

## **AIMING FOR EXCELLENCE – OR NOT?**

I recently heard yet another statement to the effect that the ultimate aim of gifted education is to have gifted students achieving “excellence”.

That’s a statement that reflects a fundamental lack of understanding of what it means to be a gifted individual.

“Excellence” is a perfectly valid objective for the high achiever. Excellence is a concept which has measurable criteria. It’s about mastering to a very high standard what is already known and understood, and that’s what high achievers do – and what we need them to do. Society needs and should value those who can reach such a level of accomplishment. It’s also a concept which is readily comprehended, even by those who cannot themselves achieve excellence. It gives a practical structure to how children are assessed at school and what their results may mean for decisions about their learning and their later life.

But gifted individuals go beyond excellence. They are driven by their inner vision of what they are seeking to do or accomplish. They set their own criteria for the fulfilment of that vision. They may know despair and failure many times in their journey towards that end. What they are striving to do may not be readily comprehended by those around them, not at that time. Yet what they ultimately bring us sets new parameters for our knowledge and for our insight and understanding of ourselves and of our world.

Even as children, gifted individuals will show evidence of these traits. Gifted children are often not satisfied with merely “getting it right”. They are not always content with doing things the way they have been told. They do not necessarily accept everything the teacher says as absolutely and completely all that can be said. Instead, they ask why, and what if; like their adult peers, they go off on tangents of their own; they experiment and explore; sometimes they argue: they are inherently conceptual thinkers, seeking a larger reality. Even those gifted children who become perfectionists are going beyond what the rest of us see as realistic standards of performance and demanding more of themselves.

By all means let us encourage gifted children to achieve highly, to reach a standard of excellence, and let’s applaud them when they do.

But when we set that measurable excellence as the end goal, the boundaries of expectation for gifted education, we fail those children. Just as the ancient Chinese custom of foot-binding stopped the natural growth of girl-children’s feet and left them hobbling all their lives, so we can all too easily hobble the minds and imaginations and spirit of our most gifted youngsters.

As educators of the gifted, let us seek wisdom and patience in guiding these children as they take us with them beyond the boundaries.