

A DISCUSSION WITH DONA J. MATTHEWS, PH.D., AND JOANNE F. FOSTER, ED.D.

Questions Posed by Robin A. Wells, Ph.D. and Michael F. Shaughnessy, Ph.D.

1) You have just written the book *Being Smart about Gifted Children*. What are your main concerns?

We wrote this book as a way to help parents and educators address some of their most serious issues, and in order to answer some of their most pressing questions. We provide a definitional foundation and understandings that inform gifted education, parenting, and decision-making. Topics include testing, identification and labeling; gifted learning needs; developmental pathways; and families, advocates, and educators. The book is over 400 pages in length so we cover a lot of material. We focus on the joys, challenges, diversity, and complexities of being gifted, as well as on strategies for living and working with those who are exceptionally capable, and on encouraging high-level development in all children.

2) What are the schools doing well for gifted children and where are they falling short?

Schools are only as good as the educators functioning within, and there are countless excellent teachers all across Canada and the U.S. who offer wonderful, motivating learning experiences for gifted children, who differentiate programs, and who empower students to be happy, life-long learners, in school and out.

However, there is considerable room for growth in areas pertaining to a) teacher training, b) sustaining teacher engagement in learning and teaching, and c) gifted consultancy. Both new and seasoned practitioners would do well to tap into more targeted, dynamic professional growth opportunities, to work collaboratively to acquire increased know-how and strategic approaches for best practice, and to enhance their ability to facilitate high-level learning for all students. This demands commitment, energy, time, and administrative support in order to “broaden individual and collective knowledge bases about teaching methods, programming options, issues, and concerns pertaining to gifted education” (p. 261, *Being Smart about Gifted Children*).

3) In the area of professional development, for those teachers already in the educational field, what types of additional information or coursework would be most beneficial for teachers with gifted students in their general education classrooms?

Teachers would benefit from the following:

- a) gifted consultancy, which can change and broaden their perspectives
- b) greater resource access, and up to date information about gifted-related research and strategies for classroom use
- c) opportunities for professional growth and networking in collegial settings so as to share ideas about exceptional learners, extend linkages and learning communities, and stimulate and harness enthusiasms
- d) opportunities for hands-on learning where there is modeling and explanations about effective practices and programming implementation

- e) open invitations to listen and be listened to; to support colleagues and be supported; to co-plan and co-create
- f) opportunities to learn how to make sense of assessments, and how to use this information to improve programming and instruction
- g) greater emphasis on learning to work in concert with parents.

4) What message do you have for parents in your book?

Love your child unconditionally. Disassociate any kind of label from the child. Provide learning opportunities that are consistent with individual capabilities and interests. Be attuned to what is going on in the child's world at home, school, and elsewhere, and be preemptive to things that may go awry. Listen. Enjoy!

5) What are some guidelines that a classroom teacher should know about working with and/or supporting students who are gifted but who also have a learning disability?

Find out all you can about high-level development, and about the disability. On the basis of any recommendations that come from testing or assessment processes, other professionals involved with the child, the parents, and others stakeholders or members of the team working on behalf of the child, determine what can be done to support the individual's learning needs. In *Being Smart about Gifted Children* we offer many suggestions, including acquiring ongoing professional support; considering the emotional, social, and motivational aspects of learning; providing frequent and appropriate feedback; structuring learning activities so they include a preview, a recap, and parameters; using technology; minimizing variance; working on organizational and time management skills; and being patient.

6) Is there a specific age at which a classroom teacher should encourage the gifted student's personal development of their own learning plan or learning in general?

There is no specific age, or for that matter, grade level. This question refers to "readiness" and that is something that differs from one child to the next in relation to the many aspects of learning—including developmental trajectories (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and domain-specific mastery), external and experiential influences, and attitudinal factors. However, we should encourage children to have investment in their own learning. The amount of choice, accountability, and autonomy offered can increase in accordance with the individual's ability to handle the learning experience, as evidenced by happy and productive engagement in the learning process.

7) Should classroom teachers anticipate any unique behavioral or social/emotional issues with gifted students?

Most gifted/high-ability learners are socially and emotionally competent, although in many instances these areas of functioning may not be as highly developed as some aspects of cognitive functioning. Unevenness of this sort is

called asynchronous development, and there are children who experience difficulty reconciling this. There are, however, different ways of growing, of experiencing the world, and of being gifted—and no two children are alike. Parents and teachers should be attuned to what’s happening in a child’s life, monitoring the ups and downs, and offering support as required. We discuss many strategies for supporting children’s social, emotional, and behavioural needs in *Being Smart about Gifted Children*.

With respect to “unique behavioral or social/emotional issues” about which you specifically inquire, problems we have often encountered among high-ability children include academic mismatch (a poor “fit” between the learner and learning provisions) resulting in boredom and frustration; fear of failure or fear of success; self-confidence issues; the setting of unrealistic goals or expectations; external stressors that present a source of anxiety; and family-related concerns. Most importantly, we suggest that classroom teachers look at the whole child, explicitly foster emotional and social intelligence within the context of daily activities, and enlist the help of a professional when a child’s well-being seems particularly compromised, for whatever reason.

8) Are we as a nation neglecting our best and brightest?

In an ideal world the answer to this would be an unequivocal “no” because anything else would be unacceptable. The truth is that in many places across Canada and the U.S. the “best and brightest” are being appropriately challenged and are meeting and even exceeding their own and others’ expectations.

However, there are many constraints in educational circles—and gifted education as part of the larger landscape often reels from the impact of these constraints. These include political and legislative policies and/or restrictions; mindsets mired in unprogressive methodologies; financial limitations; lack of teacher training in giftedness; elitist views; poor or at best inconsistent administrative support for gifted programming and ongoing resource access; and lack of understanding about giftedness issues and best practices in gifted education.

9) How might administrators or professional development coordinators provide ongoing learning opportunities for classroom teachers rather than just a one day workshop on the topic of giftedness?

One way would be for school boards to adopt the “Dynamic Scaffolding Model of Teacher Development” (Matthews and Foster, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, June 2005) whereby an appropriately trained and effective gifted education consultant acts as a catalyst for teacher growth. We have developed a three tiered approach that involves a) offering interested teachers targeted professional development opportunities, b) following this up with individual or group consultations to provide expertise in specific areas, and c) providing a range of networking options, resources and liaisons. We have found that this model facilitates learning among teachers, and leads to positive outcomes among students.

10) Should classroom teachers hold students who are gifted to a higher standard of amount and/or quality of classroom work?

The standards to which teachers and parents hold children should be appropriate to their level of competence—and for gifted learners this may indeed be considerably higher than would be the case for same age or grade peers. However, the degree of challenge and the expectations that are set should not be so high as to be unfair, compromise a child’s feelings of comfort, or short-circuit his or her love of learning. Gifted learners do not need more work, they need appropriate work. This means engaging them in learning activities that are relevant; tapping into interests; being responsive to individual areas of strength and weakness; taking into account the child’s experiential background and learning styles; and building a strong conceptual foundation for enjoyment of the learning process itself so that the person will want to continue learning. Children who are actively involved in planning their learning experiences can help to set reasonable standards for which they will then be held accountable.

11) What is the basic message you tried to get across in your book?

Giftedness is an “individual differences phenomena.” Addressing learner needs means recognizing and paying attention to these developmental differences—and there are many ways that parents and educators can support and encourage high-level development in children. “Giftedness as seen from the mastery perspective is about exceptional learning needs at a particular point in time that require special educational adaptations” (p. 16, *Being Smart about Gifted Children*). Parents and educators can help children feel happy, be productive, and find a healthy balance in their lives by offering them lots of learning opportunities that are appropriately suited to their level of mastery, and by providing them with guidance, love, and a nurturing environment. Over the course of this book we celebrate the “joys, challenges, diversity, and uniqueness” (p.xv) inherent in living and working with gifted/high-ability learners, and we share many and varied insights from within the field of gifted education.

12) What question or questions have we neglected to ask?

None! ☺