

Developing my understandings of gifts and talents as I respond to national developments

Half way through redrafting Marie Huxtable 7th Jan 07

Summary

I am writing this to:

- Clarify and improve my thinking and practice about 'gifts and talents'. Working with my current understandings of Living Theory Research I am focusing on my educational influences in my own learning as I develop my practice and understandings in enhancing the educational experiences of all pupils as they generate, reveal, develop and share their gifts as they create them and develop their talents.
- Open a conversation with other educators and learners, particularly in my local authority. I wish to invite them to co-create and research with me, understandings of gifts and talents, and practice, which is inclusive and inclusional
- Begin to develop a generative response to the DFES which will support, rather than negate, efforts to develop an environment of educational quality
- Contribute to a group of master's students who are working on a unit, 'understanding learners and learning from an educational perspective'

In this paper I intend to:

- to communicate where I have got to in my developing understandings of 'gifts and talents'
- explain my concerns with current government policy which focuses on 'gifted and talented' individuals
- explore my responses that are intended to enhance the educational contribution to their learning of each individual's gifts and talents
- open a conversation to extend inclusive and inclusional understandings of gifts and talents and contribute to the development of an educational environment of quality

Introduction

I work as a Senior Educational Psychologist, coordinating APEX (Able Pupils Extending Opportunities Project). My research is currently focused on the question: how do I contribute to the development of an inclusive and inclusional educational understanding of the creation of gifts and talents through supporting educators and schools to research answers to two questions:

- How am I/how is my school, helping all pupils generate, reveal, develop and share their gifts and talents?
- How am I/how is my school, improving my/its practice and contributing to an educational environment of quality.

The DfES is in the process of implementing its policy on 'gifted and talented education'. I wish to develop a generative response, which supports, rather than compromises the quality of the educational opportunities being developed. Although the difference in the language used, such as 'gifts and talents' and 'gifted and talented', might appear trivial the consequences for children and young people are not, which is why I am committed to creatively engaging with the challenge offered by the DfES, and to improve educational practice from the bedrock of educational values and theories. I see these values variously expressed in other DfES strategies and agendas such as Every Child Matters, Personalisation of Learning, Thinking, Emotional Literacy, the Standards Agenda, the 14-19 Agenda, the Primary Strategy... 'Values and purposes underpinning the school curriculum'...

I made a case for why I do not find the DFES notion of 'gifted and talented' educationally useful in 'Everyone a Winner' (2005). I concluded that paper with:

The current approach of using a statistical description of high ability is limiting and can have significant negative impact on learners and educators. A framework which is based on the premise that all learners may have the potential for high achievement opens the door on opportunity and in the words of Sun Tzu 'opportunities multiply as they are seized'.

Attainment only captures a small aspect of performance which may or may not contribute to an individual's achievements. High achievement, while representing one of the long-term imperatives of education, is too distant to inform the immediate actions of learners or educators. Ability, implying potential, is only validated when fulfilled. This leaves the problem of developing markers that can be useful to learners and educators in their quest for successful learning journeys with all individuals being enabled to make substantial contributions to society and experiencing a sense of personal fulfilment.

My proposition is that learners and educators should:

- *Work from the premise that all learners are capable of what is currently described as exceptional performance. That is not to say that all have the same interests, facility, or ease of progression, in all domains or disciplines.*
- *Explore and develop strategies and approaches to building a learning environment that equips all for high achievement in society rather than a minority with high attainments in school.*
- *Acknowledge that provision and identification (rather than identification and provision), or intervention and assessment (rather than assessment and intervention), are inextricably linked, and recognize that it is the learner who should be enabled to do the identification and assessment as an ongoing process tempered by their experiences.*
- *Be trying to understand high and exceptional ability in action (the 'what' not the 'who') and what supports its development and diverse expression*
- *Try to understand their own belief systems and how they impact on the decisions they make*

Unless we are willing to challenge our belief systems, continually ask and re-ask fundamental questions, and are prepared to explore new lines of enquiry then we will continue to arrive at the same answers.

I distinguished between attainment and achievement and suggested that:

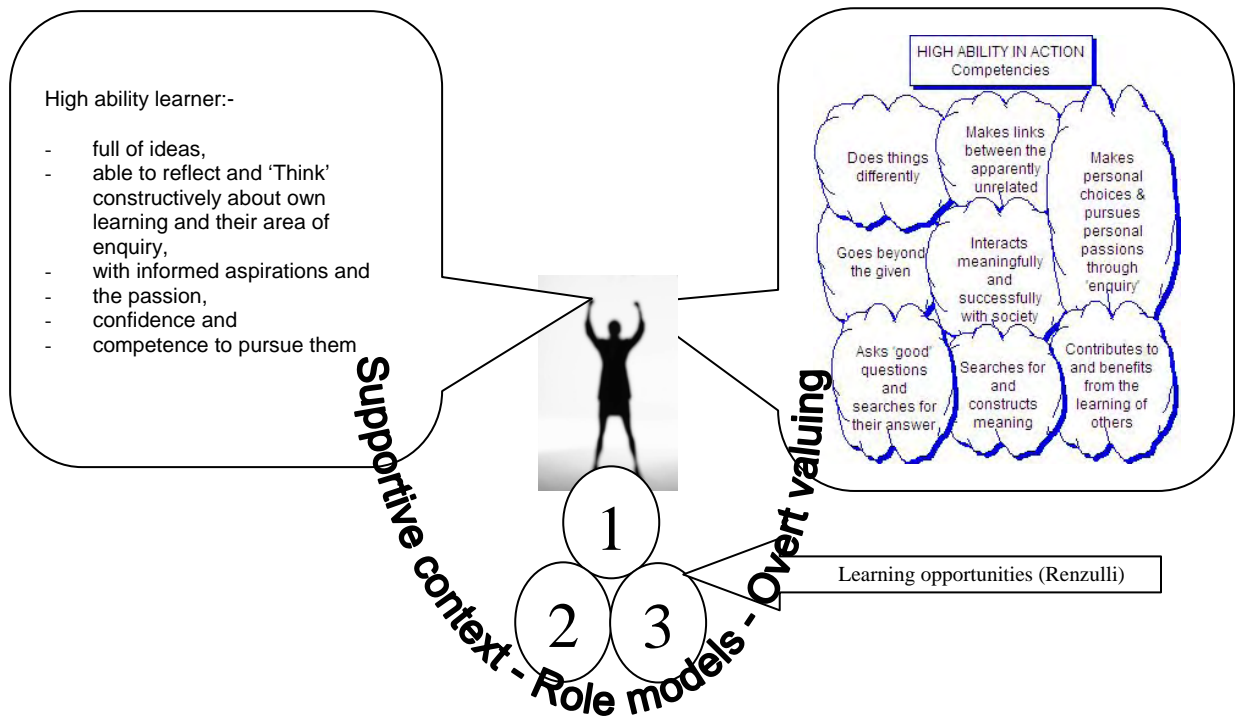
Achievement is a social construct with roots in life beyond school. High achievement could therefore be viewed as one of the ultimate goals of schooling and education and should therefore provide one of the success criteria by which schools could be judged. However the difficulty is that a person may not achieve until they reach their twilight years and achievement may not be recognized until years beyond the grave, as exemplified by the number of artists who are only appreciated fully when dead. So, using high achievement to mark the success or otherwise of schooling or education does bring its problems. Nonetheless high achievement is what we strive to equip and prepare children for.

One of the difficulties faced by educators with this long term aim in mind is the focus of the establishment on short term goals and attainments, which may be counter productive to long term high achievement. Exams require good surface and strategic learning, short term commitment, and compliance. High achievement requires deep and profound learning (as often referred to by Prof John West-Burnham and others), personal commitment and sometime rebellion.

While I still find it useful to work with the attributes and competences of high achievement I am questioning my understanding of 'high achievement', and 'high achievement' as a standard by which to judge my success as an educator, and implicitly to judge the success of another's life.

I went on to went on to offer a possible framework

Figure 2 A framework - Towards Exceptional Achievement of All



And concluded:

Educators can use these as the basis for selecting, developing and evaluating approaches and strategies but also need to understand their own belief system and constructs and how these impact on their decisions.

The development of my conceptual understandings, and the language I use, to myself and others, to express them, seem to be inextricably linked. In this paper I explore my development of inclusive and inclusional understandings of ‘gifts and talents’ which are helpful to me as an educator seeking to improve my practice and which are leading to the development of standards of judgement, and forms of evidence that contribute to my efforts to help children learn to live satisfying and productive lives.

. In writing this paper I have moved from a solely cognitive analysis and third party position, to including myself in my research and recognising and working with the visceral response I have to the language currently being used. This has been a big step for me. Eden Charles said in another context, *'we don't have the luxury to be that angry and creative of hurt'* (27th Nov 2006, at Jack Whitehead's Monday Conversation, Bath University). In attending to my growing feelings of disquiet, irritation and at times anger, while trying to connect with the best of intent of those I felt were creating my discomfort, I am, I believe, improving the contribution I am able to make to the creation of an inclusive and inclusional educational environment of quality. As you read my account I ask you to help me test my claim and develop my response.

My understandings of gifts and talents

I now try to avoid arguments concerning innate dispositions for highly applauded positions in our society. I can enter with spirit into the debate but I have found neither the process nor the outcome, the winning or loosing, contributes anything to progressing educational practice or theory. I don't dispute that some things are easier for me to learn than others. Some 'aptitudes' are valued by society some are not. Generally, but not inevitably, people prefer to commit time and energy to ventures where they can capitalise on their 'aptitudes' so I can still find a value in the way I was thinking in that paper (2005) when I focussed on Shekerjian's reflections:

'Everyone has an aptitude for something. The trick is to recognize it, to honor it, to work with it.' Shekerjian (1991)

and I asked:

Who needs to do the searching, recognizing, honoring and work? The teacher and mentor certainly, but with an ever present understanding that the intention is for the young person to be equipped to take control, with informed aspirations and the confidence and competence to pursue them and so be capable of shaping their destiny themselves by eventually doing the searching, recognizing, honoring and work independently.

What do I understand by gifts?

The possibility of living a satisfying and productive life seems to me to be influenced by a person finding the point of passion for what they can bring into the world that is of worth, for themselves and others; there is an act of creation over time with more than just self in mind. The worth is something to do with the investment of something very personal; time, energy, resources, consideration, love, effort, a willingness to endure... 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. This connection with the other person is woven into the bringing forth and manner of giving of that gift and in the anticipation of the valuing of the other... I feel pleasure when I give a gift that is valued and disappointment when it is not. The magnitude of the feeling both negative and positive seems to be related to the effort I have put in, invested of myself, even though I would like to be able to offer without expectation; to offer freely. The valuing of the other is something to do with what they do with it, the use they make of it emotionally, intellectually, physically... What worth is a gift that is not created or given or valued by anyone?



This is something I see in this picture taken by Belle Wallace. This child's gift is not an abstraction; it is the crafting of the artefact, her intention, the connection between herself and Belle that you can see in her eyes, her smile, the way she is, and in the pleasure flowing between the child and Belle at that moment when the gift is first valued.

Gifts for me have something to do with the contribution to the lives of others which carry a pleasure of connection. It feels like something that is inherent in being human. One of the first things we do in life is to enjoy the pleasure of giving something that is received with pleasure. I have been invited to play the 'ta (thank-you)' game' so often with toddlers, as you must have been; they pass you something which you receive with overt delight and you are expected to offer it back with pleasure. Or the 'peep o' game where you hide your eyes and see their delight when you surprise one another with eye contact; the gift is in the moment, co-created in the receptive, responsive (thank you Alan Rayner) flow of connection between you both.



This pleasure in the flow of connection in the mutual valuing of the gifts, is something I feel in this picture taken by Joy Mounter. It is not just in the obvious connection being expressed in the foreground but within the educational context that Joy has created, and is part of in taking this photo.

What do I mean by a talent?

The words 'gifted' and 'talented', and 'gifts' and 'talents', are often used interchangeably. I would like to explore how I distinguish between the words with an educational intent can help me to improve my educational practice.

In an email conversation about gifts and talents with Jack Whitehead he said:

You have a talent and you use it daily in the gifts you give. 3rd Dec 2006 9.26

This really rang a bell with me. It was the first time I had seen the word used in a way that made sense to me educationally. It suggested to me an understanding of a talent as being related to how I offer my gifts. It also suggests to me an engagement in which I demonstrate a 'fluency', an 'elegance', an 'aesthetic' in its execution. When I talked with my friends they spoke of a talented mathematicians/tennis player/artist... and they elaborated to say 'talent' had to do with how a gift is developed. To say 'I have a talent' is meaningless unless I go on to say how that is expressed, a talent for: applied mathematics, classical ballet, astrophysics, golf, goat herding. So, for me, a talent is connected with the gifts I am generating, revealing and developing.

I am still struggling with an educational understanding of 'talent'. Jack Whitehead (Whitehead, 2006c) has got the closest to it in the following:

Here is Moira with her students at Guyuan Teachers College (Now Ningxia Teachers University) flowing past her at the end of a lesson. As I watch Moira's non-verbal communications I believe she is giving her students a gift of recognition. I mean this in Fukuyama's sense of recognition:

Human beings seek recognition of their own worth, or of the people, things, or principles that they invest with worth. The desire for recognition, and the accompanying emotions of anger, shame and pride, are parts of the human personality critical to political life. According to Hegel, they are what drives the whole historical process. (Fukuyama, 1992, p. xvii) Fukuyama, F. (1992) The End of History and the Last Man, London; Penguin.

I think Moira expresses a world leading standard of judgment through her talent for recognising and communicating the value of the other. I think Moira loves what she does in education and is expressing this love in her recognition of the value of her students as they flow past her.

(Clicking on the picture will take you to a video clip in which, like Jack, I see Moira's talent expressed or if you are reading this in a pdf <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1jEOhxDGno>.)



And what we find easy...

As I have said the words 'gift' and 'talent' are often used interchangeably but even when they are distinguished between, they often both imply that there is something that comes without effort. 'A talent/gift for...' seems to suggest that it is something I find easy to learn, a facility, a disposition, a 'flair', learning has occurred with little instruction. I think there is often confusion between what we find easy to learn, and a prediction of how far we can, and will, take our skill, ability, gifts, talents... however you would like to term it. You can see this in the demand by the government for 'early identification', monitoring, 'added value indicators', identifying under achievement, identifying potential.

I think successful adults have often identified where they find learning easy and capitalise on it, but not invariably. Dweck (2000) points out that hard work can take a person further than an aptitude and Renzulli (1997) includes 'task commitment' in his 3 rings concept of giftedness. Freeman (1998) points out one of the best predictor of future achievement is what a child does out of school; it is more often there you will find what it is a person has a passion for. It is the passion which provides the motivation for the dedication of the time and effort needed to develop to a high standard.

As we grow older we continue to create gifts; those that are to connect and influence beyond the immediate personal circle to society, require determination with the passionate commitment to their creation and offering and valuing. Some gifts are eventually grown over time by some people to the point where they are recognised and valued nationally and internationally; 'valued' not treasured, treasure is hoarded, valued requires a generative engagement as well as an appreciation. This seems to me to be a core worth of education; to enable children to create, offer and value the gifts they want to bring into the world throughout their lives.

I believe everyone has these possibilities within them; I don't know that it is possible to predict how any individual will grow their gifts. 'Potential' for me suggests both the ability to make that prediction and to describe a preordained ceiling to what someone is capable of. With it goes the notion of underachievement and by the same logic, overachievement. On the basis of this theory efforts are made to identify and tackle underachievement, and it is this activity that is used to justify what is, essentially, exclusional and elitist. If some are 'missed' as gifted and talented by the same argument some are miss identified as gifted and talented. However it is only rarely overtly acknowledged that efforts have to be made to tackle the problem of 'overachievement',

Identification should be an ongoing, continuous process. Sometimes pupils will move in and out of the school's gifted and talented cohort. Retrieved 22nd Dec 2006 from <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/giftedandtalented/identification/expectations/>

One of the principle supporting aims of NAGTY (the National Academy of Gifted and Talented Youth) is:

to identify gifted and talented pupils throughout England retrieved 22nd Dec 2006 from <http://www.nagty.ac.uk/about/index.aspx>

and should be read in the context of ‘Gifted Education: The English Model’ where it is stated:

Today’s gifted pupils are tomorrow’s social, intellectual, economic and cultural leaders and their development cannot be left to chance. retrieved 22nd Dec 2006 from http://www.nagty.ac.uk/about/english_model_full.aspx

One of the ways NAGTY is supporting the ‘top 5%’ which includes:

Creating a national community of gifted and talented young people retrieved 22nd Dec 2006 from http://www.nagty.ac.uk/about/supporting_the_academy/index.aspx

Entry criteria and application procedures to NAGTY are intended to ensure those who are gifted and talented by their definition are registered, and the other side of the coin is to reduce the problem of having to re-label young people who are not ‘truly’ gifted and talented. Membership of NAGTY carries with it status when applying to universities or for employment; and not being a member must therefore also have implications.

I see possibilities for children to understand and create themselves and the futures they wish to live closed down by pre-deterministic approaches that come from giving them labels such as gifted and talented, able, high ability learner, exceptionally... Dweck (2000) points out the damage such labels can have on those who are defined as gifted and the others who are labelled by default as not gifted and talented, unable, low ability, unexceptional... by conferring a ‘fixed mindset.

So many adults seem to have sad tales – not because of what they did, but because of what they did not do, which usually involves not pursuing their dream– singer, motor mechanic, actress, rock-climber, entrepreneur... for any significant time. Fulfilling someone else’s dream does not seem to compensate even when achievement can be socially applauded. Over the years I have been struggling to develop my understandings and practice coordinating the APEX project I have continually returned to my difficulty ‘how do I know what I want to do if I don’t know what I want to do’. Perhaps that is something I am trying to accomplish in my work – to give children opportunities to ‘generate, reveal, and develop’ dreams, to translate them into aspirations, and gain the confidence and competences to take the risk of living them at some time, in some ways, as fully as they can. I have found no test which has ever been able to predict whether an individual will get as far as creating and being able to offer their gifts to be of value to a few friends, or to millions of people over centuries, but I have plenty of evidence from a variety of studies of the power of self fulfilling prophecies.

I am concerned as an educator that I unintentionally inflict my needs and aspirations on children and young people rather than supporting them in developing the talents they need to create, offer and value their gifts. A girl pointed that out very forcefully to me once when I was a school psychologist. I was trying to encourage her to work hard for her Key Stage 3 SATs. We were both well aware that she could get very high grades. She told me clearly that she had looked at the information on the web and knew it was irrelevant to her what level she got as she would be taking the courses she wanted in Key Stage 4, she knew her grades were important to the school as they affected their position in the league tables. She was absolutely correct. Another boy informed his mother that he knew he could get A* for his A levels without a social life, or probable Bs and enjoy living and learning for the next two years outside the constraints of preparing for A*s. I was pleased that his mother supported him in his decision. I know many teachers who have left highly prestigious positions to take up classroom teaching, and there find their fulfilment of being able. I have to ask myself whose needs are being met by putting pressure on children and young people to secure high attainment scores and to narrow their ambitions to what they find easy rather than what they would find satisfying.

I have moved from struggling with theories and practices concerning 'gifted, talented, high ability and exceptional learners' as defining concepts of children and their preordained life stories. I have moved to developing inclusive and inclusional educational practices and theories and a concept of 'gifts and talents' as educational attributes, skills, understandings and life stories which are co-created by children, as they grow into the adult they feel proud to be, contributing to a humane world. It is in this context that I read the DFES demand for 'gifted and talented' registers and, as by now you might anticipate, felt very concerned to put it mildly.

My concerns with current government policy which focuses on 'gifted and talented' individuals

Put very crudely there are two trains of thinking with respect to making provision for the education of children; one focuses on defining and identifying children, the other on describing and creating possibilities for learning with children. While not necessarily mutually exclusive they do not sit easily together in practice. My concern with the current implementation of government policy is that it puts a strong emphasis on defining a population, identifying children who fit the definition, and using simplistic measures of the effectiveness of provision.

I did not realise how culturally determined this policy is until I read Joan Freeman's observations on cultural differences:

The major cultural dichotomy affecting educational provision for the gifted and talented is between the largely Eastern perception - 'all children have gifted potential' - and the largely Western one - 'only some children have gifted potential'. (Freeman, 2002 p9)

She clearly demonstrates that 'gifted and talented' is a north European construct and it is not a universal truth. I believe this is very important as we live in a time when the need for us all to appreciate and learn from diverse cultures is increasingly recognised. I am also encouraged by her reflection that:

'The human spirit survives most attempts to be categorised, selected and treated in accord - for good or ill.' p188

A similar tension, as two trains of thinking try to run on the same tracks, can be seen in this quote from the abstract to the article by James (2005)

One of the defining features of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme is that it '... aims to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK'. This paper argues that although it is possible to use the terms outcomes for learners and learning outcomes interchangeably, they have an important difference in connotation.

The influence in practice of developing practice and theories engaging with the terms 'gifts and talents', and 'outcomes for learners', rather than 'gifted and talented' and learning outcomes', is expressed for me by Joy Mounter (2006) in her master's enquiry retrieved 8th Dec 2006 <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/joymounteree.htm>

...the awareness that we don't know exactly where the path will lead us or who will inspire us, but the openness to recognise it and explore it when it comes....

'I have learnt to never underestimate my skills of craft and learning, because nothing is impossible to a child with imagination.'
(Learning evaluation by R. aged 10)

I read this and felt very touched and tearful. I wanted to show everyone how far we have travelled as learners, how exciting the journey is and the self- realisation that comes with it. The process of this action research has been an enlightening and thought provoking process for myself, the learners in my class and staff in my school.

This communicates the essence of what I want to be able to do through APEX; to contribute to the pleasure that comes from a person contributing to their own learning and that of others, in a space which values children and adults as people who create the futures they want to live in a humane world.

Contrast this with the feelings that the summary of the documents, emanating from the DFES, engender:

The DFES expectations, with respect to 'gifted and talented' education, are that schools:

- *Will use the DFES Quality Standards*
- *Are required to indicate which of pupils are gifted and talented in their School Census return*

And

- *By September 2007 every secondary school are advised to have a leading teacher and primary schools to have a leading teacher per cluster. Ahead of the September 2007, Local Authorities will work with schools to help identify the leading teachers in preparation for the training.*

Schools are expected to:

- *Have an agreed process for identifying gifted and talented pupils*
- *Ensure that all staff understand this and use it*
- *Keep an accurate record of gifted and talented pupils*
- *Review the gifted and talented cohort regularly*
- *Self-evaluate and update the school's process as necessary*

The email from a Head teacher describes how I feel as I read such statements:

*I spent some time looking at the website,(
<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/giftedandtalented/>) and was quite horrified at the seemingly simplistic thinking about making registers and the statement that 'Sometimes pupils will move in and out of the school's gifted and talented cohort.' I can understand learners moving in, but to have them moving out suggests some kind of model of unlearning. As far as musical or sporting talents, would you not have to suffer a major disability before you no longer had that talent? The whole idea of a register sounds a death knell to the learning, both to those on it (Dweck, 2000) and to those who are not on it (low expectation, and self esteem).*

Exploring my responses that are intended to enhance the educational contribution to their learning of each individual's gifts and talents

I feel concerned that I can make claims that I might have influenced a few individuals but is that significant? I know that I am going to influence people; it is the nature of being human, I can't help influencing others as they influence me. But am I justified in claiming my influence is educational and significant?

The traditional measures leave me no closer to being able to answer those questions. For instance, even if I can claim an implied causal link between a programme I have 'delivered' and the grades the children achieve, if a child gets A*s and feels they are always on the brink of failing I do not believe I have had an educational influence; quite the converse. Dweck's work demonstrates very clearly that others share my concern.

So, a very important problem I feel I have not addressed to my satisfaction concerns the nature of evidence of educational influence. For me evaluation is intimately intertwined with action, not separate from it; the evidence I collect to evaluate my work has an

influence on what I do. Which leads me on to ask what evidence should I collect that will contribute to generative possibilities that will help me to improve what I am doing and keep the educational space open for possibilities to be created, explored and researched by children and educators?

Developing an inclusive and inclusional action plan...

I drafted an email for schools summarising the DFES position (given above) with the addition:

My focus in coordinating APEX is to contribute to the development of an inclusive educational understanding of the creation of gifts and talents through supporting educators and schools to research answers to two questions:

- *How am I/how is my school, helping all pupils generate, reveal, develop and share their gifts and talents?*
- *How am I/how is my school, improving my/its practice and contributing to an educational environment of quality.*

You will be aware of the advice and training to support challenge in the curriculum provided by the school improvement team, the support to develop an inclusive school through the Inclusion Quality Mark led by Chris Jones (Inclusion Officer), the work that comes under the umbrella of the Participation Sub Group of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership chaired by Rosie Dill...

I am seeking to add to that tapestry of support and opportunity by, for instance:

- *Encouraging schools to use the self-evaluation framework offered by the NACE (National Association of Able Children in Education) Challenge Award.*
 - *The next meetings to which all schools are invited are Friday 19th January, 12.30m – 3.30pm, Wellsway School (a secondary school focus), Friday 2nd February 1.15pm – 3.15pm, St Johns RC, Bath, Pultney St (a primary school focus). Cost £0*
- *Supporting educators seeking to improve their practice through practitioner research*
 - *Heads and Hearts in Learning, Making the Link, - a day led by Dr Jack Whitehead, Tuesday 23rd January, Combe Lodge. Cost £85*
 - *Tuesday evenings educational conversations and masters programme 5.15pm -7.00pm University of Bath in IWN 3.8 led by Dr Jack Whitehead, see the masters programme section of <http://www.actionresearch.net> .cost to teachers £0*
- *Connecting educators with an enthusiasm to creatively engage with children and young people as:*
 - *budding mathematicians - next meeting Thursday 18th January 4.00pm – 5.30pm venue to be confirmed, facilitated by Sarah Savage, consultant – cost £0*

- *Informing schools about P.A.S.S. (Pupil Attitudes to Self and School) which can contribute to amplifying the pupil's voice.*
 - *Information about P.A.S.S. and a list of schools which have purchased it are on the APEX website <http://www.bathnes.gov.uk/BathNES/learning/inclusionsupport/apex/default.htm>. The next users support group meeting will be arranged in the new year.*
- *Organising the APEX Saturday workshops, summer schools and collaborative, creative enquiries and sharing understandings of developing quality learning opportunities beyond the curriculum*
 - *Information about the Summer School and Saturday Workshop programme is on the APEX website.*
 - *Workshop on developing quality learning opportunities beyond the curriculum on Thursday 1st March, 9.00am – 12.30pm, Roman Baths led by Lindsey Braidley (Museum Service) and Marie Huxtable (APEX), cost £20pp*

I will update you in the New Year with the developing programme which I hope will contribute to your possibility of creatively engaging with the challenge offered by the DFES to continue to improve educational practice from the bedrock of your educational values and theories.

I took heart from the response of a Head teacher:

I think you've given schools a really strong clear way of creating a climate for learners in 'generating, revealing, developing and sharing each others' gifts and talents'

As I talked with other people they enabled me to be mindful that the educational values I am trying to live in my practice are shared nationally by those with power and influence. For instance, another Head teacher showed me the statement of values in the National Curriculum: Handbook for primary teachers in England. I hope that this extract will show you why I felt an optimistic surge of hope; what we are trying to do locally through APEX can be recognised as within the national framework, and we are contributing to improving the educational contexts where we are living the visions that inspire us as educators:

We value ourselves as unique human beings capable of spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical growth and development.

On the basis of these values, we should:

- * *develop an understanding of our own characters, strengths and weaknesses*
- * *develop self-respect and self-discipline*
- * *clarify the meaning and purpose in our lives and decide, on the basis of this, how we believe that our lives should be lived*
- * *make responsible use of our talents, rights and opportunities*
- * *strive, throughout life, for knowledge, wisdom and understanding*

* *take responsibility, within our capabilities, for our own lives.*

Relationships

We value others for themselves, not only for what they have or what they can do for us. We value relationships as fundamental to the development and fulfilment of ourselves and others, and to the good of the community.

... the document concludes:

Schools and teachers can have confidence that there is general agreement in society upon these values. They can therefore expect the support and encouragement of society if they base their teaching and the school ethos on these values. Accessed from http://www.nc.uk.net/nc_resources/html/values.shtml

Barry Hymer's response to the DFES Quality Standards made me look again. My reading is that they are guidance, not mandatory:

Schools might wish to use the Standard if and when they have identified gifted and talented education as a priority in their OFSTED self-evaluation form (SEF). During trials, schools have also found the Quality Standard helpful in establishing and developing self-evaluation processes, so effective preparation for the SEF.

Although it is obviously written, for the most part, but with a few encouraging inconsistencies, from the position of a discrete notion of a 'gifted and talented' population, it can be worked with very generatively if you hold to an inclusive and inclusional notion of all children and young people generating, revealing and developing their gifts and talents. To do so I have to make a few changes in the language, for instance from 'define' to 'describe' and to keep my focus on how this can help me support all children and young people benefit from, and contribute to, the educational environment I am trying to develop.

And...

In coordinating the APEX (Able Pupils Extending Opportunities project) I am working with an inclusive and inclusional understanding of 'able pupils' as might be indicated by this quote from Dweck:

...intelligence is portrayed as something that can be increased through one's efforts. (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) (Dweck 2000 p3)

I hold to the belief that all learners have the capacity for extraordinary achievement and I have sought to develop my practice to reflect my growing understanding of what I mean and how I can contribute to the educational environment in which it can flourish.

Covey wrote:

'Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In those choices lies our growth and our happiness.'
(Covey 2004 p. 43).

One of my great hopes for my work is that I contribute to the possibility of children expanding their space to choose and create the lives they want to live to their own satisfaction and to the benefit of all. I believe the space is expanded by a person having aspirations informed by passion, values and a vision of the sort of life that would feel satisfying and productive, the confidence to 'feel the fear and do it anyway', and the competences and skills to work towards realising them.

I recognise I need foci for my work in APEX to make anything happen while at the same time I am very aware of the inherent dangers that such foci can bring; when targets become destinations not signposts, when answers are valued independently of the questions they were brought into existence to respond to, when an answer becomes *the* answer. I want to invite you to inform an (organic) work plan for APEX and contribute to realising the vision of the authority expressed in the Children and Young People's Plan 2005:

"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"

I would also like to invite you to work with me to find forms of evidence which will enable me to know what educational influence I am having and which will contribute to improving the contexts which support children and young people generating, revealing and developing their gifts and talents. The closest I have come to seeing what such evidence looks like is in the visual narratives (Whitehead, 2006a) and living theory research accounts (Whitehead, 2006b). My major task over the next year will be to try to create and extend such accounts myself and support educators and children and young people to develop and extend the evidence in their own accounts of their own living educational theories as they create their possibilities of living satisfying and productive lives in a humane world. I wish to work with others to continually scrutinise APEX and articulate clearly:

- why I am doing what I am doing
- what I am doing
- what forms of evidence we might be able to develop which communicates the educational influence I am having on my own learning, the learning of children and adults, and the contexts in which I work, which reflect the values described in the national curriculum,
- what generative possibilities I can develop with others to improve what I am doing and keep the educational space open for possibilities to be created, explored and researched by children and educators,
- how I will know what educational influence I am having

keeping in focus the values expressed in the national curriculum document and the vision expressed by the children and young people in the Children and Young People's Plan 2005. I would welcome any contribution you would wish to make to the realisation of this aspiration.

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