

THE VOICE OF TEACHERS

BRIGHT KIDS AND CRABS: MY JOURNEY THROUGH TEACHING

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Can you believe they're giving away the secrets of modern day Merlins in the media? They would have us believe that there's no magic in the modern world, only sleight of hand and tricks of the light, every illusion carefully explained. Everything that was unseen is now made transparently clear. Like me, does this add to your growing feeling of disillusionment?

Of course, this only continues a process that has been going on in the world since the advent of empiricism. If it's there, we should be able to observe and measure it, says science. While God cowers in his Heaven hiding more from modern attitudes and opinions than our eyes, religion continues to take a back seat. In the area of gifted education, however, perhaps the division isn't quite as clear as the truth makers would have us think. If our children are part of a grand illusion that eclipses their true light, we must all be troubled by this. If they are the playthings of a bizarre educational cult, we should be really alarmed.

In Australia, governments spend millions of dollars on special schools and special programmes for the gifted, but often this is justified by tenuous premises that perhaps make no sense at all. If there are people in our society who could be described as "gifted" or even "bright," it's reasonable to wonder if we have ever found out who they are and, if we have, what we did then.

Intelligence certainly has the potential to be any community's major resource. While more tangible resources can be used as construction materials or units of exchange for other tangible resources, what price can be placed on new ideas? That is, ideas that are not simply the developments of ideas that went before, but original, innovative and ground breaking ideas. The answer has to be they are priceless. They have the potential to save us money and

revolutionise every aspect of our way of life and they are waiting out there to be thought by those who have the capacity and the skills to think.

It's reasonable to expect that all education systems would use the latest in research, technology or whatever else it might take to find people capable of advanced thinking and offer them the education they're entitled to. Unfortunately though, in the politicised bureaucracies of most western countries, this isn't the case as perceptions matter most and controlling bureaucracies would rather provide look-good programmes than real, do-what-they-claim-to, educational offerings. It's easier and, although no cheaper, it takes a deal less thought, study and expertise, all of which are commodities that are often thin on the ground in bureaucracies.

During my long and interesting career as a teacher in an Australian state education system, and after time served had rubbed off the patina of idealism I brought with me, I began to notice the ironies. Ironies crawl through education like Christmas Island crabs and, although pincerless themselves, educational administrators ensure that anyone who points them out gets nipped. For example, it didn't take me long to discover that teachers who speak in glowing terms to their students about the need for education are fairly selective about which meaning of the word they favour. As a student teacher I was universally told by my school based mentors to ignore the course related advice given to me by my university supervisors in favour of "real world learning" in the classroom. During my student years, I had read Professor Schon's 1995 article "The New Scholarship requires a New Epistemology" in which he said, "Educational institutions ... hold varying conceptions of what counts as legitimate knowledge;" however, I had not considered it to be as emphatically true as I was soon to find.

Later, as I joined in the flag race called "teaching", I taught courses that were intended to help students gain places at universities, which was alright as long as they didn't study education and spout academic nonsense around schools.

On the whole, the culture of teaching does not value university knowledge nor count it as

legitimate even though a person must be university educated to enter the “profession”. Having done so, they are then encouraged to mangle the meaning of the word “education” until it is completely dictated by its particular school context. Although Schon didn’t put it in quite those terms, the process he described was the same.

As university research develops knowledge which percolates down to education department bureaucrats, this is passed on to schools as policy and creates the illusion of constant change, which they term “improvement”. Behind the mirror to public opinion, however, nothing ever really changes as the culture of teaching is dedicated to contributing to the illusion and has developed excellent sleight of hand techniques to achieve this. In other words – and in spite of the pressure to do otherwise – to maintain the school culture’s meaning of “education”. There have been many years of this kind of progress in schools since our grandfathers attended; however, schools are essentially the same as they were then as teaching techniques are passed down through the culture rather than through the books.

Before I learned all this, however, I decided I would improve my teaching knowledge and hence my practice through postgraduate study. Naturally, I approached my employer for financial assistance towards this worthwhile venture. “We save our money for worthwhile ventures, not educating our staff,” an Education department bureaucrat told me, causing another irony to crawl boldly across the classroom floor.

Arriving at the introductory lecture in my Master’s class, I had a question: “How do teachers get access to all the worthwhile research done here which might make their job easier?” The long winded answer can be summed up succinctly: they don’t. Many researchers study schools and teaching methods to see how they might be improved. They then publish their hard won findings in theses. The coloured theses decorate bookshelves until someone who wishes to study a similar topic consults them. They build on the previous findings with new, improved findings which are then put on the same shelves. Teachers have neither the time nor inclination to read them. Academics have neither the time nor inclination to present them to teachers. As long as the flags end up in the can, it seemingly doesn’t matter whether there was a point to the effort.

Full of what I considered to be enthusiasm about my studies, although my colleagues wouldn’t

agree this was what I was full of, in staff meetings I would lunge into academic explanations of the latest developments in education department policy, only to be greeted by stunned silence; they didn’t quite put their fingers in their ears but the lack of interface between professional knowledge and practice was only too evident. Any culture is a powerful thing and it is hard to resist it.

My studies revealed more crawling inconsistencies. I was especially interested in education of the “gifted”. There are many people involved in this area of education and most of them disagree about most things. They consist of academics, bureaucrats, teachers and, of course, bright kids. Most agree, however, that intelligence is not something that can be directly observed; it is transparent, invisible. If brightness really did shine it would be simpler but alas this is not the case.

Even though Einstein’s brain was kept for study, no one has suggested they can point to the cause of his intelligence although theories abound. A central reason for this is no one is quite sure how to define intelligence. If our culture had not valued Maths and Physics, would we have valued Einstein? If intelligence shows itself through performance, why is this restricted to performance on tasks the culture values? In fact, the answer to this question may shed light on why indigenous people are underrepresented in special programmes for the gifted across the western world: on the whole, the performance based tests simply test things that are not valued by indigenous populations, even if they could see a reason for doing their best in the tests at all. The results are never challenged effectively since the bureaucratic gatekeepers are excellent at defending the entrance and creating “truth” while they do so. If they say you’re “bright” or “gifted” then you are. If they say you’re not ...

Within the community of people interested in “giftedness”, reputations have been built on drawing up lists of criteria that indicate its existence. Some of these criteria relate to observable behaviours and others to personality traits. Although there appears to have been a shift recently in allowing parents an input, nothing compares with the emphasis that is placed on test results. In one education department currently overseeing gifted education in an Australian state, a test is being used that was devised in the nineteen thirties. Given the amount of research that is being completed annually in this field, this is a fair indication of the part research and theory

play in policy formulation in this jurisdiction although, it is easy to suspect that many jurisdictions in Australia have similar problems since education bureaucrats are drawn from the teaching community and university knowledge is not valued. Ironic.

To teachers, performance on the work they set is a central indicator of giftedness, although many researchers claim there are large numbers of gifted people who underachieve including performing poorly at school. Although it's reasonable to ask how someone who doesn't actually do anything can be considered to have a gift for errr ... doing something, details such as this do not seem to trouble those on the ground. Inevitably, the whole issue is swept away by the use of the word "potential", although a scientific way of measuring what a person could do given the chance is also yet to be discovered.

It's a very similar debate to that of free will. A person seems to have the ability to choose their actions and to do other than they did. In order to prove this, however, they would need to do other than they did. An underachieving bright person could achieve highly if circumstances were different. The proof is to make circumstances different and see how they go. If they achieve well, they couldn't be considered an underachieving bright person so back to square one. Tautologies rule, OK?

An analogy often used involves placing a hypothetical cheetah in a hypothetical cage. Obviously a cheetah in a cage can't achieve its potential to run fast is the argument and this, it is claimed, is analogous to a bright student in a normal classroom. Unfortunately, the analogy falls down when we consider that a cheetah has a readily observable anatomical structure that gives it the ability for fast running; however, a gifted person has, at the most, suspected potential.

Essentially, it seems to come down to the fact that everyone involved in gifted education believes in something that cannot be adequately defined or explained in much the same way many people believe in a divine being. Giftedness cannot be observed nor measured without predetermined criteria; therefore, the interest groups look more like church goers than scientists. Or perhaps they believe in a kind of magic.

Those who have a stake in generating university knowledge would undoubtedly prefer to give the illusion of scientific study. A cynic might say that this is simply because metaphysical study does

not pay as well, and in any case it also does not endow the proponents with the prestige that true scientists are accorded in an empirical world.

Those responsible for delivering education simply do not think of this as an issue as they blindly follow the University prophets as far as it suits them to be able to point to the same pseudo scientific explanations that seem to give justification to the millions of dollars they devote to their "offerings".

Parents by and large act in accordance with what they are told by people suspected of knowing, and their children also believe the designation bestowed upon them, sometimes carrying it with them throughout their life: "gifted", "not-gifted", "bright", "not bright". If I had a dollar for every time someone began a conversation with me by saying, "I didn't do well at school ..." after I've volunteered the information I'm a teacher, I'd have at least a hundred and twenty dollars. The statement most likely to come next is, "I'm not very bright."

An alternative view might be that the existence of "giftedness" is similar to the existence of black holes in space. Certainly some would accuse schools of sucking as much light from bright kids as black holes might. While scientists might be able to collect data to indicate the existence of black holes, it is only because they have devised a set of criteria which they claim indicates the existence of the phenomena they are observing.

A religious friend said to me the other day, "I prayed to God that my washing would dry and it dried. He answered my prayer and this proves his existence." After hearing a researcher say that gifted children can experience problems at school, a parent said on the same day, "My son is always in trouble with the Deputy Principal which is because he is bright" Same argument. Same invalid conclusion.

God may exist but dry washing doesn't prove this. Johnny may be bright but trouble at school doesn't prove this either. Einstein may have developed theories that science considers complex and insightful but this does not prove high intelligence unless by a set of criteria that stipulates that this kind of thinking is something to be valued.

To the great detriment of children in our schools, however, it is seldom ever treated theoretically. It is assumed that intelligence exists and that everyone knows how it looks. I won't bore you

with the story of the bureaucrat who claimed in front of a class I was teaching that she could tell who was gifted simply by looking at them, even though I do wonder what she was looking at. Perhaps there is a light that mortal teachers can't see that gives rise to the term "bright".

The bureaucracies around Australia responsible for overseeing specially funded programs adopt various models to guide their offerings, but all agree that high performance on some kind of test is essential to gaining entrance to these programs. Most teachers accept without question that the students selected this way are bright or gifted and many believe they know how to cater for them. Generally, this involves giving more advanced work than would normally be given to particular aged students. I'll try to avoid the discussion about how they conclude that particular areas of any subject are more advanced than others – why, for example, Shakespeare's ideas are more valuable than Tim Winton's – but you get the point. What's that crawling across the floor?

Even though departments of education produce literature and online resources to guide curriculum provision, these support documents are often written by people who have no formal training or qualifications in gifted education and teachers don't have time to read it anyway. Ironic, eh?

Interestingly, even though a wealth of research literature suggests that the teachers of bright children need some specific qualities themselves, a recent study at the University of Western Australia showed that no special provisions are in place to select teachers for these programs, only

the children are selected. The education department uses university knowledge to construct tests to select students for programmes that are staffed by people with no particular set of qualities or skills because the department chose to ignore the university knowledge on that subject. Ouch.

In the end, I don't know why I expect things in Education to make sense. Arguably few things in life make sense if you scrutinise them too closely. The crabs seem to get in everywhere. I will admit to waiting in anticipation of the television programme that will reveal how these illusions work ... By way of example, in Perth the government is in the process of spending 43 million dollars on a selective school for gifted kids yet few people on the staff of the school or the bureaucracy that oversees it have any qualifications at all in gifted education; they don't even have the benefit of knowing the crabs. It's like a novice setting out to sail the world with a skipper who hasn't sailed before except it costs a lot more and a larger number of people are in danger!

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