

## Reflections on My Practice

by Dona Matthews

In *Gifts, Talents, and Education: A Living Theory Approach*, edited by Barry Hymer, Jack Whitehead, and Marie Huxtable (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) (pp. 39-42)

What values motivate me in my work? At heart, I am driven to do what I can to make the world a better place for children growing up. This comes from troubles and advantages I've experienced and observed, resulting in a deep desire to make things work for children as well as possible, and putting my professional focus on helping each child to find and develop her gifts and passions as far as she can. This translates in practice to a strong belief in the importance of respect, meaning that I do my best to actively respect each educator as a caring and dedicated professional, each parent as doing the best he can for his children, each child as a capable and enthusiastic learner, and myself as a thoughtful educational psychologist. If there is one value that weaves its way through everything I've done and am doing, it is the need to respect the light of love, competence, and wisdom as it flows through each one of us. This translates into many ancillary and deeply-held values: authenticity, integrity, honesty, kindness, empathy, and courage come most readily to mind. These are the values that drive my daily practice and that I do my best to live out in my research, writing, teaching, and consulting.

If I can lay a claim to having done any original work in gifted education, it would be my observation that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift in the field. For many years, I conducted a private psychoeducational practice, specialising in issues related to giftedness. I came to see that traditional approaches make the idea of giftedness mysterious, by postulating, for example, the innate and permanent intellectual superiority of certain individuals – 'the gifted' – over others – by default, the 'non-gifted'. Parents, children, and educators all talked to me about finding this categorical dualism hard to fit into their lived realities, causing problems with family and school relationships, as well as being thorny to implement educationally. At the same time as I was seeing up close the problems with a mysterious IQ-based notion of giftedness, I was identifying a serious disconnection between this model and emerging findings in a number of research directions, findings that demonstrated the domain-specificity of cognitive development, the enormous implications of neural plasticity across the lifespan, and individual developmental differences in maturational timing, among others.

I became increasingly concerned about the popular misconceptions of what intelligence is and how it develops, and how these misconceptions were damaging children and their learning. But I was simultaneously heartened in my observations that the field was gradually shifting paradigms to a model that took the evolving evidence-based understandings into account, a model that I've called a 'mastery' model to describe its focus very simply on giftedness as incremental learning, and to distinguish it from the traditional 'mystery' model. The two defensible agendas of gifted education, as conceived from a mastery model perspective, are (1) to address the special learning needs of those students who are so advanced at a certain time and in a certain subject that they require special educational adaptations at that time and in that subject area, and (2) to use what we learn about gifted development to foster giftedness more broadly. This mastery approach is simpler, more transparent, more accessible, and more inclusive. It is much easier to explain to people, and to implement educationally. It is harmonious with emerging findings in cognitive development, neuropsychology, and education. And it works really well to support gifted-level learning in all kinds of students.

Although this approach has been informed by the work of many people, including Michael Howe, Maria Montessori, Howard Gardner, Dan Keating, David Lohman, Lev Vygotsky, Jim Borland, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, Joe Renzulli, Frances Horowitz, Julian Stanley, and many others, I see Carol Dweck's distinction between fixed and growth mindsets to be the most important and exciting idea in psychology and education today. In its affirmation of all learning as incremental, and intelligence as domain-specific and dynamically responsive to hard work over time, it validates a mastery approach to gifted education, and provides powerfully effective tools for teachers to foster high-level development more broadly and inclusively across the population.

Where this takes me by way of practical ideas for the teaching-learning process is that we need to respect individual developmental differences, and make sure there are opportunities in children's education both for individual learning tasks and projects, and for meaningful collaboration with peers they stand a chance to find challenging. This does not mean the dualistic categorisation of some kids as 'gifted' (and others therefore as 'not-gifted'), but it does mean thinking about children's individual learning needs, by subject area, and within subject areas too, making sure that what we're asking of them in their hours at school is meaningful, that it is sufficiently challenging that they are actively engaged in their learning,

and thereby creating their own giftedness. I can't say it better than Barry Hymer did in his doctoral thesis:

*I suggest an inclusional, non-dualistic alternative to the identification or discovery of an individual's gifts and talents by arguing that activity- and development-centred (not knowing-centred) learning-leading-development (Vygotsky) environments lead not to the identification of gifts and talents but to their creation.*

In a recent essay, Jack Whitehead talks about the 'creative space in which to read, think and write' that he experienced as a student at Newcastle University. I find this startling, because I am finding and making for myself now, for the first time really at age 56, such a space. As a child growing up in a busy household, I yearned inchoately for such a space, and the time in which to savour it. In my 20s, when I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, this dream was validated in a way that allowed me to affirm it and continue to hold it aloft as a possibility, but it has taken me all these intervening decades of raising a family, getting an education, and earning a living, before I could finally create some real space in which to read, think, and write. Sadly, the 'getting an education' and 'earning a living' – even though these were both academic pursuits purportedly focused on teaching and learning – did not provide such spaces. They were too filled with administrative and hurdle-jumping tasks to afford the luxury of time for reflection, for contemplation, for thoughtful digestion of all I was 'learning'.

One thing I would change for children in their schooling, then, would be to give them the time and space they need for thinking, for reflection, for contemplation, and for productive collaboration. I would slow down the clock, add in more time for optional unplanned unorganised physical play, and similarly, lots more time for contemplation, optional reading, and unplanned unorganised intellectual play. I would give them time to figure out what they don't know yet, what they want to learn more about, what's troubling and interesting to them about the world. And then of course, I would want them to have the good teacherly guidance they need to use that time and space effectively, to support them in finding and creating and building on their giftedness.