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A QUALITY OF GIFTEDNESS

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In my long career studying gifts and talents, I have been heavily involved in research and teaching, and have visited gifted educational provision all over the world. I have also spent a great deal of intimate time with gifted and talented people of all ages. So, it is not only an honour to be asked to write the lead article in this edition of *Gifted and Talented International*, but a special privilege to be given the opportunity to present ideas which have emerged from my experiences.

What intrigued me with increasing force is something distinct and beyond any measures of gifts and talents devised to date. I am terming this with the shorthand of 'A Quality of Giftedness'. It emerges through the context of academic research as well as via biographies and even novels, and through my interactions with the gifted themselves.

Many years of my youth were spent forcing my mind into an academic approach to psychology. This meant learning to objectively measure and analyse human behaviour within its context. The word "I" was forbidden. Yet so much of an individual's own life goes into setting up and interpreting research. This first came to me from an early influence, a Swedish economist, Gunnar Myrdal, who described the unavoidable influence of experience and personality in designing and interpreting research in the social sciences (Myrdal, 1970). There is no escape from being oneself, he wrote, no pure objectivity for any of us.

I feel sure that others who spend time with the gifted and talented have experienced that special quality in some individuals. But like me, they find it hard to put a number on quite what it is that distinguishes two extremely high-scoring people in the way they live their lives. There is something inherent, a quality which is separate and different from what is measurable. It can be enhanced, but it cannot be planted in just anyone.

Daily evidence

In my psychology practice for gifted and talented children, I sometimes assess very young ones who can slice through a conventional intelligence test like a hot knife through butter, then look around to find something more challenging. Yet, some of them seem to me to be missing something. It is an extra which could make the difference to their lives of becoming either a very superior 'pen pusher' (who knows the answer to every question) or a fine and respected novelist. When writing to parents about their child's ability, I am faced practically with that predicament. It seems ridiculous if not actually offensive to tell a loving Mum and Dad that their child is unquestionably gifted in terms of intelligence, but is lacking in the spark of life.

Children who strike me as having high quality gifts are not passive, but often become deeply involved in the assessment. For example, a child can be a gifted synthesiser, seeing the Gestalt of the whole assessment session, describing to me the relationship of one part to

another. Another child might argue with me about approaches to the world. A few have reversed the process, thinking up questions for me to answer. One five year-old made up an instant questionnaire on working women. Some reply in creative ways to vocabulary questions. A straw, for example, is a number 7. And it is not only that they laugh (flatteringly!) at my jokes, but they take it further by making up their own jokes to make me laugh.

A five year-old who had been reading since he was two and a half told me he used a variety of creative ways to overcome his utter boredom at being asked to learn to read when he got to school. He attempted to read backwards, he said, and then when he had mastered that he missed out every other word and tried to make sense of what he'd read. When all else failed, he decided to make a tune out of what he was reading and – sing it. His teachers found him tiresome. I'd put my money on him.

Six year-old Kirsten gave a unique response to the statement “Bill Jones’ feet are so big that he has to pull his trousers on over his head”. The child is supposed to say what is wrong with that statement. Where most children giggle and talk about the difficulties Bill would face, such as his trousers would be smelly on his face, Kirsten said it was a stupid question. She contested the test. Of course, she said, he could get his trousers on over his feet, no matter how big they were. She then showed me how he could manoeuvre by pointing his feet down. She was quite right. And she had Gifted Quality.

The Quality of Giftedness

The idea of a special quality among the gifted is approached from different angles. I wonder, for example, if there are still recognisable Indigo Children around. This new kind of child, you may remember, was named after the colour of their psychic ‘auras’ (Carroll & Tober, 1999). They were almost all born in the USA at the time of the 2000 millennium, so they would be about 11 now. They were super-gifted “system busters” for whom identification was relatively simple: you just had to look into their eyes to see what “old souls” they had, and they also had the advantage of being able to communicate with angels. Quality beyond anything I have seen.

A Quality of Giftedness can stand out from the crowd quite distinctly though still not specifically enough to be measured with numbers, and it need not be world shattering. I have experienced it in action. For several years, I was a judge in a UK national children’s poetry competition. It was run by Cadbury’s the chocolate people. The entry forms were on the underside of Mars Bars wrappers and went out in millions.

The first year we had 56,000 entries. They were filtered by a bank of 20 English teachers before reaching the final one hundred. We judges were two well-known poets, a school inspector of English and me, a psychologist, an expert in gifted children. Each of us worked separately at home. At the final meeting, poker-faced, each put our top three choices of the children’s poems on the table. I was apprehensive about facing the two professional poets with mine. But we were all astounded to find that we had independently chosen the same 11 year-old girl, Sarah Davies, as the outright winner.

The odds were more than unlikely. But Sarah’s Quality of Giftedness had shone though, recognised firstly by the bank of teachers and then by the expert judges. To add to the already high improbability, it turned out that she was a subject in my long-term study. I was thankful the entries were anonymous. But where were her 10,000 hours of practice? By

chance, I had already interviewed her and her parents at home, as well as her teachers. I had evidence that she had not put that time in. Her dazzling talent was untutored and natural. She began her powerful poem, (Cadbury's, 1983. p 76) –

Sea Swan

*“Swan few heavy
over the sea
clapped white wings in the wind;
snake-neck straight.”*

How to be a genius

Not everyone recognises Quality of Giftedness, most notably Anders Ericsson and his colleagues in his decades of ground-breaking laboratory work on expertise (e.g. Ericsson, 2006). He advises us to disregard the idea of innate talent or any other qualities which might create the greats we call geniuses.

Such keen environmentalists tell us that on close examination, even the most extreme examples of genius, such as Mozart, Newton or Stravinsky, will show more hard-won mastery than innate gifts. But when did Albert Einstein put in years of practice in relativity resulting presented in his four published papers at the age of 21 which changed ideas of space and time? And where did Marie Curie study and practice science, as it was forbidden to Polish school-girls at the time? She had been a poor governess before her late entry to university in Paris. I suggest that practice can make perfect skills – as a basis for inspiration - rather than an end product.

Indeed, as the inventor Thomas Edison famously said, genius is 99 per cent perspiration – and 1 per cent inspiration. Doubtless, we could all do relatively better if we had worked harder, as many a school teacher has complained. Though it also helps considerably to be in the right place at the right time (Freeman, 1998; Freeman, 2005).

We know that geniuses do not need an IQ in, say, the top 5% of the population. Stephen Hawking, the great physicist, dismisses questions about his IQ by saying, "People who boast about their IQ are losers". Certainly, a gifted level intelligence cannot on its own predict life achievement, any more than being born with great muscular potential propels its owner to a gold medal at the Olympics with modest effort. The very best people reach world status because they take great pains to maximise their inborn gifts.

We also know from experimental work that newborns arrive with different genetic potential, such as preferences in colour and taste, not to mention personality, all of which modify the impact of even their earliest experiences. And influences are certainly not only in the one direction of environmental effects on an accepting child. As Scarr and McCartney (1983) pointed out long ago, it is a two-way exchange. Children are active in making their own environments with their caregivers. Demanding infants, for example, are likely to receive more and different kinds of attention and resources, depending on how their cries are received.

Of all the research on genius, Anders Ericsson claims that none supports the “myth” of inherent genius - that lucky few with a DNA head-start. His earlier work demonstrated the strong effects of deliberate solitary practice on high-level performance, which he sees as quite different from mindless drill. Environmentalists like him say that we need to move from

measuring ephemeral latent abilities to isolating reproducible stage transitions of superior performance. It would indeed be wonderful if we could isolate and reliably reproduce the criteria for high level creativity (Freeman 2007).

The measurement of human ability is still a tangled ball with overlapping fuzzy edges. It would be surprising if measures were a hundred percent accurate in predicting life paths. They are, though, extremely reliable for the limited purposes for which they are designed – usually school achievement.

In my studies of students at a prestigious music school in England where practise occupies almost every moment they can find, some were clearly better at producing recognisable beauty than others – pointed out by fellow-students and staff (Freeman, 2010). In fact, the school has been forced to broaden its initially highly focused music education to accommodate pupils who have discovered that talent is more than practice and enthusiasm. Hard working instrumentalists could get themselves to orchestra level, but only those who had a Quality of Giftedness made it to centre stage. It is not possible to take any healthy child at random to produce in them the quality of a Mozart. Superb performance from hours of practice is one thing, but world-changing greatness is another.

And if an extremely high measured ability in childhood does not provide the path to world fame, the opposite is also true. It is never too late to develop unrecognised and unpractised quality gifts. Remember Grandma Moses who took up her brush and easel at 76, and Mary Wesley, the world best-selling writer (e.g. *The Camomile Lawn*), who published her first adult novel at the age of 71. Neither of those very late starters ever had special tuition for their talents.

Subotnik, Kassan, Summers & Wasser (1993) have shown that giftedness may take many different forms; it may appear in quite unexpected situations and at different points during a lifetime. This means that theories and educational programmes designed for children who are advanced in conventional school subjects may miss others who disappoint their teachers and parents, but go on to live exceptionally productive lives.

Winston Churchill is a prime example of this - hopeless at school work and genius as a wartime leader. Entrepreneurs are often notable school failures, such as Richard Branson who left school at 15 and (among other things) founded the airline, Virgin. Princess Diana called herself, “as thick as two planks”, but then was able to demonstrate her world-class charisma and empathy. If these individuals did indeed spend their 10,000 hours in dedicated practice for their futures, it was not apparent.

What happens when gifted children grow up

Soon after my book, *Gifted Lives: What happens when gifted children grow up*, was published in October 2010, I was gratifyingly taken up by an international media whirlwind. Journalists from India to Iceland appeared to be fascinated by the intimate details of the lives of gifted people over 35 years as they developed from childhood into middle age. I believe it was because this is a book which is true to life, and true to what I have studied with investigative science at my elbow over a very long time. It is not just a collection and interpretation of numbers (though they are all available) or a reallocation of descriptions. It is evidence of the deepest kind.

It is the only study I know of which started out with finely matched control groups, and is also the most in-depth at this length. Its combination of hard data and analysis of variables,

along with countless hours of interviewing and conversation has brought an extraordinary insight into what it is to be gifted and how gifts and talents affect everyday life. The research was done in Britain, but I believe it has a very much wider relevance.

Of course, this project has been dominant in my own life. It was not easy to pull together the thousands of hours of audio-recorded interviewing with the individuals, their parents and their teachers in their homes and schools, and set it all into a wider context of research and practice among the gifted, and in readable language.

In the end, I decided on just 20 of the most gifted for the book, each one representing an aspect of their exceptionality. There are, for example, several sorts of musicians. One woman is empathetically gifted. Two rich women had been handicapped in very subtle ways by their gender. One of the first men to contact AIDS at 17 has managed to save himself with his gifted tactics.

A problem for the gifted, as with all responsible people, was that as adults they had to make money to support their families. That mundane aspect of being grown-up was so often detrimental to the development and display of the brilliance they had demonstrated as children. The criteria for being seen as gifted in childhood are very different from those for adults. For the children it is precocity and for the adults it is making waves.

Every one of those selected for the book encountered both unwelcome set-backs and golden opportunities. But how each treated what fate offered them depended heavily on their personalities and outlooks. It also depended on their special Quality of Giftedness.

Learning from the research

Across all the decades of my study, it struck me over and over again that if I had stopped at any point in anyone's life, how different their story would have been. Most research on gifts and talents stops at specific educational stages - but an individual's personal development does not.

Quite a few of my ideas about gifts and talents had to be reformed from its start in 1974. I'd begun, for example with the then current idea that gifted children would be rare, perhaps one in a school. But I was surprised to find when I started matching each identified gifted child with an unrecognised identically gifted comparison child, that there was at least one other to be found in almost all the classrooms. The second comparison child was matched in all other respects, but taken at random from the same class as the other two (n=210).

I had also thought that grade-skipping was a necessary and useful move. But I discovered that its early apparent success changed complexion over the long term. As they grew older, unrecognised psychological struggles in grade-skipped youngsters began to emerge. Adults told me how they had not been picked for the school sports team because they were physically smaller and could not keep up. Some denied their feelings of rejection by saying that they were not interested in sport. They even continued to see themselves as small in adulthood, though they were not. One father of a young teenager grade-skipped by two-years in an all boys' school said to me, "I feel sorry for him. He's a boy and they are men."

Now, mostly in their mid-forties, the men and women who were grade-skipped by as much as three years still often feel resentment if not anger. They told me that in the long term the move was not worth losing their childhood for. They talked sadly about all the other things

they could have done if they had not had to work at making up the missing years of lessons. They might have learned a musical instrument for which there was never enough time, or investigated another area of learning – or experienced an occasional intimate relationship.

No form of acceleration is practiced in the extremely high-scoring Scandinavian countries or in many other parts of the world, such as Spain or Holland. It is rare in Britain. Recent evidence shows that around the world 89% of educators of the gifted are reluctant to take that hurry route with a child and prefer enrichment (Freeman, Raffan & Warwick, 2010).

Another major finding was the difficulty of vocational guidance for youngsters who could do almost anything to a very high level. Jeremy, a highly gifted boy was like a donkey between two bales of hay, not knowing which way to turn, whether to throw his energies into science or music, in both of which he was outstandingly successful. After much agony, he chose the compromise route, to study medicine and play music as an amateur. Of course, he was brilliantly successful as a doctor, but his dear love was always music. That ‘sensible’ choice turned out to have been a mistake. The astounding Quality of his Gifts in music had been lost. His realisation in adulthood was terrible.

Quality

After innumerable hours of interaction and investigation with the people in my sample as they developed into middle-age, I had to conclude that many influences on happiness and success are like love – it is possible to say how it feels and what happens because of it, but there is no sure recipe to follow. Still, we do have very clear information about what the gifted and talented need by way of support towards self-fulfilment – an education to suit their potential, opportunities to flourish and people who believe in them.

The purely scientific approach to gifts and talents - if you can't measure it, it doesn't exist – may provide some reproducible structure of the dynamics of genius, but it cannot accommodate Winner's (1996) 'rage to master', Subotnik and Jarvin's (2005) 'charisma', or the vital leap of sustained spiritual faith from someone such as Mahatma Ghandi that changes life for millions of people. I have seen for myself how the power of gifted passion can knock down barriers until it touches the margins of addiction. Perhaps Dabrowski's "overexcitabilities" or "supersensitivities" are a part of it (Dabrowski, 1964).

A Quality of Giftedness that makes genius may not be scientifically provable, nor can it be manufactured by design because it is always novel. We see the quality in paintings and read it in literature. Dean Keith Simonton wrote about "the rarer kind of musical creativity that has withstood the test of time ... that people are still listening to – and are profoundly moved by – a century or more after the piece was first written." (Simonton, 2009). We experience it in scientific creativity, whether in Chain and Florey's dedication to getting Fleming's almost forgotten discovery of penicillin into manufacture, or Alfred Nobel's explosives. A Quality of Giftedness is the vital ingredient in world-class achievement which is possessed by only a few.

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