One book, above all, comes to my mind when thinking about a philosophical exploration of gifted education. It is:


In essence, Ward provides propositions (principles) aimed at providing opportunities for the whole child to develop in the realms of intellectual abilities, social awareness, social activism and relational ideation (making meaning based on reasoned thinking about ramifications and outcomes of decisions). This is well beyond the scope of current educational thinking, which continues to be depressed by accountability to a set of content standards that do little more than perpetuate the reading, writing and recitation methods found in the early 20th century to be untenable for functional citizenship. E.D. Hirsch’s conception of cultural literacy lives on; at the expense of creative/imaginative problem finding and solution generation!

Does this mean there already is a philosophy of gifted education?

Although the structural foundations were provided by Ward and further detailed by Newland (1976), not much evidence exists at present. This may be the most under-theorized component of our field. Without wise interpretations within the field of Gifted Education about the nature of knowing; nature of being; and, nature of values and valuing, Gifted Education remains in a state of flux as a field broken into factions adhering to tenets of the highly published and/or the most vocal organizational leaders.

A review of the existing literature supports this claim. I am reviewing the past 20 years worth of publications for evidence of an articulated philosophy of gifted education (or giftedness, or talent development for that matter). None exist. How dare I?

Above, I mentioned the three descriptors (focal points for any philosophical exploration). These were: the nature of knowing, the nature of being, and the nature of values and valuing.

**The Nature of Knowing**

Call this what we sense, perceive, seemingly understand.

From the earliest days of the field of gifted education (for intents of this document, the turn of the 20th century), studies have been conducted and theoretical implications discussed focusing on what the gifted/talented act or look like. For instance, Terman’s seminal study is looked upon by most as the longitudinal evidence grounding the field
of Gifted Education. Yet, this magnum opus explores tendencies almost exclusively. Life experiences and relationships between the researcher(s) and researched are hardly mentioned (except for anecdotal evidence). Call this an anomaly of research protocol of the time; this was pioneering work of a significantly longitudinal nature; yet the nature of being and the nature of values and valuing (although discussed as reasons why Terman’s work is limiting in present times) remain unarticulated.

Most other studies can be directly correlated with this category of thought in the field of Gifted Education. I’m not out on a limb, here. You are invited to explore yourself.

Examining the literature, the (by far) majority of published accounts reflect approaches based on the nature of knowing.

**How do we know the gifted?**

**How do we know the talented?**

**The Nature of Being**

What does it mean to be in the field of Gifted Education? A) to have a grasp of the historical record; b) to have empirical evidence regarding tendencies and behaviors; c) to understand the viewpoints, assumptions and experiences of the gifted (individually and collectively).

The list can go longer, but exploring these three precepts leads to realization a dearth of knowledge exists in this realm.

One can gain a grasp of the historical record and empirical evidence through advanced study (beyond the bachelors level). The record exists and is addressed openly by scholars and practitioners in the field.

The sticky precept is the third. Few studies explore the meaning of giftedness/talent from the perspectives of the individuals bearing the label. This requires qualitative schemes of study, which have been growing in popularity; but, have little evidence of existence in the historical record. We just don’t have a base of knowledge about being gifted or talented that can be effectively used (either transferred or generalized) to other settings or situations. It seems each incidence is unique; although there are some commonalities that should be explored more intensely.

**How is it to be gifted?**

**How is it to be talented?**

**The Nature of Values and Valuing**

I dare say this branch on the philosophic tree has not been realized by the field yet. Again, the historical record guides my rationalization (or ir-rationalization as colleagues might see fit to say!) here. To my knowledge few individuals (AnneMarie and George Roeper and Jim Delisle serve as notable candidates) have been willing to openly verbalize their beliefs and core value judgments. This requires many personal risks, for values and the nature of valuing elude empirical inquiry relying instead on tacit
knowledge and experience. Indeed, these open verbalizations tend to be received by others as attacks rather than the philosophical challenges they are.

As a result of limitations in the Nature of Being (see above), the Nature of Values and Valuing remains virgin territory awaiting exploration. Very few individuals have gained wisdom enough to look critically at the field of Gifted Education. Most are content to contribute here or there, as the various societal, economic or political factors dictate without a clearly articulated line of inquiry inclusive of the field as a whole.

What values inform giftedness? Talent?
What giftedness/talent informs values and valuing?

A philosophy of gifted education requires all of these areas to be articulated. We are not able to do so on a fundamental level—yet. I intend this essay to begin the process of conversation leading toward development of a philosophy of gifted education that includes rather than divides workers in the field.

So what guides current viewpoints in Gifted Education?

Basic educational theory adheres to one or the other of the following: Plato’s view of philosopher-kings ruling society as benevolent protectors (as described in The Republic); or, Rousseau’s argument that each individual be trained to the utmost of ability (as articulated in Emile). How do you think about education? Do you want to prepare youth to be productive members of society in which the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few? Or, do you believe each individual should get what (s)he needs to rise to the highest level of ability where the needs of the few outweigh the needs of the many?

Chances are great that Rousseau’s vision matches your personal ideal; as most people advocating for the gifted “see” the needs of the few to be critically important—even for the many over time. Perhaps this artificially contrived dichotomy (for there are a multitude of possibilities here) helps frame the perceived separation of gifted education from regular education. And, in our “neck of the woods” how I envision a split between proponents of giftedness and those of talent development.

Think back to the questions posed at the end of each section of this talk. Was it “easier” to answer those containing the word “talent” or “giftedness”? What figurative “camp” do you hold membership within?

Let’s start a journey into our field with a poignant question.

What do we know about talent development?

To engage this question, an underlying assumption is: at the present moment of school (and society) full understanding of what it means to be an artist, sculptor, scientist or mechanic is held. Slippery, yes. But this assumption is required by definition. If we don’t know these answers, how can we delineate (or label) talents?

Developing talent obviates a set of behaviors that when functionalized and performed necessitate critical performance judged worthy of expert (or journeyman) status in a
field. But who decides acceptable or even exceptional performance? How is this description functionalized?

By looking at the existing guiding principles; functionally examining past performance—the status quo—and then drawing inferences and comparisons.

Will boundaries be stretched, or new fields recognized? Highly unlikely.

On a broader plateau, how does a focus of talent development diminish the field of gifted education (or gifted child education)?

It limits opportunities and possibilities. When viewing high ability/giftedness/talent as something to be fundamentally exhibited through performance or acknowledgeable tendencies, we restrict the abilities of individuals to explore the exceptionalities inherent in their being. We only “see” what has come before us in epochial terms (through socially acceptable means, or culturally appropriate displays). Anything deviating from this definition elicits ridicule or, in some cases, shock and disbelief.

I’m thinking of Galileo’s astronomical work here. His theorizing led to a life of political isolation, religious inquisition, and personal desiccation. He was required to rescind his statements and beliefs under penalty of death. Who stood up for Galileo’s development of talent? Likely, his mentors were tight-lipped for fear of their own personal safety. Unfortunately, the historical record does not provide substance for this conjecture.

The same modus operandi existed for many of the “great discoverers” (typically this label was only provided posthumously). The best and brightest have always been considered the bane of their contemporary societies’ status quo. These individuals moved beyond the acceptable, the sound, the theoretically supported in their quest to satiate their curiosity.

It isn’t development of talent we need to consider. It is the spirit of giftedness. The insatiable need to push boundaries and step beyond the status quo, the current and accepted.

In other places, I’ve talked about the need for gifting—providing safe haven and support for the seemingly strange and sometimes bizarre behavior of the gifted mind. It takes a gifted individual to provide this life-bond for a protégé. Without this connection, little possibility of extension occurs. There are too many forces waiting to obey the curiousness, creativity, or imaginative spirit of the gifted. Yet, one supporter in the wilderness of giftedness is often all it takes to keep the fire blazing in the belly of the gifted individual. In functional terms, Jan and Bob Davidson fan this blaze in their Young Scholars.

This isn’t a focus on talent development—for often, no talent is observed (or is overtly observable according to social conventions!). It is the spark of acceptability and respect for the individual that fans the fires of contempt and critical passion that the gifted individual possesses. Perhaps talent will develop; but, this is an afterthought and “catching up” of society to the lived experience of the gifted individual.
Indeed, it might be that a formal identification of “giftedness” has not taken place. For most, it takes some “deviant” behavior from the norm to set the wheels of screening and identification into motion. Without an overt display of sorts, giftedness, theoretically does not exist!

Does this mean I believe everyone is gifted in some way?

Absolutely not. I do believe everyone has strengths not fully realized; but, giftedness is qualitatively different from an unrealized strength. Giftedness is a complex state of being beyond the boundaries of potential academic (content) ability—the common descriptor used in education. It is the limitless possibility of finding connections and additional questions; where others only see an answer (this, by the way, is beyond the intellectual descriptor currently used in identification schemes). It exists outside of the Intelligence Quotient (g or otherwise described!)—established through measurement on a standardized instrument of comparison to others.

Giftedness is a spirit or richness of soul embracing all that the process of life and living bring to the senses. It is intensity of emotion, imagination, motion, and intellect. It is inter-relatedness. It is captivating when others are in its presence. It is splendor of life personified. (ex. In positive regard—Mother Theresa, Ghandi; In negative regard—Genghis Khan, Hitler)

More often, the self-awareness of the individual increases to a point of high self-worth. Only then can the developing self-consciousness of the gifted individual carry the weight of “high potential.” Only then can the individual fight against conventions of thought; and the attacks of the unaccepting. Only then can the process of societal/cultural change begin to stir. This can be positive; or, as mentioned earlier negative. Critical, though, is the opportunity for the individual to reason through their actions.

Can we realize this change in philosophical underpinnings?

I believe there are some already in the midst of this struggle. There are scholars currently working the gifted-side of the street (Tom Hebert, George Betts, Barry Grant, Michael Piechowski, Jim Delisle); standing on the shoulders of the giants who came before us. Names such as Virgil Ward, E.P. Torrance, Joy S. Guilford, Leta Hollingworth, Ernest Newland, Jim Mehorter and AnneMarie Roeper.

But, this position has been slowly eroded in the name of accountability, performance, and competitiveness (or competition). Many are involved in the process of legitimizing the need to focus on developing talent in light of the political (and economic) ramifications of doing so. No bones about it, power and funding are critical to the continued existence of the field. These are the realities of living in this historical period.

Continuing down this road, however, may doom us to accountability just like regular educators face. No longer will the exceptionalities of students be recognized as what they are—developmental differences. They will be seen as imperfections that in most cases need to be fixed in order to move the student to average (or proficient in today’s language).
What of the gifted? No need to focus. They are already functioning at or beyond this level—hence the “easy” elimination of funding, programs and ultimately, focus.

How do we fight this mindset?

Start with Hollingworth (1939),

More and more it becomes clear that human welfare on the whole is much more a matter of the activities of deviates than it is a matter of what the middle mass of persons does...It is the deviate who takes the initiative and plays the primary part in social determination... (p. 102)

Address unforeseen possibilities; the undiscovered frontiers. Look at the investment potential so often neglected by American schools. Turn the proverbial tables. Review the inventions and discoveries that have led to improvements in the human condition; from life saving drugs and treatments, to mechanization and technological marvels such as the computer. Were it not for forward-thinkers and tinkerers, few (if any) of these wonders would exist. But this does not mean products prove the worth of the gifted.

Many, many inventions were ahead of their time. The inventors were vilified and scorned rather than praised for their insight. Shift to artwork. Very few of the “best” painters were recognized during their lifetimes. They received high regard a generation or more into the future, when their work could be analyzed, accepted, valued.

Were these artisans gifted or talented? Using a talent development focus, neither....then talented...then gifted! Their products were not valued; not accepted by society as exemplary (or in most cases even worthwhile). Society changed, and so did the standards of acceptability. As historians and critics examined the works, connoisseurship led to higher degrees of support, ultimately attaching the label “genius” to the so-called Masters—the gifted.

Giftedness directly correlates with dimensions of growth, crossing of borders, expansion of knowledge, connection to life and living. It is through this process that personal development builds. Giftedness is internalization of ability; and, resiliency to progress regardless of external criticisms. It is beyond the limiting scope of talent development.

Will talent development lead us to standards?

Take care when considering this question. Standards limit possibilities and options. They decry the continual focus on performance to “prove a point.” Few are thinking about (let alone exploring) the historical record as it pertains to the current wave of interest in accountability. Most are content trying to address current arguments with thoughts of Parallel Curriculum dancing in their heads.

This is not what the gifted need.

They need a philosophical and scholarly focus in gifted education that honors the past, challenges the present and looks toward the future. They need possibilities and opportunities to find strengths and then pursue them to the most personally satisfying levels. They need support and guidance through gifting that honors and respects the individual’s self-worth, developing sense of being and conceives connections and place
in an often-hostile world. They need opportunities to look beyond the immediacies of the moment into the future; all the while thinking about the complexities of living in a world constantly in political, social, cultural and economic flux. They need to learn how to play nice with others—to see, hear and respect beliefs while also challenging themselves and others to find additional perspective. They need to become activists in support of one another.

In short, they need us to focus our efforts and build community, criticism and hermeneutic spiritualism within our ranks. Fore, many of them are already embracing the Nature of Values and Valuing; finding that they stand-alone at the edge of a broad frontier.

References

