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# **a reflective conversation with tom balchin, barry hymer, and dona matthews: co-editors of the routledge international companion to gifted education (routledge, 2009)**



- You have just finished co-editing a text on Giftedness. How did this project come about and what is different about this text than previous ones?

We began work on this volume early in 2006, driven by a desire for a comprehensive, challenging, and informative reference source for those wanting to identify promising themes among the diverse international policies and practices pertaining to high-level development. We had each observed from our different vantage points in the field that gifted education around the world is in a state of flux. Does this reflect dissatisfaction with 20th century conceptualizations of giftedness, an emergent awareness of new challenges in a new century? We are still not completely sure! But certainly, we have learned in the process of developing this book that educators and policy-makers in many

countries are struggling to assess the efficacy for their own situations of initiatives that are successful in other countries, particularly the United States.

In addition to requesting chapters from recognized authorities in the field, we sought to locate authors who would challenge existing perceptions, and perhaps identify prevailing myths, assumptions, and misconceptions in the field. A good example of this is John Geake's thought-provoking chapter on neural interconnectivity, in which he explains that despite over 170 different tests of learning styles having been produced for the marketplace, the neurological evidence to date shows no improvement in learning outcomes when teaching approaches are modified to cater to differences in learning styles.

Another difference from many other current resources is our request to our international experts that they discuss issues specific to the development of gifted education within their own countries. Jim Borland very kindly stated it this way in his foreword to the book: 'This has made the collection international in more than a nominal fashion, which is very refreshing for those of us who tire of seeing everything through American-centric lenses!'

We had a strong future-orientation, and were most interested in how the field is changing, where it is going, and where it should go. We asked each author to provide a concise comment of 150 words or fewer, highlighting their suggested priorities and predictions for gifted education in their own countries over the next decade. Quite a few of them told us that this was the hardest part of their writing contribution! Many of our readers tell us that these boxes alone, positioned at the end of each chapter, make for very interesting reading.

- **I understand Joan Freeman of Great Britain has contributed a chapter. What is her focus in this text?**

Joan Freeman focused on the relationship between morality and giftedness. This is a tricky topic; morality shares the abstract breadth of giftedness, being infuriatingly difficult to define precisely. She argues that although advanced academic ability may be correlated with higher scores on tests of moral reasoning, it does not necessarily lead to more moral behaviour. She explains that morality is inextricably bound up with wisdom, which is not an entirely intellectual attribute. In order to find clues to possible connections between giftedness and morality, she examines the history of the field from as far back as Galton, and all the way to the present, discussing some of the culturally biased 'right answers' to IQ questions that focus on issues of morality--like the right thing to do when another child takes your toy--, and findings from her own gender studies. She gives us a delightfully nonsensical situation to consider: if high-level achievement and morality are positively correlated, boys are morally superior to girls in the U.S. by virtue of outstripping them in the 'hard' academic subjects, and girls are morally superior in the UK. She concludes that morality is independent of high-level school achievement and thus probably of IQ too.

- **Joseph Renzulli continues to amaze me with his prolific production of new ideas. What's new from Joe in this text?**

You're so right -- For the past thirty years or so, Joe Renzulli has been at the forefront of many of the big changes in the field. His Schoolwide Enrichment Model is used around the world to foster giftedness in children who otherwise might never engage productively with school-based learning. He

and his colleagues have provided many tools, techniques, and strategies that effectively engage children in learning across many kinds of background, ability, and experience, inspiring educators everywhere with his infectious enthusiasm for the possibilities for giftedness in many more children than are typically seen as gifted.

Renzulli has been, and continues to be a source of invention and renewal in our field, and once again, he does not disappoint. His chapter in our book, co-authored with Sally Reis, focuses on Renzulli Learning Systems, a web-based and CD-enhanced system to foster and support gifted development in children everywhere a computer can be found and put into service. It has obvious applications in rural and remote locations where gifted programming is severely limited, but it is equally useful in inner-city schools where very few teachers have both the time and the training to differentiate effectively for the highly diverse gifted learning needs they encounter in their classes. We predict that it will be on everyone's shortlist for 'the next best thing in education', and are delighted that he shared his inventive perspectives on this with us and our readers.

- **Nicholas Colangelo has been advocating for acceleration for many years. What is his current position, and what is his chapter about?**

In his chapter for our book, written with Susan Assouline, Nick Colangelo argues for the urgency of widespread implementation of acceleration practices for advanced learners. Summarising core findings from their influential 2004 report, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*, they argue their case with vigour, discussing the mismatch between the proven efficacy of acceleration as an educational

intervention, and its relatively infrequent application in educational settings. As editors, we were pleased that they made few assumptions about the prior knowledge of their readers. Their chapter covers much familiar but essential ground (e.g., the nature and types of acceleration, and the differential effects of acceleration on academic and social development), as well as some promising portents – notably the fruits that are likely to arise from the present and future work of the recently-founded Institute for Research and Policy on Acceleration.

Colangelo and Assouline are sensitive to the charge that acceleration is hardly a 'big new idea' any longer, but argue that at least—unlike so many other interventions done in the name of gifted education-- we know that it works. Space constraints prevented them from offering detailed responses to many of the stronger critiques of acceleration – e.g., the charge that it is most effective in age/grade lock-step educational settings that offer few opportunities for personalized learning and creative extension opportunities. As editors, however, we have attempted to address this by juxtaposing their chapter with others that focus on creativity and non-accelerative interventions. We are delighted to have this significant educational intervention represented by two of its most ardent and articulate advocates. Explicit and implicit critiques of the approach are to be found elsewhere in the volume.

- **Your text talks about a "paradigm shift". When did this shift come about and who started this shift?**

Experts have been describing or predicting a paradigm shift in the field of gifted education for at least the past three decades. This shift is from a categorical model such that some children are "gifted" (and all

others, therefore, are “not-gifted”), toward a developmental model, such that intelligence and giftedness develop over time, with appropriately challenging and supportive opportunities to learn, following highly individual pathways, and reflecting individual and cultural differences. One way of thinking about this is that conceptions of giftedness are moving from ‘being’ gifted to ‘doing’ gifted-level things, from something that is innate and fixed to something that is achieved.

Some of the earliest proponents of a paradigm shift were Nancy and Hal Robinson in their advocacy for the “Optimal Match” concept and a range of learning options including various kinds of acceleration and enrichment. Julian Stanley’s work with the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth continues to be an inspiration and to provide some of the best longitudinal data supporting this shift. Current proponents include Jim Borland, Bob Sternberg, Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Joe Renzulli, Frances Horowitz, Rena Subotnik, David Lohman, and Carol Dweck, many of whom have written chapters for this book, and all of whom are represented in our reference list. Most recently, Dona Matthews has been writing about this, including in her two chapters for this volume, one with Christy Folsom, and the other with Ian Warwick.

- **Children differ in their growth and development. What do teachers need to know about the changes that take place across the life span of gifted children?**

A number of our contributors address this question head-on, albeit from widely differing perspectives. In fact the volume opens with a trenchant critique of traditional approaches to giftedness from Guy Claxton and Sara Meadows, who argue for a

replacement of fixed-state attributions such as ‘gifted’ with a much more dynamic emphasis on the development of skills, dispositions and ‘learned habits’ – which have resonance and applications across the life-span. This theme is reinforced and developed by many other contributors, including Matthews & Folsom, Hughes, Wilson, Huxtable, Dweck, and Hymer. Whilst there are also many thoughtful contributions from people taking a contrasting stance (e.g., Dean Simonton’s life span perspective – from ‘gifted zygote’ to gifted older adult – and Valsa Koshy’s focus on the gifted young child), we believe that the emphasis given to fluid, dispositional factors by so many of our contributors is rather unique for a book in the field of gifted education. And perhaps it’s no coincidence either – it represents a parallel shift in focus from ‘mystery’ to ‘mastery’ perspectives (Matthews & Foster, 2006) in gifted education which captures the educational zeitgeist of the first decade of the 21st century. For teachers seeking advice about the changes affecting individuals across the life span, they will therefore find many chapters that speak to the desirability of remaining open to possibilities – and indeed creating possibilities – as none of us yet knows what our individual or collective potential truly is. This is a message which may be as attractive to true educators as it may be anathema to many administrators!

There has always been the problem of children who seem to be spectacular in many areas, but sadly get IQ scores that do not “qualify” for gifted identification.

- **What does your text have to say about these unfortunate souls?**

Our authors say a good deal about the ‘almost-gifted’ and the ‘not-gifted’ – but mostly by reframing the field. Many of them (but not all!) argue for a move away from the

deterministic dead hand of actuarial, norm-referenced approaches, and towards approaches which speak to the ringing peals of gift-creation and its dispositional, contextual and volitional antecedents. Away from the bell-curve and towards the bell-tower, if you like. Of course this is not a startlingly new insight – Renzulli, Mönks, Borland, and Sternberg amongst others have in their different ways been making this point for decades (and restate it in certain chapters in this volume), and some non-western cultures have understood this for centuries. Even within the positivist-leaning psychometric tradition represented by the 20th century IQ test and its spin-offs, the arbitrary and indefensible nature of the ‘cut-off score’ has been long understood at a theoretical level (standard errors of measurement being what they are).

We have an opportunity now, however, to support administrators in finding educationally authentic ways of organizing and personalizing schooling systems so that the tools that we used in the 20th century can be supplanted by tools fit for a world of rapid change and immense challenges, requiring creativity, commitment and flexibility – none of which qualities is well-measured by an IQ test. A number of chapters in this volume describe and outline such tools, and in the concluding chapter Sally Reis sets out the challenges and tasks that face us all as we move from a focus on assessment and standardization to the creation of opportunities for the living of satisfying lives, the development of gifts, the pursuit of passions, and the search for work that will enrich us all – physically, aesthetically, and indeed in every sense.

- **There are some children who are gifted, yet do not seem to have an outlet for their skills and abilities – due perhaps to their environment or parents. Are these kinds of issues addressed?**

To begin with, we want to refer back to your previous question about the paradigm shift, and suggest that rather than thinking about ‘children who are gifted’, we rephrase the question to say, “There are some children who have gifted-level learning needs, yet...”

That being said, whilst our volume doesn’t have the specific focus of, for instance, Wallace & Adams’ *Worldwide Perspectives on the Gifted Dis-advantaged* or Wallace & Eriksson’s *Diversity in Gifted Education*, we do give considerable attention to these issues in the chapters addressing underachievement and under-identification of giftedness in minority groups, including those by Graham Chaffey (Australian indigenous children), Joyce VanTassel-Baska (cultural diversity), and Ian Warwick and Dona Matthews (urban and diverse communities). These issues also have a place in François Gagné’s DMGT, in Belle Wallace’s TASC model, and in the chapters from Diane Montgomery and Wieslawa Limont – these latter both addressing the issue of dual exceptionality.

It is generally accepted that it’s no longer defensible to focus only on the ‘easily visible’ gifted child who has enjoyed the advantages of privileged academic, social, and emotional circumstances. Most educators recognize that we also have a responsibility to children with unrealized potential, or those for whom existing gifts and talents are masked by impediments to achievement. As editors, we accept this responsibility and believe that the volume as a whole reflects this.

- **What relevance would Vygotsky and his zone of proximal development have in terms of this newer model of gifted education?**

Enormous! Vygotsky's work forms a cornerstone of many of the perspectives that our authors describe as exemplary. Vygotsky is referred to explicitly by Lisa French and Bruce Shore in their consideration of whether or not gifted learners prefer to work alone, by Belle Wallace in her description of the TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) model, and by Barry Hymer in his discussion of an inclusional, fluid, and non-normative understanding of giftedness.

Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development is a foundational principle for the paradigm shift we discuss. In its conceptualisation of a necessary match between a child's current level of ability and the level of intellectual challenge that is provided, the ZPD informs most of the proposals in this book, including Nick Colangelo and Susan Assouline's advocacy for acceleration, both Tom Balchin's and Kurt Heller's suggestions for changing definitions, Joyce VanTassel-Baska's discussion of gifted education and cultural diversity, and Sally Reis' advocacy for appropriate challenge levels for children showing evidence of giftedness or talent.

Don Treffinger, Carole Nassab, and Edwin Selby open their chapter with a short poem of George Bernard Shaw's which makes the case for ZPD delightfully well. In it, the author laments that the only person who behaves sensibly is the tailor, because he takes measurements afresh for each new suit, while everyone else expects us to fit into their previous measurements of us. This is a perfect metaphor for the ZPD and for the paradigm shift that our volume documents: Given the dynamic and highly individual

nature of human development, it makes no good sense to 'identify' global giftedness once and for always. We do much better when we assess children's abilities by subject area, with ongoing frequent assessment, and attempt to provide a good educational match.

- **Where do mentors fit in? Has anyone written about the importance of mentoring in the lives of gifted kids?**

Many of our authors include mentorships as an important option to include in the range of learning options that are essential to meeting gifted learning needs, and to fostering giftedness and talent development in diverse students.

For example, Valsa Koshy considered the gifted learning needs of young children. In her review of exemplary practices, she included the Reggio Emilia programme's use of older mentors (17 year olds) with 6 year-olds with gifted learning needs. Sally Reis's chapter provides another example. She includes mentorships along with direct assistance, counseling, acceleration, and more, in the continuum of services that she and Joe Renzulli advocate at the national and local levels in comprehensive programmes for talent development.

- **What are some of the newer issues, perhaps that have not as yet been addressed in the field of gifted education?**

We've identified many of these in our responses to other questions, but if we had to identify one big new idea in gifted education, it would probably be Carol Dweck's research on mindsets. Dweck has written a chapter for this volume, and many of our authors—including each of us co-editors—refer to this work in their chapters.

We find it exciting in its possibilities for supporting gifted-level development much more broadly and inclusively than was previously thought possible.

Another big new idea that motivates many of our authors in their focus on change is one that Jim Borland actually proposed many years ago, and that is related to Dweck's idea of the growth mindset: gifted education without gifted children – that is, challenging programming that matches students' learning needs in a given subject area at a given point in time, without needing to identify the child as 'gifted'. This is about the learner/learning match that Vygotsky talked about a hundred years ago, and that we spoke about earlier in this interview, in response to your question about the paradigm shift in the field.

Some other issues that our authors address that are in emergent stages of implementation internationally include multiple kinds of acceleration; ensuring a much broader inclusivity in our programming for the development of giftedness and talent; and the possibilities for gifted education inherent in technological advances, as seen most obviously in the chapter by Joe Renzulli and Sally Reis, but also evident in many other chapters.

Finally, there is a theme running through many of the chapters that surprised us as we put the book together. Many of our authors have emphasised social, emotional, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions as the next big thing in gifted education. In addition to Annie Haight's and Kirsi Terri's chapters on ethics and gifted education, Maria Dolores Prieto and Mercedes Ferrando's chapter on emotional intelligence, and Dona Matthews and Christy Folsom's chapter on cognition, emotion, and the shifting paradigm (all of

which have explicit emphases on these dimensions), we have David Chan's chapter about gifted education in China, Marie Huxtable's chapter about living educational theory, Barry Hymer's chapter on inclusional understandings, and Bob Sternberg's chapter on wisdom.

- **Emotional intelligence – how important is it that gifted kids learn about it and understand it?**

Very – and one of the five sections in the volume is wholly devoted to the broader issue of psycho-social development and extra-cognitive issues, including emotional intelligence. Even outside this section, many contributors, notably Carol Dweck, highlight the significance of extra-intellectual factors in 'growing' one's 'intelligence' and in breaking down false cognition-emotion dualisms – recognising that there is a robust and strongly interactive relationship between a multiplicity of domains – not least 'the brain' versus 'the heart'. This again is no coincidence as the field of gifted education has moved inexorably to embrace those factors which previously would have been seen as the poor relations of intellect. It's over half a century since Cyril Burt remarked that 'Intelligence denotes, first of all, a quality that is intellectual and not emotional or moral: in measuring it, we try to rule out the effects of the child's zeal, interest, industry and the like.' We have moved on some distance since then – although Burt himself should perhaps have been aware of the veracity of Plato's dictum that 'All learning has an emotional base.' Within the UK and in many other countries there has been an explicit move to revalue the development of the emotions, and to teach children the value and power of the social and emotional aspects of learning. We support this move, and believe that the volume as a whole does so too.

- **What about the development of higher order thinking skills and critical thinking skills?**

We recognize that to achieve curriculum transformation in favour of developing giftedness, teachers must teach children how to learn, not simply what to learn. We know that strategies for the recognition, development and assessment of higher order thinking skills, such as problem-finding, problem-solving, creating relevancy, collating, ordering, prioritising, making judgements and verifying potential solutions are vital. Accordingly, many of our authors focus on such areas. Belle Wallace makes the case that children's learning capacities can be improved through the systematic teaching of thinking skills and she offers her well-known TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) model for further examination. Robert Sternberg refers us to his WICS (Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, Synthesised) model and memorably tells us that when students think to learn, they also learn to think. It is for this reason that we encourage teachers to teach and assess achievements in ways that enable students to analyse, create with and apply their knowledge.

Donald Treffinger, Carole Nassab and Edwin Shelby present their LoS (Levels of Service) approach, which builds on the recognition that students must be able to think clearly and critically. They show that 'focusing' tools, like the CPS Version 6.1 serve to help students analyse, organize, refine develop and prioritise call for applications of creative problem solving. Tom Balchin writes about recognizing and fostering creative production, CFP (Creative Feedback Package) which encourages students to critically analyse and enhance their own creative processes. Helen Wilson raises a provocative question: '...are children

too busy working to have time to think?' She makes a strong argument for the importance of encouraging all children's higher-order thinking skills, not just those who have been identified as gifted.

- **Musical talents and abilities- has this area been addressed, examined or explored?**

No, not specifically in this volume. However Dean Simonton in his chapter concerning giftedness through life, demonstrates how the natural endowment that contributes to giftedness may also include non-genetic contributions. For instance, it has been suggested that elevated in-utero testosterone sometime after the 20th week of gestation may be responsible for exceptional musical giftedness. Simonton posits that if this is so, then the nine-month interval between conception and birth may be a critical phase in which the gift is given to the ensuing talent.

- **What role does technology currently play in gifted education at the current time and are gifted students using the Internet wisely?**

As we said in response to an earlier question, the chief responsibility of a school in this century will be to teach students how to learn. Never more so is this true than with the internet. The new global currency is knowledge, and if knowledge is power, then never before have children had so much power literally at their fingertips! For highly capable learners, this raises all sorts of advantages – they can access so much knowledge, blog, publish web-pages, and even sell innovative ideas.

Online tutoring services are growing day by day and many universities offer online



courses that would be appropriate for gifted learners. We know that children are spending more and more time surfing the internet, sometimes as much as two hours per school night. Social networking sites such as Bebo, Facebook and MySpace can be great ways of allowing students to spend part of their evenings with similarly capable peers.

Students need actively to be shown not only how to evaluate the necessity of information, but the reliability and authorship of what they are reading. So how do we provide some sort of search framework for gifted students? Joe Renzulli and Sally Reis think they have the answer. They present the RLS (Renzulli Learning System) in the volume, and explain how computer use has evolved from e-learning to teachers being able to apply an enquiry-based pedagogy rather than traditional drill-and-practice approach. Their computerised strength assessment tool links with search engine technology to match thousands of resources exactly to students' particular strengths. Renzulli and Reis explain that this differentiation strategy for schools engages, enthuses and challenges students to stretch for the use of materials and resources that are above their current level of learning.

- **I am aware that there is something unusual about this Volume in terms of re-numeration for authors. What is it?**

This text differs in that we are very proud to say that neither we as Editors nor the 50

contributors have accepted, or will accept, any payments or royalties for the work. All royalties received will be donated to educational and disability charities close to the Editors' hearts. The first is the Kinamba Nursery school project in Kingali. This is a remarkable Rwandan charity devoted to meeting the educational, social and material needs of the poorest and most marginalized people in their local area. The country had been devastated by the genocide of 1994, which killed some 800,000 people and 11 years after the atrocity children were without still free education. The school has more than 120 children and is badly in need of a bigger premises, more desks, equipment and uniforms.

The second is The ARNI Trust. Action for Rehabilitation from Neurological Injury is a charity founded by Tom Balchin in 2001 in order to help stroke survivors rehabilitate. Tom himself recovered from near total paralysis caused by a severe brain hemorrhage in 1997. Now the charity matches stroke survivors with over 100 Instructors around the UK who are trained by him using his unique combination of neurologically sound functional task-related practice movements deriving from martial arts and strength training. We very much appreciate the donation of our authors' time and talents for these causes, and thank you, Mike, for this chance to explain the nature of the Volume. We feel hope that readers will enjoy its futures-focused approach, and that it will derive benefits from comparing gifted education strategies, procedures, plans, projects and systems from around the globe.