

Here is a paper (with video) I have given at conferences.

# TWELVE ISSUES:

## IMPLICATIONS OF POST-MODERN CURRICULUM THEORY FOR THE EDUCATION OF THE TALENTED

Piirto, J. (1997). *Twelve issues: Postmodern curriculum thought and the education of the gifted*. Speech presented at National Association for Gifted Children meeting, November, 1997, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Piirto, J. (1998a) *Twelve issues*. **Speech and video** at Iowa Research Symposium, University of Iowa, Iowa City, May, 1998.

Piirto, J. (1998b). *Twelve issues*. Speech and video at European Council for High Ability meeting, Oxford, England, September, 1998.

Piirto, J. (1998c). *Twelve issues*. Speech and video at Ohio Association for Gifted Children meeting, Columbus, Ohio, October, 1998.

Piirto, J. (1998d). *Twelve issues*. Speech and video at National Association for Gifted Children meeting, Louisville, Kentucky, November, 1998.

Piirto, J. (1999). *Talented children and adults: Their development and education*. Columbus, OH: Prentice-Hall/Merrill.

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**Contact me to borrow the video (30 minutes long) for educational use. [jpiirto@ashland.edu](mailto:jpiirto@ashland.edu)**

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### ABSTRACT:

Postmodern curriculum theory provides a framework for educators of the gifted and talented to critique the assumptions of the field from within the field. Twelve issues are discussed: (1) issues of time; (2) issues of power and class; (3) issues of the body; (4) issues of the spirit; (5) issues of the canon; (6) issues of justice; (7) issues of diversity; (8) issues of language; (9) issues of discourse; (10) issues of desire and passion; (11) issues of gender; and (12) issues of imagination.

*"Modern visions of education as characterized by the Tylerian rationale, behavioral lesson plans, context-free objectives, competitive and external evaluation, dualistic models that separate teacher and student, meaning and context, subjective persons and objective knowledge, body and spirit, learning and environment, and models of linear progress through value-neutral information transmission are no longer acceptable in the postmodern era." -- Patrick Slattery*

*"A postmodern world will involve postmodern persons, with a postmodern spirituality, on the one hand, and a postmodern society, ultimately a postmodern global order, on the other. Going beyond the modern world will involve transcending its individualism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, mechanization, economism, consumerism, nationalism, and militarism. Constructive postmodern thought provides support for the ecology, peace, feminist, and other emancipatory movements of our time, while stressing that the inclusive emancipation must be from modernity itself." - David Ray Griffin*

### Introduction

In 1994 Margolin and Sapon-Shevin, in two books critical of the field of talent development and gifted education, wondered whether there even is a giftedness construct. Margolin and Sapon-Shevin, critics from outside the field, believe that gifted and talented education benefits the privileged classes. Along with many others within the field, they also believe that giftedness is not absolute, the results of a test score, but that giftedness is a socially constructed phenomenon. (Sapon-Shevin also argued for full inclusion, that is, for full heterogeneous grouping in classrooms, with

no special services or programs for any children. Not to do so, to treat some children differently, to make the curriculum different, is to go against the idea of community, she thought.)

In 1996 in a special issue of the *Journal for the Education of the gifted*, Borland took up the cry and asked the field to criticize itself in these areas: (1) Is there such a thing as a gifted child? (2) Is gifted education racist, sexist, and classist? (3) Is there a need for ability grouping? (4) Does gifted education interfere with community? (5) Is the field irrelevant? Borland concluded that removing gifted education programs from schools would exacerbate the problem of inequity, for who would be most impacted by such removal? Affluent parents would find their children special schools and special programs, but parents who are in poverty would not be able to afford to do so. For other self-critical comments see Callahan, 1996; Gallagher, 1996; Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995; Pendarvis & Howley, 1996. These thinkers from within our field rightfully ask us to look hard at ourselves, but let me put these critiques into a theoretical framework.

In recent years, a group of educational foundations thinkers known as the curriculum reconceptualization movement (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman, 1995) called for a rejection of the modernist conception of curriculum as a list of objectives, books, and concepts to be mastered according to the plan set down (and essentially unmodified since he set it down), of Ralph Tyler in 1949. Tyler's four goals for curriculum are essentially unchanged: He asked : 1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain? [objectives] 2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes? [design] 3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized? [scope and sequence] and 4. How can we determine that these purposes are being attained? [evaluation].

The 1960s civil rights movement, the opposition to the Vietnam War, and the development of the counter culture contributed to a rejection of curriculum as behaviorism, with its "observable" goals and objectives. The rejection of positivism and structuralism led to a crisis of meaning as experiments in the "open classroom," and to neo-progressivist calls to treasure childhood for its own sake, for a more humanistic education with an emphasis on the affective, and on the personal rather than the corporate.

Since the 1970s, the reconceptualization has focused on the dangers of curriculum engineering, emphasizing a focus on freedom and aesthetics, with a call to tie curriculum not to technique but to the human spirit. The reconceptualists have urged educators not to conceive values as goals or objectives, to design an educational environment that values educational activity, to pursue a wider view of what educational activity is, and to foster creativity. They have urged us to value the arts and humanities as well as the sciences and mathematics.

By the 1980s, a move back to the center focused curriculum on stage theories of development, with an emphasis on what was appropriate during various stages. In the 1990s curriculum showed a fascination for the socialist theory of Vygotsky and with the assessment emphasis of Gardner. Higher-order thinking became the emphasis at the same time as a call for going back to the basics. Recent studies such as the TIMSS study, comparing U.S. science and mathematics curriculum (Peak, 1996) with Japanese and German curriculum have noted that the U.S. curriculum is "a mile wide and an inch deep."

goals and objectives; that is, a consideration of curriculum as a field of "design," to a consideration of curriculum from the point of view of *understanding* on a deep level what our in- school, out-of-school, conscious- and unconscious- curriculum choices and predispositions mean. We need to continue to engage head on the critiques of our field, our attitudes toward curriculum, and our ingrown biases, defensiveness, and prejudices. Postmodern curriculum reconceptualists and theorists provide a framework for doing so without resorting to personal attacks or finger-pointing.

I have chosen the omnibus term "postmodern" to define this movement, though others give it names such as "post-structuralist" or "deconstructionist." The postmodern period is variously thought to have arrived after the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, after the death by assassination of President John Kennedy, during the Cold War. The values of postmodernism have been widely discussed in the arts, architecture, and literature, and it is true that the postmodern curriculum theorists often emphasize the aesthetic over the scientific. The influence of the Scientific Enlightenment, Descartism is widely decried by postmodern curriculum theorists, who would seem to fall into the category of what Eisner (1979;1985;1994) called the "Social Reconstruction" orientation to curriculum.

I believe the questions this movement raises have been inadequately addressed by the field of the education of the talented. In reading and re-reading these critical theorists over the past few years, and in thinking about the implications of what they have to say for our field, I have settled on twelve avenues, or issues, which might be fertile for our future thinking about who we are and what we do, and provide direction for our discussion and our research.

The twelve issues are (1) issues of time; (2) issues of power; (3) issues of the body; (4) issues of the spirit; (5) issues of the canon; (6) issues of justice; (7) issues of diversity; (8) issues of language; (9) issues of discourse; (10) issues of desire and passion; (11) issues of gender; and (12) issues of imagination.

## Twelve Issues

### 1. Issues of time.

In a critique of the federal report *Prisoners of Time*, Slattery (1995) noted that contemporary schooling considers time in modernist terms, segmenting and breaking up the whole in a false conception that time is linear. He said that schools and educational researchers falsely assume that curriculum units, grades, grade levels, classes, are neat and pure elements that can be scientifically assessed and applied to other situations if one uses the proper control group. Slattery said, "This philosophy of modernity has resulted in an exaggerated emphasis on manipulation of time: time management, timed tests, wait time, time on task, quantifiable results over time, time schedules, time-out discipline centers, allocation of instructional days on annual school calendars, core academic time, carnegie units, time between classes, year round schooling, and the like" (p. 612). In applying his critique to the field of gifted education, I thought of our emphasis on acceleration. Moving a student fast through the curriculum assumes that there *is* a curriculum, a body of subject matter to be "mastered," when in reality there is not; there are certain school systems' conceptions of curriculum as interpreted by their teachers.

Likewise, the concept of "*curriculum compacting, or curriculum telescoping*" again to "buy time" for "high end learners" assumes that there are discrete subject matter "bits" to be learned and "mastered." If a student has read *Romeo and Juliet* in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and the eighth grade regular classroom teacher is angry because "we do Shakespeare in 8<sup>th</sup> grade," two questions need to be asked: (a) how can one "do Shakespeare"? ; and (b) did reading *Romeo and Juliet* twice -- or five or twenty times -- really "cover" the play? Perhaps choosing only one play by Shakespeare, to be read over and over again, will give the student a deeper appreciation for Shakespeare than reading many plays will. Is reading "more" necessarily better than reading "deep"? Curriculum compacting or telescoping seems most appropriate for such a subject as spelling or math facts or definitions, the very lowest levels of learning, the knowledge levels, and not for curricula where higher level thinking is the norm. We need to re-define our concept of rushing people through.

Social critic and novelist John Ralston Saul in his 1995 book, *The Unconscious Civilization* also asked a question about our conception of time in relation to schooling. He noted that we have more time than any people throughout history. We organize our educational experiences in a pattern that "increasingly represents a desperate rush, as if driven by the threat that time will leave us behind." The reality is that more and more people have, at the end of their lives, 25 or more years of "retirement," forced idleness. While a few years of retirement is valuable, is 25 years? Saul said, "What this indicates is that, on the conscious level, there is no particular reason, and certainly no practical reason, for us to be front-end loading our lives. Then why does our civilization push us to do so?" (p. 157-158).

Saul's comment made me think about the statement in *Goals 2000*: "Time is the variable." Presently we want to rush the talented kids through their schooling in order that they can take their places in adult society, and save the world through their great contributions at an early age (see Benbow, 1992 ; Piirto, 1992; Simonton, 1995). Considering time from a lifespan perspective, why must we do that? What would maturity do to a person's learning? What about the current emphasis on adult education and the fact that many women stay home to raise their families and then enter careers at a later date? This late entry effectively kills their chances to become world-class, "Big C" creators (cf. Csikszentmihalyi, 1995; Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994), but what if we reconceptualized the timeline of careers, and welcomed mature talented people, mothers and fathers, into the work force, welcomed their mature insights and contributions? What if we expanded our conception of the talented to include "late bloomers" and focused on them as we do on precocity as shown by behavior or test?

Considering time from a boredom perspective (our kids are bored in school because of the time they spend "waiting") we have now embraced, as a part of the larger system, the model of inclusion, where classroom pace may be even more slowed down. How can we address this short of home schooling every talented student? How can we balance boredom on the front end with boredom on the back end of life? What is the definition of boredom? There are several types of boredom: one is boredom because one doesn't know the material and another is boredom because one does know the material. Is boredom necessarily bad? Perhaps boredom provides time in which to daydream, to wonder, to wish, to enter a state of reverie where one can think creative thoughts. In our fast-paced, time-conscious field, we may need to revisit our concept of boredom and what to do about it.

## *2. Issues of power and class.*

The critiques of our field, that we are educating students in the positivist paradigm to duly and without protest assume their roles in society, must be considered. As Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg said, "In a culture of positivism education becomes a form of social regulation that guides humans toward destinies that preserve the status quo" (Giroux, 1996, p. x). How is power viewed in certain school settings by men, women, children? Are our teachers aware of their complicity with the power structure, their docility in training students toward outcomes that preclude self-examination? Giroux (1996) asked, "How can public school classroom teachers orient themselves to curriculum in a way that acknowledges the underlying ethical and normative dimensions that structure classroom decisions and experiences?" (p. 3).

The illusion of the rationality of the technocratic society pervades our field. While our goal as teachers and professors is to teach students that all beliefs are relative (that is, to bring students to an appreciation of each other's beliefs and views of the world), the postmodern theorists insist that truth is not **relative** but **relational** (that is, what is considered true is depends on who is in power, on what is the student's and teacher's relation to that power, and on the Zeitgeist). In the past year, we have seen the Lutheran and Catholic churches of Europe apologize to the Jewish people for their silence during World War II. The churches had thought that if they kept quiet, the Jewish problem would go away. And it did -- straight to the ovens. If we stay neutral we support the power structure. There is no such thing as neutrality, say the liberation theorists such as Macedo and Freire. This critique needs to be examined by those of us who educate academically talented students. Much of the rhetoric justifying our existence is to "save the world" and to exploit "our nation's natural resources, our bright children." Essentially, we are educating them to assume roles of power and privilege. If someone has power, someone does not, and when the subordinates accept their status as natural, inherent, destined, or random, oppression and power are securely entrenched.

*National Excellence* (1993) argues that international comparisons of test scores should drive the education of the outstandingly talented; that is, their "quiet crisis" is that they do not score as high on tests as bright students in other countries. The federal government wrote this report and drives policy toward the achievement of domination by capitalist interests through manipulation of the education of the brightest students in the U.S. toward achievement on international tests (e.g. TIMSS; U.S. silence about Chinese policy toward Tibet). The justification for these practices is that the U.S. is "good"; that our capitalist free enterprise system will save the world. At the same time, it destroys indigenous culture: the omnipresence of U.S. products and television in Europe has contributed to a decline in national European cultures (twenty years ago, I could find French, or Finnish, or Dutch singers on the juke boxes in restaurants; these years it is difficult to do so, though there are many American singers). The pervasiveness and popularity of American cigarettes, movies, and M-TV is, in my opinion, effectively commercializing existing national cultures to destruction and death.

On the power issue of social class, bell hooks (1995) noted that when she, as a child of the working class, entered Stanford, she never encountered a professor who was from the working class. Her professors espoused class-less values, but were themselves members of the privileged classes. While we in education do not have that situation, for most, or many of us are from the working classes -- many fathers, like mine, were staunch members of trade unions who sent us to college to fulfill a dream they themselves had -- we still behave along lines where class counts. So it is no surprise that we have complied with the implicit goals of this field, to move bright poor students into a higher social class. Or is it? Where are we from? What does that mean for our lives as educators? How have we been silenced? How have we been silenced, in an attempt to "fit in" to the goals of this field, the outcomes? Who better than we to

speaking up for our own cultures, our own working class values and backgrounds?

Of course, another issue of power is who decides? Who decides what learners will learn and what teachers will teach? Does the Advanced Placement Company decide? Does the International Baccalaureate Company decide? Does the college English department decide? Teachers of advanced and honors classes often feel they have so much material to "cover" they cannot breathe, teach, or be free. They feel relegated to positions of "curriculum delivery woman" much as the "milk man" of yore.

Still another issue of power is that of our field within the huge education establishment. We have served as bellwether; we have pioneered many teaching strategies and philosophies over the years; we have not received validation nor recognition for this, and we have pulled back into our shells, licked our wounds, and whimpered as we were accused of racism, classism, elitism, and test scorism. We slink in a cowardly manner down the halls of our colleges of education. Yet we know we represent a field that has no money, no prestigious following, no government cachet, but which strives toward educating and serving the needs of students who do have learning needs that are different from those of other children. We feel powerless against the onslaught of the criticisms leveled against us. What is our recourse? Perhaps to just continue as we have been, to be the pioneers of innovative educational practice that may begin as education for the talented, but will soon be adopted as education for all. Or maybe our pedagogy of the powerless is not so powerless at all, given our clientele, who can take a gem, a germ, a smidgeon and expand, magnify and extend.

### 3. Issues of the body.

In our field we call for the life of the mind. We abhor the anti-intellectualism of current educational curricula, and the under-educated teachers who have no appreciation of "high" culture. Maxine Greene, a doyenne of the critical theorists, herself said that the purpose of education is to learn from the Dostoevskys and not from the Tom Barones ("Tom Barone is no Dostoevsky" she said in 1996 at a qualitative research conference at the University of Georgia, virtually dismissing the work created by contemporary living artists.)

Yet cultural critics, multiple intelligencists, and special educators have begun to emphasize that there are many more ways of learning than intellectual ways -- that learning gets into the "intellect" through bodily means. As Madeleine Grumet (1996) said, "Identity is lived before it is taught" (p. 17). Magda Lewis (1996) noted, "The body of knowledge that is the curriculum and the body experience of being schooled--learning to be still and be quiet--are not separate from each other in the process of education" (p. 33). On another bodily level, the students on whom we focus are known as "good" (Margolin, 1994). They obey; they are curious and witty and have good memories; they are crowned with haloes by adults; they sit politely in classes, helping the slower students without making a fuss, and as such, they may not receive the attention they deserve as frazzled teachers wrestle with the "troublemakers," the physically active students.

On still another level, we advocate that teachers subsume their essential teaching selves from "teacher as interpreter" to "teacher as manager." The model of intervention specialist/ facilitation / inclusion that is beginning to dominate how the gifted and talented are taught may mitigate against a close, human relationship between teacher and student. Teaching as "performance" is a bodily act, an act of love and spontaneity. Teachers as "facilitators" may not be able to create the relationships with each individual student that make teaching a theatrical reaching out and coming back. The model de-humanizes the teacher such that the teacher becomes a function and not a person. Teaching is an act of passion and engagement with certain, specific, children -- "my kids," "my class." On the other hand, the model may encourage such relationships as well.

As bell hooks (1995) noted, "Teaching is a performative act" (p. 130). As we perform as teachers, we create a theater space, a space that allows us to invent spontaneously, to be artists and not craftsmen, to be fully human, and not "skillful." The picture of teacher that gains emotional validation in our popular movies, is of the teacher leaping on the desk in *Dead Poets Society*, or the socially engaged and innovative inner city teacher in *Dangerous Minds*. This is the teacher that grabs our minds and emotions. That is the teacher we seek to be. Yet we seem to be wanting to train teachers who resemble the character of "Ditto" in the movie *Teachers*. When we teach as performers, we bewitch our students, and they bewitch us. I as a teacher am an artist, a dancer; I can change focus from moment to moment; I can

read the temperature and mood of my class; I can speak up and say something to make that sleeping student in the back sit up and participate; I can "cover" the material or not, as the moment suits me; every moment of every day in my classroom I am tripping the light fantastic. I am not a "facilitator," a "guide on the side." I am a partner in my students' learning!

bell hooks (1995) noted that the more intellectual the teacher, the more he/she is permitted to deny the body, to be just a mind up there immobile behind the desk or podium in front of the class or lecture hall, proclaiming and personifying the "body" of knowledge he/she holds in the "mind." Part of the separation of social classes has to do with how little or how much one uses the body. When the teacher walks out from behind the desk or podium the body becomes engaged with the student body" (p. 139). hooks made the provocative statement that "The person who is most powerful has the privilege of denying their body." However, such denial may also be true for those who are least powerful as well. On a recent evening, in a course called "Counseling and Creativity for the Talented" 1/3, or 8, of the 24 female teachers revealed, after reading Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), that they or their daughters had or are wrestling with eating disorders! If the experience of these female teachers is any indication, we still have not resolved the bodily issues raised by the visions of women in the mass media, and by the consequences of being silenced and made to conform in our school days.

#### **4. Issues of the spirit.**

Studies by Coles (1991) and Hoffman (1992) have indicated that children have rich spiritual lives. Hoffman said, "Through increasing involvement with young children I saw that some definitely had 'higher' sensitivities for compassion, creativity, or aesthetics. Yet nowhere was this early capability recognized in my textbooks" (p. 15). Hoffman showed that people may undergo experiences that are mystical or spiritual during their childhoods. Our (my students and mine) explorations into the Dabrowski Theory of Positive Disintegration (as it is called in Canada, or of Emotional Development as it is called in the United States), using the Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ) have recently unearthed a theme in the questionnaires that focuses on talented students' connection with God. Talented teenagers made such statements as "I love God very much. He has a lot of meaning for me and gives me my most intense pleasure of purity." "God gets my mind going." "God is a paradox I have to think about a lot" (Flint, Schottke, Willmore, and Piirto, 1997). The field of the education of the talented needs to address this deep need and curiosity.

Fearful of confusing spirituality with religion, public educators understandably shy away from considering children's spiritual needs. Yet the religious right argues for the reading of the Bible as devotion in the morning before school, and for Christian prayers before school and football games. Dominant cultural values infuse the schools. Easter bunnies hop along bulletin boards during the spring, and Christmas trees sparkle in school lobbies. Protests about such religious symbolism are waged by Jewish, Moslem, atheist, and Buddhist students and parents, and these protests are ridiculed by mainstream educators who say, "What's the harm?" Christian parents protest witches and goblins on the eve of the Christian holiday called All Soul's Day. Yet such symbols and celebrations, while religious, are not spiritual. They are denominational. The deeper question to be addressed in our curriculum thought is, how to engage the deeply spiritual nature of the child? What is spirituality? How can we honor it?

In my experience as an artist and teacher of creativity classes, I have found that the aesthetic response borders on the spiritual. Likewise, in my experience as a teacher of counseling classes, I have found that the affective response borders on the spiritual. In these affective and aesthetic explorations we all, both students and professor, are awed by the depth of the spiritual insight gained. We are often in tears from the insights that have pierced us; we are often silent before the wonder of the universe. Both aesthetics and the emotional should be included in any discussion of curriculum for the talented. Music, art, and literature stir us to consider our true selves, our spiritual natures. The curriculum for talented children with their intellectual, emotional, and imaginal intensity must somehow confront the spiritual. The illusion of "objectivity" and of the presence of "objective knowledge" is false. The purpose of art is to move us to consider our deepest selves. We should battle, on all fronts, efforts to dismiss the arts as frills and nonessentials. The arts should be infused into every curricular domain.

#### **5. Issues of the canon.**

American critic Harold Bloom (1994) discussed the books he believes should be included in the canon. *Canon* is a religious term which has come to mean the inviolable course of study that students should read and discuss in order to become "educated." Mortimer Adler, Robert Hutchins, William Bennett, Diane Ravitch, and others have argued that some books have more value than others as materials to be studied in our classes. Postmodernists argue that popular culture should also be an academic concern. "Who reads must choose," Bloom said. Feminist critic Toril Moi (1988) noted that even feminist critics, who don't believe the curriculum should include all DWM's (Dead White Males) have a canon, and that is usually novels and poems by women writers of the nineteenth century. The underlying belief is that if students read "great works" by "great authors" they will become better and finer humans. The definition of "greatness" is that the version of life that has been conveyed in the work is authentic, real, and true. The reader views the work with respect and awe. The danger of using more recent works is that they may present experience that is less respectable for school purposes. Moi called them "those deviant, unrepresentative experiences discoverable in much female, ethnic and working class writing" (p. 78). What is human is necessarily censored by one's choice of material to include in the canon. The history that is conveyed through these works is most often a "whitewashed" history.

In history classes, students learn from textbooks and get into their minds the timelines and dates so that they can pass proficiency tests. Seldom are they taught critical history; that is, a historical view that critiques what the power structure has done, what decisions it has made. The 1990 Gulf War is never portrayed as "evil phallic posturing of insane men who have learned the lessons of their unexamined privilege well: the ritualized game of exclusion, violation and obliteration of the many for the narcissistic pleasure of their own power to destroy," as Lewis (1996, p. 39) said. The engagement of bright students in social criticism is not encouraged.

The question arises, What are the basics? Grumet (1996) said that the elementary school curriculum has been compressed into "a developmental mythology," where the books we give them must meet the tyranny of DA (developmentally appropriate) guidelines imposed on the elementary school by psychologists and early childhood educators. Grumet said, "In the name of the basics, relation, feeling, fantasy, anxiety, aggression, memory, irony are all banished." Texture and wonder is missing from many of these books; then, when students enter high school and college, they are relegated to "ancestry worship, oblivious to the world students actually live in and care about" (p. 17). She said we have focused on ends rather than means.

Joanne Pagano (1996), a highly educated social and educational foundationist, agreed:

I am culturally literate. I've studied classical as well as contemporary philosophy. The literary canon so jealously defended as source and sustenance of our highest and most noble aspirations is featured prominently in my educational history. I appreciate music and art, I can engage in intelligent discussions about science, and I can do some math. I have a good sense of history, and my SAT and GRE scores were very high. And yet these seem not to have made me a better person. This is not to deny that they can help. At stake in all educational debates is the sort of person education should produce. They are moral issues and not simply matters of skill and content. Our education ought to help us to be better persons. (p. 142)

These are old arguments, and by now, many of us in the field of the education of the gifted and talented have made our own internal answers to these arguments. We may go along with Hirsch (1996) who argued that we must be able to talk with our grandparents, that educational theory has failed, that "skills" divorced from engaging content are useless skills, that the romantic principles on which these theories are based have been just that -- well-taken, but too romantic -- and that a democracy fails if there is not a shared body of knowledge that is conveyed to our students. But yet there remains a nagging doubt in the mind of this working class girl.

Many critics of the canon are themselves privileged and conversant. Then they stipulate that the poor, the disenfranchised, the despairing do not have to be conversant in the canon. On the other hand, to deny a student's worth by ignoring that student's heritage in the name of the canon is also arrogant. As a child of the working class with all four of my degrees obtained at low tuition state universities, I have advocated a "core knowledge" curriculum; how much have I de-valued my own experiences as a child of a miner from a Finnish American culture in doing so? Why is my culture, its literature, and its regionality marginalized? When I was a finalist for the Woodrow Wilson fellowship in 1963, and when Erica Jong, who had gone to Barnard College, got a fellowship and I became an alternate, did I ever think that social class might be the reason? (See Piirto, 1995.) Why did I aspire to be Holden

Caulfield, seeing the "phoniness" of the bourgeoisie, and not Daisy Miller, a naive and feckless American social climbing character in a novel by Henry James?

## 6. Issues of justice.

In an industrial society, how are the economic goods and services and the cultural goods and services distributed? As Donaldo Macedo (Lewis and Macedo, 1996) said, "where in Goals 2000 are references to educational equity, social justice, and liberatory education? Goals 2000 embraces a corporate ideology that promotes individualism, privatization and competition" (p. 43). Do we as "objective" educators of the talented, teaching students who have the potential to move from one social class to a higher social class, willfully ignore the huge social problems incumbent upon us in a capitalist system? The reform of welfare, the poverty of children, the increasing disenfranchisement of middle-aged professionals who have been victims of downsizing -- are these without cost? Watching the career of Jonathan Kozol, who began writing about the poor students he taught in inner city schools, and who continues to do so with ever more eloquence is instructive. In *Amazing Grace* (1995), his latest attempt, he called for us to look at our Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and our democratic principles. In desperation he turned to spiritual and sentimentality about the principles of democracy to advocate that we finally, for once and for all, provide equity in our school facilities and faculties. He described how even resilience is turned to political ends:

I've seen heroic and ephemeral victories of individuals used by conservative sectors of the press to militate against the larger changes it would take to win enduring victories for their communities. [they infer] If only enough children . . . would act the way the heroes do, say no to drugs and sex and gold chains and TV and yes to homework, values, church, and abstinence, and if only enough good parents, preachers, teachers, volunteers, and civic-minded business leaders would assist them in these efforts, we could 'turn this thing around' and wouldn't need to speak about dark, messy matters such as race, despoliation, and injustice. (p. 161-162)

The issue of what our students, called "the best and brightest" will become in terms of their concept of social justice is a real one. Many seem to opt for the best school, the best salary, and the mortgage, the job, and the baby, using their brain power to move into a higher social class and out of their mother cultures. And we encourage this. This is not to say that this is not to be the goal or the outcome for the bright students. Terman's studies showed that no one reached eminence, no one changed the world. They became good citizens, paid their taxes, and collected their salaries. One could almost say that the promise of high IQ seems to be a life of conformity. Yet social issues abound and proliferate. Issues having to do with poverty, disenfranchisement, the environment, racism, still exist and need communal and cooperative solutions.

## 7. Issues of diversity.

On another note, the purpose of such programs as A Better Chance are to identify bright minority students who are then offered admission to elite private schools to serve as "tokens," vehicles by which the privileged are to be "exposed" to and "educated" about issues of social justice. The challenge of diversity is thus thought to be addressed. Yet is this the case? What is the inevitable consequence, the shadow, the cloud on the horizon for the student who gets the scholarship as well as for the students who are "exposed" to people of different races and social classes? Our field has glossed over this. We are glad that bright students get a chance for social mobility, and we never question whether social mobility is just, or even whether an attention to diversity (relativism) is better addressed in other ways. To stay in the social class one is born into is a sign of failure and not the American way to many families.

Magda Lewis (1996) commented that those who are not white, not of the middle and upper classes, those who work with their hands, are marginalized: "If we are not heterosexual, and if we do not embody and display the valued assets of the privilege of Euro-American culture, the school curriculum and schooling experience fling us to the margins" (p. 40). She noted that "successful forms of self-violation are rewarded with credentials." In our education of bright students, we pay scant attention to encouraging our bright students to work with their hands, to be master carpenters, welders, plumbers, mechanics, health care workers, and such, even though such work often has good financial reward and concomitant union job security.

Diversity has complexity that good minds need to address. Pinar ( Grumet and Pinar, 1996) noted that "European

Americans and African Americans are two-sides of the same cultural coin, two interrelated narratives in the American story " (p. 27). By marginalizing and by magnifying our differences we have suppressed our unconscious dependence, one on the other. Who built the pyramids? Who built the skyscrapers and the superhighways? They were built on the hand labor of the lower classes, often slaves or silenced immigrants. These immigrants were themselves racist, according to Roediger (1991), who said that whites in the working class constructed an idea of whiteness as identity, and saw Black workers as "'other:' -- as embodying the preindustrial, erotic, careless style of life the white worker hated and longed for" (p. 14). Immigrants, such as the Jews, the Irish, and the Italians, were often not considered "white" by the upper classes, and so they differentiated themselves from people with darker skin -- the Blacks, Asians, and Latinos -- through folklore, songs, stories, and rumors.

We have seldom spoken of the fact that white flight by those within the public school system who cannot afford private schools, or who have a commitment to public education, has been flight to our programs for the gifted and talented. A large study reported by Wells and Serna (1996) showed that the resistance to detracking in racially mixed schools was resistance by white parents who fled to the programs for the gifted and talented, creating a class system within integrated schools. A white parent on one of the gifted and talented education listservs commented that the academically talented minority students in his district are snapped up by private schools, and the school threatens to shut down its program for the gifted and talented in favor of heterogeneous grouping. "If this is done," he said, "we will form a charter school." If our field does not address the issues of diversity, especially in terms of numbers of students of ethnic and economic minorities served in special programs, the field will be subsumed. This is our most serious challenge. Any district's program for the talented should mirror the ethnic and economic diversity of its community.

An attention to diversity necessarily must value multiculturalism within multiculturalism. Tanya McKinnon (1997), said that multiculturalism is complex even within races. For example, the gender issues for African-Americans include boys who have a "foreshortened sense of the future," as well as "the question of sexuality and high school date rape." Class issues include "the question of African-American and Latino colorism." Essentialism issues include the question of overlapping cultural identities in families who marry cross-culturally but within the race, while the issue of sexism brings up "the question of sexual orientation" (In Freire, Ed., 1997, p. 299).

### **8. Issues of language.**

It seems to me fundamental in our field of the education of the gifted and talented that we have a certain language in mind in which these students must speak, write, and think. In fact, we could go so far as to say that our task is to teach that language, the language of the power elite, to our students because they are intelligent, and more likely to be able to move from a lower social class to a higher social class. As a former Hunter College High School (formerly a high school for gifted girls, now co-ed) student said, "I was surprised when I took that test and I scored so high. I took the subway every day from my Irish neighborhood in Brooklyn to Manhattan. They gave us classes in deportment, and in speech, to take the Brooklyn, Queens, and Bronx accents out of us. They took us from our culture and ethnicity and sent us to Harvard." [Personal communication, Marlena Corcoran, Ph.D. (from Brown University) at a restaurant in Paris, France, April, 1996.] Have we asked about the cost of this mobility?

On a more philosophical (rather than social justice/political) note, How do we make meaning? We make it with subjectivity. Without going into a discussion of the work of the language theorists and deconstructionists, it is necessary to note, along with Peter McLaren, that "All knowledge is fundamentally mediated by linguistic relations that inescapably are socially and historically constituted" (McLaren, in Freire, Ed. 1997, p. 105). The verbally talented should have a taste of such theory as they have minds which can embrace it. When Jacques Derrida came to the Hunter College High School in the late 1980s to give a speech during an assembly, the academically talented high school students followed him as if he were a baseball star. They understood what he spoke about and asked him questions having to do with philosophical truths in the one sentence he explicated which made up his whole speech.

bell hooks (1995) speaks about theoreticians and theory as also an issue of language, saying that the language used in theory-making is "work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references. . . such theory . . . is narcissistic, self-indulgent practice . . . any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public" (p. 64). I have noticed that many of my students, graduate students learning about the

gifted and talented, prefer to read work that is practical and not theoretical, written on roughly the level of children's literature of the middle elementary grades, with lots of pictures or diagrams or lists of hints. While hooks is right, perhaps we in our field should also seek to engage those who will be teaching students advanced in verbal abilities to engage themselves in challenging material that requires advanced reading capabilities. My belief is that any good theory can be explained in common language, but an appreciation of the richness of language is necessary to fully appreciate any written or spoken work.

## **9. Issues of discourse .**

The levels of discussion, or the focus of discussion of educational reform in our field has been defensive at worst, and conciliatory at best. The rhetoric that says that the nation is at risk and that such and such a model will solve all the problems is simplistic and reactionary, both on the liberal side and on the conservative side. Educational discourse is much more complicated than the latest model or strategy with lines and diagrams within a bound curriculum guide, whether the curriculum is interdisciplinary, thematic, or whatever. The rhetoric often sounds like a pep rally, where we will be number one if we do such and such, as we cheer our team on, the team of the good old USA! , where the bright students will be varsity athletes.

That we think we pose or solve a problem when we discuss a situation, and when we think that problems have solutions, is naive. We have several curriculum models that emphasize problem solving. John Ralston Saul said, "The desperate need for reason and the accompanying latent addiction to solutions are good examples of the unconscious at work." What have we unconsciously accepted? What have we unconsciously rejected? What are the hidden features, the ways we are compliant, complicit, or blind? All discourse has its hidden, implicit assumptions. Problems "solved" are few. The analysis of the process might reveal where unconscious processes take over, if only for a moment, and where they direct the assumptions that the problem is "solved."

Luke (1995, in Apple, 1995) in a discussion of the new research in educational discourse in and out of the classroom noted that every time we make a judgment about a textbook, about the truth of an argument, about the validity of information in a text, we are making an analysis of discourse. "Critical discourse analysis is, ultimately, a normative enterprise in which one pays one's metaphoric money and takes one's political chances" (p. 8).

Many of the conversations held between the students and the text, are seen in their faces, bodies, and questions, at home and outside of school, and not as seen in their test scores and products judged according to a rubric. Does this matter even though we cannot measure it? Yes. Selection of curriculum materials, modes of encountering the material, value of the material necessarily involves decisions that entail a knowledge of consequences, implied and spoken. Too many of the practitioners in the field of the education of the gifted and talented seek quick fixes, a lesson to do on Monday morning, without engagement in the two critical issues of curriculum: (a) What shall we teach the talented and gifted? (b) For what purpose? Much of the discourse analysis literature concerns children who have trouble in school because of their cultural difference from what the school expects. Researchers in the field of the education of the talented should also conduct discourse analysis research of the "good" kids, as Margolin (1994) called them. This research could shed light on cultural likeness and on resiliency.

## **10. Issues of desire and passion.**

We as teachers are lovers. We "love" our students in order to engage them in learning. We "love" our subject matter. We "love" our jobs. Passion and desire are all around us. Joanne Pagano (1996), said, "The educational challenge in the foreseeable future will be to teach people to acknowledge and understand their own passions, their own advocacy positions, without becoming reduced to them" (p. 143). Yet eros has its shadow side as well. Alice Miller, in explicating the place of narcissism in some parents' desires for their children to reflect their own desires and thus lose their true selves (Miller, 1997) has focused on one shadow side of the eros of curriculum. This is seen in the "stage mother" syndrome, similar to the "Little League father" syndrome. The teacher also can show her shadow side, as was exemplified by the film *Madame Sousatska*, where a piano teacher sought to prevent students from going to more advanced piano teachers when their growth made moving teachers necessary. This erotic side of our relationship with our students should be acknowledged. The common practice of teachers, particularly male teachers, of marrying their

students is a universal indication of the erotic nature of the teacher-student relationship.

On another level, we should discuss the presence of multipotentiality in our gifted and talented students. What do they love? Hillman's (1996) concept of the *daimon* (after Jung and Plato) is useful in helping a person with multipotentiality. The *daimon* is that which won't let you alone; that which you must work on; that which drives you. The current literature on expertise, on which many thinkers in our field model their work, devalues the place of desire and passion in the acquisition of expertise, focusing on apprenticeship models in which people acquire skills and knowledge. Passion and desire are de-emphasized, probably as they are too messy and emotional. However, without desire, no one will put in the long hours of practice necessary to become an expert in any domain. Every student should be encouraged to answer to his/her *daimon*. I have included the *daimon* in my Pyramid model of talent development as the "thorn" that determines which talent will be developed (Piiro, 1999, in preparation).

### **11. Issues of gender.**

We are all familiar with the studies of the American Association of University Women (1995) and of Sadker and Sadker (1994) which led to the conclusion that the academically talented female is at risk. Such statements as these by Magda Lewis (1996) and Joanne Pagano (1996) are common among talented women:

In the seventeen years of formal education that preceded my graduate studies I had not studied the history, culture, and political realities of women, of the labouring classes, of racial and ethnic minorities, of gays and lesbians. This is all the more remarkable when I consider that my area of study was the great thinkers of Western intellectual tradition. (Lewis, 1996, p. 43).

As a student, I was exposed to all sorts of studies and "-ologies" that taught me, objectively and disinterestedly, against my own experience, that women are, in more ways than I can count, inferior. I call that advocacy or ideological research. (Pagano, 1996, p. 145)

Yet the issue of gender in our field is more than this. The personality characteristic of androgyny is known to be present in creative producers. Yet the presence of gay academically talented and creative students has received no attention in the literature of the field of the education of the talented. The presence of androgyny as a personality attribute common to creative people is sometimes acknowledged (cf. Piiro, 1998, in press; Piiro and Fraas, 1995), but the needs of these students for role models, approval, and humanness are not addressed by educators in our field. However, a consideration of the personality characteristic of androgyny is only a small part of the shame in how we have ignored our talented gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (GLB). The 1997 World Conference and the 1997 National Association for Gifted Children conference posed a beginning as there were several sessions given by parents of gays and lesbians as well as by gay and lesbian teachers.

On another note, the push to engage girls in science and math has not been followed by a complementary push to engage boys in the arts and literature. This has led to a gender-bias that favors scientific and mathematical discourse over aesthetic discourse. One could even say that there is a revulsion toward encouraging male participation in the arts, especially dance.

On still another note, let us look at the make up of our field itself. The overwhelming number of teachers of the gifted and talented are white women. The overwhelming number of coordinators of programs for the gifted and talented are white women. The lack of presence of men and of minorities must have an unforeseen and unconscious influence on the development and direction of this field. Are there solutions to this latter situation? Probably not, as recruitment of men and minorities seems to fail whenever we try. One fact is that when we do attract men and minorities, they often shoot to the top of the field as we clamor to elect them to offices to indicate how equitable we are.

### **12. Issues of imagination.**

This matter is close to my artist-scholar heart. Along with devaluing the aesthetic experience, the aesthetic way of knowing, the aesthetically and artistically talented, we have also devalued the kind of knowledge they produce. The education researchers and philosophers have sought to understand what happens in schools with an emphasis on

rationality with an illusion of scientific truth. However, human beings being studied are often uncooperative and recalcitrant. They are not captive mice in mazes. This illusion of rationality has lost sight of the central role of imagination. As Keiran Egan (1997) said, the neoconservatives such as Bloom, Hirsch, and Ravitch and Finn have made the "valuable point that education is crucially tied up with knowledge, and that being educated means, put crudely, knowing a lot." However, Egan noted:

Education is also crucially about the meaning knowledge has for the individual, and that is where the imagination is vital. A person who has meticulously followed the neo-conservative kind of curriculum may still end up among the greatest bores on God's earth. What is absent from those books is attention to, and a clear sense of, how knowledge becomes meaningful in the lives of learners; how we can ensure that students engage . . . in imaginative learning. (Keiran Egan 1997 homepage; see also Egan, 1992)

Using the imagination is risky because there is no right answer. Students often tell me that some of the gifted and talented students they teach are not risk-takers. The older the students are, the fewer intellectual risks they want to take. Having been successful in feeding back what was fed to them, using their memories for facts and details, they may settle into being comfortable and may be reluctant to venture out of this safe realm. Engaging the imagination through metaphor, image, and symbol is necessary for any applicable learning to take place. Imagination is the creative faculty which perceives the basic relationships between things. It is a form of perception that can actively construct mental images of events or objects that illuminate the darkling plain.

While Bloom's Taxonomy lists "application" as a middle level step on the taxonomy, I believe it is the highest step, even after "synthesis" and "evaluation," for being able to apply knowledge takes imagination and creativity. This is crucial in a climate that seeks to devalue the arts and the aesthetic response, and in a field which emphasizes that its students will become "professionals" --those who profess, or who have knowledge they assert in public -- scientists, technocrats, business persons, political leaders, and profess-ors. Imagination is a human aptitude that all people need to engage in order to live whole lives.

In addition, the teacher is an imaginative human being, an artist, and not a replaceable mailman with a cunning long leather bag of "tricks" and "strategies" and "skills" in the system of "delivering" curriculum to students. Each lesson, each class, has an unknown story line. Each class period is a novel waiting to be written, a drama waiting to be acted. We often lose sight of the fact that all areas of curriculum are products of human emotions, imagination, passions, and dreams. How did math get here? How did science? Human beings with imagination thought and dreamt, discovered and created these domains.

## **Summary:**

While our field has pioneered curriculum such as Creative Problem-Solving, Future Problem-Solving, Problem-Based Learning, critical thinking, higher-order Thinking, Advanced Placement, the International Baccalaureate, Junior Great Books, brain-based thinking, thematic curriculum, interdisciplinary curriculum, and the like, the postmodern curriculum theorists also ask us to engage in understanding *what* we are doing, *why* we are doing it, and *whether* we should continue to do it. This paper has briefly indicated some areas for thought. Perhaps they have been illuminating. As a poet whose natural means of expression is in verse, I hope you will indulge me a little further as I finish with an expression in an "alternative" form of representation-- an anthem whose synaesthesia may amuse you and perhaps remind you of these twelve issues that should perhaps begin to inform our practice as educators of the talented (See Fig. 1).

### **Fig. 1: "Illuminations"**

#### **ILLUMINATIONS**

*(FOR THE EDUCATION OF THE TALENTED)*

Let the alternating current of *time* run slow as well as fast

Let the surges of *power* protect the poor and vulnerable  
Let the lightning rod of the *body* resound kinesthetic  
Let the magnetic field of the *spirit* radiate during life and death  
Let the charge of the *canon* light the mind  
Let the rays of *justice* seep into all tiers  
Let the optics of *diversity* pierce more than skin deep  
Let the circuits of *language* flash lucid meanings  
Let the filaments of *discourse* lead to insights of truth  
Let the shock of *desire and passion* inspire the muse  
Let the gleam of *gender* infuse facade  
Let the incandescence of *imagination* cut the cables  
to fly free to the red core of molten earth  
to glow and flicker blue as nature's foxfire  
to reflect cantaloupe rosy misty dawn on a northern lake  
to shimmer eerie as the aurora borealis off crystal snow  
to signal like the prism of the rainbow in a sunny summer shower

-- with thanks to Rose Rudnitski and Kathi Kearney for the image from the curriculum at the Speyer School

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