

Creating a Culture Where It's Cool to Be Smart
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On April 29, 2009, his 100th day in office, US President Barack Obama emphasized the importance of high-level learning and academic achievement, stating, "It's cool to be smart."¹ Earlier that month, on April 2, First Lady Michelle Obama, delivered a similar message when she spoke at the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School for girls in London, where she said, "If you want to know the reason why I am standing here, it's because of education." She went on to say, "I never cut class. I loved getting A's, I liked being smart. I thought, 'Being smart is cooler than anything in the world.'"

In these statements, both President and Mrs. Obama gave public voice to emerging understandings that have big implications for those of us involved in gifted education. Inspired by Mrs. Obama's comments, we wrote an open letter to her² in which we discussed how being smart is indeed both cool and attainable. Parents and educators can nurture giftedness by understanding and supporting children's high-level development (the traditional role of gifted education), and by using what is known about learning and teaching processes to foster heightened development in *all* children (an emerging and complementary theme in the field). We wrote, "Like you, Mrs. Obama, we believe this educational enterprise should be invigorating and inclusive, working to support the optimal development of every child, and helping learners to find a vitality and healthy balance in their lives—respecting and nurturing their abilities, interests, experiences, and passion to excel. We also recognize that this requires an investment of time, energy, and effort."

The Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School attracts a highly diverse student population, and is a Leading Edge school, funded by a government initiative to support children's learning outcomes.³ Many of the students at the school are dealing with serious challenges in their home lives, as well as less-than-stellar academic backgrounds, so it is particularly inspiring that this is where Mrs. Obama chose to talk about the importance of hard work, education, and high achievement. We asked Jo Dibb, Headteacher at EGAS, about her school's experience of this event. She replied, "The fact that she chose our school was so right. Our students face huge disadvantages and yet still go on to achieve so much. Her words were powerful, and carefully chosen. They really reflected what we stand for as a school. The impact was tremendous on both students and staff... they all feel part of something special. As to the long term impact, we shall have to wait and see."

Important Themes

We see three important themes emerging from Jo Dibb's response, all of them consistent with current findings on the development of giftedness. The first theme has to do

with hard work, which is instrumental for achievement and for overcoming difficulties. The second is the power of a clear, strong message of encouragement from someone who is respected. The third is the need for educators (and parents) to be patient as change evolves. One reason Mrs. Obama's message both moved and delighted us was that it challenged the misconception that some people are born smart, and others are not. Current research on cognitive development shows that high-level ability develops with opportunities to learn, in an environment of appropriate support and challenge.⁴

Psychologist Carol Dweck and her colleagues have found that the way people approach obstacles, failures, and roadblocks has a powerful influence on all kinds of accomplishment.⁵ Those who think of intelligence as developing incrementally, one step at a time, with hard work, have what she calls a "growth mindset." These individuals achieve higher degrees of success across a variety of academic and life experiences. However, those who have more of a "fixed mindset" and see intelligence as something that is innate and fixed at birth, are less likely to take on challenges or do well as time goes by.

Emerging neuroscientific research also supports Michelle Obama's and Jo Dobb's comments, showing that the brain actively develops from the moment of conception and across the lifespan. An infant's opportunities to interact with her world, a child's engagement with his environment, an adult's use of time and energy, all make a difference in cognitive and other capacities.⁶

How Can Educators Help Children Become Smart?

We are not writing this in order to support certain individuals or political ideologies, but rather to illustrate that the political climate may be in the process of becoming more receptive than it has been for a long time to the expertise that has been building in the field of gifted education. What are the practical implications of these perspectives on becoming smart? We discuss elsewhere⁷ many evidence-based recommendations for supporting the development of giftedness, and include here a synopsis of some of the most important points.

Foster a growth mindset. We asked educators about their reaction to Mrs. Obama's words. One school administrator wrote, "We are observing....that children do better when their teachers help them demystify what academic challenge means, and uncover the truth about continuously becoming smart as opposed to being smart."⁸ A school-wide attitude that encourages effort and persistence, and frames setbacks as opportunities for learning, can fuel positive change for all students.

Provide as much choice as possible, and a wide range of authentic learning options. Another administrator⁹ shared how she and her colleagues have implemented programs that provide basic necessities to the children (such as nutrition and hearing and vision testing), as well as enriching extras such as field trips; project-based learning; mentorships; career

education; partnerships with parents, community members, and local agencies; and job-embedded, research-based professional development for the teachers. She wrote, “Although we have made a conscious effort to raise the bar for our students, they have, in many cases, exceeded our expectations...even our most vulnerable students have shown growth in their understanding of their world and their belief in their ability to effect change.”

Collaborate and build meaningful connections. Giftedness is much likelier to emerge and flourish in schools that have a culture of collaboration, where teachers work with one another to the benefit of children, where educators and parents regularly consult with one another, where teachers work with students to co-create fruitful learning experiences, and where students are encouraged to engage cooperatively and respectfully with their age and intellectual peers, as well as others.

Focus on matching learning opportunities to students’ domain-specific abilities and interests. Being smart is not restricted to any particular school behaviour or population (culture, gender, age group, socio-economic status, etc.), and educators find that they are able to support gifted-level development much more broadly when they enable students to work at tasks and activities that are matched to individual levels of competence and interests.

Think about how to work with students to create giftedness rather than putting the emphasis on identifying it. Students can become effective change agents, and get involved in recognizing and developing their individual strengths and talents. We believe that this exactly is what Michelle Obama was talking about when she emphasized the importance of attitude and effort in her own life experiences and achievement.

Be patient! Real change takes a long time, and almost always involves steps backward in the forward journey. Headteacher Jo Dibb told us that although there was a higher-than-usual turnout for review classes after Michelle Obama visited the school, it is far too early to predict the full impact of her address. Converting inspiration into action and good intentions into happy long term outcomes demands patience and diligence on the part of all stakeholders.

We applaud Mrs. Obama for motivating educators everywhere, for propelling us toward collaborative endeavours and higher standards, and for emphasizing the connection of hard work to achievement and to gifted-level development.

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¹ President Barack Obama, Town Hall Meeting, St. Louis, Missouri - Apr. 29, 2009 – Broadcast on CNN.

² Our letter was published in *Education News* on April 6, 2009 (<http://ednews.org/articles/36205/1/Open-Letter-to-Michelle-Obama/Page1.html>), was posted to listservs throughout North America and the United Kingdom, and is scheduled to be reprinted in the summer 2009 issue of *Roeper Review*.

³ More about Leading Edge Schools at www.ledge.org.uk/

⁴ Ericsson, 2006; Horowitz, Subotnik, & Matthews, 2009

⁵ Dweck, 2006

⁶ Doidge, 2007; Gottfried, Gottfried, & Guerin, 2009; Horowitz, Subotnik, & Matthews, 2009

⁷ (Matthews & Foster, 2009)

⁸ Lindy Uehling, head of Admissions at Hunter College Campus Schools, City University of New York; e-mail correspondence of April 28, 2009

⁹ Nancy Steinhauer, Principal of George Webster Elementary School, which is designated a Model School for Inner Cities in the Toronto District School Board; e-mail correspondence of April 27, 2009