Chapter 11
Blessed Rage for Order: The Evolution of a GATE Educator

Lara Walker Russell
College of Charleston, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter tells the story of one GATE educator’s early quest to satisfy what poet Wallace Stevens called a “blessed rage for order.” It describes the patterns she discovered and turning points she experienced as an undergraduate student, a Peace Corps volunteer, a first-year teacher in a diverse Title I high school, a doctoral student of curriculum and instruction, and an advanced student and teacher of underrepresented gifted populations. At its heart, it is an ethnography of the catalysts—the individuals and experiences—that helped transform a troubled, high school dropout’s raw gifts into talents, enabling her to use her creativity, intensity, and love of complexity to do the one thing she swore she’d never do: teach.

INTRODUCTION

When I was invited to submit a proposal for this chapter, “an autobiography tracking a Gifted and Talented Educator’s journey to becoming a teacher,” I instinctively felt compelled to remind one of the co-editors that I was never formally identified as “gifted and talented.” The vestiges of imposter syndrome chewed relentlessly at my ear, chattering “You’re not truly a GATE person. You’ll be found-out!”

Given that much of my life’s work has been teaching predominantly underrepresented and not yet identified gifted and talented students, who have given me over ten years’ evidence that all students can succeed with GT curriculum, I am embarrassed by my initial fear. I share it with you today, not as a mea culpa, but as a grounds for mutual inquiry and exploration because it warrants further investigation.

At front and center the question is this: If a reasonably confident, middle-class, white woman with successful experience and exposure to the field of GT struggles with the question, “Can a person not identified as gifted and talented speak as a GATE person,” what must the African-American teacher with no formal background in gifted education be thinking when handed a curriculum designated for “advanced” or GT learners? What must the English language learner from Guatemala be thinking when included in a GT class despite being formally unidentified as Gifted and Talented? The rural Caucasian...
learner from an economically disadvantaged background? The dual-exceptional child? In other words, if a woman of privilege with extensive training in the field finds herself questioning her ability to speak to GT education because she was not identified as being GT, what must a person from a historically marginalized population feel when invited to the table? Can it be done–can we, the “non-identified” speak as GATE people?

It’s possible that these questions are unique to me, given my background (my initial hatred of education, my psychological make-up). I’ll let you be the judge of that. My hunch, though, is that there are others who question their inclusion in what historically was, and still is in many cases, an “elite” crowd--those who may, in fact, find themselves puzzling over the same questions. This chapter traces the evolution of my personal inquiry and is written for all individuals who may be wondering whether they belong at “this” table. It is written in the hope that they, too, will arrive at a resolution similar to my own--a resounding “YES”--and enjoy the subsequent feast.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Imagination and Anvils

Any outsider viewing the facts of my lineage might think it natural that I became an educator--perhaps even an educator of the Gifted and Talented. I was bright--the only child of two well-educated parents very much in love with one another. My father, a doctoral student of English Literature at my birth and later a public relations professional in higher education was and still is, the consummate over-achiever. My mother was an English teacher at a private, all-girls school in New Orleans. I was nursed on the milk of perseverance, independence, and social justice. The great tomes of the British Romantic poets were my earliest play things as my frequent Crayola-scribbled contributions can attest. I was the play-thing of many an eleventh-grade girl far more intrigued by a toddler than by her mother’s grammar lessons. It seemed, at least on the surface, to be an idyllic early childhood steeped in rich learning experiences.

In early elementary, things began to shift dynamically. By the second grade, my mother had left teaching due to chronic illness, my family and I had moved to four different states, and I had moved to five. At this time, my mother’s epilepsy had worsened to the extent that she and my father travelled to Ontario, Canada to take part in a medical trial designed for those suffering from drug resistant seizures. I went to live with my grandparents in Lamarque, Texas, where I finished out my second-grade year. In many ways, this year marked a turning point: I distinctly recall leaving my classroom (perhaps to use the restroom) and simply not returning. I wandered outside the school’s halls and can vividly remember the rough grit of the building’s brick exterior on my fingertips. I was “located” sometime later, but it was reported that I had gone “missing;” it was the first of my many school absences and truancies.

Although I lacked the language to convey this at the time, I thought school irrelevant. The “childhood joys” conveyed to me in Laura Ingalls books and “Toad and Frog” stories just didn’t seem pertinent to my life, and as much as I enjoyed Nancy Drew, she never helped me solve the mystery of why people we love get ill quite unexpectedly. From a very early age I had appointed myself my mother’s keeper, and school simply did not inform my job.

Abraham Maslow once said, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (Maslow, 1966, p. 16). As a child, it seemed my only tool was my imagination and every problem, much to my chagrin, did not appear to be an empty canvas or a blank
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