Giftedness

Had Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s father not been a court musician, had he not trained Mozart and his sister from toddlerhood in the art of piano playing, would he have written his first opera at the age of 5 and performed throughout Europe during his early childhood? In modern times, we can think of Alexandra Nechita, who had her first public solo exhibition of paintings at the age of eight. Had her parents not given her pencils and paints at the age of four, would she have become the internationally famed artist that she is today?

There is no doubt that some children are more predisposed than others towards one particular skill or subject than others. However, it is also very obvious that if a child is not given the opportunity to explore all subject matters and all skills, s/he would not discover a predisposition and a love towards art, music, math, science, or languages.

Sometimes, a child could have a particular talent for something that is not a subject taught in school. For example, Thomas Edison is generally considered one of the greatest inventor of all times. In school, there wasn’t then (or now) any subject called “Inventions”. To invent something, one has to know, of course, a good deal of science. But also it takes a special type of mind, that can cross through various disciplines, can think outside the box, is very creative, and most of all, is able to accept failures as steps towards success. His mother was a teacher, but she pulled him out of school very early, in fact after just three months, when his teacher called him “addle-brained”. He also had hearing problems that might have been due to scarlet fever in early childhood, or to being struck on the ear later in his youth. Today, such a child would have been labeled “special needs”. He would have to be pulled out of class for special ed sessions and speech therapy.

She “homeschooled” him and allowed his individual motivations to guide his education. She was not a famous educator with special methods.

How does all this translate into today’s schooling system? Did all the “gifted programs” in today’s public schools produce a crop of geniuses? Among the very successful people in science, art or business today, how many are graduates of “gifted programs”? There is a relationship between specialized schools such as art schools or music schools and the production of a number of great artists or musicians. But the students of these schools have already been recognized as being talented in this field, and have (or their parents have) made the choice to devote their life to this field. How does one find out whether a child has any talent or predisposition toward a particular discipline, or some unnamed type of activity (like inventions for Edison)?

Edison’s mother provides the best example. We should allow the child to explore all kinds of activities and subjects. All children should be allowed to discuss and try out various skills, be exposed to numerous facets of life, including community service. Eventually, as the child will start letting you know what s/he wants to do. You can start trimming off the unneeded and focus on something s/he wants to become really good at. It might be one thing, or it might be several.

In our day and age, and in particular in America, this land of opportunity, we should allow our children to choose a career path that they feel passionate about. As a first generation American, I am still somehow imbued with the mindset of Asian developing countries: there exists only two types of successful careers: engineering and medicine. It was very helpful for me to remember that old Chinese adage: Every profession can produce a successful winner.

We must remember that the challenge of the 21st Century is not any more to get our children educated. It would more correct to say that it is to give each child the education s/he wants, to achieve his or her potential.