

Perry's Perspective—

Blog from the principal of St. Clement's School in Toronto, an independent school for girls

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### To Be or Not To Be Gifted

It has been very interesting to read the *Globe and Mail's* series of articles, and responses, about gifted education. There is no doubt that this topic is one that offers many perspectives and is an issue upon which any school should reflect; however, I would suggest that St. Clement's School, with its outstanding academic program, should also chime in.

In reading the various articles and posts, what resounded with me is not that it is important that a label is in place for our students but that the educational experience for them is one that engages, challenges and supports them.

St. Clement's School is renowned for its academic excellence. It is paramount that our girls are afforded an outstanding academic program that is both rigorous and flexible and that this program is provided by faculty and staff who are second to none. We have been committed to this since the school's inception and it is the foundation of our mission statement.

*Our school's mission is to develop women of character by encouraging academic excellence, self-confidence, leadership, and independent thinking in an enriching, supportive environment.*

Dr. Joanne Foster, a professor of educational psychology as well as gifted education, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education responds to much of the debate in the *Globe's* series with an excellent perspective.

Dr. Foster and her colleague Dr. Dona Matthews address the notion of a 'mastery' model to gifted education rather than that of 'mystery'. While the mystery model is, at its most simplistic, the notion that individuals are either categorized as gifted or not gifted, the mastery model reflects the notion that there is no one gifted profile: "Gifted simply denotes a mismatch between a child's current level in a given subject area and the educational programming that is usually offered at that student's age and grade level". Foster and Matthews provide an informative, thought provoking and practical overview about the development of children who possess talent in a variety of areas in their book *Being Smart about Gifted Education*. As we reflect on our incredibly talented girls at St. Clement's, I couldn't help but appreciate their added statement: " We should add that although the mastery model's defining focus is intellectual advancement, it does not preclude attention to other ways of excelling, such as musical virtuosity, athletic prowess, leadership skills, or any other socially valued ability ". Anyone who has spent time at St. Clement's recognizes that our girls possess a variety of talents and it is our responsibility to ensure that we are affording them an enriching and supportive environment in which to learn, to be challenged and to grow. As one parent who blogged noted: "a person should not be identified through a program, but identified and lauded for being their own person with their own strengths and weaknesses". It is inevitable that students will have areas of strengths and weaknesses. Typically, our

girls have high expectations for themselves: they are bright and very capable but because of this, they can struggle occasionally with setbacks. It is equally important for us to ensure that we are educating our girls in how to be resilient and mindful when coping with struggles as well truly preparing them for life beyond St. Clement's School.

This knowledge of there sometimes being a mismatch of a student's exceptional ability relative to the educational program highlights the imperative of differentiation of our instruction to ensure that we are reaching all of our girls and enabling them to achieve their potential and grow. As Carol Ann Tomlinson, professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and well known educational author and speaker explains "the idea of differentiating instruction is an approach to teaching that advocates active planning for and attention to student differences in classrooms, in the context of high quality curriculums".

We are fortunate to have excellent supports and enrichment in place for our girls at St. Clement's School. With the implementation of LINCWell, our centre for enrichment and support to enhance our guidance and instruction for girls from Grades 1 through to 12, we are proud of our approach to education for our diversely talented girls.

'To be or not to be' is not the imperative. The imperative is to ensure that we continue to investigate best practice and research, allow time for dialogue and engage and support our talented students and staff in order that we continue to live our school's mission.