

EDUCATION NEWS

An Interview with Joanne Foster, Ed.D. and Dona Matthews, Ph.D.: Perspectives on Gifted Learners

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1) The two of you have been quite prolific over the past few months. Tell us about some of your recent books and efforts.

We're very excited about the second edition of our award-winning book, *Being Smart about Gifted Children*, due to be released by Great Potential Press later this year. We've changed the title of the book to *Being Smart about Gifted Education*, reflecting our focus on labeling programs rather than children. This new title is more consistent with what we call the mastery model of giftedness – giftedness as something that develops with opportunities to learn, in a context of appropriate support and challenge, rather than being an innate categorical quality of person, such that some people *are* gifted, and the rest therefore *are not*. In the four years since the first edition of *Being Smart* was published, there has been a lot of research that supports the mastery model, including work on mindsets (Carol Dweck), expertise (Anders Ericsson), the living theory of education (Barry Hymer), and the development of giftedness and talent over time (Adele and Allen Gottfried; Rena Subotnik).

We're also enjoying writing a few columns called "Giftedness Unwrapped" for the journal *Understanding Our Gifted*, where we address misconceptions about gifted

development and also issues in the field of gifted education. In each column, we respond to parents' and teachers' questions, illustrating our perspectives with stories from our case files that shed light on what giftedness is (and isn't) and how it develops. We've written about the problems associated with gifted identification and labeling, emphasizing the fact that tests are limited, but human potential is not, and we will continue to address other timely matters. Identification and labeling issues are also at the forefront of our article in the National Association for Gifted Children *Conceptual Foundations Network Newsletter* (Spring 2009), accessible online at www.nagc.org.

Dona's been associated with two writing projects that came to fruition in January of 2009. She is co-editor with Frances Degen Horowitz and Rena Subotnik of *The Development of Giftedness and Talent across the Life Span*, published by the American Psychological Association. In this book, four developmental psychologists are paired with experts in gifted education to explore giftedness from early childhood through the elder years. Focusing on the practical implications of emerging theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, the contributors (including each of the co-editors in their own chapters) consider prediction and measurement, diversity issues, and psychosocial factors as they relate to developing talent in different domains. This book is being well received, and has been the focus of a feature article in *Education Week*, and the subject of an online webforum.

The other book that Dona's recently completed, also published in January of 2009, is *The Routledge International Companion to Gifted Education*, on which she is co-editor with Tom Balchin and Barry Hymer, educational experts in the United Kingdom. The editors brought together fifty respected authors from countries around the world, each one writing about the evolution of giftedness in the context

in which they live and work, and providing a 150-word response to a request for future perspectives and suggested priorities for gifted education in the next decade. Some of the best-known contributors are Jim Borland (who wrote the foreword), Nick Colangelo, David Chan, Guy Claxton, Carol Dweck, Joan Freeman, Sally Reis, Joe Renzulli, Dean Keith Simonton, Robert Sternberg, Joyce VanTassel-Baska, and Belle Wallace. The editors focused on changes currently underway in the field, thinking about how perspectives on giftedness are evolving.

In addition to these and various other writing projects, we continue to work with teacher candidates, experienced educators, and parent groups, helping people fine-tune their understandings of gifted development while exploring the many possibilities for encouraging and supporting high-level development. We each have several professional learning presentations scheduled in the months ahead.

2) Why do parents need to get involved in their children's education?

Parents who are actively involved in their children's education—that is, stay attuned to their learning and other needs, advocate on their behalf, encourage their engagement in the world around them, help them understand and appreciate challenge and change, respond to their questions and concerns, and nurture an appreciation for the richness of lived experiences—foster their optimal growth. This is true for all children, but it is particularly urgent for those with special needs, including giftedness, whose parents are often the first and best advocates, the people who make the difference that can lead to ultimate success and happiness.

There is tremendous joy in helping a child be all he or she can be, and what can be more rewarding than knowing that, as a parent, you have had a positive impact on

your child's learning and development? This extends into the emotional, social, cultural, artistic, and other dimensions of life. Parents who are involved in helping their children balance these various aspects and more, are on track to ensuring that their children experience well-being, become caring, competent, and contributing members of society, and attain fulfillment on many and diverse fronts.

3) What are some specific things parents need to know about gifted education?

We've thought a lot about this, and have written whole books and articles on this topic, so to condense it to a short answer in an interview is a challenge. If we had to boil this down to a few of the most important points, they would be the following:

a) As scientists learn more about neural plasticity, it is becoming more widely understood that giftedness is not innate or hard-wired. It develops over time, and perseverance and hard work matter a lot more than many people realize.

b) Parents should put their energy into looking for the best possible programming match, rather than getting their child labeled as 'gifted'.

c) At any given time in their lives, most children who have gifted learning needs have those needs only in a few areas, rather than across all subject areas.

Moreover, abilities can wax and wane across a child's development. Gifted programming should be targeted accordingly.

d) Children benefit when a wide range of learning opportunities is available, including various kinds of acceleration and enrichment, gifted programs and schools, extracurricular activities, mentorships, contests, and competitions.

e) A top priority at this time is enabling teachers to acquire the training and support they need to be well-equipped to encourage and address gifted-level development, and to help families make informed choices for their children.

f) Parents have an important role as advocates, and should work collaboratively with the school to help make sure there are appropriate learning options in place.

We write more about each of the above-mentioned points in the soon-to-be-released *Being Smart about Gifted Education*. (www.beingsmart.ca)

4) I often hear the terms acceleration and enrichment. Where do you stand on these two topics? Is one better than the other?

No educational option—acceleration, enrichment, or anything else—is generically better or worse than others. What makes one option more suitable than another is context-specific, and depends entirely on the situation and child under consideration.

For example, enrichment opportunities such as mentorships, interest-based learning opportunities, community service, academic contests, or targeted extracurricular activities might provide just the right challenge and learning impetus that a given child requires at a certain point in her development. However, in another case, acceleration in one of its many forms (such as subject-specific, full grade, early entrance to kindergarten or at other natural transition times) is a better way to go.

There is a robust research base dealing with the different types and implications of acceleration, and there certainly are many benefits to accelerating gifted learners. These include more opportunities for an individual to interact with intellectual

peers, programming that is well suited to the child's level of advancement, and the chance for him to proceed at a faster pace. However, deciding whether to accelerate a child is a multi-faceted process, and it should be predicated on determining what might be involved in taking that course of action (or not)—the academic implications, as well as the affective and social ones. Parents and teachers who have questions or concerns about acceleration practices can check out resources such as *A Nation Deceived* (a comprehensive overview of the issues available online at www.nationdeceived.org), and the *Iowa Acceleration Scale Manual* (a tool designed to help parents, teachers, and students make sensible educational decisions, with information at www.accelerationinstitute.org).

5) What about kids in the 120-130 I.Q. range who do not make the "cut off" for gifted. What do parents need to do to encourage them?

This cut-off conundrum is but one of the many problems that can occur when children are labeled as gifted, rather than programs being labeled as providing specific kinds of challenges for children who want them and are ready for them. Indeed, in jurisdictions where children (not programs) are labeled 'gifted', criteria must be established to distinguish between those who merit the label and those who do not, which means that there will inevitably be those on the cusp who thereby become designated as 'almost-gifted'. Clearly this is ludicrous. People do not come only in two types, gifted and not-gifted. The 'just below the cut-off' kids exemplify one of the problems of trying to force-fit people into these categories.

We recommend that parents who find themselves in this awkward situation talk to their children about the incongruous nature of the categorical system to begin with, and emphasize that what is really important is to recognize individual strengths (and weaknesses), and to figure out how to develop their abilities further. Parents

can explain the nature of success, why it depends on effort, energy, and persistence, and how an IQ score or 'intelligence quotient' is just a number that may or may not indicate real-world competencies. In short, parents can help children realize the fallibility of the gifted labeling process, looking beyond test scores and other numerical criteria and assignments, and focusing instead on different ways to develop individual capabilities in various domains.

We advise parents and teachers to spend some time thinking about Carol Dweck's ideas about mindsets, making sure they are supporting children in acquiring or strengthening a growth mindset. This means seeing failures and setbacks as opportunities to work even harder at learning, and so getting smarter. Our open letter to First Lady Michelle Obama in response to her address at a girls' school in London on April 2nd, 2009 illustrates and reinforces this approach.

<http://ednews.org/articles/36205/1/Open-Letter-to-Michelle-Obama/Page1.html>

Interestingly, Miley Cyrus was recently quoted in a popular magazine (and consequently across media networks worldwide) as saying that the minute she stops making mistakes is the minute she stops learning. We applaud this young woman's insight, and hope it continues to be shared broadly!

6) Let's talk about gifted girls. What do parents need to know and to do?

Because children's development trajectories are individual and therefore highly diverse, it is important that parents and teachers avoid stereotypical thinking about "gifted girls" (or, for that matter, "gifted boys") and what categorizations like these may or may not imply. Individual girls are more different than each other than they are collectively different than boys: technically speaking, the within-group differences are much larger than the between-group differences. That said, broad categories like these can sometimes help people understand pertinent educational

matters. For example, there is research indicating more males than females at the highest levels of some aspects of mathematical reasoning ability. Girls on the other hand tend to perform better than boys at school, especially in verbally oriented tasks and assessments. Although findings vary across cultures and in accordance with cultural values, girls tend to read at an earlier age, mature earlier, and possess more social and emotional intelligence.

Generally speaking, however, girls' scholastic advantage vanishes at adolescence when gender identity becomes important. Some smart girls sail through the teenage years, whereas others choose to "dumb down" their academic performance or behavior to acquire social acceptance, or because they perceive they are less capable than they actually are.

So, what does all this mean for parents? There are several considerations to keep in mind, and some common-sense strategies that can help them facilitate their daughters' optimal development. These include encouraging girls to

- put forth effort in all areas, not just their areas of strength
- engage in cooperative and collaborative learning activities, as well as competitive ones
- pursue math and science alternatives
- explore nontraditional career paths
- be true to themselves (for example, respect and take pride in their academic capabilities, femininity, and intellectual curiosities)
- receive counseling help if or when needed.

Most importantly, parents can advocate for and model gender equity practices, and pay attention to their daughters' individual interests and preferences.

7) A lot of parents talk to me about their daughters reading Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" series. Should parents allow this vampire-escapism stuff or encourage their kids to read Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or something else?

To begin with, girls are not the only ones reading these books—many boys are interested in these topics, too. Secondly, reading is such an important tool for learning and brain development that we cringe when we hear about parents forbidding their children to read *Harry Potter* books or Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series.

What better intellectual stimulation is there than discussing books and sharing the excitement of reading? We do recommend that parents familiarize themselves with the books that interest their young children, and help them put the ideas into perspective. Many of the most intellectually engaged children are as curious about supernatural ideas as they are about the natural world, and (with some guidance from the adults in their lives) this can be wonderful fodder for developing their imaginations and broadening their understandings.

Although parents might find the idea of vampires and relationships with them alarming, Meyer describes herself as an avid reader, and cites some classical novels as inspiration for the *Twilight* series, including *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, and *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery. She has said that each of the books in this series was inspired by a different literary classic: *Twilight* by Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*; *New Moon* by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; *Eclipse* by Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; and *Breaking Dawn* by Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Each of these classics includes dark, troubling, and sometimes magical themes, but because they are considered classics, few parents would fuss about their children reading them.

In general, we don't recommend that parents protect their children from the culture in which they are growing. Instead, we suggest that parents provide a variety of rich learning experiences, helping their children make good sense of what surrounds them. This includes guiding them in finding a balance in the kinds of books, television, movies, technological networks, and other media to which they are exposed. The world is full of ideas. There is vibrancy in artistic and other connections, and wide cultural exploration—in a context of love, support, and healthy well-balanced values—enriches children's development. In fact, by exploring metaphysical ideas and challenging the boundaries of conventional perception and experience in this way, children can get an early experience of investigating frontiers that might prove highly worthwhile in their creative endeavors, and later on in their lives and careers.

8) What kinds of plans should parents have for the coming summer months for their children?

Parents can use the summer months to help their children discover what they like to do, and then support them in doing it. That may involve reading, technology, athletics, fine arts, cultural-oriented or community-based activities, camping, or any one of a broad range of academic, social, recreational, or leisurely pursuits.

Everyone needs a chance to relax, and children benefit from ample opportunities to play and explore the world around them. Parents can stimulate their youngsters' thinking and foster their creativity by doing things together—visit sites (museums, historical venues, the beach, mountains, gardens, the zoo, the possibilities are endless); create and then share adventures (real and virtual) and invite others to become involved; read books and then discuss them; keep journals (written, drawn, video, photographic); help others or adopt a worthwhile cause; and spend quality

time with family and friends, both young and old. Above all, find ways to have fun. Summertime can be used for the kinds of self-discovery, reflection, and invention that busy schedules don't allow. It can be a time when enthusiasms are discovered and explored, to be savored ever after.

Published April 20, 2009