1: Where shall I go? How do I improve this process of education here?

The editorial to a forthcoming special issue of the journal *Gifted Education International* concludes with these words:

How does one attempt to summarise the potential of philosophy with children to vivify a profession beset by the legacy of objectivism? Perhaps by invoking the spirit of young people as action researchers, actively exploring themselves and their world, in the finest traditions of practitioner self study:

> *Three questions beyond all compare*
> *Guide children's enquiries all year:*
> *'Where shall I go?'*
> *'Which routes do I know?'*
> *'And how can I tell when I'm there?'*

(Hymer [ed.], in press)

This account of my educational development, and the process of co-constructing my living theory, follows this path. Where shall I go? Let's make a start:

1.1: Prologue – three short stories, backwards in time

In this section I describe (but do not yet seek to explain) three significant, personally generative events. Each event in Piagetian terms evoked in me *disequilibrium* – and a need to reconcile these experiences within my existing cognitive schema. The events are presented as narratives, in reverse chronological order.

Story 1: In December 2005, at the end of a day's in-service training on 'gifted and talented education' for a secondary school in the north east of England, I was approached by a teacher. He was a mature member of the profession – I estimated not far off retirement – and painfully diffident. He asked if I could wait a few minutes, as he wanted to fetch something to show me. He returned a short while later with a copy of a poem, entitled *War*, written by a 16-year-old girl named Lynn in 1982:

Once there was a war
it caused such a riot what an' all
with bombs and aeroplanes
and spitfires what not
flying everywhere
houses being bombed
children and mothers and fathers being killed
churches
people's homes being bombed
they never had a thing left
everything they worked for was gone
and that place would never be filled.

I didn't know quite how to respond. Was it an exceptional poem? I'd read better poems by children half Lynn's age. Was *he* proud of it? It wasn't clear that 'proud' was the right description. Did this effort from one of his past pupils represent the apotheosis of his teaching career, and if so, what conclusions could I draw from that? In my confusion, I remained silent. He held the silence, then spoke – in staccato phrases, and without making eye-contact: "Bottom set, you know? Semi-literate. A quiet girl. Left school at the end of that year. Education hardly touched her. (She) Got a job in the factory, married, had kids. Still lives in the area – I see her around occasionally. But you know what? She *felt* that poem, she really *felt* it." With that, he smiled nervously, looked at me and left – leaving me with Lynn's poem and a million thoughts. I knew that my encounter with that teacher was significant and humbling, but I didn't immediately know how, or why.

Story 2: In 2002 my book on gifted and talented learners was published (Hymer with Michel, 2002). It opened with a reflection on my last year of full-time teaching, and in particular my memory of an incident involving a Year 5 (ten-year-old) boy, known as Robert in the book:

Robert was a large boy, considered something of a bully by other children and he was challenging in the classroom. He had moderate generalised learning difficulties and he was functionally illiterate. And a few weeks before the end of the school year, I also discovered he was gifted. Not globally gifted, not outrageously or psychometrically gifted, but still gifted. I discovered his gift by accident. Our school had been participating in the WH Smiths 'Poets in Schools' scheme, which had brought the poet David Orme ('Mango Chutney') to work with students across the entire Year 5 year-group. As one of their poetry-writing exercises, the children had gone out in small groups to explore – in great and close detail - the trees and shrubs adjoining the school's playing fields. They'd reflected, taken notes, drawn observational sketches, seen the trees and leaves and insects in new lights and from new angles, played with language, laughed and had fun. And then they'd returned to the classroom to knock their thoughts, notes, perceptions and

reflections into poems. I'd been with Robert and his group throughout their time outside – mostly to manage his tendency to distract others – but back in the classroom my attention was shared with other members of the class. By the time I got around to Robert's desk, he'd managed an illegible sentence, in his typically tight, misspelled and dysfluent script. I asked him what he'd written and there was a long pause as he tried to make sense of his work. Then he replied, in a voice so slow and soft I hardly heard him: "Even the winter leaves have their own secret colours".

That was it. One line. But what a line! It was mid-summer, and Robert had found and studied a solitary, decaying winter-leaf. And in his observations and his slow reflections, Robert captured an image that contained a most deliberate metaphor. He was saying, I'm convinced, "Mr Hymer, notice me. I know I've not got a great deal going for me in school, but just sometimes, in some situations, I can do things that will amaze you". The children's best efforts were collated and published in-house in an anthology entitled, "Their Own Secret Colours". With the support of David Orme Robert introduced the anthology to the parents at the official 'launch'. He later told me it was the first time he'd ever been asked to do something important. Robert's moment in the sun coincided with a staggering change in his attitude and performance in school. He saw himself as a poet, as someone who – under the right conditions – could amaze with the power of his words. He still struggled to read and write and acquire new concepts at the speed of his classmates but the bullying pretty much stopped, the friendships and peer-respect grew, and Robert walked around the school and playgrounds with a real, deep and growing sense of self-confidence. He seemed caught up in a virtuous circle. And if that was the effect of Robert's self-perception, who was I to disillusion him? A few weeks later the term and school year ended. I left the school and the area and I've no idea what became of him.

Story 3: In May 1991 I was completing my training as an educational psychologist (EP). As one of my course requirements, I wrote an assignment which I chose to

entitle, "All Day in the One Chair?" The essay was concerned with such issues as the assessment of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, the provision we make for children with these difficulties, and the theoretical models within which assessment and provision decisions take place. The essay title was extracted from a poem by W. B. Yeats, *Broken Dreams*:

> *All day in the one chair*
> *From dream to dream and rhyme to rhyme I have ranged*
> *In rambling talk with an image of air:*
> *Vague memories, nothing but memories.*

The essay itself took the form of a personal reflection on deeply felt concerns about my future practice as an EP. I had found little comfort in the catch-all concept of 'eclectic assessment' which, on placement, many experienced EPs had advocated in response to my questions about 'when to do what.' I struggled to see how I could remain neutral at moments of decision. How could I ever objectively discern which theoretical orientation held most promise in a particular case, when the range of possible orientations seemed to me to require a deep personal commitment at the level not just of technical knowledge, skills and expertise, but also of ontologically-embedded values, beliefs and ethics? I felt that there must be more to a choice of intervention than a consideration of the given context and needs, a quick 'best fit' calculation, then an application of the 'appropriate' technique (from a vast toolkit bannered 'eclectic assessment'). An example: it seemed to me that any capacity for selecting a behavioural-modification as opposed, for instance, to a humanist-phenomenological or psychodynamic or social-constructivist approach, based on the "needs and circumstances of the particular child," required, in addition to a vast menu of techniques, either God-like judgment and discernment (which I neither had nor aspired to), or so diluted a commitment to the underlying values and principles of any one approach as to render each shallow, and the EP guilty of moral relativism. I felt that at some point in my career, I was going to need, from a position of awareness of a broad range of approaches, to focus my energies on a single approach to understanding a child's needs: an approach which reflected and was sympathetic to

my own ontological understandings, core values and beliefs, and then to respond flexibly (given the unique circumstances of any individual case) – but from within the stance of that single approach.

As an EP trainee, with little status within a surprisingly hierarchical profession, I never voiced these concerns publicly. The assignment, however, seemed to present an opportunity to explore them for myself – we had been invited to set and respond to our own professional questions. My questions and my essay flowed from this 'felt' understanding and related concerns: was it necessary or even desirable, for instance, that someone approaching the assessment of a child with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties should be conversant with the widest range of possible assessment and treatment approaches? If it were desirable, was it possible? If it weren't considered necessary or desirable, did the notion of "educational entitlement" (a buzz-phrase at the time) have much resonance for a child with such difficulties? How did one reconcile one's commitment to a particular assessment or therapeutic orientation with equivocal interpretations as to what constituted valid data in the area of therapeutic outcomes? Did the provision made for a child's perceived needs reflect objectively the needs themselves, or the perceptions of those needs, or perhaps even the needs of the person doing the perceiving?

Perhaps inevitably, the essay raised more questions than it answered, left mess and complexity at the end of every paragraph, and exposed my vulnerabilities as a new entrant to the profession. Without ever having the insight or courage to frame my essay with a super-ordinate question of the type, "How can I understand and improve my practice as an EP?" by the end of the essay I had at least explored an aspect of this question to my own satisfaction: at the level of values, beliefs and commitment, I had asked if it would be more authentic of me as an EP to seek mastery of a wide range of approaches, and to discern a 'goodness of fit' appropriate to each future client or, alternatively, to spend "all day in the one chair," with "vague memories" of other approaches but a deep commitment to one approach, whilst seeking to reconcile this approach with my values as a person and as a professional? As an exercise in imagination I had inclined more strongly towards the latter position – but without

quite knowing what that orientation might be, or exploring its implications in practice. Retrospectively, I added a sub-title to the essay: "On becoming a little more aware of one's orientation, and on becoming a little less aware of others'". For all its occasional clumsiness, I believed that my essay represented a personal high-point of my training as an EP. For me, it had been the most personal, illuminating and instructive piece of writing I'd ever undertaken in an academic context, and it had been a joy to write.

This judgment wasn't shared by my tutors – the assignment was poorly received. It was considered "somewhat whimsical," "polemical" and "over personalised," thinly referenced and dealing with "the ineffable." More positively, it was recognised that the topic "… does appear to have helped the writer clarify issues for himself." In general though, it was compared unfavourably with a previous assignment of mine, which had explored the socio-linguistic legacy of Basil Bernstein. This I had completed according to the traditional method – heavily referenced, orthodox in its structure, stylistically weighted to the passive tense and with its author conspicuously absent. My "whimsical" essay was, in the end, considered acceptable in contributing to my qualification as an EP, but only on the laws of aggregation – with the support of the Bernstein essay and a subsequent research study which was again couched heavily in the positivist, social sciences tradition.

1.2: Interpretation of the stories, and rationale for this enquiry

In this section I attempt to account for the significance of the stories narrated in 1.1 as they relate to this enquiry. I aim to show how in reflecting on their significance they each (separately and also cumulatively) revealed something of my perceived need to grow in the direction of my felt values as a person and as an educator.

This enquiry is an attempt to track the spoor of my involvement in the field of 'gifted and talented' education, from my domain entry in 1996 to the present day. In it, I will attempt to explain and make explicit how my attempts to purloin credibility through reliance on disembodied knowledge and expertise mirrored my earlier years as an EP, and contributed to an increasing sense of alienation from my own values both as a person and as a professional. I will draw attention to formative influences on my thinking, and on personal battles to respond to my 'ontological insecurity' (Laing, 1959) and to myself as a 'living contradiction' (Ilyenkov, 1977; Whitehead, 1993) in the field and in my own practice – e.g. working within the hegemony of traditionally dominant metaphors such as 'ability' and 'potential' (which I have often tolerated and used unthinkingly), and my over-use of a declamatory, expert-speak style of communication which gives little hint of uncertainty – and contrast this with my own perceived educational values and belief-systems, e.g. egalitarianism and constructivism in education, the potential for unrestricted growth in children's learning and intelligence, the power of uncertainty, fallibility and of genuine communication with co-learners, and the ability of teachers and students to think for themselves, rather than to a donated script.

In this enquiry I will hold the unit of appraisal as being the process of my coming better to understand and change my own practice in the direction of my values, and

will seek to articulate the standards of judgment which can test the validity of my claim to knowledge.

Outlined in 1.1 are three stories – each different in kind, but each embodying a personal experience of perplexity and potential growth, and representing something of the generative-transformational processes described by McNiff & Whitehead (2002, 2005, 2006; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). This account represents the process of seeking to make sense of these three stories – or what these stories have come to represent – as I construct my own living standards of educational practice and judgment (Whitehead, 1993; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) within the context of my work as an educator in the field of gifted children. Each moment holds for me some insight into the tensions and ambivalences subordinated in my broader research question. *What are my educational values? How important are they to me? How do I reconcile my doubts about the concept of giftedness with my work as a freelance consultant in this field?* The research enquiry, and the thesis submission as a whole, has been some years in gestation. The process of midwifing the emergence of a central question has been characterised by numerous false starts, crises of confidence and lengthy periods of fallow inactivity – which in retrospect I could perhaps dignify with the term 'incubation.' As I see them now, however, I might try briefly to summarise and explain the significance of these three stories and their relevance to my research question in the following way:

Significance of Story 1: recognising the *ineffable*

- Coming to know the value and power of the unsaid. The encounter, for me, benefited from the lack of preamble or explicit verbal context to the gift of Lynn's poem, and from the subsequent sparely enigmatic 'explanation.' I had some work to do in connecting with this experience, and making meaning of it for myself. This took time. Ultimately, it wasn't really about the poem but about the meaning the poem had to that teacher, and, in choosing to share it with me, to ourselves.

- Valuing that which is unrepresented in norm-referenced 'product.' Arguably, the poem itself was clumsily constructed, self-conscious in its colloquialisms, and possibly even banal in its theme. Yet it had enormous value – at the time of writing to its author, and for 23 subsequent years to its author's teacher. Questions arise: what constitutes a gift? Does this need to be defined in terms of a norm-referenced sample (e.g. precocious achievement in a domain), or can it be relative to the achievements, interests and abilities of the individual learner? Or can one free oneself altogether from the preoccupation with the product, the object (in Aristotelian terms, *the particular*, having both form and substance), and focus instead on the human agents, the people relationally involved in this social process?

- Understanding the need to communicate something of deep personal value to another human being, when there is the merest hope that it will be understood, the hint of a shared value, but no assurance. The contact with me was made at the end of the day's training, not at the outset, or over lunch or a break. At what point did this teacher try to summon the trust or courage to approach me? What response did he expect, or fear?

In brief, Story 1 has assisted my emergent realisation that what is significant ontogenetically, can also be significant to others. Or in Rogerian, client-centred terms, that that which is most personal, is also most general (Rogers, 1967). Specifically in the field of gifted education, I have come to realise the centrality not just of communicating some abstract notion of "cognitive challenge" or "extension" or "enrichment," but of communicating a personal connection with the individual (student, teacher, *other*), responding empathically, with a shared sense of awe and wonder to her discovery, her creation, or even her enquiry question. This connection need not always be verbally expressed. The nature and quality of this kind of interaction is delineated by Whitehead and Huxtable (2006) in the following way:

The common features (of inclusional co-enquiry) are the sensitive consideration of the educator seeking to understand the student's enquiry, the skills and understandings that the student can bring to it from within, helping the student to

bring these to the fore and offering tools and possibilities from their experience, skills and understandings to the student. This is perhaps a brief description of 'learner centred' learning that many educators are seeking to move towards. What we see that we value, which takes it beyond this, is the educator opening themselves to the offering of superior understandings and skills of the student – valuing the student as a true co-creator of valued knowledge. There is an expectation of the student and the educator that the student has a 'responsibility' to give as well as take. We believe that this opens up the possibility for the student to be twice affirmed - it connects the cognitive and affective and contributes to the student's experience of herself as a valued creator of knowledge, with an acknowledged and valued educational influence in their own learning and the learning of others.

When this bridging of a dualism in preferment of a dialectical unity is achieved, it transcends the instrumental interpretation of Vygotskyan zones of proximal development – whereby the more skilled knower supports, deepens or refines the skills or knowledge of the apprentice. It offers instead a dialectically unified, non-hierarchical, non-instrumental, activity-based and values-congruent alternative to a vision of education which sees learners as needing to think and learn in certain acceptable, prescribed ways, and which configures their own latent or emergent gifts and talents accordingly:

> *… the attempt to 'educate' children in a manner that makes them lose their manifold talents so that they become restricted to a narrow domain of thought, action, emotion ….* (Feyerabend, 1970, p.210)

Significance of Story 2: recognising that which is usually concealed

The amplification of worrying questions, some of which were prefigured in my response to Story 1: is giftedness well described by the rationalist, quasi-scientific, bell-curve model – i.e. the 'normal distribution of intelligence' (as measured by IQ)? Was Robert really gifted? More specifically, was he a gifted poet? Could one say any

more than that *under the right conditions*, he was capable of flashes of poetic inspiration? Does true giftedness rely on the demonstration of gifts over time, if not routinely then certainly on more than one occasion? Most radically, is my role as a child's teacher to identify then respond to that child's giftedness, or to help create it? What was the nature of the relational activity that saw that line of poetry created? In Vygotskyan terms, how was the zone created that led to/was part of the learning-leading-development? In my professional practice as an educator working for the most part with teachers and other education professionals, if I believe more in the creation than in the identification of gifts, how do I translate this belief into an authentic practice?

Significance of Story 3: rediscovering a lost voice, and personal meaning

The significance of this story is less obviously related to my work in the field of gifted education, and more difficult to explain, but it is nonetheless crucial. What did I learn from the experience of having a personally meaningful piece of work called into question? Initially, and perhaps for many ensuing years, to doubt the veracity and relevance of my own experiences and tacit knowledge, and to expect future rewards to follow the modernist agenda and the 'objective' synthesis of other people's knowledge – the creation of empirically verifiable, replicable and generalisable knowledge. To avoid entering places of deep personal reflection, and to find sanctuary in authoritative, generalisable answers to established questions. To eschew radical reflection on professional practice in favour of the great busy-ness of knowledge-acquisition, and to define that knowledge in terms of fact, skill and technique, rather than the deeper epistemologies of value, morality and ethics.

I do not of course believe that these understandings were ever the direct intention of my tutors, who were in most respects supportive, wise and encouraging people whose expressed aims were to nurture the development of independent, reflective practitioners of educational psychology. I take full personal responsibility for allowing these experiences – or my constructions of these experiences – to shape the next decade of my professional life. But looking back on this decade, which was spent

practising as an EP with Cumbria Local Authority, I can see myself busied in the great enterprise of mastery and collection.[1] I collected skills, knowledge and techniques in abundance. I familiarised myself with a wide range of conditions and learning difficulties, and found ways of advising about the remediation of these difficulties. I learned how to administer any number of norm-referenced assessment instruments fluently and with due regard to all the stringencies of standardisation. To support my judgments I could invoke 'research evidence' and the pronouncements of the giants of educational and psycho-medical pathology with adequate ease and persuasiveness. I delivered my reports to specification and to time. I was considered by my peers, by my line managers, by many parents and children I had worked with, to be knowledgeable, reliable and professional – a good EP.

Superficially happy to accept these judgments, I myself doubted them. Something deep within me, something unarticulated, something 'ineffable' even, was alert to a perceived lack of synchrony between my personal and professional values and my practice as an applied psychologist – who spent his time testing children in corridors and glorified broom-cupboards, disinterestedly observing students and their teachers, and impartially advising all who would listen about 'best practice.' I recall one such moment of painful awareness most vividly. It happened in 1994, whilst carrying out a formal (statutory) re-assessment of a 15-year-old student with severe hearing difficulties. It was apparent that she was becoming increasingly exasperated by the apparent irrelevance to her needs of the psychometric tests from the British Ability Scales that I was carefully administering. This exasperation surfaced violently during the administration of the *Speed of Information Processing* scale, when she threw her pencil down and shouted at me: "Are these tests really going to impact seriously on what I do with my life? I really don't see how!" At the time, I quietly provided an authoritatively bureaucratic justification for my actions, whilst thinking to myself – "She's right. Of course she's right. This is ridiculous."

Nervous about exploring this sense of discomfort in my routine work as a maingrade EP, instead I sought and pursued alternative routes to professional satisfaction. This

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[1] According to Heidegger – in a state of 'calculative thinking' – see 2.2.

set in train the progressively more focused work in 'gifted and talented' education which led, indirectly, to the two subsequent stories which are described above.

In 1996 I accepted an invitation to set up and coordinate Cumbria LA's Able Pupil Project, and combined this role on a part-time basis with my continuing role as an EP. I undertook further study in working with more able learners, and later signed up for Newcastle University's taught doctorate in educational psychology. In 2001 I resigned from my role as an EP and Coordinator of Cumbria's Able Pupil Project, and accepted a part-time role as a Senior EP within the newly-established Barrow-in-Furness *Education Action Zone* – developing continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives and holistic community-based projects. During this period I extended my interest in approaches such as *Philosophy for Children* (e.g. Lipman, 1993, 2003), and began freelance consultancy and training – creating and delivering INSET packages and conference presentations and workshops in the fields of gifted and talented education, creativity, *Philosophy for Children* and thinking skills. Since September 2004, this has been my fulltime occupation.

Concomitant with the shift in roles over the past decade, has been the shift in focus of my work as an applied psychologist – from the identification and remediation of special educational needs to a more general interest in teaching and learning processes – and the teaching and learning needs of 'more able' learners in particular. In my attempt to find ways of relating my emergent insights into the aetiology of gifts and talents with my role both as an educator in the field and as a person, I will assert that the lessons of that significant experience in May 1991 needed unlearning. The account sets out to re-connect a sense of trust in my judgment as an educator, and to make explicit and public my own embodied knowledge and living standards of educational practice. In avoidance of "whimsy," and in support of personalised learning, I will assert that I am expressing ontological understandings in a claim to educational knowledge. This claim will be established through my consideration of and responses to questions such as these:

- Just what's the problem here? What exactly is the nature of my felt concerns about the *leitmotifs* and the language of 'gifted and talented'?
- How do my concerns connect with the published literature?
- How are my concerns, and their associations with my personal and educational values, reflected in my work as a consultant in the field of gifted and talented education?
- Does my practice progress in the direction of my ontological and epistemological values?
- How are the judgments I make about the living out of my values and beliefs perceived by the professionals with whom I work?
- As an educator, how am I influencing my own learning and the learning of others?
- How do I incorporate any emergent living educational theory into my future work as a consultant in the field of 'gifted and talented' education?

I was never going to find the answers to these questions through the propositional methods that had already failed to provide me with meaningful ways of *being* an EP, or of *being* an "expert" in gifted and talented education. I was going to need to find a route to a richer understanding through the construction of personal meaning – through *being* Barry Hymer. I can relate to the old Hassidic story, as told by Reb Zusha: "When I die and come before the heavenly court, if they ask me, 'Zusha, why were you not Abraham?' I'll say that I didn't have Abraham's intellectual abilities. If they say, 'Why were you not Moses?' I'll say I didn't have Moses' leadership abilities. For every such question, I'll have an answer. But if they say, 'Zusha, why were you not Zusha?' for that, I'll have no answer."[2] My search for a method, and for the personal meaning in my method, is outlined in 1.3.

All day in the one chair? In this account I will assert that the process of *being* Barry Hymer has involved – and is still involving – a reconnection with the *Broken Dreams* of Yeats' poem. In spending a decade pursuing the opposite conclusion to the one I had arrived at in my 1991 essay, I have broken dreams myself, and I am needing to

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[2] This story is recounted in http://www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/quotes.htm, retrieved on 6 June 2006

rebuild them. Many people and events have helped me in the process of reconstruction, and are continuing to do so. Here's just one: in 2004, Richard Holloway, the former Bishop of Edinburgh wrote *Looking in the Distance – The human search for meaning*. The book begins, coincidentally, with the following aphorism:

All religions will pass, but this will remain:
Simply sitting in a chair and looking in the distance.

Despite their similarities, the lines aren't Yeats' – they belong to Vaselii Rozanov. But the metaphor returned me at a stroke to 1991. Holloway states at the start of his book:

Following the Rozanov metaphor, I want to do a bit of distance gazing. I want to sit in the chair and describe some of the conflicting things I have seen. I shall not attempt to weave them into an explanatory package, to make them continuous with each other. That would not be honest to my own experience of the mystery of life, which has been disjunctive and contradictory rather than seamless; so I shall leave things jagged and disconnected, just as I saw them. (*Ibid.*, p.8)

Where necessary, I expect I shall have to do the same.

1.3: Finding a method; recognising data

In this section I plot the history of my enquiry in the field of giftedness, describe how and why I have come to employ a living theory action research methodology, and outline the nature of the claims to validity that this model embraces and, by implication, eschews. I articulate my sources of data, and how these data are used to generate evidence. In doing this, I contrast the approach with those couched within a traditional social sciences model, but seek also to show how the living theory approach diverges from traditional action research approaches in its exemplification of living standards of practice and judgment. I acknowledge my indebtedness to others in the co-construction of this account, and attempt to show the inter-relatedness of reflection and action in its co-construction.

I identify closely with Mellor (1998, 2000) in his descriptions of the difficulty and also of the possibilities inherent in identifying a suitable research question, and an appropriate method for interrogating relevant data. I also admire the courage and inventiveness of practitioners who find unique paths through their research, eschewing established methodological orthodoxies (Mellor, *ibid*.; Whitehead, 1993; Dadds & Hart, 2001) in their actions as passionate enquirers (Dadds, 1994). I am beginning to grasp the implications of Vygotsky's observation that the research process, like all human activity, raises a paradox – it must create its own object of investigation:

The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study. (Vygotsky, 1978, p.65)

As with his analysis of the essentially symbiotic relationship between thought and word, I have discovered (and am constantly discovering) that "A word [or a research story] devoid of thought is a dead thing, and a thought unembodied in words [or a research story] remains a shadow" (Vygotsky, 1962, p.153). Perhaps drawing on Vygotskyan thinking, Paulo Freire (1993, p.68) draws a similar distinction between the word as mere verbalism ("Alienated and alienating *blah*"), and the word as embodying both reflection and action – a *praxis*. I attempt to bring both reflection and action to this research story. This textually-recorded account of my journeying does not *express* the action research experience. Albeit in a very provisional, partial, Vygotskyan sense, it *completes* it.

What is the history of this research? My doctoral studies had begun naïvely but fairly confidently, with the intention to find out something worthwhile in the area of gifted and talented education – something *out there*, something empirically verifiable, replicable and generalisable, and which might contribute to the canon of established orthodoxy in the field. During the early, taught years of my involvement in the field of 'high ability,' I had directed my energies accordingly. I read widely around the field of underachievement and synthesised my findings (e.g. Hymer, 2000); I undertook small-scale studies involving traditional hypothetico-deductive methods (e.g. Hymer & Harbron, 1998), and I busied myself with the administrative requirements of managing a countywide project on a financially tight budget. This latter role included establishing definitions of giftedness, definitions which took on an overtly modernist, inflexible and actuarial feel within the remit of the Cumbria Able Pupil Project (see Hymer with Michel, 2002, p.9). More flexibly, I also sought ways of integrating my learning from my Able Pupil Project role with my ongoing, albeit part-time role as a maingrade EP (Hymer, Michel & Todd, 2002).

Over time, and in part through the process of attempting a living theory action research study (which in the early days was less systematic than it subsequently became), I have seen my 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 realize achievements in any domain. However this stopped short, for the most part, of exploring in any overt way the relational, non-individualistic nature of gift-creation. The shift in focus has been gradual, and not entirely linear in its chronology. It can though be traced in the subject matter of my thinking and writing from 2001 ff. – attempts at embracing holistic conceptions of giftedness (Hymer, 2001a, 2002); constructivist methodologies (but with modernist origins) such as philosophy for/with children (Hymer, 2003a, 2004; Hymer & Dawson, 2002; Hymer & Jenkins, 2005) or more recent, less well-evaluated thinking skills approaches such as dilemma-based learning (Hymer, Michel & Wood, in press), *MTa-PASS* materials (Davies, Hymer & Lawson, 2005), or *Logo-Visual Thinking* (Best, Blake & Varney, 2005). My early critiques of traditional, non-inclusive ways of understanding and responding to 'giftedness' were mildly expressed (e.g. Hymer, 2003b), whereas later attempts have been passionate and personal, even bordering on the stridently polemical (Hymer, 2006, and below):

We should certainly continue to invest heavily in the pursuit of excellence and achievement, confront anti-intellectual bigotry, and seek ways of raising aspirations within and without areas of deprivation. We need also, however, to remain open to radical reformulations of what we mean by intelligence, achievement, and potential, to the evidence of how achievement arises, and to non-normative, non-deterministic conceptions of what we mean by gifts and talents. We can learn a great deal from abroad and also from within the UK – e.g. the work of Guy Claxton, Susan Hart, Belle Wallace, and others. This may – perhaps should – lead us to question the structures and strictures currently embedded in national policy, and to suggest alternative formulations. The risk otherwise is that we end up with "gifted" students who avoid challenges, risk, uncertainty and lifelong learning, and opt instead for easy successes and validation through performance – the very opposite of what we intend. Gifted and talented policy should be the last area of education to be exempt from challenge. If we have learned anything about exceptional achievement in the past, it has been about the value of asking new questions, and seeking new answers. And so it shall be in the future. (Hymer, 2005, p.7)

The shift in focus and thinking which is represented in these writings was rarely arrived at in isolation, or through any single epiphany. I have been fortunate in having enjoyed (and sometimes been challenged, even disturbed by) many conversations with critically- (and open-) minded friends and colleagues, some of whom are listed as co-authors in my publications, and all of whom have contributed in some way to the evolution in my thinking. These conversations, and the resultant shift in my thinking, meant however that data collected through the experimental method never kept up with the journeying, nor represented anything fresh enough to be truly meaningful to me. I missed what my tutors in 1991 dismissed as "the ineffable," that domain so dominated by the tacit that articulation becomes impossible. The ineffable is captured in Chesterton's wry observation that you can only find truth with logic if you've already found truth without it, and also by Polanyi:

> ... what I call 'ineffable' may simply mean something that I know and can describe even less precisely than usual, or even only very vaguely. It is not difficult to recall such ineffable experiences, and philosophic objections to doing so invoke quixotic standards of valid meaning which, if rigorously practised, would reduce us all to voluntary imbecility. (Polanyi, 1958, p.88)

Having made a number of half-hearted and rather timorous attempts to orient my doctoral dissertation around the experimental method with which I was familiar and which had compensated for my ill-received introspective foray during my EP training (Hymer, 1991, described in 1.1), I experienced two critical, at the time unnerving and as it turned out, deeply generative conversations during a working visit to Bath & NE Somerset. The first of these, on 12 July 2005, was with a close professional colleague and friend, Marie Huxtable. The second, the following day, was with Jack Whitehead, originator of the living theory approach to action research and the person who was shortly to become Marie's doctoral studies supervisor. These conversations were good-natured and disinterested, but they challenged me to confront my qualitative demons, and to consider carefully my intentions and purposes in completing my

doctoral studies. In an email to Jack Whitehead the following week, I wrote the following:

Marie and I had had a super conversation the day before – variously wide-ranging and focused …. Marie challenged me (gently, kindly, as is her and I suspect your way) about having been stuck on my doctoral write-up for around four years now. I've given her legions of excuses for failing to start the write-up, these mostly involving lack of time, but that conversation seemed to unearth deeper reasons, confirmed in my brief meeting with yourself: I had failed to find a way of connecting my research questions with a methodology capable of doing the job authentically. Whilst I've been aware of action research approaches for some years, I've never really shaken myself free from my background training (interesting word that – from the Latin traho – 'to drag') as an experimental psychologist, steeped in things positivist, and my insecurities about bringing myself into my studies. As of today, I think my doctorate is taking a very different direction. Your work helps me connect my passions with my writing, and validates an account which will, I hope, involve me not as a trainer but as an educator (educere – 'to draw out, to bring out, to lead'), and which can draw I think on the core educational beliefs and principles set out in my 2002 book. (Email to Jack Whitehead, 18 July 2005)*

This email dates the moment I resolved finally to abandon the experimental method, and to use instead the data which had arrived almost unnoticed over many years, and which lay untidily all around me. These data were neither obviously connected to each other nor did they conform easily to the types of scale (Stevens, 1968) that my background training had taught me to collect and work on. They weren't neutral, and they certainly did "bring me" into the study. They held, I now realized, a potentially rich and fruitful source of evidence. They also revealed gaps in my self-knowledge, which suggested that I needed to collect further data, much more systematically and self-consciously than hitherto. I see the analysis of these collective data in search of

evidence,[3] and connecting any evidence in a meaningful way, as comprising the purpose of this report, in order to address the central question, '*How do I understand and communicate my values and beliefs in my work as an educator in the field of giftedness?*'

The data which I interrogate and interpret in this account are necessarily diverse, and derived from the following chief sources:

- OHTs and PowerPoint presentation slides generated in my work as a consultant in the field of gifted and talented education from 1996 to 2006 ff., and records of my reflections on how these presentations have been received by audiences, and by myself;
- Articles, books, papers and incidental musings which I have written during this period, and which often reflect on the impact on my own thinking and practice of critical writers in the disciplines of education, philosophy, psychology and science;
- Records of conversations with critical friends, both face-to-face and through emails;
- Pre- and post-course interview responses from children aged 11-12 who experienced a gifts and talents summer school which I co-organised in July 2003. These data were, in part, a legacy of work undertaken in pursuit of my initial (positivistically-couched) doctoral proposal – alongside carefully collected measures of their IQs and school attainments!;
- Evaluations of my courses from teachers and other education professionals with whom I have worked;
- Video or DVD samples of audience reactions to my presentations and workshops;

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[3] I draw on the distinction between data and evidence provided by Whitehead & McNiff, 2006, chapter 5, whereby archived data (e.g. notes, journal records, video footage, reflective writing, etc.), collected during the enquiry are sifted, sorted, analysed, categorised and interpreted in search of evidence (those pieces of data carrying special meaning and significance – 'the good in action') which might be used to justify, test and hopefully support a claim to knowledge.

- Delegates' written evaluative reflections on my courses, and their judgments as to the extent to which my values and beliefs were evident in my work with them, and whether or not these accorded with their own values and beliefs.

I analyse these data within a *living theory* practitioner research form of enquiry which draws heavily on the work of Jack Whitehead, Jean McNiff, and the 'living theory of professional practice' (e.g. Whitehead, 1989, 1993, Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Whilst this approach conforms in significant respects to a traditional action research cycle (identify an issue of concern, plan then implement a response, monitor and evaluate outcomes, reflect and continue the cycle – a model which is reproduced in the construction of this enquiry report), "It can be distinguished from other approaches in the tradition through its inclusion of 'I' as a living contradiction within the presentation of a claim to knowledge" (Whitehead, 1989, p.43). It is the belief of Whitehead that it is the tension caused by the experience of recognising oneself as a living contradiction – holding educational values whilst simultaneously seeing them negated in one's practice – that moves a practitioner-researcher to imagine alternative ways of improving his or her practice. As such, the living theory approach has both a subjective, developmental, educationally therapeutic dimension, and also a social, politically emancipatory dimension, inviting first the naming and then the challenging (deconstruction) of contradictions between words and actions, of discriminatory practice, of the perpetuation of inequalities and the institution of *power-over* rather than *power-with* (Farren, 2006) or *power-through*. It accords closely therefore with Scheurich's (1996, p.58) argument for a *subversive conversation on validity*, in order to highlight the voices of difference. In using the terms *power-with* and *power-through*, I accept Foucault's (1979, p.194) understanding of power as positive – in the sense that it is constitutive or shaping of people's lives:

> *We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms; it "excludes," it "represses," it "censors," it "abstracts," it "masks," it "conceals." In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained from him belong to this production.*

As applied also to my own enquiry, it is by seeking to integrate the contradictions between my values and my practice (contradictions which are described in the next section of this report), in my claim *to know* my educational practice, that I can go on to construct descriptions and explanations in order to empower and vivify my educational development as a person, and through improved self-knowledge, to influence also the learning of others, and of social formations. In this claim to knowledge, I assert my ambition to create new theory, not just to improve my practice as an educator. I am aware that practitioner research enquiries are often seen to enhance practice, but not theory, with the originators of theory located traditionally within a social sciences model, applying hypothetico-deductive methods as disinterested lookers-on, from a high vantage-point. This is as true in the field of gifted and talented education as it is elsewhere in educational research. As evidence, I offer the following passage, in which the perceived hierarchy of research status is made explicit:

> *The literature reviewed indicated that there have been relatively few empirical studies of gifted and talented education and, consequently, evidence-based policy and practice are scarce. Instead, much of the literature reflects practitioner experience. Whilst this is important and valuable, it is different from rigorously conducted research studies.* (White *et al.*, 2003, p.1)

Whilst recognising that research models which take on board the perspective of the interested insider (as opposed to the disinterested outsider) are vulnerable to critiques which assume Aristotelian, *knowing-that* epistemologies, I contend that an 'insider' approach is best suited to an enquiry which has as a fundamental premise a sense that 'oranges might not be the only fruit' – that giftedness need not be seen as a reified 'thing,' germane to an individual person and quantifiable as one might quantify the amount of liquid in a glass. As a rationale for my decision to employ a living theory action research model, with myself as the insider-enquirer, I offer two tables which attempt to make explicit the nature and implications of insider-outsider stances. They draw initially on distinctions suggested by Whitehead & McNiff (2006), but then relate specifically to the field of gifted education:

	Separate from others	*Part of others' lives*
Frequently-held values:	Neutrality, objectivity, task efficiency, the veracity of externally-set targets, 'generalisable truth,' respect for the truth	Involvement, participation, open relationships, the power of intrinsic targets, 'individual truth,' respect for others' truths
Preferred research orientation: (Freire, 1993, p.64: "The form of action they adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world.")	'Outsider' approach – observing others and offering descriptions and explanations of their actions; social sciences research	'Insider' approach – offering descriptions and explanations for how you and others were involved in relationships of influence; action research

TABLE 1: <u>Ontology: a theory of being – how you perceive yourself in relation to your environment</u>

	Separate from others	*Part of others' lives*
Beliefs:	Knowledge is objective, explicit, reified, and it tends to be discovered, acquired and transmitted	Knowledge is personal, tacit, fluid, and it tends to be created, transformed, and communicated
Preferred approach to the field of giftedness:	Concern for accurate identification of G&T cohorts, faith in psychometric data, external target-setting, knowledge *acceleration* and specialised provision	Concern for the creation of gifts and the authenticity of personalised targets, knowledge *extension*, suspicion of labels and standardised data

TABLE 2: <u>Epistemology: a theory of knowledge – what is known, and how it comes to be known:</u>

I accept that seeing oneself as being part of others' lives, and using a research design which is consistent with this 'insider' stance, brings with it a commensurate responsibility to ensure academic rigour. I believe that practitioner-research enquiries can indeed be rigorously conducted, and I will seek to demonstrate evidence of this rigour in this enquiry. In a message-board posting, Wakeman (2005) noted that standards of practice and judgement are a core interest of the British Educational Research Association Special Interest Group. He raised three critical questions:

1. In our self-study, in action research, process management, how can we avoid self-delusion, and validate our claims 'to know,' our beliefs that action that we have taken have led to improvements in practice: teaching, learning, management?
2. What is it that governs, drives and modifies our practice in terms of ethical standards, ontology, epistemology and sociology of knowledge?
3. How can we communicate with other practitioners in a way that is accessible and transparent?

I intend that Wakeman's critical questions will be addressed in this account. I will seek to show that there is a valid relationship between my research question and my response to it, and that this relationship can be legitimated. Whilst I recognise that different interpretations can be given to any set of data, I have sought to instil confidence in my interpretations in the following ways:

• by seeking to be open both to myself and to all those involved in this enquiry – including the teachers and others invited to comment on my practice – and theirs;
• by seeking personal validation through reflection, through being open in the process of analysis, and showing the way in which I arrived at particular interpretations;
• by seeking social validation through others, in particular by working closely with a colleague, Marie Huxtable, who has acted throughout as a sympathetic but critical friend, checking and critiquing my written interpretations of data at all stages of

my practice and my reporting on my practice, and helping me to distinguish between data and evidence, and between my synthetic and my authentic voice;

- by impartially retaining and referring to all the material collected throughout the research – i.e. without preference for particular kinds or sources of data;

- by acknowledging my own values, beliefs and biases, and their impact on my interpretations and reporting;

- by working in an area in which I have a track record of close involvement over many years, and acknowledged knowledge and expertise, both tacit and explicit.

I argue further, that for all the lack of experimental method, my enquiry meets the criteria of social validity identified by Habermas (1976), namely that it is *comprehensible*, *sincere*, *true* to its roots and its purpose, and *appropriate* to the field of enquiry. In the attempt at achieving *comprehensibility*, I will, as a practitioner-researcher, have a responsibility to present a claim to public knowledge in such a way that it is accessible, readable and open to public criticism. I set out to tell a story as a research narrative, containing a descriptive account of the systematic nature of doing the research (Stenhouse, 1983, cited in McNiff, in press). In striving for *sincerity* I will seek to identify points both of personal doubt and insecurity, as well as moments of apparent advancement in my thinking and learning. In this intention, I will seek to include an "honesty trail" (Mellor, 2000) in my report, and accept the risks of doing so - "I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings" (Polanyi, 1958). Sincerity in the field of social validity relates also to the concept of *trustworthiness* employed by Hobbs (2005). In conveying an enquiry which rings *true*, and which therefore has authenticity, I invoke a particular understanding of "truth," as something transcending any objective "fact":

> *When discussing "truths," Foucault is not subscribing to the belief that there exist objective or intrinsic facts about the nature of persons, but referring to constructed ideas that are accorded a truth status. These "truths" are "normalizing" in the sense that they construct norms around which persons are incited to shape or constitute their lives. Therefore, these are "truths" that are actually specifying of persons' lives.* (White & Epston, 1990, p.72)

I am, moreover, convinced by Habermas' proposition (in Whitehead, 1993, p.55) that this claim can only be realized in interaction:

> In the interaction it will be shown in time, whether the other side is "in truth or honestly" participating or is only pretending to engage in communicative action.

As such, this judgment will be a task shared, catalytically, with the reader of this enquiry report. Do you, the reader, feel that this research story rings true at all stages of its telling?

For the last of Habermas' criteria for social validity, I will assert that enquirying for and reporting on my own practice is the most *appropriate* way of responding adequately to my research question. It will abide by normative conventions – "what people expect to hear as part of the orthodox canon" (McNiff, in press). Since this study is located in the genre of action-research known as *living educational theory* (Whitehead, *op cit.*), it will be incumbent on me to represent epistemological standards of judgment through making explicit my embodied knowledge in the field of gifted education, as part of my attempt to provide evidence that I have come to know my own educational development:

> The unit of appraisal in my conception of educational theory is the individual's claim to know his or her educational development. Although this unit may appear strange to most educational researchers I think that it is clearly comprehensible. The standards of judgment are however more difficult to communicate.
> (Whitehead, 1993, p.54)

I assert that these standards of judgment relate in this enquiry to my ontological and epistemological values, and that these value judgments become standards of judgment in their own right. The values I hold dear in my personal and professional life, and which are translated into standards of judgment in this report, include the value of *intellectual respect*, that is, the recognition of the right, the ability and the

responsibility of myself and all other individuals to think deeply, creatively, and honestly for myself/for themselves, having regard for others' ideas but no obligation to accept these uncritically. Of course in identifying the value of intellectual respect, I need to acknowledge that this doesn't exist independently of other forms of respect, including respect for others' emotions, appearances, beliefs and practices, but will ask that these 'other' parts of being will be viewed in dialectical unity, non-dualistically, as part of and contributing to the notion of *intellect*. I will ask you, the reader, to judge whether or not this account provides convincing evidence of my efforts to move in the direction of nurturing and affirming individuals' capacity for independent thought, especially within the context of *mitdenken* – thinking independently yet also relationally, with and through other people, as embodied in the Japanese proverb, "None of us is as smart as all of us," and the African concept of *ubuntu* – "I am who I am because of who we all are."

Like Whitehead, in addition to the social standards represented by Habermas (above) I will draw also on such personal standards as *commitment*:

> *It is the act of commitment in its full structure that saves personal knowledge from being merely subjective. Intellectual commitment is a responsible decision, in submission to the compelling claims of what in good conscience I conceive to be true.* (Polanyi, 1958, p.65)

In connecting commitment to personal agency (responsible decision-making) and the demands of truth as perceived 'in good conscience,' Polanyi establishes a way of making personal standards realisable, much as Quakers seek to do in the conduct of their lives (Quaker Faith and Practice, 1995) – in their deeds. For Faust, but not for Genesis, "In the beginning was the deed." For Vygotsky, Faust becomes acceptable by changing the stress:

> *In the <u>beginning</u> was the deed. The word was not the beginning – action was there first; it is the end of development, crowning the deed.*
> (Vygotsky, 1962, p.153)

1.4 Understanding myself as a living contradiction: my educational values are negated in my practice as an educator in the field of giftedness:

In this section I document in greater detail the reasons behind my feeling I was a 'living contradiction' in my practice as an educator in the field of giftedness. I do this by delineating three dialectics, at the levels of content, process and product respectively.

Dialectic 1 (content): I believe in the *creation* of gifts, but instead I privilege their *discovery*

In 1996, on my appointment to the post of coordinator of Cumbria LA's Able Pupil Project, I began the process of reading around the field with Diane Montgomery's recently-published book, *Educating the Able* (1996). This book, like many others subsequently, revealed to me that the world of gifted and talented education is a world riven with contradiction. This is apparent at the macro-political level (national policies in gifted education), as much as it is at the micro-personal level (specific practices in relation to individuals). At the macro-level, over the past century in many countries there have been high and low points of interest in and commitment to 'gifted and talented' individuals, and this ebbing and flowing can be related to cultural ambivalences, even to the point of national crises of identity and ethics:

> *Gallagher described the struggle between support and apathy for special programs*
> *for gifted and talented students as having roots in historical tradition – the battle*
> *between an aristocratic elite and our concomitant belief in egalitarianism.* (Reis,
> 2004, p.*ix*)

Tied in with the notion of provision and "special programs" are the related notions of definition and identification – whom are we talking about, and who says? These are contentious issues, and often culture and context-dependent. In the western world, gifted and talented education is traditionally approached dichotomously. It is associated with the mental or physical *attributes* of 'gifted and talented' learners, with the process of *identifying* these largely pre-existent gifts or talents, and then with *providing* for these individuals' particular needs (e.g. Terman, 1925 ff.; Ross, 1993; Winstanley, 2004). This approach has its antecedents in a quasi-deterministic, *neural processing* model of learning, although its adherents hold to this model to varying degrees (Winstanley, for instance, offers a partial critique, as well as a partial endorsement – as do Hymer and Michel, 2002). It is also closely related to the study of such concepts as *ability*, *intelligence* and *creativity* (*cf.* Perkins, 1995 for an overview). As a result of locating giftedness individually and intra-vidually *inside the head*, the burden of identifying gifted and talented learners is commonly placed on the results of standardised tests of 'potential' or 'aptitude' (e.g. intelligence quotients, CAT scores) or standardised measures of scholastic attainments (e.g. tests of proficiency in literacy or numeracy, SAT Levels), albeit often in association with behavioural checklists and teacher or parent observations (e.g. DfEE, 1999). Historically, less attention has been given to the role of the learning environment and of meta-cognitive tools in providing opportunities for students to 'create' or (to use the language of constructivism, as in Adams, 2003) *to make* their unique profiles of gifts and talents – although there is now a burgeoning interest and literature in these areas (e.g. Shore & Dover, 2004; Jeffrey & Woods, 2003; Fisher, 2003; Perkins, 1995; Hart *et al.*, 2004).

In a recent overview of the research literature Sternberg (2004a, pp.xxiv-xxv), whilst recognising the difficulties inherent in achieving a consensus on all the issues associated with giftedness, identifies a few points of broad agreement:

- Giftedness involves more than just high IQ.
- Giftedness has non-cognitive components as well as cognitive ones.

- Environment is crucial in terms of whether potentials for gifted performance will be realised.
- Giftedness is not a single thing – there are multiple forms. Hence, one-size-fits-all assessments or programs are likely to be too narrow.
- Measures for identifying or evaluating gifted individuals need to be proposed to operationalise theories, and then they need to be evaluated rather than merely being assumed to be valid.

However, despite the recognition in the academic literature of the limitations of over-reliance on traditional, actuarial, neural-processing definitions of giftedness, such formulations still predominate within applied educational fields. The UK's *Excellence in Cities* and *Excellence Cluster* initiatives, for instance, have a Gifted & Talented Strand which defines gifted and talented students in just these terms – as being those individuals in the top 5-10% (as measured by performance or potential performance in criterion-referenced or psychometric terms) of a school's roll in the core academic subjects (gifted) or in the creative arts, music and sports (talented). This gifted and talented cohort will, it is expected, be identified through a range of quantitative and qualitative measures, and the cohort will then have access to a "distinct teaching and learning programme" based on "the individual needs of the cohort" (DfEE, 1999; DfES, 2005). In drawing as it does substantially on fixed-state factors, and a rigid, entity-theory of intelligence (Dweck, 1999) – albeit overlaid, sometimes, with social-emotional considerations – and the resultant provision of enriched or accelerated learning opportunities for the identified few, the EiC initiative can be seen to be located substantially within a traditional, modernist, actuarial model of giftedness which places little emphasis on gift-creation through relational activity, and much more on gift-identification leading to instrumental provision. Within this model, the mantra is *test-and-place* – identify the cohort of students who are likely to conform to some definition of 'gifted or talented' – then do something special with them. It's the approach that dominated gifted and talented education in the 20th century – and which still does. At its best, it's an approach that works reasonably well: schools invest in a range of standardised tests of ability or performance, combine these with more qualitative measures of achievement or potential (e.g. judicious use of

checklists), identify the highest performers, then do something special with them – implement a 'distinct teaching and learning programme' (DfEE, 1999; DfES, 2005), for instance. Given the time and financial resources, it's relatively easy to do.

There are a number of problems with *test-and-place* though, even from a modernist perspective, and it is these that lay at the heart of my own sense of being a living contradiction when operating as a consultant in gifted education. Here are just a few:

- I was aware of <u>no</u> test or measure which is perfectly valid or reliable. To pretend we can justify inclusion/exclusion decisions at the margins of percentile scores is optimistic at best, educationally dishonest at worst. Many of the standardised tests in use in schools today are notoriously weak at discriminating between high-level performances – they have a worryingly low ceiling (e.g. NfER Nelson's Cognitive Abilities Test, Lohman *et al.*, 2003). The most statistically reliable of tests of intelligence in use, individually-administered Tests of IQ or cognitive abilities (e.g. *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for children – 4th edition*, or the NfER-Nelson *British Ability Scales*, Elliott, 1997) are widely regarded nowadays as measuring only one type of intelligence (e.g. Gardner, 1983; 1999; Sternberg, 2004b), not the full range of abilities represented in the school-age population (e.g. Denton & Postlethwaite, 1984; Renzulli, 2004).
- As suggested above, ability and performance are neither fixed nor pre-determined. Both are amenable to high-quality teaching. Intelligence is far more malleable than had been thought and taught, and certain methodologies, especially those drawing heavily on the application of metacognitive processes, can lead to gains both in measured intelligence and in school attainment outcomes (e.g. Trickey & Topping, 2004; Trickey, in press; Claxton, 1999; Dweck, 1999; Baumfield *et al.*, 2005). In essence, gifts are not just discovered through identification strategies – they can be created through access to rich, challenging learning experiences.
- Test-and-place has in itself little or no effect on general classroom provision (OfSTED, 2001).

- Test-and-place, especially when configured around the concept of ability can be disempowering both for students left behind, and their teachers (Hart *et al.*, 2004).

- Many teachers feel their role is to teach – not to judge. Test-and-place invites judgement (Leyden, 1990; Hart *et al.*, 2004).

- Test-and-place implies the existence of an evidence-base which supports the notion of two classes of children – the 'gifted or talented' who need access to a specialised 'curriculum-plus,' and the rest – for whom a bog-standard, early 20th-century skills- and knowledge-based curriculum is more appropriate. I am aware of no such evidence-base. The evidence I have seen suggests, on the contrary, that 'gifted and talented' students are a non-homogeneous sample from a non-homogeneous population (e.g. Feldhusen *et al.*, 2004; Winstanley, 2004), with as diverse a range of needs and learning styles as the 'non-gifted.' Moreover, all students respond positively to focused enrichment and extension opportunities and opportunities to construct their own meanings – and to the high-quality, well-differentiated teaching which allows this to happen (e.g. Lipman, 1993; Sharron, 1996).

Unsurprisingly from the contemporary perspective and given the problematic issues associated with *test-and-place*, in *Excellence in Cities* schools the issue of identification has been the most problematic aspect of this and related initiatives (OfSTED, 2001; White *et al.*, 2003), as has its failure to bring about significant changes to the usual classroom practices (OfSTED, 2001) – although it *has* given rise to many innovative and well-received experiences for those students accessing the 'distinct teaching and learning programmes' (*ibid.*).

Test-and-place is not, however, the only route to identification. As observed earlier in this section, the limitations of 'within-child,' fixed-state conceptualisations of giftedness, and the fundamental relationship between gifts and talents and the environment (social, emotional and physical) in which these gifts and talents emerge, have become increasingly apparent in the academic literature (e.g. Passow, 1979; Tannenbaum, 1979; Sternberg, 2004b, 2004c; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathune & Whalen,

1997; Gardner, 1983, 1993, 1999; Walberg *et al.*, 2004;). Sternberg, for instance, exposes foundations of cultural relativism in the concept with the observation that "Giftedness is something we invent, not something we discover: It is what one society or another wants it to be, and hence its conceptualisation can change over time and place" (Sternberg & Davidson, 1986, pp.3-4). In Japan, western preoccupations with concepts such as intelligence can cause bewilderment.[4] Within wider society in the western world too, there is evidence of a realisation that the concept is more problematic than we once believed, and that great intellectual breakthroughs often have as much to do with context, *ubuntu,* and good fortune as they do with one exceptional individual:

> If Einstein had not existed, physics would sooner or later have invented him. I am sure of that. His theory of relativity was an understanding of nature. It lay over the cosmic horizon, awaiting discovery by the first genius to pass its way. (Simon Jenkins, *The Times,* 21 January 2005)

> The discovery of Viagra came in 1985, after thirteen years of intense teamwork. I was one member of a 1000-strong team, and we didn't set out to invent it. (Dr Gill Samuels, Director of Vascular Biology at Pfizer, *The Independent,* 9 June 2005)

Contemporary approaches to identification take greater account of *extra-neural* factors, and rely more on *identification-through-provision* – an approach which sees the challenge of identification as being contiguous with the challenge of educational provision (Freeman, 1998). Such an approach is thought to be more compatible with inclusive educational principles, since it is grounded in the basic premise that enriched learning experiences should be made available in the first instance to *all* children (not just to some pre-identified gifted group). It is anticipated, however, that individual children will respond with varying degrees of commitment, enthusiasm and ability to these experiences, and that these experiences can then be adapted, developed or

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In a recent (27 April 2006) conversation with Prof Lauren Resnick of Pittsburgh University, she described to me a mealtime encounter with a group of Japanese academics, in which they struggled to provide an equivalent term for the western concept of *intelligence* within their own culture. In the end, they suggested the term *niceness* as the closest approximation!

extended to suit the needs of the strongest responders – who might then form a 'more able' group *in that domain of enquiry*. The approach can therefore be seen to take the form of *provide-and-place*, rather than *test-and-place* (Hymer with Michel, 2002).

Whilst it is generally accepted as being more inclusive, more fluid and more context-dependent than traditional test-and-place models, most formulations of the identification-through-provision model conform in at least two significant respects to traditional approaches:

(i)   it is usually the teacher or other authoritative adult who is the agent of identification, and the self-knowledge of individual students is often under-used or even barely tapped into at all;

(ii)   the terms 'gifted' and 'talented' remain wedded to a comparative, norm-referenced framework in which a student's gifts and/or talents are identified only in relation to his or her peers' relatively inferior abilities in any particular domain, not in relation to his or her own unique array of skills, qualities, abilities and dispositions across the broad field of human achievement.

Albeit to a lesser extent than *test-and-place*, the shortcomings of *identification-through-provision* therefore also presented a challenge to my values and beliefs. A few years ago, I set out my broad personal educational beliefs, values and principles in the following way (Hymer with Michel, 2002):

•   All children have a right to a high quality education;
•   The primary aim of education is to excite in children and young people a passion for learning, and to facilitate the acquisition of skills and dispositions which will permit this passion for learning to be satisfied and sustained;
•   The primary role of the school is to maximise opportunities for all children to reach their educational goals;
•   Children's educational goals will differ.

To these (relatively) uncontroversial principles, at which I imagine few would demur, I added the following:

- No-one – not even the person him or herself – is ever fully aware of an individual's potential for learning;
- A fixed concept of 'ability' is an unhelpful descriptor or predictor of performance;
- Children's educational goals are best reached by the setting and answering of questions. These questions are best set by the children themselves;
- Deep learning takes place collaboratively rather than competitively.

Implications of the above would include a recognition that:

- Giftedness and talent are best seen as relative rather than absolute terms, within the context both of an individual child's profile of strengths and weaknesses and his or her wider learning environment;
- The school has an important role in helping *every* child to identify his or her gift/s or talent/s;
- The most effective form of assessment is formative (assessment for learning) rather than summative or normative (assessment for showing or comparing). Relatedly, promoting learning orientation (concern for improving one's learning) is more likely to lead to effective learning than promoting performance orientation (concern for grade success);
- An inclusive policy for gifted and talented education is the only model consistent with these principles;
- The school should take steps actively to implement teaching and learning procedures and methods which will accommodate the principles set out above.

I recognised that many if not all of the principles and implications set out above were open to challenge, but where values, principles and core beliefs could escape the constraints of subjectivity, a battery of supportive evidence was cited. This included, by way of illustration:

- Joan Freeman's comprehensive survey of international research into the education of able children and young people, in which she concluded that "The dominant current concern of research into the education of the very able is *the interaction between the child's potential and the provision to develop it* (italics added). Without that dynamic element, we return to the old idea of fixed abilities, most notably intelligence" (Freeman, 1998, p.56). In addition to differentiation, Freeman saw individualisation as the other route to the development of potential – "Where the pupil has greater responsibility for the content and pace of his or her own educational progress. In this, children would be required to monitor their own learning" (*ibid.*, p.56).

- Stephen Ceci's (1990, 1996) and Michael Howe's (1990) robust refutation of the idea that people who excel in certain fields do so because of their special gifts or talents: commitment and practice have been shown to be stronger determinants of exceptional performances than underlying ability.

- Paul Black & Dylan Wiliam's (1998) highly influential account into the key role of formative assessment (or 'assessment for learning') in raising standards in schools.

- Chris Watkins' (2001) extensive review of research evidence suggesting that preoccupation with grade attainment can actually *lower* the quality of performance.

- The growing recognition that thinking and learning are socially regulated activities; social interactions are seen to be essential to such learning processes as voluntary attention, logical memory, concept formation and internalisation. Research in these domains owes a great deal to the writings of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, but more recent applications in the UK educational arena include Paul Light & Karen Littleton's (1999) demonstration of the significant social and relational bases of learning – even in an age of 'standardised assessment tests' (which are designed to drive up educational standards through the illumination of individual successes and failures).

- The educational implications of the burgeoning body of evidence from cognitive neuroscience. In his review of this area, Geake noted that "There are educational implications here for the measurement of school success as a

function of students' perceived individual successes, regardless of their level of achievement. This is not a call for dumbing-down – in fact, quite the opposite. It is a call for school organisation to even further recognise neurobiologically-driven individual differences in responses to school learning, in order to break the cycle of low competence generating low confidence generating low competence, as well as to minimise underachievement by academically gifted children through boredom with an underchallenging age-normed curriculum" (Geake, 2002, p.7).

- Diane Montgomery's conclusions to the book she edited on *Able Underachievers* (2000), in which she observed that "All learners need to experience an education which is supportive and valuing, whatever their differences. To achieve this, general education needs to be made more flexible. Access to special provision where it is useful should be based on the principles of inclusion and self-referral and use authentic or performance-based assessment to provide feedback to both learners and teachers. Learners need opportunities to contribute their own views on the value and appropriateness of the education they are receiving" (*ibid.*, p.202).

The book made explicit my doubts about the direction in which national policy was moving. An example (Hymer with Michel, 2002, p.8) relating to the emerging National Academy for Gifted & Talented Youth, which was still in gestation in 2002:

The challenge of true inclusion is a stiff challenge, which can make the relative ease of providing something different for the few very alluring. This not a new insight. In her thoughtful account of Clever Children in Comprehensive Schools, Auriol Stevens (1980) foreshadows the attractions of separate and different educational experiences that are embodied in, for instance, the UK's emerging Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth: "The task is hard. It is made infinitely harder by setting up alternative systems to 'save' the clever by taking them out of the common schools. The problem may appear to have been solved by such means, but it will not have been. Attention will simply have been diverted from

undertaking the detailed, painstaking work that raising standards for all requires" (ibid., p164).

For all my preparedness to make explicit my personal educational beliefs and values, I was aware that in my practice as a consultant in the field of gifted education, and as an EP undertaking occasional assessments of children on a private basis, I often allowed my personal values to be overridden by the demands of hard-pressed, often fatigued and over-worked client groups for ready-made 'solutions' to the needs of traditionally-identified cohorts of 'gifted children.' This was the basis on which I was generally called in to work with schools, address conferences, or assess children. By way of illustration, I offer three examples of the extent to which I was habituating to the prevailing orthodoxy of gifted and talented education in the United Kingdom:

- My inservice training sessions were usually modelled on a three-part *test-and-place* formula: establish definitions, illuminate identification strategies, promote appropriate provision for the identified few. As part of this I constructed and offered up for use plausible checklists of giftedness, from which teachers and parents could identify gifted pupils in their classes (Hymer, 1998; 2001b). In essence, I provided material and advice in pre-masticated form and eschewed opportunities to get participants to think for themselves and, in particular, to question the assumptions and orthodoxies lying at the heart of western approaches to gifted and talented education.

- I constructed and advocated definitions of giftedness which had operational advantages, but which were couched in traditional, attainment-oriented conventions – *cf.* the definition first adopted by the Cumbria LEA Policy for the more able child or young person (1997): "The term 'more able pupil' is taken to apply to that individual who is consistently functioning at a level two or more years in advance of the majority of his or her same-age peers – in at least one area of the school curriculum". This definition's weaknesses include its failure to include within it the needs of the underachieving student, its failure to take account of age-within-grade effects (is a 14-year-old performing at the level of an 'average' 16-year-old really as able as a four-year-old performing at the

level of an 'average' six-year-old?) and its limp acceptance of the knowledge-based formal curriculum (and the attendant forms of assessment) as being the *only* legitimate domain for the expression of exceptional achievement. Moreover, it is at heart a complacent definition that sets few incentives and offers no real signposts to a school wishing to walk that bit further, to move beyond a recognition of existing high-level performances and to work towards the demonstration of high achievement in its many forms for all its students.

- I allowed myself to be designated as an "expert" in meeting the needs of gifted and talented learners, and benefited from the professional recognition and boost to my ego that this designation afforded me.

At times, I felt uncomfortably like one of "those seductive story tellers … on the speaker's circuit (who) would lose a good part of their consulting fees if they couldn't assure audiences that they know with certainty who is *truly gifted*" (Renzulli, 2004, p.xxvii). And the more I read, communicated and practised in the field, the more I realized that far from moving forward in the direction of my values, I was retreating – assuming a technocratic, mastery-oriented role, not dissimilar from the EP role I'd adopted, and which had brought superficial rewards, but little intrinsic satisfaction. At the level of content, my practice and my values felt incongruent – I was a living contradiction.

Dialectic 2 (process): I believe in dialogic co-enquiry, but instead I practise didactic presentation

The extent to which I, in my being and in my practice, embody intellectual respect for myself and for others comprises the chief standard of judgment upon which this enquiry is based. I know that this value reflects ontological leanings, grounded in my experiences as a child. I was born, raised and schooled as a white boy in apartheid South Africa. Being schooled in apartheid South Africa meant being schooled in apartheid. I was taught to listen and obey, to acquire technical skills and knowledge, but not to think. The status quo was not to be challenged – things *just were*. I was

well-schooled. I became an obedient and willing student, who learned his lessons, and accepted life as it was and the rewards that came from this acceptance: I became head boy of my primary school, a martinet lord of the playground who implemented the rules of the school and of the land with fervour, and I carried the *driekleur* (the three-coloured flag of the Republic) with pride at *vlaghysings* (flag-raising ceremonies) in Church Square, Pretoria, beneath the huge, cast-iron statues of Paul Kruger and countless *voortrekker* heroes. It was an easy, sun-drenched, thought-less early childhood, untroubled by doubt.

I spent my secondary school years at one of Cape Town's most popular and high-achieving schools, attended for the most part by the sons and daughters of white professionals in the liberal, English-speaking southern suburbs. One of my significant memories at this school is of a remarkable history teacher, who valued his students' capacity to think beyond their grade-gathering capacities. At that time the Cape Senior Certificate history examination was oriented firmly towards the needs of the apartheid state, in legitimation of that regime and of our way of life. Historical 'facts' were revered and rewarded, and critical analysis decried – in the authoritarian tradition described by Law (2006). We were required to work our way diligently through a single, approved text book – "Smit & Fowler." Mr Dorian Haarhof, however, as much through his person as through what he ever said, made it clear that facts were there to be interpreted, critically evaluated and critiqued, and given the reverence they deserved – but no more. He was quietly-spoken, even diffident, but his actions roared. His classroom contained sayings and quotations that revealed his values – e.g. "*Old age hath yet its honour and its toil.*" I recall how, on the morning of our final matriculation examination, he took a roll of toilet-paper, wrote the word "facts" on every sheet, and trailed it as a lure from the school entrance to the examination hall. Or the day, months earlier, when he began a lesson with these words: "Remember people, in history it's the facts that matter. Bald, objective, neutral, impartial facts. So turn to Smit & Fowler, to see how this is done. Turn to Chapter 6, to the beginning, to the passage which reads, '*The republican theme runs like a thread of gold through the fabric of South African history …'*". He then closed the book, and sat down in silence – for what seemed an eternity.

In Dorian Haarhof's lessons our teacher would talk to us, ask our views, get us to make connections, express opinions, act out roles and invite contradiction – to engage us in dialogue and, in Vygotskyan terms, *performance beyond ourselves*. In later years, I would see the performatory environment he often created as being one in which multiple zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) were being created. Being taught history by Mr Haarhof was an occasionally thrilling, always bi-lateral and mind-opening experience, but double-edged – the product didn't match the process: year on year, cohorts of aspirational and privileged white matriculants (and their parents), would be dismayed by the history results, which fell invariably two or three grades below their achievements in other subjects. Critical understanding, passion, thought, was seemingly not valued. The rumour was rife that Mr Haarhof was a marked man in the Cape's Education Department, and that his students' results were routinely downgraded by external examiners – or subsequently, to a formula. We heard rumours that he'd been 'disciplined.' But though his job in the school must have been under threat, he never changed his methods, when it would have been so easy, at one level, to subjugate his pedagogical principles for the rewards that would have followed – to *play the game*. He did eventually leave teaching, and became a distinguished poet.

In retrospect, I can now see Dorian Haarhof living out, "despite the hazards" (Polanyi, 1958, *op cit*.), a vision of education well-described by Freire (1993, p.56):

> the [humanist-revolutionary educator's] efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them.

And also by Habermas (1982, p.252):

The commitment to consider all individuals as potential participants in discourse presupposes a universalistic commitment to the potential equality, autonomy, and rationality of individuals.

But failure to live out this vision may be a default setting in many traditional learning environments, with all the consequences this entails. This sense is captured by Whitehead & McNiff (2006, p.45):

We see … how people are actively prevented from thinking for themselves through the body of official knowledge, and then how that knowledge is pedagogized into specific ways of teaching and learning, and institutionalized into specific technicist epistemologies. We know what happens when people are prevented from exercising their capacity to question, the gradual loss of excitement, and the quietude of acceptance.

Here's how *I like* to see myself, from a third-person stance: as a person and as a professional, Barry honours the Freire-Habermas-Haarhof ideology-critique, emancipatory route to pedagogy: he holds intellectual respect as a precious value – for himself, and for all with whom he comes into contact. He reserves the right to challenge dogma and received wisdom, based on his experiences, and his reflection and reasoning around those experiences. In his relations with others he also respects their right to think for themselves, even (especially?) when the consequences of this run counter to his own thoughts, views and beliefs. He believes Wittgenstein (1980), in his statement that "No-one can think a thought for me in the way that no-one can don my hat for me" (*ibid.*, p.2e). He sees independent thinking as being a crucial outcome of the educational process. If education is to "excite in children and young people a passion for learning, and to facilitate the acquisition of skills and dispositions which will permit this passion for learning to be satisfied and sustained" (a core belief, identified earlier – *cf*. Hymer with Michel, 2002), then an ability to think independently, critically, creatively and collaboratively will be at the heart of it. He agrees with Chomsky (2003, p.235), that "Real education is about getting people involved in thinking for themselves", and that reading "Good Books", or listening to

other people's learning, however impressive, will not in itself achieve this (*ibid*.). He agrees with Vygotsky (1978) that the only good learning is learning-leading-development, and also with Nigel Spivey's (2002) articulation of the power of the Socratic method:

I have overheard a student describe my lecturing style as 'pretty laid back'. This, I think, is a polite way of saying that I have a sluggish brain, and often struggle to find the next word. I suppose I practise what might pompously be called a dialogical method. It suits the slow-moving brain. You begin with a conundrum; then proceed by wondering airily how it might be solved. Before long – this is Cambridge – a few voices will pipe up from below. "Good thinking," you concede. "Let's see where it takes us." You go a little further, and pause again. "Well," you say, "Does that make any better sense?" With luck, new voices of dissent or approval. And so it goes, more conversation than soliloquy. This collective enquiry now seems to me just about the only way of getting through the hour in a mutually enjoyable way.

Nothing new in the method. Its exemplary practitioner was Socrates, the founding-father of all academic vocation. Perhaps aware of what a Socratic education amounts to – the questioning of everything – successive governments have done nothing to encourage people to become university lecturers. But they have not silenced us by the death penalty. Yet.

He agrees finally with Alexander (2004) that to live means to participate in dialogue with others: to ask questions, to reflect, respond, agree, disagree, speculate and so forth, and that our life is permeated with significant dialogic relationships (Bakhtin, 1986).

Was this picture of myself as a dialogic, relational educator, open to the co-construction of knowledge, borne out in reality? In honesty, no, the evidence suggested it wasn't: inspection of keynote and INSET course plans and records revealed the proportion of time spent engaging in discussion with my audience was

rarely above 2% of the total when doing a 60-90-minute conference keynote presentation, and rarely above 10% even during workshop and whole-day inservice training presentations. I planned and delivered to my perceived strengths, whilst secretly aware these were in reality my weaknesses: performance oratory, authoritative dissemination of facts, data, information, abstract theory, the persuasive display of *knowledgeability*. I heard myself using the terms "research evidence suggests …" or "As proved by research studies …" far too often, knowing *as I said it* that I was using these phrases, at least in some part, as a defensive tool – to buttress my own insecurities, and to suppress critical engagement with my ideas from the audience. Evaluations returns, whilst superficially positive, were implicitly damning - "fluent and authoritative" was one which made me wince and reflect. On another occasion, during a presentation to the staff of Exeter School that was otherwise well-received, I was interrupted from the floor. The question: "You're speaking about objectivism and constructivism in education and their relative merits. Just what are you practising now?" Though I didn't want to hear it then, it was a fair point. I felt I needed to be less fluent, less authoritative, less learn*ed*, more hesitant, more fallible – more of a learn*er*. At the level of process, my practice and my values felt incongruent – I was a living contradiction.

Dialectic 3 (product): I'd like to provide ordnance survey maps, but instead I offer flow-charts

Arising from the negations outlined above are related questions: what do I leave behind in my presentations, my workshops, my inservice training days, and for what purpose? Is the impact of my engagement with this group of people, for this period of time, in this way, well-reflected by 'the handout'? What does/should the product of a meaningful engagement between myself and others look like? Should it take a pre-ordained, pre-copied, recorded form at all, or should it represent a fluid, unanticipatable, personally-constructed set of meanings (or at least provisional meanings), which by definition and irrespective of its form will elude reduction to a standardised compilation of principles, recommendations or 'top-tips for teachers'?

I would like at this point to relate these questions more generally to the focus of my work as an educator in the field of giftedness – i.e. to what extent do I influence my own learning and the learning of others, specifically as this exists in and impacts on the social formations of gifted education? Responses to this question must, if they are to have any valid application in the field, relate also to these further challenges: how does what I do with teachers impact on what they do with their students? Is what I aspire to in my work with fellow educators similar to what they aspire to in their direct work with young people? What do *they* judge to be worthwhile evidence of learning? Is there a discernible 'product'? If so, what shape does this product take? Is it of a different order from the expectations I and they have of my presentations, workshops and training sessions? If so, can I – and they – justify these differences?

In attempting to address these questions, I find helpful the insights of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century pragmatist philosopher-psychologist, William James, and the proto-pragmatist, the 'Dewey of the Spanish-speaking world,' Eugenio Maria de Hostos (1839-1903). For James, for individuals to be ethical, they must practise a personal philosophy derived from individual experience (Walters, 1997). This individual experience must be rich, and arguably within the domain of the numinous. It is through a high-quality spiritual, religious, moral and ethical experience that the person who is in the process of *becoming* (*cf*. Rogers, 1967) can develop a personal philosophy (James, 1907).

For de Hostos, the ultimate educational goal is the development of the mind – cognitively, emotionally, socially, morally – and for him the standard of judgment is clear:

> the most infallible way to know if a person has developed fully in his/her capacity for thinking, is the evidence of his or her own life. If he/she causes harm, it [the capacity for thinking] is not rational enough. (de Hostos, 2000, p.299)

Between them, these are substantial ambitions, placing a rich individual experience, lived authentically in that life, at the heart of the educational process. The educator's

role in that process is to support – wherever appropriate – the nurturing of that experience, and the living of that life. Now to relate James and de Hostos specifically to the field of this enquiry, I would like to introduce Cooper (2004), who in responding to her own question, 'What is it that enables some students to recognize others' needs and, more importantly, take positive action to address those needs?' asks,

> *Is it a natural sensitivity to the human condition? A genuine concern for others' welfare? Or … a mature ethos that, incorporating these two traits, prompts the individual to change the status quo for the good of humankind? What stimulates the ethos is a personal philosophy one develops through firsthand involvement in complex, high quality, advanced level experiences grounded in real world, authentic curriculum. This personal philosophy, which reflects a magnanimous attitude of doing good for humankind [5] just because it's right, prompts productive human behaviour.* (Cooper, 2000, p.149)

For Cooper, the end point in the progression from the bud of potential to the blossom of realized talent,

> *… will be characterised by action – the talented individual will do something to express in a creative way the singular meaning the talent development journey has for him or her. Giving form to this meaning for the creative producer or the artist is a personal philosophy that, together with a highly-developed ethos, drives and shapes the individual's work.* (*Ibid.*, p.150)

The implication of James', de Hostos', and Cooper's beliefs are, for me, demanding but true: they require me in the process of being and becoming, to practise a personal philosophy, grounded in a rich experience; I must give priority to the development of my mind in the fullest sense, and to provide evidence of this development in the product of my learning – i.e. in the living of my life 'in action' as congruently and as authentically, as I can, in the direction of my living values. Moreover, in my work as

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[5] Jean McNiff (in press) problematises the notion of believing that one should seek to do substantive good, invoking Berlin (2002) in recognising that the practice of doing good can impose one's own values, one's own understanding of 'the good' on others. She understands doing good more as "trying to live one's own values, and communicating what one is doing in honesty, sincerity, truthfulness, and in a form appropriate to the context." (McNiff, in press, after Habermas, 1987)

an educator working with and through other educators, I have a responsibility to seek to provide the experiences which allow others to do just the same.

Did I live up to these ambitions? Did I succeed in providing the educators with whom I worked with a rich provocation of possibilities, with an ordnance survey map – suggesting a *philosophy of personal place*, a rich topography of potential meaning, where they chose the destination and the route? Or did I offer a pre-planned set of directions, calculated according to the specifications I had assumed for them – an unpersonalised flow-chart from uncertainty to resolution? In honesty, looking back at records of my presentations and handouts, I provided far more flow-charts than maps. At the level of product, my practice and my values felt incongruent – I was a living contradiction.