

## **How can I clarify my responsibility as a Headteacher as I provide opportunities to enable all children in the school to create talents?**

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### **A brief outline of my purpose in writing this account**

In this account I want to explore and clarify my responsibility as I explain how I've come to my current understanding of talent creation, and why I feel it's so important to develop an inclusive approach to talent creation which provides opportunities for all the children to develop talents through their time at school, and to have them recognized and be able to give them as gifts to the school community.

When I was born there were all kinds of things that I couldn't do, and already lots that I could do. There were also unlimited possibilities of what I could do, or learn to do in life. Many of them I can't do, or don't do, or have never done. What I'm interested in exploring here, is how the possibilities for learning get closed down, or opened up by the kind of education we receive in school, and how I as a Headteacher can do my responsible best in the school I work in to ensure that all possible opportunities are opened up for the children in the school, rather than closed down.

This account is a further attempt for me to be responsive to the DCSF initiatives which fall into the category headed 'Gifted and Talented'. I intuitively find this labelling to be counter educational, and want to use this account to work out for myself, as I engage with government policy and the ideas of Hymer, Huxtable, and Whitehead (Hymer, 2007; Huxtable, 2005, Hymer, Whitehead and Huxtable, 2009a; Whitehead & Huxtable, 2009) a reasoned account as to why I find it so unpalatable as well as hold myself to account for the educational opportunities I provide for the children in the school.

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.

I also feel uneasy about working with an impositional understanding from the DCSF as to what the labels 'Gifted' and 'Talented' actually mean. They are value-laden words, and I'm not convinced of the validity to me of the principles and theories they are based on.

Through this account I want to share my understandings of the words gifted and talented in a way which will claim them back for educators everywhere and will open up possibilities for all learners. I want the words to work for me as nouns rather than verbs, and lower case nouns, rather than upper case adjectival labels.

Although the emphasis of the reflection in this account is concerned with creating space for learners to develop talents, I also want to briefly explain the understanding I

have come to concerning gifts. I understand that gifts come into being in the giving. When someone uses a talent they are developing to enrich another part, or the whole of their community, then the talent is being used as a gift. I want to use my responsibility as a Headteacher to ensure that the school is a place where talents can be gifted, and received.

It is my intention to enquire into how I can develop an educational space where learners in a school community can then use their talents as gifts to enrich and challenge that community in a separate account. I want to consider how I can enable all the children I work with have to have the opportunities to develop talents without limit or prejudice.

This account will focus on the responsibility I understand that I hold as a Headteacher to provide opportunities for all learners to create talents. I also accept a responsibility for making public this understanding through my practitioner-researcher as I seek to improve my practice.

**In clarifying my responsibility I have structured my thoughts with the following questions and my responses.**

- How do I understand the concept of talent creation?
- How does my understanding of talent creation affect my thinking as a Headteacher?
- What do I then feel is my educational responsibility as Headteacher in response to my developing understanding?
- How am I trying to develop an educational space which will promote the opportunities for children to develop talents?
- How can I develop an environment in which children can show us what they can do, and what they would like to do?
- How can I ensure that all children have the best possible start for them as they start school?
- How do we work together as a staff team to provide a learning environment that is predisposed to talent creation in all learners?
- How was I able to open this discussion with colleagues in school, so we could share our values with each other?
- So how do I understand my responsibility as Headteacher in helping all learners develop talents?

**A brief outline of the framework I'm working within, with the intention of clarity of communication.**

Throughout this account I am aiming to communicate clearly the depth of analysis I have been engaged in whilst thinking, talking, listening reading, writing and rewriting.

I want to show insight, and ensure that the material I use is synthesized effectively and creatively. I have drafted and redrafted with this in mind, and shared the writing

with others for constructive feedback to achieve this. To this end, I will make reference to material in the appendix, rather than contain it in the body of the text.

The conceptual framework I have used in showing the development of my thinking is a living educational theory approach in which I am explaining my educational influence in my own learning (Whitehead, & McNiff, 2007) as I come to understand my embodied meanings of my expression of responsibility as a Headteacher.

I use a living theory methodology (Whitehead 2008, 2009) that is informed by the idea of methodological inventiveness from Dadds and Hart (2001).

In a living theory methodology the individual teacher-researcher asks, researches and answers questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' by expressing concerns, imagining improvements, acting and gathering data, evaluating the influence of the actions in relation to values and understandings, modifying concerns, ideas and actions and producing a validated explanation of educational influence.

In this account I am showing the evolution of an appropriate methodology for my enquiry into the nature of my responsibility as a Headteacher, as I enquire into my own practice in the context of my inclusive values with both children and adult learners.

My understanding of using an appropriate methodology is based on my developing understanding of a range of methodological approaches to educational research, and the importance of selecting a method, which most suits the nature of the enquiry or research.

The American Educational Research Association, in its call for papers for the 2010 Annual Meeting, 'Understanding Complex Ecologies in a Changing World' (2009) is actively encouraging submissions which encourage education researchers to draw on a range of new methodologies which more closely reflect the nature of the research and the researcher.

Here then is my account of my self-study research into my meanings of responsibility as I seek to enhance opportunities to enable all children in the school to create talents.

### **How do I understand the concept of talent creation?**

I am working with an understanding of talents which is fluid and dynamic, and not 'fixed entity' thinking where a talent belongs to someone, where it is *their* talent and can come to define or limit them and their future development in other areas.

We are all constantly learning, and we all have the opportunity to develop talents. I am working with an understanding expressed by Huxtable (2005), that my intention is to provide a learning environment, which will enable all learners to develop talents, which will be of benefit to themselves and to society.

The writing and practice of Barry Hymer as an educator has been very influential in the way in which I've come to my current understanding of opportunities for talent creation. I recognise this as an evolving understanding, which has moved from Hymer's clear exposition of the importance of working towards gift creation rather than gift identification, to my own understanding which is of talent creation.

This may just be a difference of words, rather than a difference of opinion, but I want to clarify this difference for the benefit of my own articulation. Although I fully

appreciate what he advocates, I think my emphasis would be on talent creation rather than talent identification, with the term gift only being used when the talent has been used for the benefit of another individual or within the community of learning.

In terms of the very different understandings of talent identification, or talent creation, Hymer asserts:

*'children's capacities for learning are fluid and inexhaustible. It's our job to co-create gifts with children'* (Hymer, May 2007)

He is very clear about the parameters in which any kind of identification should occur, underlining very clearly the responsibility he feels schools should have to provide an appropriately enriching environment in which learners can create talents as well as identify them for themselves (Hymer, 2007). I will come back to this aspect as I look at the implications for this understanding on my practice as a Headteacher.

### **How does my understanding of talent creation affect my thinking as a Headteacher?**

I find it hard to recollect pivotal moments in my own history of learning, but one of the moments which was very influential in my thinking and articulation about all that I feel to be important about people being offered opportunities to develop talents happened in the MA group. Marie Huxtable showed us a set of before and after illustrations from a book called Mindset (Dweck, 2006).

The illustrations, which have all been drawn by adults who had always thought they couldn't draw, are pictured below.

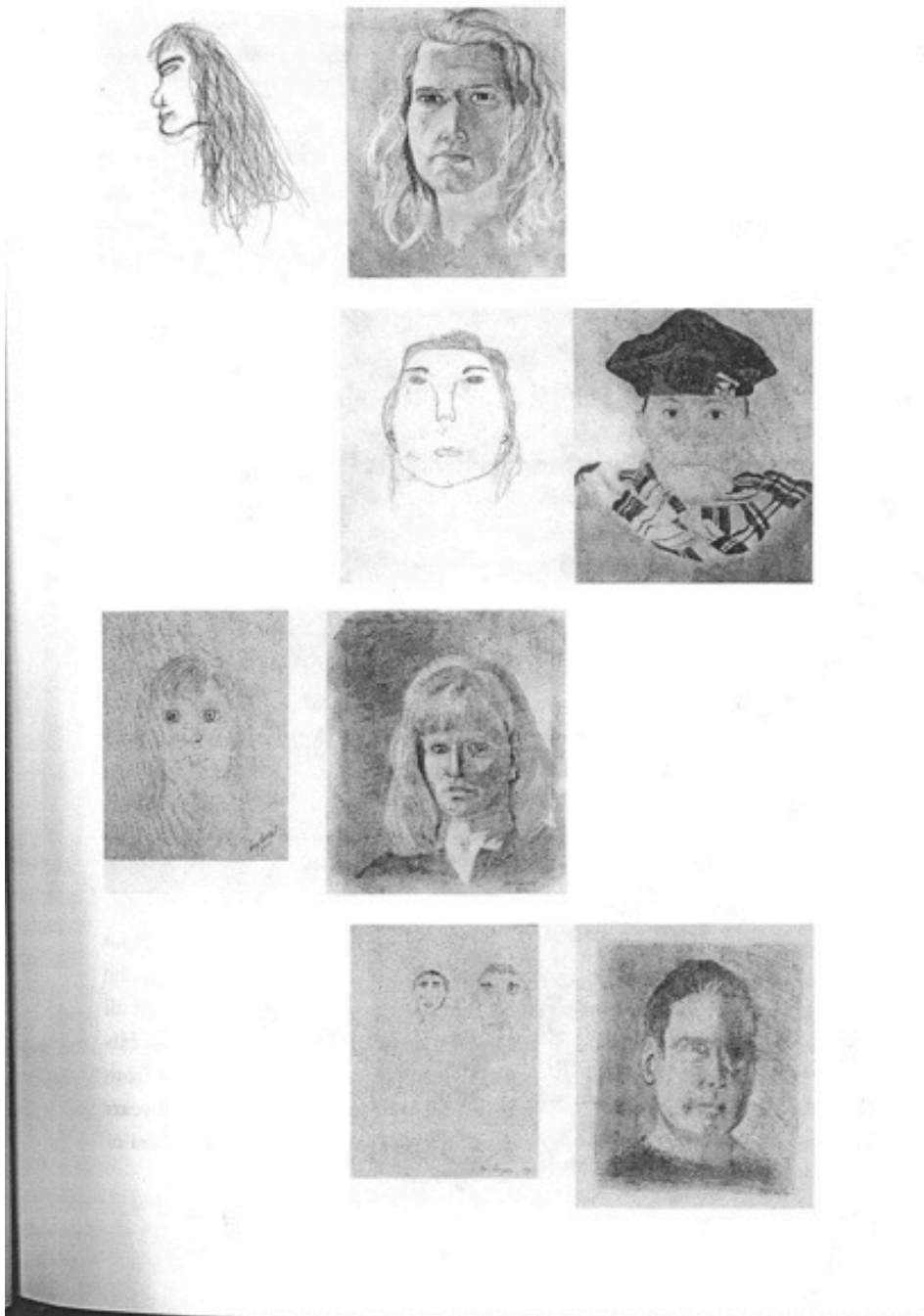
As I look at them again, I'm impressed again by the quality of the improvement in the pictures. So much so, that initially I didn't understand that the same person had drawn the before and after pictures. When I did understand, I realised that what I was seeing was a visual representation of emerging talents of at least four people.

These were people who had wanted to develop talent in this area, and had been provided with the opportunity to do so.

I was very intrigued by these pictures but also very doubtful about the claims, as I am an adult who also maintains that I can't draw. I thought the book was going to perhaps contain another step by step programme in learning to draw, but became even more intrigued when Marie explained that it was based on research about the way we think about learning. Following these learning principles, the artists here had undergone this transformation in their ability in just 5 days.

And so I was introduced to the research of Carol Dweck, and the incredibly powerful influence that our mindset has on what abilities we can develop if we choose. As I began to read about some of the research I realised the possibilities that I had as a learner to develop talents, and also professionally what I could do as a Headteacher to enable all the children to develop talents.

Dweck's (2006) assertion is that we limit our own learning when we think of intelligence as something, which is fixed, innate, and measurable. We can achieve far more if we consider intelligence as incremental, as something which grows as we practice.



(Images scanned from Dweck(2006) p.69)

**What do I then feel is my educational responsibility as Headteacher in response to my developing understanding?**

It is very clear to me that I need to ensure that the provision and opportunities for all learners are as cognitively rich and varied as possible in order to give all learners as much opportunity as possible. I also need to work out a way in which the children will

receive the messages which will help them develop a growth mindset. As Matthews (2007) clearly identifies this is the way in which all learners are able to experience 'gifted development' regardless of their perceived start point.

I find this a very liberating and encouraging way of thinking about my own learning, and very motivational. It also provides me with a far more open learning agenda to really know the children I'm working with in order to provide the opportunities for them to develop talents. It's the antithesis of an impositional model, and I find it's inherent values much closer to my own values in education. What it challenges me to do, is to work out how I can ensure the most appropriate provision to the best of my ability. This is one of the responsibilities I feel I need to work out as a Headteacher.

I also feel that I have a responsibility for, and am in the position of being able to communicate, the messages of a growth mindset. I can work with all the learners in the school to enable them to receive the positive learning messages of a growth mindset.

### **How am I trying to develop an educational space which will promote the opportunities for children to develop talents?**

I am convinced with Ikeda (2004) that talents don't just arrive with us ready made. Talents are not pre packaged and imposed upon us. They're not fixed and pre-determined, and this idea alone is very liberating as I consider the kind of environment I want to provide for children and adults to be enthused in their life and learning. I want them to learn about what really interests and motivates them. I want to provide a worthwhile context for other learning to take place.

As people we have a natural pre-disposition to learn, children arrive in our schools with all sort of interests they want to explore. Unless we're very careful and exercise our responsibilities as educators very carefully, we find ourselves imposing upon them a curriculum which we have to deliver.

In common with many educators I've never been comfortable with a model of 'education' which views children as empty vessels waiting to be filled, but many recent and current initiatives seem to require educators to parcel out bits of knowledge, delivering them as so many unwanted parcels, and wondering at the reluctance of children to pick them up and do something with them.

A House of Lords Committee has recently reported on '**The cumulative impact of statutory instruments on schools**' acknowledging that experienced educators do not thrive in an environment where there is a need to comply with '*a raft of detailed requirements*' commenting that '*We recommend that DCSF should now look to shift its primary focus away from the regulation of processes through statutory instruments, towards establishing accountability for the delivery of key outcomes.*' (House of Lords, 2009, p.15)

Whereas I agree with the need to establish a form of accountability for enhancing professionalism, the focus on 'the delivery of key outcomes' doesn't go far enough in providing the educational space, which will enable learners to most fully develop talents. It seems to me to be the imposition of a minimum requirement without regard for an enabling pedagogy.

In terms of my accountability as an educator, I am working to bring a responsible and valid account of why I work as I do, rather than trying to justify what I'm doing in evidencing how I am accountable. Through the exercise of my originality and value of responsibility I am working to account to myself and others for my educational influence in my own learning and in the learning of others.

Palmer reflects on the intrinsic pleasure that is to be found in learning by most if not all learners outside of school, and the subsequent frequently negative lessons learned in school, which hinder real learning. (Palmer 2006 p.200)

I'm beginning to raise questions for myself about whether children would be far more powerful as learners if they were able to more fully work within their own curriculum. I'm not sure what this would look like in practice, and I'm not advocating a free for all where anything goes, but rather offering equal respect to the ideas that learners bring, and working with them collaboratively to take their learning forward.

Why is there an assumption that the learning of adults is somehow superior to and more effective than the learning of children?

How much then is teaching often more to do with power?

How much is it that learning really happens when teachers stop teaching?

In terms of pedagogy should I separate more the teaching and the learning, and should I concentrate even further on the learning, in order to make the school more effective as a learning environment for all the learners?

Claxton shares similar concerns about the lack of real learning nourishment, which occurs with an ineffectual education system. (Claxton and Meadows, 2009. p.7)

### **And then they start school:-**

#### **How can I develop an environment in which children can show us what they can do, and what they would like to do?**

I find myself continuing to return to that phrase of Palmer's (2006) 'and then they start school', and feeling very challenged by it. It has an air of finality about it, and almost hopelessness, and yet I strongly believe that it is my responsibility as a Headteacher to ensure that the children in school can learn in an environment which is very much concerned with they can do, rather than constantly asking them to reach various targets, however well thought out they might be, which constantly puts children in a position of being categorised into one of three main groups, none of which really helps their learning.

Pat D'arcy (1989) who was a very influential English Advisor when I started my teaching career reflected on this very prevalent philosophy of categorising children as long ago as 1989, and outlines a 'capacity based approach' to learning which I would like all the learners in the school to experience, an approach which would certainly enable the adults in the school to have the right sort of space to develop talents.

#### **How can I ensure that all children have the best possible start for them as they start school?**

When children start school they have clear entitlements laid down for them

in the Early Years Foundation Stage, which is all about providing both the enabling environments and the recognition of the capabilities of the learners which provide every opportunity for a capacity based approach to their learning, but is it still too easy to revert to making judgements about children as they arrive at school which will limit them.

I am very challenged by an article written by Claxton (Claxton and Meadows, 2009) who elaborates on this in his paper '*Brightening up: how children learn to be gifted*', when he outlines the case studies of two children as they start school, and how easy it is to recognise one as 'bright' by the behaviour she exhibits, and just as easily to underestimate the potential talents of the other. The challenge for me also lies in the way that this message is then reinforced by how they respond to the culture and expectations of the classroom.

Claxton discusses the limitations caused to learners by the early judgements, which are made by educators, and how these judgements come to be made, based on the differing initial behaviours, which are evident. He goes on to explain that the learning behaviours are based on thousands of hours of unconscious practice.

It is through my recognition of the differences in prior opportunity for the children, and thus their current presentation together with an understanding of the articulation that I can exercise my responsibility as a Headteacher to ensure there is better provision for all the children.

An important part of that provision will be an honouring recognition of who the children are as learners and what they can do, and want opportunities to do. This is a very important part of the entitlement of the Early Years Foundation Stage, and one that I want to ensure will provide the best opportunities for children to develop their talents.

It is obvious that children come to school with different interests and varying learning dispositions and behaviours, and I feel that it's my responsibility to do what I can to help learners develop ownership of their own learning rather than deliver an impositional model.

If I don't address this issue the danger is that the children whose learning dispositions are borne out of prior experience and hours of practice will continue to thrive and be seen to move further ahead, whilst others will struggle against the cultural mismatch.

I want all the children in the school to be able to feed their love of learning in school, instead of feeling the frustration which comes from struggling against a system where ultimately they come to feel no good because their attempts at learning are not recognised and respected.

### **How do we work together as a staff team to provide a learning environment which is predisposed to talent creation in all learners?**

I find this a difficult question to research in my own practice, because as a teaching Head, I have found it easier to focus on what I want to improve in the teaching environment, than on the influence I have as a Headteacher.

However I have come to realize and acknowledge, through seeing the impact of other Headteachers in their schools, that I do have an influence and an impact, and I want to



do what I can to ensure that it is the influence that I want to have, and that I exercise the influence always with a regard to educational responsibility.

As adults in the school we all work together with different values, some are shared values, and some are not. I believe that it's as we work together, with respect for the differing values of others, to find collaborative solutions that are appropriate for the learners in our school, we form school values we can all hold to.

It's in the weekly staff meetings as we work on school policies and talk through our responses to new initiatives that we come to a shared understanding that shapes the life of the school and the learning environment for both children and adults. In the writing of this account I have appreciated the importance of researching my influence with colleagues in the provision of this learning environment. This appreciation is part of my own learning and is taking my enquiry forward.

### **How was I able to open this discussion with colleagues in school, so we could share our values with each other?**

One of the ways in which the conversation about the principles of talent creation was furthered was in having the opportunity to work with Barry Hymer. Over a period of time, all the teachers had an opportunity to attend Philosophy for Children training, with Barry. It wasn't just the content of the course that was so important, it was the way Barry worked as an educator with us, which modelled a very inclusive approach.

One of the most influential opportunities in this area that I was able to offer, was for all the teachers to spend an Inset day on a training day with Barry Hymer in 2007 . The day was entitled Teaching for Challenge and Gift Creation. I believe it has really shaped our school practice on how we work with all the children in school and, maybe just as importantly, provided us with opportunities for the ongoing conversation.

One of the members of staff evaluated at the end of that day

*' It gave a foundation to the views and thinking we, as a school, are working to extend.'*

It is interesting to me reflecting on this two years later, that this colleague identified *'we as a school'*, re-emphasising the shared understanding, the sense of a collaborative understanding.

Colleagues also identified that the understanding they developed that day would help learners to:

*' increase motivation and pupils desire to engage with tasks and develop skills'*

*'to enable challenges and failure to develop children's intrinsic motivation and help them take ownership of their own learning'.*

### **So how do I understand my responsibility as Headteacher in helping all learners develop talents?**

The opportunity to reflect on my practice through the constructing of this account has helped me to achieve the current clarity regarding my responsibility as a Headteacher.

I need to be able to understand and engage with current initiatives, particularly when they're impositional, and develop my own considered response to them. In this way I

will work to give an account of what I'm doing, rather than continually feeling that I need to justify what I'm doing to make myself accountable.

I need to work with the values of the other learners in school, and work with them to form a collaborative understanding of what we're being asked to do, then formulate actions which will provide educational opportunities for all the children.

Specifically in helping learners to develop talents, our school understanding is to provide opportunities for all learners to show what they can do in the belief that enabling all learners to develop a growth mindset will give them access to developing talents.

I see my responsibility, as Headteacher, in the light of this is to initially work collaboratively with adult learners in school in recognition of their distinctive values, to enable appropriate educational opportunities for all the children in which to develop their talents.

Having continued to reflect throughout the journey of this account, I also need to be able to continue to question the exercise of my responsibility in this area, as further questions and issues are raised.

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