

Interview with Dona Matthews and Joanne Foster

Authors of *Being Smart about Gifted Education: A Guidebook for Educators and Parents, 2nd Edition* (Great Potential Press, 2009)

Questions by Michael Shaughnessy

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1) You have just finished the second edition of *Being Smart about Gifted Education: A Guidebook for Educators and Parents*. I know how well the first edition was received, but for our readers, could you just list some of the awards the book has received?

We were honored when our book received the 2005 Glyph Award for Best Book in Education given by the Arizona Book Publishers' Association. We also received the award for Exceptional Book of the Year, conferred by *Exceptionality Education Canada*, a journal known for publishing excellence in the field of special education. Our book was chosen for the exclusive Trusted Advisor Program, a carefully selected list of resource titles compiled by Chapters/Indigo, a large chain of bookstores which operates across Canada. We have also received numerous positive reviews, accolades from other writers in the field of gifted education and, perhaps most importantly, encouraging feedback from readers—parents, teachers, and others who have read our work, and have responded to it. This encouragement fuelled our desire to develop the second edition of *Being Smart*, and continues to motivate us to write about and share new perspectives on fostering high-level development.

2) Your second edition is a "guidebook for educators and parents". In your minds, who is more concerned about gifted education - parents or teachers? Or both?

Both parents and teachers are deeply concerned about gifted education, but as might be expected, they are concerned about it from different standpoints, and for different reasons. Parents want to make sure that their children get the best possible education, and very often think that that means getting their children identified as gifted, and into a so-called gifted class. In *Being Smart about Gifted Education*, we discuss different ways children can have gifted learning needs, and how these needs can be addressed by teachers and schools, and also by parents.

Understandably, educators' concerns are more about the nuts and bolts of what gifted education is, and how to implement it. They need to know how to define and identify giftedness, what they can do to support and encourage it, whether in general education classrooms, or in full-time gifted programs, or by way of educational policies that support acceleration, enrichment, and/or a host of other learning options. We've changed the title of our book from the first edition to the second: the first edition was *Being Smart about Gifted Children: A Guidebook for Parents and Educators*; the second edition is *Being Smart about Gifted Education: A Guidebook for Educators and Parents*. You'll see that we've put more of an emphasis on education and educators in the title this second time around because in revising the book we realized that the real focus lies with learning. We have had lots of enthusiastic interest from parents, and continue to find that the book is very useful to them as well, but a large proportion of its audience seems to be educators.

3) Let's talk about giftedness and creativity - how are they alike and how are they different?

Some people think that giftedness and creativity are interchangeable terms that characterize bright, highly capable learners. Others see creativity and giftedness as disconnected, with creativity as a component of artistic endeavors, and giftedness only about academic intelligence. Still others feel that creativity underlies all gifted-level achievement or, alternatively, that heightened intellectual ability is a prerequisite for creativity. We have found that it helps make sense of the apparent contradictions and confusion if giftedness and creativity are viewed through a developmental lens.

It is useful for parents and teachers to realize that neither giftedness nor creativity appears in a vacuum. Gifted-level achievement can be nurtured over time with the right kinds of supports, challenges, and learning opportunities—and the same holds true for creativity. Helping children become gifted or creative involves giving them access to the necessary tools (such as equipment, musical instruments, resource materials, etc.), as well as ample time and ongoing encouragement. In *Being Smart about Gifted Education*, we explain how people can decide to be creative or strive toward exceptional achievement, or not.

Our work suggests that giftedness and creativity are intertwined and complementary. They each come about as a result of passion, effort, and persistence. High-level creativity builds from a foundation of content mastery; that is, one needs a strong grasp of domain-specific knowledge and skills in order to be truly creative. Conversely, creativity is an important component of actualizing giftedness in every domain. We devote a chapter of *Being Smart about Gifted Education* to understanding creativity and its relationship to giftedness, and we offer many suggestions for parents and teachers who wish to nurture creativity in children, and for that matter, in themselves.

4) Now, two key words - acceleration and enrichment. What are the pros and cons of each of these?

There is more research evidence supporting the academic benefits of acceleration than there is evidence supporting any other gifted education practice. We know that it can work well for advanced learners when it is done consistently with thoughtful guidelines such as those developed in the *Iowa Acceleration Scale* (Assouline, Colangelo, & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2009). When considering acceleration, people should remember that there are many ways to accelerate teaching in order to match children's learning needs.

For example, there is grade-skipping, where a child moves from one grade to another two or more beyond the next, generally at the start of the following school year. This is rarely the best strategy, especially if there is only one child who is being accelerated in a given school situation, as it can lead to gaps in learning. There is the more gradual process of completing the coursework for two grades over the space of one school year. This can work very well, as long as there is sufficient teacher guidance, and attention paid to addressing any gaps in knowledge. Acceleration always works better when there are a few children doing it together; that reduces both the stigma that can be associated with studying out of level, and the likelihood that teachers will ignore academic gaps.

There is also subject-specific acceleration, where a child who is significantly advanced in one subject area is enabled to do higher-level coursework only in that subject area. And, another form of acceleration is early entry into kindergarten, high school, or university. While this approach makes good intuitive sense, there is some contradictory evidence on the effectiveness as it can add to the stress of the transition into the next level of schooling.

Although it is difficult to dispute the cognitive benefits of acceleration, the evidence on social and emotional consequences is not so clear. Acceleration must be considered on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the development of the whole child, including physical, social, and emotional maturity, as well as family and school supports that are in place.

Enrichment is used a lot more frequently than acceleration, and there is plenty of room for improvement and expansion of enrichment opportunities in most schools. It is similar to acceleration in that it is not just one approach, but a practice that pulls together different kinds of approaches. Enrichment can be provided in the form of online programs, project-based learning, guided independent study, mentorships, community internships, career exploration, museum study, and as many other options as educators, students, and parents can devise. Collaborative efforts are the key to creating good enrichment opportunities and possibilities.

5) How does giftedness develop? Does it start slow and then spurt or increase?

That is a wonderful way to ask the question—it assumes that giftedness *does* develop and is not just something that some people are bestowed with at birth, a gift that others don't have a chance to get, no matter how hard they try for it. In *Being Smart about Gifted Education* we describe gifted development as being highly variable: sometimes it is evident in early childhood,

and other times it starts very slowly, and may not be evident until adolescence, adulthood, or even late adulthood. Giftedness is something that develops over time, with the appropriate supports, challenges and opportunities to learn. These are basic tenets of what we call the 'mastery model' of gifted education, as distinguished from what we call the 'mystery model' which posits that people are either born smart or not, and which is a less dynamic and developmental way to think about giftedness.

Dona was recently involved in writing a book called *The Development of Giftedness and Talent across the Life Span* (edited by Frances Degen Horowitz, Rena Subotnik, and Dona Matthews; American Psychological Association, 2009). The authors discuss how giftedness develops, considering the research literature in developmental psychology as it intersects with the gifted education literature. If there is one conclusion from that book, it is that individuals develop in highly diverse ways, and there are as many developmental speeds and directions associated with becoming a high achiever as there are high-achieving individuals.

6) How does parenting make a difference, and how can parents learn to be good parents to gifted kids?

Parents can learn a lot by paying attention to the kinds of home environments that are most conducive to gifted-level outcomes. There is lots of good evidence that responsible and responsive parenting can make a huge difference in a child's developmentⁱ. It's important (but not enough) to nurture children's cognitive development. Parents who also pay attention to their children's social and emotional needs help them gain the competencies they will need to navigate the ups and downs of everyday life.

Moreover, when parents teach their children the value of a solid education, they provide an important key for unlocking many doors in the future. In a recent interview,ⁱⁱ U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was shown a note she wrote while in sixth grade. She had said that she would like to get a good education when she grew up because she wanted to get a good job and become a scientist. When asked to reflect on these aspirations, including how they might have veered over time, she responded by emphasizing the need to get a solid education, and she spoke passionately about how "family support and values set her up to receive the opportunities" she had been given. The milieu in which one grows up (including cultural, familial, scholastic, and community), has considerable impact on what kind of person one becomes.ⁱⁱⁱ Parents can be an important guiding force in youngsters' choosing to engage in thoughtful decision-making, continue their learning, and make the most of whatever comes along as life unfolds.

We have written and presented extensively on this topic, including offering strategies and suggestions for use at home and school, and we welcome readers to visit our website at www.beingsmart.ca for pertinent resources. For the sake of brevity here, we will focus on two of the overarching themes in our collaborative work. The first is that parents should be *flexibly responsive* to their children's needs. This provides the sense of self-worth and connection that can help anchor and sustain young people as they grow. Being a flexibly responsive parent

means listening carefully to your children, including what they don't say as well as what they do. It means providing encouragement, advocating in a timely and appropriate manner for what a child needs, and being present to offer other necessary supports along the way. Learning to be good parents also entails attending to whether children are *happily productive*—our second overarching theme—, with an emphasis both on their contentment and fulfillment, and also on the momentum of positive action.

7) *What about mentoring? How does mentoring fit into the picture?*

A mentorship is a structured arrangement whereby one person (generally someone more senior and accomplished) offers another guidance, support, and assistance. Together, they shape the learning by selecting a suitable environment (whether real, or virtual, or some of each), co-creating a plan, developing a rapport, and then sharing both a commitment and enjoyment over time. The learning activities may take place inside or outside of school. It's possible to establish a mentorship relationship in any context where there is someone who wants to learn about the context, and someone else who can help that individual acquire the understandings and experience necessary for achievement in that area. A mentorship provides a unique opportunity for a child or young adult to acquire enrichment, extended learning, and experiential know-how that might not otherwise be available.

A carefully designed mentorship, built on a foundation of mutual respect and common interests, can serve to advance a child's learning, and can be extremely gratifying on many levels. In *Being Smart about Gifted Education* we discuss the benefits to mentors and mentees; offer suggestions for finding, assessing, and selecting a prospective mentor; describe how to organize, sustain, and assess a mentorship; and offer a collection of resources for those who wish to know more.

8) *What are the main additions to this second edition?*

There has been a burgeoning of research on expertise, neuroscience, and developmental science in the years since we wrote the first edition, and so in revising the book, we paid close attention to incorporating current findings and evolving perspectives on these important topics. For example, the expertise research provides strong evidence of the importance to high-level achievement of effort, hard work, and practice, sustained over a long period of time. In *Being Smart about Gifted Education*, we discuss effort and persistence as being fundamental to gifted-level achievement, and we describe how teachers and parents can support this in children. In the second edition of our book we share research evidence that shows that working hard is actually how people become smart.

The neurosciences are another exciting frontier of emerging information that supports the mastery model approach to gifted education which we discuss in *Being Smart about Gifted Education*. Neuroscientific research is still in the early stages, and one has to be careful when thinking about how findings apply to psychology and education, but one of the findings that has

clear implications is the increasing evidence of neural plasticity. The brain is not already constructed at birth with genetically limited capacity, but rather is constantly changing and growing, developing over time as a person has experiences and interacts with the world. In our book we examine how the neural plasticity findings support the move in the field of gifted education from a static mystery model to the more dynamic and developmental approach of the mastery model.

Another exciting area of development over the past few years has been Carol Dweck's work on mindsets, which provides an important theme throughout our book. We describe how the mastery model of giftedness exemplifies and supports the growth mindset (i.e., the perspective that intelligence develops over time with hard work, persistence, and opportunities to learn), as well as how the mystery model fosters fixed mindset beliefs and behaviors (i.e., the idea that people are born with a fixed level of intelligence, some gifted, some not so smart, and there is nothing one can do to change that). The fixed mindset undermines people's likelihood of achievement, well-being, and success, whereas a growth mindset can ignite high-level development.

Although we worked hard to slim down the second edition, and tightened it significantly in many places, it weighs in almost identically to the first – 426 pages as compared to 424. One of the reasons for the heft of the second edition in spite of our extensive editing is that we added lots of new and important information in context, and we updated and expanded the references enormously. We tried to make *Being Smart about Gifted Education* a thorough overview of the field, and we wanted to make sure our readers had plenty of good current resources on the various topics that interest or concern them.

9) *How can interested teachers and parents get a copy? Is it available online?*

Being Smart about Gifted Education is being released in early August, 2009. It is available online and in stores through major booksellers including Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Borders, McNally Robinson, and Chapters/Indigo, and it can be ordered from reputable bookstores across North America and around the world. For additional information about ordering multiple copies—for use by those involved in book clubs, professional learning programs, parent organizations, discussion groups, teacher training courses, and so forth—we suggest that readers contact their local bookstore and/or visit the publisher's website at www.giftedbooks.com.

ⁱ Adele and Allen Gottfried have done some pioneering work investigating the early home environments associated with subsequent giftedness. See for example their chapter in *The Development of Giftedness and Talent across the Life Span* (Horowitz, Subotnik, & Matthews, 2009).

ⁱⁱ Meet the Press, July 26th, 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ For those who wish to learn more about this we recommend *Outliers*, by Malcom Gladwell, 2008