

How am I using my own understanding and development of gifts and talents to promote the learning of children?

By Nina Clayton, September 2008

What I write has grown from a journey as a classroom teacher in a pressured year. OFSTED gave our school a 'notice to improve' last September. I specifically write 'our school' as this is what the children call it and I feel the same loyalty and pride to call it this too. I have been working at this primary school for 8 years and I have a true sense of belonging and passion towards the children, staff and teaching that happens here. My journey is not exclusive and it is a journey followed and shared with the children in my class.

I follow the action research model of enquiry (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) as this is the way I have learnt to question, reflect, share and improve my own teaching practice. Marshall, (2004) discusses the different forms of action research and questions the opinion of others in relation to 'first-person' research. She states that to inquire is to improve, and that is why I have chosen action research, to enquire about the gifts and talents I have as a classroom teacher.

The term 'gifted and talented children' has been targeted, debated, implemented and encouraged throughout our education system. There is an ongoing debate as to what is meant by the term 'gifted and talented children'. There seems to be endless definitions and the debate surrounding the correct definition has been around for many years and I guess will always continue. Gifted children are most often described as highly intelligent; however how to measure intelligence is another ongoing debate. Freeman, (1998) writes about how teachers react and treat highly able children. Teachers from a range of cultures have been known to hold conflicting views about what they consider to be a highly able child. The way these children are dealt with and treated is also different.

Worryingly the term 'gifted and talented child' is often referred to as the 'brightest' child/children in the class which I feel under minds those children that are deemed not to be as bright. I feel it is hard to measure exactly who such children are, every child is bright at something. However, 'gifted and talented' children are defined in the national gifted and talented education strategy as those achieving higher than the expected National Curriculum level for their age. Reading the guidance from the DFES (2007) states that provision for gifted children should be inclusive of children from low income and culturally different backgrounds.

'For provision to be inclusive, children in care should be viewed as being potentially gifted and talented. Provision must: be inclusive, positive and collaborative; raise aspirations; improve standards; and remove potential barriers to learning.' DFES 2007, p.4

The guidance implies that only certain children have gifts and talents. It states that children in care can potentially belong to the group of highly gifted and talented children in schools. They have the ability and it is important we reduce these barriers that prevent them from achieving their potential. Shouldn't this be the case for all children? All children have the potential to achieve their own gifts and talents. Why should there be an elite group of children? I believe that every child has a gift and talent and that it is my role to find out what they are, enhance, nurture and give time for them to

develop. I find it difficult to accept that gifted and talented children are only a small minority of my class. All children have their own gifts and talents.

Should the term 'gifts and talents' be broken down, are gifts different from talents? I ask myself what is a gift? Is it something special that a person holds, a talent they have, or is it something special that one gives and passes on? I understand that a gift can't be a gift until it is passed on. It is my responsibility to use my own gifts to bring out the natural gifts of my children. Without my gift of teaching their gifts may not be discovered. It is my duty to the children to give them the opportunities and set expectations to allow their gifts to excel.

Hymer (2007), states that all children have gifts and talents it is not just the children who obviously shine in our education system. It is my responsibility to find and provide opportunities for the talents of **every child** in my care.

If all children are given access to an enriched curriculum, the most able will identify themselves. This is not – in my view – an idealistic or precious position to adopt –it is a necessary one. Hymer, in House of Commons (in 1999), 2007, p.156

I would like to look at the gifts and talents I hold as a teacher and how they can be utilized to improve the gifts and talents of all my children.

My main gifts and talents as a class teacher include;

- Building children's confidence by ensuring a safe and secure environment to work in with consistent routines and expectations. Early Years trained, I am aware that children will not learn unless such an environment is in place
- Building relationships, as described, Clayton (2008) final para
- Differentiating activities to appeal and reflect the ability of individual children
- Skilled at using a range of questions to assess children's knowledge and interests, Shirley Clarke's (2001) work on questioning has supported my skills in this area
- Skilled at using a range of visual's and 'hands on' stimuli's that are relevant to young children's lives
- Making links between home and school by listening to children's worries and achievements, Clayton (2008)
- I never use the same planning twice. Each group of children is different, having different dynamics and needs. I look at objections given in strategies and schemes of work and create and adapt planning that focus' on the aspects of learning that need to be addressed
- Using my own passions within my teaching day, referred to on p.3
- Making all children feel valued. From the children with severe learning difficulties to those working at exceptionally high levels for their age: I use the TASC wheel (Wallace et al, 2004) to promote inclusionality and allow children to challenge themselves and work at their own pace. I will discuss how this is happening in my classroom, on p.7

The purpose of this writing is to illustrate and question myself as a teacher and how best I am able to support children, alongside developing my understanding of the term 'gifts and talents'. I want to promote my embodied knowledge into the public domain as I believe my own gifts and talents (like many of my colleagues) are worth sharing to support other teachers, to give thoughts for debate and to highlight successes. By sharing we can support each other, hold educational and reflective discussions and promote good practice.

Rayner (2008) believes that the only way we can improve is by staying a learner ourselves. Reflecting, analyzing, adapting the way we work, will have huge benefits for our children and ourselves. Rayner is stating how our world is driven by results, money, qualifications and power. By aspiring to these goals we under estimate the importance of being a learner and improving ourselves through staying a learner.

Hymer, (2007) promotes a child-led learning environment where the discovery of an individual's gifts and talents is not just their identification but also their creation. Hymer suggests gifts and talents should emerge from our teaching and we shouldn't be looking for them. As a teacher I should be providing activities that can nurture talents and allow children to involve themselves in creating their own gifts and talents.

*The focus of intervention has been on providing challenging lessons for **ALL** children by selecting a model for teaching and learning which emphasizes the use of thinking skills and allows children to ask and answer their own questions. Hymer, 2007, 1st para, p.258*

I have written in the past about what I am doing to improve myself as a teacher. Still continuing to do this, I want now to look at what skills and embodied knowledge I have already as a teacher and what it is that enables me to support children in their learning. Holding an awareness and understanding of what my own gifts and talents are, will support me to use them effectively and readily and more importantly, to enhance the gifts and the talents of the children in my class.

.....And as we learn, we pass on the gift of our dynamically embodied knowledge, i.e. the benefit of our learning experience, to others. That, for me is what the deeply inclusional and truly evolutionary meaning of 'living educational theory and practice' implies. Rayner, 2008

My passions

Outstanding teachers are 'gifted' in using both their awareness of themselves and their awareness of others to develop classroom rapport. As skilled communicators, they intuitively understand and respond effectively to the dynamics of the classroom. They are good mediators of learning, facilitators of interaction and often they become mentors who inspire children to teach. Wallace, p.9, 2001

I have seen 'an energy', a passion when some people teach. There is a connection. The passion is transferred to the children's motivation and interest in learning. But when does the energy occur? I feel it sometimes when I teach, not always but it seems to happen most often when physical activity is involved. Dance is a passion of mine, when we have movement in our class I feel energised.

It is a difficult idea to try and put into words. Jack Whitehead, has been studying how important this life-affirming energy is within educational research and he discusses ways of how it can be represented other than words.

The radical suggestion I am making here is that the usual forms of representation in such journals are masking or omitting the life-affirming energy that distinguish what should count as educational knowledge, educational theory and educational research. Whitehead, (2008)

When I look at photographs of myself teaching, Appendix A, the energy Whitehead speaks of is so obviously shining through. I can see it in my body language and my facial expressions that I am enjoying the company of the children, I am relishing in their love of learning and desire to soak up what we debate and what we share together. I believe when this passion is alive and energy is being transferred, excellent teaching of the highest level is happening.

Dance and physical movement is my passion and when this is brought into my teaching it allows me to flow. I avoid too much time sitting on the carpet, I expect my children to partake physically in learning as well as mentally. If I'm flowing the children will flow too, its contagious.

Using physical movement to teach times tables livens up what many teachers might consider a tedious task. Clapping the rhythm of chanting numbers using our hands, feet and waving our arms seems to motivate to practice more often together. Using arm and head movements for punctuating shared text has been a success. I believe I enhanced the teaching of our topic 'The Egyptians' by using dance, it proved to be a great success. The children choreographed their own moves to given music. It was incredible what thought went into their motifs of movement. It involved many thought processes, about how the Egyptians lived in order to achieve their final result. Children used their bodies to express: Rowing a boat down the Nile, praying to their chosen god and the difficulties involved in building a pyramid.

Holding onto our Gifts

Expressing and sharing our gifts and talents through pressured times has been incredibly difficult recently. I feel like I'm constantly battling against achieving results and my love of teaching children.

It is always hard for a teacher to think of what it is that makes a 'good teacher' what is the embodied knowledge Rayner (2008) speaks of? This is because more often than not, the teachers I speak to always say, they feel they can't do the job very well and feel stressed and pressured.

One of the most frustrating experiences that arose from my experience of SAT's is that your thinking and teaching are channelled towards one ultimate result limiting a holistic approach to the education of children. There is no time to incorporate what the children want to learn or to follow their interests. Skuse, 2007

I have thought hard about what it is that I can give a child in my class. It is important teachers do reflect and praise themselves for what they are doing otherwise it would be easy to give up. Whitehead, (2008) clearly states the importance of teachers researching their own practice. He distinguishes between education research, which is carried out by the perspectives of disciplines, and fields of education such as the philosophy, sociology, history, psychology, management, economics, policy and leadership of education, to the educational research which only teachers can have influence over. I agree with Whitehead, that teachers can have an influence over our own learning and the learning of others and it is only teachers who can tell the story of what is truly

happening in a classroom. It is exactly this that keeps me alive, knowing that my talents are important. Theoretical understanding of education and how a child learns and thinks is not enough. Having a living experience of teaching, needs to go 'hand in hand' with academic knowledge. My intention is to continue to improve my theoretical knowledge of the issues surrounding gifts and talents but put these ideas into my daily practice. This is not always easy, what you value and believe on paper, can become impossible to live out when working as part of a team in a large school.

Difficult times

Every day is assessment day. Our school has set up a rigorous assessment programme. We set targets with/for the children, then assess/test their progress, collect this data (in a statistical way, in the form of levels), analyse it and create new targets. This is nowadays seen as good practice as set out in 'The 10 principles: Assessment for Learning', retrieved from http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_4336.aspx on 29.09.08. This is why our school management has to follow them, whether or not this is where their values lie.

My concern is through constant testing and assessment, what damage are we doing to teachers and children's passion, relationships and our gifts and talents? My values do not lie with those of our school management. My gifts and talents are being wasted during assessment weeks. Alongside time used for marking books with targets written on, setting six weekly numeracy and literacy targets and other assessment tick sheet tasks. The principles of Shirley Clarke's (2001) marking policy are followed in our school. Clarke's work is impressive and useable but needs to be used when appropriate. Hours spent on marking books is not where my passions lie and I often wish I could spend this valuable time speaking/listening and working with the children in after school or lunch time groups.

My talents lie in building relationships with the children and listening to their needs. The way I respond and interact with them, allows me to have a greater understanding of what they should, and are able to learn; see Clayton, (2008). Margaret Farren discusses the importance of creating an educational space. Her work relates to educational practitioners research but I agree with Farren that children need this space too.

I am conscious of the need for individuals to have the educational space to develop their own voices. Farren 2008, p.65 para 3

Farren states the importance of dialogue and how listening and speaking to each other allows us to bounce ideas of other and rethink our own. She is clear that academic success in conventional subjects are not the only gifts and talents children hold. Looking to the arts for gifts and talents is crucial; these subjects must not be pushed aside as they often are in a packed school timetable.

Perhaps we need to learn from musicians, artists, designers and children who play games, even those who hold the ball in both hands and run! Farren 2008, p. 52 para 1

I am unable to listen to the children if they are continually being faced with written tests. When being tested they are not permitted to ask for help or discuss issues, my gifts as a teacher are wasted during these times.

My head-teacher has always been my role model; his love of the children in his school is so obvious. I have followed the way he listens to them, worries about them, cares, motivates, tries to understand their needs, and accommodates them. Over the past 8 years my head-teacher has been my inspiration; he has passed on and shared his gifts with his staff and with the children. He has trusted his staff and allowed us to create our own ways of learning, be creative, and ultimately know our children. We knew what interventions each child needed. Unfortunately he now has to ask us to hand in written evidence and data to prove ourselves as high quality teachers of children. To prove that we know our children and know what they need is a challenging task; this is what I find so difficult. To justify actions and give evidence that we are passing on our gifts and talents is demanding and something I do not find easy. How can I prove that my own gifts and talents are having a positive effect those of the children in my class? And how can show that their gifts and talents are being catered for, when our definitions are inconsistent?

Alternatives

It seems impossible to qualify on paper what effect my gifts and talents are having on my children, I would hope that test results in literacy and numeracy show improvement but without forgetting that education includes more than reading, writing and numeracy. I am still very interested in a holistic approach to teaching.

Cynthia Bartlett (2008) offers an alternative to testing; she highlights the study carried out by Oxfordshire head teachers and their suggestion of the model for schools of a second home. Her work tries to bridge the gap between home and school.

Her ideas appeal to me. Having a small child of my own now and the way I teach him can be mirrored in my delivery of the curriculum. I have studied how my values can be shared with my child and with the children in my class. In my assignment, Clayton (2007) I discuss how the skills I have as a mother can be transferred to my gifts and talents as a teacher and vice versa. I am now extending this by mirroring by the way I am continuing to live out these values in how I teach daily. As I follow my own son in his development and listen to the theories behind Early Years practice, I am able to reflect this way of learning into my own classroom development. By observing the way very young children learn and understanding how best to engage, motivate, scaffold and take forward their learning, it is possible to implement and continue this practice further up the school with older children. For example my child is obsessed with playing with cars. I have used this obsession and put his cars into different situations i.e. cars in the sand play, books about vehicles, tyre track painting etc. In summery I have taken my son's passion and used it in other learning situations. Using this model for my own learning, I take my own passions and put them, where possible, into my teaching.

Reading the work of Day inspires me to hold on to my passions and move on to the next stage in my gift development.

Teaching is a creative and adventurous profession and passion is not an option. It is essential to high quality teaching. Day 2006 p.3

Gifts cannot stay static they need to change and develop.

...the actual nature of the gift is dynamic rather than static. Simonton cited in Balchin et al 2009, p.27para 3

Implementing change

There is no one best way to teach children to bring out their gifts and talents and utilize ours (as teachers); this would be too easy. All educators have different opinions on the best ways we can succeed, we all work differently and we work with different children. To try and adopt a model of teaching straight from a book or theory would be disastrous. This is why through constant reflection and trial and error, I have developed a model that has worked for me and the class. My work with the children in my class has adopted a 'reflective, thinking skills' based model of its own to improve the gifts and talents we all hold. I have been giving the children more choice. I constantly give my children challenges, opportunities to think, time to discuss and reflect. Rather than, "This is what we are doing today, I shall demonstrate how to make a 3D shape out of straws", I will say, "How can we make a 3D shape, what could we use? What will we need? Hold a discussion around what problems may occur and what we will need to remember to do. Giving choices of equipment to use, a choice of who to sit with, and with whom they will work best with. Thinking skills have been my way of promoting inclusionality into my class.

Rayner discusses the term 'inclusionality' at length; he puts great emphasis on the importance of a natural inclusion within our society to create a better place.

We come to appreciate ourselves as receptive responsive inclusions of our natural neighbourhood, not alienated individuals. Rayner retrieved from <http://www.inclusional-research.org/introduction.php> on 3.10.08

I value every child in my class and I want them to all have the best education I can give them. Having a mixed ability class, it can be tempting to target the children in the middle as there are often more of them. This would go against my values as a teacher so I had to find a way of targeting all the children. By teaching thinking skills allows every child to challenge and learn by themselves and with others.

Belle Wallace's work on the TASC wheel has always been of great interest to me. The principles are very relevant to my own thinking. The TASC wheel has similarities to the way an action research model works. They both follow and encourage us to improve our gifts and talents. Wallace's work is based on encouraging and improving thinking skills for children.

.....Teaching problem solving and thinking skills across the curriculum in a planned and coherent way actively develops learner's skills of learning how to learn and actively increases their mental capacities. Wallace (2001) p.12

Using the planning approach set out by our school management I have moulded the requirements to meet the needs of the children and continue living out and holding onto my own values. See Appendix B.

Using loosely, the TASC wheel approach and principles, has enabled me to hold onto my passion for teaching and to promote my own embodied knowledge as a teacher of young children.

What is my embodied knowledge? Ultimately I feel it is the relationships I make with the children that drive their learning forward. Holding an awareness of the need to listen to their voice, and the ways in which I respond to them ensures a constant and motivated cycle of learning.

What I value alongside these essential relationships is the passion to drive thinking skills into my daily teaching practice. I believe thinking skills are at the heart of learning.

Teaching for thinking as explained by Fisher (1990), actively engages children in processing information, in investigating, in making connections and solving problems; it is a productive mode of learning. It follows a 'what-do-you-think' approach to children, approaching learning through higher-order levels. Using both the TASC wheel approach with a range of thinking skills can benefit the learning and life skills of all children. These skills can be taken with them throughout education and life.

Learning skills should not be taught explicitly – they need to be taught across the curriculum daily; see Clayton, (2008) p.7 para 2 and p. 8 para 6.

Conclusion

The term 'giftedness development' used by Simonton, cited in Balchin et al (2009) is one which I would like to adopt when discussing gifted and talented children. Developing children is what teachers are striving to achieve. Simonton discusses giftedness as a characteristic that can grow throughout our lives. It isn't always something that is obvious from the moment we are born, it will not just appear. Although he does believe giftedness is linked to our genetic make-up, it is something that will need nurturing. Simonton discusses, 'giftedness development', referring to the need that they should be worked on, studied, allowed, given opportunities for, otherwise they may never flourish. Simonton refers to giftedness that leads to exceptional achievement, genius standard, however much of what he says is relevant for teachers to understand and relate to their class of children. Embracing every child's gift and allowing opportunities for these to develop in other areas is my ultimate goal.

The GTCE (2008) reports that teachers saw innovation as the very point of their job, as it produces more interesting lessons which helped pupils learn and increased job satisfaction. Through the constraints of assessment, planning, data collection, tests, I continue to hold onto my values and live them out as often and as fully as possible. Innovating the way I teach and offer my gifts and nurture the gifts of all the children in my class is something I am continuing to develop. I am always open to trial-ling different strategies but I need to remember to use my gifts so the children can gain the best from their teacher and find their own talents.

Through sharing the gifts and talents I have, I believe I am sharing my embodied knowledge, my intuitive understanding of what my children need. The cycle of my own learning and the children's learning continues as I pass on my talents their talents shine through, I allow for their creation, I give opportunities for them to grow in many areas. I learn from their voice, I respond to them and so our journey continues.

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Appendix B

The children are given a learning intention. This is based on a number of factors, including what the curriculum covers as well as the needs of the children. Initially this was difficult to write because of the broad spectrum of abilities. However I feel more skilled in deciding what this learning intention should provide. Long winded, structured, intentions were inappropriate for my class. Often the tight learning intention written our plans would still be tightened further as they were discussed with the children. The children would then individually know how to extend or simplify the learning intention themselves. They have learnt how to self-monitor their own learning and self-evaluate.

E.g. Learning Intention (L.I.) To be able to add 3 digit numbers using the grid method.

Children would adapt this further:

to be able to add 3 digit numbers

to be able to add numbers

to be able to use the grid method

to be able to use the grid method to add and subtract

The success criteria were also always discussed. The success criteria gave many children a starting point or a point of reference when they became stuck, but I believe more importantly it helped them understand what was being asked of them and gave them a greater understanding of the learning intention.

For example

Week 3 term 4 LI: to be able to find the features of fantasy text

No teacher would send children away and ask them to highlight a piece of fantasy text or write a definition of a fantasy text without discussion. Asking the children to decide on the success criteria promotes discussion led by what the children know already and what they need to know. They can share, explain and listen to other children's ideas and work together as a group. A range of thinking skills are being used revisited and experienced daily.

Here are the success criteria the children decided on for this learning intention.

- Use highlighter pen sensibly, don't underline everything
- Find:
 - Weird settings/location
 - Charactersdescriptions given?
 - Characters.....strange activity/do strange things?
 - Unusual words- not everyday use
 - Atmosphere words?
 - Beginning, middle, end

