

How am I using my own understanding and development of gifts and talents to promote the learning of children?

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Abstract

My enquiry, which formed the subject of my Masters module on gifts and talents in education in 2008, was part of my journey as a classroom teacher during a pressured year when OFSTED gave our school 'notice to improve'. I specifically write 'our school' as this is what the children called it and I feel the same loyalty and pride to call it this too. At the time I had been teaching Early Years in this English primary school for 8 years and I had a true sense of belonging and passion towards the children and staff, and the teaching that happened there. My journey is not exclusive and it is a journey followed and shared with the children in my class. The narrative is as relevant now as it was then for teachers wanting to develop gifts and talents to promote learning in their classrooms.

Keywords: gifts; talents; Living Theory; energy

Introduction

When I was working on my Masters I had been an Early Years teacher for 8 years. The school in which I was teaching was a large primary school in a small English city. The city is generally considered prosperous but many of my pupils came from families with low incomes and many experienced difficult circumstances at home.

The purpose of my Master's enquiry was to illustrate and question myself as a teacher and how best I am able to support children, alongside developing my understanding of the term 'gifts and talents'. I want to place my embodied knowledge in the public domain, as I believe the gifts and talents of teachers should be shared to provide support for other teachers, give thoughts for debate and to highlight successes. By sharing we can support each other, hold educational and reflective discussions and promote good practice.

I follow a Living Theory approach to Action Research (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), as this is the way I have learnt to question, reflect, share and improve my own teaching practice. By a Living Theory approach I mean that I generate an evidence-based explanation of my educational influence. I offer here an account of my values-based explanation of my educational influence in my own learning and in the learning of my pupils as my living-theory (Whitehead, 1989) as this developed through my Masters 'Gifts and Talents in Education' MA module.

Marshall, (2004) discusses the different forms of Action Research and questions the opinion of others in relation to 'first-person' research. She says that to inquire is to improve, and that is why I have chosen a Living Theory approach to Action Research. I wish to enquire into the gifts and talents I have as a classroom teacher as I work and research to improve my practice.

Gifts and talents

The term 'gifted and talented children' has been targeted, debated, implemented and encouraged throughout our education system. There is an ongoing debate as to what is meant by the term 'gifted and talented children'. There seems to be endless definitions and the debate surrounding the correct definition has been around for many years and I guess will always continue. Gifted children are most often described as highly intelligent; however how to measure intelligence is another ongoing debate. Freeman, (1998) writes about how teachers react to highly able children. Teachers from a range of cultures have been known to hold conflicting views about what they consider to be a highly able child. The way these children are dealt with and treated is also different.

Worryingly the term 'gifted and talented child' is often referred to as the 'brightest' child/children in the class, which I feel undermines those children that are deemed not to be as bright. I feel it is hard to measure exactly who such children are as every child is bright at something. However, 'gifted and talented children' were defined in the national gifted and talented education strategy as those achieving higher than the expected National Curriculum level for their age. The guidance from the DFES (2007) stated that provision for gifted children should be inclusive of children from low income and culturally different backgrounds:

For provision to be inclusive, children in care should be viewed as being potentially gifted and talented. Provision must: be inclusive, positive and collaborative; raise improve standards; and remove potential barriers to learning.' (DFES 2007, p.4)

The guidance implies that only certain children have gifts and talents. It stated that children in care could potentially belong to the group of highly gifted and talented children in schools and it is important we reduce barriers that prevent them from achieving their potential. Shouldn't this be the case for all children? All children have the potential to achieve their own gifts and talents. Why should there be an elite group of children? I believe that every child has a gift and talent and that it is my role to find out what they are, enhance, nurture and give time for them to develop.

I find it difficult to accept that gifted and talented children are only a small minority of my class. All children have their own gifts and talents. Should the term 'gifts and talents' be broken down? Are gifts different from talents? I ask myself what is a gift? Is it something special that a person holds, a talent they have, or is it something special that one gives and passes on? I understand that a gift can't be a gift until it is passed on freely. It is my responsibility to use my own gifts to bring out the natural gifts of my children. Without my gift of teaching their gifts may not be discovered. It is my duty to the children to give them the opportunities and set expectations to allow their gifts to excel.

I agree with Hymer when he says that all children have gifts and talents, not just the children who obviously shine in our education system. I think that it is worth emphasising that it is my responsibility to find and provide opportunities for the talents of every child in my care:

If all children are given access to an enriched curriculum, the most able will identify themselves. This is not – in my view – an idealistic or precious position to adopt – it is necessary one. (Hymer, 2007, p.156)

I would like to look at the gifts and talents I hold as a teacher and how they can be utilized to improve the gifts and talents of all my children. I believe that my main gifts and talents as a class teacher include:

- Building children's confidence by ensuring a safe and secure environment to work in with consistent routines and expectations. Early Years trained, I am aware that children will not learn unless such an environment is in place.
- Building relationships (Clayton, 2008).
- Differentiating activities to appeal to children and reflect the ability of individual children.
- Skilled at using a range of questions to assess children's knowledge and interests. I have drawn on Shirley Clarke's (2001) work on questioning to enhance my skills in this area.
- Skilled at using a range of 'visuals' and 'hands on' stimuli that are relevant to young children's lives.
- Making links between home and school by listening to children's worries and achievements (Clayton, 2008).
- I never use the same planning twice. Each group of children is different, having different dynamics and needs. I look at objectives given in strategies and schemes of work and create and adapt planning that focus on the aspects of learning that need to be addressed.
- Using my own passions within my teaching day (referred to later).
- Making all children feel valued. From the children with severe learning difficulties to those working at exceptionally high levels for their age. I use the TASC wheel (Wallace et al, 2004) to promote inclusion and allow children to challenge themselves and work at their own pace. I will discuss how this is happening in my classroom later.

Rayner (2008) believes that the only way we can improve is by staying a learner ourselves. Reflecting, analyzing, adapting the way we work, will have huge benefits for our children and ourselves. Rayner shows how our world is driven by results, money, qualifications and power. By aspiring to these goals we underestimate the importance of being a learner and improving ourselves through staying a learner.

Hymer, (2007) promotes a child-led learning environment where the discovery of an individual's gifts and talents is not just their identification but also their creation. Hymer suggests gifts and talents should emerge from our teaching and we shouldn't be looking for them. As a teacher I should be providing activities that can nurture talents and allow children to involve themselves in creating their own gifts and talents:

The focus of intervention has been on providing challenging lessons for ALL children by selecting a model for teaching and learning which

emphasizes the use of thinking skills and allows children to ask and answer their own questions. (Hymer, 2007, p.258)

I have written in the past about what I am doing to improve myself as a teacher. I still continue to do this but in this paper I want now to look at what skills and embodied knowledge I have already as a teacher and what it is that enables me to support children in their learning. I believe that developing an awareness and understanding of what my own gifts and talents are will support me to use them effectively and readily and more importantly, enable me to enhance the gifts and the talents of the children in my class:

... and as we learn, we pass on the gift of our dynamically embodied knowledge, i.e. the benefit of our learning experience, to others. That, for me is what the deeply inclusional and truly evolutionary meaning of 'living educational theory and practice' implies. (Rayner, 2008)

My passions

Outstanding teachers are 'gifted' in using both their awareness of themselves and their awareness of others to develop classroom rapport. As skilled communicators, they intuitively understand and respond effectively to the dynamics of the classroom. They are good mediators of learning, facilitators of interaction and often they become mentors who inspire children to teach. (Wallace, 2001, p.9)

I have seen 'an energy', a passion when some people teach. There is a connection between the energy and passion. The passion is transferred to the children's motivation and interest in learning. But when does the flow of energy occur? I feel it sometimes when I teach, not always but it seems to happen most often when physical activity is involved. Dance is a passion of mine, when we have movement in our class I feel energised.

It is a difficult idea to try and put into words. Jack Whitehead, has been studying how important this life-affirming energy is within educational research and he discusses ways of how it can be represented other than by words alone:

The radical suggestion I am making here is that the usual forms of representation in such journals are masking or omitting the life-affirming energy that distinguish what should count as educational knowledge, educational theory and educational research. (Whitehead, 2008)

When I look at photographs of myself teaching, I see the energy Whitehead speaks of shining through. I can see it in my body language and my facial expressions that I am enjoying the company of the children, I am relishing in their love of learning and desire to soak up what we debate and what we share together. I believe when this passion is alive and energy is being transferred, excellent teaching of the highest level is happening.

Whenever I can I bring dance and physical movement into my teaching. They allow me to enter a state of flow as described by Csikszentmihalyi (2002). I avoid too much time sitting on the carpet. I expect my children to partake physically in

learning as well as mentally. If I'm flowing I believe that the children will flow too, its contagious.

The following beliefs need more research. I believe that using physical movement to teach times tables livens up what many teachers might consider a tedious task. Clapping the rhythm of chanting numbers using our hands, feet and waving our arms seems to motivate us practice numbers more often together. I believe that using arm and head movements for punctuating shared text has been a success. I believe that I enhanced the teaching of our topic 'The Egyptians' by using dance, and that it proved to be a great success. The children choreographed their own moves to given music. I found inspiring the thoughts that went into their motifs of movement. These involved many thought processes, about how the Egyptians lived in order to achieve their final result. Children used their bodies to express: Rowing a boat down the Nile, praying to their chosen god and the difficulties involved in building a pyramid.

Holding onto our Gifts

Expressing and sharing our gifts and talents through pressured times has been incredibly difficult recently. I feel that I'm in a constant tension between achieving results and my love of teaching children.

It is always hard for a teacher to think of what it is that makes a 'good teacher'. What is the embodied knowledge Rayner (2008) speaks of? This is because more often than not, the teachers I speak to always say, they feel they can't do the job very well and feel stressed and pressured as one teacher reported about the experience of the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs):

One of the most frustrating experiences that arose from my experience of SAT's is that your thinking and teaching are channelled towards one ultimate result limiting a holistic approach to the education of children. There is no time to incorporate what the children want to learn or to follow their interests. (Skuse, 2007)

I have thought hard about what it is that I can give a child in my class. It is important teachers do reflect and praise themselves for what they are doing otherwise it would be easy to give up. Whitehead, (2008b) clearly states the importance of teachers researching their own practice. He distinguishes between education research, which is carried out from the perspectives of the disciplines of education, such as philosophy, sociology, history, psychology, management, economics, policy and leadership, and educational research, which the embodied knowledge of teachers can contribute to. I agree with Whitehead, that as teachers we can have an influence over our own learning and the learning of others and that teachers can tell valid stories of what is truly happening in their classrooms. It is exactly this that keeps my sense of professionalism alive, knowing that my talents are important. Theoretical understanding of education and how a child learns and thinks is not enough. Having a living experience of teaching needs to go 'hand in hand' with academic knowledge. My intention is not only to continue to improve my theoretical and practical knowledge of the issues surrounding gifts and talents but to bring these ideas into my daily

practice. This is not always easy; what you value and believe to be important can become impossible to live out when working as part of a team in a large school.

Difficult times

Every day is assessment day. Our school set up a rigorous assessment programme. We set targets with and for the children, then assess and test their progress, collect this data (in a statistical way, and in the form of levels), analyse it and create new targets. This was, and is still, seen as good practice and is set out in various publications emanating from the DFES under the title 'assessment for learning' (or 'AfL'), such as the 'Assessment for Learning Strategy' published in 2008. This is why our school management had to follow them, whether or not this is where their values lie. However, the principles of AfL arising from a review of the literature on formative assessment by Black and Wiliam's (reference?) commissioned by the Assessment Reform Group have become distorted to serve the 'standards agenda'. This is done by focussing on assessment *of* learning, delivering on prescribed learning objectives and a preoccupation with the use of tests as Swaffield (2009) and many others have subsequently pointed out.

My concern is through constant testing and assessment, what damage are we doing to teachers and children's passion, relationships and our gifts and talents? My values do not lie with those of our school management. My gifts and talents are being wasted during assessment weeks. Alongside time used for marking books with targets written on, setting six weekly numeracy and literacy targets and other assessment tick sheet tasks. The principles of Shirley Clarke's (2001) marking policy were followed in our school. Clarke's work is impressive and useable but needs to be used when appropriate. Hours spent on marking books is not where my passions lie and I often wish I could spent this valuable time speaking and listening to children and working with them in after school or lunch time groups.

My talents lie in building relationships with the children and listening to their needs. The way I respond and interact with them allows me to have a greater understanding of what they should, and are able to learn; see Clayton, (2008). Margaret Farren (2008) discusses the importance of creating an educational space:

I am conscious of the need for individuals to have the educational space to develop their own voices. (Farren 2008, p.65)

Her work relates to educational practitioners research but I agree with Farren that children need this space too. Farren emphasises the importance of dialogue and how listening and speaking to each other allows us to bounce ideas of others around and rethink our own. She is clear that academic success in conventional subjects is not the only gifts and talents children hold. Looking to the arts for gifts and talents is crucial; these subjects must not be pushed aside as they often are in a packed school timetable:

Perhaps we need to learn from musicians, artists, designers and children who play games, even those who hold the ball in both hands and run!
(Farren 2008, p. 52)

I am unable to listen to the children if they are continually being faced with written tests. When being tested they are not permitted to ask for help or discuss issues and my gifts as a teacher are wasted during these times.

My head-teacher at the time (Phil Pope) has always been my role model; his love of the children in his school is so obvious. I have followed the way he listens to them, worries about them, cares, motivates, tries to understand their needs, and accommodates them. Over the past 8 years he has been my inspiration: he has passed on and shared his gifts with his staff and with the children; he has trusted his staff and allowed us to create our own ways of learning, be creative, and ultimately know our children. We knew what interventions each child needed. Unfortunately he had to respond to increasing demands by the DFES by asking us to hand in written evidence and data to prove ourselves as high quality teachers of children. To prove that we know our children and know what they need is a challenging task; this is what I find so difficult. To justify actions and give evidence that we are passing on our gifts and talents is demanding and something I do not find easy. How can I prove that my own gifts and talents are having a positive effect those of the children in my class? And how can show that their gifts and talents are being catered for, when our definitions are inconsistent?

Alternatives

It seems impossible to communicate on paper what effect my gifts and talents are having on my children, I would hope that test results in literacy and numeracy show improvement but without forgetting that education includes more than reading, writing and numeracy. I am still very interested in a holistic approach to teaching.

Cynthia Bartlett (2008) offers an alternative to testing; she highlights the study carried out by Oxfordshire head teachers and their suggestion of the model for schools of a second home. Her work tries to bridge the gap between home and school. Her ideas appeal to me. Having a small child of my own I can see the way I teach him can be mirrored in my delivery of the curriculum.

I have studied how my values can be shared with my child and with the children in my class. In my assignment, Clayton (2007) I discuss how the skills I have as a mother can be transferred to my gifts and talents as a teacher and vice versa. I am now extending this by mirroring by the way I am continuing to live out these values in how I teach daily. As I follow my own son in his development and listen to the theories behind Early Years practice, I am able to reflect this way of learning into my own classroom development. By observing the way very young children learn and understanding how best to engage, motivate, scaffold and take forward their learning, it is possible to implement and continue this practice further up the school with older children. For example my child is obsessed with playing with cars. I have used this obsession and put his cars into different situations, for instance putting cars in the sand play, books about vehicles, tyre

track painting etc. In summery I have taken my son's passion and used it in other learning situations. Using this model for my own learning, I take my own passions and put them, where possible, into my teaching.

Reading the work of Day inspires me to hold on to my passions and move on to the next stage in my gift development.

Teaching is a creative and adventurous profession and passion is not an option. It is essential to high quality teaching. (Day 2006 p.3)

Gifts cannot stay static they need to change and develop.

...the actual nature of the gift is dynamic rather than static. (Simonton cited in Balchin et al 2009, p.27)

Implementing change

There is no one best way to teach children to bring out their gifts and talents and utilize ours (as teachers); this would be too easy. All educators have different opinions about the best ways we can succeed, we all work differently and we work with different children. To try and adopt a model of teaching straight from a book or theory would be disastrous. This is why through constant reflection and trial and error, I have developed a model that has worked for my classes and me. In working with the children in my class I have adopted and developed a 'reflective, thinking skills' based model to improve the gifts and talents we all hold. I give the children as much choice as I can within the constraints I have to teach within. I constantly try to give my children challenges, opportunities to think, time to discuss and reflect. Rather than, "This is what we are doing today, I shall demonstrate how to make a 3D shape out of straws", I will say, "How can we make a 3D shape, what could we use? What will we need?" I then hold a discussion around what problems may occur and what we will need to remember to do. I try to give them a choice of what equipment to use, whom to sit with, and enable them to decide with whom they will work best with.

Thinking skills have been my way of bringing ideas drawn from inclusionality into my class. Rayner discusses the term 'inclusionality' at length; he puts great emphasis on the importance of a natural inclusion within our society to create a better place.

We come to appreciate ourselves as receptive responsive inclusions of our natural neighbourhood, not alienated individuals. Rayner retrieved from <http://www.inclusionresearch.org/introduction.php> on 3.10.08

I value every child in my class and I want them all to have the best education I can give them. Having a mixed ability class, it can be tempting to target the children in the 'middle' as there are often more of them. This would go against my values as a teacher so I had to find a way of targeting all the children. By teaching thinking skills I hope to allow every child to challenge and learn by themselves and with others.

Belle Wallace's work on the TASC (Thinking Actively in Social Contexts) wheel has always been of great interest to me.



Figure 1 TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) Wheel (Wallace, 2001)

The principles are very close to my own thinking. The TASC wheel has similarities to the way an action research model works. They both follow and encourage us to improve our gifts and talents. Wallace's work is based on encouraging and improving thinking skills for children.

...Teaching problem solving and thinking skills across the curriculum in a planned and coherent way actively develops learner's skills of learning how to learn and actively increases their mental capacities. (Wallace, 2001, p.12)

I have drawn on Ball & Henderson (2008) ideas as well to develop my practice to provide challenge for children in an inclusive classroom.

Using the planning approach set out by our school management I have moulded the requirements to meet the needs of the children and continue living out and holding onto my own values.

The children are given a learning intention. This is based on a number of factors, including what the curriculum covers as well as the needs of the children. Initially this was difficult to write because of the broad spectrum of abilities. However I feel more skilled in deciding what this learning intention should provide. Long-winded, structured, intentions were inappropriate for my class. Often the tight learning intention written in our plans would still be tightened further as they were discussed with the children. The children would then individually know how to extend or simplify the learning intention themselves. They learnt how to monitor their own learning and self-evaluate. For example, 'Learning Intention (L.I.) To be able to add 3 digit numbers using the grid method.' Children would adapt this further: to be able to add 3 digit numbers to be able to add numbers to be able to use the grid method to be able to use the grid method to add and subtract

The success criteria were also always discussed. The success criteria gave many children a starting point or a point of reference when they became stuck, but I believe more importantly it helped them understand what was being asked of them and gave them a greater understanding of the learning intention. For example Week 3 term 4 LI: to be able to find the features of fantasy text No teacher would send children away and ask them to highlight a piece of fantasy text or write a definition of a fantasy text without discussion. Asking the children to decide on the success criteria promotes discussion led by what the children know already and what they need to know. They could share, explain and listen to other children's ideas and work together as a group. A range of thinking skills were used revisited and experienced daily. Here is the success criteria the children decided on for this learning intention:

- Use highlighter pen sensibly, don't underline everything
- Find weird settings/location
- Characters ...descriptions given?
- Characters...strange activity/do strange things?
- Unusual words- not everyday use
- Atmosphere words?

- Beginning, middle, end

Using loosely, the TASC wheel approach and principles, has enabled me to hold onto my passion for teaching and to promote my own embodied knowledge as a teacher of young children.

Teaching for thinking as explained by Fisher (1990), actively engages children in processing information, in investigating, in making connections and solving problems; it is a productive mode of learning. It follows a 'what-do-you-think' approach to children, approaching learning through higher-order levels. Using both the TASC wheel approach with a range of thinking skills can benefit the learning and life skills of all children. These skills can be taken with them throughout education and life.

What is my embodied knowledge? Ultimately I feel it is the relationships I make with the children that drive their learning forward. Holding an awareness of the need to listen to their voice, and the ways in which I respond to them ensures a constant and motivated cycle of learning. What I value alongside these essential relationships is the passion to drive thinking skills into my daily teaching practice. I believe thinking skills are at the heart of learning. Learning skills should not be taught explicitly – they need to be taught across the curriculum daily (Clayton, 2008).

Conclusion

The term 'giftedness development' used by Simonton, (cited in Balchin et al, 2009) is one I would like to adopt when discussing gifted and talented children. Developing children is what teachers are striving to achieve. Simonton discusses giftedness as a characteristic that can grow throughout our lives. It isn't always something that is obvious from the moment we are born, it will not just appear. Although he believes giftedness is linked to our genetic make-up he sees it as something that needs nurturing. Simonton's notion of 'giftedness development' is a notion of 'giftedness' as something that should be worked on, studied, and given opportunities for, otherwise they may never flourish. Simonton is concerned with trying to understand 'giftedness' that leads to exceptional achievement, genius standard, however rather than being concerned with a minority I find much of what he says useful to me as a teacher trying to understand and improve the education of all my children. Embracing every child's gift and allowing opportunities for these to develop in other areas is my ultimate goal.

The GTCE (2008) reports that teachers saw innovation as the very point of their job as it produces more interesting lessons, which helped pupils learn and increased job satisfaction. Through the constraints of assessment, planning, data collection, tests, I continue to hold onto my values and live them out as often and as fully as possible. Innovating in the way I teach and offer my gifts and nurture the gifts of all the children in my class is something I am continuing to develop. I am always open to trialling different strategies but I need to remember to use my gifts so the children can gain the best from their teacher and find their own talents.

Through sharing the gifts and talents I have, I believe I am sharing my embodied knowledge and developing my intuitive understanding of what my children need. The cycle of my own learning and the children's learning continues, as I pass on my talents their talents shine through, I allow for their creation, I give opportunities for them to grow in many areas. I learn from their voice, I respond to them and so our journey continues.

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