

Who's Kidding Who?

How can I use my interpretation of the story of gifts and talents to help children interpret their own?

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If interpreting was left up to me
I'd swear every time
That the version aint mine
That's why it's called history – Gil Scott Heron

Abstract

In my last module I argued (Williams, 2010) that teachers should research their personal stories narratively in an attempt to “remember” themselves and come to new understandings or meanings for their story. I also expressed my agreement with Clandinin and Murphy's claim (2009) that research texts need to arrive at an understanding of “experiences as “storied” phenomena within social, cultural, institutional and linguistic narratives” and support for Baron Coulter and Smith's (2009) focus on “narrative researchers as witnesses of injustice and agents of social change”. In light of this, I want to use this module to examine the story of gifted and talented education in order to “revise” established notions or practice and attempt a re-visioning of the narrative that “looks again” at socially just education by asking:

- Why do we do it this way?
- Who says we should do it this way?
- What are the consequences of doing it this way?
- Are there alternatives?

False Premises and Empty Promises – the social story

For some time now schools have been expected to identify and develop gifted and talented pupils in all curriculum areas. Through this scheme, the Government aimed to bring about a “culture shift” towards an education system in which excellence and outstanding achievement were identified, developed and celebrated.

Implicit within this stated aim was an attempt to deflect a predictable charge:

“The idea that all children had the same rights to develop their abilities led too easily to the doctrine that all had the same ability. The pursuit of excellence was too often equated with elitism” (DFEE, 1997, p. 11).

This difficult balancing act of articulating a vision of schooling in which high ability was celebrated and supported, whilst deflecting accusations of elitism has become a running theme in advocacy statements from politicians and their agencies. Indeed, a defence against charges of inequality or injustice was written into the opening chapter of the “English Model” when Tony Blair first spelt out his vision of gifted and talented education:

“We believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth or advantages of privilege. We understand that people are not all born into equal circumstances, so one role of state education is to open up opportunities for all, regardless of their background. This means we need to provide high standards of basics for all, but also recognise the different abilities of different children, and tailor education to meet their needs and develop their potential.” (Tony Blair, 1996, cited in Eyre, 2004)

The strategies and initiatives that have followed this statement offer, or appear to offer, a co-ordinated approach to the support of the “most able” pupils from all backgrounds so that they can achieve their “potential.” Implicit in this ambition is recognition that some pupils face obstacles to their development through no fault of their own whilst the more fortunate circumstances of others present them with a “clear run.” Inevitable charges of elitism fail to credit what, I think, is a genuine desire to improve the educational opportunity of socially disadvantaged pupils and “narrow the gap” by raising the performance of those who find themselves at the bottom through accidents of circumstance. From my perspective these are laudable ambitions and I have no desire to suggest that policy makers are “wrong” but I do feel that the premises on which the story of gifted and talented education has been built are themselves drawn from a much older and more ingrained narrative that needs to be revised if we are ever to achieve the desired ending.

White (2006) proposes that concepts of intelligence, as expressed in England and America, and the school curriculum are, and have been, linked at the level of policy for centuries but that:

“If you look for sound supporting arguments behind them, you will be disappointed. There are no solid grounds for innate differences in IQ.” (p. 1).

He goes on to suggest that the roots of the ideas can be traced back to the radical reforms of Protestantism in the sixteenth century and argues that the men responsible for current notions of intelligence shared the same cultural roots and affiliations:

“...Galton was the creator of the notion of intelligence which has been transmitted... No one before him had come up with the thought that we all possess different degrees of an ability which is intellectual, general and limited. (p. 25).

Whilst a narrow correlation between intelligence and IQ has been discredited, many educators still believe that children come “hard-wired” with combinations of multiple intelligences and, in this, they share Galton’s tradition of belief in ability as a matter of original endowment. As White points out, the notion of predestination is a key feature of Calvinism and carries with it a sense that “Where one will end up in life – or after life – is wholly, or

largely fixed at birth, whether by God or by nature.” As much as policy makers, for all the right reasons, want to clear the path through life, there is no escaping the echo of, “puritan insistence that individuals are called by God to discover and put to good use the gifts which He has given them” through sheer hard work. Embedded in this line of thought, of course, is a dark flip side: that there is no way a person destined for damnation can be saved. Which places the narrative in an even longer narrative genealogy stretching back to biblical original sin.

Questions about the fairness of such a situation have generally been answered in one of three ways; educational need, economic necessity or social justice. Those who argue from an educational perspective assert that providing different opportunities for pupils with accelerated skills is simply a way of meeting individual needs and, as such, is just “good teaching”. When pressed on the subject they offer a subsidiary argument that gifted and talented programmes offer a “laboratory” for practice that trickles down to the whole system. Those arguing from a political and economic perspective claim that our nation can ill afford not to develop the “best and brightest” lest we lose our standing as a major world power or cease to be on the cutting edge by failing to develop society’s future leaders, champions or innovators. This attitude was neatly summed in 2004 up by Deborah Eyre, who headed NAGTY:

‘A major reason for a dedicated educational focus on gifted and talented pupils is their potential to play a leading role in their adult lives. If England is to be successful in a globalised world then it will need to produce leaders who can compete with the best’ (cited in White 2006)

In the old days we had Eton providing for both of these perspectives but times have changed so issues of distributive justice have become the explicit justification. The social justice perspective argues that it is only fair to treat pupils differently, and since schools already provide differentiated programmes for SEN pupils they should further pursue their commitment to equity by providing similarly differentiated programmes to pupils identified as gifted and talented. This woos a few middle-class parents, frustrated about the fact that their child does not get as many resources as the “less bright” children but “shows the persistence within the culture of a certain cast of mind – the belief that one’s children are different from the ordinary run of children..... The old notions of belonging to an elect and of being rescued from a life of failure are not far in the background. (White p. 142).

Each of the arguments, then, rests fundamentality on the argument that people are just innately different and that we have to provide something different for the innately able to achieve personal and economic success. Within this, however, there are yet more implicit assumptions which, as I see them, are:

- There is such a thing as giftedness; some children have it; we can test for it and, once we have identified it, we can respond to it educationally

- A gifted child is one who can be objectively identified and confidently discriminated from the ungifted child
- Gifted children represent a class of pupils so that we can speak about programmes in a generic or group way
- Success can be objectively identified and applied universally

If these assumptions hold true the policy might still hold merit but is there such a thing as giftedness that holds within its quality the possibility of society's future success? Is there some fair and reliable way of singling out the pupils who possess this quality? Can we be sure that other pupils are not likely to attain this quality? Can we reasonably guarantee that, even if all this is true and the programme "works", we will have succeeded in the sense that we will be "better off"?

Answering yes to these questions depends, to a large degree, on the extent to which one holds with the Calvinist tradition and accepts what both Blair and Eyre take for granted: that it is possible to identify potential. Identifying highly able but under-achieving pupils from under-privileged backgrounds may be a laudable ambition but just how do you identify what a student might achieve? All you can go on is evidence of what the student is doing or has done (which leads you back to actual rather than potential achievement) or focus on some supposed inherent, internal characteristics (which are also only observable now through actual actions and activities the student engages in). Either way, giftedness is no miraculous window to the future and, rather than representing an objective reality, is a social construct, a way of thinking and describing that exists in the eyes of the definer. Decisions about how to define the category, where to make the cut-off points and how to discriminate between those in the category and those outside it are ethical and political decisions that are highly influenced by beliefs and values. As we will see in the linguistic story, things are not as cut and dried as policy makers like to imagine and even the policy makers have been unable to agree a definition for long.

As soon as one points out these false premises or the fact that only a small proportion (8%) of those selected for and benefitting from the National Academy come from the poorest areas (Campbell, 2007, p 103) one runs straight back in to the fairness and meritocracy arguments, however. Gifted and talented education is "fair", comes the reply – anyone who "scores" highly enough can get in so different treatment must also be fair. It would be ungentlemanly, poor sportsmanship, just "not cricket" to find fault with one's exclusion from a game in which one was eliminated fairly.

The trouble is, even if we accept our dismissal, Blair's justifiable concern to develop policies which promote egalitarian practice and allow pupils to achieve regardless of accidents of birth or circumstance actually results in an outcome opposite to the one desired. Social justice will not be advanced by a policy of simply rewarding the talented. As Richard Bailey (2007) has pointed out, policies designed to eradicate luck from the equation have merely increased its significance. Bailey tracks the relationships between luck, effort and reward where (taking away past efforts) the difference between being

talented and untalented is taken to be a matter of luck (the equivalent of Blair's accident of birth or social circumstance).

Table 1: Relationships between Luck, Effort and Rewards

	Effort: workaholic (<i>W</i>)	Effort: slacker (<i>S</i>)
Luck: talented (<i>T</i>)	<i>Best off</i>	<i>2 nd Best Off</i>
Luck: untalented (<i>U</i>)	<i>3 rd Best Off</i>	<i>Worst Off</i>

Being in group T or U is attributable to luck. Being in group W or S is not. This gives a basis for how to distribute fairly. If we assume that differences in effort should be rewarded but differences in luck should not we can attempt a luck-neutralising arrangement.

Table 2: Luck neutralising distribution associated with talent and effort

Luck	Effort	Unadjusted Rewards	Luck neutralising distribution of rewards
<i>Talented</i>	<i>Workaholic</i>	40	30
<i>Talented</i>	<i>Slacker</i>	30	20
<i>Untalented</i>	<i>Workaholic</i>	20	30
<i>Untalented</i>	<i>Slacker</i>	10	20

The first and third individuals get the same reward because they have put in the same effort despite their different amounts of talent. The same is true of individuals 2 and 4 but individuals 1 and 3 both get a higher reward because their effort is higher.

The policy of providing additional or enhanced opportunities for the most able turns the luck neutralising scenario on its head and results in luck exaggeration.

Table 3: Luck exaggerating distribution associated with talent and effort

Luck	Effort	Unadjusted rewards	Luck exaggerating distribution of rewards
<i>Talented</i>	<i>Workaholic</i>	40	45
<i>Talented</i>	<i>Slacker</i>	30	35
<i>Untalented</i>	<i>Workaholic</i>	20	15
<i>Untalented</i>	<i>Slacker</i>	10	5

In this scenario it is talent that is rewarded rather than effort and the redistribution of rewards favours those already benefitting from luck. In other words the consequence of gifted and talented policy is to do precisely the reverse of what might be expected of a policy founded on social justice. And all this is, as yet, to say nothing about the concept of success!

What's In A Name? - the linguistic story

If we are not to “trust to luck” by rewarding our most able pupils differentially how might we go about ensuring that excellence is encouraged? Although I think the premises on which policy has been built are flawed, I do sympathise with the fundamental attitude that all pupils should be encouraged to “make the most of themselves.” A start may be to get back to rewarding effort but this still does not help us in the difficult business of identifying and delivering what each individual needs. I believe a way forward might be to help each individual define those needs for them self instead of giving them a programme or an answer but to do that we need to explore difficult questions of “self-definition” and individuality.

When I was a child we had lots of names for the kids who were good at school stuff. I am rather ashamed now to admit that among my personal favourites were creep, swot and teacher’s pet. More recently I have witnessed words like geek and keener slip into children’s everyday vocabulary and watched in horror as pupils with ability in certain areas do all they can to hide that ability so as to “fit in” with their peers. The most common reaction to this state of affairs, in my experience, is to blame the pupils for labelling others negatively and attempt to raise the “self-esteem” of able pupils by convincing them that they are “worthy” in their own right. As far as it goes, this reaction is to be applauded but it fails to take account of a more significant perspective.

When I was growing up the Aristotelian tradition taught me that objects and phenomena have essence or identity: they are things in their own right and free from contradiction in as much as they are either “this or that”. Gifted and talented programmes perpetuate this tradition by defining children as either “this or that”, “gifted or ungifted”. Once a child has been classified as the gifted “this” or ungifted “that”, the “self-defence” mechanism kicks in and they position themselves accordingly. Those who feel the injustice of being excluded from the “this” and defined as “that” assert their “self” by re-defining “this” in negative terms. This forces the children the Government want to call “identified” gifted to recognise that they are being “defined” as gifted and make an active choice about which “self-definition” they want: do they want to “get with the programme” by positioning themselves alongside “this” or do they want to position themselves alongside “that” by refusing to engage with the official story.

Things, then, are not as simple as peer pressure being wrong because it forces gifted pupils to construct negative self-images. To think that is to be blind to the “official pressure” that is competing to define the selves of all pupils. The problem is not so much in the name (gifted = good, keener = bad) as in the constant naming: the fixation on (fixed) categories that causes us to lose sight of processes and relationships. This is the continuing Aristotelian “official pressure” that, in the very act of re-naming the gifted as an act of resistance, members of “that” group demonstrate has infected the entire system.

Limited as the pupils' resistance is, however, it is still more productive than the official story because it does, at least, offer an admittedly confined choice of self. More importantly, it also expresses recognition (re-cognition?) that there are stories competing for our self and (in its "Whatever you say I am, I am not" attitude) begins to chip away at the root of the problem. This makes the pupils far more self-aware, far more self-enhancing and far more positive in the construction of self-images or self-esteem than any number of "hooray" words the Government or teachers want to attach to a definition of self that has been constructed by authority figures and imposed on an individual in the process of "identification." Identification is not (as it is often taken by teachers to be) a process of "spotting" someone. It is a process of constructing an identity and, in "identifying" where they want to position themselves, pupils are doing all they can to construct an identity of their own. Given all of the above, it is little wonder that well-meaning teachers fail to convince gifted pupils to get back with the programme, ignore peer pressure and appreciate that they are "worthy" in their own right. The programme simply doesn't value the self as highly as the pupils do. Gifted and ungifted pupils alike can see this precisely because none of them are stupid.

Sadly, for all the pretence to the contrary in other areas of Government rhetoric, schools continue to face "official pressure" to ignore this pupil voice through demands that they identify 5-10% of their pupil population as gifted and talented and through measures by which Ofsted evaluate their performance. A quick trawl through the language of official reports, however, shows that the official story is far from clear or consistent. The terminology in the table below is drawn from Ofsted reports or official data reports such as Raiseonline for schools I have been associated with and the objections are my understandings of why terminology changed.

Official terminology	Objection
More able	More than who? Ability to do what?
Higher attaining	Introduces a comparative measurement but says nothing about the effort involved
High achieving	Shows an appreciation of effort but doesn't address the "standards", "improvement" or "deficit" agenda
Potentially high achieving	Addresses "coasting" performance but begs a question about how to judge "potential"
More able	Back where we started because, try as we might, we just can't get away from a belief that some people are just better than others

This linguistic wriggling reflects a confusion that has been at the heart of Government policy since Tony Blair first spelt out the vision in 1996 (previously cited). We saw in the social story how efforts to define potential rest on a fundamental(ist?) belief in a "God-given", "Natural" ability that is encoded in the very word "Gifted" and we meet the same old story in the standards agenda. Even worse, it now includes an element of "this" and "that" as success becomes a measure of how well schools and pupils are fulfilling

some sort of “standardised” potential. But whose standards are being used to judge? Who says that meeting them counts as success? And why should we assume that being successful equates to progress or improvement? The pop singer Jarvis Cocker said:

‘The celebrity thing is a big factor, a big myth in our society. I think it’s almost like, without getting too pompous about it, it’s almost like something to believe in, isn’t it, it’s like heaven, it’s like believing in going to heaven, it’s like thinking ‘God, if I get famous, everything is going to be alright’.’ (Newsnight interview with Kirsty Wark BBC4, Oct 28th, 2005)

The pub translation “Celebrity is the new Heaven”, I think communicates the sentiments more pithily. The cultural phenomenon of X Factor and (more pertinently) Britain’s Got Talent attest to the popularity of this belief despite occasional reminders from people like Amy Winehouse that when you get there it is a living hell. The big question surrounding names in the field of education is; success in the name of what? Greed? Power? Vanity? I don’t think so.

So What’s Your View? - the personal story

In his latest e-mail to me, Jack Whitehead points out that the abstracts to Clandinin and Murphy’s (2009) and Baron Coulter and Smith’s (2009) research narratives, “Omit the expression of an educational researcher’s educational responsibility to constitute their research as ‘educational’.” For me, something is educational if it assists the meaning-making process and educational knowledge is the result of reading/interpreting/inquiring into educational stories. My reading of the story of gifted and talented education has led me to the conclusion that it is anti-educational because it is unjust and because it deprives pupils of the right to make meaning of their own stories by classifying selves in the process of identification. Further, I believe the story of gifted and talented education is part of and supportive of a much bigger story in which wealth and privilege are justified on the grounds that some people are “superior” to others. Further still, its insistence on “Natural” ability is a refutation of human/social/economic relationships and its denial of the possibility for change is, in itself, a preservation of the status quo. The sum total, for me, is a story in which the “gifts” are most categorically not “shared” and this makes it an anti-educational story that, despite the best intentions of its creators, I don’t want to share with anyone.

In place of this anti-educational story we need to look away from traditional notions of ability and success and stress the individual development and growth of the self. As Heng (2003) points out,

“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.”

It is high time we moved away from factory style education towards a model that views success in the more personal terms of self-fulfilment.

Paradoxically, this would not lead to a concentration on self-centred or selfish individuals because each student would be encouraged to examine questions of meaning and purpose as they engage in perpetual re-shaping of the self. Self fulfilment doesn't mean that pupils think only of themselves or that they don't get involved in relationships. "I" is nothing without "we" and, as White says, "Personal fulfilment is no rival to concern for others. If we conceive it aright, they are inseparable."

A self or life centred story, as Heng demonstrates, would be grounded in self-actualisation and value students for their uniqueness rather than their ability to achieve standardised measures. The emphasis would be on the "inner agenda" and the meaning-making process to produce students with a purposeful direction. To do this we would have to encourage children to question answers instead of expecting them to answer questions and we would need to get away from a "this and that" mentality in order to engage individual pupils in a personal search for meaning. Heng goes on to point out that "Helping children discover and create their life themes as opposed to living life scripted by society," will not be easy but "it is perhaps timely to consider it a moral responsibility, on our part, to guide children in their first steps as they journey pluralistic paths of excellence that begin and emanate not so much from without, but from within the individual."

To meet that moral responsibility gifted and talented educators must ask the same big questions of themselves that they wish to encourage in their pupils. Gifted and talented education itself must take on a new meaning away from instrumental ends and towards ongoing questions, driven by values, about what constitutes success. This means not living life scripted by society and feeling that we are successful just because we have met someone else's "success criteria" of 50% level 5 in English or whatever. It means deciding what "good" or "outstanding" or "achievement" or "success" means for our self and helping our pupils to do the same. Strangely, if we did this, I have a strong suspicion that the policy makers would be less, not more, likely to impose their script precisely because we would be demonstrating that we are acting responsibly and, consequently, could be trusted to get on with it on our own.

Derrida (1990) coined the term "difference" to refer both to the operational difference between terms to create meaning and to refer to the notion of infinite deferral of total explanation, where the signifier is never directly connected to the signified. Our pupils seem to be instinctively aware of this when they resist the application of the signifier "gifted". All facts, theories and truth claims are dependent on factors that are absent (deferred or silenced) and, in the case of gifted and talented education, my knowledge of its oppressive character rests with a recognition of the absent "ungifted and untalented". Derrida points out that any "system" cannot be self-enclosing but must have a "surplus" which is beyond the explanation of that system. This, I think, is Derrida's contribution to knowledge. I have attempted to make a start on exploring the surplus surrounding gifted and talented education but I

recognise that to present my own interpretation as “fact” or “truth” would be to ignore absent voices. One system cannot be replaced with another. Instead, amidst the rubble I have created of gifted and talented education, I hope our beliefs and values can find a meeting place from where we can begin the construction of a more liberated and pluralised educational story that is more meaningful and fulfilling for ourselves and the selves of all our pupils. That, I think, might be an educational story worth sharing.

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