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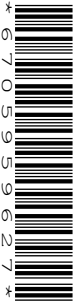
Tuesday 6 June 2017 – Morning

GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

A680/02/RBI Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

READING BOOKLET INSERT

Duration: 2 hours



INSTRUCTIONS TO CANDIDATES

- The materials in this Reading Booklet Insert are for use with the questions in **Section A** of the Question Paper.

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Gifted children no more likely to succeed

Rosie Millard discovers that fate, personality and good old-fashioned drive are just as important to adult success as academic potential.



Well hurrah, let's trample on the Non-Verbal Reasoning test papers immediately. And while we're at it, please stop all these silly Language Days when our 'gifted' children have to do Maths in French or Geography in German. And can we can the violin practice before school, the specialist sports coaching after it, and all the other preposterous hurdles we expect our children to vault. Because the news is that hot-housing your child and encouraging them to walk the path of a mathematical, musical or linguistic genius doesn't make a blind bit of difference to their future success, happiness or material gain.

Professor Joan Freeman, who studied the adult careers of 210 child prodigies for her book *'Gifted Lives: What Happens When Gifted Children Grow Up'* has discovered that not every child who is labelled an infant Mozart, composing symphonies at the age of 8, will necessarily become one. Far from it: of the 210, only six became incredibly successful in later life.

Indeed, the book reveals that the old schoolboy riposte 'Winston Churchill failed his exams at school and he didn't do badly, did he?' might have something important in it after all. Apparently, fate, personality and good old fashioned drive are just as important to adult success and fulfilment as the ability to describe Shape A after twisting it by 90 degrees, or describe Pi to 60 decimal places, or knowing the numbers and letters on 'Countdown' before the age of two. Probably more, in fact.

'There is a whole person involved in whether a person becomes successful,' advises Freeman, adding that children can be 'sick and tired of having their nose to the grindstone'. Don't hothouse your kids, she writes, citing grim examples of fed up and demoralised youngsters whose only treats were visits to museums and who were never allowed to read comics.

Not only must this be a relief to anyone who has had the unfortunate experience of being described as a prodigy because they know the number of pages in each book on the bookshelf, but it also flings a much needed bucket of water over 'helicopter parents' who rush their children from special maths coaching to special tuition in languages, terrified of wilfully ignoring the blossoming of that precious thing known as children's 'potential'.

Right now, as exams for selective secondary schools, both state and private, loom on the horizon, parents' anxiety about their offspring's promise has reached a zenith. Maths tutors, music teachers and French masters are being lined up across the nation in a sort of stealth operation to give extra shine to the genius that is their child. If dinner party chat is any sort of social barometer, squeezing the most from your child has become an even more gripping topic of middle class anxiety than a drop in house prices, and that's saying something. Last week I heard a discussion about Non-Verbal Reasoning Tests between complete strangers at the ungodly hour of 12.40 a.m. 'My son did an hour of test papers every day for a year,' this man told me. 'I thought I was letting him down otherwise.' To my shame, I heard myself congratulating him. Every day after tea, I too have trooped upstairs to see the small frame of my son, 10, hunched over past papers for this or that school, in order to fulfil my aim that his cleverness is fulfilled.

And if you have an officially 'gifted and talented' child? Treat them no differently from others, says Professor Freeman. Pushing them all the time might be seriously deleterious in the long run. Do children really need to be able to tell the time when they are three years old? 'They might cope at school and university but, when they find themselves free to make their own decisions,... some cut loose. The examples are out there.'

The stories of child geniuses gone wrong are plentiful. There is one maths prodigy who went to Oxford at 11 who insists that her children will 'develop in a natural way' and another who completed GCSEs aged 8 and works in Macdonald's. Then there are alleged musical geniuses who fail to make the grade and end up out of work.

Finally, parents anxious about getting the most out of their children's potential might well be advised to look the word up in a dictionary. 'Potential, virtual; baseless, unsubstantial' is how one puts it. We would do well to remember that.

I was a late developer

As his friends went through puberty, Neil Brennan remained stubbornly boyish and undeveloped. By 18 he was desperately anxious.... would he ever catch up with his peers?

The bouncer looks me up and down. Then, as he beckons the rest of my 17-year-old schoolmates into the nightclub without hesitation, he looks me up and down again. He calls another bouncer over. They take it in turns to look me up and down. Everyone in my school year looks on from inside the club, passersby stop to gawk. My head turns so red that it threatens at any moment to blast off into space. 'What do you think?', the first bouncer asks his pal, 'DOES he look 18 to you?'

The truth is I don't. Not even close.

Puberty came to me so late that, until the last year of university, I looked about 13. Think of Daniel Radcliffe in the first Harry Potter movie, all high voice and cherubic face. That was me, for the best part of a decade. I would shy away whenever my parents wanted to take a picture of me. Few teenage boys want to be reminded that they look like Sue Perkins.

I was always a little small for my age, but that was never a big issue, even after some creative bullies successfully tested the theory that I was small enough to fit into a bin upside down. However, I was funny enough to mostly get away with being the smallest kid in the class. By which I mean I made jokes about the obese kid to deflect attention from myself.

Suddenly, all the other boys shot up; their voices got deeper, their bodies hairier. The PE changing rooms became a natural history documentary for me, at once fascinating and terrifying. Worst of all was the realisation that girls loved this stuff. When I heard a bunch of them rating the broadness of other boys' shoulders, I despaired. When were my shoulders going to broaden? When were girls going to objectify me?

I didn't confide in my parents straightaway. It was embarrassing enough to be fighting this private war with my stupid, stubborn body. I didn't want anyone else making fun of it for me.

It wasn't just the good stuff of puberty that I wanted. I actively sought spots and would wolf down greasy food in the hope of attaining some. The thing I craved most of all was a prominent Adam's apple. A classmate had one that looked like he had swallowed a golf ball that had got stuck. My friends stopped hanging around with me. They wanted to sneak into pubs, buy cigarettes, meet girls – I still had trouble getting into 15-certificate films. They bullied me out of the group, using tactics to let me know I was too much of a kid to be seen with them.

Aged 18 and in my final year at school, a Catholic priest visited us to talk about joining the priesthood. I seriously wondered if this might work for me, as it would give me an excuse for why girls never took an interest in me. Then I remembered I was an atheist. So, instead of talking to God, I did something I should have done a long time before: I talked to my parents.

I told my dad about my concerns first. His advice was a mixture of the positive and the practical: he would happily take me to a doctor, but advised that I should start to dress older. So it was out with the baggy jeans and loose hoodies and in with the shirts and smart trousers.

The truth is that it took two more years of waiting. The bouncers outside my graduation party were still to come, as was missing all of the socials at the start of my first university year. On my 18th birthday, I was turned away from my local pub because the manager reckoned my passport was a fake. Well, I did have form, I suppose.

When I was 20, nature finally took its course. On a four-month study programme in Australia, the skin on my face toughened and then sprouted tiny hairs, invisible to anyone but me. I stopped having to pretend my voice was deep; it just was.

I came home from Australia with a new confidence and didn't look back. I graduated and made a move on a girl I had fancied for years. It was like getting over a cold; one day everything was as it should be and it was hard to dwell on all the rough times that had gone before.

What was harrowing at the time now seems hilarious – and that includes my parents' photograph albums.

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