

## CHAPTER 1

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# WHAT'S IMPLICIT IN 20TH CENTURY NOTIONS OF GIFTEDNESS? WHY ARE THESE NOTIONS UNFIT FOR PURPOSE IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

### **Natural Inclusion – from Adversity with Love** by Alan Rayner

My struggle has been based in a simple longing to be included in the common space of natural human neighbourhood, from which my upbringing and education singled me out. I have needed to uncover a way of thinking that does not alienate reason from emotion, and does not disparage ordinary human qualities in the quest for exceptional performance. I wanted to discover the extraordinariness of the mundane and express this in a common sense and obvious way that isn't necessarily obvious to the highbrow, but is deeply embedded in our everyday experience of living, loving, fear and death.

From an early age, I was brought up with the expectation that I *ought* to be faultless, both morally and intellectually. Never mind that this was an unrealistic and ultimately meaningless aspiration for any human being, my duty as a privileged child of the British Empire was to try as hard as I could to achieve it. The message was that my family and I would suffer greatly if I failed in this endeavour. I would succeed by becoming a scrupulously honest and dutiful paragon of virtue who always put others' interests and welfare before his own needs, whilst paradoxically being supremely competitive when it came to the kind of performance deemed important by those in my vicinity.

Spurred on by this pressure to excel and a need for my father's approval, I came through my early education with all the A and S Levels he could

have wanted. They got me to King's College, Cambridge, where I studied for six years, gaining a triple first in Natural Sciences, followed by a PhD in fungal ecology. I soon moved to Bath University as a lecturer and at the age of 35 was promoted directly to a Readership.

By the time I became President of the British Mycological Society at the age of 47, I had published six books and over 120 scientific papers. My academic colleagues, however, did not see this as good enough reason for further promotion or celebration. My research by then was producing findings that challenged orthodox schools of thought concerning the fundamental nature of evolutionary creativity and the legitimacy of scientific method and was therefore becoming neither publishable nor fundable through channels acceptable to the mainstream.

I felt unsupported and unvalued. Ever-present tensions and anxieties suddenly exploded to overwhelming proportions. Long-suppressed self-destructive and self-reclaiming processes took over my life. I had to take six months sick leave. Later I managed to return to work, but I was a changed man and an embarrassment to my colleagues. I set about radically changing the course of my teaching and research to include artistic and philosophical themes relevant to the global social, environmental and psychological crises that I now saw as paramount.

I had never got over my childhood feeling that there was something fundamentally *wrong* with me, some *gap* in my make-up, which, when exposed, would prove both catastrophic and profoundly humiliating. My experiences of school and university education, with its many cruelties, iniquities, absurdities and pretences, did nothing to alleviate and much to reinforce this feeling. I never felt more than temporary relief from my academic successes. They only served to cover up and delay recognition of my underlying deep inadequacy, until the next fearful test came along that could finally show me to be the dreadful fraud I really am. This sense of being a fraud also infected my personal life; loving and caring for others felt like a dangerous charade.

Yet at the same time I had the feeling of being possessed by an exceptionally inspiring, creative, knowledgeable, perceptive and empathic spirit, capable of seeing through the obstructions that everywhere block our human understanding and enjoyment of the flow of nature. This feeling would fill my heart with enormous enthusiasm and joy in sharing my experience and learning whenever I could just let go of my fears and not be painfully reminded of them.

My quest to understand and heal the seeming contradiction within myself began with the supposition, in line with much modern think-

ing, that my childhood perception was correct: there is indeed something fundamentally *wrong with* me. But I had great difficulty identifying what this something was.

Recently, my wife, Marion, brought home *The Achilles Syndrome – Overcoming the Secret Fear of Failure* by Petruska Clarkson (Element Books, 1994). Reading it was a revelation. I had already vaguely heard about and related my experience to what has been called the Impostor Syndrome, but Clarkson's book goes further and deeper in identifying a psychological archetype, epitomised by the myth of Achilles. If ever a character combined exceptional prowess with exceptional vulnerability arising from a *gap* in his upbringing, here is the one. Moreover, this character was not only a great warrior (and worrier – like me, he would doubtless have been diagnosed these days as suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder), but he also expressed enormous creativity, compassion and healing power.

In identifying the origin of this syndrome, Clarkson had no hesitation in pointing to over-expectant forms of upbringing and education in a competitive culture, which neglect human needs for love and respect in the quest for fast-tracked superiority. The result is what she calls pseudocompetence – apparently advanced skill built on fragile foundations: in another word, bullshit.

Conventional rationalistic thinking regards individual behaviour as a definable product of internal brain structure and chemistry (genetic “nature”) and external environmental influences including education and upbringing (“nurture”). A hard line is drawn between inner world and outer world, notwithstanding that there is no modern scientific evidence for the existence of such discrete boundaries and much evidence to the contrary, implicit in relativity, quantum mechanics and non-linear theory.

I think it is just this kind of objective rationality, however, which creates the divisive cultural context in which the sense of vulnerability underlying Achilles Syndrome can grow out of all proportion. It makes this vulnerability seem like something wrong *with* individuals – a failing that needs to be surmounted, not a vital and inescapable source of human and evolutionary creativity.

Objective rationality also fails to appreciate how viewing vulnerability as a failing contributes to global crisis. It underlies the human propensity to try to remove doubt by imposing unrealistic definitions of things. We embed such definition deep within our philosophical, mathematical, scientific, linguistic, educational and governmental foundations. We strive to be complete and perfect individuals who will

be preserved (if not pickled!) in the Darwinian struggle for life, whilst not appreciating that any form of completion rings the death knell for evolutionary creativity. We render ourselves into discrete subjects and objects capable only of transactional, competitive or co-operative interaction rather than being lovingly receptive and responsive inclusions of one and another. We don't recognise that evolutionary perfection can only be a property of *all* in dynamic relationship, not *one* in isolation, and so try to live out our lives as paradoxical singularities, alienated from our natural neighbourhood.

But the gaps in our individual make up are *not* the problem. The *presence* that these gaps can be eliminated or covered up is what makes us pseudocompetent. We cannot breathe or move or love or live without gaps in our bodily boundaries. These boundaries are necessarily *incomplete*, distinct and dynamic, not discrete and fixed. As William Wordsworth said, in nature everything is distinct, yet nothing defined into absolute, independent singleness.

There is therefore very good intellectual reason for compassion. What we might deem, in a perfectionist framework, to be a flaw in human nature, our vulnerability and proneness to error, is actually vital. It is the source of our creative spirit. It is an aspect of our nature that enables us to love and feel love and so work co-creatively in dynamic relational neighbourhood, celebrating and respecting rather than decrying our diversity of competencies and appearances.

Correspondingly, my personal response through adversity has been to develop and explore a form of awareness called "inclusional-ity." This does not replace objective rationality but utterly transforms it into a far deeper and more encompassing appreciation of all form as *flow-form*, a dynamic inclusion, not an occupier of space. With this awareness, seemingly opposing external forces are transformed into complementary influences within the limitless immanence of Natural Inclusion – the co-creative, fluid dynamic reconfiguration of all through all in receptive spatial context. The local, "to be *or* not to be" objective logic of the excluded middle is transformed into the fluid dynamic "to be *in* not to be", of the included middle. The possessive sovereignty of the individual, "I alone", self is transformed into the complex identity of self as neighbourhood with both local (particular) and non-local (everywhere) aspects. The occupation and fractionation of territory is transformed into a *natural communion* of pooled togetherness. The exploitation of other by one is transformed into sustainable attunement of one with other. The imposed box of three-dimensional geometry – with space and time abstracted – is transformed into an infinite, dynamically nested, holeyness.

To view our human vulnerability as an Achilles Heel allows us to arrive at a naturally creative solution for adversity, a gap that opens the possibility of *agape* (spiritual love).

What we are seeking to do in this book and in our practice is to restore a focus on the idea of a gift as something freely created and offered with the intention of contributing to the possibilities for well-being and well-becoming. We eschew the obsession with objective rationality that can lead to a dead-end drive for 'pseudocompetence' – identified in Alan's story, above – in favour of true educational journeying.

In a world that emphasises economic rationality, the value of what we produce is often understood in terms of the price for which it can be sold. In this book, we are emphasising the importance of expressing a life-affirming energy as we express and develop our talents in producing something that is offered freely as a gift. This is not to deny the importance of our economic activity in meeting basic needs for food, shelter and productive work, or to disguise the fact that this book may have cost you, the reader, something to buy! It is to highlight the importance of the flows of life-affirming energy that carry hope for the future of humanity in the expression and development of our talents, in the production and offering of gifts.

Whilst this book as a whole is avowedly a story of enchantment with the concept of gifted education, this particular chapter is a story of disenchantment, not with 'giftedness' per se, but with the ways in which giftedness has traditionally been conceptualised, interpreted and applied in educational settings. It seeks to set the scene for the later descriptions which we offer of inclusive and inclusional (Rayner, above) understandings of gifts and talents, rooted in values of humanity such as love, justice, respect and egalitarianism. We see these descriptions as contributing to the endeavours of educators working in progressive 21st century classrooms and schools where practice can be recognised as non-normative, truly personalised, growth-oriented and enquiry-centred.

In our view of education, history is important for the way that it can show that many of our beliefs and ways of thinking are socially constructed and developed through cultural influences in our families, schools, peers, media, universities, colleges and workplaces. Present ideas of giftedness, which we wish to transcend, have such historical and cultural antecedents, and they are considered below. They are sustained by what people do, and whatever individuals do requires power and energy. Such expressions of energy are only weakly conceptualised in educational and social research, and we are aware of the need to recognise the influence of such power and energy in offering our generative transformational approach to giftedness.

This chapter is also a story of Barry's expression and development of his drive to extend and deepen his understanding of gifts and talents in education. He is creating and offering his story of the transformations in his learning as a gift, a living example, of the new conceptualisation of gifts and talents we are offering through this book. It carries his life-affirming energy and passion for education – the qualities that attracted Marie and Jack to work with Barry on this text. They have both seen Barry working with teachers and pupils in workshops on philosophy for/with children (P4C). They have been inspired by his expression of a dynamic, loving energy in his educational relationships. In expressing this loving energy, they believe that he seeks to avoid violating the integrity of the other, and this is expressed as the 'special humility of the educator' (Buber, 1947, in the work cited).

The three of us have studied the growth of our educational knowledge in masters and doctoral research programmes. We recognise that some transformations in the way we think have been disturbing because they involve a change of mind. It hasn't been easy to respond creatively to the recognition that the kind of knowledge that dominated the pedagogies and curricula of our school, college and university teachers did not address the embodied knowledge for living a loving and productive life. The knowledge most highly valued in the pedagogies and curricula was theoretical knowledge of a particular kind. This is still the case. It is a propositional knowledge, a 'knowledge that', communicated in relationships between abstract statements that can lose a feeling of connection with lived experience.

In the story below, Barry demonstrates a level of scholarly engagement with abstract conceptualisations at a level appropriate for a doctoral programme. This is expressed in the movement from his grasp of abstract conceptualisations of gifted and talented education into our shared educational enquiry into gifts and talents in education. In the story that follows, Barry deconstructs the field and explains its limitations as he moves us into our shared enquiry, starting with the socially constructed concept of 'giftedness' and moving on into 'definition' and 'identification'.

The motivation for Barry's changing perception of gifts and talents in education developed from his feeling of being a living contradiction in holding certain values and being aware that these were being denied in what he was doing. The tension in this contradiction stimulated his imagination and creativity to work on ways of changing his actions and understandings to bring them more in line with his values. This tension is felt by many practitioners in their daily practice, as instanced in an email by a deeply committed (and increasingly dispirited), gifted and talented coordinator in an English local authority (sent to Barry on 10 March 2008):

I find I'm being systematically boxed – which is anathema to me – very stressful. I had a review of my job description last week. I will have primary work removed, and be labelled a secondary strategy consultant, which means I will deliver “the word” of National Strategy G&T, based on measurement and progress in levels. I'm told that the whole school ethos is not what I should be concentrating on – just a class of level 7's – since when I've gone down with a severe case of allergic conjunctivitis and am off work today. They listen, but they don't hear. My motivation has hiccupped – I'm more set on retirement. However, I'm sure I'll manage to do my own thing in schools for the next 6 months, though they've removed my central budget, and effectively downgraded my post.

This educator's sense of being asked to live a professional life far removed from her core beliefs and values is, alas, far from exceptional. Her tacit, embodied knowledge is ignored or rejected. Her skills, professionalism and competence as an educator are considered subservient to what the 2008 Primary Review of Education in England characterises as ‘the state theory of education’. Her sense of disempowerment stands in marked contrast to the words below, emailed on 16 March 2008 to Barry by Anna Grayson, a former head teacher, long retired, who has found a way to continue to work with passion, engagement and moral purpose as a teaching assistant in a small, rural school:

Having spent a lifetime in education I am still humbled by the thoughts that children share and feel that we are truly privileged to be able to enter their world and be part of their learning and thinking. Having had a life threatening illness three years ago, namely complete kidney failure in the space of three days, the one thought that kept me going during the dark days for nearly a year was that I still felt that I had something to contribute to children's thinking and learning in a small way and I feel so humbled to think that I can still do this.

What now follows is in the language of abstract concepts. We have found that much formal assessment in education is focused on being able to demonstrate a grasp of such abstract concepts. In transforming our ways of thinking to emphasise the importance of embodied knowledge in education, we have needed to move within such abstract concepts, to feel ourselves as living contradictions, and to allow our imaginations and creativity to move us into a different way of thinking that does not separate our minds from our bodies as we express and develop our own talents and craft our gifts.

The concept of ‘giftedness’ is closely related to the study of such equally abstract concepts as ‘ability’, ‘intelligence’ and, in more recent years, ‘creativity’ (cf. Perkins, 1995 for an overview). Borland (1997) draws particular parallels between the concepts of ‘giftedness’ and ‘intelligence’. Both concepts can be viewed as being historically recent, reified social constructs,

representing not some objective, discoverable reality 'out there', but concepts constructed to meet the needs of 19th and early 20th century social structures in the Western world. These centuries were predicated on industrial metaphors, on expanding education for the masses, and on norm-referenced procedures for measurement and standardisation. These beliefs continue to exist in the imagination even when contradicted in experience. England's addiction to 'testing' is a case in point. The Primary Education Review of 2007/2008, the first for 40 years, is showing evidence of the damage of too much 'high-stakes' testing, and thereby poses challenges to a test-insistent culture.

We know that many people who are recognised as leading the thinking in their fields of expertise do not reach that point in their journeys by following neat, linear paths – and yet it is just these neat paths that are so often created for children who fit a particular category. Examples of this can be seen in the personal stories in this book – e.g. Alan Rayner's story at the start of this chapter. In real life, some people take an apparently straight path, whereas other journeys are far more obviously diverse and diffuse. Traditional approaches have specifically sought to predetermine the end points of individuals' journeys as early as possible, without reference to their evolving awareness of who they are and who they want to be. Traditional approaches are intended to create a smooth career path to carry the individual over the years, ignoring the experiences that contribute to that person's determination of a point they identify in their careers as desirable, fulfilling or satisfying, an indicator amongst many of a life well lived.

Borland (1997) writes as a critical friend of the field, asking awkward questions yet anxious for an education for people designated as gifted to retain a central role in broader and more inclusive debates around education, learning and teaching. But the shifting nature of the socially constructed sands that focus our professional energies is acknowledged when he notes that even 'Gallagher (1996), one of the more conservative writers in the field, wrote "We should admit that 'gifted' is a constructed concept"' (Borland, 1997, p. 7).

As might be expected of a socially constructed concept, the world of gifted and talented education has been, and still remains, a world riven by competing perspectives, internal dissensions and contradictions. This is apparent at the macro-political level (national policies in 'gifted education'), as much as it is at the micro-personal level (specific practices in relation to individuals). At the macro level, in many countries, there have been high and low points of interest in and commitment to 'gifted and talented' education, and this ebbing and flowing can be related to cultural ambivalences, even to the point of national crises of identity and ethics (see Balchin, Hymer & Matthews,

2008 for many examples of such cultural ambivalences in countries across the world):

Gallagher described the struggle between support and apathy for special programs for gifted and talented students as having roots in historical tradition – the battle between an aristocratic elite and our concomitant belief in egalitarianism. (Reis, 2004, p. ix)

Tied in with the notion of provision and ‘special programmes’ are the related notions of definition and identification – who are ‘the gifted’, and who says they are gifted? These are contentious, ethical, socio-political issues as much as they are issues of social science and educational research, and as a result, they remain culture- and context-dependent.

Despite its socially constructed provenance, in the Western world at least, education for learners classified as gifted and talented is traditionally approached dichotomously, as if giftedness is a state, not a construct. It is therefore associated with the mental (or physical, as in many understandings of ‘talent’) *attributes* of ‘gifted and talented’ learners, with the processes of *identifying* these largely pre-existent gifts or talents, and then with *providing* for these individuals’ particular needs (e.g. Eyre, 1997; Ross, 1993; Terman, 1925, ff.; Winstanley, 2004). This response has its antecedents in a quasi-deterministic, largely genetically determined and *neural processing* model of learning where giftedness exists across the lifespan – although its adherents hold to this model to varying degrees. Winstanley, for instance, offers a partial critique, as well as a partial endorsement – as do Hymer with Michel (2002), whereas Simonton (2008) seems to hold quite rigidly to a linear-sequential, ‘gifted zygote’ line: ‘A gifted child was probably a gifted infant, even zygote, and may later become a gifted adolescent and adult, and may even die being gifted’.

As a result of locating giftedness individually and intra-vidually *inside the head*, the burden of identifying gifted and talented learners is commonly placed on the results of standardised tests of other reified concepts – e.g. ‘ability’, ‘potential’ or ‘aptitude’ [variously quantified in the form of intelligence quotients (IQs), Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT) scores or scholastic aptitude test scores] or standardised measures of scholastic attainments (e.g. tests of proficiency in literacy or numeracy, Standard Attainment Test (SAT) Levels), albeit often in association with behavioural checklists and teacher or parent observations (e.g. DFEE, 1999). Historically, less attention has been given to the role of the learning environment and of meta-cognitive tools in providing opportunities for students to ‘create’ or (to use the language of constructivism, as in Adams, 2003 or Watkins, Carnell & Lodge, 2007) *to make* their unique profiles of gifts and talents – although there is now a burgeoning interest and literature in these areas (e.g. Fisher, 2003; Hart *et al.*, 2004; Jeffrey & Woods, 2003; Matthews & Foster, 2006; Perkins, 1995; Shore & Dover, 2004).

In an overview of the research literature, Sternberg (2004a, pp. xxiv, xxv), whilst recognising the difficulties inherent in achieving a consensus on all the issues associated with giftedness, identifies what he perceives to be several points of broad agreement:

- Giftedness involves more than just high IQ.
- Giftedness has non-cognitive components as well as cognitive ones.
- Environment is crucial in terms of whether potentials for gifted performance will be realised.
- Giftedness is not a single thing – there are multiple forms. Hence, one-size-fits-all assessments or programmes are likely to be too narrow.
- Measures for identifying or evaluating gifted individuals need to be proposed to operationalise theories, and then they need to be evaluated rather than merely being assumed to be valid.

However, despite the recognition in the academic literature of the limitations of traditional, ‘actuarial’, neural processing definitions of giftedness, and the challenges these pose especially in communities of cultural diversity (e.g. LGT, 2007), in practice, such formulations still predominate within applied educational fields. The UK’s Excellence in Cities and Excellence Cluster initiatives, for instance, have had a gifted and talented strand, which bifurcates the field into *gifts* (seen as relating to the core academic areas) and *talents* (seen as relating to sports and the expressive arts), and which then adds an actuarial element and an invocation of segregated provision (DfEE, 1999):

- Giftedness relates to high-level ability (or potential) in one or more statutory subjects other than art, music and Physical Education (PE).
- Talent relates to ability (or potential) in art, music, PE or any sport or creative art.
- At least two-thirds of the cohort are to be gifted.
- The cohort should comprise 5–10% of the school roll.
- The cohort should have access to a distinct teaching and learning programme.

This definition meets almost perfectly the specification many people cautioned against before a House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry in 1998/1999 (House of Commons, 1999). Concerns over this definition, and doubts over its potential for making a significant difference in the educational opportunities for our nation’s children are several and multifaceted. These include moral and ethical concerns over the rationalist, exclusive and discriminatory philosophies of the sort embodied in the phrase ‘distinct teaching and learning programme’, which assumes neat delineations of human characteristics at an abstract level, in the belief that these correspond to the *truth* of individual people. There are also practical and pragmatic res-

ervations over a *test-and-place* methodology which are outlined in more detail below. Moreover, the synthetic distinction being made between *gifts* and *talents*, and the implicit hierarchy established, can be seen to be troubling. We are aware, for instance, of Winner:

While children who are precocious in those kinds of scholastic skills assessed by an IQ test are called gifted, children who show exceptional ability in an art form such as the visual arts, music, or dance or in an athletic area such as skating, tennis, or diving are called talented. Two different labels suggest two different classes of children. But there is no justification for such a distinction. (Winner, 1996, p. 7)

The dominant conceptualisation continues to draw substantially on fixed-state factors, and a rigid, entity theory of intelligence (Dweck, 1999) – albeit overlaid, sometimes, with social-emotional considerations. Moreover, there is an implied suggestion that the two classes of children require two different routes to meeting their needs. Dweck, amongst others, finds no such distinctions – dispositions such as persistence, risk taking, seeking out challenges, etc. apply as much to maths as to music, to biology as to business, to physics as to PE, to astronomy as to art.

The provision of enriched, extended or accelerated learning opportunities for the identified few, as in current formulations within the UK and many other countries, is a model that is located substantially within a modernist, actuarial view of giftedness which places little emphasis on gift creation through relational activity, and much more on gift identification leading to instrumental provision. Within this model, the mantra is *test and place* – identify the cohort of students who are likely to conform to some definition of ‘gifted or talented’ – then do something special with them. There are often accompanying exhortations to seek to raise the achievement of all by adequately responding to the needs of the ‘most able’ (encouraging their ‘slipstreaming’ in the wake of the gifted and talented, cf. LGT, 2007), but the gifted/non-gifted dualism remains ever present. It’s the approach that dominated gifted and talented education in the 20th century – and which still does.

White (2006) proposes that the beliefs about intelligence and a subject-based curriculum, which underpin so many of the national strategies and implementation plans, and so much of the practice in schools, are rooted in values of a bygone era. He asserts that, ‘. . . if you look for sound supporting arguments behind them, you will be disappointed. There are no solid grounds for innate differences in IQ; and there are none for the traditional subject-based curriculum’ (p. 1).

White goes on to explore the sources of these influential but flawed driving forces and provides well-reasoned arguments for those frustrated by

dominant practices that feel to be negations of our educational values of egalitarianism and a love of humanity. He asks why, despite the philosophical doubts about the justifiability of these core beliefs, they have persisted and have been so powerful. He turns for his answers to socio-cultural history and the lives of the individuals that embodied the theories which have been systemically influential. White's story of intelligence starts in 1865 when Francis Galton first put forward his notion of intelligence. No one before Galton had posited that we all possess different degrees of an ability which is innate, intellectual, general and limited. The theory clearly reflects the beliefs of a man living the values of empire, class and preordained destinies, who had the Victorians' enthusiasm for measurement and statistics. Despite modern values being those of egalitarianism, inclusion and self-determinism, Galton's theory has made an invisible transformation from a hypothetical construct to accepted 'fact' which significantly influences policy and practice in education in much of the world today. 'Test and place' has a long history:

It will be an important though subsidiary object of the School to discover individual children who show promise of exceptional capacity, and to develop their special gifts (so far as this can be done without sacrificing the interests of the majority of the children), so that they may be qualified to pass at the proper age into Secondary Schools, and be able to derive the maximum of benefit from the education there offered them. (The 1904 Elementary Code, Board of Education, 1929, p. 9) (White, 2006, p. 8)

Traditional routes to 'identification' follow traditional test-and-place practices. Schools invest in a range of standardised tests of ability or performance, combine these with more qualitative measures of achievement or potential (e.g. judicious use of checklists, parental, peer or self-nominations), identify the highest performers, then do something special with them – implement a 'distinct teaching and learning programme' (DfEE, 1999; DfES, 2005), for instance. Given the time and financial resources, it's relatively easy to do, and it can be dressed up as an 'inclusive' approach through the application of circular logic – because it includes the most 'able' in its considerations, and often takes place in the mainstream classroom (*ibidem*)!

There are a number of problems with 'test and place' though, even from a modernist perspective, and it is these that in recent years have initially provoked our own senses of being 'living contradictions' (Ilyenkov, 1977; Whitehead, 1993) when operating as researchers or consultants in gifted education. Here are just a few:

- To link provision and resourcing decisions to test outcomes is questionable, when the validity and reliability of tests is highly variable, and none is perfectly reliable and valid. No test can claim accurately to predict

future performance because no test can adequately 'measure' the full range of cognitive, contextual and dispositional factors that combine inseparably to give rise to performance. To pretend otherwise is optimistic at best, dishonest at worst. Many of the standardised tests in use in schools today are notoriously weak at discriminating between high-level performances, a criticism which is also commonly levelled by university tutors at A-grade A-level examinations. The most statistically 'reliable' of intelligence tests, individually administered tests of IQ or cognitive abilities (e.g. *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – 4th edition* or the NFER-Nelson *British Ability Scales*, Elliott, 1997), are widely regarded nowadays as measuring only one type of 'analytical' intelligence (Gardner, 1983, 1999; Sternberg, 2004b, 2008), not the full range of abilities represented in the school-age population (e.g. Denton & Postlethwaite, 1984; Renzulli, 2004; Sternberg, 2008).

- Ability and performance are demonstrably neither fixed nor predetermined. Both are amenable to high-quality teaching. Intelligence as described by test scores is far more malleable than had been thought and taught, and certain methodologies, especially those drawing heavily on the application of meta-cognitive processes, can lead to gains both in measured intelligence and in school attainment outcomes (e.g. Adey *et al.*, 2007; Baumfield *et al.*, 2005; Claxton, 1999; Dweck, 1999; Trickey, 2007; Trickey & Topping, 2004). In essence, abilities and performances that are valued in school are not just discovered through identification strategies – they can be developed through access to rich, challenging learning experiences.
- Test and place has in itself little or no effect on general classroom provision (OfSTED, 2001).
- Test and place, especially when configured around the concept of ability, can be disempowering both for students left behind and their teachers (Hart *et al.*, 2004).
- Many teachers feel their role is to teach, not to judge. Test and place invites judgement (Hart *et al.*, 2004; Leyden, 1990). It invites judgement of the person – it does not invite a shared appreciation of learning to inform an educational process. The purpose is to 'prove', not to 'improve'. Judgement is also made against standards of attainment not against values and the progression to living them as fully as you can through the development of talents or the creation, valuing and offering of gifts.
- Test and place implies the existence of an evidence base which supports the notion of two classes of children – the 'gifted or talented' who need access to a specialised 'curriculum plus', and the rest – for whom a bog standard, early 20th century skills – and knowledge-based curriculum – is more appropriate. We are aware of no such evidence base. The evidence we have seen suggests, on the contrary, that students classified as 'gifted and talented' are a non-homogeneous sample from a non-homogeneous

population (e.g. Feldhusen, Asher & Hoover, 2004; Winstanley, 2004), with as diverse a range of needs and learning styles as the group labelled 'non-gifted'. Moreover, all students respond positively to focused enrichment and extension opportunities and opportunities to construct their own meanings – and to the high-quality, well-differentiated teaching which allows this to happen (e.g. Lipman, 2003; Sharron, 1996).

Unsurprisingly from the contemporary perspective and given the problematic issues associated with *test and place*, in Excellence in Cities schools, the issue of identification has been the most problematic aspect of this and related initiatives (OfSTED, 2001; White, Fletcher-Campbell, & Ridley, 2003), as has its failure to bring about significant changes to the usual classroom practices (OfSTED, 2001) – although it *has* given rise to many innovative and well-received experiences for those students accessing the 'distinct teaching and learning programmes' (ibidem), in response to creative and dedicated teaching and support.

*Test and place* is not, however, the only route to identification. As observed earlier in this section, the limitations of 'within-child', fixed-state or entity theory, conceptualisations of giftedness, and the fundamental relationship between gifts and talents and the environment (social, emotional and physical) in which these gifts and talents emerge, have become increasingly apparent in the academic literature (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen, 1997; Gardner, 1983, 1993, 1999; Passow, 1979; Sternberg, 2004b, 2004c; Tannenbaum, 1979; Walberg *et al.*, 2004). Like Borland at the start of this chapter, Sternberg exposes further the foundations of cultural relativism in the concept with the observation that 'Giftedness is something we invent, not something we discover: It is what one society or another wants it to be, and hence its conceptualisation can change over time and place' (Sternberg & Davidson, 1986, pp. 3, 4). In Japan, for instance, Western preoccupations with concepts such as intelligence can cause bewilderment.<sup>1</sup> Within wider society in the Western world, too, there is evidence of a realisation that the concept is more problematic than we once believed, and that great intellectual breakthroughs often have as much to do with context, collaboration and good fortune as they do with the person as a unique individual:

If Einstein had not existed, physics would sooner or later have invented him. I am sure of that. His theory of relativity was an understanding of nature. It

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<sup>1</sup> In a conversation with Prof. Lauren Resnick of Pittsburgh University (27 April 2006), she described to Barry a mealtime encounter with a group of Japanese academics, in which they struggled to provide an equivalent term for the Western concept of *intelligence* within their own culture. In the end, they suggested the term *niceness* as the closest approximation!

lay over the cosmic horizon, awaiting discovery by the first genius to pass its way. (Simon Jenkins, *The Times*, 21 January 2005)

The discovery of Viagra came in 1985, after thirteen years of intense teamwork. I was one member of a 1000-strong team, and we didn't set out to invent it. (Dr Gill Samuels, Director of Vascular Biology at Pfizer, *The Independent*, 9 June 2005)

Contemporary approaches to identification take greater account of *extra-neural* factors, and rely more on *identification through provision* – an approach which sees the challenge of identification as being contiguous with the challenge of educational provision (e.g. Freeman's 'Sports Approach', 1998). Such an approach is thought to be more compatible with inclusive educational principles, since it is grounded in the basic premise that enriched learning experiences should be made available in the first instance to *all* children (not just to some pre-identified gifted group). It is anticipated, however, that individual children will respond with varying degrees of commitment, enthusiasm and interest to these experiences, and that these experiences can then be adapted, developed or extended to suit the needs of the strongest responders – who might then form a 'more able' group *in that domain of enquiry*. The approach can therefore be seen to take the form of *provide and place*, rather than *test and place* (Hymer with Michel, 2002).

This shift to identification through provision signifies a move towards the construction of more inclusive gifted and talented educational theory and practice which begins to connect with the inclusive, egalitarian and humanitarian values we believe are essential in the 21st century. However, because there has been no understanding that the traditional approaches have been created as expression of values that we have evolved beyond, there are still tensions which are experienced but which cannot be resolved.

Whilst it is generally accepted as being more inclusive, more fluid and more context-dependent than traditional test-and-place models, most formulations of the identification-through-provision model conform in at least two significant respects to traditional approaches:

- (i) It is usually the teacher or other authoritative adult who is the agent of identification, and the self-knowledge of individual students is often underused or even barely tapped into at all.
- (ii) The terms 'gifted' and 'talented' remain wedded to a comparative, norm-referenced framework in which a student's gifts and/or talents are identified only in relation to his or her peers' relatively inferior abilities in any particular domain, not in relation to his or her own unique array of skills, qualities, abilities and dispositions across the broad field of human achievement.

Albeit to a lesser extent than *test and place*, the shortcomings of *identification through provision* remain a challenge to our values and beliefs. A few years ago, Barry set out his broad personal educational beliefs, values and principles in the following way (Hymer with Michel, 2002, p. 3):

- All children have a right to a high-quality education.
- The primary aim of education is to excite in children and young people a passion for learning, and to facilitate the acquisition of skills and dispositions which will permit this passion for learning to be satisfied and sustained.
- The primary role of the school is to maximise opportunities for all children to reach their educational goals.
- Children's educational goals will differ.

To these (relatively) uncontroversial principles, he added the following:

- No one – not even the person himself or herself – is ever fully aware of an individual's potential for learning.
- A fixed concept of 'ability' is an unhelpful descriptor or predictor of performance.
- Children's educational goals are best reached by the setting and answering of questions. These questions are best set by the children themselves.
- Deep learning takes place collaboratively rather than competitively.

Barry felt at that time the implications of the above would include recognising that:

- Giftedness and talent are best seen as relative rather than as absolute terms, within the context both of an individual child's profile of strengths and weaknesses and his or her wider learning environment.
- The school has an important role in helping *every* child to identify his or her gift/s or talent/s.
- The most effective form of assessment is formative (assessment for learning) rather than summative or normative (assessment for showing or comparing). Relatedly, promoting learning orientation (concern for improving one's learning) is more likely to lead to effective learning than promoting performance orientation (concern for grade success).
- A genuinely inclusive policy for gifted and talented education is the only model consistent with these principles. We can't have non-inclusional theory and practice underpinned by inclusional values. The standards by which improving practice is judged is against evidence of the underpinning values being lived.

- The school should take steps actively to implement teaching and learning procedures and methods which will accommodate the principles set out above.

Of course many, if not all, of the principles and implications set out above were (and remain) open to challenge from a variety of standpoints, but where values, principles and core beliefs can escape the constraints of subjectivity, a battery of supportive evidence could be cited. This included, by way of illustration

- Joan Freeman's comprehensive survey of international research into the education of able children and young people, in which she concluded that 'The dominant current concern of research into the education of the very able is *the interaction between the child's potential and the provision to develop it* [italics added]. Without that dynamic element, we return to the old idea of fixed abilities, most notably intelligence' (Freeman, 1998, p. 56). In addition to differentiation, Freeman saw individualisation as the other route to the development of potential – 'Where the pupil has greater responsibility for the content and pace of his or her own educational progress. In this, children would be required to monitor their own learning' (ibidem, p. 56).
- Stephen Ceci's (1990, 1996), Michael Howe's (1990) and Carol Dweck's (1999, 2006) robust refutation of the idea that people who excel in certain fields do so because of their special gifts or talents: commitment and practice have been shown to be stronger determinants of exceptional performances than underlying ability. 'Potential' needs to be seen not in Galtonian terms as a ceiling on performance, but as an opening for further development.
- Paul Black & Dylan Wiliam's (1998) highly influential account into the key role of formative assessment (or 'assessment for learning') in raising standards in schools.
- Chris Watkins' (2001, 2005) and Watkins, Carnell & Lodge's (2007) extensive reviews of research evidence suggesting that preoccupation with grade attainment can actually *lower* the quality of performance.
- The growing recognition that thinking and learning are socially regulated activities; social interactions are seen to be essential to such learning processes as voluntary attention, logical memory, concept formation and internalisation. Research in these domains owes a great deal to the writings of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, but more recent applications in the UK educational arena include Paul Light & Karen Littleton's (1999) demonstration of the significant social and relational bases of learning – even in an age of 'standardised assessment tests' (which are designed to drive up educational standards through the illumination of individual successes and failures).

- The educational implications of the burgeoning body of evidence from cognitive neuroscience. In his review of this area, Geake noted that ‘There are educational implications here for the measurement of school success as a function of students’ perceived individual successes, regardless of their level of achievement. This is not a call for dumbing-down – in fact, quite the opposite. It is a call for school organisation to even further recognise neurobiologically-driven individual differences in responses to school learning, in order to break the cycle of low competence generating low confidence generating low competence, as well as to minimise underachievement by children designated as academically gifted through boredom with an underchallenging age-normed curriculum’ (Geake, 2002, p. 7).
- Diane Montgomery’s conclusions to the book she edited on *Able Underachievers* (2000), in which she observed that ‘All learners need to experience an education which is supportive and valuing, whatever their differences. To achieve this, general education needs to be made more flexible. Access to special provision where it is useful should be based on the principles of inclusion and self-referral and use authentic or performance-based assessment to provide feedback to both learners and teachers. Learners need opportunities to contribute their own views on the value and appropriateness of the education they are receiving’ (ibidem, p. 202).

At the time, Hymer and Michel’s book expressed explicit doubts about the direction in which national policy was moving. An example (Hymer with Michel, 2002, p. 8) relating to the emerging and rather short-lived National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, which was still in gestation in 2002 follows:

The challenge of true inclusion is a stiff challenge, which can make the relative ease of providing something different for the few very alluring. This is not a new insight. In her thoughtful account of *Clever Children in Comprehensive Schools*, Auriol Stevens (1980) foreshadows the attractions of separate and different educational experiences that are embodied in, for instance, the UK’s emerging Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth: ‘The task is hard. It is made infinitely harder by setting up alternative systems to “save” the clever by taking them out of the common schools. The problem may appear to have been solved by such means, but it will not have been. Attention will simply have been diverted from undertaking the detailed, painstaking work that raising standards for all requires’ (ibidem, p. 164).

Given a dominant modernist and positivist framework in which ‘giftedness’ is embedded, it is all too easy to habituate to that domain, and to orient one’s practices accordingly. Personal values and beliefs can be overridden by the demands of hard-pressed professional groups (teachers, local authority

advisers and coordinators) for ready-made 'solutions' to the needs of traditionally identified cohorts of 'gifted children'.

It might be helpful at this point to recount in more detail Barry's story of involvement in the field of gifted and talented education, as an illustration of the disconnect that can exist between values and practice, and as an explanation for our felt need to construct giftedness differently – a construction which forms the substance of this book.

When reflecting on his own practice as a consultant in the field, Barry realised that he tended to habituate to the prevailing orthodoxy of gifted and talented education in the UK. His in-service training sessions were usually modelled on a three-part *test-and-place* formula: establish definitions, illuminate identification strategies and promote appropriate provision for the identified few. As part of this, he constructed and offered up for use plausible checklists of giftedness, from which teachers and parents could identify gifted pupils in their classes (Hymer, 1998, 2001b). In essence, he provided material and advice in pre-masticated form and eschewed opportunities to get participants to think for themselves and, in particular, to question the assumptions and orthodoxies lying at the heart of dominant Western approaches to gifted and talented education.

Moreover, Barry constructed and advocated definitions of giftedness which had operational advantages, but which were couched in traditional, attainment-oriented conventions – cf. the definition first adopted by the Cumbria LEA Policy for the more able child or young person (1997): 'The term "more able pupil" is taken to apply to that individual who is consistently functioning at a level two or more years in advance of the majority of his or her same-age peers – in at least one area of the school curriculum'. This definition's weaknesses include its failure to include within it the needs of the underachieving student, its failure to take account of age-within-grade effects (is a 16-year-old performing at the level of an 'average' 18-year-old really as able as a 3-year-old performing at the level of an 'average' 5-year-old?) and its limp acceptance of the knowledge-based formal curriculum (and the attendant forms of assessment) as being the *only* legitimate domain for the expression of exceptional achievement. It is at heart a complacent definition that sets few incentives and offers no real signposts to a school wishing to walk that bit further, to move beyond a recognition of existing high-level performances and to work towards the demonstration of high achievement in its many forms for all its students.

In June 1998, 2 years into his work as coordinator of Cumbria LEA's Able Pupil Project, Barry was invited to submit evidence to the House of Commons Education and Employment Committee Inquiry into Highly Able Children. At that time, Cumbria had just adopted the operational, readily measurable and traditionally achievement-oriented definition cited above. Yet in his

submission to the Inquiry, reinforced verbally before the Committee in December 1998, the definition he advocated was already very different, drawing as it did much more on a multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1983, 1999) perspective:

I would define a highly able child as that child who, given access to a wide and stimulating environment, creates products (which could be recorded in a range of forms) which demonstrate originality, depth of understanding and high levels of expertise. This definition resists quantitative measurement. I believe it is counter-productive to set out to identify that sample of children who meet the requirements of an operationalised definition, which will be largely arbitrary, and then to provide that sample with a qualitatively or quantitatively enriched educational experience. If all children are given access to an enriched curriculum, the most able will identify themselves. This is not – in my view – an idealistic or precious position to adopt – it is a necessary one. (Hymer, in House of Commons, 1999, p. 136)

Even ignoring the *naivete* of the penultimate sentence,<sup>2</sup> it is possible to attribute the substantial inconsistencies between the views identified above and the definition actually implemented, as evidence in part of the living contradiction between Barry's values and his practice, and in part to his reflecting over time on the inadequacies of the 'operational' definition as it was being applied in schools with children. The yawning gap between social science and social policy becomes a chasm when social policy is considered in relation to the individual person. Looking back now on the definition recommended to the Inquiry, it is possible to see that this, too, was couched in a Western, modernist and un-deconstructed (let alone reconstructed) understanding of the term 'gifted and talented' – although it took a more obviously liberal and less reductionist line.

Shifts in definition continued. In September 2001, in conversation with a colleague in the Barrow Education Action Zone (EAZ), Deborah Michel and Barry asked the question, 'What would be different if we spoke about *gifts* and *talents*, rather than *gifted* and *talented*?' Reflecting on that question permitted a re-framing of the concept from one representing a static *within-person* state to one allowing a separation between the concept (giftedness) and its embodiment (the 'owner' of the 'gift'). At the time, this distinction was attractive, despite the reification implied in the concept of 'gift'. In the co-creation of Barrow EAZ's definition, Barry was more concerned to give

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<sup>2</sup>The suggestion that, given access to an enriched curriculum, 'the most able will identify themselves' is ignorant of the literature on institutional racism – children who have 'ability' but who lack cultural or social capital in certain contexts and who are typically under-represented in traditionally identified gifted and talented populations – cf. Lidz & Macrine (2001), Chaffey & Bailey (2003), Lidz & Elliott (2006), Warwick & Matthews (2008).

due regard to the complexities underpinning the terms gifted or talented, and to frame the definition of individual gifts and talents in relative terms, rather than as absolute 'abilities' measured against set 'norms'. This would be a departure even from the more inclusive – but still performance-based – definition he'd provided to the House of Commons Inquiry. He wanted factors giving rise to giftedness and talent to be seen as inextricably interrelated and, wherever possible, he was anxious to reject false dualisms – e.g. *intellect–body*, *gift–talent*, *knower–known*, *identifier–identified*. Looking back on this period, it appears that these ambitions were only partly realised, and attempts to liberalise conceptions of giftedness were nonetheless framed within a traditional psychological epistemology: the complexity would embrace, for instance, both within-child factors (e.g. inherited or acquired predispositions, aptitudes and intelligences, learning dispositions) as well as situational and motivational factors (e.g. levels of opportunity, encouragement and learning challenge). Moreover, the *concept–embodiment* dualism was retained.

Barry was, however, also anxious for the evolving definition to draw heavily on a meta-cognitive component – i.e. the awareness of and control over one's own mind or thinking (Claxton, 1999; Flavell, 1979). This would offer increased scope for the creation and self-identification of gifts and talents over time (as revealed in any single domain of knowledge or experience), not just a snapshot identification drawing on the usual *test-and-place* criteria – with learners seen as the passive recipients of a label awarded on the basis of a test score, exceptional performance or similar criterion.

Whilst the job of identification should lie, he felt, substantially with the individual learner, the educational provider (in this instance seen as the teacher/s and school) had a responsibility to ensure a broad, balanced, enriched and truly challenging curriculum for all, as opposed to a distinct teaching and learning programme for the few. The identification of personal gifts and talents should represent an opportunity open to all learners, irrespective of 'ability', 'potential' or prior achievements. A definition which it was thought could go some way to achieving these intentions, yet without becoming unhelpfully complex and over-nuanced, was the following:

A gifted or talented student is regarded as one who has

- (i) experienced a degree of facilitated self-reflection on his or her pattern of learning strengths and preferences, *and*
- (ii) identified his or her area(s) of greatest strength(s) within the framework of an enriched or extended learning environment.

Strengths would include gifts and talents as identified by the Department for Education and Skills Excellence in Cities initiative, G&T Strand (DfEE,

1999), and also less easily measurable ‘soft’ skills and qualities such as interpersonal and intra-personal skills and other elements crucial to thinking for learning (e.g. resilience, analysis, wise judgement and discernment, intuition and imagination, etc.).

Such a definition defied any capping of the numbers of children identified (e.g. by an arbitrary figure of, say, 5–10%), or a narrow understanding of who might be gifted or talented, yet it also avoided, it was hoped, a woolly, ‘All children are gifted, so let’s not talk further about it’ response. Without being prescriptive about means of implementation, implicit in the definition is a clear requirement for schools rigorously to discharge their responsibilities – e.g. to provide meta-cognitive learning opportunities to support the child’s self-reflection (stilling activities, guided visualisation, learning logs and thought journals, peer mentoring, etc. – cf. Fogarty, 1994) and to focus their energies on creating enriched, challenging, stimulating learning environments. There was the potential (never fully realised during Barry’s association with the EAZ) for 100% of a school’s roll to be identified as gifted or talented – but only through the rejection of a norm-referenced, comparative understanding of the term, in which a child is gifted because she is objectively ‘better’, ‘brighter’, ‘more successful’ than another, in any given domain – the ‘competition game’ described by Holzman (1997). Instead, there is the potential for the term to be conceived in ontogenetic terms, in which a child (any child) is seen to have a gift in a domain, because *relative to her other interests, aptitudes or performances*, this domain emerges as a relative strength or focus of energies. With this latter interpretation, it is clearly possible for a special school to engage fully, genuinely and unapologetically in the ‘gifted and talented’ agenda.<sup>3</sup>

This definition was subsequently adopted without revision by the EAZ and was promoted in its schools. Alongside the definition, we advocated an identification strategy based on *identification through provision* (Freeman, 1998), characterised by the following features:

- seeing identification as process-based and continuous;
- basing identification on multiple criteria, including provision for learning and outcome;
- validating indicators for each course of action and provision;
- presenting students’ abilities as profiles rather than as unitary figures;
- adopting increasingly sharp criteria at subsequent learning stages;
- recognition that attitudes may be affected by outside influences such as culture and gender;

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<sup>3</sup> As indeed was the case within the Barrow EAZ, which included support for a special school for children with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties, and a pupil referral unit for children and young people with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties.

- involving students in their own educational decision making, especially in areas of their own interest.

In promotion of this approach, supportive procedures and tools were recommended – those which might probe and illuminate from multiple angles – e.g.

- self-reflection exercises;
- evidence-based checklists (e.g. Freeman, 1998, pp. 12, 13);
- teacher nomination based on a combination of structured observation, instinct and intuition, and inspection of classwork performance;
- peer nomination through games and affirmative activities;
- parental nomination;
- self-nomination through the process of self-reflection, communicated to teaching staff;
- standardised and unstandardised test results, including national curriculum tests, tests of attainment and aptitude available through commercial publishers and tests of creativity.

To promote identification and provision contiguity, consideration of general principles underpinning decisions in relation to organisational responses was encouraged, with an emphasis on maximising

- effective learning for all students (including self-knowledge and metacognitive awareness, currently emphasised in the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) material on 'Thinking Skills', as well as the acquisition of facts and concepts);
- the delivery of an enriched curriculum to all students;
- the active participation, engagement and inclusion of all students.

It was believed that these principles were incompatible with a policy of blanket student streaming or even setting. That said, it was considered that there would be times where teachers might feel that significant alterations to the usual inclusive arrangements were appropriate, without violating the general principles above. These alterations would best, we felt, be related to the time, context and groupings needed for the learning objectives to be met or realised. An example was the formation of an editorial board for the construction of a school magazine or prospectus, drawing on students with appropriate gifts and talents from across the school. Similarly, the option of pursuing forms of acceleration in particular content areas was retained, but it was expected that this would be appropriate for only a small minority of students, and only after

- The introduction and outcomes of sustained high-quality enrichment and extension activities had been critically evaluated.

- Full consideration had been given to the likely short, medium and longer-term impact of the acceleration on the whole child; this would include reference to the perspectives of the child and his or her parents.

Realisation of these considerations would involve, it was thought, the use of a wide variety of class and student groupings in order to promote effective learning. This included

- collaborative learning groupings;
- groupings arising from curriculum compacting processes (Reis *et al.*, 1992);
- the use of mentors, including peer mentors;
- cross-age interest groupings and clusters;
- a degree of informed experimentation with groupings (with evaluation and review);
- where appropriate to the learning needs of the students, occasional opportunities for advanced enrichment work in withdrawal groups.

The tracking of the evolutionary shift in definitional stances outlined above provides some insight into Barry's conceptual journeying towards living his values and beliefs in his practice, but it reveals also, we feel, a residual drive to 'contain' and to 'control' the educational process from the 'outside', and to keep a strong focus on the issue of identification, rather than on gift creation. This may not be coincidental. Whilst allowing himself to be designated as an 'expert' in meeting the needs of gifted and talented learners, and benefiting from the professional recognition that this designation afforded him, Barry felt at times like one of '... those seductive story tellers ... on the speaker's circuit (who) would lose a good part of their consulting fees if they couldn't assure audiences that they know with certainty who is *truly gifted*' (Renzulli, 2004, p. xxvii).

The more he read, communicated and practised in the field, the more he realised that far from moving forward in the direction of his values, he was retreating – assuming a technocratic, mastery-oriented role. At the level of content, his practices and his values felt incongruent – he was a living contradiction.

When engaged in formally researching his practice (Hymer, 2007a), Barry ultimately attempted to move his practice in the direction of his values as a constructivist, enquiry-oriented, inclusive educator, but he had begun more confidently, with the intention to find out something 'worthwhile' in the area of gifted and talented education – something *out there*, something empirically verifiable, replicable and generalisable, and which might contribute to the canon of established orthodoxy in the field.

During the early, taught years of his involvement in the field of 'high ability', he directed his energies accordingly. He read widely around the field of underachievement and synthesised his findings (e.g. Hymer, 2000); he undertook small-scale studies involving traditional hypothetico-deductive methods (e.g. Hymer & Harbron, 1998) and busied himself with the administrative requirements of managing a countywide project on a financially tight budget. This latter role included establishing the operational definition of giftedness cited earlier. More flexibly, he also sought ways of integrating his learning from his role as a coordinator of able pupil provision in a local authority with his part-time role as an educational psychologist in that authority (e.g. Hymer, Michel & Todd, 2002).

Over time, Barry saw his interests and energies shift from the identification and appropriate 'management' of 'gifted learners' (the *given state*) to the exploration and advocacy of approaches to 'creating' gifts and talents in learners – i.e. to nurturing and developing the dispositions, attitudes, skills and motivations required to realise achievements in any domain. However, this stopped short, for the most part, of exploring in any overt way the relational, non-individualistic nature of gift creation. The shift in focus was gradual, and not entirely linear in its chronology. It can though be traced in the subject matter of his thinking and writing from 2001 ff. – attempts at embracing holistic conceptions of giftedness (Hymer, 2001a, 2002); constructivist methodologies (but with modernist origins) such as P4C (Hymer, 2003a, 2004; Hymer & Jenkins, 2005) or more recent, less well-evaluated thinking skill approaches such as dilemma-based learning (Wood, Hymer & Michel, 2007), *MTa-PASS* materials (Davies, Hymer & Lawson, 2005) or *logo-visual thinking* (Best, Blake & Varney, 2005).

His early critiques of traditional, non-inclusive ways of understanding and responding to 'giftedness' were mildly expressed (e.g. Hymer, 2003b), whereas later attempts were more passionate and personal, and bordering on the polemical (Hymer, 2006, and below):

We should certainly continue to invest heavily in the pursuit of excellence and achievement, confront anti-intellectual bigotry, and seek ways of raising aspirations within and without areas of deprivation. We need also, however, to remain open to radical reformulations of what we mean by intelligence, achievement, and potential, to the evidence of how achievement arises, and to non-normative, non-deterministic conceptions of what we mean by gifts and talents. We can learn a great deal from abroad and also from within the UK – e.g. the work of Guy Claxton, Susan Hart, Belle Wallace, and others. This may – perhaps should – lead us to question the structures and strictures currently embedded in national policy, and to suggest alternative formulations. The risk otherwise is that we end up with "gifted" students who avoid challenges, risk, uncertainty and lifelong learning, and opt instead for easy successes and validation through performance – the very opposite of what we intend. Gifted and talented policy should be the last area of education to be exempt from

challenge. If we have learned anything about exceptional achievement in the past, it has been about the value of asking new questions, and seeking new answers. And so it shall be in the future. (Hymer, 2005, p. 7)

The shift in focus and thinking which is represented in these writings was rarely arrived at in isolation, or through any single epiphany. Barry was fortunate in having enjoyed (and sometimes having been challenged, even disturbed by) many conversations with critically (and open-) minded friends and colleagues, some of whom are listed as co-authors in his publications, and all of whom contributed in some way to the evolution in his thinking. These conversations, and the resultant shift in his thinking, meant, however, that data collected through the experimental method never kept up with the journeying, nor represented anything fresh enough to be truly meaningful to him. These data missed the easily dismissable: 'the ineffable', that domain so dominated by tacit knowledge that articulation becomes impossible. The ineffable is captured in Chesterton's wry observation that you can only find truth with logic if you've already found truth without it, and also by Polanyi:

... what I call "ineffable" may simply mean something that I know and can describe even less precisely than usual, or even only very vaguely. It is not difficult to recall such ineffable experiences, and philosophic objections to doing so invoke quixotic standards of valid meaning which, if rigorously practised, would reduce us all to voluntary imbecility. (Polanyi, 1958, p. 88)

Having made a number of half-hearted and rather timorous attempts to orient his research around the experimental method with which he was familiar, he experienced two critical, at the time unnerving and as it turned out, deeply generative conversations during a working visit to Bath and North East Somerset. The first of these, on 12 July 2005, was with Marie. The second, the following day, was with Jack, originator of the living theory approach to action research. These conversations were good-natured and disinterested, but they challenged Barry to confront his qualitative demons, and to consider carefully his intentions and purposes in completing his doctoral studies. In an email to Jack, he wrote the following:

Marie and I had had a super conversation the day before – variously wide-ranging and focused. ... Marie challenged me (gently, kindly, as is her and I suspect your way) about having been stuck on my doctoral write-up for around four years now. I've given her legions of excuses for failing to start the write-up, these mostly involving lack of time, but that conversation seemed to unearth deeper reasons, confirmed in my brief meeting with yourself: I had failed to find a way of connecting my research questions with a methodology capable of doing the job authentically. Whilst I've been aware of action research approaches for some years, I've never really shaken myself free from my background training (interesting word that – from the Latin *traho* – "to drag") as

an experimental psychologist, steeped in things positivist, and my insecurities about bringing myself into my studies. As of today, I think my doctorate is taking a very different direction. Your work helps me connect my passions with my writing, and validates an account which will, I hope, involve me not as a trainer but as an educator (*educere* – “to draw out, to bring out, to lead”), and which can draw I think on the core educational beliefs and principles set out in my 2002 book. (email to Jack Whitehead, 18 July 2005)

This email dates the moment he resolved finally to abandon the experimental method, and to use instead the data which had arrived almost unnoticed over many years, and which lay untidily all around him. These data were neither obviously connected to each other nor did they conform easily to the types of scale (Stevens, 1968) that his background training as a psychologist had taught him to collect and work on. They weren't neutral, and they were most definitely self-referential – the enemy of traditional research accounts. They held though, he now realised, a potentially rich and fruitful source of evidence. They also revealed gaps in his self-knowledge which suggested that he needed to collect further data, much more systematically and self-consciously than hitherto. The analysis of these collective data in search of evidence<sup>4</sup> became the focus of his research, and over time, a central question emerged: 'How do I understand and communicate my values and beliefs in my work as an educator in the field of giftedness?'

Whilst the form of action research that Barry used is described in more detail in Chapter 3, for present purposes, it suffices to say that it helped Barry to integrate the contradictions between his values and his practice in his claim *to know* his educational practice, so that he could go on to construct descriptions and explanations that would empower and vivify his educational development as a person, and through improved self-knowledge, to influence also the learning of others, and of social formations. In this claim to knowledge, he asserted his ambition to create new theory, not just to improve his practice as an educator.

We are all three of us aware that practitioner research enquiries are often seen to enhance practice, but not theory, and both are often disconnected from underpinning values. The originators of theory are traditionally located within a social science model, applying hypothetico-deductive methods as uninterested lookers-on, from a high vantage point. This is as true in the field of gifted and talented education as it is elsewhere in educational

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<sup>4</sup>We draw on the distinction between data and evidence provided by Whitehead & McNiff (2006), Chapter 5, whereby archived data (e.g. notes, journal records, video footage, reflective writing, etc.), collected during the enquiry are sifted, sorted, analysed, categorised and interpreted in search of evidence (those pieces of data carrying special meaning and significance – ‘the good in action’) which might be used to justify, test and hopefully support a claim to knowledge.

research. As evidence, we offer the following passage, in which the perceived hierarchy of research status is strongly implied (our italics added):

The literature reviewed indicated that there have been relatively few empirical studies of gifted and talented education and, consequently, evidence-based policy and practice are scarce. Instead, much of the literature reflects practitioner experience. Whilst this is important and valuable, *it is different from rigorously conducted research studies.* (White, Fletcher-Campbell & Ridley, 2003, p. 1)

Whilst recognising that research models which take on board the perspective of the interested insider (as opposed to the disinterested outsider) are vulnerable to critiques which assume Aristotelian, *knowing-that* epistemologies, we contend that an ‘insider’ approach is best suited to an enquiry which has as a fundamental premise a sense that ‘oranges might not be the only fruit’ – that giftedness need not be seen as a reified ‘thing’, germane to an individual person and quantifiable as one might quantify the amount of liquid in a glass. As a rationale for our decision to use and to advocate a living theory action research model, with ourselves as the insider–enquirers, we offer two tables which attempt to make explicit the nature and implications of insider–outsider stances (Tables 1.1 and 1.2). They draw initially on distinctions suggested by Whitehead & McNiff (2006), but then relate specifically to the field of gifted education.

**Table 1.1** Ontology: a theory of being – how you perceive yourself in relation to your environment

	<i>Separate from others</i>	<i>Part of others’ lives</i>
Frequently held tenets	Neutrality, objectivity, task efficiency, the veracity of externally set targets, ‘generalisable truth’, respect for the truth	Involvement, participation, open relationships, the power of intrinsic targets, ‘individual truth’, respect for others’ truths
Preferred research orientation (Freire, 1993, p. 64: ‘The form of action they adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world’.)	‘Outsider’ approach – observing others and offering descriptions and explanations of their actions, social science research	‘Insider’ approach – offering descriptions and explanations for how you and others were involved in relationships of influence, action research

**Table 1.2** Epistemology: a theory of knowledge – what is known and how it comes to be known

	<i>Separate from others</i>	<i>Part of others' lives</i>
Beliefs	Knowledge is objective, explicit, reified, and it tends to be discovered, acquired and transmitted.	Knowledge is personal, tacit, fluid, and it tends to be created, transformed and communicated.
Preferred approach to the field of giftedness	Concern for accurate identification of G&T cohorts, faith in psychometric data, external target setting, knowledge <i>acceleration</i> and specialised provision	Concern for the creation of gifts and the authenticity of personalised targets, knowledge <i>extension</i> , suspicion of labels and standardised data

The 'separate from others' column of Table 1.2 captures, we believe, the dominant paradigm of gifted education in most Western countries. This normative model, to which there has been surprisingly little dissent, is couched unambiguously in the language of propositional 'truth', through which educators' energies are focused not on conceptual, holistic, ethical or moral exploration of the terms involved, but on the circular, self-perpetuating, technocratic, proceduralist concerns of identification, provision and 'product outcome'. We have *national academies* and *registers* to populate, cohorts to 'track' and 'monitor', records to keep, Key Stage 2 SAT Level 5s and General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) A and A\* grades to work towards and to count. Little wonder, perhaps, that many teachers feel there is a gulf between their practice and their values – as evidenced by this teacher's comments: 'I have to get results based on objectives. I am paid to do the opposite of what I believe – how sad is that?' (reported in Hymer, 2007a).

This is a situation familiar to Whitehead & McNiff (2006, p. 26):

... we are deeply concerned with how teachers and other practitioners are systematically bullied by dominant forms of research and theory, and are persuaded to think that they cannot think for themselves or participate in public debates about education and the future of professional endeavours.

There are concerns shared within and outside the field of *giftedness* – that many children are bored, unchallenged and unexcited by their educational diet, and that many teachers do not know how best to stimulate a passion for learning and discovery – especially within a system that seems to put performance before learning (Watkins, Carnell & Lodge, 2007; Watkins,

2001). But to move from this shared recognition to a conviction that the answer lies in identification strategies, labels, cohorts and the apparatus of data gathering, tracking and monitoring is, we believe, questionable. There is a dominant story that one has to identify/label a child as 'G&T' before one can adequately meet his/her needs. There is an alternative story: we would suggest that many excellent schools and teachers (for example, the nine teachers whose practice was studied in depth by Hart *et al.*, 2004, or the practice of Hannaford, 2005) have been meeting the needs of their students for years, and without needing cohorts, labels or performance-led approaches such as acceleration in order to do this. You can access a range of such alternative stories from teachers at <http://www.actionresearch.net/mastermod.shtml>.

These teachers dispense with a priori identification procedures, and instead invest their energies in creating challenging, enriching, extending, enquiry-friendly learning environments for all their students – and being led by the unique student responses these conditions elicit. They know that for students identified as gifted and receiving the resources that become their due, you will always be able to find another, equally deserving and able to benefit from the same provision, but who lacks the high-status but double-edged 'gifted' designation (Freeman, 1980, 1991, 2001). This, however, is not an argument for identifying more thoroughly or widening access to such institutions as the Student Academy. On the contrary, it's an argument we believe for questioning a preoccupation with 'identification', burying the labels, and putting the considerable resources saved into teacher continuing professional development and inclusive, high-quality opportunities for learning, enquiry and knowledge creation.

In this alternative story, we wish to surrender an obsession with quantitative systems, summative record keeping and number crunching, and instead invest our efforts in understanding and improving the quality of educational provision. What we are offering is a different way of understanding quality. This will involve the amplification of the educational stories of educators who are developing their talents and creating and offering gifts and doing the same for the educational stories of pupils. We believe that the amplification of such stories, with the help of the Internet, will spread their influence. We think that such an approach is suited to the creation of a curriculum for all, one which allows us to be continually surprised by who responds to truly inclusive *gifted education* and by how the response is made and contributes to the education of a critically engaged citizenry in a 21st century democracy.

If we need the term, perhaps it's the education, not the children who are best seen as *gifted* (Borland, 2003). The argument is that the label gifted is as damaging to those who have it as to those who haven't (Rayner, this chapter).

When it's their education, we can touch the hard-to-reach and the disadvantaged. This is not an idealistic story, based on a belief that all children are the same, or a call for dumbing-down education – it's the very opposite. There are a growing number of people who have documented the advantages of responding radically and inspirationally to the needs of their students, such as Susan Hart *et al.* (2004), Sapon-Shevin (2003) and others, but being outside established conventions, the new understandings, the unknown species and the robust hybrids are easily missed. Closed systems like the field of gifted education need critical voices and fresh ideas to grow. We exclude them at our peril.

We are struggling to find a suitable language to communicate standards of judgement – viz., the extent to which we live in and practice the values and dispositions we hold as central to our being. Traditional terminology can be seen to be inappropriate where it has arisen from incongruous values, theories and practices, and our reservations follow from this – for instance,

- our personal values which hold that 'Labels are for jam jars, not children' (Leyden, 2000);
- our awareness of the evidence that 'Intelligence labels, good or bad, have undermining effects. Both teach children that their underlying intelligence can be readily judged from their performance' (Dweck, 1999, p. 121);
- our knowledge of the anti-psychiatric, anti-pathogenic critique offered by Illich (1976): the label once applied becomes the only 'reality', and all perception is filtered through it and all action directed towards it, not the person or the 'truth' of the person's condition;
- within the postmodernist perspective of narrative therapy (e.g. Crocket, 2004; Ingram & Perlesz, 2004; White & Epston, 1990), our sense that the invisible social 'controls' of linguistic terms have the potential to subjugate and oppress: '... if family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and professionals think of a person as "having" a certain characteristic or problem, they exercise "power" over him or her by "performing" this knowledge with respect to that person. Thus, in the social domain, knowledge and power are inextricably interrelated.' (Tomm, 1990, p. viii)

Within the field of giftedness, the *power-over* stance illuminated in narrative therapeutic understandings is as much an issue for the child 'having' *giftedness* as it is for the child 'lacking' it. For this reason, in response to a well-intended invitation to all parents of children attending one parent's secondary school to 'nominate' their children (with 'evidence') for inclusion on the school's 'G&T Register', this parent replied as honestly as he could – requesting an opportunity to meet with the school's G&T coordinators in order to discuss alternative models for supporting high levels of challenge for

students and, relatedly, to request that his daughter be excluded from any existing register:

We are as anxious about [our daughter] being labelled as “gifted” as we are about her being implicitly labelled “ungifted.” In some situations she excels, in others she doesn’t – much like any child or adult anywhere. The flaw is with the concept of ability in itself – terms like “bright,” “clever,” “G&T,” and “intelligent,” or euphemisms such as “smart cookie” are usually well-intentioned, but they act insidiously to reinforce the belief that an individual’s exceptional achievements are explained by “her intelligence” – when there is no evidence for this belief. We are alert to the dangers of a child being identified (or even identifying herself) as “gifted” – invariably on dodgy and sometimes spurious grounds, and innumerable pieces of research document the dangers of children being judged “ungifted” relative to their peers. Does this happen at [her school]? You bet: it happened just yesterday. I have no idea what the criteria for being selected to take part in the Enterprising Activities Day were (“G&T” cohort? Excellent life and enterprise skills? Poor life and enterprise skills?) – and, I would suggest, neither do the students. What I do know, is that [our daughter] told me when I picked her up from school yesterday, that “All the brainiest kids are doing an Enterprising Activities Day tomorrow. I’m not doing it, so I guess I’m not that brainy.” When I asked her how she knew it was the “brainy” ones who’d been selected, she said, “Because it’s all the brightest kids, and [the teacher] told [two friends who’d been selected] that ‘It’s because you’re all the bright cookies.’” This may be reality or it may be children-talk, but apparently her French set was talking about little else – and in the absence of clear criteria for admission, children, like adults, will create their own explanations.

Please forgive the length of this piece – it in no way is intended to devalue the admirable efforts of yourselves and your colleagues in making [the school] the outstanding school that it is, and to creating the extension and enrichment opportunities that can make education magical. It is, however, intended to ask challenging questions about practices in a school I believe has the reputation, confidence and skills to transcend 20<sup>th</sup> century formulations of intelligence or giftedness (enshrined in NAGTY’s constitution), and to explore 21<sup>st</sup> century routes to excellence and achievement. In so many ways, [the school] already manages this. Just one example from our own daughter’s case: we know how much ... has benefited from the opt-in opportunities she’s had in music – none of which has needed her to be judged as “musically gifted”. (ibidem)

These concerns may well represent a minority view, and they are easily dismissed by a dominant paradigm as being woolly, unhelpful, unrealistic, even pernicious concerns over ‘elitism’, or as setting back the ‘cause’ of gifted education, in much the same way as Sapon-Shevin was attacked for questioning the concept of giftedness from a sociological perspective (Sapon-Shevin, 2003). But in asking the question ‘Whose interests does the term *giftedness* serve?’ the likely answer is, ‘many’, but at its worst, it can damage the interests of many more: it might be seen to benefit all those for whom the term denotes positivistically some ‘direct knowledge of the world’, and those whose livelihood, status and sense of self-worth is, at least to some

considerable extent, caught up in its supposed 'reality' and veracity. We could, of course, include ourselves in the latter list, but in choosing to reject a global renunciation of the field, we seek also to offer a way forward which we believe brings the best of giftedness along with it.

In choosing to reject a global renunciation of the field, we must ask what our reluctance to repudiate is founded upon: sincere ontological and epistemological reservations, or rationalisations, pragmatism, compromise and craven self-interest? Whilst recognising that renunciation of 'G&T education' is in many ways distinctly attractive, we are aware that there are many things that would, for us, be lost in so doing. These are picked up again in later chapters of this book.

How then, do we reconcile our present and future practice with our values? We attempt to do so in this book, in which we provide evidence of the extent to which our values can be lived through our practice, and in which we eschew an affiliation to orthodox conceptualisations of giftedness in favour of those elements which are rooted in values of a loving, just society and are germane to non-deterministic, inclusive conceptualisations in the field – concepts such as *challenge*, *personal enquiry*, *extension* and *enrichment*, for instance.

In integrating these elements in our approach to giftedness, we are using a living theory approach in which we express and develop our talents in the production of gifts that are freely given. This living theory approach to giftedness, an approach that is generative and transformational, has required a transformation in the way we make sense of the world.

