

THE CONUNDRUMS OF SUCCESS

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Abstract: *What does success mean for the gifted individual? How do we as teachers determine our success in working with such individuals? Is the true criterion for both the manifestation by the student of outstanding performance? Is this not an entirely reasonable proposition – that what distinguishes the gifted individual is exactly that –outstanding performance? Or is this, as some argue, a misleading emphasis for the educator? This is a debate which is central to our understanding of the goals and purposes of gifted education. Which road should we take? Or is there an alternative route?*

In defence of success

Success, it can surely be argued, is a natural requirement of living. The lion must succeed in catching the antelope; the antelope must succeed in escaping the lion. The tiniest seed must succeed in finding fertile soil in which to grow. And we humans must each succeed in a thousand different ways if we are to survive in the complex physical and social environments we have created for ourselves.

Little wonder, then, that success plays a significant part in our judgement of ourselves and of our fellows. Success financially, success at work, in sport, in relationships, success in gaining a promotion, in winning election to a coveted role, in having our work chosen for publication or exhibition: success in any field will have an impact on our self concept and on how others perceive us.

Conversely, the lack of such success can profoundly diminish a person in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of others, and can inhibit his or her actions even in other unrelated fields.

In short, the experience of success in some acknowledged form could justifiably be defined as a *need* for human beings. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs would seem to suggest exactly this. Not only is it directly relevant to all the lower orders of needs, but self-actualisation, placed at the pinnacle of his hierarchy and described as motivation, a desire to "become everything that one is capable of becoming", would seem to be hardly capable of realisation without the experience of success.

If this is so, then clearly there are important implications for education. However we structure this, children will need to have experiences of success in order to learn successfully and in order to build confident yet realistic perceptions of themselves and their own capabilities. This is by no means a new or radical concept: the child-centred approach to learning embodies just such a philosophy.

The question is, what does this mean for the gifted child?

Success and the gifted learner

In this paper I want to begin by examining this question, and from there to lead on to a view of our purposes in gifted education which may help us to resolve, or at least to reflect constructively on, some of the significant issues that confront us in this field.

“By their deeds ye shall know them”

Before we can deal with this question, we must first decide what we mean when we talk about “success”. In Western society at least, it is a term which is intimately bound up with performance. We can scarcely conceive of it in any other way. Whether it is about learning your spelling list correctly, being picked to star in the school play, graduating with an “A”, or the Kiwis beating the Aussies at rugby, cricket, tennis, swimming, netball, rowing, horse-racing - or just possibly the other way round on occasion -, success for us is essentially defined by performance.

The significance of performance first comes to the fore with gifted students when we are considering how to recognise those who fall into this category.

Historically we relied on high achievement – i.e. performance - in IQ tests to determine who would qualify as gifted. As we came to acknowledge that giftedness could apply in fields other than the purely academic, we began to look at a wider range of possible identifying factors. This period saw the development of instruments such as the Purdue and the Hartman-Renzulli Rating Scales which gave credence to a teacher’s more subjective assessment of learning behaviour and characteristics, as well as the development of parent questionnaires, learning style tests, interest-a-lyzers and other such devices.

In recent years, however, we seem to be seeing a return to an emphasis on the purely quantifiable, a resurgence of the view that gifted students can only be recognised by measurable performance.

For example, in an extended article on gifted children which appeared in the *New Zealand Listener* last year, reference was made by a source close to the New Zealand Ministry of Education to an alleged impending directive to schools advising that entry to gifted programmes should be based solely on evidence of “outstanding performance”. (April 21, 2007).

Little has since been officially said about this, though it is interesting to note that the Ministry now refers to “Talent Development Initiatives” and “talent-development programmes” where once it would have used the word “gifted” in these contexts.

This is a change which reflects a stance taken by the writers of the American Federal Report, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent*”, published in October 1993 by the US Office of Educational Research and Improvement, which stated that

The term "gifted" connotes a mature power rather than a developing ability and, therefore, is antithetic to recent research findings about children.

It then went on to offer a new definition replacing “gifted” with “talented” and beginning thus:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment.

These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields.

(OERI, 1993, p.26) Thus the focus is placed very specifically on various kinds of *performance* - those tangible outcomes which can in some way be quantified, measured or observed, or at least predicted with some degree of accuracy.

A reasonable approach?

Our first response to this may be to say that it appears to be entirely reasonable. Surely we do expect the gifted to produce work at a gifted level, at least sufficiently often for it to be seen, measured or recorded in some objective way? Isn't that the whole point, we may ask.

Very relevant to this debate, teachers' subjective judgements about children's ability are notoriously unreliable. As far back as 1959, Pagnato and Birch (cited in Clark, 2002, p.334) found that of every 100 students teachers named as gifted, only 26% actually were, while at the same time teachers *failed* to identify some 55% of the genuinely gifted. All of us who work in the field can provide reams of anecdotal evidence that still today many teachers have only the vaguest idea of what constitutes exceptional ability – like the teacher who told me that a certain child *must* be gifted because “she writes so *neatly*”, the other side of the same coin as all those teachers who insist that a child *cannot possibly* be gifted because their work is untidy, illegible or unfinished. And so on!

Well-intentioned as they undoubtedly are, if attitudes like these are even moderately typical, then tangible products or performance (especially the hard data of test scores) must surely be a more effective way of finding the gifted (or the talented) than relying on teacher opinion.

Standardised testing, in contrast to individual teacher opinion, draws on a large population sample, producing definitive norms, and therefore surely gives us more accurate classification than does teacher judgement. Secondly it is much easier and less time-consuming for the teacher than trying to make qualitative judgements, so schools are more likely to buy into such a process. Overall the result would logically seem to be that if we use this approach, we will have a better idea of how many children are likely to

fall into this or that category, making for more efficient planning, administration and resourcing.

Thus surely this will lead to more reliable and more equitable outcomes.

Or at least, so the argument goes.

Does this line of reasoning hold up?

It does not. It is fatally flawed in a number of respects.

The most obvious flaws have been very thoroughly traversed by other writers, so I shall just summarise them briefly here.

The first really huge problem with this line of reasoning is that it completely ignores the fact that many genuinely gifted children, including some of our most highly gifted, do NOT demonstrate their abilities in ways their teachers perceive or can adequately measure.

There are various quite different reasons for this.

To begin with, there is the very simple fact that the opportunity to manifest ability in observable or measurable ways is so very dependent on the learning environment and the teaching practices to which a child is exposed. But what research tells us is that most regular classrooms do *not* provide opportunity for performance at a gifted level. (Archambault et al, 1992, and Whitton, 1997, cited in Westberg & Daoust, 2003). As recently as last year, Francoys Gagne, comprehensively reviewing all the factors that impact on the emergence of giftedness, similarly concluded that the weakest link of all lies in the quality and appropriateness of what schools provide. (Gagne, 2007).

In addition, there is a whole range of other factors which can obscure or mask high ability. If we insist on performance as the only criterion for the identification of the gifted child, then we will continue NOT to identify some of our most highly creative individuals, the divergent thinkers whose responses do not correspond with our preordained one-right-answer education system. We will fail to find those gifted children who have learned to inhibit their responses in order to “fit in”, those who are “twice-exceptional”, those whose cultural imperatives do not match our own, those whose development has been delayed by poverty, poor resources or discrimination, and all those angry, resentful and frustrated little souls who do ardent battle with the system in the only way they know how, and are then labelled “behaviour problems” as a convenient way of not having to deal with their reality.

Nor can we rely on any form of standardised testing as a way of avoiding these pitfalls. Let me say at once that I’m an advocate *for* tests of cognitive abilities (or “IQ testing”) as one of the valued tools in our assessment repertoire. But we must acknowledge the research which tells us that such tests can discriminate against highly creative thinkers

and against those from different cultural backgrounds, and thus use them judiciously to *include* rather than to *exclude*.

That, I think, is well established, but we are perhaps less familiar with the possibility that test results can be manipulated to achieve ends that have nothing to do with children's real welfare. For example, where such testing is used as the sole criterion for entry to gifted programmes with a cut-off point being set, there have been reported instances where the cut-off points have been raised or lowered in different years according to how much funding the education authority was prepared to make available. Raise the cut-off point, and lo and behold, fewer gifted students, less funding required – a strategy not altogether unknown in other governmental activities.

In short, an identification process based purely on performance neatly serves the interests of those teachers who want black-and-white solutions which require no challenge to their thinking, time or energy, and those administrators who want systems that are easy to manage and involve minimal expenditure. It may sometimes serve the interests of those who have a particular political or social agenda.

It does not, and never can, serve the best interests of the gifted child.

The first conundrum

Thus we see the first example of the conundrum: if we focus on success, then when it comes to identification, we will at least partially fail.

But this notion of focussing on measurable performance casts a much longer shadow on the future of the gifted child than simply at the moment of identification, even for those who make it through this channelled gateway and are recognised for what they are.

If we believe that measurable performance or achievement is the sole criterion of giftedness, then this belief shapes, not only how we try to identify the gifted child, but also everything we then do for the gifted child. It determines the nature and scope of the provisions we put in place. It defines the goals we set for the child and for ourselves. It decides for us how we will monitor and evaluate what we do. And just as using performance as a criterion can limit our ability to identify gifted learners, so it can limit our ability to provide for them.

Let me give you an example of this in practice. Some years ago I had a connection with a high school whose principal was totally dedicated to the view that the whole business of identifying and catering for gifted students revolved around achieving high level performance. Thus the entire programme for these students from Year 9 onwards was driven by his determination that in Year 13 every one of them would gain an "A" bursary in the Scholarship exam which was then the country's highest external exam. To that end he chose their subject options for them at every level, regardless of their personal preferences. His view, publicly stated, was that gifted students should have fewer choices than other students. He applied that in various ways. For example, one student who wanted to take journalism in her Year 12 year as a prerequisite for tertiary study in her

chosen career was refused permission to do so because it was not a Scholarship subject. When some schools opted into another externally monitored exam outside the Ministry requirements, he insisted that his gifted students take this too. The students as a group did not want to do so, wishing instead to concentrate on their current exams. He and the deputy principal repeatedly visited their class and relentlessly harangued them until they finally gave in. Two who held out were individually interviewed and pressured to change their minds; their parents were similarly lectured, and subsequently expressed their anger at such harassment of themselves and their children. The same principal refused to give one boy leave from school when he was selected to play soccer for a New Zealand junior team. The reason? The school prioritised rugby. Boys gifted in sport should make that their focus.

I knew this principal, and I have absolutely no doubt that he was sincere in his belief that he was doing the right thing for all these students. But perhaps the underlying attitude in that school to students as people was best summed up by the Board member who referred to students as “units of production”.

This may seem an extreme case. I certainly trust and believe that it is. Valuing academic achievement is very definitely NOT wrong, entirely the reverse. I would like to emphasise that statement. It is certainly something I personally value very highly. (For the record, I’m a rugby fan too!) I want to acknowledge here that there are many, many schools who support their students in reaching academic and indeed sporting achievement without going to the extremes that this principal did.

And yet this school was regarded as one of our “good” schools, solely because of the high marks gained by a handful of its students in an external exam. This highlights for us the second part of our conundrum. What part *should* success play in setting our goals for gifted students and deciding whether those have been reached? Is quantifiable or visible achievement the best or the only measure of success? If not, what other measure could we possibly use?

The great divide

This is a question of paramount importance for both parents and teachers. When we are parents, it is one of the key questions to shape our enquiries about our child’s progress from the day he or she first enters school. Is he or she doing well? How do we know? If marks and grades and test results are good, does that mean there’s nothing to worry about? Later, when it’s time to move from the local primary to the big world of the high school, how do we choose a school for our child? Will a record of external exam successes guarantee the best for our gifted learner? What else *can* we ask about?

If we are teachers, the same question arises and becomes especially significant when we’re dealing with children at the outer edges of the ability range. What should our expectations be for these children? Is helping the gifted child develop his or her specific abilities – his or her “talents” – the single most important responsibility we have? If all our gifted students win A Bursaries and other high prizes, can we say with certainty, “Our gifted programme works”?

Two writers who have been particularly concerned with these kinds of issues are Linda Silverman and Stephanie Tolan. Both have seriously questioned the increasing focus on performance and “talent development” so emphatically stated in the American Federal Report, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent*. Both draw a sharp distinction between giftedness as something which can only be defined by its outward products, and giftedness as something which shapes the *inner perceptions* of the individual and influences both internal and external responses.

Tolan, noting that “egalitarian references are everywhere” in the Federal Report, concludes with dismay that, “We are being urged away from the threatening idea of unusual intelligence and directed toward a more comfortable array of fragmented capacities.” (Tolan, 1994 (a), p. 2), Silverman similarly warns us that

As we split our understanding of the interrelated intellectual/moral/emotional structure of giftedness into many fragmented talents, we risk creating more one-sided children. And as we place too much value on performance ... we may be inadvertently teaching gifted children that they are valued for what they do, instead of for who they are in their totality. Annemarie Roeper would say that we have forgotten the Self of the child. Yes, we have lost something precious in the bargain: our ability to perceive the morally sensitive inner world of the gifted.

(Silverman, 1994, p.5).

In “Discovering the Gifted Ex-Child”, Tolan explores her concern about this at greater length. Noting that gifted children reach specific developmental milestones and acquire various skills significantly earlier than other children, she points out that

the difference is not mere precocity, not just “getting there sooner”. The child who deals with abstract concepts early brings those concepts to bear on all later experience. This different, more complex way of processing experience creates essentially *different* experience. (My italics).

(Tolan, 1994 (b), p.3.)

Thus for Tolan as for Silverman, giftedness is

“a quality of mind that creates a genuinely unusual developmental trajectory ... The reality of giftedness remains a different experience of life.”

(Tolan, 1994 (b), pp 2-4).

In support of her thesis, she cites a number of the common characteristics of the gifted child with which we are all familiar, such as unusual retentiveness, unusually varied interests, curiosity, accelerated pace of thought processes, ability to generate original

ideas and solutions, humour, a heightened concern for justice and morality, and so on, pointing out that all these are differences in *kind* rather than in precocious acquisition.

The significance of this is that all such characteristics *change the way* in which someone perceives and reacts to experience.

All of us who live or work with gifted children have seen a thousand instances of this. I recall observing assessment sessions where a preschooler would be left alone to explore a table laden with different items of equipment. For example, one item was a small black box containing a powerful magnet, with a few dozen little magnetised metal stars sticking together to make a little tower on the top. Most children took a fairly perfunctory look at this, and, if they picked it up, played rather randomly with it for, at most, one minute. Gifted preschoolers reacted very differently. They would carefully take the little tower apart and try to reconstruct it or make another shape on top of the box. They would experiment to see if the little stars would stick to the sides and the bottom of the box as well as to the top. They would lay the stars out on the floor and make patterns with them, and then they would try to pick them up with the magnetised box all in one go. They would discover that the little stars would fly up to meet the descending box, and they would experiment to see how high they could get the little stars to leap up. Sooner or later, they would all start to invent a story about what they were doing. “Wheeeee, see the star vacuum cleaner vacuum up the stars!”

You can call this “gifted performance” if you like, and you can even measure it and say that in every case this took about 15 minutes in contrast to the one minute of other children. But the *key difference* here is one of *perception*. Gifted preschoolers perceived many more questions they could ask about this little item, many more angles they could explore and experiment with, many more discoveries they could make about its qualities. What they experienced with that box was utterly different in kind from what most children experienced, and *that’s* Tolan’s point.

Why so different?

How does it come about that some people see giftedness purely in terms of performance, while others see it as expressing a fundamental internal difference in the individual? Whose view should guide our response as parents and as educators?

In an extremely interesting essay on differences between male and female perceptions of giftedness, Linda Silverman quotes one Dad whose puzzled response seems to sum up the dilemma for those who try to define giftedness by performance. Told that his five year old son had been assessed as gifted, this Dad’s comment was, “He’s only five. What could he have *done* in five years to be gifted?” (Silverman, in press, p.2).

Silverman has been involved in the assessment of some 5500 gifted children. Throughout this extensive involvement, she records that she has noted that mothers often react with relief when a diagnosis of giftedness is confirmed, while fathers, like the one just quoted, are much more likely to be sceptical.

Acknowledging that it is not always so, she nevertheless concludes that in general this reflects the differences in the relationships parents often have with their children in childhood. Mothers are still more likely to be the primary caregivers for very young children. Thus they have more opportunity to notice that their children are moving faster through the early developmental stages than other children. But as Silverman notes, a mother's initial pleasure in her child's development often begins to turn to uneasiness as she sees that developmental differences are creating a distance between her child and others of the same age. She may begin to worry about how her child will fit in at school, whether he or she will be lonely, what the teacher will do with a child who's already reading, what she as a parent should do. But in our society, it takes quite some courage to ask the "g" question, "Is my child gifted?" Hence the relief when an expert says "Yes, your instincts are right": now the mother has some definite starting point for finding out how to help her child.

Fathers on the other hand very often have a less intimate hour-by-hour contact with their children during these early years, and thus may have much less chance to see them interacting with other children of the same age. They may not have the same opportunity to become so aware of differences in their children or of what those differences could mean for their child's adjustment to school. Thus if the question of giftedness is raised, a father – understandably – is more likely to fall back on his existing notions of what giftedness is, notions he shares with the rest of the community, of people doing extraordinary and outstanding things. Silverman interprets his reaction at this point as essentially a protective one. His child does not appear to be doing what he would think of as extraordinary and outstanding things. What if his child is put into a gifted programme and fails? In Silverman's words, he worries that his child "may be set up for failure – a life of unbearable pressures and false hopes." So he may doubt the diagnosis and be hesitant about involvement in any special provision.

Thus both parents are equally concerned for their child's welfare and happiness, but each is viewing this from a completely different standpoint. (Silverman, in press, pp 4-5).

Remembering that Silverman herself points out that this is a generalisation, those of you who are here today as parents may nevertheless find her comments interesting to reflect on in the light of your own experience and what you've observed in others!

Silverman's observations of this significant difference led her to review the literature in the field, where, sure enough, she found that differences between masculine and feminine perspectives of giftedness become apparent even in the earliest writings on the topic. Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin and father of the study of intelligence, published his seminal text *Hereditary Genius* in 1869. Based on his study of the lives of eminent British men, mostly from wealthy families, this book established eminence – ie high level performance – as the "quintessential evidence" of giftedness. In contrast, Leta Stetter Hollingworth, who taught the first-ever course on the "Nurture and Needs of the Gifted" at Columbia University Teachers' College in 1922, rejected eminence as a useful criterion, and focussed her writings on the psychosocial development and adjustment

issues gifted children encounter as a result of their developmental differences.
(Silverman, in press, p.15)

These profoundly opposite views have continued to drive debates about the nature of giftedness and the role of gifted education right through to the present day. Silverman quotes, for example, Sternberg's five criteria for determining giftedness from his triarchic theory published in 1985:

1. excellence relative to peers
2. rarity of a high level skill
3. the area in which the person excels must lead to productivity or the potential for productivity
4. it is demonstrable through valid assessments
5. it is valuable – the excellence the person possesses must be valued by his or her society

and contrasts this with comments by Annemarie Roeper, writing in firstly in 1982 and then in 1996:

Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences.

And then:

The Self of the gifted child is structured differently. Their depth of awareness is different. The center of their inner life is different. Their view of the world is more complex in a fundamental way ... There is a gifted personality structure, and the more highly gifted a child is, the more this difference becomes apparent.

(Silverman, in press, pp22-24).

The implications

Thus for Roeper, Silverman and Tolan and others sharing their perspectives on these issues,

The missing element in the achievement-oriented models is the *gifted child*. With the emphasis on talent development, the field has lost sight of the *inner experience* of giftedness. (My italics)

(Silverman, in press, p.23). Again, Grant & Piechowski write of researchers and theorists proposing this model as people who are “trapped by the metaphor of ‘gifts’”. They go on to describe this with a vivid metaphor of their own:

The models and theories set to maximise giftedness regard gifted children much as farmers regard cows and pigs, with an eye to getting them to produce more. They do not describe how giftedness works – how the gifted think, feel and experience.

(Grant & Piechowski, 1999, p.8, cited Silverman, in press, p. 23). As you consider this, you may perhaps be reminded of the high school I described earlier: it seems a fairly accurate comparison.

In contrast, Silverman pleads for us to recognise that a focus on the gifted child's experience in childhood matters, "not merely in terms of how it shapes or foreshadows their adult lives, but because childhood is precious in and of itself, and children's happiness or misery is important." (Silverman, in press, p.24).

Grant and Piechowski assert that in fact child-centredness is the "moral responsibility of gifted educators", stating that:

To recognise also means to acknowledge, to accept what we have identified in its own right and on its own terms Being child-centred means respecting children's autonomy, providing experiences that enable children to follow their passions and be self-actualising, and seeking to understand things from a child's point of view. The strongest argument for child-centredness is that it regards children as ends, not means.... It does not impose a way of being on them.

(Grant & Piechowski, 1999, pp. 6-8, cited Silverman, in press, p.24).

What does this mean in practice for children's lives? If one picture is worth a thousand words, then perhaps sometimes one quote is worth a thousand academic papers. I'm thinking of a line from a poem by a nine-year-old boy which a colleague recently sent me:

Like chalk, I crush easily.

What do those few stark words tell us about that child's experience of school?

Many of you who are here as parents will hear that child's cry echoing in your hearts as you think of your own child. Dabrowski's work on "over-excitabilities" has simply confirmed what we as parents already know, that gifted children have profoundly heightened sensitivities, and experience life with an intensity that is beyond the comprehension of most. That is something that brings with it the capacity for both great joys and great griefs. It is a capacity which at one and the same time makes the gifted child uniquely vulnerable and yet which also plays an integral part in shaping those insights and perceptions that are the most valued creations of the gifted mind and the gifted imagination.

The third conundrum: where to from here?

I should think that by now it is fairly obvious on which the side of the fence you will find me. Throughout all my years in education, I have believed in and sought to follow a child-centred approach, an approach which holds that the nurturing of a child's imaginal, emotional, social and ethical growth is as integral to the child's

development as is nurturing the intellect. These are key components in the REACH model I've used for over twenty years in working with gifted learners. I share utterly with Linda Silverman the view that, "childhood is precious in and of itself, and children's happiness or misery is important", and I'm immensely relieved to note the growing number of papers and workshops which recognise the social and emotional needs of gifted youngsters. I deeply value scholarship, but I am uncomfortable with any approach that separates learning performance from the individual and values that performance as the one relevant measure of the individual. I cannot equate that with scholarship in its truest sense.

And yet I find myself now with a question which perhaps you share – my third conundrum.

Talent development focusses on the specific ability, not on the child. It measures effectiveness in terms of level of performance in that ability area. It is not necessarily concerned with the inner self of the child. It does not have to take into consideration those needs of the child which do not directly relate to that ability. It does not have to ask is the child happy, is the child satisfied, is the child making friends and feeling good about him or herself.

But if we reject this and opt instead for a child-centred approach which does ask these questions and does care for the child's inner self, then where is the place of performance in our view? Does it have a place, and if so, what is it? Can one be child-centred and still value performance and measurable forms of success?

This becomes an especially relevant issue at high school, where students have many teachers, teachers have many classes, and everyone is intricately involved with exams and marks and grades and passes and fails. If we cannot find an answer to this question for our gifted learners at this level, then "talent development" will predominate.

So what is the answer? Must we accept that a child-centred approach can work only in the younger years of a child's schooling?

As the parent of two adults who are in their thirties, I do not find that my concern for their happiness and wellbeing diminishes now that they are grown-up. The decisions are now theirs, but the hopes, fears and joys of parenting remain just as strong regardless of age. That is just as true for my husband as it is for me.

And I realise when I look back that, inherent in whatever we did as parents, there was always a concern, a hope, not only for our children's happiness and wellbeing at that moment in time, but for all their future years as well.

That applied in so many ways. When we taught them it mattered to be truthful, when we encouraged them to complete a job once started, when we showed our pleasure in their kindness to animals, when we played riotous and thoroughly silly family games based on punning and word jokes, when we included them in our discussions about politics and

community affairs, even when we taught them table manners, we were teaching them values and attitudes and skills for *life*, not just for when they were children. Similarly, when they each showed a sustained liking for and ability in certain areas of the arts, we did not think of this as something that would stop being relevant once they stopped being children. On the contrary, when we supported them in exploring and developing their abilities and interests in those areas, we did so precisely because we knew that this was an involvement that could carry on into adulthood and play a significant part in shaping how they lived their lives. Thus it *mattered* for them to have the opportunity to develop their skills, to find out how well they could really do in those areas - whether they were viable as career choices or simply as personal interests -, to make subject choices in school which would allow them to pursue those abilities *beyond* school.

Thus our experience of parenting has been that *it is not possible to care for a child in the present without also caring about and for that child in the future.*

I suggest that this would hold true for every parent here, and indeed that it is so natural and so instinctive that we take it for granted.

I put it to you that if this is integral to parenting, so must it also be integral to educating.

I put it to you too that just as a care for the child includes nurturing those values, attitudes and skills that will guide the child throughout life, so it must also include nurturing those abilities that the child has the capacity to use to shape his or her own future life role.

If it so happens that those abilities are exceptional, that does not negate our responsibility to help the child recognise and develop those abilities.

Does this mean that a focus on “talent development” is right after all?

What am I saying here? If nurturing ability is something we *should* be seeking to do, is that the same as talent development, with its emphasis on measurable or visible outcomes?

As parents, of course we had been delighted when our children succeeded in exams and won awards at school. Such success boosted their confidence, rewarded their efforts, and opened the door to further study in their chosen fields. These measurable outcomes were important for them. Let me make it *very* clear that I am not dismissing that. But did it equate to nurturing their abilities? Ultimately, was it enough?

To try to answer that question, let's look at some great human beings, some acknowledged “successes”, and let's try to understand how they might perceive their own lives. What would they say their success had been?

Mother Teresa, for example. Can we suppose that she would look back on her life and say she succeeded because now she is to be recognised for all time to come as a saint? Or did her success lie in the fact that she was *able* to bring comfort to a dying human being, and *able* to make others aware of the value of such acts?

Stephen Hawking: he surely and quite rightly enjoys the recognition he has won, the awards, the opportunities he has had and has taken despite his physical condition. But can we doubt that his greatest satisfaction will lie in having wrestled with a huge intellectual problem and found answers that had eluded all others?

Colin McCahon, probably New Zealand's greatest ever painter: would he have said that his artistic achievement could be measured by the fact that people now pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for his paintings, or by the numbers of his paintings that hang in public and private collections, or even by the fact that Australia bought his largest work, the great "I Am" painting? Or was his achievement the fact that he transformed how we see and experience the land that is New Zealand, both physically and spiritually? That he enabled others to see and feel what he had uniquely seen and felt?

The Dalai Lama, driven out of his country, robbed of all the physical trappings of his leadership, in worldly terms a ruler without power, yet continuing to be venerated worldwide, not just by his own people. Why? Would he see himself as a failure? Or does he find meaning and effectiveness in his ability to reach out to people, to enlighten both hearts and minds?

Finally Sir Edmund Hillary: he had perhaps the most measurable outcome of all: he climbed Mt Everest! When he died earlier this year, all New Zealand wept. Young men in hoodies stood with tears on their cheeks, Mums brought their toddlers in pushchairs, schools and shops closed, businessmen came out of their offices, fashionable women in Remuera lined the streets for his funeral procession, completely extraordinary for normally fairly undemonstrative New Zealanders. Why? Because he climbed a mountain? Or because he spent the rest of his life working to help the people of Nepal and somehow through both his courage and his generosity touched all of us with a sense of what is finest in our human spirit?

As Deborah Fraser puts it in her essay on spiritual giftedness, these are all people who "have walked among us and shaped history and culture in unforgettable ways." (Fraser, 2004, p.259).

In their widely different spheres, they have all "performed". Yet it is not the quantifiable aspects of their performance which ultimately determine their greatness, but the intrinsic nature of what they did, how it extends our understanding, enriches our knowledge, changes our vision, excites our imagination, touches our hearts, expands our horizons.

Resolving the conundrum

What appears to unite all these people is an intense and extraordinary vision, and a fierce and undeniable drive to realise that vision. Whatever their sphere, therein surely lies their giftedness. People like this will tell you that they do not really have a choice about what they do. Plaudits, credits and awards are a pleasant affirmation, but essentially extraneous. What matters, what is incredibly important, what absorbs them, is the striving towards that vision. Even though there will always be more dying people to comfort,

more paintings to paint, more mysteries of the universe to solve, it is that striving which brings satisfaction and fulfilment.

And there I think we have it. There I think we find what success truly means. Not just quantifiable performance, not just tangible products. Success is the sense of realising a vision, of fulfilling one's life purpose.

There too I think we have our justification for nurturing ability, intrinsically different from the limited focus of talent development, intimately linked to the inner self of the individual, ultimately linked to the greater good of all humanity.

This does not just apply to extraordinary human beings like those I've just listed, nor is it confined to the gifted. It applies to all of us, those of us who are not gifted as well as those of us who are. Ask yourself why *you* are here today. How many of us are here solely to gain some sort of credit on our CVs? Or are we here because this might help us in fulfilling our important life role as caring parent or caring teacher?

Thus what I want to propose to you today is:

- that the *child-centred approach* which guides us so wisely in the earlier years is most fittingly balanced by an approach which guides students towards *understanding and achieving fulfilment of the inner self in their adult life role*, and
- that *that* is what needs to shape our education system as we consider forward for our students to life beyond school.

Annmarie Roeper makes a related and important point when she argues that success is in fact a natural byproduct of an education that concentrates on the development of the Self. (cited in Silverman, in press, p.24). It's somewhat like an upside-down version of the old saying, "Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves", or cents and dollars in today's money. If we truly care for the inner self of the gifted child, truly respect and value the insights and imaginings and thoughts that that inner self produces and do all we can to nurture that, then that child's own natural drive and vision will bring about that translation into what the child actually does, creates or produces.

Re-defining success

When we consider this approach, it becomes immediately apparent how far it is removed from what we have been encouraged to see as "success" in our materialistic, competitive society. Both in school and extending beyond school, success has come to mean doing better than one's fellows. Winning. Being first. Earning more. Owning more. Having more power than others.

Contrast this with a story Renzulli tells in an article of his I shall refer to shortly: he tells us about Melanie, a little girl who over a period of some months helped a partially sighted younger boy to move from being teased and rejected by other children to winning

acceptance and even admiration from others. Asked about her work with him, she says simply:

It didn't change the world, but it changed the world of one little boy.

(Renzulli, 2002, p.1). I cannot imagine a better illustration of the deeper meaning of success than that, can you? This, I think, is precisely what Passow meant when he wrote:

Self-actualisation is but one goal of gifted education; self-actualisation in service to humankind is the twin goal.

(Passow, 1988, p.15).

Considering fulfilment

How, then, does this relate to what we actually do as parents and educators? As we have seen, wealth and fame are not the values which drive the truly gifted, though they may accrue. Nor is eminence – public recognition – the inevitable outcome of fulfilled giftedness. Wholly different considerations drive the gifted individual. How can we tap into those considerations to provide the right kind of support for that individual as he or she moves through childhood and into adolescence and begins to think of that adult life role?

Do we ask, what are you good at? What's available? What will mean a good job with lots of money? No, the ordinary questions like these clearly won't do. So what *do* we ask?

Stephanie Tolan wrote about this in her young person's novel, *Surviving the Applewhites*. Lead character Jake is a highly disruptive adolescent who's been thrown out of every school he's been sent to. Finally he's placed with the Applewhites, an eccentric homeschooling family whose notion of teaching their young involves allowing them to choose and pursue their own topics. Jake is thoroughly confounded by having no structure to rebel against. Finally Zedediah, the family grandfather, asks Jake what gives him joy. Jake doesn't understand the question. "You mean, what do I like to do?" he asks. "I mean", Zedediah says, "exactly what I said. *What gives you joy?*" Jake can't come up with an answer, so Zedediah just says quietly, "Once you know that, you will know what you want from an education." And in time, that's exactly what Jake does discover.

This is a question about self-discovery, and this is the process which is an essential part of moving towards fulfilment of the inner self. Thus we need to replace those ordinary questions with questions that look *inside* rather than *outside*, first-person questions like these:

What gives me joy?

What intrigues me?

What absorbs me?

What enrages me?

What gives me the deepest satisfaction when I do it well?

What matters so much to me that I feel I must do it?

*What do I do now that I can imagine still wanting to do when I am old?
What is my life direction?*

It is vital that these should be first-person questions, because this is not about imposing ideas or expectations, it is not about setting limits, it is not about pre-determining the future. It is about giving choice and control back to the individual. It is about giving a child the tools he or she needs to engage in the ongoing and evolving process of self-discovery –tools which fit naturally with the positive reflective introversion of the gifted individual.

As a child finds answers to these questions, he or she is finding also those fields of ability that have the highest personal relevance for him or her, the field or fields which it will be truly satisfying to nurture and develop.

Furthermore, as we ask questions like these, we can begin to explore with the child an understanding of the meaning of terms like “satisfaction” and “fulfilment”, and we may find answers like these emerging from their own experience:

Being totally absorbed

Doing what is hard and working it out

A sense of achieving “the right word in the right place”

Bringing about change, making a difference for someone

From these sorts of concepts, it is both a natural and a necessary step to developing the crucially important belief, central to an effective life in *any* sphere, *that an individual person can make a difference*, not always changing the whole world, but nonetheless real and in some way that matters. The lack of that conviction leads to apathy, depression, self-indulgence, despair and purposelessness. Its possession gives meaning to life and can bring riches in the best sense of that term. In the words of that inspirational teacher, Roland Barth,

A school can fulfil no higher purpose than to teach all its members that they can make what they believe in happen.

(Barth, 1990. p. 171).

Furthermore, the process I am briefly describing here strongly supports the development of resilience, which I think is very like what we used to call self-discipline, in simplistic terms the very necessary capacity to “get up and go and get up and *keep* going, no matter what”.

It also very strongly helps us in developing the natural inclination of the gifted towards moral integrity of purpose and of action, essential attributes for those whose abilities have the potential to influence or alter the lives of others.

The ultimate dimension

This brings us to what I would call the ultimate dimension, the final part of resolving the conundrums I have discussed today.

We have been talking about finding one's life direction, discovering and nurturing the abilities that can give meaning and purpose to that life direction, developing the values that will shape both the use of those abilities and one's response to all the events of life.

In a very real sense, that means we have been talking about what kind of human being the gifted child will become as an adult.

Over the years, when people have asked me what I hope to achieve when teaching gifted learners, my response, reflecting all I have been saying today, has been simply that I do not want merely to produce clever students who get high marks in exams. Instead I hope our teaching will help our gifted children become adults who are wise in all their dealings with others.

Thus when I wrote the mission statement for the George Parkyn Centre, New Zealand's gifted education centre, it was worded thus:

Our task is to ensure that each gifted individual is met with recognition and understanding, and to provide support in developing his or her abilities to the full. Our hope is that each gifted child will grow in wisdom, insight and compassion in the use of his or her talents in the wider world.

"Talent" was a somewhat less compromised word back then; today I might replace it with "abilities"!

But the fundamental thought of that statement holds true as far as I am concerned, and as I read the works of others who have reflected on the purposes of gifted education, it is deeply reassuring to find the same concern coming through.

Leta Stetter Hollingworth seems to have been the very first in modern times to pursue this in her programme for gifted children back in the 1930's. Linda Silverman writes that "Infused throughout this program was a beautiful set of human values: basic respect for humanity, awareness of our global interdependence, and commitment to service. Follow-up studies [in the 1990's] indicate that Hollingworth's program had a profound, lifelong impact on the students." (Silverman, in press, p. 27).

Since then, many others have written about the need to embed such values into our concept of the purposes of gifted education, people such as Linda Silverman herself, Stephanie Tolan, Harry Passow, Raymond Swassing, Barbara Clark, George Parkyn, Annemarie Roeper, Joyce van Tassel-Baska, Jill Bevan-Brown, and more. New Zealander Deborah Fraser perhaps spoke for them all when she wrote, "As educators it seems that we have a responsibility, even an urgency, to encourage such qualities." (Fraser, 2004, p.259).

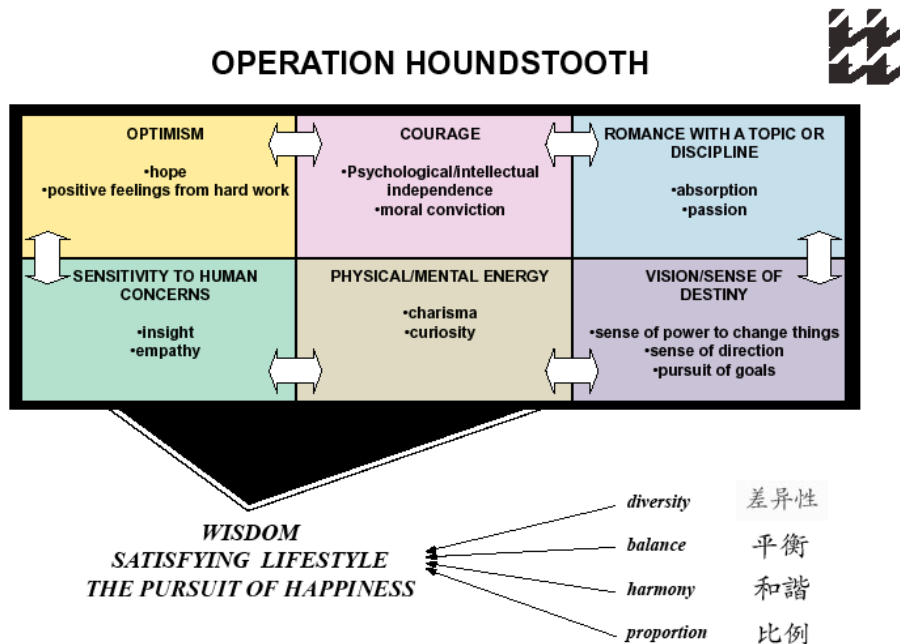
A very interesting development in this field is Renzulli's 2002 article on expanding the conception of giftedness to include what he has called "co-cognitive traits". He asks a

question which would have seemed unthinkable to many in the not-so-distant past - and perhaps still does today! -, namely :

Can we influence the ethics and morality of future industrial and political leaders so that they place gross national happiness on an equal or higher scale of values than gross national product? (Renzulli, 2002, p.2).

Noting that we have learned much about what leads to high accomplishment in many fields, he points out that we have not, however, acquired the same understanding of those strengths that lead to the emergence of remarkable human beings like Nelson Mandela, Rachel Carson and Mother Theresa who have “focused their talents on bringing about changes directed toward making the lives of all people better” (2002, p.4). Clearly we will need such an understanding if we are to bring about the social transformation Renzulli sees as so crucial to our human future.

In response to this enormous challenge, Renzulli has proposed a set of interrelated behaviours or “co-cognitive traits” which he believes lie behind the motivation of those who commit themselves to working for social change, and has set up a major research project, the Houndstooth Project, designed to test and refine these definitions and to explore the ways in which we as educators may be able to encourage and nurture them.



© Operation Houndstooth
 The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented
 University of Connecticut
 Joseph S. Renzulli, Rachel E. Sytsma, & Kristin B. Berman
 November, 2000 www.gifted.uconn.edu

As the graphic shows, those traits include optimism, courage, romance with a topic or discipline, sensitivity to human concerns, physical and mental energy, and vision or sense of destiny, and you will note that Renzulli sees the possession and exercise of these

qualities as leading to exactly what we have been talking about, wisdom, a satisfying lifestyle and the pursuit of happiness, which here I think we may read as equating with the fulfilment of self.

(I am pleased to say that we have a link in New Zealand to the Houndstooth Project that I hope will lead to useful material for both of our “down-under” countries.).

A brief note

Before concluding, I would like to make a brief and perhaps unexpected reference to Gagne’s Differentiated Giftedness and Talent Model.

Not surprisingly, given its name, this model seems to some to epitomise the “Talent Development” movement, and it is of course absolutely true that Gagne has been and is very directly concerned with the process by which inherent ability does find its way towards some outward manifestation.

However, it is perhaps helpful to remind ourselves that Gagne began by questioning the belief that giftedness did not exist until it was manifested in performance. He emphatically drew our attention to the fact that giftedness was an *innate* quality, completely real whether – or not – it had quantifiable outward manifestation, and equally emphatically insisted that dependence on performance would result in our failure to identify many of the genuinely gifted who did not “perform”. (Gagne, 1985).

Subsequently he sought to identify those factors which either encouraged or hindered a gifted individual in developing that ability. It is this aspect of his work that I would suggest has particular value for those of us who are concerned, not simply with measurable outcomes, but with the discovery and fulfilment of self. It *is* important that as parents and educators we realise the impact we can have on a child’s opportunity to undertake that journey of self discovery, awe-making to recognise that responsibility, profoundly exciting to think that we can support and encourage it.

Perhaps, just perhaps, here is the link between these two highly divergent views of the purposes of gifted education, the point where some productive dialogue may, just may, start to emerge.

In conclusion

In our society today, we have defined success largely as attainment *over* others, rather than as attainment *with* or *for* others. We have set this type of success as the measure of the individual against which his or her whole worth to society shall be judged. We determine whether or not it has been achieved by tangible products or performances which can be measured and compared against the products and performances of others.

If this is inhibiting for the child of average ability whose aspirations to this kind of success must inevitably have limits, it is equally or even more restricting to the gifted individual.

As Roland Barth pungently reminds us, “Zen Buddhism advises us that to train a bull, it is sometimes necessary to enlarge the fences.” (Barth, 1990, p. 178).

In this paper, I have sought to enlarge those fences by putting forward a view of the nature of success which I believe represents the most realistic and appropriate response to the inner world, the inner perceptions, of the gifted child. It does not negate or reject those externally imposed quantitative measures where they do have relevance, but it removes them from their distracting and unnecessary central dominance. It allows us to focus on ability and its nurturing and expression as integral to the fulfilment of the inner Self and as the individual’s link to other Selves. I would like to conclude today by quoting the words of a young man who has made that discovery through that very process.

By one of those lovely coincidences in life that we call serendipity, just as I was starting work on this paper, I received a letter from this young man’s mother, who had first contacted me when he was just six years old. She wrote:

I hope that you remember the Bookman family and of course Sam in particular who attended the George Parkyn Centre in its early days... I remember clearly phoning you when our little boy Sam told me that he did not want to live any more as he did not have any friends. You counselled me on the other end of the phone for about 2 hours. I will never forget the feeling of relief after that conversation. From then on it was all up hill... This journey has culminated with Sam being a very happy, secure and confident young man well respected and loved by many ... and now the 2007 Dux of St Kentigern College. The friends that he found hard to communicate with in those early years are now some of his closest.

I have attached the speech he gave at the College the other night.

And this is what Sam said:

What is success? How can it be measured? What makes someone successful?

Our society seems driven to succeed, and tonight is about celebrating success. There is no doubt that the prize-winners here tonight have been successful. And tonight, we have measured success in the form of books, cups and medals. They are all well deserved. But when I reflect on my time at Saint Kentigern College, it is not a book, a cup or a Dux medal that epitomises success in my mind. Success, ultimately, is not measured in trophies.

Four hundred years ago Shakespeare examined what success was. He talked about a king, King Lear, who had everything – a crown, riches, and prestige. But most importantly, Lear had the love of friends and a daughter. However, the foolish king rejected this love in pursuit of his ego. King Lear was not successful. Once he had banished those who loved him, Lear’s world collapsed around him. No riches or kingly prestige could protect

Lear from those who wanted to harm him. Without any relationships, Lear was powerless.

The message of King Lear is as powerful today as it was then. In the same way that riches or prestige were never the measures of success for King Lear, in the same way the real success of my peers and myself is not measured in cups and trophies, but in the relationships we have forged. Behind each success recognised here tonight is an immense net of support.

Friedrich Nietzsche once said 'our greatest success comes not in our loudest hours, but rather in our most quiet'. When I measure my success over the last five years, I don't look to my academic record, but to thing we most take for granted; relationships.

These relationships come in the form of family. Success is hugs from your parents, the knowledge that they are there to support you no matter what. Success is the knowledge that you can trust your brother or sister. Success is being able to have a beer with your dad, or a glass of wine with your mum. Our greatest success comes not in our loudest hours, but rather in our most quiet.

These relationships come in the form of friends. Success is having friends you can feel comfortable talking about anything with. Success is having someone who makes you feel like you can accomplish anything. Success is making friends in the places you least expect; the chess club, the drama studio, the bike sheds. Success is having a friend you wake up every morning and know you are lucky to have. Our greatest success comes not in our loudest hours, but rather in our most quiet.

These relationships come in the form of teachers. Success is having enough respect for that Economics teacher that makes you believe anything they'll say. Success is being able to laugh with that Media Studies teacher. Success is looking forward to that next period of English, because you know it's going to be fun. Our greatest success comes not in our loudest hours, but rather in our most quiet.

It's scary how much we take our relationships for granted. When I look back on my successes at this school, I am reminded how much I've been influenced by my family, friends and teachers. The true mark of success is recognising the part these relationships have to play in everything we achieve. The cups and trophies tonight, and this medal, are the result of years of support, learning and love from all sorts of people.

Ultimately, this medal is not mine. It belongs to hundreds of people from all walks of life. It is the result of hundreds of successful relationships that have empowered me and instilled a sense of faith that has made this possible. Success is recognising that our achievements are the result of influence from others. At the end of the day, I will measure my own success at this College by my ability to influence others. Hopefully, someone at this College will have learnt something from me, become empowered, and maybe even driven to succeed. Because that influence is success.

So in proposing my vote of thanks, I don't want to only thank the College as an institution. My vote of thanks goes out to all the families of students here tonight. My vote of thanks goes out to all my friends. And particularly, my vote of thanks goes out to the incredible teachers of Saint Kentigern College, and the administration that supports them – the Trust Board, Mr Peat, and Mrs Winthrop. But highest of all are the teachers themselves. It is their influence that is the real success tonight. Because, as Nietzsche said, our greatest success comes not in our loudest hours, but in our most quiet.

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