Addressing the Elephant in the Room: How to Talk About Giftedness

Preamble
What – Bringing Gifted out of the Closet

- We need to be able to talk comfortably about giftedness in order to create change
- We need to start somewhere. Our observations of the stumbling blocks are:
  - Stop agonizing over a better word - As we fight that battle we are losing the war
  - Desensitize people to the word gifted by educating them on its full meaning
  - Stop concentrating solely on what gifted is and give equal due to what it is not
  - Form alliances – look for common ground because it builds empathy and support
  - Utilize modern social science research and marketing tools - Go beyond preaching to the choir
- As part of a campaign for social change, we are providing a toolkit (a year focus grouping this)
  - Common vocabulary
  - A template for a talk - Customizable to you and different audiences
  - Inspire/motivate you to inspire and motivate others

SHARON - We must become systematic in our approach
1. Only discussed amongst educators and ourselves... Must take steps to create awareness across all disciplines
2. We are a detailed population, but as we spend all our time finding a “perfect” word the misunderstanding continues. Our aim is to re-define Americas view of the word gifted. IF someone comes up with the perfect word, at that point we can switch it out, but until then we need to stop wasting time on this and start “redefining” that the current word means....... Gay use to mean child molester in the eyes of many..... Education helped change that myth
3. Analogies to LGBT movement. Not saying being gifted or being gay are the same experience, rather, the LGBT movement was a very successful social change movement and we should learn from the techniques they used. Changes were deliberate, effective, current and society will recognize, understand and relate to the change techniques used.
4. Look for commonalities amongst other minority groups & work to gain mutual empathy. Empathy not mean pity/means the ability to understand things from someone else’s point of view. NOT promoting victimization, but understanding
Joanna

By equating giftedness with success we are also living by a limited external definition of success.

At its core we need to educate that giftedness does not equal achievement success wealth or eminence if we can get that point across we eliminate the elitist flavor and start creating empathy and understanding across all ranges of intelligence.

We need to remember that as long as we insist on having the giftedness conversation in the education arena and not where else we are falling into the same trap as everyone else...narrowing the definition of giftedness to achievement and promoting that giftedness is a qualitatively different way of experience information and the world that is not limited to the school day.
Addressing the Elephant in the Room: How to Talk About Giftedness

Sharon – name, who, what - Introduction
- Welcome – This talk is about a subject we have passion over
- Different than most gifted talks..... Educate, parent them. In this talk, we are going to talk about giftedness as a concept, and we are going to be factual and blunt
- Because talking about intelligence is socially unacceptable, at times you might feel uncomfortable. We want you to notice those feelings and reflect on them when it happens because it is likely that they are due to the impact of societal conditioning on you.

Joanna - Name, who, what - Introduction
- Perfect body – making the connection to how ppl respond to giftedness You may think that because I am thin I am also beautiful, and I have the perfect magical life
- Some may think they could look like me if they worked out and had surgery, just like some think they can make a child gifted if they send them to Kumon
- It is very important to help people cycle through and understand how they feel about gifted
- I am gifted
Parents, educators, and politicians resist discussing the needs of gifted children due to fears of being perceived as elitist. Or getting attacked by others.

This reluctance adversely impacts gifted students in terms of funding, development of services and willingness of parents to seek out support for their gifted children.
The Root of the Problem

1. Society limits giftedness to education
2. Myths about giftedness are entrenched
3. The concept of intelligence creates discomfort

Solving these problems requires changing deep rooted mindsets

Joanna: Table of contents for talk – Make sure to say all three roots page
1. The first step to trying to find a way to change how things currently are was to look deeply for the root cause, dig back and find the common reasons for what we hear, feel and experience
2. We did a root cause analysis based on the fact that we know what the symptoms of the problem are (i.e. “all children are gifted”, etc other myths), we feel the pushback (they don’t need anything different, they all even out by the third grade) and we see the impact (kids break down or give up – loose that amazing zest for learning), but
3. It is our belief that the root causes can be summarized into these three underlying problems
4. These problems run so deep in our culture that they have their roots in our very social fabric.
5. So much so that solving them amounts to nothing less than social change –
Sharon

So how do we change mindsets of a society......First we examined social change movements of the past. Their techniques, successes and failures

Even though we are talking about changing societies view and seeking equal rights for a minority population, It is VERY important to note the difference in the response to giftedness vs civil rights and LGBT

1. Attempting to gain empathy for the needs of what is perceived as an already advantaged population
2. The response is often emotional (defensive, envy, denial, offended, incredulous)
3. Those who understand gifted know that these responses are unwarranted,

THIS perceived advantage is at the center of the communication barrier we face
Step Out of Role

- Human nature is such that people are more apt to join forces against something than for something.
- Because of the perceived advantages of the gifted population, there is a significant hurdle.
- We need to create empathy for giftedness but NOT portray gifted individuals as victims.
  - i.e. Gifted children are “not being treated fairly” as opposed to asking for services because they will “save the world someday.”

Sharon

make sure to emphasize social science research talking about the negative as a strategy not victimization
Sharon 2

Ash Beckham TED talk quote: I would much rather someone stumble over their words or offend me or not know ...Silence halts change.

Why people are afraid to speak up – faced backlash before, often introverts themselves, how many parents here have experienced some sort of negative reaction about your child's giftedness?

Why people may seem aggressive – intense by nature and we are generally defending our children. This can be perceived as aggression and the cycle continues.....Also, we can’t dismiss this discussion because we think others “cant understand”.... We MUST be humbly explain

Without speaking up the issue will never resolve itself
### Problem #1: Society Limits Giftedness Education

- Definition of “gifted” changes based on the purpose of its identification
- CAG, NAGC, SENG, State, District and Local Educators
- Understanding the different purposes helps in discussions

- Some theorists try to explain giftedness away
  - Outliers: Malcolm Gladwell
  - Mindset: Carol Dweck Recently replaced “fixed” mindset with “gifted”

- Essential to break the idea that gifted is the same as eminence, achievement and success
  - Anyone gifted or not can become eminent, high achieving or successful
  - We need to raise awareness on “who” chooses what constitutes “success.”
  - American public resonates with freedom of choice – Understanding this disarms a misperceived threat to non-gifted children

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**Joanna**

Outliers: Practice anything for 10,000 hours you will become an expert at it: New Meta Analysis from Princeton, Michigan and Rice: deliberate practice explained: 26% of the variance in performance for games, 21% for music, 18% for sports, 4% for education, and less than 1% for professions.

Theories that Market hope that EVERYONE can become anything they want: They take a truth and a core American value that everyone can grow, but it has been incorrectly extrapolated to mean that everyone can be anything if they work hard enough. Anyone can become an Olympic ice skater if they believe they can and practice enough. Sadly replacing the word “fixed” with gifted also implies that gifted people cannot grow (or do not believe they can grow which is not at all true). Anyone can grow, but some people have innate abilities at different things

All of these theories measure what you do (achievement) not how you think: “Giftedness is less what you know and more about how you connect what you know”

BUT if we separate out giftedness from high eminence, achievement and success.. decoupling these levels the playing field for everyone and thereby lowers defensiveness.

**The most dangerous shift since nclb professors writers bloggers write to dweck about the negative impact of what she is doing with her new wording**

The other piece of the problem is that Dweck and Gladwell also define success in a very limited way: We will forever be fighting battles over what is needed as long as we allow people (theorists, journalists, the public, etc.) who do not understand its full essence to define giftedness
STEP OUT OF ROLE

- You need to be aware of Dweck’s new wording. She has replaced “fixed mindset” with “gifted mindset”
- Paints gifted as a negative thing
- Therefore she is saying gifted vs growth (these words imply that if one believes in giftedness cannot grow)
- WE MUST CHANGE THE DEFINITION AND UNDERSTANDING OF GIFTEDNESS NOW BEFORE IT BECOMES A NEGATIVE SLUR

Joanna

This needs to be discussed directly and often and we need to stop being silent..
Sharon: Paint by numbers definition. We know that IQ numbers need to be taken with a grain of salt, because not all gifted individuals score well on an IQ test, but I include this slide for the purpose of helping people understand the context of giftedness. The gifted experience intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder)." [euphemism treadmill]. This means that whatever term is chosen for this condition, it eventually becomes perceived as a politically incorrect insult.

Standard Bell Curve applied to anything. 95% of any population ...example: 95% of all men in the US fall between 5’4”- 6’1”, my husband 6’5”. Many studies show there is an advantage to being a tall man, but they don’t tell you he cannot fit in many cars, we need to buy more expensive bulk head seats, cannot sleep on his stomach with a cal king bed or feet hang off. Scalps himself on doorways. There is an advantage, but the world is not made for him... further, we would not expect him to wear clothes for those in the normal 95%, but we ask gifted kids to be normal all the time.

1. Two sides mirror each other.... Equal difference from middle. We don’t ask the left side to act and react the way everyone else does .... To be “normal” or neurotypical, but we ask that of the right side... we ask them to wear the same size clothes and to fit in or be pathologized.

2. When we talk to someone with an intellectual disability, we are not thinking, I am better at math or reading comprehension, what you notice is the difference in the experience of taking the world in and reacting to it. The gifted child experiences and reacts to the world around them just as differently from the norm.

3. Curves continue. Right highly gifted/ left (outdated and politically incorrect term used only so audience understands the meaning of the new term used in the DSM V because they may not have heard the new one)....mentally retarded

4. Left side of the curve more alike in reactions and behavior than right side of curve. Right side may be more difficult to detect because of this and because...
• The height analogy resonates with audiences – used very effectively

• Received feedback that using a minority analogy would be helpful, but does not resonate well unless you can legitimately represent one
**Problem #2: Myths About Giftedness are Entrenched**

- Myths are the result of
  - The unclear understanding on a physiologic, psychological and emotional level
  - A culture that does not understand or know how to deal with the traits and behavior of gifted individuals
- Belief in these myths
  - Perpetuates incorrect stereotypes (prevents empathy)
  - Results in emotionally harmful reactions from society
  - Prevents people from being able to address their physiologic, psychological and emotional needs

Good intentions do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding  
– Albert Camus

**Joanna 2 – “The SECOND root cause to the problem is:....**

Clarifying these myths is perhaps the greatest challenge and the action that would help the most gifted children.

They are deep rooted and stem from a lack of understanding due to little or no training as to what gifted is and looks like. Behaviors are often counterintuitive. Flunk 4th grade math A’s in 8th grade math - goes against all teaching rubrics, autonomous and/or unusual preferences may not look like what society thinks “smart” should look like (again what is success and who gets to choose).

Important to note in the education world, that teachers and the administration are not the enemy – they need training and parental support

Need to help provide them that language – they need to fight for the ability to differentiate in their classrooms
Problem #2: Myths About Giftedness are Entrenched

- The Grandest Myth: All children are gifted
  - Because they equate it with the potential for eminence, achievement and success
- Misinterpretation of the Gardner Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI)
  - MI proposes that every individual possesses strengths and weaknesses
  - Eagerly embraced by educators (far less so by science and psychological communities)
    - Provided an easy explanation for the variations of achievement in the classroom
    - Made it more comfortable to talk to parents about a child’s performance
    - Over time, eroded to the belief that all children are gifted “in their own way”
    - Never the intent of the theory. MI provides insight at the individual level, but was never intended to measure overall aptitude/capability across a population
- This theory feels good to people in a world where performance is important
- Additional myths clarified via hand-out

All our knowledge has its origins in our perceptions. - Leonardo da Vinci

Joanna 4 –

As long as we allow people to believe that gifted equates or holds the patent to Eminence, Achievement and Success, people will feel the need to ensure their kids have the same opportunities, thus all kids are gifted. .... If not, how can they succeed?, so parents fear being told “no”.

From Gardner himself: “My own work on MI has entailed descriptions of differing profiles of intelligence across INDIVIDUALS” not unlike a Myers Briggs

Myth that that services for gifted take away services for others.. And the truth is what works best for gifted works best for everyone and benefit everyone
Tell them how to use the handout

Step Out of role

- We have four page handout of myths of giftedness
- A tool to promote meaningful discussions across all disciplines
Sharon - Societal concerns over inequality of talent are NOT universal: Athletes - Beauty - Intelligence

1. Athletes are familiar to people – I get congratulated if I say my son got a full football scholarship to a pack ten school – no questions.
2. Musician – Julliard is just out there, impressive, not in their sphere of knowledge, but recognizable, most done expect their kid to be there
3. Model – on the edge – Now I am Jon Benet Ramsey’s mom – I have exploited by daughter, your daughter is pretty too, America idolizes beauty, but to talk about it sits on the razor’s edge of socially unacceptable
4. Intelligence - Kid taught self to read at 2 and taught self algebra at 4. Suddenly I have flash carded him and am a pushy tiger mom...... or conversely, simply disbelieved and thought of as nuts. Denied that it exists.....at a certain level is just not understandable, people do not have a frame of reference to deal with it, Some get defensive, Some explain it away, Some are polite and just leave the conversation not knowing what to think, feel like failure like how did they not help their kid be there...

If we change the connection between giftedness and eminence then people can begin to recognize that All children are equal all children are gifts, but they are not all the same, the do not all have the same level of ability and they are not all gifted,, but that does not mean that they are not all equally precious and important to the world and wonderful
Sharon

Even if it is recognizable as existing, not comfortable with it in their lives – People laugh and love Sheldon, but pathologize those same traits in gifted children – Sheldon didn’t become quirky he was born that way .... Sheldon would not do well in many classrooms today and would most certainly be pathologized in many

Making fun of intelligence or new reality t.v. show “child genius” exploits the stereotypes and is VERY destructive to the campaign to help the public understand what giftedness really is. We should nto remain silent on this one – write letters to newspapers – not producers as the are less likely to care and it is the publics perception that we need to educate.
The Call to Action

Elevator Speech

6.3 million people in the United States fail to receive necessary services from the medical, psychological and educational communities as a result of the continued reluctance to acknowledge and accept that there are differences in individuals across the intelligence spectrum. Preliminary research has shown that the physical and psychological development of gifted individuals is as different from the norm as the physical and psychological development of individuals possessing developmental delays. Without continued research, education and meaningful discussion about the characteristics associated with giftedness, we will continue to have a societal mindset where the qualities and characteristics of gifted individuals are pathologized, misunderstood and mistreated.

Sharon - Step away from fear of being seen as victims or militant - we are trying to create empathy and understanding

1. We affect social change by being real and by opening up the conversation.
2. When we expose ourselves as real we need to be prepared for real responses in return. They may be uncomfortable, but
3. This is not bad.... This is good..... The fact that the conversation is taking place is what we need our goal to be – it’s the conversation!
4. Though we need to let people know that this populations bleeds too, it is NOT about being a victim, but about opening the conversation up so we can create empathy for a cause so that we can affect change.
The Call to Action

- Gifted Children have unique needs and are often treated unfairly
- Takes away defenses – helps people look at the issue in another light
- Maryland Report to Congress: Gifted and Talented children are, in fact, deprived and can suffer psychological damage and permanent impairment of their abilities to function well which is equal to or greater than the similar deprivation suffered by any other population with special needs.
- As a nation we have a problem
  - Fastest growing homeschooling population is gifted children (often because children are misunderstood in the classroom not just for academic reasons)
  - Persistent in the belief that giftedness is an academic or education issue
  - We cannot expect professionals to be able to meet the needs of these children, burdened by societies misunderstanding
- Bullying
  - **Entry point** for meaningful partnerships: LBGT strategy
  - More permissible to blame the victim if they are perceived as more able (Robin Hood)

Joanna 4 – **EMPHASIZE** this is a call to action – what we want them to do!!! .................A VERY dense slide but super important – this is our meat!

Just as they used to not test drugs on women

This slide and the next is where you need to be the psychologist and make sure they understand this very well

Bullying: NO one will accept bullying of ANY population. Important to understand that is an entry point make alliances with more successful groups and use some of their momentum to further our specific cause - use example of Nick, Ella and JJ mending to them – must reach all disciplines
**The Call to Action**

- Address misperceptions directly
  - Be brave/speak up
  - Respond directly to inaccurate media
  - Be public - educate your peers
  - Give your children the language to speak out
  - Write articles, use the op ed pages
  - Teach classes - incorporate this into what you already do
- Use the word “GIFTED” bravely and without apology
  - It’s the technical definition - not an elitist word
  - It is nothing to be embarrassed about and you show that by using it
  - If we bubble wrap our children for fear of the world’s acceptance of their giftedness, we are doing the same disservice as parents did to LGBT, disabled and mixed-race children.
- Pressure state legislature, licensing boards - Mandatory education on giftedness
  - Psychologists
  - Educators (lobby for in service on gifted for all staff, Professors include giftedness in your lectures)
  - Medical Community (Dr.s Pharmacists, OT, PT, Dentists, etc.)

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**Joanna 4 - These myths are insidious**

1. Cancer survivors came out of the closet – with their shaved heads...
2. When you hear/see a stereotype talk about it
3. Psychology requires no training in gifted, medicine no training in gifted, education training in gifted is virtually all about achievement. Because we don’t insist that gifted be talked about, these children do not receive help, they are bullied and there are going to be tragedies like New Town, Columbine and Aurora...
4. Professionals are required to have training on HIV, elder and child abuse, drug/alcohol abuse, but not giftedness
Joanna

YOUR ORTHODONTIST STORY – accepted the compliment we mourn the fact that our kids don’t fit in and we second guess ourselves because we don’t have social support

When everyone used to say that Ella and Katie was very pretty and skinny ..... We were told to counter that with that they were smart too. It was acceptable to say when they were five and six, but we don’t say that now that they are older

Don’t split hairs on the HG/PG, etc.....Transgender ppl could not have gotten recognition if the 10 % of the populations that is homosexual had not been successful in increasing awareness for it as a whole person concept first
Sharon - We need to understand that as we offer a “different” point of view we will get questions may not be wrapped in a perfectly politically correct bow. That doesn’t mean we should stop the questions from being asked. We need to keep conversations going; We must recognize when people are trying to understand even if they don’t get it perfect.

1. Ash Beckman TED talk quote: I had an older friend who always referred to my girlfriend as my “lover.” I cringed every time. It was so 1970s gay porn. It seemed like it oversexualized our relationship. But in this woman’s frame of reference, that was the appropriate word. And in her head other options such as “friend” or maybe “special friend” would have minimized our relationship. By talking it through, she finally got it, and was able to say “girlfriend.” But first I had to be willing to tell her why I felt uncomfortable with what she said, to explain the negative historical connotations I felt when she spoke that way. I showed it was not an issue of being politically correct; this was personal.

2. If we get so hung up on people having to understand perfectly, we miss a huge opportunity to engage people in our cause.

3. They don’t understand the myths about gifted children are not true, they don’t understand the social and emotional damage that can be caused by attempting to force them to behave neurotypically .....open the door gently for that conversation
Sharon

We have created, combined, modified and shuffled and folded spindled and mutilated a gifted children's bill of rights.

Take a copy
Xerox 10
Distribute – a poster campaign

Nothing here is controversial – EVERYTHING is good for ALL children, but people do not think of these in terms of gifted children. This poster is designed to add context to what gifted is (and is not).... Simple, non threatening and therefore impactful - a powerful tool that will hopefully tweak people’s thoughts about gifted individuals.
Turning the Problem Around

Bringing the Needs of Gifted Children Out of The Closet

“Coming out of the closet not just about being gay. We all have closets. A closet is nothing more than a hard conversation, and though our topics may vary tremendously, the experience of being in and coming out of the closet is universal. It is scary, and we hate it and it needs to be done, and sometimes, the awkward responses that are received are the other participants in the conversation attempting to come out of their own closets by partaking in the conversation”

- TED Talk, Ash Beckham

Sharon

Very important quote from a TED talk – something to keep in mind as we talk to others about this
Questions/Contact

Questions?

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You can only watch injustice go on for so long until you’re compelled to say something. To speak out against it – Macklemore

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