Refinements, Bridges, and Themes in our Conceptual Foundations

Mystery to Mastery: Shifting Paradigms in Gifted Education

Dona J. Matthews
Joanne F. Foster

We provide here a brief historical analysis of a movement in progress from a belief-based “mystery” model to an evidence-based “mastery” model of giftedness and talent development. We have observed that educators concerned about exceptionally capable learners are moving from a categorical notion of “the typical gifted child” with somewhat mysteriously defined attributes and learning needs, toward the perspective that some children have exceptionally advanced learning needs that require more flexibly responsive educational attention. We discuss factors that differentiate the two models, and observe some benefits of the shifting paradigm, arguing that by conceptualizing gifted education as providing a dynamically responsive educational match for students who otherwise experience a mismatch with the curriculum normally provided, the mastery model is socially, educationally, and politically more defensible. We discuss some practical implications of this shift in perspective.

Joanne F. Foster teaches Psychological Foundations of Learning and Development as well as Gifted Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. She is also a Gifted Education Consultant and works with educators within individual districts, boards of education, and school settings conducting targeted professional development, facilitating community networks among parent and teacher groups in support of gifted learners, and providing consultation in the implementation of strategic programming initiatives. Her research, teaching, writing, and consultancy focuses on understandings of giftedness and high-level development, and on ways to adapt curriculum to accommodate innovative practice. In addition to writing Being Smart about Gifted Children: A Guidebook for Parents and Educators (2005, Great Potential Press), she and co-author Dona J. Matthews have conducted presentations at conferences across North America addressing many gifted-related issues. E-mail: jfoster@oise.utoronto.ca

Dona J. Matthews is the Director of the Hunter College Center for Gifted Studies and Education, and an Associate Professor of Special Education at Hunter College, City University of New York. She holds a Ph.D. in Special Education (Gifted) from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, and has worked in many capacities to support exceptional development in diverse populations, including research, writing, and publishing; university teaching; initiating and directing an extracurricular program for academically gifted children; conducting a private practice doing assessment and counseling; and consulting to educational, government, private, and media organizations interested in a variety of topics pertaining to high-level development in children. She is the co-author with Joanne F. Foster of Being Smart about Gifted Children: A Guidebook for Parents and Educators (2005, Great Potential Press). E-mail: dmatt@hunter.cuny.edu

In a recent series of articles exploring the theoretical foundations of gifted education, the Roeper Review is encouraging those of us working in the field to take a fresh look at our assumptions and practice. We are prompted to consider what works, what doesn’t, and why. At best, articulating an effective theoretical foundation is an ongoing process that helps us clarify our goals and objectives, enables fresh perspectives, and inspires productive action. A strong foundation gives us the solid footing that we need in order to define and pursue meaningful goals, and connect with revitalizing visions of possibility. It is of course just such visions that motivate healthy reassessment and reform: “Vision can galvanize the will of the community and its leaders, ignite the creativity of teachers, hearten parents, and motivate gifted people to invest their talent and passion in the revitalization.” (Fox, 2003, p. 253).

We are not engaging in visionary thinking, nor presenting a new theory, but rather charting an emerging trend and illustrating how traditional ways of thinking about giftedness are undergoing change. After comparing what we are calling the mastery approach to giftedness with a mystery model, we consider some of the practical implications of the incremental learning (or mastery) approach. We encourage readers to consider how this discussion fits with their own perceptions and experiences.

Shifting Paradigms

There is considerable confusion and controversy surrounding the concepts of intelligence and giftedness. Many parents and educators see gifted education as exacerbating social, economic, and racial divisions in society, and certainly it can be argued that too frequently it has done just that. There is, however, an emerging perspective in the field, a paradigm shift that provides a politically defensible alternative. Over the past thirty years or so, we have observed a movement from a prevailing emphasis on a categorical notion of the typical gifted child with somewhat mysteriously defined attributes and learning needs, toward an understanding that some children have exceptionally advanced learning needs that require flexibly responsive educational attention.

In thinking recently about the possibility, desirability, or necessity of a consensus on a definition of giftedness, Gagné (2005) observed the need for a clear definition, and described what he saw as a “conceptual fuzziness” (p. 12) in the field. Concluding that, “Thankfully, the cavalry of common sense is there to come to the rescue!” (p. 13), he observed that most practitioners have operationalized giftedness as high academic ability. Consistent with this perspective, we argue here that educators are moving toward (a) concerning themselves with students who have exceptionally advanced learning needs that require special educational adaptations, (b) identifying students’ current levels of subject-specific mastery, and (c) then matching that with appropriate learning opportunities. In calling this a mastery perspective, we are attempting to distinguish it from traditional approaches that we see as somewhat myste-
rious. We recognize the mysterious complexity of human development, and argue here that in fact the simpler mastery model addresses that better than the historical mystery approach. We also recognize the dynamic nature of the development of expertise, and use the term to describe the nature of the educational exceptionality that is being addressed, rather than an end-state of completed mastery.

Although historically giftedness and intelligence have been contentious in definition, assessment, and practical implications, domain-specific advancement (as might be seen in highly developed mathematical, linguistic, or musical ability, for example) is relatively easy to understand, identify, and address. It is a focus on the complex and incremental nature of learning and development that gives rise to the mastery model definition, as we see it emerging in the field: “Giftedness is exceptionally advanced subject-specific ability at a particular point in time such that a student's learning needs cannot be well met without significant adaptations to the curriculum.” (Matthews & Foster, 2005b, p. 26).

A quick historical review serves to illustrate some of the fundamental influences on what we are calling a paradigm shift within the field of gifted education. With a focus on domain-specific abilities rather than general intelligence, the Marland Report (Marland, 1972) laid early groundwork for giftedness as a domain-specific phenomenon, a movement away from IQ or the ‘g’ model of general intellectual superiority. Another early and important influence was the work of Julian Stanley and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University with their Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) (Stanley & Benbow, 1983; Stanley, Keating, & Fox, 1974). This work illustrated dramatically the possibilities and promise inherent in identifying and supporting students’ exceptional domain-specific strengths, in contrast to prevailing models that conceptualized giftedness as the global cognitive superiority of certain individuals.

In 1982, Nancy and Hal Robinson proposed the optimal match concept. They argued for providing a range of options for gifted learners, and emphasized the importance of matching programming to individual learning needs, which contrasted sharply with the prevailing perspectives that categorized some children as globally gifted, and thereby established a large de facto category of “not gifted” children. The following year, Howard Gardner proposed his theory of multiple intelligences (MI) (1983). Although the notion of intelligence as multifaceted was far from new—in gifted education alone, we had already seen the Marland Report (1972) and SMPY (Stanley, Keating, & Fox, 1974), as well as many other approaches such as Guilford’s Structure of Intellect model (Guilford, 1967)—Gardner’s MI theory ignited people’s imaginations and changed the way that many educators began to think about intelligence.

In 1989, Jim Borland published Planning and Implementing Programs for the Gifted. Describing himself as “a special educator whose population of interest is gifted children” (p. 2), he argued that an approach to giftedness as a need for special education is more defensible than alternative approaches, and provides a workable framework for special programming. Working from a similar perspective in 1991, Dan Keating argued for policies grounded in understandings of individual and developmental diversity, and the incremental nature of human development. Keating suggested that practical implications of such an approach included making available a wide range of curriculum options for developmentally advanced students. Additional highly persuasive evidence for a domain-specific developmental perspective on gifted-level ability was provided by Michael Howe in The Origins of Exceptional Abilities (1990).

Many other more recent perspectives in gifted education are also consistent with important elements of the mastery model. These include the talent development approach (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Arnold, 2003; Tannenbaum, 1983), and the integrated curriculum model (VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003). These approaches are grounded in understandings of individual developmental differences along complex continua, rather than categorical dichotomies such as gifted/not gifted.

Over the past few years, many experts in gifted education have written about the need for major changes in the way giftedness is perceived (Borland, 2003; Feldhusen, 2003; Rogers, 2002; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Arnold, 2003). David Feldman (2003) wrote, “Recognition that the field of gifted education is holding an increasingly untenable position appears to be growing, perhaps to the critical point at which real change becomes possible, even necessary” (p. 15). Some have described the changes underway as a paradigm shift (Feldman, 2003; Treffinger & Feldhusen, 1996). We concur with this characterization, and suggest that a good way to understand the shift is as a move from what we are calling traditional mystery model thinking, to a mastery model mindset that takes into account the incremental nature of learning.

A Comparison: The Mystery and Mastery Models

When a paradigm shift is in progress, most practitioners experience a period of having one foot on each side of the shift (Kuhn, 1962), and so it is today in gifted education. Traditional models and approaches continue to serve us well in many particulars, and have much to offer as we move collaboratively into the evolving mastery approach. Our objective here is not to criticize historic or existing perspectives, but rather to point out that there is a model emerging that is worth thinking about and that may have the power to simplify and clarify our work in the field.

From a “pure” mystery model perspective, delineated here in extreme form for the sake of making a distinction with the understanding that very few practitioners or theoreticians now adhere to it as described, gifted children are born with high potential and score in the superior or very superior range of intelligence tests. Their ability stays relatively constant over time. From the mystery point of view, exceptionally intelligent children have certain characteristics in common, often reflected in lists and descriptions of “the gifted child”. In our experience, both adults and children are confused by the identification process and by the label; too frequently, they don’t really know what it means to be gifted, and describe themselves as uncomfortable with the concept (Foster, 2000).

The mystery model is implicit when children are labeled as “gifted” or not gifted without any explicit links to specific educational programming based on their particular strengths or abilities. This approach is mysterious because it is difficult to figure out what giftedness means using this model, and what to do about it when it is identified. There is a false sense of homogeneity across members of the labeled group: “When you categorize children you create the impression that all children

Winter, 2006, Roeper Review/65
who fall under that category are alike and require the same educational intervention. Nothing could be further from the truth” (Boyd, McDougall, & Yewchuk, 1998, p. 186).

From a mastery perspective, the term gifted denotes a mismatch between a child’s current developmental level in a given subject area and the educational programming that is usually offered at that student’s age and grade level. It refers to a level of subject-specific mastery that is exceptional for the child’s age or grade, and that requires special educational programming if the child’s learning needs are to be met. The mastery model is consistent with evidence in psychology and education about individual differences in developmental trajectories, and the highly diverse and incremental ways that learning actually happens (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Howe, 1990; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). From this perspective, a child is considered gifted only when her learning needs in any given subject area are so advanced relative to her age-peers’ that special adaptive programming is required for continued challenge and academic development. In practice, this means finding a student’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1930/1978), the zone in which an individual’s learning is challenging enough to be interesting and familiar enough to be mastered with some scaffolded support, and then determining which students are working beyond the zone within which the teacher is teaching. Optimal assessment approaches are ongoing, integrated with curriculum, and sensitive to children’s individual developmental levels and differences in various domains (Gardner, 1993; Heward, 2002).

There is no mystery about what giftedness means from the mastery model’s perspective: it is essentially about matching exceptional learning needs with educational provisions. It should be noted, however, that although the mastery model’s defining focus is intellectual advancement, it does not preclude attention to other ways of excelling—such as musical or artistic virtuosity, or athletic ability—or to other concerns. There are social and emotional consequences and concomitants of giftedness, as there are with other exceptionalities. And, just as there are social and emotional consequences and concomitants of giftedness, as there are with other exceptionalities. And, just as we pay attention to social and emotional dimensions of learning disabilities and sensory impairments, so we must attend to these issues with exceptionally advanced learners.

The best way to describe the mastery model, and to explain why the distinction is useful, is to compare it directly with the mystery model. We offer ten points to consider (see Table 1):

1. Origins of exceptional intellectual ability, as understood by the vast majority of practitioners today, include both genetic (nature) and environmental (nurture) dimensions interacting over time. However, there is a difference between the models in their emphasis, with the mystery model focusing more strongly on the nature side of the question, seeing some children as innately having brains that work unusually well, just as some are born with a greater than usual likelihood of becoming exceptionally tall. The mastery approach is more strongly focused on the nurture dimension, conceptualizing intelligence as a developmental phenomenon that is importantly dependent on a child’s opportunities to learn.

2. Duration differs significantly. The mystery model posits giftedness as conferring an intellectual superiority across the lifespan: “Once gifted, always gifted.” Mastery model proponents see exceptional ability as a current need for special educational programming. There is no fixed duration to a dynamic construct. One’s levels of advancement, and thus one’s need for adaptive instruction, can change over time.

3. Domains of competence also differ between the models. From a pure (historical) mystery model perspective, it is possible to talk about the gifted child who is superior in thinking tasks in most or all domains. Proponents of the mastery model view intellectual competence as fundamentally variable, within and across domains or subject areas. For example, a child might be described as mathematically or artistically gifted, or gifted across several areas.

4. Identification timing varies across these models. From the mystery standpoint, early identification prevents the child’s innate giftedness from being wasted: the sooner the gift is identified and addressed, the better. From a mastery perspective, identifying children’s areas of exceptional strength (as with weakness) is an ongoing process, flexibly responsive to changing circumstances and developmental needs, a natural part of a child’s education.

5. Identification measures provide another area for consideration. IQ is the gold standard for a traditional mystery model

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Mystery model</th>
<th>Mastery model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Origin</td>
<td>Nature focus (i.e., genetic, innate), with nurture/environmental influences</td>
<td>Nurture focus (i.e., appropriate opportunities to learn) in context of genetic predispositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Static; “once gifted, always gifted”</td>
<td>Dynamic, changing over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domains of competence</td>
<td>Most or all intellectual areas</td>
<td>Domain-specific (e.g., mathematical giftedness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification timing</td>
<td>Once, as early as possible</td>
<td>Ongoing, as needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification measures</td>
<td>Intelligence tests; checklists; creativity tests</td>
<td>High-ceiling academic reasoning and ongoing dynamic classroom assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum/placement</td>
<td>Categorical (gifted or not gifted)</td>
<td>Flexible; special education needs at a specific time in a specific area of functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence</td>
<td>Enrichment; segregated gifted class</td>
<td>Range of options; regular class if possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political implications</td>
<td>Charges of elitism, problems with scapegoating, funding concerns</td>
<td>Much more easily defensible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>User satisfaction measures</td>
<td>Academic and cognitive measures of learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Identification. From a mastery perspective, however, IQ is a measurement tool to use sparingly, primarily when more extensive diagnostic data are necessary as a complement to a combination of dynamic classroom assessment approaches and high-ceiling tests of academic reasoning.

6. Identification implications of the two categories are quite distinct. Traditionally in the mystery model, when a child achieved at or above whatever IQ cutoff score was designated for gifted identification in the school district, he or she acquired a categorical designation — gifted or some other term such as “high potential student”— which was then (sometimes) a ticket for admission to some form of programming that was not directly connected to having a high IQ. Within the mastery model framework, identification of subject-specific advancement leads directly to educational planning.

7. Placement options differ, as well. Under the mystery model, the best placement was very often deemed to be a segregated gifted class or pullout program. From the mastery perspective, this option would be the last choice. From the mastery model point of view, program placement depends on a child’s domain-specific abilities and interests. Mastery model theorists are more likely to consider a broader range of learning options, with the segregated class viewed as only one of many diverse and targeted possibilities.

8. Coherence across definition, identification, and programming is notably different between these two models. Because the traditional model (in pure/historic form) defined giftedness as innately higher learning potential; used an IQ score as the identification criterion; and often grouped identified-gifted students together with a teacher who had little or no training in understanding, interpreting, or programming for high intelligence test scores, it is not surprising that it was frequently experienced as confusing or contentious. One of the most important strengths of the mastery perspective is the fact that the process of identification of giftedness is a natural outcome of its definition as domain-specific mastery, and the consequent programming options make obvious sense from the identification data. For example, if a child’s level of functioning is 3 grades advanced in language skills, then she is linguistically gifted from a mastery perspective. Diagnostic assessment indicates a need for a more challenging and advanced language curriculum than would normally be provided. Programming for this child might involve language arts acceleration, some kind of mentorship, or any number of other learning accommodations responsive to the student’s interests and abilities, and as available.

9. Political implications of these two models are dramatically different. Educators working within a mystery model framework often faced considerable pressures from their colleagues and communities; with a pervasive sense of gifted education being elitist and/or racist. They frequently experienced active threats to their continued work in this area, including chronic funding instability. People tend to have far fewer problems with the idea of gifted education when it is understood from a mastery perspective. This is because that model’s flexibility is responsive to individual differences takes into account racial, economic, gender, and cultural diversity, and can be seen to be at once equitable and conducive to excellence. The mastery model orientation is much more readily accepted because gifted learning options are (and also are seen to be) flexibly targeted to special learning needs, and include all students for whom they are appropriate. Conceptualized as a need for special (advanced) education, giftedness can be found in every school in every district, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, language, or culture.

10. Evaluation tends to be ill defined with the mystery model. When we don’t know what specific learning needs distinguish participants in a given program from other children (as is the case when we identify giftedness with IQ or tests of creativity or aptitude), it is difficult to make sound programming decisions, and even more difficult to figure out if the enterprise has been valuable in some way. Traditional evaluation methods in the field were user satisfaction as determined by a child’s perception of his or her engagement and pleasure in the learning process, or parents’ and teachers’ perception of the same (Renzulli & Reis, 2003). Because one would expect that most children, teachers, and parents (regardless of gifted status) would be happy with enriched programming provisions, user satisfaction is not a meaningful or appropriate evaluation approach. Mastery model programming on the other hand can be evaluated by discerning whether a given child is actually learning, and at what rate. This can be assessed using various measures of academic achievement, including portfolio assessment, standardized tests, grade-normed tests, and other measures, depending on the domain of learning.

Mastery Model Thinking: Practical Implications, Benefits, and Connections

By conceptualizing gifted education as providing an educational match for students who otherwise experience a mismatch with the curriculum normally provided, the mastery model can more flexibly accommodate those whose exceptionality might not otherwise be identified. On a school-by-school or classroom-by-classroom basis, the mastery model is responsive to individual developmental differences, and therefore, can be more inclusive of racial, economic, gender, and cultural diversity. This is of course, socially, educationally, and politically much more defensible, and can help us avoid some of the problems associated with the under-representation in gifted programs of some minority groups and disadvantaged children (Ford, 2003; Robinson, 2003; Rogers, 2002).

One argument that we have heard against adopting a mastery approach is that parents who want their children designated as gifted will just move from one school or district to another until they get that label. While using local norms to establish the need for special gifted education may result in different identification criteria across jurisdictions, very few people change schools to acquire the gifted designation if it means moving away from a school where the general education level is high enough that the child’s learning needs are accommodated well in the regular classroom.

The mastery model in practice means providing teachers with the scaffolding they need in order to understand, identify, and address exceptional learners’ needs, both with respect to their strengths and to their learning problems (Gallagher, 2003). Optimally, this happens at all levels of teacher development, starting with inclusion of gifted education courses in preservice education, and including additional qualifications courses and ongoing professional development (Matthews & Foster, 2005a).

A mastery model perspective also means creating and making available to teachers, parents, and students, a wide range of learning options that can be employed as appropriate to meet advanced learning needs (Keating, 1991; Robinson, 2003; Robinson & Robinson, 1982). Important dimensions of this range are early entrance to various levels of schooling and
many different kinds of acceleration. Although acceleration is not suitable for all gifted children, it has been studied extensively and has been found to be effective for many students who are functioning far ahead of grade or age peers in one or more subject area(s) (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). Additional important options for gifted learners include curriculum compacting and enrichment, Advanced Placement courses, working with mentors, project-based learning, special classes, special schools, extracurricular programs, and talent searches, among many others (Keating, 1991; Matthews & Foster, 2005b; Robinson & Robinson, 1982; Rogers, 2003).

The range of possible options might start with a classroom teacher adapting her reading requirements for a gifted reader, encouraging the expansion and extension of ideas, and networking into the school, the community, the world, as far as the imagination goes. When educators (and parents, and students) understand that the objective of gifted education is to match programming to learning ability and interest, and that their job is to figure out the best way of doing this, they become energized and engaged in the learning process. Two of the delightful and unexpected benefits of implementing a mastery perspective in a regular classroom are that when students are given permission and assistance, they can become their own best advocates in the curriculum-adaptation process, and that when teachers understand giftedness in this way, the classroom is enlivened and all of their students benefit (Matthews & Steinhauser, 1998; Trotter, Stevens, Hawes, & Matthews, 1999). Years of experience working in regular classrooms and alongside teachers have afforded us many opportunities to design and implement these kinds of options, and to appreciate their successes. We have seen countless ways to support children’s high-level development, and have repeatedly seen and heard about the joy of meaningful engagement in learning when children are provided with targeted and appropriately challenging opportunities.

Another implication of the mastery approach concerns the concept of “potential.” Most people would agree that we ought to encourage the best possible educational outcomes in all children. The science of cognitive measurement, however, is too imprecise for us to ascertain with any degree of certainty which child has more potential than others, or in which areas. The more we learn about brain development, especially neural plasticity (Nelson, 1999; in press), the clearer it is that we have to be careful when setting limits on people’s potential for learning. Developmental pathways are highly variable, at least as individual as fingerprints, and we do well to avoid identifying which children might have more (or less) potential than others. Educators are on firmer ground from the standpoint of emergent findings on neural plasticity when discussing giftedness as a need for special education at a certain point in time, and avoiding the mystery-laden concept of potential.

Renzulli’s Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) (Renzulli, 1976, 1986) straddles the mystery and mastery approaches. Its flexible commitment to identifying and responding to individual developmental differences is clearly in the mastery camp, and the strongly positive research on these aspects of SEM provides a good illustration of some of the benefits of the mastery approach (see for example, Renzulli & Reis, 2003). On the other hand, the identification methods employed for students’ inclusion in the SEM’s “talent pool” comprise a number of instruments such as teacher, parent, self, and peer nominations; interest and learning style inventories; and creativity tests. Combining several low-validity and low-reliability scores and indicators like this makes gifted identification a more subjective and complicated task than it needs to be, and raises the mystery model question of what it is exactly that is being measured, and why.

Perhaps more importantly from a mastery perspective, the SEM’s emphasis on “creative productive giftedness”, means that, at least in some implementation practices, it does not systematically address the learning needs of those students Renzulli calls “the schoolhouse gifted” those with high intelligence test scores and/or who tend to do exceptionally well on academic tasks of all kinds, whether in a single academic domain, or across subject areas. Although the idea that “every child is special” (Renzulli & Reis, 2003, p. 190) is philosophically appealing, this can work in practice to distract our attention from those whose academic ability is so exceptional as to require educational adaptations, those considered gifted from a mastery perspective.

Like the SEM, Gagné’s (1999) differentiated model of giftedness and talent (DMGT) incorporates elements of both the mystery and mastery perspectives. At its foundation, it distinguishes between gifts as “natural abilities (called aptitudes, or gifts)” and talents as “superior mastery of systematically developed abilities (or skills) and knowledge” (Gagné, 2003, p. 60). As might be expected from our discussion of potential, this aptitude/mastered abilities distinction is not one that a mastery-oriented theorist would make: as educators, we cannot know what is innate to any given child or presume to rank-order children on their degree of potential. All we can really know are the students who present themselves in our classrooms. We can agree that children who have exceptionally advanced abilities that require special education do need accommodations to the curriculum. Many of Gagné’s suggested methods of developing talents fit well within a mastery perspective, including his thoughts on catalysts for development.

An approach that is more consistently representative of the mastery model is the content-based curriculum model developed by VanTassel-Baska and her colleagues at the College of William and Mary (VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003). Research on this model has demonstrated that it is possible to:

- Develop high-powered, rich, and complex curricula that treat content, process, and product considerations as equal partners in the task of educating gifted learners. . . . An overarching concept or theme binds the curricular study together within and across areas of learning so students can appreciate the world of ideas as a superordinate bridge to understanding their world. (p. 2)

In this model, those students who require high-level curriculum adaptations are provided them appropriately, consistent with the mastery approach, and with the understanding that their learning in each subject area must be scaffolded systematically over time if they are to achieve the level of expertise necessary to authentic gifted achievement as adults.

Moving into the developmental psychology field, the mystery model is analogous to Carol Dweck’s notion of the “entity” theory of intelligence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Henderson & Dweck, 1990), which she differentiated from the “incremental” theory. Those who hold the entity theory see intelligence as a more or less fixed attribute, which is demonstrated in successful performance. Because they see failures as evidence of lower ability, they are likely to avoid challenges. Incrementalists on the other hand, see intelligence as malleable, and as
developing over time; they enjoy mastering new skills, and tend to attribute their failures to a need to work harder or smarter rather than to a lack of ability. In further support of the mastery perspective on giftedness, considerable research evidence indicates that students who hold the incremental theory of intelligence do much better over time than entity theorists because they tend to view their failures as learning opportunities, and to welcome challenges, (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Henderson & Dweck, 1990).

Although we have not mentioned here the social and emotional dimensions of giftedness, we recognize that the experience of being exceptional can have enormous developmental consequences in every domain of functioning, certainly including social and emotional. This is no less true for academically gifted learners than for learning disabled, blind, or otherwise exceptional learners. It would be a misconstrual of the mastery approach to suggest that because it defines giftedness as simply a need for special education, it ignores the various other (and often complex) challenges faced by gifted learners. We address elsewhere issues associated with mastery perspectives on giftedness such as motivation, social skills, labeling, self-concept, leadership, behavior problems, conflict resolution, play, humor, adolescence, career development, gender and racial identity, family dynamics, and many other social and emotional concomitants (Matthews & Foster, 2005b).

Conclusion

By understanding the paradigm shift in progress in gifted education, and by considering its implications, we can reflect on our own practice, and fine-tune our approaches to supporting high-level development. We have argued here that by demystifying gifted educational practice and strengthening the connection between theory and practice, the mastery approach leads to more defensible policy and practice, and opens the way to clearer visions of possibility.

REFERENCES


(Original work published 1930)