

Teachers' Untold Stories: Gifted Education in Schools

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It is generally said that each of us has a special story to tell, stories about our lives, our likes and dislikes, our reflections and concerns, and what not. Perhaps, particularly touching to most of us as teachers or education practitioners are stories about views and experiences regarding education, our teaching, and our students. Yet, most of these stories remain untold. One reason, among others, could be that we feel that they are insignificant, they will not amount to anything, and they might not fit in with the dominant story being told.

To uncover some of these untold stories, **Project GIFT** has commissioned our editors to interview teachers of Project Schools, and to solicit their stories about how they viewed or felt about the practice of gifted education in their schools. We hope to give voice to those local narratives that have so far been virtually disregarded, inadvertently ignored, or even purposively silenced.

Amazingly, our editors have managed to pull together the bits and pieces gathered in interviews with teachers, weaving them into touching stories of teachers' experiences. These stories are now reprinted before you as a collection.

As a **Project GIFT** advisor, I was asked to read through these stories and make comments on them. I never ceased to be amazed by the dreams, visions, and experiences of teachers, which were crafted and woven into narratives that could bring about profound resonance in us. André Gide, the Nobel Prize winning French writer, once wrote, "*Les choses les plus belles sont celles que souffle la folie et qu'écrit la raison.*" (The most beautiful things are those that are inspired by madness or dreams and written with reason.) I feel these narratives of teachers' experiences are indeed our most beautiful things.

It soon occurred to me that my comments could hardly do full justice to the rich and thick descriptions of teachers' unique experiences, which in one way or another, make a difference in the practice of gifted education in Hong Kong. In each of these stories, teachers recalled or traced the evolution of gifted education in their schools, thus giving us a big picture on how schools in Hong Kong came to implement the three-tiered intervention model which was borrowed from the prevention or special needs paradigm and advocated by the Education Bureau of the Government at the time. Unfortunately, because of the overemphasis on talent search and identification, and on the mode of service delivery, gifted education in Hong Kong remained the education for the selected identified few for many years.

Now, as described by teachers in our Project Schools, it is gratifying and reassuring that the notion of whole-school talent development is put into actual practice. The saying attributable to Joseph Renzulli that "A rising tide lifts all ships" aptly paints this big picture. While the saying has been interpreted in more than one way, here the appropriate interpretation is that what is good for the selected few of identified gifted students could be good for students in general. Thus, education for the few selected gifted could be extended to talent development for all or most students, as their levels of abilities or achievements are elevated because of the rising tide. Following this, perhaps, "*gifted students*" is only a convenient term to mean "*students with specific talents*". It is more appropriate to think of our students not so much as whether they are *gifted or non-gifted*, but as *how or in what ways they are gifted*. In this connection, we as teachers are challenged to think of ways to help students develop their strengths or talents, whatever they may be.

It should be noted that while this schoolwide talent development approach is often referred to school-based level 1 services, school-based gifted education needs not be confined. The truly school-based gifted education should also encompass level 2 and 3 services such as pull-out programming and one-to-one

mentoring for selected groups of gifted students. The articulation of these three levels of services in school-based gifted education will certainly pose a major challenge to schools in Hong Kong in the future.

In describing the current practices of gifted education in their schools, teachers in each of these stories also talked about how they viewed or felt about gifted students in a metaphor or an analogy. These metaphors or analogies are so revealing, as they inevitably stretch our imagination. Despite the diversity, most teachers did mention that they recognized the importance of a student-centered and strength-based approach in schoolwide talent development.

Parenthetically, instead of making serious comments on the stories, I chose to put down simply some of the thoughts that came to mind at the time of reading. Specifically, for each of these stories, I focused on only one or two points that speak more powerfully to me. I had fun doing it, and I hope you enjoy reading my casual comments. Moreover, I invite you as readers to do the same.

My comments or thoughts on individual stories are as follows.



Story 1

Crescendo

Amazing! I've never heard of such a refreshing analogy. "Crescendo" captures the idea of unlimited potential from an initial stage of obscurity. To top this, I could only think of my favorite fairy tale, The Ugly Duckling.

The Ugly Duckling starts his life with the experience of feeling unwanted, unattractive, and different. After going through many travails and crises, he emerges with a new identity to become a swan. You might hasten to say that he is always a swan undetected. But, perhaps, more importantly, he could be a duckling transforming himself into a swan, which is metaphorically possible. Anyway, *the tale which begins in rejection and hurt ends in happiness and celebration, symbolizing the gradual unfolding of talents and the importance of talent recognition when opportunities present themselves.*

Story 2

Empty Glass



If we picture an individual without education as an empty glass, we could always draw the analogy that education is the attempt to fill it with water. The higher the level of the water, the more educated the person is. We may even suggest that with a glassful of water, this person is more resourceful, and perhaps more talented. Undoubtedly, this is conventional thinking.

This story gives another alternative to the empty glass analogy. Perhaps, *giftedness has less to do with the amount of water but has everything to do with our ability to empty our glass to prepare us to accept new learning.* This kind of thinking, perhaps also rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy, is reminiscent of Carol Dweck's notion of an open mindset. Thus, a part of being gifted or talented could be the consistent use of an open mindset in learning.



Story 3

Super Racecars in Busy Streets

Normally, walls are built to divide. However, in this school, students are encouraged to build walls to connect. In the process of building or modeling with Lego, students learn to express themselves and collaborate for their creative productions. What a brilliant idea!

It is also revealing to think of gifted students as super racecars in busy city streets. Their navigation is made difficult by heavy traffic and pedestrians just as the performance of gifted students are hampered by overcrowded school curriculum and unnecessary school regulations. *To see the speed and power of these super racecars, they need to be taken to where they belong to, the racecourse.* To help realize the potential of gifted students, we need to build racecourses for them.

Story 4

Starfruit



I like the starfruit metaphor. It encompasses the idea that if we cut it in the right way, we could reveal the star. Metaphorically, *reaching for the stars is the objective for every student. But how can we do it for individual students? The magic lies in differentiation.*

Unfortunately, when we think of differentiation, we often think only in terms of teaching and curriculum. It is revealing that if we shift our thinking of differentiation to learning on the part of the students. It makes very good sense to allow students to make choices and use their preferred ways of expression or performance. That will give us a sense of whether our differentiation in teaching and curriculum works.

Here, the saying that “A rising tide lifts all ships” has another meaningful interpretation. Developing one strength area may have reverberating effect on raising the level of another area of weakness, as exemplified by the unicycle experience of one student as described in this narrative.



Story 5

Popcorn

Adding heat could be the analogy of teaching to allow maize seeds to “pop” explosively. The diverse ways of “popping” could be related to the multiple intelligences of students, whereas the manner of heating and the amount of heat could be related to the role of teachers.

Talent recognition could be the first step for talent development. It is best that students first start to know their own strengths, talents, or multiple intelligences. *They need teachers who nurture their love of learning, teachers who help them to develop self-discipline for serious learning, and teachers who give them the permission and choice to freely unfold their talents.* We might need to play all these roles, perhaps at various times, and for different students with different strengths in their multiple intelligences. Admittedly, it is challenging. But the “pop” makes everything worthwhile, especially when it is made to occur in a contained and appropriate space.

The High-End Population



Metaphorically speaking, when we put all the big fish from small ponds into one pond, we might need to seriously consider not only the size of pond but also the relative bigness of the fish. We might need to consider distinguishing the real big ones from the not-so-big ones. Again, we might need to evaluate our judgment of bigness beyond size, such as whether the fish is predatory or belongs to one of the rare species. Here, I have no intention to use fish as a derogatory term to refer to students. I merely want to use the well-known small-pond-big-fish analogy to make the point about complexity.

With this sort of scenario in mind, I think one natural consideration could be the provision of acceleration options within school, apart from referring highly gifted students to pull-out programs outside of school. At least, most gifted students like to be in the company of challenging like-minded peers. *The concentration of “sharp” and highly-gifted students also highlights the need to seriously consider their social and emotional well-being.*

Perhaps, an appropriate affective curriculum, including service learning, and the notion that higher ability should go hand in hand with greater responsibility and contribution to society, should be duly introduced to students. In addition, contrary to what is commonly believed that level 3 services have no place in a school-based program, one-to-one mentoring, as a form of level 3 services, could be established within school to connect passionate teachers and gifted students who share these teachers’ interests.



Sponge

The sponge is an apt metaphor. It highlights the insatiable desire to learn or the passion for learning, which is a hallmark characteristic of gifted students, including the twice-exceptional. Unfortunately, this passion might not translate into good school performance or good examination results.

Consequently, if our bureaucratic university admission system continues to adhere to a strict minimum level of proficiency requirements for all core subjects, some of our very brilliant students might not be able to get admitted to local university education. We are squandering society’s precious human resources. To prevent this talent drain, the university admission system might need to consider relaxing its rules and make exception for these gifted students.

Regardless of whether we can change the university admission system, *the need to sustain the passion for learning in students still rests firmly on us as teachers.* One key option is to introduce a schoolwide mentoring system. It could simply be a tele-mentoring system for all students with a passion for learning specific subjects. And this could be elevated to a small-group or even a more personal one-to-one mentoring system for those who require special attention beyond the general group level.

Story 8

Goldmining



The analogy linking talent search and identification to goldmining is interesting, especially when this is considered in the context of the rush for gold search in California when gold mines were first discovered.

Perhaps teachers should not forget that apart from the element of surprise, there is always an element of risk-taking in this life investment.

While Rome was not built in a day, there are certainly many roads leading to Rome or excellence. If one must choose a popular thoroughfare, it could be social studies, or science, or STEM. Perhaps the key is to choose a subject that could be more readily taught and learned with an interdisciplinary approach and with an emphasis on reality-based applications.

I think the school has really capitalized on this strategy and topped it with the promising idea of promoting students to become autonomous learners.



Story 9

Rainbow Colors and Drama

The spectrum of rainbow colors is a powerful metaphor to confer the notion of the diversity of gifted students' multiple talents or their individual personalities. Whether we are thinking of color pigments that we use for painting or the light spectrum, we know that mixing or blending them gives rise to an infinite variety of colors.

The color spectrum thus implies not only collaborative efforts but also creative productivity, and metaphorically, unlimited opportunities and possibilities.

Drama is another metaphor suggested by the teacher to characterize the life experiences of gifted students. The production of a play or drama episode requires the collaborative efforts of many professionals, including but not restricted to, the actors and actresses on stage, the directors, producers, script writers, choreographers, backdrop and costume designers, and many supporting workers behind stage.

Different gifted students might prefer or be good at playing certain roles, and all roles are important. For each individual student, he or she is the protagonist of his or her own drama.

Undiscovered Treasure



Gifted students are likened to undiscovered treasure. The question is when and how they will be dug out. This story provides some answers in practice.

There are undoubtedly many viable paths to school-based gifted education. *Their success or failure depends, I think, mostly on whether they are truly student-centered or not.* A simple indication in classroom experience is whether students' choice or preferred ways of expression and performance are respected and honored. It follows that student performance will not be evaluated solely by the traditional paper-and-pencil format. Evaluating performance based on their choice of expression could bring out the best in students. This is the time when the treasure become discovered.

One might raise the question whether a student-centered approach will necessarily be a strength-based approach. I think the answer is yes, because working on strengths could be much easier for teachers and much more welcoming to students than a remedial approach that works on making up deficits or weaknesses. Very often, when students could freely exercise their strengths, the level of abilities in their weakness areas will be elevated. This could be a result of many factors, including self-efficacy changes.



Sponge

One signature characteristic of gifted students is their passion for learning, and the sponge metaphor is illustrative. For a teacher, allowing oneself to step into the shoes of students could mean a total change of perception from one of dreading the students' troublemaking to one of valuing their inquisitiveness. Why not stay hungry and foolish as they do and grow with them?

The good student-teacher relationship could be the key to providing a conducive learning environment for the success of school-based gifted education. Gifted students, along with all students, like to interact with teachers who not only teach but also care, who not only command respect but also pay respect, and who not only receive honors but also honor differences.

In interacting with students, teachers need to become more empathic, and be always prepared to consider the perspectives of students.

Story 12
Diamond



Diamond is the metaphor suggested to best represent gifted students for good reasons. One obvious reason is that it has this sparkling and twinkling look, though this beautiful look will not emerge unless we spend great efforts in cutting and polishing. That is why we need to keep polishing our gifted students in and outside school to allow them to shine.

Another is its inherent quality of hardness and sharpness that cuts through all sorts of materials, just as do our gifted students. Our gifted students pose imminent threat to our teacher status as they keep pounding at us with challenging questions on subject matters that we are supposed to know. Very often, *their cutting sharpness also get them into troubles getting along with fellow students and among themselves, echoing the need for affective education.*



Story 13
Apps and Match

The Apps and the match are two very different metaphors suggested to represent gifted students. However, *they have in common that their existence depends on their being discovered, marketed or made public.*

In the smartphone industry, numerous apps are written to meet the demands of our everyday life. Many of them remain in oblivion while a few are discovered, adopted for use, and become popular in the apps market. In parallel, a match remains a piece of cardboard paper in a matchbox unless someone comes along and see the need to strike and light a fire. Both metaphors stress the important role of the teacher in this discovery tour.

Story 14
Halo



In this narrative, gifted students are said to have haloes over their heads, yet many of them do not shine as expected. Questions are raised as to why and what went wrong.

One reason is that these gifted students are studying under an exam-oriented system where the focus is mostly if not entirely based on performance requiring verbal and mathematical skills. If their interests or talents fall outside the academic domains, they are bound to be regarded as underachieving. The narrative also brings home an important point. *What matters perhaps is not so much the identification, but what goes after the identification procedures.* In other words, what sorts of programs, interventions, or supporting measures to provide for these students after recognizing their talents are much more important.



Story 15

Computer and a Piece of Paper

Again, two very different metaphors are suggested to represent gifted students. Yet, *what is common is that they both entail unlimited possibilities.*

The narrative starts with two cases of high-IQ students who did not perform well. They remind me of the well-known broken-twig stories of William Sidis in the U.S. and Fang Zhongyong in Imperial China. The sad stories remind us that we need to look at gifted education more seriously.

If we make the comparison between a gifted student and a computer, it is no surprise that we need to talk to a computer in computer language. Nowadays, a computer may have a CPU of immense capacity. All we need to know is how to tap into the use of its full capacity. Indeed, its capability seems limitless, considering that the world is recently shocked by the defeat of the Korean Go Grandmaster Li by a computer.

If we prefer a low-tech metaphor, a piece of paper also entails boundless possibilities. Anything can be written on it. And we could fold it in many ways to yield any number of interesting things.

Story 16

Tree



Comparing a gifted student with a growing tree, one highlights the importance of the developmental perspective. *The growing tree is alive and responsive to what we do to it, our watering and trimming, and most importantly, our tender loving care.* The tree metaphor also reminds me of the acorn metaphor where one is surprised that a small acorn can grow into a sturdy oak tree.

If education, including gifted education, is to enable students to learn how to learn, and to be in step with the demands of the changing world, then school and home are partners in this adventure. Unfortunately, home is often relegated to become the less important partner.

In fact, many parents know their children well at least from the home perspective, and they are more than willing to participate in bringing the best to their children. Some of the parents are also professionals and could very well serve as mentors for able learners who would like to enter similar professions.

Speaking of mentoring, the peer mentoring case in this story is also illustrative. The school could think of a network of mentors connecting parents, teachers, and talented students. Together, parents and teachers could help to bring the best out of gifted students.



Story 17

Electric Drill

Do not underestimate the power of a small electric drill, for it could, given the right conditions, give you a tunnel through a mountain. This is the metaphor suggested to reflect the potential of gifted students.

Yet, students themselves might not even know that they have the power and potential, not to mention to put into beneficial use. Thus, the first task in talent development should be one that helps students recognize their own strengths or talents.

Regardless of whether you subscribe to the Multiple Intelligences (MI) framework, the Friday MI one-hour class as described in this story provides a good example on how students could be helped to recognize their own strengths or talents in academic and nonacademic domains.

Talent recognition could be extended. Think of the joy and satisfaction when you find your painting on display to the whole school. *There is no better way to celebrate the recognition by committing yourself to the further development of your talent.*

Story 18

Gift Box



Unwrapping a gift box tied with ribbons is always joyous. There is an element of expectation, and could be an element of surprise. This analogy is meant to convey how teachers feel in the process of identifying talents in students, the same kind of feeling in unwrapping a gift box.

Surprisingly, this analogy can work in both ways. It also applies to the students' own recognition of their talents when they unwrap the gift boxes given to them. Very often, *they unexpectedly find certain talents that they feel they don't have*. This recognition of one's own talents is important, as it is often the first step to a commitment to future talent development.

To dwell on this same analogy a bit further, perhaps, it is a good idea that teachers and students unwrap the gift boxes together, starting a partnership on the path of talent recognition and talent development.



Story 19

Drill in the Bag

A gifted student is likened to a drill in the bag, which you can kind of sense its existence even though you have not set eyes on it. This analogy suggests that you may miss it, just as you miss identifying talents in a student because, unlike the visible school academic records or exam performance, it is in a bag and not in full view. *Only the keen observer with high sensitivity will be able to detect the drill in the bag.*

This narrative also makes another important point. Gifted students have strengths as well as weaknesses. Focusing on their weaknesses as we traditionally did in remedial work might not work as well as focusing on their strengths. This strength-based approach helps students not only in developing their strengths but also in elevating their abilities or performance in other areas, including the weakness areas.

Story 20

Fruits in a Fruit Stand



Gifted students and their talents are as diverse as the fruits in a fruit stand. This analogy not only points to diversity in types, colors, and nutritious values but also the uniqueness. Some fruits are more commonplace and grown in many places, others are more regional and could only be found in places with certain kinds of soil, water, and climate.

The diversity notion alerts us that in helping students develop their specific talents, we correspondingly need many kinds of specific supporting measures suited to nurturing the many different types of talents.

In a fruit stand, we may see only the commonplace fruits and overlook the presence of less common ones, just as we focus very much on academic talents, and ignore or discount nonacademic ones. To avoid this oversight, *this narrative suggests we advocate a student-centered or student-directed classroom to honor the diversity of talents.*