THE CONUNDRUMS OF SUCCESS

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Today I want to talk to you about some perhaps unexpected aspects of a topic that has a special significance for all of us who are involved with gifted learners – success – and I want to begin by exploring what can be said in defence of success.

Success, it can surely be argued, is a natural requirement of living. The lion must succeed in catching the antelope; the antelope must succeed in escaping the lion. The tiniest seed must succeed in finding fertile soil in which to grow. And we humans must each succeed in a thousand different ways if we are to survive in the complex physical and social environments we have created for ourselves.

Little wonder, then, that success plays a significant part in our judgement of ourselves and of our fellows. Success financially, at work, in sport, in relationships, success in gaining a promotion, in winning election to a coveted role, in having our work chosen for publication or exhibition: success in any field will have an impact on our self concept and on how others perceive us.

Conversely, the lack of such success can profoundly diminish a person in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of others, and can inhibit his or her actions even in other unrelated fields.

In short, the experience of success in some acknowledged form could justifiably be defined as a *need* for human beings.

If this is so, then clearly there are important implications for education. However we structure this, children will need to have experiences of success in order to learn successfully and in order to build confident yet realistic perceptions of themselves and their own capabilities. That is certainly something we all generally accept as true.

The question for us today, then, is:

> What does success mean for the gifted child?

Before we can deal with this question, however, we must first decide *what we mean* when we talk about "success". In Western society at least, it is a term which is intimately bound up with performance, with visible and measurable achievement in some arena. We can hardly conceive of it in any other way. Think of the "successful" adults you know. What makes them publicly recognisable as successful? In school, it is the same. Whether it is about learning your spelling list correctly, being picked to star in the school play or join the First XV, or graduating with straight "A's", success in school is essentially most often defined by performance.

This has implications first of all for how we *identify* gifted children. For many schools and, it would seem, for much current Ministry policy-making, the belief is that gifted students can really only safely be recognised by measurable performance. It's a belief summarised in the following still widely influential definition:

> Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment.
>
> These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields.

Thus in this definition the focus is placed very specifically on various kinds of *performance* - those tangible outcomes which can in some way be quantified, measured or observed, or at least predicted with some degree of accuracy. Reflecting this approach, the very word "gifted" is replaced in this definition with the more specific and more assessable term "talented".

Our first response to this may well be to say that it appears to be entirely reasonable. Surely we do expect the gifted to produce work at a gifted level, at least sufficiently often for it to be seen, measured or recorded in some objective way? Isn't that the whole point?

Very relevant to this debate, teachers' *subjective* judgements about children's ability are notoriously unreliable. All of us who work in the field can provide reams of anecdotal evidence that many teachers have only the vaguest idea of what constitutes exceptional ability – like the teacher who told me that a certain child *must* be gifted because "she writes so *neatly*", the other side of the same coin as all those teachers who insist that a child *cannot possibly* be gifted because their work is untidy, illegible or unfinished. And so on!

Well-intentioned as they undoubtedly are, if attitudes like these are even moderately typical, then visible products or performance (especially the hard data of test scores) must surely be a more effective way of finding the gifted (or the talented) than relying on teacher opinion – mustn't they?

However, on further reflection, we might find ourselves asking some rather troubling questions.

For example, this line of reasoning apparently ignores the fact that many genuinely gifted children, including some of our most highly gifted, do NOT demonstrate their abilities in ways their teachers perceive or can adequately measure.

There are various different reasons for this.

To begin with, there is the very simple fact that the opportunity to manifest ability in observable or measurable ways is so very dependent on the learning environment and the teaching practices to which a child is exposed.

But what researchers have been telling us for at least the last twenty years is that most regular classrooms do *not* provide opportunity for performance at a gifted level. Gagne, for instance, writing in 2007 and comprehensively reviewing all the factors that impact on the emergence of giftedness, concluded that the weakest link of all lies in the quality and appropriateness of what schools provide. Researchers here have reached similar conclusions, especially the research published by Tracy Riley and others in 2009.

In addition, there are all those other factors which can obscure or mask high ability. If we insist on performance as the key criterion for the identification of the gifted child, then we will continue NOT to identify some of our most highly creative individuals, the divergent thinkers whose responses do not correspond with our preordained one-right-answer education system. We will

fail to find those gifted children who have learned to inhibit their responses in order to "fit in", those who are "twice-exceptional", those whose cultural imperatives do not match our own, those whose development has been delayed by poverty, poor resources or discrimination, and all those angry, resentful and frustrated little souls who do ardent battle with an inappropriate system in the only way they know how, and are then labelled "behaviour problems" as a convenient way of not having to deal with their reality.

In short, an identification process based purely on measurable performance might seem understandably appealing to classroom teachers already under pressure and just not needing any additional challenge to their thinking, time or energy. It might appear a sensible solution to administrators who want systems that are easy to manage and involve minimal expenditure. It may sometimes serve the interests of those who have a particular political or social agenda.

But an identification process based too narrowly on performance does not, and never can, serve the best interests of the gifted child.

Thus we see our first conundrum**:**

> If we focus only on measurable success, then when it comes to identification, we will, at least partially, fail.

But this notion of focussing on measurable performance casts a much longer shadow on the future of the gifted child than simply at the moment of identification, even for those who make it through this channelled gateway and are recognised for what they are.

Whatever view we hold of how giftedness is to be defined, that view inevitably shapes, not only how we try to *identify* the gifted child, but also everything we *then do* for the gifted child. It determines the nature and scope of the provisions we put in place. It defines the goals we set for the child and for ourselves. It decides for us how we will monitor and evaluate what we do.

Thus when schools believe that giftedness is adequately defined by exceptional performance or achievement, then the focus of provision is likely to be on promoting such achievement, and the success of provision will be measured by the degree to which this comes about.

Let me give you an admittedly somewhat extreme but telling example of this in practice. Some years ago, I worked with a school where the principal was highly achievement-oriented. To ensure his most able students achieved highly, he himself chose five of the seven subjects they were obliged to take for School Certificate, still then in place. At the next level up, he enrolled the entire class in an external international exam, despite the fact that most of the students did not want to take it. At Bursary level, he forbad one young woman from taking journalism as an option, because, although it was a requirement for entry to tertiary study for her chosen career, it was not a Bursary subject, and, in his words, he was determined that every member of this class would get an "A" Bursary. His attitude towards his students seems best summed up by one Board member who in my hearing referred to students as "units of production". I do believe that this principal was sincere in his desire to see his top students succeed, but did school image overtake student interest here? Or does this true story highlight a very real danger when we focus too exclusively on the product and forget the person?

This highlights for us our second conundrum:

Is success successfully measurable?

Is high level performance or achievement the best or the only measure of success? If not, what other measure could we possibly use?

This is a question of paramount importance for both parents and teachers. When we are parents, it is one of the key questions to shape our enquiries about our child's progress from the day he or she first enters school. Is he or she doing well? How do we know? If marks and grades and test results are good, does that mean there's nothing to worry about? Later, when it's time to move from the local primary or intermediate to the big world of the high school, how do we choose a school for our child? Will a record of external exam successes guarantee the best for our gifted learner? What else *can* we ask about?

If we are teachers, the same question arises and becomes especially significant when we're dealing with children at the outer edges of the ability range. What should our expectations be for these children? Is helping the gifted child develop his or her specific abilities – his or her "talents" – the single most important responsibility we have? If all our gifted students

achieve at NCEA Level Three, can we say with certainty, "Our gifted programme works"?

One of a number of writers who have been particularly concerned with these kinds of issues is Stephanie Tolan. Tolan draws a sharp distinction between giftedness as something which can only be defined by its outward products, and giftedness as something which shapes the *inner perceptions* of the individual and influences both internal and external responses.

In her essay "Discovering the Gifted Ex-Child", Tolan explores her concern about this at greater length. Noting that gifted children reach specific developmental milestones and acquire various skills significantly earlier than other children, she makes the following point:

> The difference is not mere precocity, not just "getting there sooner". The child who deals with abstract concepts early brings those concepts to bear on all later experience. This different, more complex way of processing experience creates essentially *different* experience. (My italics).

In support of her thesis, she cites a number of the common characteristics of the gifted child with which we are all familiar, such as unusually varied interests, curiosity, accelerated pace of thought processes, ability to generate original ideas and solutions, humour, a heightened concern for justice and morality, and so on, pointing out that all these differences are differences in *kind* rather than in precocious acquisition.

> The significance of this is that all such characteristics *change the way* in which someone perceives and reacts to experience.

All of us who live or work with gifted children have seen a thousand instances of this. I recall observing at assessment sessions where a preschooler would be left alone to explore a table laden with different items of equipment. For example, one item was a small black box containing a powerful magnet, with a few dozen little magnetised metal stars sticking together to make a little tower on the top. Most children took a fairly perfunctory look at this, and, if they picked it up, played rather randomly with it for, at most, one minute. Gifted preschoolers reacted very differently. They would carefully take the little tower apart and try to reconstruct it or make another shape on top of the box. They would experiment to see if the

little stars would stick to the sides and the bottom of the box as well as to the top. They would lay the stars out on the floor and make patterns with them, and then they would try to pick them up with the magnetised box all in one go. They would discover that the little stars would fly up to meet the descending box, and they would experiment to see how high they could get the little stars to leap up. Sooner or later, they would all start to invent a story about what they were doing. "Wheeeee, see the star vacuum cleaner vacuum up the stars!"

You can call this "gifted performance" if you like, and you can even measure it and say that in every case this took about 15 minutes in contrast to the one minute of other children. But the *key difference* here is one of *perception*. Gifted preschoolers perceived many more questions they could ask about this little item, many more angles they could explore and experiment with, many more discoveries they could make about its qualities.

What they experienced with that box was utterly *different in kind* from what most children experienced – and *that's* Tolan's point.

It's interesting to contrast this with one puzzled father quoted by Linda Silverman whose response seems to sum up the dilemma for those who try to define giftedness by performance. Told that his five year old son had been assessed as gifted, this Dad's comment was, "But he's only five. What could he have *done* in five years to be gifted?" For this father, giftedness meant achievement, and therein lay his dilemma.

These different approaches go right back to the earliest days of exploring giftedness, with Galton's firm declaration in 1869 that eminence – ie high level performance – is the "quintessential evidence" of giftedness, contrasting with Leta Stetter Hollingworth's focus in the 1920's on the psychosocial development and adjustment issues gifted children encounter as a result of their developmental differences. Sternberg's five criteria for determining giftedness from his triarchic theory published in 1985 is a more recent example of the performance-oriented approach:

1. excellence relative to peers
2. rarity of a high level skill
3. the area in which the person excels must lead to productivity or the potential for productivity
4. it is demonstrable through valid assessments

5. it is valuable – the excellence the person possesses must be valued by his or her society.

Compare this with Tolan's summary:

> A quality of mind that creates a genuinely unusual developmental trajectory … a stable attribute, remaining with the individual throughout life, whether outwardly evident or not …. The reality of giftedness remains a different experience of life.

And Piechowski:

> It is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing**:** vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding – a way of being quiveringly alive.

These profoundly opposite views have continued to drive debates about the nature of giftedness and the role of gifted education right through to the present day. Whose view should guide our response as parents and as educators?

For Silverman, Tolan, Piechowski and others sharing their perspectives on these issues, the missing element in the achievement-oriented models is, actually, the *gifted child*.

What does this mean *in practice* for children's lives? If one picture is worth a thousand words, then perhaps sometimes one quote is worth a thousand academic papers. I'm thinking of a line from a poem by a nine-year-old boy which Sue Barriball sent me:

> Like chalk, I crush easily.

What do those few stark words tell us about that child's experience of school?

Many of you who are here as parents will hear that child's cry echoing in your hearts as you think of your own child. Dabrowski's work on "over-excitabilities" has simply confirmed what we as parents already know, that gifted children have profoundly heightened sensitivities, and experience life with an intensity that is beyond the comprehension of most. That is

something that brings with it the capacity for both great joys and great griefs. It is a capacity which at one and the same time makes the gifted child uniquely vulnerable, and yet which also plays an integral part in shaping those insights and perceptions that are the most valued creations of the gifted mind and the gifted imagination.

Can our schools really justify placing a focus on measurable achievement, on product and performance, perhaps on talent development, which does not take into account these realities?

I should think that by now it is fairly obvious on which the side of the fence you will find me. Throughout all my years in education, I have believed in and sought to follow a child-centred approach, an approach which holds that the nurturing of a child's imaginational, emotional, social and ethical growth is as integral to the child's development as is nurturing the intellect. I deeply value scholarship, but I am uncomfortable with any approach that separates learning performance from the individual and values that performance as the one relevant measure of the individual. I cannot equate that with scholarship in its truest sense – as in fact I saw it made live in the work and in the person of George Parkyn, our founding Patron.

And yet I find myself now with a question which perhaps you share – my third conundrum.

> What is our proper first concern – achievement in measurable terms, or the inner self, or - ???

The achievement-oriented model, in its narrow sense, focusses on the specific ability, rather than on the child. It measures success in terms of level of performance in that ability area. It does not necessarily have to take into consideration those needs of the child which do not directly relate to that ability. It does not have to ask is the child happy, is the child satisfied, is the child making friends and feeling good about him or herself.

But if we reject this and opt instead for a child-centred approach which does ask these questions and does care for the child's inner self, then where is the place of performance in our view? Does it have a place, and if so, what is it? Can one be child-centred and still value performance and measurable forms of success?

This becomes an especially relevant issue at high school, where students have many teachers, teachers have many classes, and everyone is intricately involved with exams and marks and grades and passes and fails.

So what *is* the answer?

I put it to you that just as a care for the child's physical, emotional and social well-being includes nurturing those values, attitudes and skills that will guide the child throughout life, so, regardless of age, it must also include nurturing those abilities that the child has the capacity to use to shape his or her own future life role.

If it so happens that those abilities are exceptional, that certainly does not negate our responsibility to help the child recognise and develop those abilities – absolutely the reverse.

Does this mean that a primary focus on achievement or "measurable performance" is right after all?

This very week, I was delighted to read my little granddaughter's very first school report, brimming with achievement. Years before, when our now adult children were at school, I certainly remember that we were delighted when they succeeded in exams and won awards at school. Such success boosted their confidence, rewarded their efforts, and opened the door to further study in their chosen fields. These measurable outcomes were important for them. Let me make it *very* clear that I am not dismissing that. But did it equate to nurturing their abilities?

Ultimately, was it enough?

To try to answer that question, let's look at some great human beings, some acknowledged "successes", and let's try to understand how they might perceive their own lives. What would they say their success had been?

Mother Teresa, for example. Can we suppose that she would look back on her life and say she succeeded because now she is to be recognised for all time to come as a saint? Or did her success lie in the fact that she was *able* to bring comfort to a dying human being, and *able* to make others aware of the value of such acts?

Stephen Hawking**:** he surely and quite rightly enjoys the recognition he has won, the awards, the opportunities he has had and has taken despite his physical condition. But can we doubt that his greatest satisfaction will lie in having wrestled with a huge intellectual problem and found answers that had eluded all others?

The Dalai Lama, driven out of his country, robbed of all the physical trappings of his leadership, in worldly terms a ruler without power, yet continuing to be venerated worldwide, not just by his own people. Why? Would he see himself as a failure? Or does he find meaning and effectiveness in his ability to reach out to people, to enlighten both hearts and minds?

Finally Sir Edmund Hillary**:** he had perhaps the most measurable outcome of all**:** he climbed Mt Everest! When he died in 2008, as many of us will remember, all New Zealand wept. In Auckland, I saw young men in hoodies standing in the street with tears on their cheeks, for his funeral procession. Mums brought their toddlers in pushchairs, schools and shops closed, businessmen came out of their offices, fashionable women in affluent Remuera lined the streets there for his funeral procession, all completely extraordinary for normally fairly undemonstrative New Zealanders. Why? Because he climbed a mountain? Or because he spent the rest of his life working to help the people of Nepal and somehow through both his courage and his generosity touched all of us with a sense of what is finest in our human spirit?

As Deborah Fraser puts it in her essay on spiritual giftedness, these are all people who "have walked among us and shaped history and culture in unforgettable ways." (Fraser, 2004).

In their widely different spheres, they have all "performed". Yet it is not the quantifiable aspects of their performance which ultimately determine their greatness, but the intrinsic nature of what they did, how it extends our understanding, enriches our knowledge, changes our vision, excites our imagination, touches our hearts, expands our horizons.

What appears to unite all these people is an intense and extraordinary vision, and a fierce and undeniable drive to realise that vision. Whatever their sphere, therein surely lies their giftedness, and their success.

People like this will tell you that they do not really have a choice about what they do. Plaudits, credits and awards are a pleasant affirmation, but essentially extraneous. What matters, what is incredibly important, what absorbs them, is the striving towards that vision. Even though there will always be more dying people to comfort, more mysteries of the universe to solve, more mountains to climb, it is that striving which brings satisfaction and fulfilment.

And *there* I think we have it. *There* I think we find what success truly means. Not just quantifiable performance, not just tangible products.

> *Success lies in the sense of realising a vision, of finding and fulfilling one's life purpose.*

There too I think we have our justification for nurturing ability, intrinsically different from a limited focus only on measurable achievement, intimately linked to the inner self of the individual, ultimately linked to the greater good of all humanity.

This does not just apply to extraordinary human beings like those I've just listed, nor is it confined to the gifted. It applies to all of us, those of us who are not gifted as well as those of us who are. Ask yourself why *you* are here today. How many of us are here solely to gain some sort of credit on our CVs? Or are we here because this might help us in fulfilling *our* important life role as caring parent or caring teacher?

When we consider this definition of success, it becomes immediately apparent how far it is removed from what we have been encouraged to see as "success" in our materialistic, competitive society. Both in school and extending beyond school, success has come to mean doing better than one's fellows. Winning. Being first. Earning more. Owning more. Having more power than others.

Contrast this with a story Renzulli tells about Melanie, a little girl who over a period of some months helped a partially sighted younger boy to move from being teased and rejected by other children to winning acceptance and even admiration from others. Asked about her work with him, she says simply:

> It didn't change the world, but it changed the world of one little boy.

(Renzulli, 2002, p.1). I cannot imagine a better illustration of the deeper meaning of success than that, can you? This, I think, is precisely what Harry Passow meant when he wrote:

> Self-actualisation is but one goal of gifted education; self-actualisation in service to humankind is the twin goal. (Passow, 1988, p.15).

Very relevantly for us as citizens of Aotearoa-New Zealand, this emphasis on qualities as well as measurable achievements and then this linking to service to others as a facet of giftedness is also at the heart of the Maori perception of giftedness, as Jill Bevan-Brown has so eloquently told us, reinforced now by many of her Maori colleagues.

How, then, does all this relate to what we actually do as parents and educators? As we have seen, wealth and fame are not the values which drive the truly gifted, though they may accrue. Nor is eminence the inevitable outcome of fulfilled giftedness. Wholly different considerations drive the gifted individual. How can we tap into those considerations to provide the right kind of support for that individual as he or she moves through childhood and into adolescence and begins to think of that adult life role?

Do we ask the traditional questions, what are you best at? What security will that job or that career offer you? What will mean a good job with lots of money? No, the ordinary questions like these clearly won't do. So what *do* we ask?

In Tolan's novel, *Surviving the Applewhites,* rebellious teenager Jake is bewildered when he's asked to devise a learning project for himself. Zedediah, a wise old grandfather, says to him, "What gives you joy?" Jake can't come up with an answer, so Zedediah just says quietly, "Once you know that, you will know what you want from an education."

This is a statement about self-discovery, and this is the process which, for the gifted individual, is an essential part of moving towards fulfilment of the inner self. Thus we need to replace those ordinary questions with questions that look inside rather than outside, first-person questions like these:

What gives me joy?

What intrigues me?

What absorbs me?

What enrages me so that I want to take action?

What gives me the deepest satisfaction when I do it well?

What matters so much to me that I feel I must do it?

What do I do now that I can imagine still wanting to do when I am old?

What is my life direction?

It is vital that these should be first-person questions, because this is not about imposing ideas or expectations, it is not about setting limits, it is not about pre-determining the future. It is about giving choice and control back to the individual. It is about giving a child the tools he or she needs to engage in the ongoing and evolving process of self-discovery – tools which fit naturally with the positive reflective introversion of the gifted individual.

As a child finds answers to these questions, he or she is finding also those fields of ability that have the highest personal relevance for him or her, the field or fields which it will be truly satisfying to nurture and develop.

Furthermore, as we ask questions like these, we can begin to explore with the child an understanding of the meaning of terms like "satisfaction" and "fulfilment", and we may find answers like these emerging from their own experience to describe what brings satisfaction:

Being totally absorbed

Doing what is hard and working it out

A sense of achieving "the right word in the right place"

Bringing about change, making a difference for someone

From these sorts of considerations, it is both a natural and a necessary step to developing the crucially important belief, central to an effective life in *any* sphere, *that an individual person* ***can*** *make a difference*, not always changing the whole world, but nonetheless real and in some way that matters. The lack of that conviction leads to apathy, depression, self-indulgence, despair and purposelessness. Its possession gives meaning to life and can bring riches in the best sense of that term. In the words of that inspirational teacher, Roland Barth,

> A school can fulfil no higher purpose than to teach all its members that they can make what they believe in happen.

If we can imbue our gifted students with that belief and that commitment, then have we not achieved success?

To conclude, then, in our society today, we have defined success largely as attainment *over* others, rather than as attainment *with* or *for* others. We have set this type of success as the measure of the individual against which his or her whole worth to society shall be judged. We determine whether or not it has been achieved by tangible products or performances which can be measured and compared against the products and performances of others.

If this is inhibiting for the child of average ability whose aspirations to this kind of success must inevitably have limits, it is equally or even more restricting to the gifted individual.

But as Roland Barth pungently reminds us:

> Zen Buddhism advises us that to train a bull, it is sometimes necessary to enlarge the fences. (Barth, 1990, p. 178).

In this paper, I have sought to enlarge those fences by putting forward a view of the nature of success which I believe represents the most realistic and appropriate response to the needs of the gifted child.

Let me simply re-state it:

> *Success lies in the sense of realising a vision, of finding and fulfilling one's life purpose.*

I leave that with you, with my hope that this view of success could guide us in taking a new look at the ongoing debate about purposes in gifted education, and that resolving that debate is ultimately the real challenge for gifted education in the coming decades. Its resolution, I submit, comes through re-defining success in the way I have outlined here. I commend this view to everyone here, to the Ministry, to our schools, and in particular to the new Centre for Gifted Education as it shapes its policies and strategies and our gifted future. Thank you.

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