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The Changing Life Metaphor of Gifted Youth

Metaphors influence our perceptions and thinking, from fairly inconsequential concepts, to some of the most basic matters. A root metaphor is one that is foundational to other beliefs and conceptions. These root metaphors become a primary mechanism we employ to understand our world. We see evidence in the metaphors we use of our underlying beliefs, and evidence in our behavior of the metaphors underpinning our beliefs. Metaphors not only represent our understanding, they also act to shape our understanding. There seems to be a major change in the metaphor currently underpinning our society. In this column, I explore what I believe has become the dominant root metaphor of today's gifted youth. I illustrate some of the antecedents of the change and some of the outcomes of the current metaphor being employed.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are foundational to our understanding of our world because they "structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do" (p. 4). Rather than merely being linguistic creations as originally thought, metaphors actually represent the inner workings of the mind. Cognitive psychologists such as George Lakoff study language and analyze metaphors as a means to more fully understand the thought patterns of individuals. Metaphors contain a topic and vehicle that are linked by a common ground (Winner, 1988). A topic becomes better understood by applying attributes or characteristics of the vehicle to it. For example, the saying that "Time is money," suggests that time has features of value, is a commodity, and can be used up. How we perceive and experience time becomes affected by the characteristics of money. Our society has rep-

resentative sayings that support this claim. Wasting time, spending time, and borrowed time are examples that Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have written about. We also understand such important concepts of success or good or smart metaphorically.

Antecedents to the Change in Root Metaphor

It is my contention that the evolution of an emerging metaphor of *life as entertainment* has been influenced by several factors. The most obvious is the hyper changing nature of the technology available to children. With the realization of so many forms of technology using digital architecture, an amalgamation across discrete technologies is occurring that allows for users to have significantly different experiences. From these changes, communications across groups is possible in real time, and among numerous people, at one time. The change in communication patterns is changing the nature of our gifted children's lived experiences of relationships.

A second aspect of this change in communication patterns is revealed in the breadth of interactions among children who do not know each other and who cluster around areas of interest. Age ranges vary more than has been typical in the past and relationship boundaries are being redrawn by the children.

Another characteristic of these changes is in the area of music collection and creation. Children now have access to virtually every song ever recorded and can locate and download the music within minutes of logging onto one's computer. Music libraries are growing to incredible levels, with considerable per-

sonalization determining what music the child possesses.

The use of new technologies to create music is flourishing in a manner that is remarkable to see. Students who in the past would never have attempted to create their own music are now doing so without ever leaving their computers. It is conceivable that someday all young people will have experienced composing music electronically.

Confluence of Antecedents

With the digitization of the various technologies available to our youth, in just a few short years they have integrated these technologies into their daily routines. They can pursue their interests by using their laptops, cell phones, e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, and so forth. Some engage in all these activities while listening to music, taking pictures, and sending e-mail by using BlackBerry devices. They communicate, search for information, and create new music on a whim. They can download images on every conceivable topic and create personal museums of art. All of this can be carried out and printed wirelessly. The world is not only their oyster, it is their personalized oyster. The culture of me (note the metaphor) is being taken to new limits, shedding many of the longstanding accoutrements to the psychosocial development of children.

Cultural Influences

In the second half of the 20th century, I believe the most recognizable face in America shifted from that of a scientist (Albert Einstein) to that of a professional athlete (Michael Jordan). This shift represents a change in interests and priorities that effectively taught

our children to aspire for athletics and away from an academic focus. The metaphor of success as contributions in the academic arena changed to success as measured by athletic performance. An important difference in these two metaphors is the fact that aspirations of academic work are inherently conducted out of the limelight, while athletic performance is performed primarily as a form of entertainment for the masses. A second important difference between these metaphors is that the primary assumption about the success of the academic is that it depends on hard work and general intelligence. The athletic metaphor is based more on an assumption of innate ability—a natural talent.

With the growth to 300 television channels available, children's attention has been carried for years. Sports, cartoons, and commercials absorb considerable attention of many of our children. By adding computer time, including all of its advertisers' efforts, one can predict certain outcomes. For example, a few years ago, LeBron James reportedly signed a contract to be paid \$94,000,000 to advertise tennis shoes. This was in addition to his extremely large salary to play basketball for the Cleveland Cavaliers. He was 18 years old at the time.

For two years, I worked with impoverished children in Louisiana in an 8-week-long summer program held on the campus of a university best known for its engineering degrees. The program brought more than 100 children together who had failed the eighth grade one or more times. They worked half a day, learning employment skills, and were paid minimum wage. The second half of the day was spent with academic instruction in mathematics and language arts. Many of these children became the breadwinners of their families upon receiving their first check. I got to know these chil-

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dren quite well. I had access to their school records, so I studied them and their lives very closely. I played basketball with them, oversaw an extensive counseling program, and generally lived with them for 2 months. They changed my life and helped form many of the beliefs I hold today about our field.

The first important lesson they taught me was that success in school was not solely contingent on academic ability. Their measures of ability revealed a nearly perfect normal distribution, with more than half showing average or greater intellectual abilities and some showing that they needed services for intellectually gifted students. Another lesson I learned through daily experience was that poor minority children are always watched, ridiculed, suspected of being delinquent, and regularly accused of breaking rules. They certainly were not considered able students by many of the adults who worked on the university's campus. For example, I came across a group of the students being lined up against a wall by a university policeman who was accusing them of vandalism. He pointed to marks on a sidewalk. I recognized the chalk outline of the body of Rapunzel. The 30-foot long outline of her hair was a dead giveaway. The artwork was in support of a creative writing class. It was very creative and quite artistic. The level of aggression of the police officer and the message conveyed was very disconcerting to me. The kids attempted to comfort me, once I had sent the officer on his way.

They came from abject poverty, but did not complain, feel entitled, or ask for preferential treatment. The teachers in the program were among the best I have been around in 25 years in higher education. The students' academic gains were tremendous. Statistics from the program indicated that those who

participated in this program were seven times more likely than comparison groups to graduate from high school.

What is the tie in to the metaphor emphasis of this column? My colleague and I discovered that none of the students could name more than these four occupations: teacher, minister, police officer, and professional athlete. A teacher was a White female (three quarters of the students were male and many were African American), and a person who most of these children had not had good experiences with. Being a minister required a "calling" and they were open to it, but one does not aspire to it. A police officer was seen as an enemy, certainly not a profession to pursue. That left professional athlete as their only possible future occupation. Virtually every student attending this program had all of their aspirations focused on becoming professional athletes, mostly professional basketball players. Having played ball with them on a daily basis, I learned that most of them had never participated on a formal basketball team. Moreover, their range of athleticism was normally distributed. In essence, the chance of being born into families of abject poverty had doomed them to a cultural ignorance with no reasonable aspirations for the future. The enormous wealth and admiration of a few world-class athletes became their hope for the future. More perniciously, it defined for them a future that could not be had. So, imagine being a student in a culture that defines you as a criminal and your only hope is being discovered as a great talent.

The metaphor of success for these young people was clearly entertainment-based. The children of poverty are not the only ones who see the world in this way. Cultural influences have encouraged a metaphorical shifting among most young people today.

Psychosocial Development

Erik Erikson and other psychologists have claimed that children go through predictable developmentally oriented psychosocial crises as they mature. During these periods, common issues are experienced. For example, as children move into early adolescence, they often feel like they are on stage, being watched by others. This feeling can be very strong, causing considerable concern to the young person. Other experiences of self-consciousness are exacerbated by feelings of differentness and inadequacy often felt during puberty. According to Erikson, between the ages of 12 and 16 years, children try to resolve psychosocial crises associated with identity formation. During this time, children grapple with the tension between the need to feel accepted and the desire for attention. They also are contending with issues of fitting in and standing out. These related issues, including feeling on stage, feeling different, desiring attention and wanting to fit in, and being accepted but feeling unique, are important aspects of the lived experiences of our young people.

A related experience of feeling on stage is an anticipation of being discovered. This phenomenon has been elevated to mythical status by tales of the occasional Hollywood actress who was "discovered" while sitting in a local soda shop. In the early days of this expectation, the implication was that one would be discovered on the way to becoming both competent and famous. Interestingly, modern day versions of this phenomenon hold little to no expectation for becoming competent, or becoming well known due to one's talent, but rather merely being discovered for who you are and becoming famous. Being famous or infamous has become the end goal. This change

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is very important in the psyche of those who have internalized this expectation. The metaphors of *fame is good* or *success is fame* or *success is fame for one's talent* or *labor versus success is fame for being you* are important in how they affect the lives of our children.

The Impact of This Confluence on the Emerging Metaphor

When you mix together these elements you find that during the past 20 years or so, the primary metaphor influencing the perceptions of children with gifts and talents has become *life as entertainment* (Kövecses, 2005). At different times in American history, important metaphors for the purpose of life have included survival, self-improvement, gaining wealth, and now entertainment. Underpinning most of the dominant metaphors during the past 75 years has been the construct of a meritocracy. In a meritocracy, people earn and realize opportunities due to hard work and commitment to improving oneself. The emerging entertainment

metaphor does not seem to be underpinned by such assumptions or concerns. Hence, being discovered means to become famous for the person one is, not based on any specific dedicated behaviors, sacrifices, or even goals.

Another aspect important to the entertainment metaphor is the ongoing expectation to be engaged in something one considers entertainment. Many children listen to music, watch television, and communicate with others on the computer, all while engaged in other endeavors. In other words, old notions of personality types determining who multitasks seem antiquated, being replaced by interests, passions, talent, access to technology, and the ever-present root metaphor of entertainment as a way of understanding life.

As adults interested in the development of gifted students, we will need to help shape the evolving characteristics of the entertainment metaphor to be sure that hard work, the importance of preparedness, goal setting, the role of incremental progress, stretching oneself, and occasional failure become internalized by our children. We should also commit to expanding students' knowledge base about professions and the pathways to get there. Because

the entertainment metaphor seems more representative of our youth, we will need to recognize the fact that we cannot eliminate it, but we may be able to help define it. As we all live in an increasingly *me-oriented* society, building community will necessarily be on the terms of the children who understand their world with an entertainment metaphor as its basis. It is important that we come to understand both the ramifications of this metaphor and the meaning that it holds for our children in order for us to be effective shepherds (yet another metaphor) as we attempt to guide them successfully into adulthood. **GCT**

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