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GIFTEDNESS, RESPONSIBILITY AND SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Responsibility is used here to mean being in charge of one's own behaviour whether in self-regulation or in relationships with others, whether in action or by omission. It is described as a mixture of intellect and emotion which schools can positively and develop, and is particularly pertinent to the gifted as potential opinion formers. It is related to the development of social cognition which starts from birth. The growth of children's responsibility is considered within the school social context, individual emotional development and the effects of the teacher and style of teaching. Teaching for responsibility is encouraged, for which techniques of applied psychology are outlined.

Responsibility is a mixture of both intellect and emotion. I am using it here to mean being in charge of one's own behaviour whether in self-regulation or in relationships with others, whether in action or by omission. It is a particularly important developmental trait in gifted children because they are the most likely to grow up to discover new knowledge and influence opinion. However, engendering a sense of responsibility in pupils is not perhaps the policy of most of the world's schools. Most aim to instruct pupils in acquiring knowledge, while their emotional development gets relatively little attention. Yet, although families exert the strongest influence on children's attitudes towards themselves and to others, schools do have a clear influence on children's development.

To most people intellect and emotion are understood as different things. Intellect is usually seen as being a higher state, a rational brain-activity that only humans can do, whereas emotions are of a lower more primitive level. The assumption is often made that whereas the intellect is controllable, emotions are still wild, like - can't help falling in love. But intellectual activity and emotion cannot be separated. The intellect is affected by all the emotions experienced, from sadness to joy - and unquestionably by the extremes of passion. The volunteer, for example, who wants to help a poor village in a developing country must think intellectually about how to provide a supply of clean drinking water, but is inspired by feelings of compassion.

Social cognition

Responsibility reflects the individual's state of social cognition, that is the way each judges other people and comes to understand their thoughts, emotions, intentions and viewpoints. The psychological processes by which children learn to develop social cognition is through their images (representations) of mental states, such as beliefs, desires and intentions. Social awareness comes partly from example, social role-taking and is also related to personality. Children's experiences in the family are used to develop a system of inferences from the way they see others, which they then use to make predictions about people, especially in relation to themselves. It is part of every infant's learning, starting with the earliest social relationships, and is essential to their understanding and response to other's behaviour as well as their own self-esteem and sense of responsibility.

In his theory of Personal Constructs, Kelly (1955) described people as scientists, in the sense that we can all be seen as placing our own interpretations (theories) on the world of events confronting us, and from these theories we derive hypotheses and make predictions about future events. The way we behave is the 'experiment' in which we test those hypotheses, using feedback from the environment, and our conclusions determine how we behave in future. One could simply say it is learning from experience, though sometimes it can take a long time.

Social understanding is also described by Wellman's 'Theory of Mind' (1990) - the ways in which children use their increasingly sophisticated minds to think of the objects, events and persons around them in a co-ordinated way. The Theory of Mind is used, for example, to make sense of the following scenario: a man comes out of a house, hesitates, then turns back into it. One might infer from his actions that he remembered he had left something inside and decided to retrieve it. In fact, all human communication requires individuals to share some understanding and suppositions. Without it, we are strangers. Children who grow up in conditions of emotional neglect or who suffer from either Asperger's syndrome or autism fail to develop an adequate, flexible Theory of Mind. They can't get into the minds of others and so can be disadvantaged in human relationships and self-awareness, and can't take responsibility.

Social cognition is related to intelligence. I found in my research, that when I interviewed children independently, the higher the child's IQ the more likely each one was to say they were able to understand others, to be empathetic (Freeman, 1991). But understanding is not the same as actual social behaviour; and there can be a difference. The way each of us behaves comes from learning in a variety of social situations, and good learning benefits from adult guidance. Socially positive attitudes, such as being sensitive to the feelings of other people, are more often shown by confident young children, who are also better at making use of adults as resources.

In a cleverly designed social-cognition experiment to explore young children's awareness of other people's feelings, 3-6 years-old were asked to predict what someone else would like as a birthday present, rather than what they themselves would have liked to receive (Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, J., & Jarvis., 1968). Each child was presented with an array of objects, and asked to select a birthday present for each of his or her parents, siblings, and teachers. Their choices were judged as role-appropriate on the basis of age and gender. The 3 year-olds disregarded both the age and gender of the intended recipient, while 4 and 5 year-olds' choices represented a type of transitional level, and all the 6 year-olds made appropriate role responses. Age seemed to improve social cognition, which was significantly more advanced for the most intelligent children in each age-group. However, the available research does not reveal a recognisable relationship between social cognition and actual behaviour towards others, whether intellectual or emotional.

Neither does this seem to be the case for assessments of moral reasoning. Highly intelligent children may score highly on tests of moral reasoning, but this does not guarantee accordingly high-level moral behaviour in school or the business world.

Social experiences also help determine what we notice or fail to notice, and there is a strong relationship between the way people perceive and how they process information. Attention is

always selective. It affects the extent to which people feel in control and responsible for the events in their lives. Julian Rotter's original idea of Locus of Control proposed that those who feel in control of their lives, who have an internal locus of control, are better placed to succeed in the world than those who feel under the control of others, that is with an external locus of control (Battle & Rotter, 1963). There has been much investigation of this idea, though with mixed results. But overall, it seems that people who feel in control of their own lives are more likely to seek information, process it more efficiently, spend more time making decisions, and have better memories for what they have learned. They have more task-related thoughts and are better at concentrating, so they are more likely to achieve more highly, especially when that achievement depends on original thinking. It would follow that highly achieving gifted children are more likely to have an internal locus of control.

An extreme form of external locus of control is learned helplessness. When children learn that whatever they do it has little effect on those around them they tend to give up the fight and their motivation to succeed drops. Low motivation affects self-esteem because children feel apathetic: they blame themselves, expect failure and lose interest. Yet, these mental sets are changeable. There is considerable biographical evidence of children who have risen to adult eminence from poor circumstances (e.g. Howe, 1999).

I am presenting ideas here on the school's influence on the development of responsibility with special reference to gifted children in three sections:

1. The way schools work: the social context which children learn responsibility
2. The development of emotion and a sense of responsibility
3. Teaching for responsibility

1. THE WAY SCHOOLS WORK

School-teaching is strongly affected by politics, in that a large part of its remit is to teach the values of the society it represents. But of course society is made up of different groups, and because these groups want different things from schools, each tries to exert its own influence. In many countries the most influential group is the dominant religion, wanting children to learn their scriptures and morals. But then, universities and colleges demand intense preparation for their higher-level courses. Employers want literacy and mathematical skills for their clerical staff. Factory owners want a steady supply of skilled workers. Intellectuals insist that children should learn to think rationally. Who, in all this, cares about the emotional development of the children?

Internationally, the spectrum of school approaches runs between two extremes of teaching - the child-centred and the society-centred. Whatever approach the school takes along this spectrum affects the attitudes of teachers to pupils and consequently the attitudes children take towards themselves and to others - their sense of who is in control of their lives, their self-esteem and sense of responsibility.

The child-centred approach is the ideal in many advanced countries, where schools not only aim to provide pupils with opportunities to take up knowledge but also to develop as responsible people. Lessons and time-tabling are relatively flexible to adjust to individual differences. The education is intended to bring meaning into the pupil's

learning through individual projects and personal interests, guided by the child's personal strengths and weaknesses.

In such a school even the smallest children have the possibility of learning to be responsible for themselves and others. Children are encouraged to talk about the way they see events and how they might learn to live with others. Additionally, pupils are often given some form of responsibility in the school, whether individually or in pupil governments which have formal communication with the adult management.

The society-centred school is more usual in developing countries. There, more attention is paid to rules and to acceptable ways of behaving. The children's emotional development has a low importance, but their moral development within the prescribed mores is carefully nurtured. Teaching is often designed to pass on the basics skills of numeracy and literacy, taught in traditional ways. Even these, though, are sometimes controlled by a religious body which insists on a different curriculum for boys and girls. We are seeing this at its extreme in Afghanistan where the Taliban are forbidding girls all but the simplest reading and writing skills, and certainly not to take responsibility in the greater society. But considerable research has shown that the higher women's standard of literacy, and thus the greater their potential for responsibility the better the children's chances are of health and success in life (Freeman, 2000).

Such schools do not encourage children to question what the teachers tell them, and in some this is expressly forbidden. Learning is often by rote memory, and examinations are designed to see how well the pupils have memorised what they were told. It is a difficult situation for children who have a drive to be creative, expressive, and to think for themselves. The effects of repressive schooling can be seen in the children's creative work - dull, neatly written and correctly spelled essays, with the repetition of set phrases from the teacher appearing in many exercise books. Art-work too is noticeably dull and conventional as the pupils soon learn which style gains the teacher's approval.

In a school where the greatest importance is given to the transfer of information from teacher to pupil, the disregard of the pupil's internal regulation, that is their responsibility for their own learning, and the stifling of intelligent curiosity is a sad educational price to pay for a smoothly running organisation. The high moral behaviour which 'good' pupils show is not necessarily that of a real conscience which will function well in adult life. Do we really want to teach children to be frightened and obedient as life's big lesson?

Yet however rigid the regulation and the teaching, no school is merely a machine for passing on information. Every school inevitably develops what can be called a 'personality' of its own, and individual teachers usually try their best to help children develop positive attitudes towards learning so that they might continue to grow when they are outside its direct influence.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMOTION AND A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

A high self-esteem is probably the major emotional influence on the development and demonstration of high potential in all areas of learning. There is the danger, though, that insecure bright children can take their self-esteem from their academic success, rather than for themselves as rounded individuals. The gifted are sometimes under extra pressure from parents and teachers to be continually successful, so that their time to find out about life at their own pace and in their own ways can be drastically reduced - a situation often complained about by the subjects of the follow-up of 1964-1968 Presidential Scholars in America (Kaufman, 1992). She found that although the ex-scholars continued to do well, they often described how they relied on school-type achievement, not only to provide them with an identity but also a feeling of worth. What is more, being a 'know-all' is not perhaps the best way of attracting friends.

Good self-esteem brings the ability to control the need for instant gratification, as was demonstrated by Mischel, Shoda & Rodriguez (1989) with four year-olds. They found that although the ability to delay gratification increased with age, as might be expected, it also correlated positively with intelligence and greater social responsibility. Australian work (Marsh, Chessor, Craven & Roche, 1995) investigated self-concept in special gifted classes. They predicted that this selective education would have lowering effects on academic - but not non-academic - self-concept. It appeared to be the case. The children in gifted classes thought less highly of their academic abilities when they were among equally high achievers, but other aspects of their self-concept remained the same.

Some social adaptation is essential if children are to take part in activities with others. This developing conscience and the beginnings of responsibility start early. In fact, some internal control, the earliest form of conscience in relationships with others, is normally in operation well before a child starts school (Rosenblith, 1992). As they enter the school gates, children bring along their attitudes from home. But because schools have their own values and standards, difficulties can arise when they are very different from those from home. All children have to learn that there is one way to behave at school and another outside. It's confusing at the beginning because moral standards tend to be higher and more formal in school. For instance, at school a pupil's dirty clothes may be more offensive to teachers than parents. A child who spends many of his waking hours in a school which pays little attention to his parents' influence is obliged to split his developing psychological life in two.

Emotions and gifts

There is no reliable research evidence linking gifts *per se* with either emotional problems or delinquent behaviour, whatever the form and however frustrating the learning situation. There is, however, some promotion of that idea that, for example, children who are extremely intelligent are said to find it very difficult to live in this 'mediocre' world with normal education, and so will suffer from emotional problems which produce irresponsible behaviour, if not actual delinquency. The evidence, though, is almost entirely to the contrary. Most studies of high achievers have found them to be emotionally stronger than others, with higher productivity, higher motivation and drive, and lower levels of anxiety (see Freeman 1997). High level creativity, in particular, requires notable strength of character to overcome the forces of conventionality.

One reason for the extra emotional stability in the gifted may be in the stress-reducing benefit of 'cognitive appraisal' - an intelligent awareness present in all mental coping strategies,

outlined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). In theory, children with an advanced and more varied menu of social-cognition, which brings improved coping strategies, would be better adjusted than their peers, possibly encouraged by a reinforcing history of social successes. Hence, an adaptable intellect - one which has been well exercised in retaining balance and working at its most efficient - would also be the most resistant to any ill-effects from the usual hassles of daily life. To unbalance such a well functioning mind would thus take more powerful problems than would be needed to upset the less intelligent.

However, it is particularly difficult to find out about the normal emotional development of gifted children because so often they set-off emotional reactions in other people, producing so many folk-beliefs and unrealistic expectations about them. Adults may be jealous of their abilities, for example, believing that if only fate had been kinder, they too could have been recognised as gifted. Some even think of gifted children as superior beings, inherently different from other children, emotionally independent and without the same need for praise, support and love. Has anyone ever met a gifted child who is like that?

Morality and gifts

There is often a superior moral dimension implied in the definition of giftedness. There are two sides to the moral coin. The first is the morality of the society which influences whether gifted potential is allowed to flower, that is whether or not those gifts are accepted and admired, and so whether there is provision and encouragement for learning and excellence. For example, when Nelson Mandela had no vote in South Africa under apartheid he was never seen as a dignified Black statesman, but a rough revolutionary. With the removal of apartheid and his presidency he became one of the most dignified statesmen in the world. Only with the change in South Africa's moral views could his gifts of compassion and leadership reach millions.

The second side of the coin is the personal morality of the gifted themselves. There is an increasing number of programmes in America for 'gifted leaders', which are based on the assumption that those who score highly on IQ tests are better fitted to guide those with lower scores. But there is no evidence at all that an IQ of 150, for example, makes anyone more morally capable in life than someone with an IQ of 120. Evil itself is no stranger to a high intelligence. Hitler's propaganda minister, Hermann Goebbels, could have been a Mensa leader, though perhaps the Führer's membership would be less certain (Zilmer et al, 1995).

Strangely, there is the alternative myth that highly intelligent children have less well developed social cognition than other children. But in fact, as most research shows, they tend to have sympathy, adaptability and compassion in abundance, and do not usually choose to be without friends (Stednitz, 1995). If some gifted children do not seem to want to make friends with others of their own age, it can be because they have a high level of self-sufficiency, which means that they are happier on their own for longer periods of time than other children - or they may have been discouraged from playing with their age-peers by their parents' unspoken, but understood, disapproval. After all, the myths and expectations around giftedness are many and varied, and if parents see the desired signs of giftedness as a lack of friends, then it is more likely that the child will try to oblige.

A major clue to the relationship of morality and intelligence is to look at the moral behaviour of men and women over the centuries. The evidence is more than clear. Women rarely start

wars, rob, torture and behave in other immoral ways. Indeed, if demonstrated moral behaviour became the entry ticket to leadership courses for the gifted they would be filled almost entirely by girls – which they are not. Only if it were possible to demonstrate that females are outstandingly more intelligent than boys could we conclude that morality is indeed positively associated with intellectual gifts.

Problems and gifts

Some say that mental development in precocious children does not always keep pace with their emotional maturity. Indeed, there may be certain difficult times for them. These could be the first years of school, for example, when they have to relearn what they already know but have not yet acquired the social skills to get on with differently experienced class-mates. Another well known time of crisis is adolescence when peer pressure to conform to the popular norm is strong. But they should be given responsibility appropriate to their years rather than their advancement in, say, mathematics.

Stereotyping. There are some special problems for the gifted, such as in the use of the label 'gifted', which is associated with particular stereotyping. The labelled gifted may be used to further other people's desires, such as parents and teachers who would like to gain prestige through these children. Stress at school can come from pressure and over-high expectations, whether from the teachers or from the ambitious pupils themselves.

Motivation The talented may have their motivation to succeed inhibited by too much pressure from school. Feeling good about one's own abilities also encourages motivation. The talented really learn best when they take responsibility for their own learning, as opposed to instruction by the teacher. Gifted pupils with a high level of self-regulation show an increased desire to learn and to use that learning well (Span, 1995).

Perfectionism There is actually little evidence that the gifted are likely to be perfectionists. There is the possibility, though, that they may *procrastinate* - putting work off until the last minute - in case the product is less than what they are aiming for. Sometimes the gifted are better able than other children to recognise the best but cannot yet accomplish it, which can be very frustrating. As to whether the talented have heightened emotional sensitivity is still unsure, although people working with the talented often feel that its true.

3. TEACHING FOR RESPONSIBILITY

Men and women, of all kinds - young or old, stable or neurotic, can train to be teachers. They are a self-selected group who may neither have a natural ability nor a real wish to teach. In general, though, they have themselves enjoyed being taught and are often the children of teachers. But as they are often without much experience of the outside world, the profession is sometimes said to be rather inward-looking, which can produce a dulling effect in the classroom.

On the whole, teachers tend to be friendly, outgoing people of well above average intelligence, who value human relationships above all. Primary school teachers are particularly happy when involved with children. The teachers of adolescents, though, sometimes put more energy into their subject than their pupils.

In many countries, the most obvious feature of teachers is their upward social mobility. It is a time-honoured route through which intelligent, hard-working but poor people can reach a profession: it is also one of the few 'respectable' ways by which girls may earn money. This affects the role models pupils see in school. Everywhere, compared with male teachers, women teachers are likely to have been higher-achieving students, tend to come from a higher social class and are likely to outnumber the men. But more men are taking responsibility for the running of the school.

Teachers, not surprisingly, tend to value the educational system which has benefited them, and usually think their pupils should also appreciate the educational system. Most speak to their pupils in a correct form of the language considered suitable for imitation. This means that pupils whose morals, manners, and out-of-school activities are not in the approved style are likely to be at odds with the teacher's ideas. Teachers are most effective in their efforts with pupils if they share a value system about what they are aiming for and have respect for each other.

Responsibility is not always welcomed by every teacher. Refusal to accept it and attempts to identify and befriend pupils as equals can be very confusing for pupils, who are capable of rejecting the teacher's offered friendship quite bluntly - a blow to the teacher's self-image. In the end, a teacher must be in charge of the classroom, and failures of teacher self-discipline, such as constant lateness, an observable dislike of the work, bad technique, shortage of knowledge, and so on, will detract from authority and order, inviting chaos and lower pupil learning.

To do their best in the daily effort, teachers need encouragement, which can be brought about by putting more (not less) responsibility into their hands. Classroom teachers need enough freedom to use their own initiatives and styles of communication, whether through enthusiasm, good eye-contact, loving physical contact with little ones, and so on.

Applying psychology in teaching for responsibility

Though educational psychology is an integral part of all teacher-training programmes, it is often over-burdened with theory. When facing a class of lively teenagers, most teachers would have difficulty in applying Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, not to mention Chomsky's linguistics. They often see such theories as simply academic exercises for exams.

Applied psychology is a distillation of the most practical aspects of psychology. It includes the teacher's self-understanding as the basis of understanding others, notably the emotional development of their pupils. Ethical personal involvement with the pupils encourages respect between teacher and pupil and helps children learn respect for children of different abilities and backgrounds. Student teachers who are able to make use of group counselling sessions, or to practice interviewing with feedback from others or video, will be more aware of their feelings and performances, and better prepared for the role of developmental guide to children.

Teachers using applied psychology will, for example, do things with children rather than for them, and be concerned with the structure of the learning process. Such matters as self-confidence and personal relationships are the mainstay of positive attitudes to responsibility. The teacher also makes use of the children's own values and interests, building this into

individual programmes. I've summarised the three main areas of applied psychology as follows:

Basic communication: Understanding and using verbal and non-verbal communication; not only being aware of depth of meaning and response, but body-language (such as pointing), use of furniture (such as hiding behind a desk) and barriers to communication (such as stress).

Teaching: Selective reinforcement, where the teacher rewards adaptive, rather than maladaptive, behaviour, either verbally (praise) or by some form of reward (such as giving extra points for a thoughtful act). The teacher can raise or lower standards temporarily to give the child a feeling of success to act as a further spur.

Understanding research: When a teacher can read and understand research with regard to its applicability and limitations, the way is open to turn it into useful practice.

All pupils' sense of being worthwhile can be helped by giving them practice in real responsibility within the school community. With some adult help, they can be involved in administration, the accounts, and especially in designing the syllabus. For very poor working children, this must not mean the children do not lose money by it. Governments and industry could support such schemes by paying the children as much for their work in the school as they would have earned working outside. In such situations it can help to think of the school as being 'without walls', that is not to think of education as confined within the school building, but part of the wider community.

CONCLUSIONS

The world always has a need for intelligent, well-educated and compassionate people who can take and deal with responsibility for themselves and others. But where resources are stretched to the limit, as in developing countries, extra effort and concern for those who are capable of taking a responsible role may not take a high priority, and some potentially valuable children are excluded because of culturally shaped views.

But even in the best of all possible worlds, schools are limited in what they can do. No single kind of school can be wholly better for all children than another, because no school is adequate to meet all the pupils' needs all the time, and schools are far from being totally responsible for all children's learning.

There is still a long way to go, not only in knowing how to promote emotional balance and responsibility in all children, but also in investigating different ways of responsible schooling in different communities. The important thing is to use what research has discovered to be effective (see Freeman, 1998) as a useful means of helping children from all backgrounds to become the kind of adults that any society would be proud of.

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