

## **How does using philosophy and creative thinking enable me to recognise and develop inclusive gifts and talents in my pupils?**

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In this assignment it is my intention to show how using philosophy and creative thinking with junior school children has enabled me to identify gifts and talents that I might otherwise have been unaware of; the impact this has had on the children concerned in terms of their own awareness of themselves as learners, and to question where this fits into current policies about gifted and talented education.

My paper will demonstrate how I have used an action research method based on my own values and embodied professional knowledge in that I have identified and sought to improve an area of concern in my teaching, and in generating my own living theory of how I teach, I have made my ideas available for public scrutiny, therefore testing them for validity against the critical responses of a wider audience. (Whitehead, & McNiff 2006 p13)

Using notes from my personal journal, sharing video evidence with colleagues and in discussion with the Tuesday Master's group at Bath University, I intend to comply with Habermas' (1976) criteria for validity in that what I say will be understandable to another person, understood by them and a common understanding reached, enabling me to add my own living theory contribution to the wider body of professional knowledge.

### **My Concern**

My area of concern is that all children have gifts and talents. These gifts and talents are wide ranging. Within the National Curriculum only certain of them are considered to be of importance; there is not enough value given to abilities which cannot be measured by tests. Teaching the standard objectives does not allow children space to demonstrate what their strengths are or the level of learning and thinking they are capable of.

We judge children so much, or we are asked to judge them, on their literacy, numeracy and science ability. We record and target their learning through the levels they produce,

even though this is a doubtful measure of a child's ability or intelligence. We look at whether they put in correct punctuation, join their handwriting and use adverbial clauses, not whether they have a gift for writing and communicating. We record how well they remember mathematical operations rather than explore their potential as great mathematicians, and in Science we grade them by the regurgitation of a limited set of scientific facts, not whether they have the curiosity and imagination to be a future Einstein.

My concerns are supported by Sternberg's (1996) theories of intelligence in that what we fail to recognise and act upon within the education system is the potential each child has. He comments that instead of looking at where the child might go, we are obsessed by recording the statistics of where they currently are:

*'Tests of achievement measure what you know. One can understand why people would value what you know. What is less clear is why people would value a test that measures what you may, or may not, come to know'. (P26)*

The introduction to 'All our Futures' (DfEE. 1999), stresses the need for children to reach their full potential, and yet the restrictions of the curriculum and the pressure on schools to achieve good test results, in my opinion, work against giving children the learning space to do this. Reaching your 'full potential' should therefore include recognition of your gifts and talents, yet how can they be identified when only limited opportunities are given within school?

### **My understanding of Gifted and Talented and how it compares to the government's definition.**

In trying to define what I believe is meant by 'gifts and talents' I enter in to the area of a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead & McNiff .2006) in that my own value based interpretation does not match that of the government. Working from my own values I believe that every person has some special skill, aptitude, gift or talent to offer the rest of us. It is not something static that they are born with, but rather something that can be developed with the right nurturing. Part of this requires being given the opportunity to realise you have that talent. It also requires being encouraged to develop that talent and being made aware of the learning attitudes that will help in this. (Dweck 2000, 2006) Also it requires someone else to confirm its value.

The government's initiative on 'Gifted and Talented' education seems to be based on eradicating social inequality (Eyre, 2005) by replacing it with an educational elitist policy.

The QCA Guidance on Teaching the Gifted and Talented (2006) defines:

*'Gifted' learners as those who have abilities in one or more subjects in the statutory school curriculum other than art and design, music and PE;*

*'Talented' learners as those who have abilities in art and design, music, PE, or performing arts such as dance and drama.*

*This guidance uses the phrase 'gifted and talented' to describe all learners with gifts and talents.*

There is a glimmer of hope within the official documentation. Eyre in the 2005 NAGTY conference acknowledged the need for opportunity, support and promotion of talents. She discussed the difficulty in identifying gifted and talented children in statements such as:

*'Giftedness/talent in particular areas can emerge at any point in a child's primary school education and will only emerge in response to appropriate opportunities*

Also Joan Freeman in her response to the Select Committee's (1999) question about highly able children responded that:

*'Given the provision and the take up by the child, and what the child does with the provision, that is your measure of ability" (p4)*

The living contradiction that I face is that, from an official point of view, identifying and then providing for would seem to be the dominant focus. My own values look at the situation from a different perspective. My own interpretation of gifted and talented education is more linked to an inclusional and developmental approach, as proposed by Hymer (2007) when he uses the phrase 'virtuous circle' (p4) and by McBeath (2006) when he states:

*'We discover we have vastly underestimated the outer limits of human potential, constrained only by our own imagination and the structures we have invented to contain children's learning. ( p5)*

How do we know what gifts and talents children have if we do not provide them with opportunities to develop an awareness of them? We can identify those they already have, but that gives us no reliable indication of what they could be. If we only label a few children as 'more able' then we are in danger of making this a self-fulfilling prophesy at the expense of those we have overlooked. This is also echoed by Sternberg (1996) when he suggests that:

*'Labels are not just descriptions of reality; they contribute towards shaping reality.'* ( P23)

### **The advantages for the children.**

My original reasons for introducing creative thinking activities and philosophy into the classroom were not actually linked to the area of gifted and talented education, although through reflection on what the results were, I have come to see both as a means of improving the quality of learning and 'talent spotting' in all children. My original intentions were twofold. Firstly I wanted to increase the children's motivation as learners. Secondly I was concerned with the simplistic level of their responses to oral and written questions. I felt they needed an opportunity to explore what they were thinking. Both are separate activities, and yet there are common threads linking them.

### **Philosophy**

In a philosophy session the children will sit in a circle, forming a community of enquiry as proposed by Lipmann (2003). A topic is introduced and questions raised by the children. The group votes on which question to investigate in depth and opinions are aired and exchanged in an open and positive way. This enables the children to think about their own views, compare them to the views of others and make adjustments in the light of new information. As a life skill for an uncertain future it is of immense value. Fisher (2003) describes the benefits of philosophy as:

*' It offers the opportunity not only for young people to attempt to come to terms with a broad range of personal, moral, and social issues, but to become more conscious of themselves as critical thinkers. Children ...see themselves, and the world, in a new way.*

*They gain access to ideas they might not otherwise have thought about, they begin to make connections which lead to deeper understanding. (p. 21)*

And he also suggests (2005) that:

*What is needed for future survival is innovative learning. If our children are to anticipate and cope with the turbulence of change both at an individual and social level they need to learn not simply how to accommodate to the future but how to shape it. (p. 24)*

### **Creative Thinking**

Creative thinking activities have taken many forms but mine are frequently based on the ideas of Edward De Bono, using designs to explore possibilities of unknown situations. For the learner they offer the opportunity to become creative in an unrestricted way. By incorporating drawings they enable the child with poor literary skills to demonstrate imagination without the hindrance of written recording. This is one area that has been very important in the recognition of gifts and talents in children who score badly in literacy based activities.

Claxton (2001) supports using a range of recording and working styles and quotes the results of Sternberg's research that:

*'Students with creative and practical abilities are essentially 'iced out' of the system, because at no point are they allowed to let their abilities shine through and help them perform better.....the result is that career paths may be barred to intellectually talented individuals.'* (p. 31)

And he supports the idea of playing creatively with ideas when he states:

*'In the learner's toolkit imagination is the ability to sense and feel situations which are not physically present, and to explore how they might behave and develop in the mind's eye....The ability to 'go to the movies in your head' is one of the most powerful learning tools we possess. (p87)*



*An example of a child's ideas on what they would do if they could be invisible for a day.*

These activities have been fitted into to the timetable as and when possible. They are not a fixed weekly feature and do not always relate to any other specific curriculum area due to the pressures of timetabling. Despite this they have still been an important indicator of abilities that I would otherwise not have noticed. These are particularly noticeable in the area I would term original thinking; a sense of novelty in the child's response to a certain situation. The illustration above shows a delightful creativity in ideas, an ability to enter through drawing into the world of imagination from a child who found it difficult to express his thoughts in words.

### **Reflections on the Activities.**

In describing some of the activities and sessions carried out with the children I do not wish to separate philosophy from creative thinking as frequently the two overlap. Children's responses in philosophy have been creative; their ideas in creative thinking indicative of deep levels of thought. For the purpose of this paper I shall view both from the perspective of creativity as defined in 'All our Futures' (1999) as being:

*'Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value.'* ( p.29)

I began largely with creative thinking activities; asking the children to design machines to water plants or bath a dog. It was important that they were 'problems' to solve which had no one correct answer, but instead had a variety of possibilities. Some children amazed me with their designing ability and made me realise that working on something that **really** interested them, rather than just feigning interest to keep me happy, increased their

concentration and motivation. There was a delightful 'buzz' as they worked and they stayed on task for far longer than usual. The designs ranged from dog shaped robots to complicated pulleys and alarms.

More than this, though, was a sense that they were taking control of their learning, thinking it through and making choices. They were less dependent on me for advice or instruction, I was able to observe and join in with ideas when invited. For some the increase in perseverance was enough to make me wonder what else they were capable of, if only I gave them the right conditions to show me. They didn't show this level of on-task concentration in other lessons. Several really had a talent in this area, whereas in general lessons, where I set the objectives and the model of what was expected, they performed without any noticeable spark of originality.

This was what I had hoped to find, but as the activities became more structured I also noticed that some of my 'invisible' children were extremely good at coming up with novel and original ideas. When using De Bono's plus, minus or interesting format they would soon be putting more under the last heading than the others. A session on broomstick travel triggered the response from one very quiet girl that the entrances to shops would have to be built on the roof, as you nearly always went in a shop on the level your journey ended.

In a recent session on designing a tourist guide to an alien planet my journal entry recorded the fact that on meeting two boys later that evening:

*'One was still speaking 'alien' and the other, normally a disinterested child, was actually enthusiastic about the lesson and said how much he'd enjoyed it. They had been challenged by how far they could take their ideas; the less able had found a way of showing their talents.*

It is the second boy who made the greatest impression on me here. This was not the first time he'd suddenly come alive in a creative activity. A few months before, when given the task of producing a short film using plastic animals, he had been extremely animated and enthusiastic. The work he produced was really good, and he was the driving force in the small group. This is totally contrary to the slow moving, disinterested child who has to be urged constantly to get on with his work – the one I see in Literacy and Numeracy.

Following up a video recording of this I asked him what the difference was and how had it made him behave so differently. His reply was that it interested him and he was in charge of what he was doing. Moreover, without these previous experiences of him I probably would not have noticed his attention to detail in his last DT project, and his outstanding ability to modify his design and explain why. Through giving him opportunities to create in a safe situation, he was able to show me his designing and making talents.

Examples of exceptional responses have been frequent in the philosophy sessions as well. After one of the early sessions about wildlife my journal recorded:

*'C, who has poor literacy skills, never seems to remember anything of an organisational nature, appearing permanently 'vague', was really animated and excited. So was J, a girl who can be extremely difficult in lessons and has very limited attention. ...Will these sessions enable them to become more confident of their own abilities and carry it into other areas which they find difficult?'*

Since then I have discovered that despite their difficulties with the written word, both children have exceptional understanding of scientific facts and amazing memories where it comes to topics that interest them. J began our unit on the solar system by explaining to me about Pluto's demotion as a planet and that the universe was said to be expanding. Without the opportunity of the philosophy would I have continued to see her as a rather disruptive and difficult personality in the classroom?

In another example a very quiet boy (A) made me suddenly aware of the depth of thought going on when we had finished a P4C session on whether the hero of a cartoon film should have won the race or stopped to help his friend.

*He listened to much of the discussion, saying very little, apart from in his small group. As the session finished and I asked for other questions the film had raised, his response quite took me aback. It was one of those tingle moments when you feel you've just experienced something special. Looking thoughtful A asked, 'Why do people have to be nasty just because they want something badly?' Here was a child easily overlooked making an incredibly deep and fundamental question about the nature of human beings.*

This was not just a one –off incident by any means. One of the aspects of philosophical thinking sessions that I have come to value most highly is the frequency with which I am astonished by a child’s response. This is not to say that I don’t think children are capable of thinking in such depth, quite the contrary, but rather it is the very children who come out with the most profound responses that astonish me. They are often not the ones with the high assessment scores or curriculum levels; they are often restless, ‘challenging’ and appear disinterested in their education. And yet when it comes to thinking they seem to have a refreshing originality and perception. These are frequently the children who would not be identified on a formal register as being ‘Gifted and Talented’, and yet given the right space in which to show what they can do, it’s obvious that they are talented.

In another P4C session where we followed up with questions to the film *The Piano in Literacy*, both my TA and myself were astounded by the understanding some children had to memories. The animated film shows an old man playing the piano, where he appears to be joined by the ‘ghosts’ of his wife, a dying soldier and himself as a child. The question they chose to discuss was why he chose to play the piano if it brought him sad memories. The session was recorded and I was able to talk to the children afterwards about how deep and profound their ideas had been. Among their replies were ideas such as:

\*It made him feel close to the people who had died

\*The memories comforted him

\*It made him feel that they were still around

\*He felt calmer for remembering and it helped him cope with the grief.

Although comments such as these might not make me reach immediately for my pen and add these children to the Gifted and Talented list, they do have an effect in the way I perceive the abilities of these children. I am aware that I have scratched the surface of their understanding of life and emotions, and that if this is just the surface, what else might they be capable of. Of course using philosophy and creative thinking is not necessarily going to show me who will become the next world class musician or scientist, as the ‘talents’ are not subject specific, but they do indicate that there is an intelligent ability in these children which the ordinary curriculum is not promoting.

The children themselves have shown an insight into where these activities might lead them. Concerning philosophy sessions they have voiced opinions such as:

- It gets your mind going and you think, 'Oh, I never thought of that.'
- It makes you think about what it would be like if things were different.
- It makes you get inside your head and talk to yourself.

In my opinion these are talents that can be developed into their adult lives and enable them to lead satisfying and productive lives: surely what the government wants for its citizens.

## **Reflections and Conclusions**

One of the difficulties I have found in trying to convince colleagues that philosophy and creative thinking enables me to recognise inclusive gifts and talents is that there is no hard evidence beyond a better response in the SATs reading test and answering questions more fully. This of course does not indicate having a gift or a talent; it could be that oral practice has produced better verbal fluency.

This is the point where I need to return to my interpretation of how I see gifts and talents and what it is I am trying to achieve. I know that I am developing the children's verbal skills and ability to think more creatively this way through looking at their responses. But this does not automatically link it to the nurturing of gifts and talents, those special qualities I believe every child has. However, just because it's not something easily or accurately measured does not mean it has no value. As Shekerjian (1990) states:

There are a lot of things worth knowing that resist being made familiar, but still we are sure the answers must exist.' (p. xxii)

I am drawn to Huxtable's (2007) definition of inclusional gifts and talents in that she states:

*When I talk of gifts I think of something I have created, crafted, developed with another in mind; the investment of something of me and an attempt to go beyond the shell of the other person, to think about the person inside; what would be meaningful, of worth, to them that I would like to offer.*

This is how I would envisage the gifted child: the child who has made a personal investment in their own learning and is able to offer it to others, whether it is an understanding of science or an ability to empathise.

At its simplest I am looking for **potential** areas of growth in the children. What excites me in their responses is not that I 'recognise' talent, but rather that I 'recognise' the potential for talent. As I reflect on the results of my reading and my action research cycle I feel the distinction is very significant. I approach the sessions wanting to be surprised and having my preconceptions challenged. It is not that I have already decided who the gifted and talented in the group already are; instead I am waiting for them to reveal themselves through the 'virtuous circle.' It may well be that their particular talents do not emerge until a much later time, but my gift to them is the space to explore their strengths, preferences and thoughts about life. I can assist them in becoming better learners by taking them through uncertainty and times of not knowing, by allowing them to use their imaginations to work through 'what if' situations. If they are to be successful adults they will need to know how to learn, how to deal with uncertainty and also be aware of their own strengths.

It is my belief that in providing the children with opportunities to explore their own values, beliefs and creativity I am opening up possibilities for them. That this is in some way linked to my awareness of my own talents and how these have gradually 'opened up' for me is also something that both results from what I do with the children and feeds into the next stage. The action research cycle thus links to my own development of my living values.

Freeman's recommendations on the Standards Site of the characteristics of 'Gifted and Talented' children list many that I am seeing developing in the children:

- prefer verbal to written activities
- be self taught in their own interest areas
- be artistic
- have strong views and opinions
- have a lively and original imagination / sense of humour
- focus on their own interests rather than on what is being taught
- be socially adept
- appear arrogant or socially inept
- be easily bored by what they perceive as routine tasks
- show a strong sense of leadership

In her study of what acknowledged geniuses had in common, Shekerjian (1990) identified several abilities or traits that each of them shared. It is my belief that these are also being encouraged in the sessions I take with the children. They are:

- having a natural talent or skill and recognising it
- working at it
- taking risks
- being able to tolerate periods of uncertainty
- creating the personally right conditions

What I feel the philosophy and creative thinking are doing is making the children aware of talents beyond school based subjects, enabling them to deal with unknowns, encouraging them to work at ideas that interest them and not being afraid to take risks. My gift to them is to show that I value them as individuals and that their gifts are of value to themselves and the wider community, for not only do they share their talents with me but increasingly they are supporting each other.

It may well be that a large number of these children will never develop their own gifts further. But without giving them the opportunity to find out the number would surely be even greater. If they are to develop into Sternberg's (1996) successfully intelligent adults then they need to have the chance to think analytically, creatively and practically. All three types of thinking are included in the philosophy and creative thinking activities. Sternberg (1996) describes it thus:

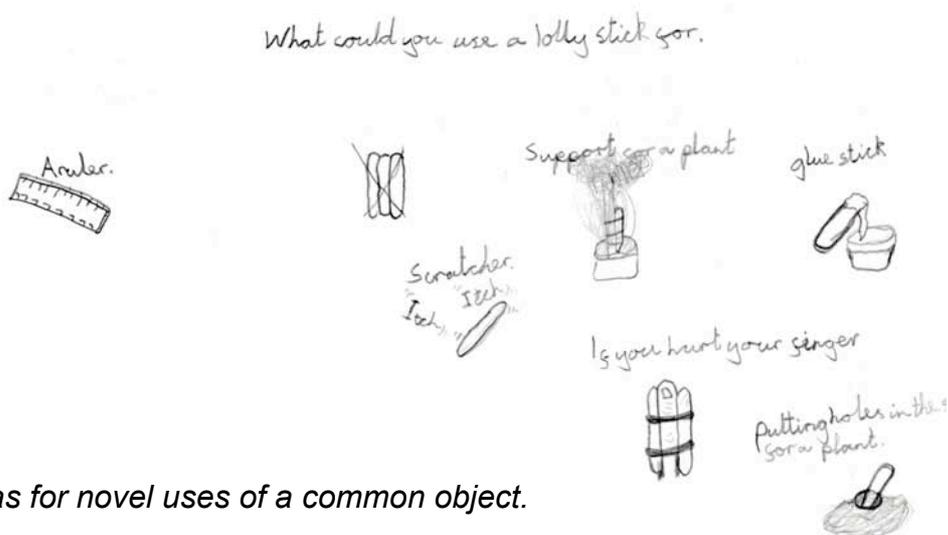
'Successfully intelligent people question assumptions and encourage others to do so.....without the impetus of those who question assumptions, little or no progress would ever be made in any human endeavour. (p. 201 )

By choosing to develop this through philosophy and creative thinking activities I am also aiming to reach those children who are demoralised in a currently overwhelming literate culture. Claxton (2001) makes the point to support this when he cites Sternberg's research:

'Students with creative and practical abilities are essentially 'iced out' of the system, because at no point are they allowed too let their abilities shine through and help them perform better.....the result is that career paths may be barred to intellectually talented individuals.' (p. 31)

Gifts and Talents are not restricted to the school curriculum. The future adult will need flexibility when it comes to learning new skills, perseverance through times of change and the ability to adapt to new technologies. In this I am reminded of the quote by Eric Hoffer, which states:

*'In times of change the learners will inherit the earth, while the learned will find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists'.*



*Ideas for novel uses of a common object.*

We cannot possibly know now what 'talents' will be of use in the future and yet we have government policies suggesting we need to keep a register of those with potential. My argument is that every child has potential and therefore needs to be encouraged to become an independent thinker with an awareness of what they are good at. By expanding the provision within their curriculum I believe that the future for them will bring the rewards.

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