Transforming Gifted Education from a Dream to a Goal: Reflections about the Education of Gifted Children

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I want to thank Dr. Jim Brooks, Wes Guthrie, Linda Robinson, and the NCAGT Board of Directors for inviting me to join you today. As a former NCAGT board member, I am proud to be included in this always outstanding conference, and to have a chance to speak to fellow educators of gifted children in the state of North Carolina, where I have taught for so many years.

My thoughts today will include three topics: dreams and goals, reflections about goals, and a big problem, an SOS. And I want to speak from my perspective as a curriculum writer. I do not have to face the problems that a superintendent has to face, or a principal, or even a classroom teacher; as a curriculum writer, I face different problems, and these give me an alternative view of gifted education.

ONE - Dreams and Goals

From time to time, it is healthy for us--as educators devoted to optimizing differentiated education for gifted children--to reexamine our most fundamental assumptions.

The assumption I would like to discuss with you can be expressed in a question:

Is gifted education a dream or a goal?

These two words, <u>dream</u> and <u>goal</u>, have much in common. They both indicate positive visions, and they both envision a change, a hope that the future will be better than the present. As educators of gifted children we value and need both dreams and

goals, but they must be differentiated dreams, and differentiated goals, if they are to optimize changes for gifted children.

There are different types of dreams. There are general, social dreams, that we wish for every child, but there are also the professional dreams of our specialty, differentiated dreams about gifted children living out their unique promise. It is a social dream that all children live in a world where they are treated equally, fairly, and gently. It is a professional dream that gifted children always go to school and learn things they do not already know. Is it a dream to think that the United States, having abandoned formal language study in the past two decades, will soon restore formal language study to our schools?

Let us explore some of the differences between a dream and a goal.

Dreams come to us; goals come from us.

Dreams are more passive; they envision an ideal.
Goals are more active, they have intentionality.

A dream is not necessarily something you intend to do, or to do yourself. A goal is something you intend to do. Dreams may not be within our power; goals must be within our power.

Dreams can be more abstract; goals must be concrete.

Dreams might not be realistic; goals must be.

> We can be inspired by a dream, but we must organize for a goal. We are not responsible for our dreams; we are responsible for our goals.
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> Dreams do not have deadlines, they are about someday; goals have deadlines, they are about when.
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> A dream is, in a sense, the ideal, extreme, perfected form of a goal; a goal is, in a sense, a dream made concrete, a dream optimized, temporal, and actionable. Dreams and goals are synergetic, symbiotic, yin and yang, mutually necessary and complementary. In some sense, then, gifted education is a synthesis of both dreams and goals; it is a tough-minded plan driven by a dazzling dream.

But when we select points for curricular emphasis, we must be guided not by dreams, with their wide latitude and soft focus--we must be guided by ambitious goals to ensure that gifted children get educated.

TWO - Reflections about Goals

I think we can agree that not every gifted child in the United States receives a full-strength, differentiated power education optimized for his or her learning potential. The reality is that in many situations, gifted education is a shining dream, lacking the goals to make it a reality.

If gifted education is about professional goals, then how can we think about goals most effectively? Again, I ask this question from my point of view as a curriculum writer.

First. In planning, start with the goal, and calculate backward. We cannot achieve greatness if we just pick random good ideas and see what happens; we must start with the goal, and let it define and organize the details, including the deadline. We cannot reach our goal by its deadline if we do not start the parts of the process in time. Let me use an example from science. The paradigm for calculating backward is NASA. In the early 1990s, when NASA wanted to do a mission to Saturn, they first calculated the planetary physics. They discovered that because of the orbits, they had a chance to rendezvous with Saturn in 2004. But they could only intersect with the fast-orbiting Saturn in 2004 if they met specific targets. To get to that point when Saturn got to that point...

- They had to launch their craft in October, 1997.
- They had to do a Venus flyby in 1998 and get a gravity boost, using Venus's gravity as a slingshot.
- They had to go back to earth and do a flyby in 1999 and get another gravity boost.

- They had to do a flyby back around Venus again in 1999 and get a third gravity boost.

- They had to do a Jupiter flyby in 2000 and get a fourth gravity boost that would sling them toward Saturn.

- They had to fine-tune the precise trajectory and velocity necessary to bring them into perfect rendezvous with Saturn in 2004.

NASA had to start with the final goal of arriving at a pinpoint in space at a pinpoint in time, and then calculate backwards to find what each stage of the mission required.

NASA's mission was not a dream; it was a goal. Each stage was critical. If NASA had failed to launch on time, or had missed the locations of their planetary targets, or missed the times of any of the four gravity boosts, they would have missed Saturn. And too much was at stake; NASA could not afford to miss any of those points because national goals and millions of dollars and thousands of professional careers were involved. LIKE A SCHOOL SYSTEM.

The goal of the Saturn mission was too important for imprecision. NASA could not afford to miss. Like a school system. Our educational goals are, if anything, more important than NASA's. We, too, spend millions of dollars and employ thousands of professionals on missions of critical national importance, and we cannot afford to miss. This nation cannot afford to fumble the education of its most promising minds. The world will make us pay.

If our goal, for example, is that by 8th grade, gifted students will be competent in the academic genre of writing, then we have to start with that goal and calculate backwards, launch our writing mission years in advance, and and make sure

that students arrive at that goal-point, at that 8th grade moment, with every necessary skill on board.

So, first, start with a dated goal and calculate backwards.

Second. Include every component of the goal. We all know that sometimes an important intellectual element can be unpopular and become subject to curricular neglect. Everything that is necessary for the goal must be on our curricular list. We cannot pick and choose which vital prerequisites we prefer to teach. We must teach them all. We must accept, welcome, and implement everything required for the mission. To write academically, for example, students must know conventional grammar, academic punctuation, academic style and vocabulary, paragraph design, essay structure, and research format. Fail to instill one of these, and we miss Saturn.

Third. Give first priority to academic goals. If one of our goals is that the gifted children in our schools receive strong preparation for honors high school courses and college courses, then we must prioritize class time, giving first emphasis to academic studies.

An example in language arts is, again, academic writing. It is good that students can write journals or short stories or other genres of writing, but students MUST be able to write standard academic papers with correct grammar and standard punctuation; their grades in most subjects depend on academic writing. In setting goals, we must give first priority to the academic options.

Fourth. Think in terms of competence, not exposure. Some courses are designed as broad, complete surveys, anthologies of excerpts, making sure that all points are covered. But the price we pay for being complete can be that the encounter is always shallow. Students only touch on things, and the wow is lost. Students may read paragraphs about famous authors, but never read the authors.

It is not enough that kids have had some exposure, even good exposure, to greatness. A short excerpt of a novel in an anthology does not put students in a close encounter of the literary kind. It is not the same. If you read a few chapters of Homer's Odyssey, that is not the same as having read the Odyssey. Reading the whole book is the difference between "I love the Odyssey" and "I think we read something about that."

Similarly, which is more important--being exposed to six genres of writing, or mastering academic writing really well?

Fifth. Trust fame. At first, this seems to be a foolish thought, but we live in a multimedia world that worships the latest everything. It is easy, in this glitter, to make the mistake of thinking that the great masterpieces are no longer necessary, relevant, or readable, that they are not worth the trouble of having students adjust to them. But the most famous novels, symphonies, paintings, autobiographies, buildings, and poems are not famous by mistake. Classics are not classics because they have been picked by teachers; it is the world of readers who pull a great book in and make it famous.

For many years I have been assigning numerous, unabridged classics in my honors and gifted classes. Every year, the students struggle during the first quarter. Why did Jane Austen have to write like that? Why should we read something that is so out of date? By the fourth quarter, students have adjusted to classics, and they no longer ask those beginners' questions. When I ask students if they would take ten dollars for their memories of the books, they always say no, no way.

Classic works educate students in a way that superficially similar modern works do not. Students and adults all over the world are reading Jane Austen and Jack London. The Narrative of Frederick Douglass inspires people on every continent.

So we should trust fame, which is another way of saying, trust greatness. We must open our minds and our hearts to greatness. We must face down the cool cynicism of the modern world. We must give ourselves and our students permission to be overexcited.

Fame can play a strong role in educational goals for gifted children because these students have unique potential to appreciate cultural masterpieces that are complex or subtle. Cultural sophistication is within their reach.

Sixth. Use the Pygmalion Effect, and apply it to ourselves. You remember the Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who fell in love with his sculpture of a beautiful woman, Galatea; Pygmalion prayed to Venus for help, and Venus brought the statue of Galatea to life for him. The Pygmalion Effect is an educational concept developed in 1968 by Robert Rosenthal; Rosenthal's

experiments with students and teachers demonstrated that students achieve what teachers expect them to achieve, even when the expectations are concealed and never directly communicated to the students. In Rosenthal's experiment, two groups of teachers were given randomly selected students, but the first group of teachers was told--falsely--that their students would be struggling learners, yet they found that it was true and got poor results; the second group of teachers who were told--falsely--that their students would be gifted also found that it was true, and got superlative results--even when in reality both groups of students were randomly selected, and were neither challenged nor gifted at all. Students rise, or sink, based in significant part on our faith in them. They tend to achieve what we believe they an achieve. If we want to optimize our academic goals for gifted children, we must set our goals high, higher than we first think possible.

An important twist for us as teachers is to turn the Pygmalion Effect on ourselves. We do, sometimes, find ourselves responsible for teaching something, such as grammar, that intimidates us. We do sometimes lack confidence. We are people too. But we must turn the Pygmalion Effect on ourselves and believe in our professional abilities. Every great teacher has mastered a body of power content on the job. It is one of the glories of our careers. If Pygmalion could do it, we can do it.

Seventh. <u>Keep research in perspective</u>. In recent years education has been inundated by a tidal wave of objectivity; we have become fanatical about measurable goals, demonstrable achievement, quantifiable results. Enormous amounts of class time that used to be spent on intellectual greatness are now

spent on preparing students to score well on tests of measurable skills. Some of school's greatest experiences are gone.

I had lunch this year with a group of principals in a western state. They spoke of the state test and of the elimination of literature from their curricula. Trying to think about how much time in the school year would be available for expanding their literature programs, I asked, "How much time do teachers devote to the state test?" "All of it," the principals said. "Our students in English class now read no novels at all."

Research has limits. Like other instruments, research only displays the objects it looks at. There are still important things that research has not yet examined, and important things that typical research studies are not designed to view. There are research projects that have gone wrong. We must keep the power of research in perspective; not everything can be researched. Not every goal is quantifiable.

Research is an excellent instrument, but a liberal arts education, and the judgment that comes from it, is also a high-powered instrument, and liberal arts judgment can make confident assessments that would be difficult or pointless to quantify.

As one example: we certainly want students exposed to the haunting stories of ancient Greek tragedy, of Sophocles and Eurpides and Aeschylus, but whether the students have internalized the humanity of Greek tragedy is less measurable than whether they can identify a run-on sentence on a multiple choice question. The results achieved through reading Greek

tragedy may be less measurable, less inductive, less objective, but they are profoundly important.

We must trust the enlightenment we receive from our liberal arts educations. We must trust the mind of a veteran English teacher. Most of the benefits from reading Shakespeare are not researchable or quantifiable, yet they are among the most important benefits available in education.

In developing our goals, we should benefit from research without rejecting goals that are beyond its perspective.

Eighth. If it isn't different, it isn't differentiated. In my travels around the country, I sometimes see gifted programs that are, at most, minor tweaks of the regular curriculum. But to optimize the curriculum for gifted children, tweaks are not sufficiently differentiated. Many gifted kids's reading levels are years beyond their classmates; they should be reading different literature. A little gifted girl might be able to ace the final math exam on the first day of school; she does not need more, or even harder, exercises on grade-level math; she needs the next math, math she does not already know. A true gifted curriculum is not the regular curriculum, tweaked. Some of our goals may involve creative scheduling so that gifted children can learn things they do not already know.

Ninth. Gifted kids thrive in each other's company. Anyone who has ever been around a group of gifted kids learning together knows why the research consistently shows that gifted kids benefit from being grouped together, at least part of the time. The sheer speed of their interactions is dizzying.

Overexcitable kids crazy to learn are plunged into a situation with other overexcitable kids crazy to learn, and the whole process takes on a pell-mell joy rarely seen in ordinary school life. When gifted kids learn together, the dynamic of mutual acceleration is a cognitive and affective force propelling all of them forward into the content.

So: Start with the goal and calculate backward; include every vital part of the goal; give first priority to academic options; think in terms of competence, not exposure; trust fame; use the Pygmalion Effect to make what we believe in happen; keep research in perspective; if it isn't different, it isn't differentiated; and gifted kids thrive in each other's company. If we keep these ideas in mind, we can construct more powerful goals.

THREE - A Big Problem, an SOS

Before I begin this final point, let me assure you that I love computers, wonderful software, and the internet. I am so glad that I lived long enough to enjoy these things. What I will say is not an attack on technology; I am not a Luddite.

You say you want a revolution? More than we realize, we live at a revolutionary tipping point in the history of American education--it is an educational cataclysm, unlike anything we have ever seen before. It is happening with incredible speed. The very basis of traditional education is evaporating out of our hands. It is a technological revolution, and it carries with it both blessings and horrors. Books, printed books on paper, are vanishing from the social landscape, and digital documents and communications are raging into dominance like a towering, technological forest fire.

Increasingly, students do not grow up with books; they grow up with websites, with texting, with video games, with iPods, with MTV. When I was a child, we read books at school AND at home. For many students in the United States today, that is not the case. It used to be that a bookless home was a function of socioeconomics; today it is a function of digital technology, affecting every home.

Everything is becoming digital.

Our personal documents are now often originally and exclusively digital; we never print them at all.

We access our bank accounts digitally, make purchases digitally, and receive digital bills to our email.

Written letters are replaced by emails, received by our distant friend in a matter of seconds.

Newspapers and magazines are going out of business. In 2009 more than one hundred American newspapers closed, and of the top twenty-five newspapers, twenty-three reported circulation declines. 2009 has been called “The Year the Newspaper Died.”

Great bookstore chains such as Borders are closing their doors.

This month, Apple demonstrated its new iPad handheld computer, which will run gorgeous digital versions of books, newspapers, and magazines. Personal libraries are accumulating in hard drives, instead of on shelves. People in airports read Kindles.

This is sometimes seen as an inexorable fait accompli. A teacher said to me not long ago, “Students today want to learn everything on their iPods, and we have to adjust to it.” We see some school systems in the country altering their programs to go with the flow, reducing the number of real books students read, and condensing the curriculum to more readable, dumbed-down, heavily illustrated texts.

Disturbingly, we begin to see some school systems replacing book orders with software orders. Think about that: software viewed as an alternative to books. Software is not an alternative to books; it is an alternative to filmstrips.

Unfortunately, the danger of our time is even more complex. This digital revolution that is edging printed books out of the landscape is also happening after decades in which American schools have come to rely more and more on textbooks and less on real books. There are students in the United States whose book experience consists entirely of textbooks, students who have never, ever, experienced great reading.

Unfortunately, textbooks are also not an alternative to real books. Having taught history and English since 1969, I have used an enormous number of textbooks in my career, and I know that there is no comparison between a textbook and Jane Eyre. Between a textbook and the Narrative of Frederick Douglass. Between a textbook and Romeo and Juliet. Between a textbook and the Constitution of the United States of America.

Textbooks are simply not written for the same reasons, for the same audience, or with the same language as real books. And textbooks, tragically for education, have been systematically dumbed-down for decades. They lack the vocabulary, the rich and complex sentences, the depth of meaning, the power of articulation. The greatness of language.

It is important to understand how intentional and methodical the dumbing-down of American education has been. The novelist James A. Michener once worked for one of the major textbook companies, Macmillan, and he described what the dumbing down process was like from the inside:

> [I was working for] one of the premier New York publishing companies, Macmillan, where I helped produce textbooks in a

> variety of subjects for use in schools across the nation. While I was at Macmillan, a radical new discipline began to dominate the writing of schoolbooks. A highly regarded educator and psychologist, Edward Lee Thorndike, compiled a list of words and the frequencies with which they occurred in everyday American life: newspapers, popular books, advertisements, etc. From these basic data, he published a list, sharply restricted, which he said ought to determine whether a specific word should be used in writing for children. If, for example, the word take received his approval, use it in schoolbooks. If discredit did not appear on his list, don't use it, for to do so would make the books too difficult for children.
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> We editors worked under the tyranny of that list, and we even boasted in the promotional literature for our textbooks that they conformed to the Thorndike List. In my opinion, however, this was the beginning of the continuing process known as "dumbing down the curriculum."

We have become so accustomed to dumbed-down school texts that we have lost our social memory of what school books, such as the McGuffey Readers, once were like. As we have relied more and more on these textbooks, with many students not reading any real books to provide contrast, we have settled into a dumbed-down reality, where we no longer think it is realistic for real children to read real books.

And now, books are being replaced by digital products. It is the invasion of the book snatchers.

The reading that educates is an essential element of our goals in all subjects. We cannot, we must not, let the digital tide wash real books from our schools, leaving only pallid textbooks behind. The technology that washes away the books will wash away our dreams and our goals. We must not cancel our book

orders or begin to lose the substance of our school libraries. Reading is the very meaning of education.

The dream of gifted education does not need to be a lost dream; it can continue to be the great dream that drives our goals. In our schools, real books and fast computers can and must coexist. We must find the way to enjoy the wonders of modern technology without losing the great reading that is the heart of the educational experience for gifted children.

I would like to conclude by telling you a story that illustrates, for me, what education can be if it is centered on the great tradition of knowledge, on the life of the mind, rather than on interminable tests of small skills.

Twenty years ago, yesterday, Nelson Mandela was freed from prison in South Africa. I happened to be teaching Alan Paton's great novel Cry, the Beloved Country in my world literature English class, and I had taught the students about the tragedy of South Africa and the oppression of the apartheid government. We finished the book on February eleventh, 1990. I told my students that Mandela was freed from Victor Verster prison, and I read them the final passage of the book:

> "Yes, it is dawn that has come. The titihoya wakes from sleep, and goes about its work of forlorn crying. The sun tips with light the mountains of Ingeli and East Griqualand. The great valley of the Umzimkulu is still in darkness, but the light will come there. Ndotsheni is still in darkness, but the light will come

> there also. For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret."

I asked the students, when is that dawn of emancipation? What day is that?

They thought, and looked at me, and said, "Today."