

A Discussion with Dona J. Matthews, Ph.D., & Joanne F. Foster, Ed.D.

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Dona J. Matthews and Joanne F. Foster have written a book entitled “Being Smart about Gifted Children.” In the current educational climate, it is being increasingly recognized that gifted children are not receiving an appropriate education, and are being neglected. The recent Nicholas Colangelo report on “A Nation Deceived” seems to indicate that we are neglecting our “best and brightest.”

In this interview, Dona J. Matthews of Hunter College and Joanne F. Foster of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto discuss their new book and some of the pressing concerns regarding gifted children and gifted education.

1) You have just written a book “Being Smart about Gifted Children.” What are your main concerns?

We wrote this book as a parent-friendly and educator-friendly response to answer the most pressing questions that parents and educators have been asking us over the past twenty years. We provide a theoretical foundation for understanding gifted education, parenting, and decision-making, as well as practical ideas for addressing exceptional children’s developmental needs. Topics include testing, identification, and labeling; gifted learning needs; developmental pathways; and families, advocates, and educators. We focus on the joys, challenges, complexities, and perplexities of being gifted; strategies for living and working with those who are exceptionally capable; and ways of encouraging high-level development in all children.

One of our reasons for writing this was because we were observing a paradigm shift in the field of gifted education. We compare what we are calling the “mystery” and “mastery” models of giftedness. We discuss a number of differences between mystery-laden categorical views of giftedness on the one hand, and a more flexibly inclusive mastery-based model on the other. In short, the mystery model is predicated on a belief that select persons are and always will be gifted in ways that are not consistently easy to identify, define, or program for. From a mastery model perspective, giftedness is subject-specific mastery that is exceptional for an individual’s grade level, such that differentiated programming is required for happy and productive engagement in learning. Understood in this way, gifted education means identifying exceptional learning needs at a particular point in time, and providing the right kinds of educational opportunities for children’s optimal development. We argue that this perspective is far less mysterious and far more defensible. It removes some of the allure and much of the stigma frequently attached to gifted education.

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

It is impossible to talk about what “schools” are doing well or poorly, because there is such huge variability across schools and jurisdictions. Schools are only as good as their teachers and administrators, and there are countless excellent educators across Canada and the U.S. who offer wonderful, motivating learning experiences for gifted children, who differentiate programs appropriately and creatively, and who empower students to be happy, life-long learners, in school and out.

However, at the same time that there is much good work happening for gifted children, there is also considerable room for growth in many jurisdictions. The areas most often needing attention concern teacher training, sustaining

teacher engagement in learning and teaching, and gifted consultancy. Both new and seasoned practitioners would do well if they had (1) access to more targeted, dynamic professional development,(2) better opportunities to work collaboratively to acquire increased know-how concerning best practice, and (3) support for enhancing their ability to facilitate high-level learning for all students.

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 tell us that they enjoy and benefit from the following:

- a) access to gifted consultants, who can support them in learning how to identify and work effectively with gifted learners
- b) greater resource access, including 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 their enthusiasms
- d) opportunities for hands-on learning where there is modeling and discussion 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. Listen to him or her. Remember that the label is not 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 proactively attentive to things that may go awry. As the child moves into adolescence, become reactive rather than proactive, encouraging the child's movement to autonomy. Most importantly, Enjoy!

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

Find out all you can about the individual student's strengths and weaknesses. Taking into account the recommendations from testing and 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 special learning needs, on both ends of the learning spectrum. In "Being Smart about Gifted Children" we note that "an effective approach for parents and teachers is to develop and use children's strengths and interests as catalysts for strengthening their weaknesses, remembering that there are many, many different ways of being gifted." (p. 304) We offer many suggestions, including 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; working on organizational and time management skills; being patient; and emphasizing successes.

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?

It is never too soon to ask children to think about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it, and this is particularly true for exceptionally capable learners. Gifted children can be their own best advocates, and teachers' best resources in adapting curriculum appropriately for them. Certainly by the time learners are entering early adolescence (age 10 or 11, around 5th grade), they should be encouraged to take some ownership of their own learning. Some children are ready before then, and of course they should be encouraged to be as involved as the teacher estimates to be reasonable. The amount of choice, accountability, and autonomy can increase in accordance with the individual's ability to handle it, as evidenced by productive engagement in the learning process.

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

Most gifted learners are at least as socially and emotionally competent as their age-peers, although quite often these areas of functioning are not as highly developed as their cognitive functioning, and some gifted children experience difficulty managing this asynchronous development. 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, remembering that gifted children are really children.

The most obvious and prevalent problem for all exceptional learners, including those who are gifted, is the sense of being "different" than others. This problem can be particularly painful at early adolescence, when identity issues are at their height, and when being socially accepted by one's peers is of high importance to one's self-esteem. Some of the other problems we have encountered among high-ability children include the boredom and frustration that result from academic mismatch (a poor "fit" between the learner and learning provisions); fear of failure or fear of success; self-confidence issues; and the setting of unrealistic goals or expectations. Most importantly, we suggest that classroom teachers look at the whole child, make sure that curriculum is adapted to the child's learning needs as much as possible, 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. And in fact, 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 on education, and gifted education is too often a particular target of some of these constraints. These include lack of teacher training in giftedness; anti-elitist ideologies; poor or at best inconsistent administrative support for gifted programming and teacher development; and lack of understanding about giftedness issues and best practices in higher education. Collectively, these constraints mean that too many of our most exceptionally able learners are not getting the kind of education that they need in order to make good use of their abilities.

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 children this may indeed be considerably higher than would be the case for same age or grade peers. However, it is also important to remember that 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 kids do not need more work, they need work that is appropriate to their abilities. This means engaging them in learning activities that are relevant; tapping into their interests; being responsive to their individual areas of strength and weakness; taking into account their experiential background and learning styles; and building a strong conceptual foundation for enjoyment of the learning process itself so that they will want to continue learning. Children who are actively involved in planning their learning experiences can help to set reasonable standards for their own learning, but they should not be penalized with lower grades for trying harder work or because the teacher thinks them capable of more. An “A” level project should be an “A” level project whether it is done by Johnny or Ethan.

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.

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