Chapter 14

Pathways to Supporting the Gifted: Four Educators’ Personal Journeys

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is comprised of the written recollections of four intellectually gifted adults, all of whom became teachers. None had any idea they would ultimately focus on gifted students. Because there is no significant research about who becomes a teacher of gifted students, the purpose of this chapter is to illustrate some of the precursors, critical events, and catalysts that may lead to becoming an educator and advocate for gifted children. The authors each in turn describe the influences of family and others significant to their own talent development and how their exposure to different social and cultural conditions impacted their views. The vignettes provide firsthand information about what motivated these teachers, both internally and externally, and what personal traits contributed to the ways they have advanced the field. All discovered their own giftedness while educating themselves on the needs of gifted students.

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INTRODUCTION

While the literature on education provides a wealth of information about general teacher development, it includes little on the developmental trajectory of teachers who purposefully identify with and teach to the needs of gifted learners. The absence of such material reflects an indifference toward giftedness within the educational establishment that begins at the very foundation of education and extends through the institutions charged with graduating teachers capable of challenging and nurturing all students.

The advancement of gifted pedagogy and advocacy should not be left to chance and the individual efforts of gifted teachers; systematic and systemic educational support for teachers of such students should be provided. The four biographies in this chapter provide anecdotal information about growing up gifted, how it feels to be gifted, the challenges some gifted students face in the American public-school system, and how teachers who were themselves gifted children became aware of and focused on gifted education. This information can serve as an introduction to the lived experience of giftedness and a springboard for further analysis, understanding, discussion, and action.

DEBORAH L. RUF

I first realized I wanted to be a teacher when I was in second grade, because I loved my teacher. I wanted a career, but the women in my family were stay-at-home mothers, so my role models were teachers, secretaries, and nurses. I didn’t choose nursing or secretarial work because I envisioned being bossed around. Teaching looked like an independent, professional role, and I planned to marry and have children, so summers off would work well for my children’s schedule. Everyone around me approved!

Often, personal and career paths are not as simple as one might expect. As a child, I assumed my life was normal. In my late 30s, I sought counseling because I wanted to be a good mother to my three sons, and I wanted to get any issues solved so I could be. It took about a year before I could accept that my childhood had not been “ridiculously good” as I’d thought it was. Initially, I felt ashamed I “needed” counseling when I felt I’d been so blessed in my life, but it was there I discovered many of my viewpoints and expectations were counter-productive to my being the mother – or person – I wanted to be.

My two younger brothers and I were raised by parents who had some terrible things happen to them as children. Their overall similarities, as well as the similarities of having been hurt, drew them together and created an environment that didn’t always work well for us kids. My mother had a condition now known as borderline personality disorder. For the children of a parent with this condition, it’s somewhat like living with a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde – we never knew when Mom would blow up, scream at us, or subject the three of us to hours-long rants, which occurred about three times a week our entire childhoods. I eventually described it as “the slot machine effect” – intermittent reinforcement. When my mother was good, she was very, very good, and I am very grateful for the good times.

Mom was smart and wise, ahead of her time in many areas, and she imbued in us an openness and acceptance of others. Race, social status, and sexual orientation didn’t make people any better or worse, more or less worthy than we. For example, I learned through her that many problematic behaviors have a back-story. I remember a conversation around “the facts of life” during which she said, “There is no such thing as ‘a bad girl.’ There are girls who haven’t been given enough information.” Such insights into behavior left me with an expectation that all human beings are essentially good. Imagine learning
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