

What am I doing as a Headteacher to provide opportunities to enable all children in the school to create talents?

In this account I want to explain how I've come to my current understanding of talent creation, and why I feel it's so important to develop an inclusive approach to talent creation which provides opportunities for all the children to develop talents through their time at school, and to have them recognized and be able to give them as gifts to the school community.

When I was born there were all kinds of things that I couldn't do, and already lots that I could do. There were also unlimited possibilities of what I could do, or learn to do in life. Many of then I can't do, or don't do, or have never done. What I'm interested in exploring here, is how the possibilities for learning get closed down, or opened up by the kind of education we receive in school, and how I as a Headteacher can do my responsible best in the school I work in to ensure that all possible opportunities are opened up for the children in the school, rather than closed down.

I want to consider how I can enable all the children I work with have to have the opportunities to develop talents without limit or prejudice.

How do I understand the concept of talent creation?

I am working with an understanding of talents which is fluid and dynamic, and not 'fixed entity' thinking where a talent belongs to someone, and is *their* talent., and can come to define or limit them and their future development in other areas.

We are all constantly learning, and we all have the opportunity to develop talents, I am working with an understanding expressed by Huxtable, that my intention is to:

'progress a learning environment which provides the experiences and support that will enable children and young people to develop the attitudes, attributes, understandings and skills of thought full and thoughtful learners, with informed aspirations, and the confidence, competence and understanding of themselves, necessary to realise them, to their own and society's benefit'

The writing and practice of Barry Hymer as an educator has been very influential in the way in which I've come to my current understanding of opportunities for talent creation. I recognise this as an evolving understanding, which has moved from Hymer's clear exposition of the importance of working towards gift creation rather than gift identification, to my own understanding which is of talent creation.

This may just be a difference of words, rather than a difference of opinion, but I want to clarify this difference for the benefit of my own articulation. Although I fully appreciate what he advocates, I think my emphasis would be on talent creation rather than talent identification, with the term gift only being used when the talent has been used for the benefit of another individual or within the community of learning.

In terms of the very different understandings of talent identification, or talent creation, Hymer asserts:

'children's capacities for learning are fluid and inexhaustible. It's our job to co-create gifts with children'

He is very clear that about the parameters in which any kind of identification should occur,

We were also anxious for our definition also to draw heavily on a metacognitive component – i.e. the awareness of and control over one's own mind or thinking (Flavell, 1979; Claxton, 1999). This would offer increased scope for the creation and self-identification of gifts and talents over time (as revealed in any single domain of knowledge or experience), not just a snapshot identification drawing on the usual test-and-place criteria – with learners seen as the passive recipients of a label awarded on the basis of a test score, exceptional performance, or similar criterion.

And he also underlines very clearly the responsibility he feels schools should have to provide an appropriately enriching environment in which learners can create talents as well as identify them for themselves. I will come back to this aspect as I look the implications for this understanding on my practice as a Headteacher.

How does my understanding of talent creation affect my thinking as a Headteacher?

I find it hard to recollect pivotal moments in my own history of learning, but one of the moments which was very influential in my thinking and articulation about all that I feel to be important about people being offered opportunities to develop talents happened in the Tuesday MA group which I had been a part of for quite a while. Marie showed us a set of before and after illustrations from a book called Mindset.

The illustrations, which have all been drawn by adults who had always thought they couldn't draw, are pictured below.

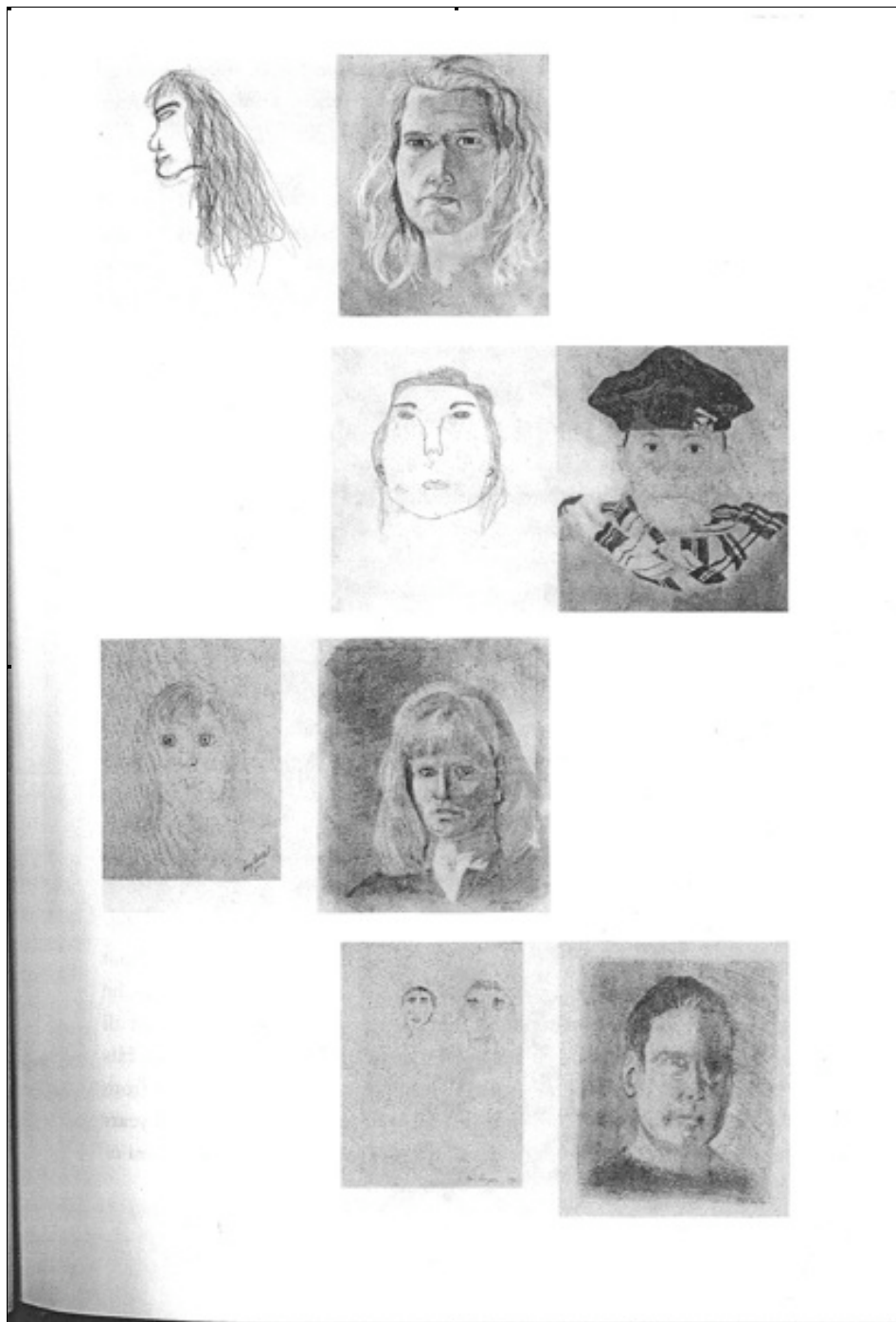
As I look at them again, I'm impressed again by the quality of the improvement in the pictures. So much so, that initially I didn't understand that the same person had drawn the before and after pictures. When I did understand, I realised that what I was seeing was a visual representation of emerging talents of at least four people.

These were people who had wanted to develop talent in this area, and had been provided with the opportunity to do so.

I was very intrigued by these pictures but also very doubtful about the claims, as I am an adult who also maintains that I can't draw. I thought the book was going to perhaps contain another step by step programme in learning to draw, but became even more intrigued when Marie explained that it was based on research about the way we think about learning. Following these learning principles, the artists here had undergone this transformation in their ability in just 5 days.

And so I was introduced to the research of Carol Dweck, and the incredibly powerful influence that our mindset has on what abilities we can develop if we choose. As I began to read about some of the research I realised the possibilities that I had as a learner to develop talents, and also professionally what I could do as a Headteacher to enable all the children to develop talents.

Carol Dweck's assertion is that we limit our own learning when we think of intelligence as something which is fixed, innate, and measurable. We can achieve far more if we consider intelligence as incremental, as something which grows as we practice.:



In Mindset, Dweck distinguishes between a fixed mindset on the one hand, and a growth mindset on the other hand (the incremental theory to those who have been following work in this area for some time). From a fixed mindset, ability is seen as innate and permanent: some people are intelligent and some are less so. From a growth mindset, ability develops incrementally over time with appropriate opportunities to learn: intelligence develops. Mindsets are domain-specific – you might have a fixed mindset about your mathematical ability, for example, and see

yourself as terrible (or great) at math; but have a growth mindset about sports, and realize that you can't just pick up a racket and expect to be good at tennis.

According to study after study in a number of lines of research conducted by Dweck and her associates, and published in the major journals in education and psychology, there is a big advantage for those holding the growth mindset: they are happier, healthier, more fulfilled, and more successful in school, work, sports, business, love, friendships, and life.'

What do I then feel is my educational responsibility as Headteacher in response to my developing understanding?

It is very clear to me that I need to ensure that the provision and opportunities for all learners are as cognitively rich and varied as possible in order to give all learners as much opportunity as possible. I also need to work out a way in which the children will receive the messages which will help them develop a growth mindset.

'our conception of what giftedness is and how it develops shifts dramatically when we move from a fixed mindset, where some students are categorized as inherently smart and some are not, to a growth mindset, where intelligence is conceptualized as dynamic, as developing over time with appropriately scaffolded opportunities to learn. Looked at from this perspective, teachers who encourage their students' continued engagement in the learning process are fostering gifted development, quite independently of where their students may start in ability or intelligence test scores':

I find this a very liberating and encouraging way of thinking about my own learning, and very motivational. It also provides me with a far more open learning agenda to really know the children I'm working with in order to provide the opportunities for them to develop talents. It's the antithesis of an impositional model, and I find it's inherent values much closer to my own values in education. What it challenges me to do, is to work out how I can ensure the most appropriate provision to the best of my ability. This is one of the responsibilities I feel I need to work out as a Headteacher.

'Whilst the job of identification should lie, we felt, substantially with the individual learner, the educational provider (in this instance seen as the teacher/s and school) had a responsibility to ensure a broad, balanced, enriched and truly challenging curriculum for all, as opposed to a distinct teaching and learning programme for the few. The identification of personal gifts and talents should represent, we argued, an opportunity open to all learners, irrespective of 'ability,' 'potential,' or prior achievements.'

In addition to the educational provider having the responsibility of providing a 'broad, balanced, enriched and truly challenging curriculum for all', I also feel I have a responsibility and am in the position of being able to communicate the messages of a growth mindset, and work with all the learners in the school to be able to receive the positive learning messages of a growth mindset.

'from a fixed mindset, if you learn very quickly, you are gifted, but if you have to work hard at something, or learn it slowly, you are not. By contrast, from the growth perspective, skills and achievement come through persistence and effort, and speed and perfection are the enemy of difficult learning. High achievement comes from hard work over time, and thoughtfulness (which can be slow) is a good thing'.

How am I trying to develop an educational space which will promote the opportunities for children to develop talents?

. *"Everyone has some kind of gift. Being talented does not mean just being a good musician, writer or athlete. There are many kinds of talent. You may be a great conversationalist, or make friends easily, or be able to put others at ease. Or you may have a gift for telling jokes, selling things or living economically. You may be punctual, patient, reliable, kind or optimistic. Or you may love taking on new challenges, be strongly committed to helping others, or have an ability to bring them joy. Without doubt, you possess your special jewel, your own unique talent. In the same way, each of us has a mission that only we can fulfil. That mission will not be found somewhere far away, in doing something special or extraordinary. Even those people who seem to have led great lives have really only done what they felt they had to do in order to truly be themselves. We realize our purpose in life by doing our very best where we are right at this moment, by thinking about what we can do to improve the lives of those right around us." (2004, p. 4)*

Daisaku Ikeda (2004) A Piece of Mirror and Other Essays. Kuala Lumpur; Soka Gakkai Malaysia

I am convinced that talents don't just arrive with us ready made. Talents are not pre packaged and imposed upon us. They're not fixed and pre-determined, and this fact alone is very liberating as I consider the kind of environment I want to provide for children and adults to be enthused in their life and learning, and learn about what really interests and motivates them, and can provide a worthwhile context for other learning to take place.

As people we have a natural pre-disposition to learn, children arrive in our schools with all sort of interests they want to explore. Unless we're very careful and exercise our responsibilities as educators very carefully, we find ourselves imposing upon them a curriculum which we have to deliver.

We would all say that we've grown away from a model of 'education' which views children as empty vessels waiting to be filled, but then we find that we're parcelling out bits of knowledge, delivering them as so many unwanted parcels, and wondering at the reluctance of children to pick them up and do something with them.

As Sue Palmer has reflected:

Children start learning from the moment they're born...And almost all this learning is entirely voluntary, for the sheer pleasure of doing it...On the whole, children want to learn, and parents and other primary care-givers are pretty good at gauging what can be expected of them.....learning develops out of their interests.

And then they start school.

Palmer, S. (2006) *Toxic Childhood* London. Orion p.200

I'm beginning to raise questions for myself about whether children would be far more powerful as learners if they were able to more fully work within their own curriculum. I'm not sure what this would look like in practice, and I'm not advocating a free for all where anything goes, but rather offering equal respect to the ideas that learners bring, and working with them collaboratively to take their learning forward.

How much is it that learning really happens when teachers stop teaching.

In terms of pedagogy should I separate more the teaching and the learning, and should I concentrate even further on the learning, in order to make the school more effective as a learning environment for all the learners.

As Guy Claxton asserts '*As Charles Darwin astutely observed, almost everyone is born with the ability to be bright and to be G and T in something. Some children do not get that ability fed. And some get the joy of learning knocked out of them by too much chaos or too tight a prescription of what it means to be 'good' or by an education system apparently driven by assessment and labelling*'

And then they start school:-

How can I develop an environment in which children can show us what they can do, and what they would like to do?

I find myself continuing to return to that phrase of Sue Palmer's 'and then they start school', and feeling very challenged by it. It has an air of finality about it, and almost hopelessness, and yet I strongly believe that it should be within my power as a Headteacher to ensure that the children in school can learn in an environment which is very much concerned with they can do, rather than constantly asking them to reach various targets, however well thought out they might be, which constantly puts children in a position of being categorised into one of three main groups, none of which really helps their learning.

Pat D'arcy who was a very influential English Advisor when I started my teaching career also reflected on this very prevalent philosophy as long ago as 1989. She puts very clearly into words exactly the positive approach I would like all the learners in the school to experience, an approach which would certainly enable the adults in the school to have the right sort of space to develop talents:

'I find it ironic and also sad, that after more than a century of state education, we are still operating with a system that sets out to differentiate our children and young people into the bright, the mediocre, and the bloody awful – or if you prefer a less blunt version, into the "gifted", the "average" and the "special needs" pupils. As a profession we are currently being exhorted, indeed required to evaluate youngsters according to arbitrary and predetermined "levels" of performance and lest we should falter in our task to look to the tightening of screws on our instruments of measurement.

I am firmly opposed to the notion that human intelligence is quantifiable, and angered at an approach to learning which has the arrogance to claim that it is possible –

indeed right and proper, to make so-called objective judgements about the intelligence of others, especially when those “others” are vulnerable children and teenagers. In my view a teacher’s goals, both short and long term, should be to find ways of giving all pupils such confidence in their own learning powers, that their motivation to arrive at fresh knowledge and new perceptions is heightened daily.

Paradoxically, I believe that all learner would surpass our current expectations, if we were to spend more time inside our classrooms revealing to them what they are already capable of doing (but take too much for granted to utilise fully) – and demonstrating to them how active and responsive their brains can be, without exception. Such an approach would seem to offer a positive alternative to devising ways to sort our student into those who can, those who could with a struggle and those who cant – a sure way of insinuating that we regard the mental equipment of at least two-thirds of the school population as under par or below standard. Even (p.1) when tests are labelled “diagnostic”, they still carry a message of failure for those who are deemed by their testers to require additional help.

It is for these reasons that I offer a “capacity-based” approach to learning, which operates on the assumption that all children possess both the ways and the means of making sense. I offer it as an alternative to a “skill-based” approach, which operates on the assumption that initially children are pretty skill-less and therefore, once they are at school, need to be taught in considerable detail how to go about working with a variety of media (words or paint or metal or music or mathematical symbols) before they can shape meaning in a way that is acceptable to their teachers – and beyond teachers, parents; and beyond parents, employers or universities. The degree to which young learners can be encourage to make sense or to shape meaning in ways that are satisfactory to themselves tends to be overlooked if the teacher’s stance is based first on training “skills” – and then on measuring them.

Even with the best of intentions, such an approach tends to place the learner in a passive position, waiting to be told. A capacity-based approach on the other hand, because it emphasizes both the what and the how capacities that the child already possesses, places the learner in the position of confident instigator and meaning-maker and the teacher in the position of partner in a joint meaning-making enterprise. (p.2)

D’Arcy, P. (1989) Making Sense, Shaping Meaning. Portsmouth; Heinemann Educational Books

How can I ensure that all children have the best possible start for them as they start school?

When children start school they have clear entitlements laid down for them in the Early Years Foundation Stage, which is all about providing both the enabling environments and the recognition of the capabilities of the learners which provide every opportunity for a capacity based approach to their learning, but is it still too easy to revert to making judgements about children as they arrive at school which will limit them.

I am very challenged by an article written by Claxton who elaborates on this in his paper ‘**Brightening up: how children learn to be gifted**’, when he outlines the case studies of two children as they start school, and how easy it is to recognise one as

'bright' by the behaviour she exhibits, and just as easily to underestimate the potential talents of the other. The challenge for me also lies in the way that this message is then reinforced by how they respond to the culture and expectations of the classroom.

Claxton asserts:

'It is easy to forget that 'brightness' or 'giftedness' are inferences and attributions, not statements of self evident fact.....When children first arrive at school it is likely that within weeks, if not hours, judgements will be made about how 'bright' they are,

He goes on to describe the differing behaviours presented by two 5 year old children and explains the apparent brightness of one is attributed to the fact that *'she is more socially sensitive, more adult-oriented, more inquisitive, more resilient, more focused and more interested in connecting ideas and experiences. She also remembers things better, asks better questions, makes more appropriate comments and interacts better with her peers.'*

Claxton is very clear that children come to school as apparently bright, chiefly because of the thousands of hours they have unconsciously had of practice before they started school.

'Like adults, any group of children will vary widely on their current levels of achievement and performance (CLAPs) on any kind of skills or subject matter'.

'Neneh came to school with high CLAPs on a set of skills and dispositions that matched those that her teachers valued, and on which the smooth and successful running of a school has been assumed to depend, Whatever her genetic envelope of possibility, her early apprenticeship has developed her dispositions to be attentive and responsive to adult's non-verbal cues, to search her own memory for links, to sit still and listen, to make appropriate contributions to debate and so on. Through repeated interactions and observations, over hundreds of bathtimes, mealtimes and storytimes, she has developed the proto-educational mindset that her teacher's think of as 'bright'. Not only is she already more disposed than Jacob to the kinds of learning that will go on in her reception class,; she is also more disposed to learn the ropes that she has not already mastered. Jacob's epistemic apprenticeship has cultivated a different set of habits and sensitivities that do not mesh so well with the cultural demands of school. His ride through school may well be rockier as a result'

I can very readily recognise the Nenehs and Jacobs in my own school, and through this clear and powerful articulation by Claxton, and it is through my recognition of the differences in prior opportunity for the children, and thus their current presentation together with an understanding of the articulation that I can exercise my responsibility as a Headteacher to ensure there is better provision for all the children.

An important part of that provision will be an honouring recognition of who the children are as learners and what they can do, and want opportunities to do . This is a very important part of the entitlement of the Foundation Stage, and one which I want to ensure will give the best opportunities for children to develop their talents.

It is obvious that children come to school with different interests and varying learning dispositions and behaviours, and I feel that it's my responsibility to do what I can to help learners develop ownership of their own learning rather than deliver an impositional model. If I don't address this issue the danger is that the children whose learning dispositions are borne out of prior experience and hours of practice will continue to thrive and be seen to move further ahead, whilst others will struggle

against the cultural mismatch. I want all the children in the school to be able to feed their love of learning in school, instead of feeling the frustration which comes from struggling against a system where ultimately they come to feel no good because their attempts at learning are not recognised and respected.

How do we work together as a staff team to provide a learning environment which is predisposed to talent creation in all learners?

I find this a difficult question to research in my own practice, because as a teaching Head, I have found it easier to focus on what I want to improve in the teaching environment, than on the influence I have as a Headteacher. However I have come to realize and acknowledge through seeing the impact of other Headteachers in their schools, that I do have an influence and an impact, and I want to do what I can to ensure that it is the influence that I want to have, and that I exercise the influence always with a regard to educational responsibility.

As adults in the school we all work together with different values, some are shared values, and some are not. I believe that it's as we work together, with respect for the differing values of others, to find collaborative solutions which are appropriate for the learners in our school, we form school values which we can all hold to. It's in the weekly staff meetings as we work on school policies and talk through our responses to new initiatives that we come to a shared understanding that shapes the life of the school and the learning environment for both children and adults

How was I able to open this discussion with colleagues in school, so we could share our values with each other?

One of the ways in which the conversation about the principles of talent creation was able to be furthered was in having the opportunity to work with Barry Hymer. Over a period of time, all the teachers had an opportunity to attend Philosophy for Children training, with Barry. It wasn't just the content of the course which was so important, it was the way Barry worked as an educator with us, which modelled a very inclusive approach.

One of the most influential opportunities in this area that I was able to offer, was for all the teachers to spend an Inset day on a training day with Barry Hymer in 2007 . The day was entitled Teaching for Challenge and Gift Creation, and I believe it has really shaped our school practice on how we work with all the children in school. And maybe just as importantly provided us with opportunities for the ongoing conversation. One of the members of staff evaluated at the end of that day

' It gave a foundation to the views and thinking we, as a school, are working to extend.'

It is interesting to me reflecting on this two years later, that this colleague identified *'we as a school'*, re-emphasising the shared understanding, the sense of a collaborative understanding.

Colleagues also identified that the understanding they developed that day would help learners to:

' increase motivation and pupils desire to engage with tasks and develop skills'

'to enable challenges and failure to develop children's intrinsic motivation and help them take ownership of their own learning'.

