

Sally Cartwright

## **HOW CAN I ENABLE THE GIFTS AND TALENTS OF MY STUDENTS TO BE IN THE DRIVING SEAT OF THEIR LEARNING?**

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My most vivid childhood memories of learning at school were not what the teachers taught me but what I found out for myself. I remember at junior school completing a project on childhood games and feeling important when I discovered there was a museum devoted to the topic. In Year 9 in Geography a project on industry led me to interview a manager from a local company. In all these projects I remember the emotional engagement with the work because it was unique to me but what I did not appreciate was the research and thinking processes that underpinned my endeavours. Working individually and independently I lacked the constructive criticism of peers. It is these omissions that have led me to value not only the TASC framework (Wallace, B. 2008) the work of Bognar, B, and Zovko, M, (2008) but also the idea of a research community as shown by Whitehead, J. and Huxtable M. (2008) in their University of Bath seminars. Through employment of these strategies in answering the question: how can I enable the gifts and talents of my students to be in the driving seat of their learning, I have discovered new opportunities for these students. Concurrently I have also been given the confidence through working in a non - judgemental seminar environment to start to recognise that I too have gifts and talents as a teacher.

Into this narrative I wish to pull together strands that have been woven together, to form an exciting tapestry for both the student and teacher to develop their gifts and talents. For the student there is a new qualification from the English Examination Board AQA called the Extended Project Qualification, which appears to meet a need to develop the skills of independent and interdependent learning. For the teacher there is the opportunity afforded by the concept of an Educational Living Theory (Whitehead, 2008.).

The students taking part in my school's delivery of AQA's pilot Extended Project Qualification have all been identified as Gifted and Talented. Yet it is this experience of working with those students labelled as Gifted and Talented and non-Gifted and Talented within my own school that has raised questions as to the current direction of government policy.

The government definition of Gifted and Talented seems to contain contradictions. On the one hand the Government policy from the DCSF identification of Gifted and Talented learners ([standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://standards.dfes.gov.uk)) defines the group supported by the National Programme for Gifted and Talented education as:

**"Gifted** describes learners who have the ability to excel academically in one or more subjects such as English, Drama, Technology;

**Talented** describes learners who have the ability to excel in practical skills such as sport, leadership, artistic performance, or in an applied skill....

The recent government document: National Strategies: Handbook for leading teachers for gifted and talented education also says the following p11:

*'We encourage schools in identifying gifted and talented learners to focus on:*

*learners aged 11–19 who meet the published eligibility criteria<sup>1</sup> for the top 5% nationally including those who were members of the former National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY), and others who meet the criteria;*

*in addition, learners aged 4–19 who are gifted and talented relative to their peers in their own year group and school/college;*

*a range of abilities including talent in the arts and sport; and*

*ability rather than achievement, so that underachievers are among those identified.*

*There are gifted and talented learners in every year group in every school/college. All institutions are free to determine the size of their gifted and talented populations, but should be able to justify this in terms of improved standards for all learners identified.*

*Every school/college should have some gifted and talented learners and should keep a register of those learners. Since relative ability changes over time, learners should move on and off the register when appropriate, though such movement might be expected to reduce with age. Since ability is evenly distributed.'*

However since the 1944 Education Act, there has been an emphasis to meet the needs of all children, Bartlett C (2008). 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All' (2005), claims that it's aim is to help pupils develop lively, enquiring minds, the ability to question and argue rationally.'

Yet, in the document Handbook for leading teachers for gifted and talented education (2008) the following is also given:

*"The new Primary and Secondary Frameworks and EYFS provide schools with the opportunities to design personalised learning pathways for gifted and talented learners. In practical terms, this means:*

*for schools: a professional ethos that accepts and assumes every child comes to the classroom with a different knowledge base and skill set, as well as varying aptitudes and aspirations; and that, as a result, there is a*

*determination for every young person's needs to be assessed and their gifts and talents developed through diverse teaching strategies; again seems to contain contradictions.'*

If the Personalised Learning Pathway assumes that EVERY child comes to the classroom with a different knowledge and skill and that all children should have their needs assessed why should the provision for Gifted and Talented be singled out as a subset?

The National Strategy seems to ignore a range of issues concerned with those on and not on the Gifted and Talented register. For those not on the register, is there an assumption they do not have gifts and talents and so are not entitled to opportunities set aside for the Gifted and Talented? One has to ask on what grounds does one student qualify as Gifted and Talented and another not? According to White (2006) 'There are no solid grounds for innate differences in IQ; and there are none for the traditional subject-based curriculum' (p.1). My teaching experience shows that it is the student's readiness to learn, not what measurable set of grades or IQ results they bring to the classroom, that makes the difference between their progress or not. By failing to offer the opportunity to explicitly develop their gifts and talents to those students who do not meet the Gifted and Talented criteria, but are willing to be reflective and open themselves up to learning, is there not the potential to disappoint and reduce the self efficacy of such a student willing to learn and to sow the seed of the fixed mindset? (Dweck C S 2008)

What about the pupil who is on the register one year but not another or the student who would be on the register in one school but not in another? For the students on the register what consideration has been given for their sense of failure if they do not achieve targets set or they do not want to participate in such a scheme? What consideration has been given to prevent the creation of an elitist attitude as I have seen amongst one of our own students, who on one occasion showed surprise when non 'gifted and talented' students were offered the same opportunities of extension and development.

I would question whether any educator is able to identify what any one student will derive from an opportunity. What I was able to recognise from working along side the Gifted and Talented students on the AQA's new Extended Project was that each student faced their own challenges and therefore derived different benefits. However these needs and challenges emerged over time and could not have been recognised at the start of the project or identified by an IQ test, GCSE or A level grade or membership of an elite sports or artistic group. Producing an extended piece of writing, making science accessible to the lay person, having the confidence to talk to a large audience and allowing one's assumptions to be challenged were some of the challenges that these students identified for themselves. However these skills do not only belong to the top 5 – 10 % of a school population. I can think of many focused young people who given the space and time to reflect would welcome the opportunity to

develop what they perceive as their learning needs and would be prepared to rise to the challenge. I also know of students who are on the school's Gifted and Talented register who, have declined the opportunities afforded by this classification. Our pilot course for the Extended Project Qualification was only offered to Gifted and Talented students. However as we ran it for the second time the qualification was presented to all interested students in Year 12. The result is that two of the twelve newly registered students this year would not have been eligible if it had been exclusively for the Gifted and Talented.

The power of this point was well illustrated recently at a conference in Bath organised for advisors, teachers and students all carrying out research. At this meeting were Psychology students from my school , none of whom were registered as Gifted and Talented, as well as those from the Extended Project. One of the Psychology students said the following in the plenary discussion at the end of the afternoon

' I am not a student who will get all grade As or even all Bs but I would like someone to know I have been on a learning journey.'

This student's comments silently reverberated around his audience. I was left with the question: would someone please tell me why that student with his own profound insight into how he and others view his progress should not be given the same opportunities as those who are labelled Gifted and Talented?

The DCSF is: '*expecting all schools to have a gifted and talented education policy and whole school improvement programme in place which is part of the wider improvement plan including personalisation of Learning, AfL, Inclusion, Every Child Matters and all major strategy initiatives.*' ([standards.dfes.gov.uk/giftedandtalented](http://standards.dfes.gov.uk/giftedandtalented)).

Where there is this expectation, it seems crucial there is a very clear understanding that Gifted and Talented is positive to all. Hence the approach by B&NES to explicitly take an inclusive and not exclusive approach to Gifted and Talented is to be applauded. The notion of developing a child's gifts and talents is clearly an essential part of Personalised Learning. However I think with all government initiatives they are developed within a system of finite resources with the potential consequence of a 'mass production approach' . It is easier to identify the top 10% or 5% of a school population in terms of grades and label them as Gifted and Talented rather than work in a more 'untidy' way with staff, students and parents identifying needs, gifts and talents of all students. To what extent is a Gifted and Talented policy, that only allows a minority of pupils and students certain opportunities, a policy of finite resources and tokenism?

In a consultation paper sent out to by the DCSF (accessed 2008) to its Regional Partnerships the following question was asked:

*'What are your organisation's current priorities in terms of the gifted and talented agenda? And, what performance indicators do you use to measure progress?'*

Would it not be more exciting if at the beginning of a school year there was the opportunity for each student, parent and teacher to discuss what talent or skill the student would like to develop regardless of whether it was part of the school curriculum or not? At the end of the year there could be a conversation about how things had gone to review and celebrate that progression – rather than allocate grades or marks. How pleasant would it be for a student to be treated as an individual and not a government or school product. Is there no place for the teacher, student and parents to make a judgement as to whether the student has made a learning journey and set the criteria together? Unless great care is taken with answering the DCSF's question, significant limitations could be imposed which ironically could curtail the development of certain Gifts and Talents

Certainly I think one can take something from the Extended Project that asks for evidence of the Learning Journey a student has made. There are skills to be developed but the student is in far more control of what they are doing compared to my experience of other qualifications. There is the opportunity for three formal one to one interviews throughout the project: The challenge for the teacher and the school would be what breadth of ideas they would tolerate in such a system. There is no government measurement of where they have begun or finished but through a log of the decisions and changes a student makes and through a comparison of their starting and finishing point one has an understanding of the Learning Journey that has been made and it is that which is allocated a mark and grade.

Marie Huxtable's (2007) explanation of the meaning of Gifts and Talents will provide an interesting answer to the DCSF question. Within her definition of Gifts and Talents one sees a significant cultural shift.

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

To understand one self as a giver of non - material gifts is a very powerful and challenging concept in an educational world where one is often judged by what results you have and not by what one can offer to others.

In delivering the Extended Project we modeled our approach on the concept of the research community exemplified by Jack Whitehead's Master's seminars at the University of Bath. While this concept is not part of the AQA qualification it nevertheless goes hand in hand with what is required of the students. Marie Huxtable and Jack Whitehead ran two sessions with the group in a university seminar room to model how a research community

provides a critical supportive environment. It was this sharing and giving that proved to be so powerful. It was in the context of the research community that in giving, the students received a great deal. Their giving was to read another's work, give positive criticism and give their time to discuss another student's project and help another student move forward, It was in this giving they came across subjects which took them into, areas which due to the narrowing of the curriculum at Key Stage 5, they would not, otherwise have met. To give a Scientist an insight into the implications of the Berlin Wall and to give a Modern Linguist an insight into the Physical and Mathematical difficulties to reach Mars was a pleasure, which all in the group celebrated. There was a creation of talents and a sharing.

The actual essay titles formulated after reflection and refinement by the students were as follows:

- The physiological and psychological effects of excess fats on people in modern society?
- Why has it proven so difficult to man a mission to Mars?
- Exploring a connection between Phi and Aesthetic Preference.
- How has the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall affected Germany?
- Is genetics just an intellectual curiosity or will it help to treat disease?

The 'stretch and challenge' that was identified by the Tomlinson report that generated the ideas for the Extended Project and expected by the exam boards has not just come from the individual' students' own task, but also from being drawn into reading and commenting on the work from other students as a part of a research community sharing their gifts and talents.

This definition of Gifts and Talents has also given me the confidence to ask of myself what are my gifts and talents? My self - efficacy as a teacher has been severely dented by the annual fault finding that comes through result accountability, performance management and lack of training and resources that accompany constant change. It seems alien to be asked what gifts and talents do I have. I believe the culture of labeling students and teachers has inhibited growth, and developed the fixed mindset that asks the questions will I fail or pass, will I look smart or dumb, will I feel like a winner or a loser? (Dweck, CS. 2008 p6). Now it is as if I am emerging from hibernation after 15 years and am beginning to witness spring, breaking through the business model of statistics and league tables that has made up this educational winter. I wanted my students to be taken out of the school system and to be able to see some embodiment of learning to which they aspired.

Like my students I have been on a learning journey. Through the concept of embodied love promoted by Jack Whitehead I have come to accept that

there is a space to reflect on our own gifts and talents and that it is right for each one of us to recognise them in a public forum and use them to the benefit of our students.

I have learnt to value how I can be sensitive to the entirety of a person when they communicate described by Whitehead, (2008) 'as a gaze of recognition of the other'. It is inclusive by nature and has a role to play in dealing with all people. For me this is part of recognising others for who they are and not what they are and coheres with my views on what Gifted and Talented education should be about. It is about us being valued for who we are, and about enabling others to have the confidence to discover their hidden gifts and talents.

I have included a brief account of one of the discussions held between us to show how students were starting to take ownership of their learning and how there was a sharing. The freedom given to a student to choose their subject of research meant that a student can choose an area that is not considered by his or her teacher to be their strongest subject in terms of exam performance, however it may be that the learning journey the student travels is greater because he or she may be starting from a lower base in terms of knowledge and skill. This may not sit particularly comfortably with an educational climate where teachers are held accountable for student performance, where risk taking is at a minimum and where student performance is seen to say something about their teachers and institution rather than themselves. I would hope that in this project this can be challenged and that students are put in the driving seat of their learning, and do as the Extended Project expects and take responsibility for making decisions even it is to ignore their supervisor's advice. I would hope that an institution has the courage and confidence to allow students to be accountable for themselves and not for their institution. Certainly the essay title concerning excess fats and the title concerning genetic engineering were both subjects that could be uncomfortable and controversial but this did not mean a student should not research these issues. Perhaps what was a challenge to both the student and the institution is that the 5000 word essay is also given as a presentation to an invited audience with the opportunity for questions. At this point there can be no script, no rehearsal, simply the student's own engagement with what they have researched and their audience. The student can therefore take the discussion beyond what might be considered acceptable in a school environment but raise issues that within a university or adult forum would be valued within the context of free speech.

In the account below one sees a student raising their own questions they wanted to ask, one sees them defending their particular essay direction in the light of a suggestion and raising some challenging questions. One also sees the challenge of uncertainty faced by one of the students.

"Marie says to James 'Your question is challenging.'

James submitted for discussion his first draft of an essay entitled: 'Mathematics and Aesthetics - Exploring the Golden Ratio' and his essay began as follows:

'Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice quotes: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." But is this really the case? What gives something visual its aesthetic appeal? Whether it is a building, a sculpture, a face, or simply a composition, people have their own, often differing opinions on what is pleasing to the eye; but is there a universal correlation which links the characteristics of an object, to its aesthetic appeal? And does the answer lie within the realms of Mathematics?' (Mould J 2008)

Jack comments that the relationship between Art and Maths could be extended to music and refers to Bach.

'I am not entirely sure where this essay will end up says' James, 'But I want to stay with the visual.' 'I want to stay with human aesthetics.'

Jack says 'You need to be prepared to question your own assumptions.

"Is it futile to explain aesthetics in terms of maths?" Devon asks of James.'

Or rather can one explain aesthetics in terms of the human response?'

Jack proposes.'

On what basis does Maths come out of aesthetics or even aesthetics out of Maths?' Someone round the table asks.

'All students should be open to the possibility of being wrong.' Says Jack and re-assures James that as a researcher you need to allow yourself to feel uncertain.

Why does this conversation with its twists and turns so interest me as a teacher? It is the chemistry and dynamics of the group that have awakened my sense of pleasure of being a teacher. The challenges the students are prepared to take on, the acceptance that there is more to learn about learning, the ready absorption of new ways of working, the courage to be independent in their thinking and perhaps foremost the ability to listen to and to give positive criticism and engage in dialogue with others about their own work. They are learning as Jack taught them in the previous seminar, to check the validity of each other's work.

The make up of this group is also inspirational as for me it breaks down several false barriers that at times are there in education. Firstly there is Jack, there is Marie writing her doctorate, there is myself making my way through a Masters Degree and five 16-17 year olds preparing for their AS Level exams. Yet what is of value is the presence of each person, the ideas and contributions that each gives to the other and the interest in each other's work. There is here, an experience of commitment to the mutuality of joint exploration (Fielding 2007). Formality, rigidity, defined objectives, defined outcomes, defined content, have been replaced by curiosity, questioning, enquiry, reflection, a desire to listen, an enthusiasm, a quiet seriousness and an openness to consider criticism. The group can claim ownership of the questions and their own curiosity.

Below is one comment from each student, taken from the reflective aspect of their log, which I believe illustrates the above.

'The biggest thing I will come away with from this project is that genetics is a lot more useful than I first thought. (Buchan, D. 2008)

'I think that first and foremost, the project has taught me the value of good time management - by the end of the project I would set my self weekly writing deadlines something that got the project done considerably quicker than if I had stuck to my approach at the start of project and writing whenever I felt like it'. (Clarke, S. 2008)

'However, the skill which I consider to be the most important for me is the improvement in my public speaking ability. With no experience and little confidence in this field before my participation in the Extended Project, yet now I am quite happy to give presentations and indeed I have done relating to other subjects'. (Mead, L. 2008)

'before I had started this project I had never written an essay on such a large scale. Doing this project has not only allowed me to develop my writing skills but to write to a new audience, which is something I had not done before... above all I have learnt to challenge my assumptions and that planning is an essential part of a project.' (Moore, L. 2008)

'Perhaps the aspect of the project I found most valuable was the seminar based sessions whereby we discussed each others' projects in groups. This encouraged our criticising and analysing skills and the way the group members responded to these sessions was really positive. A brilliant working environment was established and this is something I am looking forward to experiencing at university'. (Mould, J. 2008)

At a meeting of teachers and advisors the students above spoke about their experience of learning and Louise Cripps, a headteacher who was present recorded some of their reflections given below:

'While we were helping others we were helping ourselves.'

'It's a lack of communication which stifles progress.'

'You can explore without fear.'

'The atmosphere Mrs Cartwright has created gives a degree of freedom with boundaries. You need just enough freedom that's the best way to learn.'

'We set our own curriculum – it was a journey from the title to the conclusion which we thought would be a straight line.'

'You have to challenge yourself to keep to the task'

'The question is how can this be applied to everyday life. It's not fun but is enjoyable. It's the sheer joy of finding out more about something that you are interested in.'

'Its our own interests in something we felt really passionate about.'

'You (Jack) taught us how to work as a research group – learn to hold the criticism, generous in sharing criticism – genuinely trying to move the work forward.'

These comments should not be the prerogative of those who are labelled as Gifted and Talented. I believe the opportunity to take on a challenge within school time but outside the prescribed curriculum, to be able to drive one's own learning and uncover one's own gifts and talents, to have an audience to hear the expressed reflection should not be limited to those who are Gifted and Talented.

For me the reflective comments above are evidence that I have enabled the gifts and talents of my students to be in the driving seat of their learning? However in the future I want to explicitly introduce my second group of students to Living Educational Theory, as documented by Croatian teachers Bognar N., and Zovko M. (2008) who said of action research with young pupils: 'We realise that action research is not a teaching strategy for gaining better educational results, neither is it a preparation for life: it is life itself'.

'A living theory is an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work.' It (McNiff, J. 2008) is the idea that each person is capable of offering evidence-based explanations for how they live as they attempt to exercise their educational influences in learning.

'In my view, educational research is distinguished as the creation and legitimation of valid forms of educational theory and knowledge that can explain the educational influences of individuals in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work.' (Whithead, 2008)

Thus as a classroom teacher, this approach gives allows the practitioner to speak, as in this essay.

Living Educational Theory (McNiff,J 2008) requires one to engage critically with one's own thinking and that of others. I believe thinking is at its best when it is evolutionary. However as a teacher it is difficult to isolate one's

own thinking from practice and often others have told teachers how to practice resulting in significant tension for the teacher.

While I welcome the Living Educational Theory one cannot ignore the challenge that not all audiences in the world of education recognise this approach but instead prefer the Aristotelian, propositional approach where 'two mutually exclusive opposite statements cannot be true simultaneously' (Huxtable, M accessed 29/11/08) and thus require rational presentations of ideas and experiences thus omitting the contradictory and the individual's values from the exposition. However as a teacher one often feels that one is in fact caught more in the Platonic dialectical situation where one is holding living contradictions together in practice. Nevertheless the theory that has helped me most understand my practice as an educator and bring me through this current work is that of the Living Educational Theory. However one of the current challenges for me as an educator is that my mind, body and spirit have to be able to work within all three spaces.

To conclude I do believe that within this tension of space it has been possible to leave behind the no risk approach, spoon-fed, exam driven system of qualifications and we have made a journey of learning together which contained uncertainty, pleasure, challenges, effort and a recognition of the other. I believe this opportunity has enabled the gifts and talents of my students to be in the driving seat of their learning and that their achievement is summed up in the following words:

*'The hallmark of successful individuals is that they love learning, they seek challenges, they value effort, and they persist in the face of obstacles* (Dweck, C.S. 2008, p.1)

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