



Transcript of episode 50: Bright & Early - A Story of Radical Acceleration

Emily: Hey there and welcome to episode 50, this is the first episode of our third year in production and we are really excited that you are here with us today. I'm going to talk to a young woman who is just going to amaze you. Haley Taylor Schlitz is only 17 years old and she's already in her second semester of law school. She'll talk about her experiences as a gifted student of color and a radically accelerated homeschooler in just a minute. A few notes about some of the cool things that are happening around here. We are excited to continue our growth as your go-to podcast for all things related to the development of gifted people throughout the lifespan. We would love for you to join our Facebook group and join the conversation. In addition to topics related to supporting and advocating for gifted education, we'll be having an online conversation about each episode about a week after the new episode airs.

Emily: This'll be a great way to elaborate on the conversation, ask questions and share your thoughts about the topics. Just find us on Facebook we're the Mind Matters podcast and click join group. If you already follow us on social media, you may have seen those really nifty little Mind Matters earbuds that I've been giving away at the conferences that I've attended. Well now you can have your own, even if you aren't planning on attending one of the conferences. We've added the earbuds as a perk for our Patreon subscribers at the \$5 donation level. Patreon is a way for creative endeavors like ours to have financial support from our listeners and your help means a lot. If you want to support us, you can go to Patreon, P A T R E O N.com, forward slash Mind Matters. Of course, another way you can help us is by rating and leaving a review for us on your favorite podcast platform. Up next...

Haley: Hi, I'm Hayley Taylor Schlitz, and I'm a first year law student at SMU and I am a co-author of a book called The Homeschool Alternative with my mother.

Emily: Stay with us. (Break)

Emily: Today's guest began college at age 13. We're talking with Haley Taylor, Schlitz. And Haley, how old are you now?

Haley: I'm 17.

Emily: So you're obviously one of the youngest kids there. So what we're going to be talking about today is just kind of what your life has been like and what brought you to this point where all of a sudden, you know, you're a teenager already in law school, obviously you know, a gifted kid and you've been homeschooled. But I kind of just wanted to start off by talking about when you were a very young elementary student, kind of going back to the beginning. What type of a student were you before you even began being homeschooled?

Haley: I was very dedicated and motivated. I was really interested in the things that were being taught to me. I loved going to class. I loved asking questions. I love engaging the teachers and talking to my parents when I got home about the homework and actually trying super hard and I just loved school. I was really, really happy.

Emily: Just kind of one of those kids who kind of absorbs everything. Did you have a favorite subject or was there something that you were really drawn to?

Haley: Yeah, my favorite subject's always been math.

Emily: Now, when I saw you, you talked about the fact that your family had moved from California to Texas and at that time you actually didn't even qualify for gifted services. Was that because they only assess in like one or two grade levels?

Haley: That's what they said. They said that you're only allowed to test for the gifted and talented program in kindergarten and anytime after that you're not allowed to be tested. But the weird thing was other students who maybe happen to not be of color were testing and the fifth grade and the fourth, fifth, sixth grade, were still testing and getting into the gifted and talented program. So that wasn't, it didn't seem to be true.

Emily: Yeah, that's really interesting that that all happened. So how old were you when you moved into the other school?

Haley: I was, let me see, fourth to fifth grade. I was like 10 and then I would've been 11 when my mom pulled me out.

Emily: And let's talk a little bit about that. So you mentioned that when that began to happen, it was in late elementary school, your grades actually began to fall. So tell me a little bit about that.

Haley: Yeah. So in fourth grade I was doing great and then I moved to a new school because that's what the school system, after fourth grade elementary school's over and you go to an intermediate school, which is fifth and sixth grade. And so I was in the, you know, normal route of going to a new school in fifth grade and that's when my grades started to drop. My mom and dad noticed that I didn't really care about my education like I used to. I wasn't excited, I wasn't answering questions. I wasn't motivated to do the homework or learn. I wasn't interested in the material. I was more interested in what my peers had thought about me. And what, you know, where, where I was sitting at lunch time or who I was hanging out with during recess. It was, it was a, I wasn't, I didn't

care as much about my grades nor my education or learning. So it was, it was a, it was a shock.

Emily: What were some of the things that you felt like your peers expected? Like, what were some of those changes that you saw at that time?

Haley: They didn't think that girls could be good at math or science. And so like I said, math was my favorite subject, so I was always like really good at that because it, whether it was natural or not, I love just, you know, doing it, doing the homework, working ahead, you know, anything about math. I really liked it and so I was good at it. And in class I would ask questions that were not where we were like a little ahead. I would be able to think ahead. I would see what's coming. I was good at the worksheets and stuff and that just wasn't cool. And so all the, you know, the girls wouldn't really talk to me or hang out with me because they thought that that was, I don't know, a nerd or, you know, I don't know what was going through their head, but I didn't like it. And so I decided to stop being good at math and so that I could, so I could be their friends, I guess.

Emily: Right. I know a lot of the gifted kids that I work with at my office a lot of times, especially when they're really bright with math, they like to know the why. They want to understand like how it connects with other math concepts. And a lot of times that doesn't fit with the general curriculum. Like the curriculum is so lockstep, we're doing this and then this and then this. And I can imagine that that was kind of where you were too. You're making connections with other things and kind of, you know, intuitively understanding that, and the other kids probably were looking at that going, they just had no idea where you were coming from.

Haley: Exactly.

Emily: So did you have some good friends when you were about that age? Were there a couple of people that you could really rely on?

Haley: There were, I considered them good friends. I liked them. I still couldn't be good at math or science around them, but that was pretty much the entire class. Yeah, there were a few people who I considered my friends. There's only maybe one person that I still talk to from that school system now.

Emily: Yeah. So you started to lose that motivation. You started to lose some of that drive, but your parents really saw that potential that you had. So whose idea was it to homeschool originally?

Haley: My mom's idea.

Emily: What brought her to that place? Like had she had any experience with homeschooling or was it something that she knew other folks who had been doing it?

Haley: No, actually she went and got me tested privately because like I said, they wouldn't let me test for the gifted and talented program. So we got my IQ tested and the test takers

said that I came back extremely gifted and that I should do the accelerated program where I go to college early. And so my mom had explored how to be able to do that and she found out that homeschooling is a good way to be really flexible with your educational path. And so that's what, you know, set her off in looking into homeschooling.

Emily: So it sounds like the plan, even from the beginning, was to kind of radically accelerate and get you into college early. So what were your feelings about homeschooling at first?

Haley: I was excited because I was hoping to meet a new crowd of people where I could really, really like, you know, math and science and not be, not have to hide it or be ashamed or have to stop, you know, being good at what I really liked being good at. And they would still be friends with me. And so that really worked out well because the people that met where I was homeschooled because I wasn't completely homeschooled. I went to a homeschool co-op or I went to an actual building two days a week with other teachers and students. And then the rest of the time I was at home. And so the students at that school were really good. They, you know, they accepted that I was, you know, really smart and they were also really smart. And not that the other students weren't, but they just, you know, shined and, and, you know, just developed their, their gifts and talents and it was a really, really healthy environment.

Emily: They were a lot more driven. Perhaps. It didn't really sound like other than your grades that you were necessarily dissatisfied at your previous school. If your mom hadn't gone and been an advocate and found out about those options, what do you think your schooling would have been like?

Haley: I think that I would still be in the public school system. I would probably be a senior right now. I think that I eventually would have you know, developed myself and found myself as many say and I think I would have, you know, just came into, you know, liking math and science, say. I like to think that eventually I would have stopped caring what other people thought about me. You know, really worked on myself to make myself better, to get into a good college. I feel like that's where I would be right now.

Emily: I asked that question because I think it's interesting, you know, so often we've had a couple of episodes for the podcast on acceleration. And one of the things that always comes up in those conversations is that the decision not to accelerate is still a decision. And it's interesting to think about the kids who we just follow the path that's, that's provided because that's what's the norm and, and what type of potential are we missing out on, you know, for so many kids who could do so much more.

Haley: Exactly.

Emily: So once you started homeschooling, what was the impact? Like how did that change you, um and, and your view of school?

Haley: I feel like not... When it came to how much I liked school and learning, not a lot changed. I've always liked school and learning, but I feel like I was able to actually

express it because in public school, like I said, I wasn't really able to express that. And so I'd made myself stop caring. Whereas in homeschool, it really allowed me to be like, okay, why can't... I can be good at what I want to be good at now? And not have to be afraid of being ostracized. And so I feel like that's one of the biggest things that I feel like maybe changed when I went to homeschooling was that I was able to actually be myself, which I really of course appreciated. It really allowed me to explore who I was and where I wanted to go with my life.

Emily: So how old were you when you were ready to try to enroll in college?

Haley: I was, oh god, that's a good question. I was 13.

Emily: How did that start? Did you kind of start doing like dual enrollment where you're kind of just taking like one or two classes at the college or did you jump right in and, and were you a full time student?

Haley: Although the plan from the beginning of homeschooling was for me to be able to take my own route, my parents didn't expect it to be this, you know, accelerated. The plan was for me, like I said, to go at my own pace and whether that be I needed to do a particular class or grade twice or if I needed to skip several grades, which was the case, we didn't plan on necessarily dual enrollment, not even like, not in general and not, and then not at such an early age and not even graduation. This was all, uh, completely foreign to my parents and they didn't know what to do. And so when I was, when I was ready to what I said and I felt like I was ready to graduate high school and go to college, well my parents decided to do was do a class at TCC over the summer so that I could try out what a college level class would be like while still in high school. So kind of like, I guess that was like a dual enrollment, a tiny period just to see what the college classes levels were like to see if I thought I was, you know, ready before they actually graduated me and put me in college. So that went well.

Emily: So was there like a lot of red tape or like you know, regulations and things that you had to really kind of get through to get accepted and be able to take those classes?

Haley: I mean the, the beauty I feel like of TCC was that they don't have like age requirements. They don't ask a lot of questions when it comes to what classes you're signing up for. So I went up there with my mom and she paid, you know, for the class fees and stuff and I just, they didn't like it. It was, it wasn't, it wasn't extremely difficult. There weren't a lot of barriers. It was, it was really nice.

Emily: There wasn't a roadmap there, there was no plan because so few people I think go this path. Were there any resources that they found? I mean, I think that that's part of the thing that you guys try to help families with with your book is about, you know, how can you make this path work for you? What are some things that they discovered through that process?

Haley: They found like, of course a lot of like online curriculums. And tutors that were helpful. Like I said, the homeschool co-op you know, I dunno, structure the school that they

found was also helpful and very flexible. We found other students who were similar to me, you know, gifted and just different kinds of thinkers. And there were, there's only been a few students who we've met who did the path that, that the similar that I've done, you know, extremely accelerated young, young and in college, young and in their graduate programs. But nonetheless, I have been in a lot of gifted groups where the students, they're all just extremely smart and just, you know they've, they've really explored what they like to do and they know like, not who they are, but I guess what they like, what classes they like, they've accelerated the things that they're good at. Um and so I think those are the, some of the things that my parents found a useful extreme, you know, like really useful was being able to talk to other gifted parents and parents of gifted students and see what they do with their students because you know, they're different thinkers and just have a different, you know, kind of just the different way of studying, a different way of approaching school. And so they would be able to talk to those parents and see maybe what tutors or online classes or you know, camps or whatever they use for their students. And it was just, it was a good environment to be exposed to.

Emily: Did you ever feel like you got burnt out?

Haley: I mean, I don't feel that way. I feel like I've always had, I don't, I, it's really hard for me to describe, I don't know what it is in me that just gets me up every day and just keeps going. I don't, I don't feel tired of doing any, you know, like school. I mean, I would love to be done because for me that's been, I feel like one of the key motivators is to be able to get on with life and being able to not even necessarily enter the workforce, but just have control over what I'm doing. And, you know, when it comes to school, people are grading you and they have control over whether or not you move on, it's a pass fail, it's an A or B. And just being able to have a grip on my own life and control where I go and what I do and what I learn. And that's, that's, I feel like that's always been a motivator for me, and so maybe that's what's pushing me to get done since, and I don't know what it is, but I don't feel burnt out. I feel motivated.

Emily: Yeah. You're driven to just kind of continued pursuing that goal. What about the critics who really oppose acceleration? Like, Oh, parents are just pushing their kids or that, you know, it's bad for their social development. What would you say to those people?

Haley: I would say just generally that you shouldn't, you can't, it's really hard to speak in absolutes for starters. You can't, it's, you can't say that all parents are pushing students if they're accelerated. That doesn't make much sense. And then more so I would say that you shouldn't, you shouldn't stop a student from being, you know, achieving their dreams or being great or going accelerated our learning at the level that's right for them and where they are in their life because you think that their parents are pushing them. Like if the student isn't doing well in a class, it's not necessarily because the parent pushed him, it's because maybe the class or the teacher, the style of teaching or maybe they're just not fully grasping the material. There are a lot of different things that go into a student, what they're learning and if they learn it and it's not just where it's not just their parents, you know?

Haley: And so I, I guess I would try to explain to them and more of an open mind kind of way that students are all very different and if they want to be accelerated or if it's necessary for them to be accelerated because that's just where they are and their mindset and that's just, they, they would be more engaged in an accelerated rate or an accelerated program, then we should let them, we shouldn't encourage them to be bored in class or distracted because they are, this isn't their level, this is not where they need to be to be engaged and interested. I guess more of an open mind point of view.

Emily: When you look back, what do you think would have made your path easier or better perhaps?

Haley: Oh, that's a good question. Easier. I guess, of course, less of the haters. You know, there's always people in life who are telling you like, oh, it's only homeschool or, no, you can't do that, or you're not gonna make it. And just, they never really got to me. But of course that, you know, life in general would be easier if everybody just supported you. So.

Emily: Hmm. So you've just finished up your first semester of law school, correct?

Haley: Yes.

Emily: What was that experience like? Was it what you expected? Was it different?

Haley: It was what I expected. I feel like it, I feel like my expectations were almost exactly where they needed to be. I thought going into law school that my expectations were really high. People had told me, Oh, you know, you're not going to have any free time. There's going to be a lot of reading. You're not going to be able to do half the things that you do right now. So if you're wanting a relationship, you really need to explain what you're going into because most relationships don't make it. They like, you know, they, yeah, they got the message through. And so I was nervous, of course, like I don't know what to expect. I've clearly never done this before. And so my expectations were extremely high. Like, you know, I'm just going to have zero free time. I'm rarely going to see my family. Like, I was just expecting to be like locked in my room all day. And so when it wasn't like that, you know, like, cause that's a, that's a little much. When it wasn't like that I was, I was happy and pleasantly surprised. So I mean I can't, I, I can imagine that that's not most people's reactions to their first semester of law school. But my, my, my expectations were really, really high. So it was a pleasant surprise. Yeah.

Emily: And you were prepared, you know, it sounds like you were ready. You mentioned free time. What are some things that you like to do in your free time?

Haley: I like to draw, I love to play video games with my siblings when I can because we used to do that a lot. But now that my brother is going to start university next semester and my sister's in high school and you know, me with my law school, we don't do that as much as we used to. And so whenever we can do that, I'm definitely doing that and playing with friends online as well.

Emily: So one of the things that really drove you to enter law school was that you really are motivated to be an advocate for gifted kids in general, especially culturally diverse gifted kids. What do you feel like are the biggest obstacles that are facing the educational system today?

Haley: I feel like diversity is one of the biggest obstacles for our education system, especially the public education system. Diversity specifically in the teacher workforce. I feel like when you have a diverse teacher workforce, you help the diversity of your, you know, your class, your students. And there are statistics that show that when a student of color has a teacher of color, they do better in class and they actually do better on their life trajectory than students who'd never had a teacher of color and they were a student of color. I feel like there are a lot of, you know, there are a lot of, of course teachers who are amazing teachers, but there are a lot of teachers out there who have, you know, biases and things like that as all humans do. But negative biases that negatively impact their students.

Haley: And I feel like diversifying the teacher workforce would be a great way to really, really reach a lot of the students as we are one of the first generations that are majority minority. I feel like it'd be really useful to have a diverse teacher workforce because you're going to need it. There are so many students who are of color now and they need a good role model. They need good role models and they need a good teacher more hopefully than one, but a good teacher of color that can, you know, guide them and believe in them.

Emily: Yeah. Where do you see your role within that?

Haley: I've placed myself in a lot of different places, especially with going to law school. My goals are that I have a very wide range. I would love to start a school to be on, you know, some sort of education board and hopefully make policy changes. I want to be a Supreme court justice, you know, I want to do that. So if my goal is like everywhere which I like, I like doing that. You know? It helps me, it helps me explore.

Emily: Now law was not your first intended career path was it? What were you interested in doing previously?

Haley: I wanted to be an ER doctor, like my mother.

Emily: Yeah. So you're getting ready to start your next semester here. What thoughts do you have that you would like to share with educators or parents who maybe have gifted kids and they're kind of trying to figure out what the next best steps are for their, for their gifted kids?

Haley: I would say to keep your mind open. I feel like what is some advice that my dad gives that I think it's really good advice is to not box your students in just because you have a specific expectation or a specific idea of what a sixth grader or what a 13 year old should be doing or whatever age your kid is. And so I would, I feel like some great advice for parents specifically is to keep your mind open to whatever your student may need or

wherever their path may go. Because when you know, when they're supposed to be biggest supporters and helpers and guiders in life try to limit them, uh it's, it's really, it's tough, you know, because it's hard to overcome such a, such a big barrier. It's just, of course no parent wants to be a barrier in their student or child I guess's life. So keeping an open mind as to where their path is going to go would be, is, is key.

Emily: Her website is HaleyTaylorSchlitz.com and her book is *The Homeschool Alternative: Incorporating a Homeschool Mindset for the Benefit of Black Children in America*. Haley Taylor Schlitz, thanks for being on Mind Matters.

Haley: Yeah. Thank you for having me.

Emily: Imagine what the perfect school would be like. One where every student is challenged and supported. The curriculum is tailored to each individual kid's strengths. Students would move at their own pace and without the constraints of the typical classroom, they would show levels of motivation that we just wouldn't believe. Of course, this isn't our reality, but I often question how much potential we restrain with the way that our current schools are set up. Whether it's barriers that prevent culturally diverse learners from accessing gifted programs or the fixed age cutoffs that keep kids with other students their same age. The systems that are in place aren't created to let gifted kids thrive.

Emily: I visualize potential like the water behind a dam. It's all held up behind the dam and the flow is impeded by the rate at which you allow water through. If you let a small amount of water through at a time, you're only going to get a small amount of electricity. The minute you open the dam, more water can go through and a higher amount of energy is created. Homeschooling is an amazing option for families, but it isn't a reality for everyone for a variety of reasons. How can we take the lessons learned from a story like Haley's and harness the potential of our gifted students, whether they are in a traditional school setting, a homeschool environment, or some alternative? How can we ever know how far kids can go if we don't give them the opportunity to try? I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on Mind Matters.