climbing up a bit more like that guy, actually to have to work hard sometimes. Sometimes it gets a bit boring just doing nothing all the time, not trying hard all the time.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013)

Three years later it was the one Dumbo picked to describe how she felt at school which can be seen as a positive turn. By the end of Year 10 Dumbo's work ethics had improved and rather than just feeling at the top she now placed herself as working her way up, with the rope representing the journey ahead and all the things she still needed to do. Although Dumbo said she had improved she also was aware that there were still things she needed to do and that there was more she could be doing. The notion of not being there yet was also reflected in the Blob she chose for where she wanted to be in Year 11 and to be more precise by the end of Year 11. At the end of Year 10 she was aware of all the things she still needed to do to get to the top and her aim was to have done the things and reach her goal by the end of her secondary education. This was in contrast to her 2015 Blob where she placed herself right at the top based on some of her grades. In science

she got the best mark in her year in the end-of-year test and in mathematics she was also doing well still without putting a lot of effort in. Obviously something had happened during the course of Year 10 which had changed her mind. During the 2016 interview it became apparent that Dumbo had a clear idea about her future wanting to become a doctor. In order for her to do so she knew that she had to get good grades at GCSE to get into the necessary A-level courses:

Interviewer: [...] So for you Dumbo, knowing where you want to go, does it make a difference for you in terms of your motivation in school?

Dumbo: Yeh cos I know I have to work hard, it's like, it's not just I'll see what comes out of it, I know what I have to do and just got to do it.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 22 July 2016)

The change for her had not so much to do with school but with a vision about what she wanted to do and that was what motivated her.

Bob's journey showed a few more ups and downs. In 2013 the first Blob he chose was the one sitting down and drinking tea as school was easy, he was just flying through and did not have to put in much work. He also chose the group of Blobs huddled together as he had '*got quite a lot of good friends*' (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013). The main feelings associated with that group of Blobs were being part of a group, feeling secure and happy. In 2015 he chose two rather opposing Blobs. First the '*dead guy*' (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 15 July 2015) as he felt tired due to it being the end of term. Secondly he chose the king as life inside and outside of school was easy and fun. At the end of Year 10 he returned to the tea drinking Blob but with a different explanation:

Bob: Cos I'm feeling happy that it's the end of the year but I also kind of know that I need to work. I don't know how that Blob reflects that.



(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 22 July 2016)

So this time it was not so much about everything was easy but it was about slowing down at the end of an academic year and contemplating what the next steps were in looking to Year 11. The latter for Bob was linked with a feeling of succeeding and achieving. The Blobs he chose looking forward to Year 11 were all at the top of the picture for Bob representing that he had done well. For himself he would like to see as many A\*s in his GCSE examinations as possible.

Similarly to Dumbo, achieving very good grades at the end of Year 11 seemed paramount in order for him to pursue A-level and later a university course in the sciences. So although his Blobs show some ups and downs this is mainly linked to tiredness at the end of an academic year rather than social-emotional issues at school.

### 5.3.2.2 What difficulties did they encounter?

In a similar way to Natalie and Keith, neither Dumbo nor Bob mentioned any issues in lessons or school in general to do with teasing or negative comments. Both mentioned some friendly teasing but not to the extent that it overshadowed their educational experience. Their difficulties were more linked to boring or too-easy lesson content and consequently a poor work ethic.

One of the themes running through all three interviews was that neither of the two students were working particularly hard in lessons. What I heard mainly was 'easy', 'don't have to put a lot of effort in', 'boring', 'doing nothing all the time'. When asked about extension work the only subjects coming up as more regularly offering work to challenge them were mathematics and science. Some lessons did not seem to offer any differentiated approach:

Dumbo: [...] Some lessons are always extensions, sometimes there's

just nothing to do after you've done the work. It's like there's no way of splitting from the class really, getting higher levels than the rest of the class. I mean a lot of the time they keep you as a group so you do the same work as the group, you get the same levels as the group sort of thing.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013)

In Year 7 both, Dumbo and Bob, would have liked harder work but by Year 9 this had somehow changed. Although they still wanted to do harder work they were not interested in extra work, just no extra effort. There seemed to be two different reasons at play. One is that because they never had to really put any work in they then did not see the point in putting any extra work in. On the other hand there was the issue of having to get through easy stuff first before being able to do the harder stuff. Dumbo did not like that:

Dumbo: I'd prefer to have harder work, like double maths instead of doing the work and then doing the harder work, I'd prefer to just do the harder work, like instead of doing the extension, just do the extension like throughout the lesson.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013)

This seemingly constant lack of stimulating and challenging lessons had a detrimental effect on both students' work ethics. Both told me that even though they knew they had to work harder especially in the light of the upcoming GCSE examinations they did not actually know how to do that:

Interviewer: If you were to do harder work, how do you think that would affect you, how would that be for you?

Bob: It would probably give me a stronger work ethic.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Bob: Cos if I just got used to working on harder things then I'd put the same amount of effort as I did with that into other things. I'm not saying I don't put enough effort in now, it's just I think I'd be a bit more attuned to it.

Interviewer: So you think if you actually had to work a bit harder to figure something out, you would learn work ethics and then that might help you in other areas?

Bob: Yeh.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 15 July 2015)

Interviewer: [...] So what is for you the drive to say, I know I will have to do more work, I know I should put time to the side but I know I probably won't do it?

Dumbo: I've never really had to put any hard work in before, so I don't really know how to do it. It's like someone says, do this and I'm like, well I've never done it before, what am I supposed to do. It's just I haven't got in the habit of doing it.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 22 July 2016)

Not being challenged in lessons and mostly feeling bored led to both of these students losing interest in learning and working hard. When they reached the point where they knew what they wanted to do they also realised that they were not sure about how to get it. As Dumbo pointed out, if you are not in the habit of doing something then it is harder to start with it suddenly.

When talking in more depth about the situation in lessons it became apparent that moving a whole class at a steady pace towards their examinations in Year 11

was the more sensible choice. Already in Year 7 Dumbo pointed out that she was at the top of the class and two steps up from where she was she would have had to start GCSE work. In her eyes, extending someone so much just led to a waiting game in the end till the class had caught up. Being in your first year in secondary school and already knowing that in your favourite subjects the next few years will be pretty much a matter of sitting around while the others are catching up will undoubtedly have its consequences. One I already described above (disengagement with lessons and learning) and the other I shall turn to now.

One of the biggest struggles for Dumbo and to some extent also for Bob were the physical consequences of their boring lessons. Especially during Year 9 and Year 10 Dumbo fell asleep in lessons. During our 2015 interview she explained that the problem was not that she was not getting enough sleep but that lessons were just not very interesting:

Dumbo: Yeh I was asleep half the year so.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Dumbo: I don't know, I just fall asleep in lessons. If I don't find it interesting I'm not going to listen.

[...]

I: Interesting. So do you not sleep enough in the night or is it just?

Dumbo: I sleep plenty.

Interviewer: So it's basically coming into school and being in lessons that are just not very stimulating.

Dumbo: Yes.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 15 July 2015)

This issue still prevailed in Year 10 but not as pronounced. Dumbo described some falling asleep in the beginning of her GCSE courses especially when she already knew things but then lessons changed and *'mostly it was new and quite tricky, like there was always more you could learn about'* (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 22 July 2016). Being challenged and having to pay attention in classes to be able to keep up, the urge to fall asleep had disappeared again.

Bob went through a similar but not quite so drastic phase of 'spacing out' (not being focused, not paying attention to what is happening, feeling sleepy) during mathematics in Year 9:

Interviewer: Bob, how are you doing, how are lessons and stuff going at the moment?

Bob: Yeh I think it's going pretty well, maybe except for maths.

Interviewer: Why are you saying that?

Bob: I think I just space out a little bit during maths.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Bob: It's only started happening recently and I don't think it's because I'm tired because I'm not but um, I think it's because I become unfocused.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Bob: No idea.

Interviewer: Is it just maths or is it other subjects as well?

Bob: Maths and English just really.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 15 July 2015)

Also for Bob, not being focused in lessons led to feeling sleepy and not paying attention. Interestingly, Dumbo offered a possible explanation for it saying classes in English and mathematics were quite ‘challengeable’ and because everybody ‘mucked about’ (not listening to teacher, talking to peers, not doing their work) they did not actually get a lot of work done.

Lastly, another difficulty Bob especially mentioned was the awareness of how others might view him and his achievements. Being labelled as gifted and talented was not necessarily the problem but the acceptance of it was:

Interviewer: Would you see yourself as gifted or talented?

Bob: I suppose in some areas.

Interviewer: And what would that mean to you to say I’m gifted and talented in maths and science?

Bob: That would make me seem stuck up.

Interviewer: Ok, why would that make you seem quite stuck up if you were said to be gifted in maths or science?

Bob: Because it’s a showing off, you shouldn’t really show off.

Interviewer: Why?

Bob: Because it makes other people feel bad about themselves.

Interviewer: But isn’t that their problem? Why is that your problem?

Bob: Because you’re making them feel that way.

[...]

Bob: Well I don’t really go out of my way to make other people feel bad, it’s not a very nice thing to do.

(Interview Dumbo and Bob, 15 July 2015)

For Bob there clearly was the sense that saying about oneself ‘I’m gifted and talented’ was not the thing to do as it would seem like boasting or showing off and this in turn might make others feel bad. This reasoning is very similar to that of some teachers who feel uncomfortable to distinguish between gifted and talented students and those who are not (Brady and Koshy, 2014) and on the other hand the issue of singling out some others who could give the impression of elitism and favouritism (House of Commons, 2010).

### 5.3.2.3 How did they cope with the difficulties?

Dumbo and Bob were phased with unchallenging lessons, an undeveloped work ethic, falling asleep in some lessons and the challenge of not standing out in the wrong way, but how did they cope with these difficulties? Some of their coping mechanisms are reoccurring compared to the other students I observed at St. Paul’s:

- Non-participation in lessons including falling asleep
- Not putting enough effort in
- Conscious effort to focus in lessons

The first two points are very closely entwined. Both students mentioned that they did not overly contribute to lesson discussions. Bob mentioned that he will volunteer an answer if he thinks it is a good one but if an answer is too obvious he will not answer. Dumbo is another extreme as she does not put her hand up at all. In her view other people can give answers and if no one does *‘then the teacher will tell them and it’s fine, all gets worked out’* (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 15 July 2015). The reasons behind this approach are on the one hand about not wanting to stand out or show off and on the other to do with effort, especially with Dumbo.

Another form of non-participation in lessons also resulted from falling asleep. Although described above as a difficulty it also is a coping mechanism. It is an answer to boring and unchallenging lessons. By falling asleep Dumbo did not have to sit through the lessons and play the ‘waiting game’. Of course, this approach in turn led to less work being put into school work and in certain subjects not even basic levels being achieved at times. For Dumbo especially it was about *‘It’s just so easy so why bother’* (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 15 July 2015).

However, there was a clear change in attitude in Year 10 with Dumbo and Bob, as both started to make an effort to pay more attention in lessons. Dumbo explained that lessons were actually not as slow if you concentrate and that way become more interesting. Bob also mentioned that he made a conscious effort to put his hand up more as it kept him more focused. Although some issues were still present, like the inability to work hard and the struggle to put effort in, some issues were starting to soften as lessons became more challenging and thus more interesting.

What have I learned about Dumbo’s and Bob’s journey through St. Paul’s? Both students did not mention teasing or unpleasant comments as a big issue and both of them were part of strong friendship groups throughout their time I observed them. What they both struggled with were boring and unchallenging lessons which did not only have a detrimental effect on their academic development, for example not developing study skills, but also their social-emotional well-being as they both experienced times of falling asleep or feeling sleepy in lessons. With the school’s focus on getting students through their GCSE examinations in Year 11 there did not seem to be room for acceleration of individuals but rather a slowing down of those who were doing exceptionally well. By Year 10 Dumbo explained that teasing comments about high grades were not really happening any more because peers were now getting the same results as her and therefore it had all levelled out. Bearing in mind her astonishing results at the end of Year 7, especially in mathematics as well as the sciences, she had been held back and was thus not



allowed to develop her true potential, a situation which also became apparent in the cases of Natalie and Keith and to some extent Edward.

## **5.4 Additional research sites - Highfield Secondary School and Newton Sixth Form College**

Before leaving this chapter, I will take a brief look at my two additional research sites, Highfield Secondary School and Newton Sixth Form College, to highlight some similarities and differences between school culture and the self-theories of the gifted and talented students there. The data presented in this section is additional data generated to triangulate findings from my main research site.

### **5.4.1 Highfield Secondary School**

Generally speaking, Highfield is not so different from St. Paul's in terms of size and student intake. Located in the centre of the same town students come from a variety of backgrounds possibly with a lower percentage of students from more deprived families. The cultural audit, however, shows some slight differences.

- Four of the five teachers interviewed put Highfield Secondary School in the Hothouse corner with a tendency towards the Formal and Wellfarist types; one teacher perceived the school more on the Wellfarist side. What they all agreed on was the fact that Highfield definitely did not share elements of the Survivalist type. This view was also expressed during the interview which highlighted a good working atmosphere in the school and teachers feeling happy and supported. Other ways the school was perceived included that teachers were enthusiastic and committed, the school was a fun and enjoyable place to work and hard work was recognised. One of the teachers'

also mentioned that he never had the ‘Sunday-night-feeling’ about having to go back to work the next day but was rather looking forward to it. Another point which was raised was concerned with the relationships between staff and between staff and students. The general feeling was that staff got on well with each other and that relationships between staff and students were based on mutual respect. Lastly, one of the teachers said that what he liked about the school was that *‘people are allowed to be who they are’* (Teacher interview Highfield Secondary School, June 2015) resulting in an accepting atmosphere especially amongst students.

- In the previous year the school had undergone changes due to a new head-teacher. Introduced changes aimed at making procedures more rigorous and formal and thus moving the school a bit more towards the Formal school type but without losing the focus of wanting the best for the students. Part of this tidying up procedures was to put greater emphasis on targets and examination grades. However, as one teacher put it, students and staff alike could still have a *‘wicked time’* (Teacher interview Highfield Secondary School, June 2015) at Highfield.
- This mix of Hothouse and Formal also shows in parts of the student questionnaire. Table 5.1 shows the top five characteristics students identified for Highfield. *‘Making progress’*, *‘Stress’*, *‘Exams, exams, exams’* and *‘Achieving’* also featured in the top five characteristics at St. Paul’s, which could indicate that examinations and tests do influence educational experiences of different students in different schools in a similar way. But there is a difference which is the *‘Having fun’* element which suggests a feeling of enjoyment students get from being at school which did not feature as highly at St. Paul’s as it did at Highfield.

Although these are just a few impressions from the teachers’ interviews’ and the students’ questionnaires’ some elements present differently compared to St. Paul’s



Figure 5.7: Blob's chosen by gifted and talented students at Highfield Secondary School in 2015 (Copyright Pip Wilson and Ian Long (2004), www.blobtree.com)

as seen above. What stood out also for me was the tone of the teachers when talking about work as it was much more positive and enthusiastic; a feeling I did not get at St. Paul's.

The gifted and talented students also had a slightly different experience at school. In June 2015 I interviewed three gifted students whom I also observed in lessons: Tom (Year 7 boy, 12 years of age), Bella (Year 8 girl, 13 years of age) and Ben (Year 9 boy, 14 years of age). As with the other gifted and talented students, I used the Blobs to start the interview. Figure 5.7 shows the choices of Tom, Bella and Ben.

Tom picked out the Blob in the glider because he felt school was going well, he

Table 5.1: School characteristics of Highfield Secondary School, N=90

Characteristic	Percentage	Responses out of N=90
Making progress	37%	33
Stress	37%	33
Exams, exams, exams	31%	28
Having fun	29%	26
Achieving	24%	22

was working hard but was also having fun at the same time. The second Blob he chose was helping another Blob up. His explanation centred around the fact that he liked to help others as this also helped him understand subject content better. The latter I also observed in a mathematics lesson where the girl next to Tom asked him for help which he did. When asked about how challenging lessons were Tom said that most lessons teachers would have harder work for those who needed a challenge. He did not report any teasing or unpleasant comments from peers about his high ability but explained that the school encouraged everyone to work at their own pace so they could achieve the best possible grades. Another aspect he mentioned was that students were also encouraged to ask questions and find out the facts for themselves; a view neither of the five students at St. Paul's had expressed. Lastly, Tom talked about not always pushing himself hard in all lessons as he sometimes wanted to relax but that overall, when it came to tests, he would work harder and revise for assessments to get the best possible grade. This also is a view which most of the students at St. Paul's would not support, namely Keith, Natalie, Bob and Dumbo.

Bella chose two Blobs representing her helping others as well as knowing where she wants to go and how to get there. In terms of her helping others she mentioned two points. One was about first doing her work before helping others as this gave her a better grounding and thus a better position to help her friends. The second point was concerned with helping others because she wanted them to feel confident and more comfortable. Bella said that she felt better when she understood lesson content and that was something she wanted her friends to feel, too. In reference to lessons, Bella mentioned that most teachers tried and pushed the more able students to do well but especially revision lessons were boring. What clearly came across in the interview was that Bella felt happy at school and even though she did not like to stand out for good work, she did not hide who she was and what she liked. When observing her in lessons I also got this feeling, that she was socially integrated and felt happy where she was.

Ben chose the rope climber Blob for similar reasons to Bella. It was about knowing where he wanted to go and knowing how to get there and in most subjects, Ben felt, teachers were giving him exactly that, feedback on how to improve his work. The other Blob was chosen as he had sat a media studies GCSE a few days prior to the interview and during that process had felt a bit more unsure about how he was doing and what was needed to do well. The latter point raises one strong characteristic of Ben which shone through in the interview: he wanted to improve his work himself and liked to be in control of his learning. Similarly to Bella, Ben seemed very settled within the school, a feeling also supported by my lesson observations. Although friends humoured him sometimes about all the work he put in to achieve good grades he did not mention any unpleasant comments from other peers.

What was apparent throughout the interviews was a sense that all three students were happy with the school and generally how they were supported academically. There seemed to be a sense of being able to be who they were, a view also expressed during the teacher interview, and working at your level, whichever one that might be. Further to that, all three students were very well motivated, wanted to do well and worked very hard for their successes. Of course, it is hard to tell how much of this is due to support and encouragement from parents, which especially Bella and Ben mentioned, or the culture of Highfield Secondary School. But there clearly was a different perception of their school compared to the students I interviewed at St. Paul's. It felt like the enthusiasm and commitment of the teachers was apparent in lessons and in their way of working with the students, which seemed to have a positive influence on the educational experience of the young people in their care and thus their academic engagement.

### 5.4.2 Newton Sixth Form College

Many of the elements Edward mentioned in our interviews about why he enjoyed college were not so much about being singled out as a very able student and being given extra work in lessons, but were linked to the very different approach to teaching and learning as well as the general atmosphere at college or what some might call the culture of the setting. One could argue that his experience is an isolated one as well as being related from a subjective perception. However, when conducting my research at Newton Sixth Form College I found that the five students I interviewed mentioned very similar points about why they loved college so much more than their old schools (for example, challenging lessons, exploring off-curriculum topics, having people around them who shared their passion for mathematics). Similarly, when I analysed the questionnaire that students completed, some of those points surfaced through the data.

My observations about Newton Sixth Form College are based on the following data:

- Student questionnaire January 2015; whole school cohort at the time (only one year group) (N=69); 32 students took part in the survey but some questions were not answered by all, which I will point out where necessary.
- Interview with the headteacher on 13 January 2015.
- Three lesson observations as well as observations during break time on 13 January 2015.
- Group interview with five Year 12 students (their first year at Newton Sixth Form College) on 28 January 2016.

One aspect which featured highly in interviews as well as the questionnaire is the fact that working together as well as supporting each other is one of the key

elements and characteristics of Newton Sixth Form College. Although students who completed that section of the questionnaire mentioned ‘*Stress*’ (8 counts, 36% of participants), this could also be linked to the situation that at the time students were sitting their first Advanced Subsidiary level (AS-level) examinations and thus focus was very much on those. In a positive way, it was also apparent that academic achievement (‘*Making progress*’, 9 counts of 22; ‘*Achieving*’, 6 counts of 22) and learning together (‘*Feeling supported*’, 7 counts of 22; ‘*Working together*’, 6 counts of 22) defined the college which contrasted with the responses at St. Paul’s (see sub-section 4.1.1) but resonated with what Edward experienced at his college.

During the interview with the headteacher he explained the motivation of Newton Sixth Form which was about widening participation (encouraging more students from disadvantaged social backgrounds to engage in further and higher education) on the one hand but also creating a centre for mathematicians on the other. The latter was strongly fuelled by his own experience of studying mathematics at Cambridge University where studying mathematics was not just about getting good grades but becoming an expert in a field and developing one’s skills:

I just, that just completely changed the way I approached the subject, I had to up my game a lot and it was really challenging and interesting and fun and I really enjoyed interacting with mathematicians and talking about mathematics and it made me a much better mathematician, a much better mathematician; so my hypothesis was, let’s bring it together, let’s have this mathematical hive and in that environment, in that culture where mathematics is respected and it’s cool to be good at mathematics, that changes the way in which you develop your interest in the subject and in the end makes them better and makes them more aware of the opportunities they have as a skilled mathematician and more likely to go on and do good things within the subject and around the subject.

(Interview headteacher Newton Sixth Form College, 13 January 2015)

This approach to learning clearly works on the basis of wanting to learn because it is the process which is enjoyable - a view which in the literature often is linked with a more positive academic self-theory (Dweck, 2000; Garn et al., 2010). Furthermore, being amongst others who share a passion brings me back to Edward's perception of college but also the literature which advocates that developing expertise about a field is being immersed in it and being surrounded by other masters of the field (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Sternberg, 2000). Another aspect which was also mentioned by the students is that of being amongst peers and teachers who share the passion of, in this case, mathematics. The learning community which was created at Newton Sixth Form College radiated exactly that, a passion for the subjects and masters of the field introducing the novices as well as engaging with them in discussions and going with students on a learning journey. This became very apparent during the group interview and the way the students talked about the school and the teachers. For example, Asuna<sup>2</sup> was buzzing about how '*insane*' the support at college was, how approachable the teachers were and that they were around and that they shared her interests. Similarly, Scarlett talked about her economics teacher as the '*best teacher ever*' (group interview Newton Sixth Form, 28 January 2016) because lesson content was made relevant for them and thus they could relate to it.

What also shone through in the group interview especially was the fact that the ethos, or what others might call the culture of the school, of Newton Sixth Form College was not about getting students to pass examinations but to understand the subject at hand, ask the right questions and explore subjects in more depth. To facilitate that, students reported during the interview that lessons were challenging but also went beyond the curriculum to enrich their learning experience. The positive buzz during the group interview as well as during break time gave the

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<sup>2</sup>Student names all changed



Table 5.2: Changes between secondary schools students used to attend and perception of Newton Sixth Form College, 21 participants of whole school cohort of N=69

Secondary school student attended	Newton Sixth Form
Not stretched academically	Suitably challenged
Sometimes it felt like a few of the teachers didn't care how you did and weren't that supportive/useful when you asked for help, making me struggle and stress about my inability to do something.	It's like a family, i feel like I can ask the teachers for help and discuss things other than work and all the students are nice and everyone gets along.
Sometimes school was tiring and lonely	There are people like me at my new school, so I'm not always alone
Because the majority of the time I was quiet and slightly separated from most other people.	Because from the moment we've come here, all students and teachers are in harmony with each other.
I spent a lot of time helping others instead of myself.	I have friends who support me, and I them.

impression of a group of young people who felt happy and secure in the place where they were. There was a sense of community and belonging which showed in the interview as well as the characteristics students chose to describe Newton Sixth Form. This in turn had a mostly positive influence on students' self-theories as they felt accepted and part of a group and enjoyed the learning. Part of the questionnaire was also the Blob tree with the slight adaptation that students were first asked to identify three Blobs showing how they felt at their old school and then three Blobs showing how they felt then at Newton Sixth Form. Table 5.2 gives some highlights of student answers regarding how they felt at their old school compared to college. In this case, I chose comments highlighting changes between the old and the new; comments on the same row are from the same student to allow for comparison between the different schools.

These responses are a small part of the data from this school; I specifically chose these to compare with some of Edward's experiences. In full, the data offer further insight into the workings of Newton Sixth Form College and how students perceived their time there as well as the struggles which came with challenging and stretching

lessons. However, given the scope of this study, I cannot relate all the outcomes, but where appropriate, I shall refer back to Newton Sixth Form College in the next sections.

I will now turn to drawing conclusions from my findings of the previous two chapters and highlight areas I feel need further research.

# Chapter 6

## Conclusion

*‘Well,’ Miss Honey said, ‘it’s only a guess, but here’s what I think. While you were in my class you had nothing to do, nothing to make you struggle. Your fairly enormous brain was going crazy with frustration. It was bubbling and boiling away like mad inside your head. There was tremendous energy bottled up in there with nowhere to go, and somehow or other you were able to shoot that energy out through your eyes and make objects move. But now things are different. You are in the top form competing against children more than twice your age and all that mental energy is being used up in class. Your brain is for the first time having to struggle and strive and keep really busy, which is great.’*

*(Dahl, 2010)*

When setting out on this research journey, I was curious about how perceptions and experiences could influence practices and how in turn these established practices possibly along with the school culture were, or were not, influencing the development of students’ self-theories and thus their academic engagement. In this section I bring together the findings to formulate some overall outcomes and answers (in some cases more tentative than in others). As this was a largely qualitative study findings cannot be generalised but they do highlight areas which need further research to fully understand connections and relationships.

## 6.1 My research questions

### 6.1.1 ‘Giftedness and talent’ - What do these terms mean?

*How a teacher understands these terms has an impact on how they will or will not meet the needs of gifted and talented students which in turn has an impact on the students’ development of study skills and work ethics and can, at times, even influence a student’s personal development.*

*My research suggests that the teachers I interviewed had a very limited or vague understanding of the terms which in turn limited the teachers’ ability to provide challenging lesson tasks for gifted and talented students in their care. This status of not-enough-challenging-lessons also seemed to have an impact on the development of study skills and a positive work ethic amongst the very able students I followed at St. Paul’s. Lastly, giftedness and talent was mainly linked with high ability or ‘cleverness’ and high achievements or grades which did not require them in this context to undertake hard work.*

Through my research I have heard about some of the difficulties teachers of an English secondary school encountered when faced with gifted and talented students. Foremost was the issue of having certain ideas about what gifted and talented students should be like, how they should behave and what kind of grades they should achieve (Teacher focus group, May 2015). There also was a discussion about those students who seem to do well without putting any effort in and were still getting good grades. Teachers also raised the issue of very able learners coasting and not putting any work in, acknowledging at the same time that this might be due to a lack of challenge in some lessons and therefore a developed habit of not working in lessons which can be hard to break. In the same discussion, the teachers present also admitted that they did not actually plan for their gifted and talented students in their classes as they either did not know what to do for them or did not have

the time to prepare extra tasks for them. The latter was an issue which was also raised in the cultural audit group interview in February 2013. Lastly, in conversation with Edward, a misunderstanding shone through as teachers did not seem to understand that excellent grades require a lot of work (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015). All of these points together highlight the problem of uncertainty and misunderstandings amongst teachers about what the terms giftedness and talent mean. This in turn has been shown in the literature to lead to a number of difficulties in the education of very able students, namely the limited or reluctant identification of very able students (Brady and Koshy, 2014; Eyre, 1997), the discussion about elitism and thus the view that educational support for gifted and talented students is not necessary (Eyre, 1997; House of Commons, 2010), as well as the focus on achievement only and not the acknowledging of potential which needs to be nurtured through educational interventions (House of Commons, 2010; Subotnik et al., 2011).

Adding to that was the fact that none of the teachers actually knew where the gifted and talented register was and therefore did not know why someone was on it and what the students' special interest or field of expertise was (Teacher focus group, May 2015). The creation of the gifted and talented register at St. Paul's also showed that giftedness and talent was mainly linked with high achievement (KS 2 results) and high ability (MidYIS scores) thus limiting the notion of giftedness and talent to those who show it and not necessarily those who might have the potential of doing very well in certain subject areas. Further to the difficulty of actually having an understanding of the terms, putting together a gifted and talented register also proved one-sided, just focusing on high achievement (SATs results) and the MidYIS scores. Only slowly was the idea introduced to identify students 'on the go' as they developed at secondary school and therefore to also rely on teacher nomination for the register.

This is somewhat different to my other two research schools. At Highfield Sec-

ondary School nomination for the gifted and talented register is not just based on KS2 results and MidYIS but also on departmental identification. The latter is defined by individual subjects collating the criteria which constitute giftedness and talent in their domain. Thus, the definition of giftedness and talent is widened and includes strengths in other areas such as sports, arts and the performing arts, too. At Newton Sixth Form no identification process is in place. The philosophy of the school is about furthering the expertise of their students in their chosen domains and thus does not rely on labelling any students as gifted and talented but generally offers a challenging curriculum to all its students.

Going back to St. Paul's Secondary School, when informally discussing the topic of gifted and talented students with colleagues over the last few years, the lack of understanding of the terms has been obvious. This mirrors similar struggles in the research field where various and very different understandings of the terms stand side-by-side (see section 2.1).

When confronting the gifted and talented students with the question of defining the terms, their answers mainly centred around achieving higher grades than their peers in certain subjects. What became clear from their contributions was the link between above-average achievement linked with interest, therefore confining the area of expertise to certain subjects or subject areas and not so much others; a notion also discussed by Renzulli (2012). Further, what also became apparent was the negative connotation the terms had for some students, as they felt referring to oneself as being gifted and talented was showing off or boasting which was seen as negative (Interviews with Keith and Natalie in 2013, 2015; Interviews with Bob in 2013, 2015 and 2016). This resonates with the findings of Francis et al. (2012) who highlight the difficulties students face when labelled as a 'geek', 'boffin' or 'nerd' and which are often associated with being less popular in a school setting which is something to be avoided. The issue of labelling students and thus making them stand out has also been questioned within the literature, because labelling

can lead to discrimination which in turn can lead to isolation and thus a lower self-esteem which again has a negative impact on academic engagement (Borland, 2003; Sapon-Shevin, 1994; Walther-Thomas and Brownell, 1999). Thus, the question stands whether the labelling of students as gifted or talented or not is actually necessary and whether it furthers the education of the children involved.

One definition of the terms which stood out to me was that given by Edward in our 2016 interview, as it was distinctively different but still captures this complex topic in a nutshell:

I'd honestly say it's about bringing together a group of people who are kind of passionate about their thing. And the thing I kind of liked about my friend group was they weren't necessarily A star achievers, but they were really passionate about their thing, if that makes sense.

(Interview Edward, 07 July 2016)

Being passionate about 'their thing' and enjoying it in a group reflects a number of points also discussed in the literature which support the idea that excellence and mastery of a field is not about very high ability but the development of skills associated with the field which after a lot of practice lead to mastery (Garn et al., 2010; Hymer and Michel, 2002; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Sternberg, 2000). But, of course, without having an understanding of what the terms mean may imply that adequate support for the most able students will be limited and might even, at times, hinder their personal as well as academic development.

### **6.1.2 What practices did gifted and talented students encounter?**

*The vague understanding of the terms at St. Paul's led to irregular educational offers for the gifted and talented students in some subjects but not all. In most*

*lessons, students reported no kind of differentiation being in place for them. Teachers admitted sporadic interventions for the most able students in their groups giving a number of reasons for the lack of differentiation.*

Teacher interviews in 2013 as well as the teacher focus group in 2015 showed that teachers did not plan differentiated lessons with gifted and talented students in mind very often. Some of the reasons given were:

- Teachers expressed that they did not have enough time to plan differentiated lessons as there are too many lessons to teach and added to that was the need for keeping up with marking, making it seemingly impossible.
- Because there is such a strong focus on helping students achieve C grades there is not so much focus on students whose working levels are As or Bs as they are already beyond the crucial threshold (the latter refer to Ofsted criteria<sup>1</sup>).
- Differentiation is also seen as a double-edged sword as some students do not want to be singled out or do the harder work. In the same way others are sometimes keen to do the harder work but are not felt 'there yet' by the teachers to complete the higher-level work. Some experience of teachers also shows that differentiated tasks can cause distraction as students start talking about the different work rather than doing it.
- Lastly, there is the difficulty of not actually knowing sometimes what to do with gifted and talented students. There simply is a lack of understanding and knowledge about what high-achieving students want and need academ-

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<sup>1</sup>This research was conducted under the old Ofsted framework which focuses on students of a school achieving 5 A\* to C grades in their GCSE examinations including English and mathematics (Ofsted, 2014). What needs to be seen is how new educational policies like the 2015 White Paper change this 'grade culture' as the focus is now also on so called Attainment 8 and Progress 8 and in future, schools will be measured in terms of how many of their students reached their targets not just how many achieved a 'Pass (Grade 4)' or a 'Good pass (Grade 5)' (DfE, 2015; DfE, 2016b).



ically (Brady and Koshy, 2014; Eyre, 1997).

When looking further into the data from staff interviews, another aspect arises which is rooted in the pursuit of good grades, meaning C grades and above. This is to do with not having time to enjoy learning and explore interests but having to teach a syllabus so students can do well in their examinations. Teachers mentioned this leading to a '*spoon feeding approach*' (TC, MJ, CR; Staff interviews 2013) which does not allow for creativity and in-depth exploration. Students also found this in lessons where getting through the syllabus was the main goal and thus there was no time for real understanding or going off on a tangent just because it came up in a lesson. As reported in sub-section 5.2.2, thinking differently and deeper was at times discouraged by teachers due to time constraints. But of course, throughout the literature this aspect of learning is very often associated with gifted and talented students and enrichment is seen as one approach to providing adequate provision for the most able students (Gross, 2004; Stephen and Warwick, 2015). During interviews with Edward as well as students at Newton Sixth Form College it becomes apparent that what they enjoy most about their time at college is exactly that, depth and real understanding of the topics at hand. Therefore, not being able to explore topics in depth is hindering students in general but very able students in particular to develop expertise and further their understanding (Gross, 2004).

When talking to the gifted students at St. Paul's they all reported that most lessons did not offer any kind of differentiation or challenging work. Mathematics and sciences were the only subjects mentioned where more in-depth thinking was encouraged or supported on a more regular basis. However, as student interviews have shown, even in those two subject areas there were times when simply getting through the core curriculum was the only point on the teaching agenda and exploring certain issues further could not be indulged in. Further to lessons, the gifted students talked about the school trips gifted and talented students were invited

to but this only happened in Years 7 and 8. The older students were in school, the less offers were experienced. Thus, being on the gifted and talented register did not mean anything to these students as it did not make a difference to their educational experiences apart from being labelled and in their eyes made different from their peers - an idea all of the interviewed students at St. Paul's disliked (see chapter 5). This is supported by Eyre's (House of Commons, 2010) observations that often schools which do not identify their gifted and talented students but have a whole school approach focusing on the best outcome for all have overall better examination results in the end as well as better progress for all. This also resonates with the work of Borland (2003) and Sapon-Shevin (1994) who have questioned the process of identifying students as gifted or talented on the grounds of equity as well as creating an inclusive approach to education which has the best for all in mind.

### **6.1.3 What is the culture with a focus on giftedness and talent?**

*Culture is a layered social construct which can be expressed differently in different parts of an institution. However, although students expressed different feelings about different subjects, there was an overarching sense amongst them that their school, St. Paul's, was not necessarily interested in them achieving even better grades once they had passed the C grade and that examinations were more important than passion and interest in subjects taught. The latter was not just being enforced by teachers but also at times other students who were not interested in exploring subject matter in more depth.*

Gifted and talented students at St. Paul's were being identified purely based on academic achievements with only a few students being included on the register due to their talent in the sports, arts or performing arts. During my years of research at

St. Paul's, there was a clear trend of pursuing good grades for everyone meaning at least a C grade but not being overly interested in developing those students who were achieving A grades. With a changing emphasis at St. Paul's, which was strongly concerned with making it an outstanding school in Ofsted terms, new ideas were introduced which saw a rise in praising and acknowledging high achievement as well as hard work in an annual Presentation Awards Ceremony. However, although progress was praised the event in general focused more on attainment. Even though this raised the profile of doing well in school it did not necessarily boost challenge in lessons. Nevertheless, Dumbo and Bob mentioned this ceremony as well as badges being given out for very good work in different subject areas, or faculties in the case of St. Paul's, as something positive and as a way for the school to nurture those who did well (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013).

Overall, the culture at St. Paul's with a focus on giftedness and talent was not very pronounced or developed. Sporadic interventions were happening in lessons or extracurricular but they did not boost the overall feel of the school as welcoming high achievement or the general standing of high-achieving students. Even though there seems to be a decline in bullying of bright students (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015 compared to interviews Natalie and Keith, 2013 and 2015 as well as interviews Dumbo and Bob, 2013, 2015 and 2016) St. Paul's still did not seem the place where students felt comfortable to share their enjoyment of learning or certain subjects or where they felt they could develop their passion:

Interviewer: Did you ever feel back at St. Paul's that you could do that, that you could express maths?

Edward: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Edward: I really felt limited. I mean I felt, I felt a lot of the times

when I put forward something, it wasn't necessarily, not necessarily by the teachers and the staff, but it wasn't necessarily received well. Why would they be interested. I mean and so there wasn't really, you know I wasn't punished exactly but it wasn't exactly actively rewarded so I just didn't bring it up, you know.

(Interview Edward, 07 July 2016)

These findings are contrasting those from Highfield Secondary School (discussed in section 5.4.1) and points shared by students from Newton Sixth Form College (for the discussion see sub-section 5.4.2). In both cases students expressed feeling supported by teachers and being encouraged to explore their interests further as well as being pushed if not in all so at least in most lessons. It is worth to mention here again, that the cultural audit as well as teacher interviews at Highfield Secondary School suggested a more Hothouse culture and only a slight tendency to Formal and Wellfarist characteristics which is very different compared to St. Paul's Secondary School.

But how did this combination of (a) uncertainty about what giftedness and talent means, (b) unchallenging lessons and (c) a non-supportive school culture influence the development of self-esteem and self-theories amongst the gifted and talented students at St. Paul's? I will discuss this question in the next section.

#### **6.1.4 How do practices and culture influence the students' self-theories?**

*Edward's educational journey highlights how certain aspects of education at St. Paul's contributed to his development of a negative view of himself and who he was. On the other hand it illuminates the aspects of college life which helped him to embrace his enjoyment of academic work and develop a positive self-theory again.*

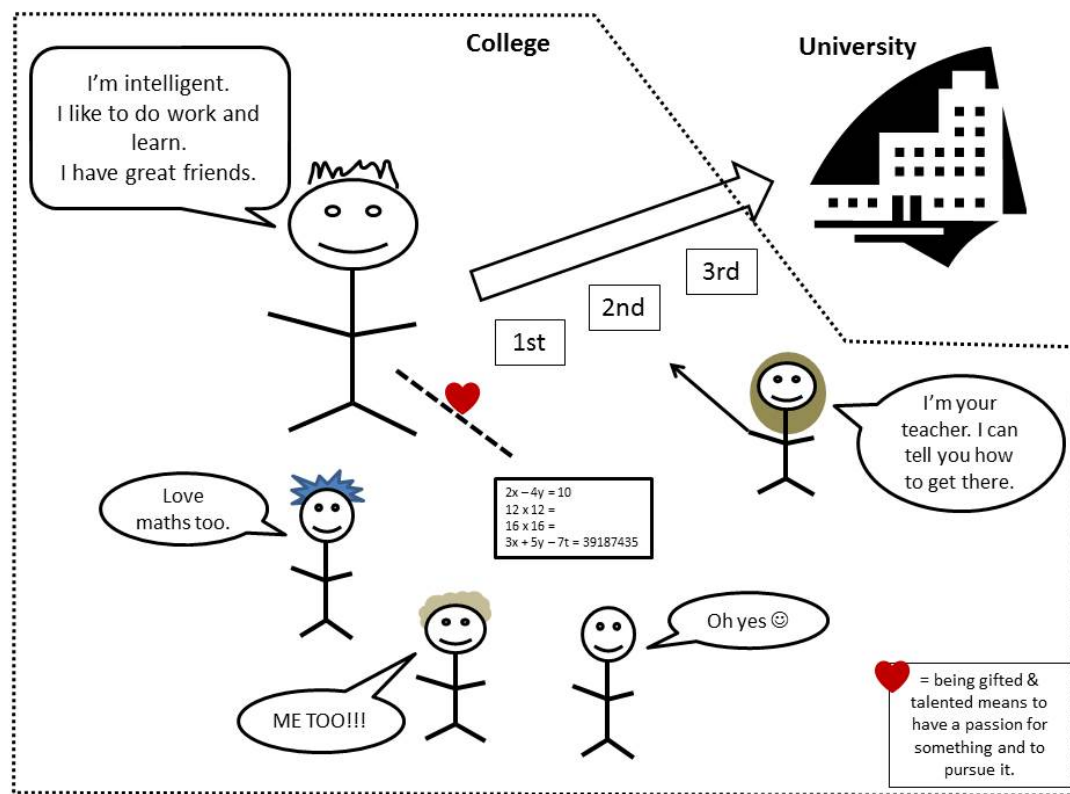


Figure 6.1: Diagram summarising Edward's perceptions of life at college

Self-theories of young people are shaped by their experiences and interactions with their environment and the people around them, as discussed in section 2.4. In Edward's case, his perception of secondary school lacked some of the elements other scholars have identified as necessary to develop a positive self-theory as well as fulfil their academic potential, some of them being a supportive friendship group, recognition of achievements and knowing who one is (Berndt, 1999; Dweck, 2000; Erikson, 1980; Francis et al., 2012; Gross, 2004; Warin, 2010). But firstly I would like to take a look at Edward's time in college and what he perceived as elements which helped him to be a happier self. Figure 6.1 shows an illustration of points Edward made during our interviews in 2015 and 2016.

For Edward, the best thing about college was being able to follow his passion for mathematics and the sciences and to meet other people who shared his passion. When joining college he found a good group of friends who also shared his passion for mathematical problems. Thus, debating these mathematical problems with

his friends became a natural part of their relationship which was a novelty for Edward as he had not been able to do so before. Becoming part of a friendship group whose individuals shared his passion was very important in him being able to accept who he was and not feel the need any more to hide his enjoyment of academic work (Francis et al., 2012). In addition to a close friendship group and a really good friend who shared his interests as well as being high achieving he also mentioned having supportive teachers in the sense of showing him the way. When Edward started college he was not totally sure about what he wanted to do after college, what to study and where. Halfway into Year 12 he had set his sights on Cambridge University entrance and, with the support of teachers, had found out what he still needed to learn to be accepted and was given extra work by his mathematics teacher. These points support what other scholars have found:

- High achieving students need support academically and socially to be able to deal with the challenge of having to work hard for their success but also be accepted by their peers (Francis et al., 2012).
- Working with peers of very similar ability allowed Edward to push even more for exceptional achievements as he was not naturally the brightest or best any more, which of course furthered his academic development (Adams-Byers et al., 2004). Edward embraced challenges and thus developed his expertise further (Dweck, 2000; Murphy and Dweck, 2010)
- Edward's drive at college was not purely about getting the best grades but to become an expert in a certain field, namely mathematics and the sciences, in order to pass the entrance tests at Cambridge University but also to achieve the necessary scores (Cambridge University did not just ask for an A\* grade but in previous years offers were made to candidates achieving approximately 93 of 100 possible marks in the course-related A-level examinations). Thus, Edward had a goal which he worked towards which was self-determined; he wanted to go to Cambridge University because he wanted to further develop

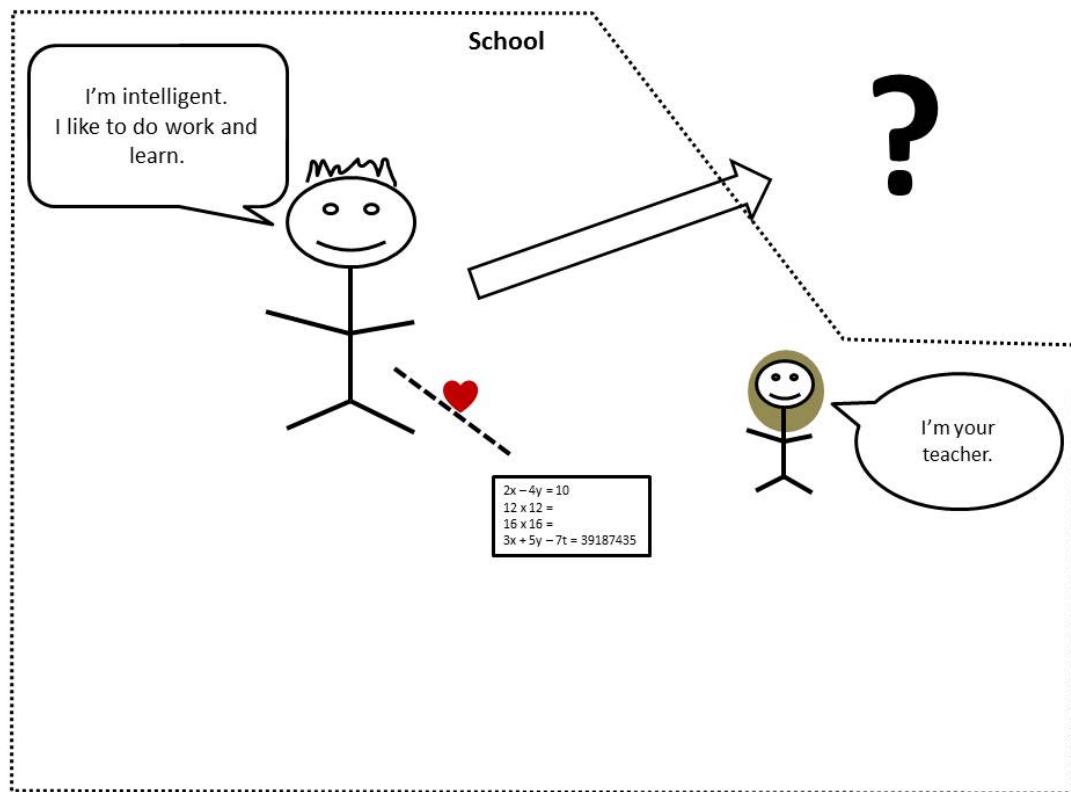


Figure 6.2: Diagram summarising Edward's perceptions of life at St. Paul's

his expertise and indulge in his passion for mathematics as well as the sciences (Garn et al., 2010).

The points above become even more pronounced when presenting how Edward perceived his support structure at St. Paul's (see Figure 6.2).

During his last year especially, Edward felt very much alone and although he had some friends, none of them shared his passion for mathematics and the sciences. Thus, when offering his insights or questions in lessons he did not feel accepted but rather rejected by his peers even though he was in the top set. But feeling accepted within a social environment is a crucial part of growing up and becoming an adult (Berndt, 1999; Francis et al., 2012) and for developing a positive self-theory (Warin, 2010). It is about fitting in and not standing out (Sapon-Shevin, 1994). Research by Murphy and Dweck (2010) suggests that an organisation's lay theory of, for example, intelligence, shapes how members of the organisation view

themselves and consequently even others. So, if members of a group, in my study teachers especially, embrace an entity perspective on intelligence, intelligence is what will be seen rather than the hard work someone invests to reach set goals. With Edward understanding himself as a learner and embracing learning, being hailed as ‘the clever and the smart one’, did not help him to find his place within the social setting of the school. Thus, the situation at St. Paul’s hindered exactly that for Edward: developing a view of himself which embraced his love of academic work and learning and saw him accepted as who he was. In his specific case this led to an extremely difficult time personally, including moments of bullying as well as truanting school, but fortunately did not hamper his academic achievements as he still did really well in his GCSE examinations achieving a number of A and A\* grades.

This stands in contrast to findings from Highfield Secondary School where ‘*Having fun*’ was one of the associations students had about their school alongside, for example, ‘*Making progress*’, ‘*Stress*’ and ‘*Achieving*’. Students further felt that overall ‘*there is a good learning atmosphere in my lessons*’, ‘*students in my school work hard in lessons*’, ‘*lessons in my school are fun*’ and lastly ‘*teachers work hard to make lessons interesting*’ supporting more of a Hothouse than Formal school culture. Within this educational environment the gifted and talented students seemed to be well integrated and none of the three I interviewed felt they had to hide their academic achievements or reported any bullying or teasing comments; furthermore, all of them felt confident in pursuing their academic interests (Student interviews Highfield Secondary School, June 2015).

In addition to not having a friendship group, Edward also felt that he was not necessarily supported academically. As discussed in sub-section 5.1.2, at St. Paul’s Edward often felt left alone having to get on with things by himself. Again, the view that gifted and talented students can get on by themselves is disputed by a number of scholars who argue that supporting them academically as well as



socially is as important as supporting any other students in a class (Francis et al., 2012; Gross, 2004; Peterson, 2009).

During his GCSE years at St. Paul's, Edward did not know where he wanted to go and what he wanted to do after college. Thus, his main drive in school was to get good GCSE grades to be able to get into college and do the courses he wanted to do. In turn, this did not push him much in lessons to work harder as he did not know what for in the long run; this led to a coasting approach to learning and school as Edward called it (Interview Edward, 07 July 2016).

## **6.2 Contributions to the research body in the field of gifted and talented education**

Research suggests that being faced routinely with an '*unchallenging curriculum*' (Ishak and Bakar, 2010), repetitive lessons or routine tasks can lead to disengagement with the practice at hand (Garn et al., 2010; Ishak and Bakar, 2010). This is strongly linked to the notion of academic engagement which is nurtured by intrinsic reasons like enjoyment and can be hindered by purely extrinsic factors such as grades (Garn et al., 2010). Thus, an educational environment where extrinsic factors are the only ones available to students can be detrimental to the development of positive work ethics and the active pursuing of learning and can, in some cases, lead to amotivation or demotivation meaning educational disengagement because students cannot see the point of doing the work (Dweck, 2000; Garn et al., 2010). Through my research I can support these points fully: St. Paul's is a school which is focusing mainly on improving examination grades at the end of Year 11 which in turn will better its rating in the eyes of Ofsted. Using Hargreaves's (1999) typologies of school cultures my data suggest that St. Paul's could be described as a strongly Formal school with a focus on progress and achievement reflected in GCSE grades as well as a hierarchical power structure with the headteacher at the

top. Students picked out phrases to describe St. Paul's with most counts being given to *'Making progress'*, *'Achieving'*, *'Being bored'*, *'Feeling happy'* and *'Stress'* (see sub-section 4.1.1) which supports this Formal character. The five gifted and talented students I interviewed between 2013 and 2016 all showed academic disengagement of some form. Natalie, Keith, Bob and Dumbo all reported that they did not work to the best of their ability and in some cases never had done so during their time at St. Paul's (mentioned by Natalie and Keith). For some time, Dumbo's disengagement included not even doing the basic tasks as she felt they were too easy and she did not see the point in doing them; she preferred just doing the harder work (Interview Dumbo and Bob, 23 July 2013 and 15 July 2015). All five students mentioned during interviews that lessons were boring and not very challenging. The consequences were manifold and I shall discuss them in more detail.

This limiting type of school culture also limits the available identity types for very bright students which in turn can have a negative effect on their academic engagement (Francis et al., 2012; Jackson and Nystroem, 2015). In this instance, identity types relate to, for example, being seen as a 'nerd', 'boffin' or 'geek' which often carries a negative connotation and leads to students not wanting to be seen as part of that group of students (Francis et al., 2012). There also is the possibility of being popular and high-achieving but this means a lot of work for the student as they have to match some of the expected stereotypical behaviours within a school setting. The latter, for example, including aspects of being physically attractive, also in a sexual way, as well as sporty, being humorous and cool, sociable and confident (Francis et al., 2012). It has to be noted though, that different school types or cultures will make different identity types available to students in general and high achieving students in particular (Francis et al., 2012). This is also linked with acceptance of certain identity types within certain educational settings leading to bullying. Research shows that gifted and talented students are especially vulnerable to bullying in some schools as they are different and thus

stand out (Peterson, 2009; Peterson and Ray, 2006). Interestingly, only Edward reported bullying during his time at St. Paul's. When we talked about why this might have happened he explained that those who treated him badly verbally and in some cases physically were those who had lost interest in education and thus were at a loss as to what to do after finishing school. With Edward clearly being different to them and achieving better he thus was put in a vulnerable position of being bullied (Peterson and Ray, 2006). The other four students all mentioned friendly teasing by friends but nothing hostile and none of those four took it too seriously or even to heart. What has to be said is that these four students were all part of strong friendship groups and, not like Edward, had social support in school. However, although all of them reported that most of their friends were also in set high ability classes or that they shared the same interest, none of them said that they could openly engage in talk about academic issues with their friends apart from comparing who got which grades. Coming back to identity types, they did not feel they could openly share their high ability and how easy they found lessons. They still hid their high ability and also interests in academic work to some extent so as to not stand out or be seen as boasting or showing off.

Further to the points above, Edward's story contributes some specific examples of strategies which helped him cope with his struggles. For example, the finding that differentiated lesson content was not the key which unlocked his academic potential, but the overall challenging atmosphere in his lessons which pushed students to their limits rather than holding them back, was an important finding. Generally, Edward perceived the bar in his college lessons as higher than that at St. Paul's as he felt more challenged in lessons and had to put more work in. In addition to that, teachers were able to provide guidance, as they knew what Edward needed to succeed and thus could lay down stepping stones for him and send him on his way. An approach like this also allows for learning through trial and error which Dweck (2000) has identified as being beneficial for academic engagement as it supports the development of a growth mindset which focuses on learning and developing

one's abilities rather than praising cleverness and thus intelligence (Jackson and Nystroem, 2015; Sternberg, 2000). Another element of college education which helped Edward develop a positive self-theory was that of being able to work independently and teachers not spoon-feeding their students (Interview Edward, 20 January 2015).

But what are the downsides of this kind of educational experience? What are my contributions to the research field?

Throughout all the interviews I conducted with the five gifted and talented students at St. Paul's a number of themes kept coming up that seemed linked to students' personal but also academic development at St. Paul's:

- Examinations and the golden 'C grade'.
- Effort in and out of lessons and physical symptoms.
- Self-theories.

### **6.2.1 Examinations and the golden 'C grade'**

Regularly, students at St. Paul's and especially the five gifted and talented students I worked with commented on the importance of examinations and especially the achieving of at least a C grade:

Interviewer: Ok. In terms of school would you say that our school embraces really high achievement and supports learners on that way?

Edward: I think they really aspire to doing that but quite often they don't and they are much more focused on making sure that everyone gets the good grades rather than a couple of people getting the absolutely outstanding grades.

(Interview Edward, 22 July 2013)

This strong focus on examinations and grades meant learning and the enjoyment of learning and exploring of the world around us can be lost as it is based on extrinsic reasons for education and learning (Garn et al., 2010). In turn, it limits learning as well as the nurturing of interests and passions if lesson discussions which are off topic are not indulged as it takes time away from preparing for the examinations. But as seen throughout the students' interviews at St. Paul's as well as the small glimpse of Newton Sixth Form College, very able students enjoy challenges and want to know about more than just the matter at hand. They are curious about the world; they also want to understand and not just know, a view also supported through the research literature (Gross, 2004). It also resonates with findings from Highfield Secondary School which encourages every student to strive to be the best they can be, ask questions and learn independently. This kind of school culture also seems to suit very able students better in their academic as well as social-emotional development as the interviews with them suggest (see sub-section 5.4.1).

Further to this focus on examinations and the drive to get as many students as possible to achieve C grades, it does lead to neglecting students who are already achieving higher grades. During a chance encounter with a colleague at St. Paul's she explained to me that she knew what she should do in lessons, including with the gifted and talented students, but because she had to hit a certain percentage target of A\* to C grades she focused on those not yet getting it. A reason why she could do that was because gifted and talented students were working fine in lessons, so she could deal with other students. Focusing on grades and progress is woven into current educational policy and thus education and has manifested in the introduction of the new and more robust and more academic GCSEs (DfE, 2015; DfE, 2016b). However, as my research suggests, this culture of grades does not support the development of a growth mindset which enables students to cope better

with difficult situations and conquer them rather than them giving up (Dweck, 2000). Secondly, only having extrinsic factors which drive a student's learning does not necessarily support academic engagement and can even lead to disengagement with school and academic work (Garn et al., 2010).

### **6.2.2 Effort in and out of lessons and physical symptoms**

A discussion which often came up with the gifted and talented students was centred around revision sessions. In most cases, revision lessons were labelled as boring as they were always the same and did not lead to new understandings for the students. What was surprising was that due to the Formal nature of St. Paul's especially in the lead up to examinations (internal as well as external) revision was very structured and mainly organised by the school. This led students to be relying on it too much and hindered them to develop their own strategies to revise (see sub-section 4.1.2 and Chapter 5). Further to that, the students mentioned some struggles in connection with revision:

1. Four of the five students I interviewed said that they did not actually know how to revise. This is probably a point other students would share and is not so unique to gifted and talented students. However, gifted and talented students at Highfield Secondary School did not mention any of those issues, quite on the contrary, all three interviewed mentioned working harder and revising for tests and examinations as well as knowing how to improve their work based on teacher feedback.
2. Some of the gifted students I interviewed mentioned that they did not see the point of revising as they normally get good grades anyway so did not actually see the point in preparing for tests or examinations. This is significant as it links to challenging and stimulating lesson content as well and how a lack of such can lead to disengagement (Garn et al., 2010).

3. To just forget about revision especially for internal and mock examinations was especially apparent during my interviews with Natalie and Keith. Both mentioned that they just forgot about revision for their mock examinations in the summer term 2015 as they were busy with their actual RE GCSE. But what four of the five students pointed out was that if you never established a habit of working hard and revising in lower school years it is hard to suddenly be able to do it when you get to your GCSE examinations or looking even further when you start further or even higher education.

Being faced with mainly boring and not very challenging lessons throughout their time at St. Paul's all five students reported that to some degree they lost interest in some subjects and with that the willingness to put work in. My interview data suggest that too much easy lesson content led to a decrease in students' work ethics. In Dumbo's case, this was to the extent that she did not even achieve basic levels in some subjects as she refused to do the work. Further it seems that once this habit of not having to work hard and coasting in some lessons has been established it is hard to break it again. The data from Highfield Secondary School paints a different picture as all interviewed gifted and talented students mention being challenged in most lessons and feeling encouraged by teachers to ask questions and find out facts by themselves. This approach to learning seemed to support a love of learning in the gifted and talented students rather than decreasing their work ethics. Of course, having only spoken to three gifted and talented students at Highfield Secondary School, their views cannot be generalised for all gifted students at Highfield but they offer a glimpse into their educational world and suggest some differences.

Thus, my data indicate that the students did not necessarily arrive at St. Paul's with the attitude of 'I don't want to work in lessons' but that it was something which developed over time and eventually manifested itself in the habit of 'not putting much work and effort in'. This development seems in parts guided or

enforced by the Formal school culture of St. Paul's.

Lastly, in two cases, inactivity during lessons even led to students falling asleep, something I could not find within the literature of the gifted and talented field. Responding physically to a lack of intellectual engagement is worrying in two ways: (a) falling asleep in a lesson although sleeping enough at night indicates that the student is somehow unwell, (b) teachers would of course interpret behaviour like this in certain ways, and depending on their interpretation this could make lessons even more uncomfortable for the students. I remember when Dumbo used to fall asleep in lessons and was so disengaged academically that she would not even achieve basic levels in certain subjects. Teachers would sometimes see her as arrogant and would thus develop a negative attitude towards her which in turn decreased her chances of being provided with adequate work.

### 6.2.3 Self-theories

My data suggest that there is a shift in work ethics and attitude from students arriving in Years 7 and 8 to later on in school life. Often students arrived at St. Paul's wanting to work, they enjoyed and longed for academic challenges but this enjoyment somehow got lost. When students reached Year 9 or higher they often shied away from putting a lot of work and effort in. It seems that lesson content not being hard enough over a long period of time meant that the minds of the gifted and talented students were not being trained in thinking, working, being challenged and questioned. When students moved on to their GCSEs in Years 10 and 11 they all wanted to do well because they all had aspirations to go to university after school and thus had high expectations of themselves but they did not know how to get there. This is also supported by the finding that they are very good in some subjects and did not have to put a lot of work in to achieve good grades. It strengthens a fixed mindset seeing one's innate ability as the key to success and not the work one puts in.



This supports Dweck's (2000) research which shows that praising students' intelligence and their grades rather than the work and effort they put into their work can strengthen a fixed mindset. Thus, a school culture which is focused on results and grades and not learning to develop one's abilities encourages a fixed mindset which in turn makes students shy away from challenges and hard work as they do not want to lose their status of 'being smart'. So in a nutshell, no challenges in lessons for very able students might very well mean stagnation and not learning to work hard and might hinder them to learn to cope with failures, a skill which is essential to live a successful life.

Further, these findings align with what Eyre was reporting (House of Commons, 2010), that schools which do not identify their gifted and talented students but overall have a focus on learning and high expectations within the school get better results including their very able students compared to schools which specifically identify their gifted and talented students. The key, therefore, seems to be to nurture students' mindsets from the word go and offer stimulating learning experiences. School culture, the feel of a place, thus seems to also have an impact on the mindset of students and, my research suggests, can shift students' perceptions about their achievements as well as ability. Of course, within a school which displays elements of a Formal school culture with, for example, a strong emphasis on achieving high grades, making progress and a very teacher-led approach to learning and revision many students still work extremely well and achieve outstanding results. This is something which this study did not look at, but would be worth investigating to get a fuller picture of how school culture influences the learning experiences of students in a school, not just of the identified gifted and talented students.

Eyre (House of Commons, 2010) as well as Francis et al. (2012) argue that schools which have a holistic approach to teaching and learning seem to enable students better in achieving higher. As supporting factors Francis et al. (2012) refer to the

work of Warrington and colleagues (2006, as cited in Francis et al., 2012) who found that the leadership of a school, the partnership amongst all involved parties as well as teaching practices are vital to establish a positive working atmosphere and enable students to do well. My research adds to that particular field as my case study of St. Paul's illuminates in-depth the workings of an English secondary school and how the above-mentioned elements play together. More importantly it shows the impact these different elements had on the social-emotional well-being of five students who attended St. Paul's.

My study shows the effect the focus on certain grades within an educational setting has on supporting those students who have already passed the necessary threshold grade, namely at least a C grade in GCSE examinations. This focus on grades was very much a whole school approach at St. Paul's and it seemed almost impossible for teachers and students alike to escape it. Therefore, in highlighting how the school culture influenced the development of the students' self-theories my study adds to Dweck's (2000) research as it shows those elements of the school culture that can have an influence on whether a student develops positive academic engagement leading to success or not, some of them being challenging and engaging lessons (not necessarily meaning differentiated lessons), enthusiasm of teachers about their subject and indulging in off-topic discussion to further understanding (therefore not purely focusing on examination grades and progress but developing expertise in a certain domain), as well as students feeling accepted as who they are by teachers as well as peers.

Most of all, my research adds the voices of young people to the research field, reflecting on their educational journey under the label 'gifted and talented' and how it shaped and influenced their experiences; an aspect which still seems very much under-represented in the field.

## 6.3 Methodological contributions

Further to the contributions above, my research has also added methodological aspects to the research field, either techniques not used before or still under-represented:

- **A longitudinal view:** Within the field of gifted and talented research not many studies have been conducted following children's social-emotional and academic development over the period of more than two or three years, something already raised by Gross (2004). My research enabled me to observe students informally over a period of 3 to 5 years. In addition to that I have had the opportunity to interview 3 students three times and 2 students 2 times during this project. This longitudinal tracking allowed me to view developments of individual students but also compare developments over time between different students. When only taking a snapshot of a situation (as in other studies, such as Adams-Byers et al. (2004), Francis et al. (2012), Ishak and Bakar (2010)) only some details become revealed and many others remain in the dark because certain points only become apparent when observing a social situation or phenomenon over a longer period of time. Thus, my study allows insight into the lives of five students who had been identified as gifted and talented by their school and how this did or did not in some cases influence their time at school (Cohen et al., 2007; Gross, 2004). As this was a limited explorative study, more research needs to be done to get an even deeper understanding of how being labelled as gifted and talented impacts on students' educational experiences to be able to evaluate practices and policies to support rather than hinder the development of expertise amongst students.
- **The Blobs:** Using the Blobs as a visual tool to engage with students was a rewarding exercise, as it allowed me to elicit rich and in-depth explanations

of students about how they felt. The Blobs led to a number of fascinating discussions as well as giving students the opportunity to relate their experiences in a different way, as words can sometimes be hard to find. By using the same illustration every time I met the students, I was enabled to track developments and changes in their educational but also personal journeys. Thus, the Blobs were an effective and fun way to engage with the students and collect unique and very nuanced data (for example, when Edward reached college the Blob he chose expressing his feeling of being supported was the same he highlighted 2 years' previously as how he would like to feel at school). Within the literature about gifted and talented students I have not come across researchers who used that visual tool and as such it would be worth taking a closer look at the effectiveness and how the Blobs can enhance research in the field.

- **The researcher-participant relationship:** Being an insider as well as an outsider at St. Paul's again opened many doors for me. The five students I interviewed were all known to me and they all knew me. Thus, I was able to develop close relationships with them which in turn gave me a richer insight into their experiences (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Qualitative research aims to provide stories and rich pictures which in my case was even more enhanced as the relationship between students and me developed. Edward at some point said to me that our interviews had allowed him to reflect on his educational experiences and be able to move on. This reminded me that interviewing people is not or should not be a one-way conversation but is a dialogue. It is two or more people bringing their stories together and engaging them. Without knowing the students and their environment so well I would not have been able to do it in the way I did. Being caught up in the whole process and environment, it gave me the knowledge to ask very specific questions and refer to happenings in the school or even specific happenings around the students which an outsider would not know. Researching a sit-

uation as an insider but also outsider does not feature strongly in the field of gifted and talented research but provides a chance to get a rich insight into the reality of students' lives and relate to them, moving from talking ABOUT them to talking WITH them.

## 6.4 Limitations

My research presents a case study which produced in-depth insights into the workings of one English secondary school. Of course, any findings could be limited to this one school site and only further research including more schools can show which of the points raised in my research actually apply more generally. This also includes the question of generalisability. Given the small scope of this study my findings can be seen as true for the one school but further research is necessary to validate them on a bigger scale. However, some of the points discussed also surfaced in the other research schools suggesting a wider reach of observations.

In solely relying on Hargreaves's (1999) typologies of school culture I have limited myself to certain elements and have overlooked others. Although it was necessary for this study to do so, evaluating these typologies and possibly updating them would be another step necessary to widen the reach of this work and its relevance in the field. What I also left aside in my study was the evaluation of classroom practices as this would have opened up another path too wide to travel as well with this research. Lastly, the data collected at the additional research sites was too detailed to include in this study in its entirety. Whenever possible, I used it to contrast points made about observations about St. Paul's.

## 6.5 Outlook

The joys of my study were to engage with students in discussions about their education and what kind of education they would enjoy. I was able to hear stories about their positive but also negative experiences at school and how some stories had very happy endings and wonderful new beginnings. What has truly shaken me was seeing through the eyes of the students the impact teaching and thus my teaching has on students. This is not just in the sense of whether they achieve their targets or not but how what I do can change their outlook on life and even themselves.

In some ways, this feels to be the most satisfying outcome of this study, as I have changed my views and perceptions of what it means to be gifted and talented. What used to be an easy answer has turned into more questions. Understanding giftedness and talent is not as easy as saying ‘children are born like that’. Research has shown that many more factors play a part in making a very able person and that not just one aspect is important but so many more. My research has shown me that identifying students as gifted or talented is not always a good thing and can even lead to social and academic difficulties. Where there was black and white is now much more grey. The field of educating very able students is a difficult one to master and manoeuvre but an important one nevertheless, as it is about helping children to grow up to be the best person they can be.

I look back at my journey gratefully, as it has opened my horizon to different ways of understanding an issue and has also questioned my personal opinion about the topic at hand. I believe that, through this research, I have become a more reflexive teacher not just in the way I set tasks but also in the way I praise students or talk about their achievements. I have gained a better understanding of their needs and that differentiating tasks is not necessarily the best way to approach teaching very able students. In the same way, I struggle to define what giftedness and talent

means. At the beginning my understanding was linked to able parents and a good upbringing leading to a high IQ. I am now more drawn to the understanding that IQ only plays a small part in developing expertise and that being enthused about a domain and pursuing a passion/an interest are more important in being motivated to put the work in which really seems to be the key in doing exceptionally well.

Thus, I leave this study with a number of questions and challenges which need further discussion and research:

- Very able students need support in school, academically and personally. This support has to be facilitated by teachers. For teachers to be able to do that they need to understand what giftedness and talent means and what not. Thus, I see two points which need addressing within teacher training and the research field. (1) Teachers need to be adequately trained in working with very able students including what kind of learning is suitable for them and what approaches might work best. (2) Research which highlights good practice in schools concerned with the balance between students making progress and enjoying school, as well as school characteristics which allow for students of all ability levels to thrive needs to be more widely spread and applied within schools.
- Educational policies seem mainly concerned with developing and improving the educational system as such but do not engage in honest educational debates about what teaching and learning should really be about. This is partly steered by the current understanding that the aim of education is to get children the best grades they can get so they can become valuable members of the working force (Francis et al., 2012). Being driven by achievement only sees education moving next to business and industry and positions gifted and talented young people at the heart of positive change within society, a notion which is not new in the understanding of giftedness and talent (DfE, 2016b). This issue needs addressing if education is to be improved. My research has

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highlighted some of the issues students and teachers encounter within this culture of grades and how it can hamper the emotional well-being of students as well as their academic engagement.

- Lastly, evaluating approaches to teaching very able students is important but needs to be seen in a long-term way. Too little is so far known about what it really takes to succeed later on in life and how schools and education can contribute to successful life stories. More research is necessary taking this longitudinal perspective in the field of gifted and talented students to develop a deeper and better understanding of their needs informed by their own experiences.



# Chapter 7

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# Appendix A

## Interview Edward

Place: St. Paul's Secondary School

Date: 22/07/13

Duration: approx. 46:30

No. of participants: 1 (m, 15, end of Year 10)

**AZS** What I would like to start off with is more BLOBs.

**EDWARD** Ahh.

**AZS** You filled in a questionnaire but I'd like to really hear from you how you feel being in this school and especially being a G&T student.

**EDWARD** Yeah.

**AZS** So feel free to have a look at the BLOBs. If any of those, even if it's more than one, describe quite well how it is for you take a pick.

**EDWARD** Sometimes I guess you can sort of be the one at the very top of the picture (1). *You sort of you're getting good grades and you're getting there and you're at the top and you can sort of look over*

*and say 'yeah it's pretty good'. And then sometimes you're the guy sitting down drinking a cup of tea (3). You know **you've got where you've wanted to be and I think now you can kind of sit down and you know take it a bit easy.** Sometimes how you feel and stuff. You know. You've got there it's where you want to be so you **don't have to push yourself much further.** Or you **not being pushed much further.** Often sort of this guy (x1) as opposed to this guy (x2) you know. **You're not necessarily been given as much support rope than anyone else** you sort of. . . I don't want to say it's a bad thing **cause you're sort of more intelligent you're left to sort of more independent sort of study,** which I actually prefer so it's not a big problem for me. **I've adapted.***

AZS Now you were just saying that you 'have a cup of tea'. You're not being pushed any further. **Would you like to be pushed any further?**

EDWARD **Sometimes in certain subjects yes but then you think 'Oh my goodness there's so much work on my plate, please no.'** Like I have one lesson where it's slightly more of a sit down. So, in some aspects yes and **you know some lessons you can sit there and literally do nothing** [laughter] Often in Maths cause you start your GCSE and you sit there and think it's too hot. . . you know maybe.

AZS OK. Because you've done your GCSE haven't you? You've already finished that so you're now just waiting for your results?

EDWARD Waiting for the results, that's a bit hard. **Waiting for results cause if you don't get what you want then you've got to go through it all again. That's a bit scary.**

# Appendix B

## Coded interview Edward

### Social-emotional aspects - COPING MECHANISMS

**Relax after work** p.1 “[...]you’ve got where you’ve wanted to be and I think now you can kind of sit down and you know take it a bit easy.”

**Don’t push yourself further** p.1 ”You’ve got there it’s where you want to be so you don’t have to push yourself much further.”

**Adaptation** p.1 “I don’t want to say it’s a bad thing cause you’re sort of more intelligent you’re left to sort of more independent sort of study, which I actually prefer so it’s not a big problem for me. I’ve adapted.”

**Not working** p.1 “some lessons you can sit there and literally do nothing [laughter]”

### Social-emotional aspects - SELF-CONCEPT

**Getting good grades, at the top** p.1 “You sort of you’re getting good grades and you’re getting there and you’re at the top and you can sort of look over and say ‘yeah it’s pretty good’.”

**Work-relax-balance** p.1 “And then sometimes you’re the guy sitting down drink-



ing a cup of tea (3). You know you've got where you've wanted to be and I think now you can kind of sit down and you know take it a bit easy."

**Content with place, not pushing further** p.1 "You've got there it's where you want to be so you don't have to push yourself much further."

**Struggling with waiting and finding out about results - patience** p.1 "Waiting for the results, that's a bit hard. Waiting for results cause if you don't get what you want then you've got to go through it all again. That's a bit scary."

### **Social-emotional aspects - STRUGGLES**

**Workload** p.1 "Would you like to be pushed any further?" "Sometimes in certain subjects yes but then you think 'Oh my goodness there's so much work on my plate, please no.'"

**Scared of failure and what friends will think (teasing him, pouncing)** p.1 "Waiting for the results, that's a bit hard. Waiting for results cause if you don't get what you want then you've got to go through it all again. That's a bit scary." "Why is that scary?" "I'm actually quite worried what my friends will think."

### **Practices and provision in school**

**Independent study ('left to their own devices')** p.1 "Or you not being pushed much further. Often sort of this guy as opposed to this guy you know. You're not necessarily been given as much support rope than anyone else you sort of [...] don't want to say it's a bad thing cause you're sort of more intelligent you're left to sort of more independent sort of study, which I actually prefer so it's not a big problem for me."

### **Edward's understanding of the concepts of giftedness and talent**

**Being intelligent** p.1 “I don’t want to say it’s a bad thing cause you’re sort of more intelligent you’re left to sort of more independent sort of study[...]

# Appendix C

## Learner survey

## MY SCHOOL – Tell me what your school is like?

In which year group are you? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender?  Male  Female

### Question 1

Please tick all the boxes which describe your school best:

Overall...	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
...teachers in my school seem warm and friendly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...there is high pressure to work hard and reach set targets in my school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... teachers in my school want me to do well and succeed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...teachers in my school are very strict	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...my school is a very lively school with lots of things happening after school (for example, after school clubs, trips, special events).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...academic success is recognised and praised more than anything else in my school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...my school has too many rules about behaviour.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...school rules restrict me in being me by being strict about, for example, uniform, appearance and punctuality.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...there is a good learning atmosphere in my lessons.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...students in my school work hard in lessons.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...students in my school can get away with silly behaviour.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...lessons in my school are fun.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...teachers work hard to make lessons interesting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...my school is very caring.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...there are lots of ways that my school makes sure I am safe and well (for example, they offer counselling, we have a chaplain and other people I can talk to if I have a problem).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Question 2

Please look at the BLOB tree on this page. Take your time and look carefully at the BLOBS: What are they doing? What do you think about how they feel?

Then, please answer the questions on the opposite page.



- a) Choose 3 BLOBs (max) which show best how you actually feel when you are at school (circle and number them)? Can you please explain your choice?

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- b) Please choose another 3 BLOBS (max) which show best how you would like to feel when you are in school (circle and number them, too)? Can you please explain your choice?

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**Question 3**

Please choose 3 of the images/phrases which show the most important characteristic of your school.

Fear <input type="checkbox"/>	On my own <input type="checkbox"/>
Stress <input type="checkbox"/>	Feeling supported <input type="checkbox"/>
Feeling happy <input type="checkbox"/>	Exams, exams, exams <input type="checkbox"/>
Being bored <input type="checkbox"/>	Achieving <input type="checkbox"/>
Having fun <input type="checkbox"/>	Being proud <input type="checkbox"/>
Working together <input type="checkbox"/>	Feeling low <input type="checkbox"/>
One amongst many <input type="checkbox"/>	Making progress <input type="checkbox"/>
Failing <input type="checkbox"/>	Feeling welcome <input type="checkbox"/>

Are there any other phrases or images you would like to share? Here is the space for them.

**Thank you very much for taking part :o)**

## Appendix D

Student questionnaire St. Paul's  
Secondary School – full data



QUESTIONS: Overall...	Total	Missing	Some are/do	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
... teachers in my school want me to do well and succeed.	396 99.2%	3 0.8%	1 0.3%	140 35.4%	195 48.9%	45 11.3%	9 2.3%	6 1.5%
...school rules restrict me in being me by being strict about, for example, uniform, appearance and punctuality.	394 98.7%	5 1.3%		119 30.2%	134 34.0%	68 17.3%	56 14.2%	17 4.3%
...there is high pressure to work hard and reach set targets in my school.	396 99.2%	3 0.8%		91 23.0%	226 57.1%	57 14.4%	19 4.8%	3 0.8%
...my school is a very lively school with lots of things happening after school (for example, after school clubs, trips, special events).	397 99.5%	2 0.5%	2 0.5%	86 21.7%	181 45.6%	74 18.6%	43 10.8%	11 2.8%
...there are lots of ways that my school makes sure I am safe and well (for example, they offer counselling, we have a chaplain and other people I can talk to if I have a problem).	395 99.0%	4 1.0%		83 21.0%	164 41.5%	101 25.6%	27 6.8%	20 5.1%
...my school has too many rules about behaviour.	394 98.7%	5 1.3%	2 0.5%	77 19.5%	102 25.9%	99 25.1%	98 24.9%	16 4.1%
...students in my school can get away with silly behaviour.	395 99.0%	4 1.0%	2 0.5%	62 15.7%	115 29.1%	80 20.3%	98 24.8%	38 9.6%
...teachers in my school are very strict	398 99.7%	1 0.3%	5 1.3%	56 14.0%	114 28.6%	140 35.2%	75 18.8%	8 2.0%
...my school is very caring.	392 98.2%	7 1.8%		46 11.7%	137 34.9%	127 32.4%	54 13.8%	28 7.1%
...teachers work hard to make lessons interesting.	392 98.2%	7 1.8%	4 1.0%	44 11.2%	139 35.5%	121 30.9%	62 15.8%	22 5.6%
...academic success is recognised and praised more than anything else in my school.	394 98.7%	5 1.3%	1 0.3%	30 7.6%	122 31.0%	148 37.6%	69 17.5%	24 6.1%
...there is a good learning atmosphere in my lessons.	397 99.5%	2 0.5%	3 0.8%	27 6.8%	154 38.8%	119 30.0%	68 17.1%	26 6.5%
...teachers in my school seem warm and friendly.	397 99.5%	2 0.5%	7 1.8%	25 6.3%	212 53.4%	102 25.7%	39 9.8%	12 3.0%
...lessons in my school are fun.	395 99.0%	4 1.0%	6 1.5%	18 4.6%	97 24.6%	115 29.1%	102 25.8%	57 14.4%
...students in my school work hard in lessons.	394 98.7%	5 1.3%	6 1.5%	17 4.3%	109 27.7%	145 36.8%	90 22.6%	27 6.9%

Figure D.1: Scaled questions student questionnaire St. Paul's Secondary School, full data