

How have I developed my own personal views of Gifts and Talents in education and how does this influence what I do in the classroom?

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I write this essay in an attempt to establish my own view upon gifted and talented education and as an attempt to review and analyse the perspectives and opinions of others in the field of education. I will examine how people believe gifts and talents are created in an attempt to establish and affirm my own viewpoint. I will look at what I believe are my own gifts and talents and how I nurture these and offer them to others. I will look reflectively at how I draw out gifts and talents in the children I teach in my role as Foundation stage teacher.

When I first started to think about my own personal perspectives on 'Gifts and Talents' in education I quickly realised that it was not something I had ever thought a great deal about. However, that is not to say that I haven't got already established views and opinions embedded in my current practises thoughts and teaching methods. Our views are shaped by the world around us and it is impossible for my practise within the classroom to be pulled apart from my already accomplished 'living theory'. Catherine Snow (2001) talks about the importance of sharing knowledge and how teachers have the potential to contribute to research however, at present there is no way of standardising this knowledge.

'The knowledge resources of excellent teachers constitute a rich resource, but one that is largely untapped because we have no procedures for systematizing it. Systematizing would require procedures for accumulating such knowledge and making it public, for connecting it to bodies of knowledge established through other methods, and for vetting it for correctness and consistency. If we had agreed-upon procedures for transforming knowledge based on personal experiences of practice into 'public' knowledge, analogous to the way a researcher's private knowledge is made public through peer-review and publication, the advantages would be great (my emphasis)'. (Snow, 2001, p.9)

I write this essay as a contribution of my knowledge and experience as an educator in the field of primary education and in the hope that it will inspire others. Teachers may have the best knowledge of the children they teach, with the exception perhaps of parents or carers and should therefore be leading in the research of how they learn and develop best. My narrative is written in response to an attempt at showing how to make public my embodied knowledge as an educator in terms of my talents as explanatory principles to explain why I do what I do on a daily basis. 'Teacher educators, students and pupils as co-researchers could help to generate the forms of

educational knowledge that are needed to enhance contributions to both improving practice and generating knowledge.’ (Whitehead, 2009, p.108)

I have a desire to clarify and develop my own talents, talents that are values-laden and hence shape the way that I respond in the classroom environment. As Whitehead explains, in order to improve practice, we need to ensure we contribute to the world of knowledge and enhance what happens at ground level.

‘Children start learning from the moment they’re born.And almost all this learning is entirely voluntary, for the sheer pleasure of doing it.....On the whole, children want to learn, and parents and other primary care-givers are pretty good at gauging what can be expected of them.....learning develops out of their interests.’ (Palmer, 2006, p.198) It is on this bases that the Early Years Foundation Stage’ curriculum for 3 to 5 year olds is developed. It assumes that all children have a desire to learn and have a good idea about what they want to learn. If you follow a child’s interest, you get with it their enthusiasm, love for learning and excitement and desire to learn more. This does not come alongside a pre-determined curriculum set out without any knowledge of what sparks a child’s interest or excites a desire in them to learn more. And then they start school.’ (Palmer, 2006, p.198)

The above quote struck a cord with me in terms of how powerful the school environment is in developing the already sparked gifts and talents that are waiting to be ignited in children. I really like the phrase used by a colleague of mine Jane Southwell (Early Years Consultant for BANES) when she talks about ‘nurturing the spark’ in children. Whilst talking about what we mean by ‘Gifted and Talented’ education she explains how she feels it is a teachers responsibility to develop the spark children already have for a particular interest or area of learning. This is something that I believe I share with Jane in that in response to children’s talents, I am attempting to develop the talents already ‘brewing’ within them and encourage them to offer the gifts they have within them. I was also excited to learn from Jane that in the near future, a publication will be made available for Early Years educators giving guidance on how to respond to the gifts and talents of individuals. I would be interested to know how this publication was developed and how many educators contributed to this.

From my experience, places where I see children offering there gifts and talents are usually in places outside of the school such as on trips and outings or in extra curricula clubs after school or at home. This got me thinking about why children show their ‘true colours outside of the school environment. Is it because the school does not allow for these to be expressed? Is it linked to the freedom children have outside of the rigid curriculum of school? Or perhaps it’s something to do with the fact that the children have chosen to attend these clubs and events rather than having no choice?

For the last few years I have run a cookery club for KS2 children after school. Last year I had 87 children wanting to attend! As I began to work with the children at the club it became apparent that several children who had behaviour problems in the classroom were an absolute delight to work with and those who often experienced

difficulties were given the opportunity to shine. Last year I had the pleasure of working with James, a child experiencing significant difficulties in terms of academic achievement. It was amazing to see James come alive at cookery club. He knew lots about food and cookery and had so much knowledge to share. It became apparent that he watched many cookery shows and really enjoyed cooking and baking. I spoke to James' teacher about this the next day and she was surprised to learn about this aspect of James' knowledge. He certainly had a gift to offer and his experiences somehow changed the dynamics of the club and ignited relationships that had never previously been present. His knowledge and interest opened up a new way of communicating and interacting with others. For once he was in the driving seat and this gave him an immense sense of satisfaction and pleasure. These are the kinds of opportunities I strive to create when I talk about developing gifts and talents in the children I teach and work alongside. It is my responsibility as an educator to share these experiences that resonate with others in order to create knowledge that has not previously existed in the field.

Too often in the school environment there seems to be pressure for children to complete tasks in a set amount of time. Children are not given the space to reflect and develop their ideas and pressure is constantly placed upon them. I remember feeling this pressure personally when I worked within the Year 2 class and expressed my views and knowledge upon this. (Skuse:2008) Children take time to master skills and it takes hours to create a talent and develop it to its full potential, I doubt that any talented individual would admit that they have ever reached a stage where they have nothing left to learn. A talent takes time to develop and requires constant practice, determination and revisiting. *'For too long, the dominant emphasis in education has been on achievement, on what the child is able to do rather than on who the child really is.'* (Heng:2003:p.142) within education, children are expected to achieve and progress in such a short amount of time. There is no time to get to know the children and gain an insight into what makes them tick and what they are interested in.

When I think about my own gifts and talents I have to look at what I have chosen to do and what I enjoy most. I would say that my real talent lies in cooking and in particular, icing and cake decorating. This is something which I always enjoyed doing but never really had the opportunity to develop further. I always loved spending time with my Nan and she fostered my 'flair' for icing in allowing me to experiment and bake in her kitchen! Recently I have chosen to develop this further by attending an evening course on sugar craft and making cakes for friends and family. However, this is something I never did at school and is not something I even considered as a career. I do wonder however, that if I had been given this opportunity earlier in my life whether my career would have taken a different path. Should there have been a chance for me to show this interest and would this have been recognised given the knowledge and developments within this field today?

I have thought at length about the difference between a gift and a talent and how I distinguish between the two. I find this notion quite a difficult one and sometimes struggle to clarify what I understand by a gift and a talent. I have turned to the knowledge and thoughts of others in order to establish my own values and opinions. The DCSF makes the distinction between gifted and talented as this,

'Gifted describes learners who have the ability to excel academically in one or more subjects such as English, drama, technology, where as **Talented** describes learners who have the ability to excel in practical skills such as sport, leadership, artistic performance, or in an applied skill.'

Ikeda (2004) discusses the idea of talents being ready made, they don't just arrive at a given point in time.

'Everyone has some kind of gift. Being talented does not mean just being a good musician, writer or athlete. There are many kinds of talent. You may be a great conversationalist, or make friends easily, or be able to put others at ease. Or you may have a gift for telling jokes, selling things or living economically. You may be punctual, patient, reliable, kind or optimistic. Or you may love taking on new challenges, be strongly committed to helping others, or have an ability to bring them joy. Without doubt, you possess your special jewel, your own unique talent.' (Ikeda, 2004, p41)

I particularly like this quote due to the fact that it sums up how I feel about gifts and talents in education and comes very close to my own constructed ideas around being gifted and talented. Every child has something to offer that is unique to them and this is part of what makes them the great person they are. It is possible that this may be something which is blindingly obvious or on the other hand it may be something that takes time to seek out. Part of my responsibility as an educator is to help children to identify these and play a part in creating and developing gifts and talents. However, it is clear that there are many different ideas and concepts associated with the idea of gifts and 'giftedness.

The government paper states that 'Gifted and talented children are those who have one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop these abilities).'

(<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/giftedandtalented/govpolicy/aims>) Although in theory this sounds a fair statement to make, I feel that it is riddled with issues and is actually quite contradictory. It is relatively easy in academic terms to determine a child who has abilities above those expected of their year group. However, this is far more difficult to do for those subjects that are less academic or not measurable on an academic scale. For instance, how would we measure whether a child's talents were significantly ahead of those in their year group? Is there a national expected level that children should achieve in certain skills, for instance football? Also, the children in one class may not necessarily be representative of those nationally. The

idea of having 'a potential' to develop into a gifted or talented individual also poses many issues for me. I may have several children or perhaps all of the children in my class with a potential to develop a gift or talent of some description. However, how do I ensure that I have given them the opportunity to do this when they have been in school for less than four months and when do we make a judgement that they have the potential to develop at a given skill?

'I assert that giftedness is not a fact of nature or something that educators and psychologists have discovered. Instead, it is a socially constructed concept, something recently invented' (Borland, J, 1997)

Perhaps as Borland suggests, the concept of giftedness has arisen out of the current need to label and categorise children. It is not concrete but more a fluid concept that may well change as understandings, ideas and knowledge around the notion of what it means to be gifted develop further in the future.

'There are gifted and talented pupils in every school, but schools define their own populations. We believe that ability is evenly distributed throughout the population, so a school's gifted and talented cohort should be broadly representative of its whole school population.' (DFES:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/giftedandtalented/govpolicy/aims/>) I feel that this notion has the potential to be somewhat controversial in that one cohort of children may not necessarily be representative of a whole school population. I particularly like the ideas put forward by Cripps at the masters group. Cripps believes that selecting children as gifted and talented is something which is laden with problems,

'I am convinced from the outset that attributing a label such as 'gifted and talented' to some learners and not others, is detrimental to all learners.

The expectation, which follows from the DCSF, to identify a population of 5% or 10% of a school population as gifted or talented, is an example of a type of postcode lottery. It creates a situation where you may be identified in one school as 'gifted', and not in another school.' (Cripps, 2009, p.1)

I can see that the government have a need to identify gifted and talented children in some way. However, perhaps a register is not the most effective way of doing this. Maybe its worth considering what we as professionals believe is more important, why are we concerned with identifying children's individual gifts and talents? I think I would be correct in saying that we as teachers are concerned that these get recognised in order that we can support children in developing these further and reaching their full potential. On the other hand however, the government are concerned with identifying these children for the reason of statistics and figures. I feel that our responsibility here is not to get bogged down with the reasons why we need to do this but rather accept that each person approaches a concept from a different view point and for different reasons. These different viewpoints and reasons form part of our living theory and in turn shape and mould our values and beliefs, all of which are developed from our own unique experiences.

Many of those in power at present have an extremely narrow view of what constitutes as a gifted child and how children arrive as gifted.

'Today's gifted pupils are tomorrow's social, intellectual, economic and cultural leaders and their development cannot be left to chance. We believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth or advantages of privilege.' (Blair:1996)

I believe that the above quote is in itself laden with issues. It assumes that children who are gifted are those capable and indeed required to lead future generations. It also states that children should be given the chance to achieve regardless of their background however, by providing a 'special curriculum' it could be said that children are being given unfair advantages by being labelled as gifted.

Sapon-Shevin (1994) debates the idea that identifying children as gifted almost ensures their success as it gives them access to chances that other children are not worthy of and stamps them with a special label.

'Many see the gifted child as one who was born deserving the special status and the special advantages the school provides.' (Oakes & Lipton:1994:p.xii)

This identification provides these children with the best education, access to some of the best and most dedicated teachers and the most up to date resources. Therefore, some might say these children are then given an almost guaranteed advantage. Linked to the fact that the majority of 'gifted' children tend to come from white middle class backgrounds, they are being given the best possible chances to succeed.

However, some would argue that given these additional chances, 'non-gifted' children would also thrive and do well. This creates a debate in the fact that children may not be born gifted but given the best opportunities, children do well. I would argue that this is probably even more essential for children who do not have a high IQ or come from supportive and relatively wealthy backgrounds. In education you often hear the phrase 'you could shut them in a cupboard and they would learn!' Often children who are identified as gifted within a school usually have the skills to be able to achieve before they even embark on their educational journey. The odds are usually stacked against rather than in favour of these children to do well and therefore they need the best possible chances at school. Perhaps giving all children these opportunities by putting more funding into education would result in more children having some level of 'gift'.

Sapon-Shevin's work also highlights the negative effects that the identification of the 'gifted' children has on those who are not identified as so. It assumes that those who do not have the label will never do as well, hence creating low expectations amongst this group. It may also have negative effects on children who are identified as being gifted. Children will not be given the opportunity to discover that to do well you have to work hard and persist. Children will simply assume that they will do well due to the mere fact that they are gifted rather than the opinion that they are gifted due to the fact that they work hard.

Hymer discusses two different definitions of gifted. The first view he puts forward is the fact that some children simply have an exceptional academic ability in comparison with others of the same age. *'Some kids are just brighter than others. The very brightest are gifted. Period.'* (Hymer:2009:p.11) The other view however is one that is much less familiar to the majority of us, this is the idea that you have to have the energy and be prepared to persist in order to achieve. This is linked to the idea of mastery, if you have the right attitude you will succeed if you are prepared to work hard.

These differing concepts offer two quite opposing views on what it might mean to be gifted. I personally find it a somewhat difficult, if not impossible task to identify exactly where my personal opinion lies. I have seen children who work hard and achieve 'mastery' of a skill but on the other hand I have also know children who have a natural talent and flair for something that they have not had to work particularly hard to achieve, it is just something which comes naturally to them with little effort. In relation to my own talent, I would say that I have experienced a mixture of the two. I always had an interest in icing and cake decorating and could create things from an early age with relatively little practise and effort however, in order to develop this further and achieve mastery I have spent years dipping in and out, developing my skills and putting in hours of effort and persistence to achieve the level that I currently operate at.

I clearly remember the first time when the talent of a young person was quite literally 'thrown at me'! I had only been teaching for a couple of years when I embarked upon taking my class of year 2 children to a 'soccer tots' tournament. This was an addition to the PE curriculum and was organised by the school sports partnership at Culverhay School. Whilst we were at the tournament, as I was watching the matches, I was enthralled by the talent of Tommy, a boy in my class. Tommy was not 'academic' and had to try particularly hard with most of his work. He sometimes lacked motivation and hated writing! He did however enjoy PE and had a great sense of humour. Nevertheless, I had never seen his true colours until that day at Culverhay. He scored a total of 21 goals and the memories of this realisation still bring tears to my eyes today. It was clear that Tommy had a talent that was far beyond any of the other children present on that day. At the end of the event, Mark the organizer came up to me and said 'he's good, there's something promising there.' Following this I spoke to Tommy's mum. Much to my surprise Tommy did not attend any football clubs after school but did like to play football, his mum said that he had golf lessons but she would investigate football clubs for him if that was what he wanted. Tommy now plays for Bath City youth and I will not be at all surprised if we are watching him on the television in a few years time! In studying 'gifts and talents further I have been reflecting upon how I identified this talent that Tommy had and whether this would have been identified if we had not attended the event. I knew Tommy enjoyed maths and that his brain functioned in this way as I worked with him on a daily basis with this. I had also taken several PE sessions but he had

never been given the opportunity to 'shine'. For me, this highlights the need to broaden the primary curriculum and allow children exposure to experiences they might never have had before. It means giving them access to challenge that they may never have been given before and allowing access the learning environments they have not yet experienced. If Tommy had not been given that opportunity he might still be living with a hidden talent or his skills may never have been developed or channelled in to something very special.

I am now very lucky to be working as a teacher in the foundation stage. Since moving from Key stage one I have been able to compare how gifts and talents are identified and nurtured across the school. I do strongly believe that children in the Foundation stage have more scope for gifts and talents being identified due to two main underlying reasons. The first being that the children in the Foundation stage access a far broader and more balanced curriculum than those further up the school. As children move through the school I see that the curriculum narrows and breath stretches as far as Literacy, Numeracy, Science and topic.

It would however, be impossible to provide a curriculum that was tailored completely to each individual child's interest. When I first started teaching in the Foundation stage I remember struggling to realise how I was going to create a curriculum that followed each child's interest. I quickly realised that this was impossible 'In large classes...a single teacher isn't usually in a position to take the developmental level of individual children into account.' (Palmer, 2006, p.199) However, in order to develop gifts and talents teachers need to tailor teaching to suit a wide range of interests and remember that what excites one child will probably excite others and the enthusiasm of one often creates a snowball affect within the classroom.

'One unfortunate result of government involvement in education is mushrooming bureaucracy. Each year sees more systems, regulations and targets imposed, and more requests for records, statistics and test results spawning a mountain of paperwork. The more teachers are preoccupied with tending to this bureaucracy, the less time and energy they have for teaching, and the less children's individual needs can be taken into account.' (Palmer, 2006, p.200)

Teachers in upper KS2 are under pressure to prepare children for SAT's and the interests of the individual child are often squashed out to allow for teaching in Literacy and Numeracy. There is no doubt that these skills are important and I am not suggesting that we abolish all formality and curriculum but perhaps a more balanced approach is needed with greater range. Maybe we need to look at offering greater experiences such as space and the Earth or Chemistry in primary schools. Secondly, the power given to teachers is far greater in the Foundation stage than it is further up the school. Within the foundation stage, teachers are encouraged to link the curriculum ad learning specifically to children's interests however, further up the school this learning has to be geared to levels and achievement of standards.

'We teach reading and writing far too early, substituting sterile attempts to compose with the pen for living communication by word of mouth. Today the school deliberately deadens the child's (real) interest and idolatrises the formal tools of learning.' (Drummond:2000)

There is much evidence that the British education system, unlike many other systems in the world, channel children far too young an age, into the academic route of learning. We impose a curriculum that is already pre-determined with set goals for children to achieve and arguably flatten any potential that a child has. There is little scope to tune into what children are really interested in and it might therefore be argued that schools do not currently have the power to be able to address and develop the talents of the individual child.

'there are concerns shared within and outside the field of giftedness – that many children are bored, unchallenged and unexcited by their educational diet, and that many teachers do not know how best to stimulate a passion for learning and discovery – especially within a system that seems to put performance before learning.' (Hymer, Whitehead, Huxtable:2009:p.33)

As much as the quote disheartens me, it also rings true with what I witness within school on too frequent an occasion. Children spend hour upon hour completing meaningless reams of Literacy and Numeracy work that does not excite even the smallest part of them. Very little time is given to the development of talents that come from within children and as yet, the curriculum does not allow for this type of education to develop.

In conclusion, it can be said that many different ideas and viewpoints upon what it means to be gifted or indeed talented exist in the field today. Professionals within education may have very different understandings of what it means to be gifted or talented and this therefore makes it difficult to define. It also raises questions about how schools identify and cater for gifted and talented children and highlights the huge differences that probably exist between schools and authorities.

In terms of addressing my own personal view of gifted and talented education it might be said that although I have widened my knowledge of the issues that exist, this has also highlighted just how controversial some of these are. I know that I am some way along the journey in that I believe that all children have potential and hidden talents however, for me, questions remain unanswered as to how we cater for these in the current system as it stands today. In summary, the quote below sums up my thinking at this point in time and I would like to end my findings with this.

'Different people are born with different physical 'potential', different ranges and aptitudes. But the training which these muscles receive determines whether they get stronger, much more so than differences in 'potential'. (Claxton and Meadows:2009:p6)

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