

# Discovering and Nurturing Talents of Children and Youth: A Personal and Professional Journey

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# Discovering and Nurturing Talents of Children and Youth: A Personal and Professional Journey

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With gratitude to King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity “Mawhiba”, I am pleased to reflect on and share personal and professional experiences while following my passion. I have been blessed with divine guidance in ideas, experiences, people, and research results that helped (and continue to help) me accomplish my life purpose: To help children and young people recognize and develop their natural talents and abilities. I have devoted my life to other people’s children.

Me as A Young Child: Two Significant Experiences

My mother was a teacher in one-room schools in rural Kentucky. Her last assignment before the consolidation of small schools was near our home, so as a preschooler, I accompanied her when my father, a farmer, was busy with farm work. My mother told me that when I was a little girl, I would line up all my dolls and toys, stand in front of them with my “blackboard” and teach them something. She said she always knew I would be a teacher.

One night when I was about five years old, I had a significant dream: children were on pedestals, and adults were putting them in boxes. Some boxes were beautiful, with pretty ribbons and bows, and others were like prisons with bars and shackles on children’s legs. All the children, including those in pretty boxes, were unhappy and many were crying; but the adults continued containing them in their boxes. I was disturbed at this sight, going from adult to adult, pulling on their pants legs and skirts, telling them “You’re hurting them! You’re hurting them!” No one listened. When I awoke, I was distraught. I couldn’t stop crying. How could people hurt children, especially when they say they love them? My mother was wise; her understanding was far beyond what one might think possible in this world. When I told her why I was crying, she said “When you’re older, people will listen.” I believed her and later understood the significance of the boxes: adults were stifling children’s thinking and creativity!

From the age of three months, I had bronchitis, leading to pneumonia, every year when we started closing our house for winter. The only way to help me heal was for the doctor to come to our home and give me a penicillin shot. When I was eight and struggling to breathe, my mother tried to reach the doctor, but he couldn’t come. Soon I stopped breathing and was turning blue.

She called the elders of the church, who responded and came to help her pray. What I remember most was somehow I knew I had a choice to “come back” or leave this world. I also was “told” if I came back, I could help children! Then, there was no choice. Even though I had struggled every year with breathing, I had to follow my path. I came back, and here I am! Miraculously, I did not have bronchitis or pneumonia again as a child or young adult!

### Some Highlights of Secondary Education and College

In our small rural high school without advanced classes, our teachers and administrators recognized that five of us needed more challenges, so they created advanced algebra, trigonometry and physics classes for us. In physics, instead of lecturing, the teacher gave us creative tasks: design machines to demonstrate the principles we were learning. My thought at the time was this could be a great method to use for everyone—not just advanced students. This experience was similar to all the wonderful challenges and fun during childhood when my father showed me how to make toys with materials we found on the farm. He also used methods such as “forced associations” (later included in assessing and stimulating creativity) in which we were to tell what we would get if we combined a particular insect or animal with another one. One that was particularly fun for me was a wasp and a grasshopper. What would you get? Describe its qualities. In school, different outlets for my creativity were cheerleading, playing the flute and piccolo, being a majorette, acting in plays, and editing the yearbook for the final year of high school.

In college, as part of the honors program, we were offered a cross-disciplinary seminar involving students from diverse colleges all over the university. We wrote papers on certain topics and then participated in open-ended discussions of our papers. Again, I thought these methods would be beneficial learning experiences for all students. My advisor suggested I take a class on teaching gifted students because methods such as these were characteristic of those programs. I took both a course and independent study. Then, I changed my goal from elementary education to education of the gifted. Now, I needed a master’s degree in the field!

I taught for a short period of time, then became regional supervisor of programs for gifted students in the State. Three years later, I was offered an internship in the newly created federal Office of the Gifted and Talented. My task was to develop rules and regulations for administering new funds, so I learned about funding opportunities, resulting in grants for two books and a scholarship to study my Ph.D. During doctoral study, one professor fueled my passion again! Herb Richards, my professor, taught factor analysis using a discovery learning approach. To this day, I understand factor analysis better than any of the other statistical methods I learned. He

also said something I will never forget: “You are not the most intelligent student I have ever had, but you are the most creative!” This was another confirmation that I was on the right path.

Unexpected confirmation came from my dissertation research on successful scientists with disabilities. Those who were successful were creative problem solvers. Unsuccessful ones were not creative in their approaches to challenges they faced because of their disabilities. These results triggered memories of my dream as a five-year-old! Clearly, this was an important direction for my research. I needed to find ways to liberate children and youth’s thinking so they could solve problems creatively, both for themselves and for our world.

### **They Listened! Professional Experiences**

I followed my passion, continuing what I had begun. Many valuable experiences resulted from the books and articles published while in my doctoral program and afterwards. Perhaps, for the girl who grew up in rural Kentucky, some of the most significant were opportunities to make speeches and provide professional development all over the USA and in many different countries, helping me learn more about other cultures. Experiences equally significant were results of personal decisions to participate in my research rather than hiring assistants for tasks such as observing students during problem solving. Another was to work closely with teachers in their classrooms, thus learning first-hand how students responded to the methods I was advocating. With skills and a long-term interest in photography, I documented my observations, making interesting slide shows and PowerPoint presentations for speeches and workshops.

### **Developing Assessments of Creative Problem Solving**

Starting with defining giftedness (later called exceptional talent) as “the ability and willingness to solve the most complex problems in the most effective, efficient, ethical, or elegant ways,” the Discovering Intellectual Strengths and Capabilities while Observing Varied Ethnic Responses (DISCOVER) teams created assessments. We field-tested, implemented, and studied their validity and reliability in countries and cultures as diverse as Australia, the UK, France, Thailand, Mexico, and Chile. From 1992 to the present, we created assessments for preschoolers and students of all grade levels in many talent areas. In all phases, I observed children so I could learn for myself how they responded to tasks we designed.

### **Developing Teaching Methods for Creative Problem Solving**

Following abbreviated versions of the talent development principles in my books, I worked in in Mainland China, Australia, and the USA. In the DISCOVER in China project, for instance, we

had more than 1,000 schools, including schools in all provinces. In the USA, we partnered for several years with teachers and administrators in 15 schools in areas with children underserved in programs for gifted students, such as American Indian, Hispanic, Black, and from low-income groups. In a recent significant experience, with a team of graduate students and a scientist, we field-tested and implemented our Real Engagement in Active Problem Solving (REAPS) teaching model in a classroom in a multicultural area of Tucson near the university. In Australia, the American teacher, the scientist, and I collaborated with all teachers and administrators in a multicultural school for six years. The teacher and I had been partners and colleagues in several projects, and I considered him to be the best teacher I had ever seen! We were comfortable working together, team teaching one day a week. I never ceased to learn from him, the children, and my graduate students.

## Avoiding Putting Children and Youth in Boxes: What Have I Learned?

### Materials

Give children and youth materials that can be used to make an infinite variety of things based on their imagination. Do not give them “kits” to make one thing, with instructions for putting the pieces together! In addition to materials you can purchase, collect unused items such as old clothes, objects, or containers you might otherwise throw away, calling them “junk.” Many interesting constructions can be made from things you and your children or students might collect outside.

Provide materials related to all the talent areas, including those you might not think are interesting to your child or students, such as writing utensils, books (including picture books) at their levels, art supplies, materials for making mechanical constructions, materials for making sounds, toys to use for storytelling, costumes and masks, math games and puzzles, hands-on math materials such as Tangrams or Pattern Blocks that can be used in a variety of ways, sports equipment and materials such as balance beams. To support and encourage Scientific/Naturalistic talents, give and encourage everyone to contribute pictures of different natural environments; provide objects and animal/insect toys that can be found in various environments.

### Questions

In this section are questions focused on development of the 21st Century skills of creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. The most important principle to

follow is to ask questions with no “right” answers. You also must avoid showing which answers are your favorites! Here are examples:

- **Creativity:** What are all the sounds you can hear in nature? What are all the sounds you can hear in a city? Make some of those sounds with materials here (at home, in the classroom). What do you think are the causes (be sure to get several) of the conflict between Israel and Palestine (or any other conflict)? What are the forces that cause things to move? Give an open-ended task using hands-on material such as “Make anything you want to make.” Then, say “Tell me about what you made.” Be sure not to ask “What is it?” That would be insulting.
- **Critical Thinking:** Ask “why” after they answer some of the questions in the other sections, and make sure you are open to hearing their reasons; “Of all those ways to express your feelings, what do you think is the best?” “Why do you think that is the best way for you?” After asking about the causes for a conflict, ask “Which of those causes do you think were the main ones?” After getting answers, ask “Why do you think those are the most important?”
- **Communication:** Ask “If you are upset with someone, what are all the ways you can express your feelings?” “How many words can you think of that mean happy (or any other ideas or feelings you would like them to explore)?” “If you are asked to make a speech or a presentation, what are all the methods and materials you can use?” “How would you put them together to express your ideas?”
- **Collaboration:** After your child or students have completed a task such as making something together or developing a solution to a problem, ask “What did you do that helped the group?” Get several answers, then after each answer, ask “Why do you think that helped?” Next, ask “What did you do that might have made the group’s work more difficult?” Get several answers, then after each answer, ask “Why do you think that made the work more difficult?” After both questions, ask “How could you be a better group member (or, for those who are older, collaborator)? Then, after each answer, ask “Why do you think that would be a good thing for you to do?”

## Final Thoughts

I sincerely hope the description of my journey and suggestions I have offered are helpful. While writing this, I started thinking about us as teachers and adult guides. We need to be able to free ourselves from our own boxes! Trying new ways, learning from different cultures, thinking of many ideas or ways of doing something before selecting one based on past thinking without using our minds to create new plans or designs. Thinking of my mother again, I remembered her

strategy to keep her creativity alive when she was homebound and in a wheelchair. She played Scrabble games with imaginary partners, then made a crossword puzzle with the Scrabble words. She then put it away and solved it several weeks later! Her creativity and memory were excellent until the age of 96!