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AN INTERVIEW WITH DONA J. MATTHEWS AND JOANNE F. FOSTER

**Questions posed by Robin A. Wells and Michael F. Shaughnessy
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1) What are you currently working on/writing or researching?

We are both extremely busy with our respective practices in areas of teacher training and consultation in gifted education. Dona has just launched the Center for Gifted Education at Hunter College, The City University of New York and is working on many of the priorities that she outlined as most crucial to the success of this venture (for more information go to www.hunter.cuny.edu/gifted-ed). She has developed a graduate program in gifted education at Hunter College, and is working with the New York City Department of Education on implementing gifted programs and providing professional development for educators across the city. She is involved in crafting and implementing many local initiatives pertaining to gifted education and urban concerns, and is providing expertise in the development of policies and programs in New York City.

Joanne continues to work as the Gifted Education Consultant for a large school board in Toronto, and in the Teacher Education Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. She teaches Educational Psychology in the High Ability Cohort, and has designed and instructs the course in Gifted Education. In addition, she provides consultation and conducts teacher development sessions for independent schools. Joanne has started to draft the framework for a book in which she and Dona will further develop some of the ideas introduced in *Being Smart about Gifted Children*, including elaborating on the mastery model of giftedness and examining specific modes of professional development that will enhance teachers' ability to apply targeted and strategic applications for advanced learners and others in various educational settings.

We are presenting at several regional, national and international conferences over the next few months, and have several other writing projects on the go, many of them concerned with implementation of the mastery model of giftedness that we discuss in our book.

2) You have just completed a text “*Being Smart about Gifted Children: A Guidebook for Parents and Educators.*” What prompted you to write this text?

Being Smart about Gifted Children is not just a text because that implies that it is meant to be primarily in academic institutions. Certainly, it is receiving considerable recognition as a resource for teacher development purposes, suitable for use in inservice, preservice, and additional qualification certificate, undergraduate and graduate level courses. However, it is also written with parents in mind, and parents are indeed proving to be as strongly enthusiastic an audience for it as are teachers.

Our main objective in writing the book was to answer questions that parents and teachers had been raising in our combined 40 years of work in this field. Their questions, and our desire to provide clear, evidence-based, and comprehensive answers to those who live and work with gifted children, prompted us to write this book.

3) Tell us about the “Mystery Model” and “Mastery Model” of giftedness? Do you support one model over the other?

It’s probably most useful to combine these two questions. We compare the models descriptively and graphically in the first chapter of *Being Smart about Gifted Children*. We discuss a number of differences that relate to the categorical model and traditional views of giftedness vs. a more flexibly inclusive model—and we consider the kinds of changes that have taken place over the last couple of decades during which understandings of giftedness have undergone what we refer to as a paradigm shift, heralding an evolution that has been instrumental to and aligns with mastery model thinking.

In short, the mystery model is based on the idea that a person is and always will be gifted in ways that may not be easy to define or program for. A mastery model orientation, on the other hand, is one whereby gifted definition, identification, and programming form a coherent whole, each informing the other. Within a mastery model perspective giftedness is a level of subject mastery that is exceptional for an individual’s age or grade in one or more subject areas such that special programming is required for happy and productive engagement in learning. There is no mystery to it. It is a matter of identifying learning needs at a particular point in time, and providing the right kinds of educational and opportunities for a child’s optimal development.

4) You speak of the difference between testing and assessing children for giftedness. It would seem that you feel general educators are very capable of

“assessing” a child for giftedness. Please tell us about those aspects that should be considered or observed when assessing the giftedness of a child?

Assessment of a child’s abilities is a comprehensive process and should include several different measures. Dynamic classroom assessment involves determining a child’s level of content mastery at the outset of any unit of study so that the teacher and student can then engage in an appropriate and cyclical assess—teach—assess—teach mode. When a student reaches mastery level of a particular skill set then new and more challenging material can be presented. Teachers who seek to match learners’ developmental demands with curriculum demands should also consider other factors including individual children’s learning styles (visual, audio, kinesthetic); self- concept; attitude toward the learning and the school; emotional and social concerns; and experiential background. A student portfolio or compilation of work is a very good way to assess student progress in one or more areas. Standardized achievement tests can also be administered by teachers, and these measures can yield targeted information about subject-specific areas strength and weakness, which can be useful for instructional purposes.

5) Is there a current consensus as to a term that should be used when speaking about individuals who are gifted, talented or creative? I know they refer to these individuals as “Highly able” in Europe.

There really is no universal consensus. The word “gifted” has many misconceptions tied to it, ranging from elitist to nerdy. Over the years people have made various assumptions about what constitutes giftedness, have used different criteria for identifying it, and have attributed to it countless descriptors or “characteristics” in efforts to put their finger on what “gifted” is (or is not). In Being Smart about Gifted Children our first sentence is, “There is no such thing as a ‘typical gifted child.’” Therefore because giftedness is an individual differences phenomena it can be problematic to use one little word as a blanket or means to define this broad-based population of learners. Although we discuss other terms, we recognize that the label “gifted” still tends to be commonly used within the field. Other terms we are comfortable with include high-ability learners, exceptionally advanced learners, or reference to children who evidence exceptional content or domain-specific mastery. This last one in particular seems academic and lengthy and so is not destined to become as popular as “gifted”—a term which by now has a certain cache attached to it whether in Canada, Europe, or elsewhere. However, no matter where one lives, we believe it makes much more sense to label educational services rather than children.

6) Assuming that a teacher feels a student has exceptional skills but has not been evaluated as being “gifted,” what type of supports could the teacher incorporate in the general education classroom which would be beneficial for that student?

We devote an entire section of the book to programming adaptations of various kinds, and so it is extremely difficult to encapsulate a response to this question. The mastery model approach to gifted education is a flexibly inclusive model wherein a wide range of programming options is employed to meet the needs of exceptionally advanced learners. These include project based learning, guided independent study, single subject acceleration, career exploration, and cyber-learning. We discuss many other options. Each approach that we describe is predicated on teacher support, is designed to stimulate student engagement in learning, is respectful of diversity, and encourages collaborative involvement among all stakeholders in the learning process. In *Being Smart about Gifted Children* we also provide lots of links and resources for those who wish to explore other opportunities increasingly available for those who have highly diverse and developmental learning needs in specific domains.

7) Are there any strategies that are specifically beneficial for parents to use in supporting their child in the educational system?

Yes, absolutely. In *Being Smart about Gifted Children* we present an “A list” of recommended strategies pertaining to **A**ctivities, **A**ugmented learning, **A**ccounting, **A**chievement, **A**utonomy, and **A**ttitude. We also address parent **A**dvocacy in considerable detail. Furthermore we talk about issues pertaining to motivation, information access, sibling relationships, and consultation services. We provide more strategies than can possibly be noted here—an entire book full in fact—and parents and teachers can adapt them to particular circumstances and contexts as necessary.

8) What are your perspectives regarding the provision of separate “gifted programs” for students? Would any type of gifted program be beneficial for all gifted students?

Since there is no one gifted child profile, there is no one “gifted program” that would suit all learners. According to the mastery model perspective that underlies our thinking, programming for a child’s giftedness should involve providing a range of learning options and finding a match that suits an individual’s needs, interests, and areas of strength, and weakness. These will vary from one person to the next. Individual development is not something that can be categorized, and as such the most “beneficial” approach is to provide lots of learning opportunities—and teacher

development programs that will help educators in their ongoing efforts to support and nurture high-level development in all students.

9) Nicholas Colangelo, Miraca Gross, and Susan Assouline have recently released “A Nation Deceived.” Have if you read it, and if so, what are your thoughts?

The time is ripe for educators to take a close look at acceleration and to recognize that it is a viable and practical means of accommodating individual learning needs. “A Nation Deceived” provides much needed information about the process, and substantive evidence about its benefits. It has garnered considerable press coverage and is generating serious discussion and re-evaluation of the process of acceleration and its variations. As a result, more and more administrators are looking to this document as a guide for implementing acceleration in their schools and districts. Acceleration is likely to gain momentum as a result of this comprehensive research and the report that details its many findings.

10) What is your current philosophy on acceleration? What still needs to be done or researched?

There are a lot of good reasons to accelerate children, and there are many different ways to go about doing so. A decision in favour of a form of acceleration or another is often the appropriate one for parents, teachers, and the child to make—especially if it enables him or her to be happier, more engaged, and more productive. However, acceleration is not the right choice for everyone, and it is an option that should be carefully considered in relation to the many factors that have a bearing on any one child’s social, emotional, and academic well-being.

Areas of research that could be considered include finding ways of providing clear and understandable information about the process to parents, teachers, and kids so that they can make educated decisions , and examining the provision of teacher training in relation to the various types of acceleration.

11) What necessary knowledge and skills should future teachers possess to meet the needs of diverse learners?

Our own preservice programs draw on collaborative efforts, case study applications, research orientations, inquiry-based learning, and text-based and other readings – all within a milieu designed to stimulate meaningful dialogue and thinking about high-level development, diversity, and domain-specificity.

It is also important to focus on the knowledge and skills bases of teachers already working in classrooms, and particularly those operating in ways that are no longer current. Ideally, we would like to see all teachers (new and experienced educators) adopt a mastery model perspective, such that children with exceptional learning needs are offered differentiated and appropriately scaffolded learning opportunities. This means that classroom teachers also require support, as well as relevant and ongoing professional development—including learning and interaction in the form of customized workshops, individual and small group consultation, and resource access and networking opportunities. One of the biggest problems in the field of gifted education is a lack of teacher training—both preservice and inservice. We are definitely making inroads, but it tends to be a slow process. Our Dynamic Scaffolding Model (DSM) of Teacher Development, which we describe in *Gifted Child Quarterly* is designed to address the many gaps we perceive in teacher preparedness and competence in relation to programming for gifted learners. (Matthews & Foster, 2005).

13) Are there any special concerns regarding the social and emotional well-being of individuals who are gifted?

Yes, although it should be noted that most gifted/high-ability learners do just fine. There are, however, different ways of being gifted. Each individual is an active agent in creating his or her own intelligence, and there are many internal and external influences along the way that can make an otherwise smooth road seem rocky. Children's developmental pathways are widely discrepant and unpredictable, so parents and teachers need to be attuned to what's happening in a child's world. It is important to target instruction to individual patterns of interest and ability, but it is equally important to be flexibly responsive to a child's social and emotional needs. We devote a great many pages to this topic in *Being Smart about Gifted Children*, and we discuss numerous strategies. For example, being attuned means looking past labels; listening—really listening—to what children have to say; being patient and flexible; reducing sources of anxiety; understanding self-confidence issues, social landscapes, and what constitutes well-being; and knowing when to enlist the help of a professional.

Encouraging gifted-level development is not confined to the realm of academics because in any given learning context we should be looking at the whole child. Ultimately we can help him or her to learn and succeed not only at school but beyond it by being the very best he can be emotionally and socially, as well as academically.

14) I.Q. tests—are they over utilized, or underutilized, or inappropriately utilized?

Yes. No. Yes.

The issue of IQ testing is one that remains controversial. Practitioners who adopt a mastery model perspective recognize that ongoing dynamic assessment in the classroom is an excellent way of identifying academic and other needs. IQ tests can provide valuable information about an individual's learning styles and areas of cognitive strength and weakness, and this can be used to inform programming to help ensure the best possible learner-learning match. However, it must be remembered that the value of any test lies in the interpretation, and in understandings of test-related issues. In *Being Smart about Gifted Children* we discuss various matters pertaining to this topic over the course of three full chapters (and Appendices)!

15) Dr. Foster, how does gifted education in Canada differ from the U.S.?

Gifted education differs from one educational setting to the next—whether that context is a classroom, school, district, province, state, or country. It also differs in other ways based on culture, resource access, attitudes about giftedness, parent advocacy networks, funding, teacher training vehicles, and so on. Comparing Canada and the U.S. is therefore not something that can be done in “pigeonhole” fashion.

In Canada, education is mandated provincially. Each province or territory has a Ministry of Education that is responsible for setting policy and establishing guidelines in such areas as practice, teacher accreditation, and curriculum development. Gifted education falls under the umbrella of special education. However, there is no one federal overseeing body, and no national organization such as the National Association for Gifted Children, or the American Psychology Association Center for Gifted Education Policy, both of which are influential in the U.S. There is only one university-affiliated gifted centre in Canada (an excellent one located in Calgary) as compared to many highly acclaimed centers in the U.S. For the most part, teacher training in the area of gifted education is sadly lacking in Canada, although there are some pockets where efforts are being undertaken quite admirably. In the U.S., educators of gifted programs are struggling mightily with the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act. There is no such legislation in Canada. Canadian schools adopt many if not all of the same gifted

education practices one would find in American schools, although the nature and prevalence would vary from place to place depending upon what drives the decision-making processes in any one Canadian district or the next. The unique Canadian culture, and its Aboriginal and Francophone dimensions, lend powerful and interesting curricular influences, and enhance the mix of program offerings in various locales across this vast country. Finally, heightened awareness about giftedness and greater parent involvement through advocacy channels (such as the Association for Bright Children—ABC) are starting to empower more Canadians who are becoming increasingly involved in educational reform, including special education across the spectrum.

16) What components of professional development do teachers of gifted learners have to engage in? How can we convince teachers that these skills are necessary?

We address the first part of this question in our response to question #12. The second aspect, convincing teachers that it is necessary to engage in professional growth in areas of gifted education, drives home an extremely important point. Enthusiasm borne of desire is integral to the learning process, and when that is missing then the professional development process lacks relevance; the teacher is merely going through paces. That is not good enough. Their learning is less likely to be applied, remembered, shared, or built upon in meaningful ways. Convincing teachers that gifted education know-how is vital may be a multifaceted job. It is up to all stakeholders—administrators, parents, able students, and teachers themselves—to recognize the need, to spread the word, and to be proactive about making a difference. Schools should consist of classrooms that are well-managed; programming should suit all students across the learning spectrum. This demands that ongoing professional development initiatives be in place to support teachers in their work, and these offerings should be accessible, interesting, practical, and productive so that more teachers will see the benefits in take advantage of them.

17) Gifted children seem to need a certain degree of validation and support from others like them. How can this be provided and why are we not sensitive to the mental health needs of the gifted?

Validation and support from peers are both important. A child's sense of self and well-being rest to a large extent on feeling accepted by others, including the adults in his or her world. In a perfect scenario, a child's school work is appropriately engaging and challenging, and the other dimensions in his or her life are balanced. Parents and teachers can help children who are experiencing difficulty in social,

emotional, or other domains to develop coping mechanisms and to feel good about themselves. Each approach would depend on the circumstances and individual's needs, have its own goals, practicality, and advantages, and should be appropriate to the child's mastery level and development in a context that supports his or her optimal development.

If “we [who exactly is we?] are not sensitive to the mental health needs of the gifted” perhaps it is because this represents a relatively small target population, or because these children's strengths are often perceived to be enough to enable them to cope with experiential problems, or because they are able to mask their problems so that they go unrecognized. Other reasons could include a general lack of awareness among parents and educators about the mental health needs of exceptional learners, a paucity of highly trained professionals in the field, and an emphasis on those at the other end of the learning spectrum who are often given greater address because their issues may appear more profound.

18) Sylvia Rimm has written much about underachievement of gifted individuals. Have you worked with underachievers and what have you found?

There are many bright children who do not do well academically. In *Being Smart about Gifted Children* we discuss a number of reasons for this, the most obvious being a curriculum mismatch between the learner and the learning opportunities being provided. Other reasons for low academic achievement among capable learners include learned helplessness, frustration, boredom, poor study skills, learning disabilities, academic overload, health issues, stressors, linguistic barriers, power struggles—the list goes on, and it is reflective of both internal and external factors. Those labeling a gifted learner as an “underachiever” should first be very clear about expectations, and about what is actually meant by “achievement” or “underachievement” as it relates to success in any one context.

What is required then? Flexibility, sensitivity and concern for the individual, in concert with an understanding of the particular set of circumstances, and with an eye toward ensuring that curricular offerings are appropriate to the child's domain-specific levels of mastery.

19) Your text on giftedness also touches on creativity. What concerns do you have in this realm?

Some people confuse creativity with giftedness. They are not the same thing. Others deem creativity a prerequisite of gifted level achievement, or vice versa. This all seems complicated! *In Being Smart about Gifted Children* we state, “It is not necessary to be formally recognized as gifted in order to be creative, but it is helpful to have the rich and complex mastery of a domain that is the essence of giftedness as we define it here with the mastery model perspective.” Being gifted is a good springboard for being creative, then. And, conversely, being creative is a means of stretching frontiers—thinking in fresh and analytical ways about matters one is knowledgeable about and communicating one’s ideas effectively—which is a good way to enjoy and extend one’s gifts.

20) What question have we neglected to ask?

None that we can think of at this point.

