

# **How do I create a generative response to the implementation of the Department of Children Schools and Families' (DCSF) Gifted and Talented strategy?**

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Marie Huxtable 14<sup>th</sup> March 08

## **Abstract**

In the context of this self-study tensions are experienced and expressed between educational values of inclusion and a belief that learning is created by the learner and the contradictions, for instance the government expectation that children should be categorized and registered as gifted and talented, and learning is understood as a commodity to be delivered. A generative response, that is one that carries energy and hope of educational transformations, which focuses on the living values of individuals and those expressed within national strategies is described and explained as it is emerging through my practice.

## **Background**

I am a senior educational psychologist responsible in an English Local Authority for the coordination and development of inclusive gifted and talented education for all, which is consistent with the vision expressed by young people in the Local Authority Children and Young People's Plan 2005 as follows:

*"We want all Children and Young People to do better in life than they ever thought they could. We will give children and young people the help that they need to do this"*  
(B&NES, 2005)

I empathise strongly with the inclusive and un-limiting sentiments expressed. By that I mean I work from the premise that all children and young people hold within themselves the possibility of living a satisfying and productive life, each individual can make a valued and valuable contribution to their own life and the life of us all and there is no predetermined limit as to what that contribution might be. I do not mean that I believe a child is able to grow up to achieve anything they might choose, rather I believe it is not possible to predict what they might achieve during their lifetime given opportunity and their determined inclination and commitment to realising their aspirations.

Part of my role is to support schools in responding to government strategies, particularly the national Gifted and Talented (G&T) strategy in the context of the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters (ECM, 2004) agenda which underpins all of the development and work within children's trusts and states that it is of most importance for all children and young people to:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution

- Achieve economic well-being

I am seeking ways of improving my contribution through the ‘lens’ of ‘gifted and talented education’ by supporting the development of inclusive and inclusional living educational theory and practice. I understand gifts and talents as dynamic, living educational concepts, which can be developed and enhanced in energizing, creative and invitational educational spaces and relationships. When I talk of ‘inclusional’ I am working with Rayner’s (2006) idea of a dynamic relational awareness of space and boundaries which are connective, reflexive and co-creative. When I refer to living educational theory I do so with reference to the work of Whitehead (1989) who created the idea of living theories being the explanations produced by individuals for their educational influence in their own learning and in the learning of others and social formations.

Part of the job of an educator I see is to open their pupils’ eyes to dream of more vocational possibilities than they might otherwise have thought of and to experience themselves in those imagined ways of being, at least for a moment. That is why I have developed a ‘beyond curriculum’ programme over 10 years. Children who have participated are now working with us to improve it. They want the notion of ‘gifts and talents’ to be understood inclusively, and they are helping us to develop strategies to communicate this more effectively to teachers as well as their peers, and influence school cultures and organisation.

This programme is part of my generative response to the DCSF G&T education strategy and is predicated on my belief that ‘gifted and talented’ is a descriptive quality of educational provision not of a person. It should open children and young people to create dreams of possible vocations with an optimism and vitality before they formulate vocational aspirations and embark on a focussed journey. You will never realise what you do not first dream. This contrasts rather starkly with practices recommended by the national strategy where schools are expected to define, categorise and register 10% of their population and make provision specifically for those on the register and set targets for progress as early as possible.

I agree with White (2006) that the beliefs about intelligence and curriculum, which underpin so many of the national strategies and implementation plans, and so much of the practice in schools, are rooted in values of a bygone era. I find his argument compelling when he asserts:

*“...if you look for sound supporting arguments behind them, you will be disappointed. There are no solid grounds for innate differences in IQ; and there are none for the traditional subject-based curriculum.”(p. 1)*

and I share the sense of his conclusion,

*“The school curriculum is not a thing in itself. It is a vehicle to realise larger aims. ... The school curriculum is – or should be – a vehicle to enable young people not only to*

*lead a fulfilled personal life, but also to help other people, as friends, parents, workers and as citizens, to lead as fulfilled a life as their own” .(p. 151)*

In the national strategy there is a tension between the dominant theories and practices which have their origins with Galton’s notion of ‘intelligence’ reflecting 19<sup>th</sup> century values (White, 2006) and educational theory arising from modern values.

I have found some hope of working within this contradiction by keeping my values in focus, identifying these values expressed in the strategies, promoting practices which appear consistent with them, researching my own practice and supporting educators to research theirs.

### **My Research Approach**

One of the Children’s Workforce Development Council training handbooks (CWDC, 2007) helps to clarify the value of educators researching their own practice through a living theory approach

*“What we value and believe has an impact on how we behave and the choices that we make. It is therefore very important that practitioners examine their values, beliefs, attitudes and opinions and consider how these may affect their practice ...*

- *Beliefs are what we hold to be true*
- *Values are what we hold to be important. (p. 8)*

How I am, more than what I know or do, influences the quality of the educational experience children and young people will have.

### **What is my concern?**

I want to work for an egalitarian, inclusive, democratic society where people are respected as able to make valued contributions to their own lives and that of others and I see education as an emancipating process. These values are expressed to a large extent in the national strategies. What are not communicated are the qualities of warm, loving, sustaining relationships which flow with humour, pleasure, peacefulness, and vitality which give meaning and purpose to my life. The tension comes with practices that I am expected to employ which negate or contradict these values.

### **Why am I concerned?**

Defining, categorising and predetermining life trajectories can disenfranchise people from their own lives and those early experiences can damage for life.

## **What could I do that might improve what I am doing?**

My challenge is to create and offer a professional development programme for teachers who are leading their school's development of gifted and talented education which recognizes and values them as creators of valuable educational knowledge, enhances their abilities to develop their inclusive theory and practice and draws on the inspiration of Mai Li Juan (2005) to, 'attract their attention educationally' to engage with it.

While my concern comes from some of the practices being expected through the national G&T strategy there are also opportunities. By connecting with the values as expressed in for instance ECM and identifying practices that are consistent it is possible for new theories and practices which hold hope of influencing future directions to be generated, recognised, valued and offered.

## **A generative response to a government strategy in my educational relationships with other s-step researchers.**

What excites me about the work of the educators I work with is that they are engaging in self-studies of their own teaching practice as they seek to enhance their educational influences in the learning of their pupils.

The evidence of my influence in responding to the government G&T policy is being created through my educational relationships with the teachers as they use some of the ideas that I have brought to their attention. In particular I have brought into the educational space of masters units in the University of Bath, the ideas of Wallace (2004) who created and developed TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) and Hymer's (2007) thinking about the development of talents and gift creation. Without in any way detracting from the creativity and originality of the teachers I work with they have acknowledged my influence in bringing the ideas above into their thinking and classroom practice.

I have encouraged teachers into the educational space offered by Jack Whitehead in the master's programme because I believe his ideas of Living Theory and the way he expresses them are a valuable resource for teachers seeking to live more fully values that resonate with my own in enhancing educational experiences and opportunities for young people.

## **Thinking Actively in a Social Context (TASC)**

Sally Cartwright teaches in a secondary school and is registered on the master's programme. In her educational enquiry of January 2008 Sally (Cartwright, 2008) provides an evidence based explanation of an educational innovation with her school in which both staff and students are now using the TASC approach (Wallace, 2004) I introduced her to, to improving both professional learning and the learning of students.

Sally provides the evidence of her use of TASC and has acknowledged my influence in introducing her to the idea and encouraging her to join the master's group. This introduction was not simply a technical exercise of transmitting existing knowledge. I pointed out to Sally how the idea of creating her own living theory as an explanation of her educational influence in her own learning and in the learning of others, goes further than the TASC wheel in recognising the researcher as a knowledge-creator. Sally has exercised her own originality in generating her own living educational theory as she expresses and develops her own talents as an educator into the gift of her account to the professional-knowledge base. She has originated a very exciting development of a new accredited course for 6<sup>th</sup> Formers and after a first session, which I had helped her to organise at the university for her students with Jack Whitehead, she wrote to me

*'Many thanks for organising the meeting tonight. Who would have thought that first cup of coffee you got for me in Keynsham would have enabled those students to be there tonight - which I found to be a very exciting process. They seemed to grow as learners in front of my eyes.'* Personal email 13<sup>th</sup> March 08

### **Creation of Gifts and Development of Talents: Inclusive theories and practice**

Ros Hurford teaches in a junior school and also works with the master's group. In her educational enquiry (Hurford, 2007) she shows how she has drawn on the ideas of TASC, a living theory approach to action research (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) and the inclusive thinkers in the field of gifts and talents that Hymer (2007) has introduced us to, such as Dweck (2000), to develop her own theories and practices and write a new gifted and talented school policy that reflects her values. Ros shows how she has influenced her own learning over the years which has come from the pleasure of coming to know her pupils as people, being recognised as a person by them and valuing the difference her pupils have brought about in her. It brought a smile to me where Ros mentions her experience of our first encounter 11 years ago when I ran a workshop on Bloom's taxonomy for the staff of her school and her colleagues left with 'a higher awareness of learning, instead of the gardening expertise we had imagined!' Ros is about to embark on her final masters unit which will be the new unit which I was instrumental in bringing into the university, titled 'Gifts, Talents and Education'.

I know how much I owe to the ideas of others in the development of my own understandings and I now wish to acknowledge their influence.

### **Engaging with the work and ideas of others and drawing insights into my own understandings**

I am inspired by the work of Joy Mounter (2007) who shows 7 year olds critiquing TASC and beginning to articulate their own theory of learning. Branko Bogner (2006) shows 10 year olds who have engaged in action research presenting their work to their class as a validation group. The videos of these children show how sophisticated and skilled children can become in a relationship with a skilful educator who respects their pupils as

co-creators of knowledge capable of influencing their own learning and that of others, including the adult.

Mounter and Bogner show knowledge in creation and learning as a process. However the words knowledge and learning are often used as though they are products, commodities to be dispensed in measured quantities which confer power on the dispensers. Knowledge and learning as product can be seen in the demands of national agencies where there is an expectation that strategies and agendas will be delivered through pre-described training which sits in relation to the context of continuing and postgraduate professional (CPD and PPD) development in the UK.

CPD for teachers is widely considered a critical condition for improved instructional quality and student learning. It has traditionally taken two approaches: one-off workshops and cascade training. Both have been considered as ineffective by teachers and researchers. According to researchers such as Schwille, 2007 effective CPD requires:

- teachers working together and making decisions about their own professional development in their own schools
- balancing subject-matter and pedagogy
- peer observation and feedback on teaching
- action research and sharing results
- opportunities for teachers to apply what they are learning in their own classrooms, with outside assistance as needed

In short good CPD respects educators capable of creating valuable knowledge as educational researchers and empowers them to be a transforming educational influence in their own lives, that of their pupils and students, their colleagues and their learning communities. As Eisner (1993) pointed out

*'...we do research to understand. We try to understand in order to make our schools better places for both the children and the adults who share their lives there.'* (p.5)

My living theory (Whitehead and McNiff, 2007) is a research story that I create to explain what, how and why I am doing what I am doing, how I intend working to improve and to explicate my living values as the standards by which I hold myself to account. It is a story that I can test for validity and rigour and in communicating to others I can hold the hope of being an educational influence in the learning of other people and organisations in the manner consistent with my values of emancipation, egalitarianism and democracy. In enhancing the validity of my account I ask myself questions about the comprehensibility, truthfulness, rightness and authenticity of any account (Habermas, 1976). To enhance validity I ask about the quality of my reflective and dialectical critiques, plural structure, multiple resource, risk, plural structure and theory practice transformation. (Winter, 1979)

As an educator I want to enhance the emancipating quality of the educational experience for all but I agree with McNiff (2007) that freedom is not something which can be imposed. This is one of the reasons I do what I do in the way that I do it. I was told by a

teacher after a workshop on 'Thinking Skills' that I ran a number of years ago that what she saw me do was 'create and offer a palette' of opportunities. I very much like that description of my work. I am selective about what I add to the palette. I have added, for example, TASC with Belle Wallace, Philosophy for Children with Barry Hymer, living theory action research with Jack Whitehead, approaches to stimulating thinking and questioning by Robert Fisher and Guy Claxton, as much for the person running the sessions as for the content. These people embody many of the qualities I hope I communicate through my practice. They exude an enthusiasm for improving their own learning and a love for what they are doing. They encourage others to take responsibility for their own learning and the quality of the educational experience they create for their pupils which values them as people. They stimulate critical and creative engagement with their ideas. They are open to learning from and with those they work with and a humour and pleasure in being with them. These are also the qualities I see communicated in the accounts of the educators I work with such as Sally Cartwright (2008), Ros Hurford (2007) and Joy Mounter (2007) and Claire Formby (2007).

I appreciate Lather's (1994) notions of ironic validity as I say it is difficult for me to show myself exhibiting these qualities in this text and invite you to look at a video clip accessible from <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/marie/mhjwclip1.mov>. I am explaining to my colleagues my concern with the way 'targets' form a 'basket of indicators' and what I think is missing from the present 'standards' in terms of the values I believe to be vital to education. I believe you can see me demonstrating some of the qualities that I have said I value in other educators such as love, humour, pleasure, the genuine feeling of valuing the other and interest in them.

Feldman (2007) expresses why I think it important to try to understand my 'way of being',

*"In the present paper I argue that an awareness of their existential freedom allows teachers to act responsibly to construct educational situations that help pupils to become aware of the way that they exist in the world. For this to happen, teachers and their pupils must recognize that each is an individual human being who is situated, whose self emerges through experience and who has freedom to choose.( p. 239)*

In this paper I have sought to show how I have created generative responses to the implementation of the national gifted and talented strategy by focussing on the values of individuals and as expressed within national strategies. I have am working to further develop inclusive, inclusional, energizing and creative educational spaces and relationships.

In conclusion I ask the reader to respond in a way which will help me in discharging my educational responsibilities in coordinating and developing inclusive gifted and talented education in my local authority. I also ask you to respond in a way that will help to improve the quality of knowledge I am creating.

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