

How have I come to recognise and develop my talents which are my gift to my colleagues and pupils?

Kate Kemp, Gifts and Talents in Education Masters Unit, 2008.

Prior to writing this account I have to admit to have given little thought or consideration to the notion of gifts and talents in education. I have been aware of central and local government policy regarding able or gifted and talented pupils however in my work with permanently excluded pupils these policies have seemed to have little relevance. I have, however, been attempting to clarify my own values and beliefs as an educator through writing about my work and telling stories about some of the young people I have worked with. Through the process of writing I have hoped I would improve my practice and explain my educational influence.

Faced with writing my contribution to the MA unit 'Gifts, Talents and Education' I was somewhat at a loss as where to start feeling that I knew nothing about the subject. What I felt I did know something about was myself and my own personal journey and that I also had as 'data' the stories which I had already written. Whilst I was still mulling over where to start I came across the following quotation:

'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)

This passage, from an essay by Daiseku Ikeda, President of the Buddhist organisation to which I belong, immediately resonated with me. Amongst the beliefs I have been attempting to clarify for myself is that everyone has something unique to offer the world and that one of the purposes of education should be to help young people uncover for themselves what their unique contribution might be. I have considered this in my previous enquiry 'Can I put the pupils voice at the heart of our request for support form' (Kemp 2008) in which I explore the possibilities of ensuring that young people begin to recognise their own strengths (rather than having them recognised for them).

I therefore decided, using an action research model, to embark on my exploration of 'Gifts, Talents and Education' by considering what my 'unique talent' is and use this question as a lens through which to examine literature on the subject and my own professional and personal experience.

I have used the narratives which I had already written as data to which I have added commentaries which show what I have learned and what use I make of the learning.

Through these writings I believe that I have identified the following 'talents' which I wish to offer in my work as an educator:

- A belief in the possibilities for growth and development of all people

- A desire to truly understand whoever I am with and have an understanding of their world.
- A commitment to helping young people ‘find their own thing’.
- A creative energy which brings together ideas from different places and people.
- Bringing the qualities of strength, wisdom and compassion into my relationships.

I have come to recognise these talents through reflecting on my early experiences and on people who have played a significant role in encouraging me. I have also come to recognise them through the stories I have told about the young people I have worked with.

I am very conscious however that the living values I embody in my practice cannot be adequately communicated through the written word. These living values are embodied in my relationships and I have clarified them through writing the narratives below and in the Appendix. The statements above are signposts to the values embodied in my practice. My love for what I do in education is expressed through a flow of energy that must be experienced to be understood.

Whitehead (2008 a&b) has drawn attention to the significance of these flows of energy in explanations of educational influence.

Context

An examination of the literature on ‘gifts, talents and education’ throws up a range of thinking and beliefs about the nature of ‘gifts and talents’. On the one hand there is the DCFS description of gifted and talented in which giftedness is described as high level ability in one or more academic subjects such as English or maths and talented relates to ability in practical subjects such as art, music or drama and where there are guidelines that schools should have a ‘gifted and talented register’. On the other there are the many inclusional approaches found in, for example, ‘Gifted Education’ by Balchin et al (2009). The contrast between these extremes indicates opposing ontological and epistemological beliefs.

The most recent guidance from the DCFS is clearly underpinned by the belief that gifts and talents are both identifiable and limited in numbers as demonstrated in the following quotation from ‘England’s National Programme for gifted and talented education :plans and reforms for 2007-2010.

‘We have revisited our description of the national G&T population. This comprises:

- a. A nationally identified top 5% by ability in absolute national terms aged 11-19, who are unevenly distributed within and between maintained secondary schools and colleges. These are presently identified against the published eligibility criteria (though these will be reviewed in due course); and
- b. A further group of G&T learners, aged 4-19, in each maintained primary school, secondary school and college whose ability is

developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group within their institution (or who have potential to develop such ability) and who are identified by that institution.

.....We collect information about our national G&T population through a termly School CensusWe shall be working hard to improve this figure during the next few years. Once we approach 100% of schools identifying, we expect the national population to exceed one million.’ (points 9 and 13)

Even were one million children identified this would still leave a very large number of children who are presumably neither gifted nor talented! Such labelling it would seem to me is detrimental not only to the ‘ungifted’ and ‘talentless’ but arguably to those who have been identified. I explore this idea further in my narrative ‘One Trick, Two Drivers’ in which I use my personal experience of being identified as ‘gifted’ and place it in the context of Carol Dweck’s work on ‘fixed and ‘growth’ mindsets. (Dweck 2000) -of whom more later.

White (2006) explores the epistemological beliefs which underpin this notion of gifted and talented in his book on the ideological roots of intelligence testing. He describes the work of Galton who, in 1865, introduced his influential ideas that intelligence is innate and measurable. The influence of these ideas, written at a time of rigid class structured and notions of preordained destiny, played a huge part in providing the ideological rationale for what is described sometimes as the ‘test and place’ methodology. This in turn underpinned the 11+ and selective schooling.

It is clear to me and to, I hope, my reader that these fixed and limiting notions of gifts and talents are at odds with my beliefs as described at the beginning of my account. My own ontological and epistemological beliefs lie very firmly in the inclusional camp. ‘Gifts, talents and education: a living theory approach’ (Hymer et al 2009) contains many action research enquiries on the nature of ‘gift-creation’ and provide a definition of gift as being ‘something we freely give’ (p98).

I have found the definition which Marie Huxtable uses in her contribution to the book very helpful in broadening my understanding of the difference between inclusion and inclusionality:

‘I am seeking ways of improving the contribution I make through the lens of gifted and talented education by developing inclusive (integrating all pupils in the mainstream) and inclusional (a dynamic relational awareness of space and boundaries where all can be held)’ Huxtable (2009, p293).

The focus which all my narratives have on dynamic relationships I think bears this out.

I have also been intrigued by the journey described by Barry Hymer himself in the same book.

‘Over time, Barry saw his interests and energies shift from the identification and appropriate ‘management’ of ‘gifted learners’ (the *given state*) to the exploration and advocacy of approaches to ‘creating’ gifts and talents in learners-i.e. to nurturing and developing the dispositions, attitudes, skills and motivations required to realise achievements in any domain’ (p29).

It is unusual to come across such a comprehensive story of how someone's ideas have changed and been influenced by those around them. I hope that some of my stories will be similarly interesting.

I mentioned earlier the work of Carol Dweck and, if I have learned nothing else from writing this account, I am grateful that the writing of it has brought her to my attention. She describes her central thesis in her contribution to 'Gifted Education':

'We are exploring different ways in which thinking of intelligence as a fixed trait (a 'fixed' mindset) versus a malleable quality that can be developed (a 'growth' mindset) influences students' motivation and achievement. In past work we have found that holding a fixed mindset makes students more concerned with learning (rather than looking smart) and leads them to seek challenges, value effort and shine in the face of difficulty' (p308).

This idea gave me the explanation for the difficulties I found myself in when I went to secondary school and as described in my piece One Trick Two Drivers and its commentary. Sadly I am still, on occasion, debilitated by the 'fixed' mindset idea and indeed have been during the course of writing this account. I have reached points when I have said to myself 'it's too difficult, I can't do it'. Fortunately through the encouragement of colleagues and my own determination not to be a 'living contradiction' I have gritted my teeth and continued.

These are some of the different perspectives on gifts and talents in educational contexts which I have considered in relation to myself and my beliefs.

Methodology

In using a living theory methodology (Whitehead 2008) I will be clarifying my talents and values through a form of narrative enquiry. I have collected together a number of stories which I have written about myself, my work and in particular some of the pupils I have worked with. I have then added commentary to each story to make explicit the values and principles which the stories illustrate. I also reflect on the relationship between the values which I express and some of the different perspectives of gifts and talents which I have explore earlier.

Throughout the stories I try to explain to myself how I have been influenced and explore my own educational influence

My reason for using narrative is an attempt to exchange the constrictions of a formal, linear style essay for a multi- faceted composition which explores, in a dynamic and flowing way, how I have been influenced and how I influence others. I imagine these short pieces to be the surfaces of a polyhedron-all part of the same thing (me/my life) but different views of it. Clendenin and Connelly have, in a number of publications, explored teachers' stories and, in 1994 introduced the idea of 'stories to live by':

'As we listened to practitioners and conducted the work on which this book is based, we realized that the theoretical puzzle was to link knowledge, context and identity. We developed a further term to begin to make this link, namely 'stories to live by' This thread helps us to understand how knowledge, context and identity are linked

and can be understood narratively. ‘Stories to live by’, the phrase used throughout this book to refer to identity, is given meaning by the narrative understandings of knowledge and context.’ Connelly and Clandenin (1999, p4)

For me, the phrase ‘stories to live by’ expresses beautifully the meaning of my narratives in that they are stories which tell of the values and beliefs which I try to live fully in my work.

Validation

This account has been through a number of different versions. I shared earlier drafts with my colleagues at the Conversation Café-an improving practice group within Bath and North East Somerset Children’s Services. I sought validation from the group using Habermas’ (1976) four criteria of comprehensibility, rightness, truth and authenticity. The account has changed from being principally a number of narratives loosely strung together, which might have been interesting stories but were without specific reference to the assessment criteria of the Gifts, Talents and Education unit. My own reflections and those of the group have led me to make the account, I hope, more ‘comprehensible’. I became aware through writing my commentary on ‘Strength, Wisdom and Compassion of a contradiction between the notion of seeking to truly understand another and that of exercising critical judgement. This contradiction however is an authentic one and deserves further exploration which I hope to do in my next writing.

The narratives

I have organised my writings around 7 narratives and commentaries, each of which shows how I have clarified for myself and others the talents, values and understandings I am seeking to express as fully as I can in my educational relationships. Because of the word limitation the narratives, which were originally the main text, are all now in the Appendix apart from the first –One Trick, Two Drivers. As the context became clearer to me and the commentaries more significant the narratives themselves, although still important, became more like data and therefore more suited to being in an Appendix. A description of each narrative follows with its accompanying commentary in italics.

1. In One Trick, Two Drivers I describe my personal experience of being labelled as ‘gifted’ and the detrimental effect it had on me and to a certain degree has still (see page 4). I reflect on my understanding of Carol Dweck’s notions of fixed and growth mindsets and how I relate this to my and my work.

‘I have taken on board the learning from these ideas and the consequent advice to praise children, not for their achievements but for the effort they have made’

2. In At the Centre I focus on persistence and on the importance of living with the idea that ‘there is no failure only feedback’.

'The following piece, and About Anne, are about people who have played a key role in helping me recognise what I have to offer.

It was John who first introduced me to the notion of 'no cock-ups, only learning experiences' an idea which is echoed by Matthews and Folsom in the previous piece and by many other writers and theorists not least Edison and practitioners of Neuro-Linguistic Programming. One of the 'operating principles in NLP is 'there is no failure, only feedback'. This notion is crucial in developing young people's resilience; for them not to give up when things go wrong but to be able to view difficulties and disappointments as opportunities'

3. In About Anne I describe the talent, which I learned from Anne, of being able to truly listen and accept someone for who they are.

'I learned from Anne the value of a talent which I try to develop in myself. This talent is the ability to come to an understanding of 'the other' and in doing so recognise them as the wonderful individual they have the capacity to be. Something happens in the process of being truly listened to in a warm, non-judgemental way, that creates space for the person being listened to explore what they think and how they want to be'.

4. The Cuckoo Child is the first of two pieces (the other being ...and there she stood) which I wrote some time ago for the Conversation Café.

I am next going to include a piece of writing I completed for the Conversation Café group. This, and The Cuckoo Child are about young people I have worked with in the last few years and demonstrate, I think, qualities which I use in my work in order to help young people grow and develop

In this piece I reflect that:

'there are few things more pleasurable than knowing you have made a difference to a young person's life and, in some small way, helped them find 'their thing''

5. In ...and there she stood I tell the story of another student with whom I have worked:

'What pleased me about both stories was the satisfactory dénouement. In both cases the young people concerned had-as I like to describe it-found 'their thing'. Finding 'one's thing' is the closest I have come to describing in a colloquial way the Buddhist concept of 'mission' as described here by Daiseku Ikeda in the continuation of the passage at the start of this essay (page 1).

'Without doubt, you possess your special jewel, your own unique talent. In the same way each of us has a mission that only we can fulfil. That mission will not be found somewhere far away, in doing something special or extraordinary. Even those people who seem to have led great lives have really only done what they felt they had to do in order to truly be themselves. We realise our purpose in life by doing our very best where we are right at this moment, by thinking about what we can do to improve the lives of those right around us'

Ikeda, (2004, p41)

To return to those two young people I think that the part I played in them 'finding their thing' was down to my persistence and genuine determination to help them 'be truly themselves' in the way that I have described in my earlier piece 'About Anne'

6. In How it works I explain how I bring together, with energy and enthusiasm, ideas which I have come across:

‘Does it resonate with values that I already hold? Does it put into words something I already believe but have had difficulty articulating? If any or all of these things are true then it’s definitely worth exploring and adding to my ‘map’ of the world.’

7. In Strength Wisdom and Compassion I describe the qualities which I bring to my work, reflect on how I try to keep them flowing and my determination to not slip into ‘critical’ mode.

This is the talent I work hardest at developing as for me this is the most difficult. It’s very easy to be critical of other people but I feel that I have failed myself if I slip into judging others. All labels are limiting, as I discussed earlier with regard to ‘gifted’, but perhaps even more so if they are pejorative labels such as ‘bad’ or ‘stupid’. I truly believe, that everyone has the capacity to grow and develop and ‘find their thing’, or mission and so it is harmful to label them. . In making this point about being ‘critical’ I am not denying the importance of critical judgement. For example, the values I use in accounting to myself are critical standards I apply to my own life as I seek to improve my practice and generate knowledge. I am thinking here of values such as strength, wisdom and compassion.

My first introductory piece was written recently. I started describing my early school experience and in the course of doing so came to recognise significant factors which influence me still.

1. One Trick, Two Drivers

If I were to use the DCFS definition of gifted and talented I expect that I would have been described as one or the other when I was at primary school. Certainly I became a statistic as I was one of the 6 highest scoring 11+ pupils in Oxford for my year and consequently was offered a free place at the fee-paying girl’s school in the city.

In fact on reflection it would be more accurate to say that I had an aptitude for intelligence tests of the kind that the 11+ consisted of. It was certainly not something I had to work at. I didn’t go to the fee-paying school because my father-a university chaplain-objectioned to the headmistress because she was an atheist so I went to the local girls’ grammar school where it pretty soon became apparent that I was a ‘one-trick pony’. Having been told at my primary school that I was remarkably intelligent I soon found that there were many girls getting much higher marks than me. I couldn’t understand why I wasn’t doing better and fairly soon decided that there wasn’t much point in trying.

For the rest of my school career I did just about enough work to get by and concentrated on getting involved in activities. I joined the school choir and the school drama group. I swam in the school team and did voluntary work. I sang in the church choir and acted in the local pantomime. I started a Duke of Edinburgh award, went riding, had piano and flute lessons, went on sponsored walks, got a Saturday job, baby sat and kept myself very busy.

On reflection most of this activity stemmed from two sources. Firstly I joined pretty much anything going because I wanted to ‘belong’. Secondly I got involved because I wanted to help.

These were two very strong drivers which I still recognise in myself today.

I have recently become very interested in the work of Carol Dweck and her notion of 'fixed' and 'growth' mindsets which relates specifically to theories of giftedness, creativity and talent. In the fixed mindset model intelligence, talents and so on are innate. In the growth mindset model they can develop over time and, crucially, require effort and practice.

I realise from writing this short piece that I had a very fixed mindset or view of my own intelligence which meant that when, faced with having to make an effort, I just gave up. As Matthews and Folsom say in discussing Dweck:

'People operating from a fixed mindset have much to lose by failing...The best way to address and prevent underachievement may be to help students learn to approach things from a growth perspective where failures are perceived as learning opportunities, chances to see what we don't know yet or need to work on.'

Matthews and Folsom, (2009, p22).

I have taken on board the learning from these ideas and the consequent advice to praise children, not for their achievements but for the effort they have made

In conclusion

My narratives have come to have several purposes during the course of the writing of this account. To begin with they are stories which stand on their own as snapshots of people, ideas or experiences. However, as with pictures in an exhibition for example, when viewed together they tell a bigger story as they amplify the values and beliefs inherent in them. I also know that pictures in an exhibition can take on new and deeper meanings when accompanied by explanatory text to provide context and signposts to the significance of certain elements.

I hope that these stories are of interest as illustrations of how I have come to recognise and develop the talents which I bring to my work as an educator. I have continued to find the process of writing about myself difficult and constantly question why anyone would want to know what I think. However I then remind myself that, just as I have a deep and abiding interest in other people, it is possible that others might have the same interest in me. In a recent email Jack Whitehead wrote to me:

'I know I feel most privileged when others tell me stories about their lives that matter to them' (email sent 30.12.08),

As I entirely agree with this I must relate it to myself as well as others!

Finally have I answered my question 'How have I come to recognise and develop my own talents which I offer as my gift to my colleagues and pupils?'

How I have come to do this has been through reflecting on my own experiences and looking at what I have learned from that reflection through the lens of theories about gifts, talents and education. My reflections and learning have enabled me to identify the talents as described at the beginning of this account, and which I will continue to nurture and offer as my gift to my colleagues and the pupils with whom I work.

References:

- Alder, H and Heather, B (1998) NLP in 21 Days, London, Priatkus Books Ltd
- Bachin, T, Hymer, B and Matthews, D (Ed.) (2009) The Routledge International Companion to Gifted Education, London, Routledge
- Centre for Confidence and Well-being website, retrieved 11th January 2009 from www.centreforconfidence.co.uk
- Connolly, F.M and Clandenin, J. (1999) Shaping A Professional Identity: Stories of Educational practice. London Ontario, Althouse Press, p4
- Covey, S (1989) The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, New York, Simon and Shuster
- DCFS (2008) England's National Programme for gifted and talented education: plans and reforms for 2007-2010, retrieved 11th January 2009 from <http://www.spanglefish.com/mariessite/index>
- DfES (2005). The Standards Site, gifted and talented strand 'non-negotiables', retrieved 11th January 2009 from [http://www.standards.dsfs.gov.uk/gifted and talented](http://www.standards.dsfs.gov.uk/gifted%20and%20talented)
- Dweck, C (2000) Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development. Philadelphia: Psychology Press
- Habermas, J (1976) Communication and the evolution of society. London, Heineman
- Huxtable, M (2009) Creating inclusive and inclusional understanding of gifts and talents through living educational theory research in the Routledge International Companion to Gifted Education, Balchin, Hymer and Matthews (Ed) London, Routledge, p292
- Hymer, B (2007) How do I understand and communicate my values and beliefs in my work as an educator in the field of giftedness D.Ed.Psy University of Newcastle, retrieved 11th January 2009 from <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/hymer.shtml>
- Hymer, B, Whitehead J and Huxtable M (2009) Gifts, Talents and Education: A living theory approach Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, p29
- Ikeda, D (2004) A Sense of Purpose. A Piece of Mirror and other essays Malasia, Sokka Gakkai, p41
- Kemp, K (2008) Can I put the pupils voice at the heart of our request for support form? MA Educational Enquiry submission, University of Bath
- Matthews, D and Folsom, C (2009) Making connections: cognition, emotion and a shifting paradigm in the Routledge International Companion to Gifted Education, Balchin, Hymer and Matthews (Ed) London, Routledge, p18

White J, (2006) *Intelligence, destiny and education: the ideological roots of intelligence testing*. London, Routledge

Whitehead, J (2008a) Increasing inclusion in educational research: A response to Pip Bruce Ferguson, *Research Intelligence*, No 103, pp.16-17

Whitehead, J. (2008b) An Epistemological Transformation in what counts as Educational Knowledge: Responses to Laidlaw and Adler-Collins. *Research Intelligence*, No. 105, pp. 28-29.

APPENDIX

The following piece, and About Anne, are about people who have played a key role in helping me recognise what I have to offer

2. At 'The Centre'

After I had trained as a teacher and not got a job teaching because no one needed art history teachers so got a job in a publishing company and got bored and went round the world I got a job as a youth worker at a large youth centre for 16-24 year olds in central London. My boss, John, was an inspirational leader. He had a clear vision of what we should be doing at the Centre and encouraged all the youth workers to engage in personal development and training. He introduced me to the idea of 'non-possessive warmth' which made a lot of sense to me in my attempts to engage with the huge range of young people and problems which came through our doors. He modelled how he expected us to be with our visitors-open, friendly and welcoming without being overly insistent on them doing anything in particular or being anything other than themselves. I continue to find the notion of 'non-possessive warmth' a very useful and understandable description of how I think professional relationships with children and young people should be.

Despite my training and my travels I realised I knew very little, and understood less about the backgrounds of the homeless young people, office workers, au pair girls and hip hop boys. I wanted to help but had very little idea of what to do. I had the feeling that I might be patronising but thought that if I could get some of these very different groups of young people to begin to talk to one another and join in activities together it might break down the barriers between them. I became quite adept at 'doing introductions' and found that I had a very useful talent for remembering names and information.

After I'd been there about 3 years John left. At his leaving do, attended by both staff and young people, he made a great speech which ended with the words 'just remember there have been no cock-ups, only learning experiences!' Apart from thinking he was rather daring to use such language I was suddenly struck by what a useful thought this was. Rather than blame and recrimination when things went wrong (the traditional model well practiced in my family) John was advocating taking the experience and making something good come from it. This changed my way of thinking about situations and continues to be a guiding principle.

It was John who first introduced me to the notion of 'no cock-ups, only learning experiences' an idea which is echoed by Matthews and Folsom in the previous piece and by many other writers and theorists not least Edison and practitioners of Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Edison is quoted as saying, on developing the light bulb, 'I have not failed 700 times. I have not failed once. I have succeeded in proving that those 700 ways will not work. When I have eliminated the ways that will not work I will find the way that will work'. One of the 'operating principles in NLP is 'there is no failure, only feedback'. This notion is crucial in developing the abilities of young people, for them not to give up when things go wrong but to be able to view difficulties and disappointments as opportunities.

3. About Anne

I first met Anne in an art gallery in Washington DC-this is significant because, amongst other things, she encouraged and nurtured in me a love of modern art. I had flown into New York early that morning but my backpack had unaccountably been sent to Berlin. I found myself at the start of a 5 month visit to the States, weary and luggageless. It was early January and I sat in the bus from New York to DC with my head leaning back looking at the skyscrapers, the tiny patch of sky and the huge mounds of snow piled up by the side of the road.

I'd met Leah the previous summer in London. I'd just graduated from university with my art history degree and a plan to do teacher training the following year but had decided to have another year off and see a bit of the world. Leah and I had been working together at a youth hostel and before she set off for home she said I should come and stay with her and her Mum in Washington DC.

So here I was, and here was her mother Anne, looking unlike any mother I'd ever seen. This was in the late 1970s when 40 year olds were definitely middle aged. Anne, on the other hand was quirkily fashionable and immediately engaging.

I was impressed by everything she did and said and wore. And amazingly she was impressed by me!

Being one of 5 children, I think it fair to say that I didn't get a great deal of attention growing up. Anne was interested in everything I said and any views I held. When she later moved to New York we would have whole days of gallery visiting or shopping and I would be asked my opinion of everything we saw. She took me very seriously but also in her eyes I could do no wrong. We might disagree about shoes (she liked pointy and heels!) and who is the better artist-Matisse or Picasso (Matisse of course) but I somehow knew from the attention she paid me and her demonstrative warmth that, at least with her, I was a worthwhile person. It also meant that because she had such a high opinion of me I felt I had to live up to it and become kinder and more generous.

Sadly we haven't seen one another for nearly 10 years. We email and phone and the affection we have for one another is undiminished by time and distance. She played a crucial role in developing my confidence, my interests and above all my view of myself. Everyone should have an Anne!

I learned from Anne the value of a talent which I try to develop in myself. This talent is the ability to come to an understanding of 'the other' and in doing so recognise them as the wonderful individual they have the capacity to be. Something happens in the process of being truly listened to in a warm, non-judgemental way, that creates space for the person being listened to explore what they think and how they want to be.

4. The Cuckoo Child

So there I was buying some lemon stuff to make my dishwasher smell better when I realised that the woman on the till was the mother of a boy I used to work with several years ago.

This boy-let's call him Joe- started refusing to go to school quite early on in his first year at secondary school. He continued to have bouts of school refusal throughout his time at school which culminated in the LEA going to court to seek an Education Supervision Order of which I was the Supervising Officer.

Early on in my dealings with him he would usually run off if I turned up at the house or would hide under his duvet. I therefore got to know his Mum quite well as I was often sitting around waiting for him to come home or get out of bed.

So after we'd said hello and discussed the merits of lemon dishwasher stuff I enquired, with some trepidation, as to what Joe was now doing. My anxiety was due to the fact that, when I first encountered him I had been to his primary school to see if I could get a handle on what was at the bottom of his school refusal. His year 6 class teacher had some alarming stories to tell about him which included setting fire to letter boxes and running away from home.

As I got to know Joe it seemed to me, in my amateur psychologist role, that he had ended up in the wrong family. He was, for instance, very talented at imaginative writing but lived in a house with no books. He was quite a sensitive and anxious boy surrounded by noisy and argumentative parents and siblings.

As part of the Education Supervision Order I got him and his family to agree to go and see a family therapist. I also arranged for a tutor to work with him on an individual basis at school gradually reintroducing him back into the classroom. The school got him involved in a production of Oliver Twist and the last I had heard of him, three or four years ago, he had gone onto Bath College to study performing arts.

'So what's Joe up to these days'?

'Oh he's doing really well, he's at Guildford Art College studying theatre design and he's doing an Open University degree. He's always in the Bath Chronicle for some Christmas pantomime he's produced or play he's written'.

'So thank you' she says.

'My pleasure,' say I. And truly it is for there are few things more pleasurable than knowing you have made a difference to a young person's life and, in some small way, helped them find 'their thing'.

5.....and there she stood

As I approached the door of the theatre I saw her. There she stood, poised and elegant, welcoming guests to the show. When she saw me she smiled and came over and kissed me on both cheeks. 'How are you? How great to see you' she said.

I'd last seen her about a year or so previously when I'd taken her and her mum to an admission meeting at a school. She'd been out of mainstream education for at least 6 months and was very nervous about returning but was quite determined that she was going to make a go of it.

She'd been permanently excluded from her secondary school for persistent rudeness and disruptive behaviour, which had culminated in shouting and swearing at the head teacher in the middle of a crowded corridor.

Following the exclusion I had visited her at home to discuss what would happen next and she told me that she had times when she just 'lost it', she didn't know why, but that she had to get back to school as she needed to get her exams as she wanted to become a psychologist.

I visited her on numerous occasions over the next few months as we tried to get a school to take her. I helped her Mum write an appeal letter to a school which had rejected her and hand-delivered it to make sure it got there. I felt that I needed to call by regularly just to apologise for the length of time it was taking to get her back into school.

We eventually persuaded another school to take her and I had last seen her as she started her final year at school.

Whilst at the tuition centre she had got involved in their drama workshops and then had been asked if she would help with drama sessions for children at the theatre. She clearly had a talent for this and when an apprenticeship came up at the theatre she applied and, out of the 70 or so applicants, was successful. So here she was, telling me about her work at the theatre and how much she loved it.

I wished the Head teacher of her original school, and the other school which had rejected her, could have seen her, transformed from an angry girl into a confident young woman with a life to look forward to. .

What pleased me about both stories was the satisfactory dénouement. In both cases the young people concerned had-as I like to describe it-found 'their thing'. Finding 'one's thing' is the closest I have come to describing in a colloquial way the Buddhist concept of 'mission' as described here by Daiseku Ikeda in the continuation of the passage at the start of the essay.

'Without doubt, you possess your special jewel, your own unique talent. In the same way each of us has a mission that only we can fulfil. That mission will not be found somewhere far away, in doing something special or extraordinary. Even those people who seem to have led great lives have really only done what they felt they had to do in order to truly be themselves. We realise our purpose in life by doing our very best

where we are right at this moment, by thinking about what we can do to improve the lives of those right around us'

Ikeda, (2004, p41)

To return to those two young people I think that the part I played in them 'finding their thing' was down to my persistence and genuine determination to help them 'be truly themselves' in the way that I have described in my earlier piece 'About Anne'

My next piece is a practical example of how I collect together ideas which have influenced me and created my own guiding principles for my work and the way I look at the world

6. How it works

It's the last day at work before the holidays and I'm finishing up some odds and ends and making sure I have everything I need to write this essay. I decide to 'google' the phrase 'non-possessive warmth', a quality I am intending to explore in one of my pieces, to track down where it originates (Carl Rogers I think). My googling leads me to a website called 'Positive Psychology Resources' and thence to a place in Scotland called the Centre for Confidence and Well-being and I am so delighted by what I find there I want to move to Scotland immediately! The website says that the mission of the Centre is to 'help bring about a transformation in Scottish Culture so that it supports more:

Optimism (for self, other and Scotland)

Self-belief (an important ingredient in 'can-do' attitudes)

A growth mindset (essential for people to release their potential)

Resilience (required in helping people keep going when life is difficult)

Positive energy (essential for relationships, team working and collaboration)

A sense of purpose/meaning (important for motivation and well-being)

Giving (an antidote to a 'me' centred world and a source of energy and empowerment)

Wisdom (important for decision-making and leadership)

<http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/techniques.php?p=c2lkPTEExJnRpZD0zJmlkPTIwOA==>

I agree with all of these principles and realise that they resonate with ideas that I have picked up from Neuro-Linguistic Programming and from Stephen Covey's '7 Habits of Highly Effective People'. They also resonate with my own Buddhist beliefs. I delve a little further into the website and come across references to Carol Dweck's work. I check the books I have borrowed to write this essay and yes! here is Carol Dweck referenced in both 'Gifts Talents and Education: a living theory approach' and 'the Routledge International Companion to Gifted Education'. I am sure I have heard my colleagues talk about her as well and here she is on this website which looks really

interesting and engaging. As she's now been doubly recommended to me I am determined to find out more about her and what she's written. And this is how it works. Come across an idea-has it been introduced to me by someone who I know who is passionate and enthusiastic about it? Does it resonate with values that I already hold? Does it put into words something I already believe but have had difficulty articulating? If any or all of these things are true then it's definitely worth exploring and adding to my 'map' of the world.

7. Strength, wisdom and compassion

I'm off to see Kay and her Mum for the second time. The first time I went round was a couple of days after the permanent exclusion and the purpose of my visit was to explain the process and make arrangements for Kay's education to continue at the PRU. This time my visit is to go through the PEX paperwork in preparation for the governor's meeting next week.

These are the tasks which I want to accomplish during my visits however there are other things I want to do at the same time.

I know from experience that this is usually a very difficult time for pupils and their families. They are often hurt, confused, angry, worried and looking for help and advice. I see my being there not just to be about giving advice but also about alleviating some of these concerns and helping to make a difficult situation seem not quite so bad. I want to give them hope that together we will get through this and get the pupil back on track.

How I do this is by being both clear about my reasons for visiting and what I want to achieve but also by inviting both the pupil and parents to talk about what has happened. I try to make sure that I have enough time so I'm not rushed and they have plenty of time to tell me anything they want.

On my first visit I listened to Kay's mum telling me how difficult it had all been and how hard it is to live with Kay as she is at present. I ask Kay what has happened at school. She feels very hard done by and that people are 'inconsistent'. She's clearly angry with the world and hardly looked at me. I tried to strike a balance between the seriousness of the situation and it not being the end of the world.

I also always try to get a feel for what the young person is interested in, what motivates them. This isn't always easy but I'm prepared to wait to find out. In Kay's case it seems she might be interested in dance and I promise to get some information about the Egg theatre dance company.

On this second visit Kay is burying her head in a cushion and hardly acknowledges me though, as she doesn't go away. I assume she's listening. Her mum talks again about her impossible behaviour and how she just flies off the handle for no reason. I describe how I think Kay must feel inside and how hard it must be to have all that churning anger there most of the time and then I say to Kay that I know how bright and capable she is and that she has a choice about how she behaves and there are other things you can do if you're angry. Her mum and I share what we do when we're angry or stressed. Kay is listening but not responding.

I think as far as she's concerned I'm just another grown up telling her what to do. I think she would respond to someone nearer her own age and I am laying plans to introduce her to someone eminently suitable.

Strength, wisdom and compassion are the three-legged stool of the Buddhist practice. You need to have all three to be perfectly balanced. Strength and wisdom without

compassion may lead to harshness, wisdom and compassion without strength may lead to not taking action, strength and compassion without wisdom may lead to poor judgement,

I try to keep all 3 qualities running through me as I am talking and listening to Kay and her mum and draw on them as I respond to them and their situation.

This is the talent I work hardest at developing as for me this is the most difficult. It's very easy to be critical of other people but I feel that I have failed myself if I slip into judging others. All labels are limiting, as I discussed earlier with regard to 'gifted', but perhaps even more so if they are pejorative labels such as 'bad' or 'stupid'. I truly believe, that everyone has the capacity to grow and develop and 'find their thing', or mission and so it is harmful to label them. . In making this point about being 'critical' I am not denying the importance of critical judgement. For example, the values I use in accounting to myself are critical standards I apply to my own life as I seek to improve my practice and generate knowledge. I am thinking here of values such as strength, wisdom and compassion.