

Looking for Gifts in All the “Wrong” Places

BY DR. KEN W. MCCLUSKEY

Editor’s Note. *With this article, we conclude our year-long series on diversity. Dr. Ken McCluskey, a Canadian colleague who has many years of experience in talent development among diverse groups of students (and whose work has also appeared in PHP before), challenges us to stretch our understanding of both giftedness and diversity, and to seek and nurture strengths and talents in many places and in new ways.*

Unfortunately, strengths and talents are frequently overlooked, ignored, dismissed, or marginalized among young people from several segments of society. While almost everyone today pays lip service to the idea that talent has no racial, cultural, or socioeconomic boundaries, opportunities are still not evenly distributed.

Insofar as in-school enrichment goes, the playing field has often been far from level. The late Dr. E. Paul Torrance observed that the educational system often penalizes children whose values and attitudes differ from those found in the dominant culture. Some researchers have found that African-American, Hispanic, or Navajo students were seldom nominated, yet alone selected, for gifted programs in some school settings and that high-ability Native students seldom had opportunities to hone their talents; indeed, their abilities have often been unnoticed and unappreciated. Reports in the early 1990’s suggested that participation by American Indian/Alaska Native students was less than one-fourth of that of other student populations.

It may not be possible to change attitudes and reform systems overnight, but – by becoming sensitive “talent scouts” – parents and educators can make a definite beginning in identifying emerging abilities in children. Grover Young proposed several guidelines for talent spotting, including searching constantly (every day) for special passions and interests, staying alert over an extended period of time, designing open-ended activities that allow hidden abilities to surface, behaving like a detective gathering information, and keeping a note pad on hand to record observations.

However, the issue is not just, “How to look for talent effectively?”, but, “Where to look?” To my mind, the answer is obvious: Everywhere! As Maugham wrote, “There is no

more merit in having read a thousand books than in having ploughed a thousand fields. There is no more merit in being able to attach a correct description to a picture than in being able to find out what is wrong with a stalled car. The stock-broker has... knowledge too, and so has the artisan. It is a silly prejudice of [intellectuals... that theirs are] the only ones that count.” We must seek out talent among all young people in all areas of human endeavor, with breadth of vision. We would do well to consider education as taking place within an ecosystem of learning. In addition to schools and classrooms, education is influenced by what happens in homes; at computers on the Internet; in community workplaces; in churches, museums, and theaters; on athletic fields; and in correctional facilities, youth homes, and health care centers.

Not All Gifts Come Nicely Wrapped

Our experience in Manitoba has convinced my colleagues and me that talent, albeit often hidden, disguised, or dormant, will surface in unexpected places. As a consequence, we believe it is critical to extend our search well beyond the usual settings to encompass the following (frequently overlapping) populations:

1. Disconnected underachievers.

High-ability individuals don’t always show their talents at school, and many end up leaving or being “pushed” from the system. A survey by Statistics Canada some years ago indicated that only 8% of school dropouts in the country mentioned academic problems as their reason for quitting; over 30% had been maintaining A or B averages before exiting. Obviously, many left who should not have been lost. Dr. Jean Peterson has highlighted in her research how decidedly few enrichment opportunities are offered for one group of potential dropouts – the “tough bright.” In some instances, their life situations make the school curriculum virtually irrelevant.

Lost Prizes, a shared project initiated by three school districts in our province, was designed to “reclaim” at-risk, talented high-school dropouts. Their talents notwithstanding, the youth in question were producing virtually nothing. At best, they were floating aimlessly; at worst, they had run far afield

of the law. Several had serious substance abuse problems. The intent was to reconnect with these individuals, awake dormant creative potential, and motivate them to do something more productive with their lives.

During the first phase of the program, a facilitator worked directly with the participants in an off-site classroom setting. The classes featured information sessions (on anger management, learning styles, nonverbal communication, and the like), career exploration, and Creative Problem Solving (CPS) training. Using CPS tools, the reengaged students learned to make reasoned educational, career, and life decisions and considered how to move from their “current reality” to a “desired future state.” Individual Growth Plans were mapped out to help identify and work toward goals. In the second phase, students gained experience in the world of work through on-the-job placements. More specifically, they had an opportunity to encounter and resolve some real-life problems with caring, philanthropic mentors in the business community.

Ryan Gauthier, who has shared his “From Down-and-Out to Up-and-Coming” story in a number of presentations and publications, was one of the Prizes. As a child, he had been nothing but trouble in school. By junior high, he was involved in various criminal activity (assault, robbery, and break-and-enter offenses) to support his drug habit. After spending the greater part of his adolescence in and out of the local youth center (mostly in), Ryan decided to take a different path after his stepfather was killed in an alcohol-related car accident. It wasn't easy. However, Ryan's artistic talents were recognized and celebrated in the Lost Prizes program, and he was one of seven participants invited to present at the National Association of Gifted Children Conference in Tampa in 1995. After talking about his life and displaying his art during the session, Ryan was inundated with commissions and requests for his sketches. He summed up the experience and the program by remarking: “This is a bigger high than drugs.” Ryan went on to graduate from high school, to gain experience in several responsible jobs, and to produce cover art and illustrations for many books and magazines. During the journey, he “re-bonded” with his mother, who provided tons of encouragement and support. Now married with three children, Ryan is currently attending college in pursuit of his new goal, working with at-risk children and youth.

There were many Lost Prizes like Ryan, who – once their talents were identified, appreciated, and nurtured – turned their lives around. To be precise, over the three-year life of the project, 57 of the 88 participants (64.77%) responded by returning to high school, entering post-secondary programs at university or community college, or obtaining employment (two now own the businesses). Not bad for formerly troubled and troubling ne'er-do-wells.

2. Children and youth not of the dominant culture.

As mentioned earlier, schools often find it difficult to meet the needs and develop the talents of children from minority groups. In Canada, we are struggling to address the plight of one group in particular – Native students. However, to do so effectively demands that we take into account their cultural beliefs and values. In contrast to the goals of many in today's dog-eat-dog, look-out-for-number-one world, traditional Native teachings tend to place sharing and generosity above materialistic gain. And in contrast to the oft-used linear approach to pedagogy, such teachings emphasize a holistic, circular style. It is essential that parents and teachers recognize and validate these differences.

The track record with Aboriginal students (First Nations Native, Inuit, and Métis – those of mixed ancestry) in our province has not always been strong. In an attempt to do better, the tri-district partners embarked upon another venture, Northern Lights, targeting at-risk Aboriginal school dropouts and non-attenders. In most ways, the program mirrored Lost Prizes, with the in-class CPS training and the work placement phases. However, this time around, we found it necessary to add a substantial cultural component, to hire Aboriginal social workers and educational assistants to reach out to participants and their families, and to deal with the incursions of Native youth gang recruiters. Once these variables were addressed, the results were again powerful, with 38 of 58 (65.52%) of the youth returning to school, being admitted into post-secondary programs, or entering the world force on a full-time basis.

3. Disadvantaged young people.

The term “at-risk student” became popular soon after America was identified as a “nation at risk” by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. According to many sources, risk factors include being poor, transient, male, of minority group status, and coming from a separated family. However, if I were a Native single parent mother of a 10-year-old son living in poverty in the inner city, I might not think all that highly of this definition. Clearly, for those trapped in unfortunate life circumstances, this view is extremely pessimistic and, since it ignores or masks variations within groups, limiting. Some youngsters from affluent two-parent families are very much at risk. And I know several economically-disadvantaged, single Native mothers who have created loving, caring, and supportive homes for their children, where school is deemed critically important, where identification and development of childhood talent is a priority, and where appropriate, socially responsible behaviors are modeled in exemplary fashion. Children from such homes may have challenges to deal with, but they are not necessarily at risk for school or other types of failure.

Dr. Richard Curwin has made the point that it is what parents and children do, not their ethnic background or where they live, that determines the degree of risk. The behavior, rather than the situation, is the key – and behavior can be changed. Perhaps it has been too easy to take a deficit rather than a strength-based approach when dealing with certain kinds of children. We might do well, particularly with hitherto marginalized populations, to consider possibilities rather than problems, and talent development rather than remediation.

4. Special education students.

Some children with special needs become known for their disabilities rather than their abilities. To counteract that tendency, learning disability associations across the continent send out considerable literature about “disabled” students who have made good. Similarly, Dr. Bonnie Cramond – in her intriguing work exploring possible links between ADHD and creativity – has referred to biographical accounts of “problem” individuals who have achieved eminence. Borrowing indiscriminately from these and a variety of other sources, here are some examples: Einstein and Churchill were, to put it politely, far from stellar students; Henry Winkler, along with many other actors, has had to cope with a serious learning disability; Edison’s teacher described him as “addled” and incapable of benefiting from school; Samuel Johnson was described as being in “perpetual motion;” and Pope Leo X fact that da Vinci would “never accomplish anything” because “he thinks of the end before the beginning”.

My wife and I have a firsthand illustration. Our daughter Amber, a classic ADHD person if ever there was one, caused us no end of grief during her early years. By the time she reached nine years of age, she had been diagnosed from various quarters as exhibiting “schizophrenic tendencies,” “severe learning disability,” “functional illiteracy,” and eventually “profound ADHD.” One principal described her as “the worst child in the school district.” Obviously, as parents, we were incredibly worried and depressed. Then something happened that caused us to look at Amber differently.

Discouraged, we decided to drive for a family holiday in Mexico City (where we had some accommodating friends who were always willing to put us up for a couple of weeks). Our hyperactive youngster fit in without much trouble. Amber clearly relished the luxurious environment in which we found ourselves, and made friends, quickly and for the first time in her life. Our host summed it up wisely: ‘You Canadians and Americans. You’re robots. This girl is alive! She’s like us!’ The stay was enjoyable and invigorating. The Sunday prior to our return, all members of both families decided to head out to the market for a souvenir-hunting expedition. Amber, in an uncharacteristically subdued tone, surprised us by asking to stay back – a marked change in routine from someone who always wanted to be out and about. Because Sunday is, by tradition, the maids’ day off, only one elderly cook was to remain behind.

This compassionate soul graciously volunteered to babysit, and we acquiesced. Naturally, we should have known something devilish was afoot. Somehow, our nine-year-old had acquired enough Spanish during the brief visit to search through the Mexican telephone directory in our absence, identify a beauty salon, put in an ‘emergency’ call, and make herself understood. Upon our return, we found that Amber had ordered a bevy of beauticians to the home. They were all busily engaged doing her hair, her nails, the works!

After that episode, we set about recognizing – and redirecting – our daughter’s talents. And, with time and fine-tuning, the weaknesses have become strengths. Now a successful young adult, Amber is excelling and showing exceptional talent in her work with children. It’s helpful that there’s not a child born on the face of this earth who can wear her out. And Amber brings her energy into her own parenting: She is the only mother we’ve known who would wake the babies up to play!

5. The institutionalized.

There are many examples of talent bursting forth from institutions. Kenneth Donaldson was committed, wrongly, for more than 15 years to a state mental hospital. Insisting all the while that he was sane, he wrote a book during his institutionalization, *Insanity Inside Out*, which helped secure protection for the rights of mental patients. And Janet Frame, the poet and novelist from New Zealand, was diagnosed as schizophrenic, placed in a mental institution, and subjected to many rounds of electroshock “therapy.” A scheduled lobotomy was canceled only after her first novel won an international literary award.

Like Ryan Gauthier, many young people with talent – whose paths to legitimate goal attainment are essentially blocked – look instead in unsavory directions. And, as unpalatable as it may be, it takes considerable ability to become a successful criminal or member or leader of a youth gang. Waln Brown, himself a former incarcerated delinquent who went on to earn a Ph.D. from an Ivy League university, has examined the cases of several talented and resilient individuals who beat the odds. For example, Warren Rhodes has chronicled his story of dropping out of school, gang involvement, shooting a friend, near death from a drug overdose, and jail time, and then his personal and academic rebirth culminating in a doctorate. His book, *From the Jail House to the White House*, was written after Rosalyn Carter invited him to Washington to speak about his life. Along similar lines, Phil Quinn discussed his odyssey through the child welfare system and foster care in his book *Cry Out*, and his life in a motorcycle gang in *Renegade Saint*. And, looking further into the past, Huddie Ledbetter, or Leadbelly, the noted blues musician, did much of his song writing (which included *Good Night Irene* and *Midnight Special*) from a jail cell.

My co-workers and I also have some direct experience with Native Canadian inmates incarcerated in Manitoba jails for drug offenses, fraud, break and entry, assault, physical or sexual abuse, or even murder (as a juvenile). Truly, it would be difficult to find a population more at risk. In all, 31 prisoners (27 male; 4 female) took part in Second Chance, yet another project featuring Creative Problem Solving, career awareness, and work experience (as part of pre-release training). After these inmates had “done their time,” completed the program, and been released into society, they were monitored for a year to see if they would “go straight” or run afoul of the law once more. As well, members of a matched group of Native offenders – from the same home reservations as our participants – were monitored over the same period. Individuals in this control group, however, were simply warehoused through the correctional system in the traditional manner, and left to fend for themselves upon release. That is, unlike their Second Chance counterparts, they received no pre-release support whatsoever. Recidivism during the follow-up year was 90.32% (28 of 31) for the unsupported control group, but only 38.71% (12 of 31) for our “second chancers.” While the distressingly high rate of re-offending in the non-treated condition is an indictment of our present judicial and penal systems, the results suggest that promising alternatives – emphasizing a talent development approach – are worthy of serious consideration. Importantly, a progress review of Second Chance participants a decade later showed that the recidivism rate held firm – the former inmates had turned their lives around, and kept them turned around.

So Let's Get To It

Brown also discusses the work of John Seita, another reclaimed at-risk youth who has gone on to a life of academe, service, and advocacy for the disadvantaged. In his book, *In Whose Best Interest?*, Seita asserted that at-risk children and youth will be more likely to develop resilience and overcome adversity if they are provided with what he termed CCDO during their formative years. The letters refer to *Connectedness* – children need to belong and be attached to someone or something; *Continuity* – they must have that sense of security over the long term; *Dignity* – for self-efficacy to grow, children need to feel they are important to others; and *Opportunity* – they must have a chance to experience success, build confidence, and recognize and develop their abilities. Far too many disadvantaged, vulnerable young people don't get that chance. The true ‘cost’ of talent delayed or denied is virtually impossible to discern. What is the cost of a symphony unwritten, a cure not discovered, a breakthrough not invented? In today's complex world, and in preparing for tomorrow's certainly more complex one, we can scarcely afford such waste of talent capital and human potential.

We must, as parents and educators, change attitudes and re-frame our thinking. Talent is not the sole province of “teacher pleasers” and other compliant children. Black sheep, annoying nonconformists, the disadvantaged, and children from markedly different cultural backgrounds have much to offer. And without doubt, negatives in childhood can evolve into great positives in later life: it is a small step from stubbornness in early years to determination in adulthood, from off-the-wall behavior to creative thinking, and from unfocused day-dreaming to productivity and inventiveness. Let us, therefore, expand our search and give all young people an equal opportunity to have their talents recognized and nurtured.

For Additional Reading

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