Talent: is it a result of nature or nurture?

Assembly by Dan Meehan, incoming Head of Year 7, May 2025

Recently I have undertaken some reading about talent, as I had some questions. Is talent something we are born with, is it something that is determined by our culture, environment or upbringing? What is the best way to reveal and nurture talent? In front of me now is a room full of talented people in a range of fields from, education, music, sport, drama and many more. You see... the concept of talent is applicable to all of us in one way or another. At Wells we are enriched with opportunities to develop and express our talents on a daily basis. So, what is talent?

In a book called 'The Talent Code' Daniel Coyle discusses a view that talent is built on revolutionary scientific discoveries involving our nervous system, via a neural insulator called Myelin. Myelin is considered by many neurologists to be the holy grail of acquiring skill, because every human skill, whether it's dribbling in Hockey, learning a new language or learning to play the Violin is created by chains of nerve fibres carrying a tiny electrical impulse which act as a signal travelling through a circuit.

When we fire our circuits in the right way - when we practice playing a forward drive in Cricket or playing a specific note on the piano for example - our myelin responds by wrapping layers of insulation around that neural circuit, each new layer adding more skill and speed. The thicker the Myelin gets, the better it insulates, and the faster and more accurate our movements and thoughts become. Therefore, the more time and energy you put into the right kind of practice, firing the right kind of signals through your circuits - the more skill you get.

This view is somewhat supported by the 10,000-Hour rule. The rule suggests that it takes roughly 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to achieve mastery in any field. Deliberate practice involves focused, goal-oriented training designed to improve specific aspects of performance. It requires feedback, reflection, and effort that pushes us beyond our comfort zone. For example, in music, a pianist might spend hours working on a difficult passage, receiving feedback from a teacher and making micro-adjustments along the way.

In this sense, the 10,000-Hour Rule holds some truth: high achievement is rarely possible without sustained, intentional effort. Several famous figures are cited as proof of the rule. The Beatles, for instance, are said to have played over 1200 shows before achieving global fame—accumulating thousands of hours of live performance. Similarly, Bill Gates had access to a computer terminal as a teenager, a rare opportunity that allowed him to spend countless hours programming before founding Microsoft.

However, these examples also illustrate the role of context. The Beatles had the chance to perform night after night, and Bill Gates had access to cutting-edge technology long before his peers. Their success was not just about the number of hours, growing skills and developing their craft required opportunity and a significant amount of energy, passion and commitment.

Therefore, the 10,000-Hour Rule has value as a motivational idea, reminding us that excellence is more about effort than effortless genius. It highlights the importance of dedication, discipline, and the willingness to persist. However, while well disciplined and consistent practice is vital, it often stems from something that psychologists refer to as ignition.

Ignition occurs when passion is ignited in someone because of a specific moment, event or person that provides them with the drive to fully commit to mastering their talent. For example, in 1998 a female South Korean Golfer named Se Ri Pak won The McDonald's LPGA Championship. Before her no South Korean had succeeded in Golf, but fast forward ten years, she had inspired a nation and there were 33 South Koreans on the LPGA Tour.

Therefore, when reflecting on the concept of talent this got me thinking about our individual roles and responsibilities in the development of our own talents and how we can inspire each other to explore them fully. From this I narrowed my focus to three areas:

1. Challenges:

These can be anything that pushes us out of our comfort zone. For some of you, it might be a difficult subject or the thought of moving into senior school, starting your GCSEs or sitting A level exams. For others, it could be speaking in public, making new friends, or training for a marathon.

But... Here's the truth: Challenges are not there to stop us. They're there to help us grow and often present us with opportunities which drive us forward. This can be challenging as to achieve our full potential and realise the true depths of our talent we must stay disciplined and consistent.

2. Choices:

Every day, you make dozens of them — what to have for breakfast, who to hang out with, whether to study, whether to do exercise or whether to practice.

Choices matter. Even the small ones add up. They shape your habits, and your habits nurture the development of your talent and your goals.

You might think, "But I'm just one person. What difference can I really make?"

Well, let me give you an example. Malala, a girl from Pakistan, chose to speak out for girls' education even though it was dangerous. That one choice made her a global voice for change and earned her the Nobel Peace Prize.

Now, you don't need to change the world in one go. But every good choice you make—studying, being kind, standing up for someone or something—makes your world better. And that counts for something.

3. Opportunities:

Sometimes we can be guilty of letting opportunities pass us by, but we have to grab them with both hands and have confidence and trust in the talent we have nurtured.

At Wells we have a wealth of opportunities, but the reality is that not all opportunities look like shiny golden tickets. They come disguised as hard work, as taking a risk, or saying "yes" when it would be easier to say "no." Maybe your opportunity is joining a new club, trying out for a team, applying for a leadership role, or simply taking an opportunity to ask for help when you need it in class. Seeing opportunity everyday is important.

But let's be honest for a moment: when it comes to talent some people seem born with it. Some seem naturally fast, gifted, coordinated. But talent alone is never enough. Take Cristiano Ronaldo. One of the greatest football players of all time. Yes, he has talent — but it has been years of early mornings, intense training, sacrifice, setbacks and comebacks that shaped his talent.

Fulfilling your talent doesn't mean becoming famous though, or even being the best in your field. It means being faithful to the gifts you've been given — and using them for something greater than yourself. In each person's journey, talent is measured differently. It's not just about success and achievement, but is also about how you treat others along the way. In the Bible passage from Corinthians, St Paul uses the image of a race.

He writes:

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize."

Now, Paul isn't just talking about medals or finishing first. He's pointing to the way we live — with effort, with direction, with heart. He's saying: "Don't just turn up — give it everything you've got."

And that, in many ways, is what fulfilling your potential and exploring your talent is about. It's not about comparing yourself to others. It's about becoming the fullest version of who you are meant to be.

Here at Wells, many of you already shine on the sports field, or in music, drama or in academics. Others might feel unsure of your direction. That's okay.

Not everyone's talents are the same. You're not all called to the same kind of race.

But... The question is not: “What are others doing?”

The question is: “What talent have I been given — and what can I do with it?”

Life is full of opportunities to fulfil your potential and grow your talents... These are gifts — not put there by accident, but on purpose, so:

- **Show up consistently** – You don’t have to be the best every day. But be present, persevere and be willing to get out of your comfort zone.

- **Accept your choices** – In life, we rise higher when we commit fully and take full ownership of the choices we have made.

- **Embrace failure** – Every setback creates an opportunity. You are not defined by failure — you are refined by it. So let us run, then, not with fear — but with purpose and may each of you embrace opportunity, and fulfil the potential of the talents placed within you.