
Gifted children on a different path to adulthood

'Gifted children do need to be taught': UWA neuroscience undergraduate Andrew Frank, who taught himself to read at 18 months. Picture: Colin Murty

VICTORIA LAURIE THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM July 21, 2017

University student Andrew Frank taught himself to read a newspaper by the age of 18 months: "I skipped baby words and spoke full sentences fairly early."

But he says the capacity of educators to deal with his gifted abilities "varied pretty wildly".

He became severely depressed in primary school, "because I was so bored with school and wasn't doing anything". He was upset when a headmaster told his mother his abilities were "freakish".

Researchers, educators and parents are meeting in Sydney for the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children's 22nd Biennial World Conference, an international gathering to discuss ways of assisting gifted children through their growing years.

Hosted by the University of NSW's School of Education, a world leader in gifted education, delegates will hear that boredom is a major issue for gifted children.

Australian Mensa's gifted children's coach Alan Thompson, who works with chess champions, musical prodigies and maths nerds, says accelerating a child's learning by installing them in higher classes is nearly always appropriate.

"One of my clients is an eight-year-old doing Year 11 subjects," he said. "They're all on the same wavelength. This is what these children need, to be with like-minded people."

Noting that US entrepreneur Elon Musk took his children out of standard schooling and created a customised environment, Mr Thompson added, "it doesn't have to be in home schooling or a Montessori school".

Australian teachers are interested in supporting pupils with high ability, and accelerated learning can happen in a standard school. He says there are 400,000 gifted students from pre-Kindergarten to Year 12, aged four to 17.

"A bunch of schools want to be part of Australian Mensa, and are making provision for gifted students over and above the normal provision," Mr Thompson said..

"There are a few schools with an older mindset from the industrial age, the mentality that says 'let's churn out these kids like a learning factory'. But this is the creative age: there's no room for factory children any more. What the world is crying out for is children who are self-driven."

Mr Thompson, who describes himself as a "coach for high-ability families", says there are huge gains in having families involved in supporting a bright child.

Mr Frank, now 20, is at the University of Western Australia studying a neuroscience and psychology double major to understand more about the brain and giftedness.

He skipped several grades in his schooling, but said "as a result I missed out on some maths concepts and there were no bridging classes". "Teachers expected me to be able to pluck geometry knowledge out of thin air, but gifted children do need to be taught.

"If I got a bad result, they'd say: 'Oh he's not as bright as we think he is.' "

He says the university system is better suited for the kind of self-directed learning bright individuals such as him need.

"It's far easier than the schooling system in that respect."