



## Research Article

### An interview with Dr. Matt Zakreski

Michael F. Shaughnessy<sup>1</sup>

*Educational Studies, Eastern New Mexico University, United States.*

#### Article Info

**Received:** 13 March 2023

**Accepted:** 28 June 2023

**Online:** 30 June 2023

#### Keywords

Matt Zakreski

Interview with Matt Zakreski

Gifted education

2149-1410/ © 2023 the JGEDC.

Published by Genc Bilge (Young Wise) Pub. Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license



#### Abstract

Matt Zakreski is an important scientist known worldwide for his work on creativity, neurodiversity, and giftedness. I asked him questions on important issues related to his research field and he answered sincerely. I would like to state that this interview contains important codes for researchers and practitioners study on the field of gifted education.

#### To cite this article:

Shaughnessy, M.F. (2023). An interview with Dr. Matt Zakreski. *Journal of Gifted Education and Creativity*, 10(2), 131-140.



**Michael Shaughnessy:** Dr. Zakreski, can you begin by telling us about your education and experiences with gifted?

**Matt Zakreski:** I grew up as a gifted kid in Fair Haven, a small town in NJ. I was identified in second grade and got gifted programming in the school throughout elementary and middle school. I was diagnosed with ADHD in high school, which frankly explained a lot. At the time, I didn't the words for twice-exceptionality, masking, or neurodivergence, but I sure wish that I did! I really leaned into my nerd/counter-culture identity in high school (musical theatre, improv, choir) in addition to soccer and all the classes and extra-curriculars. I attended the Center for Talented Youth (CTY) program for FIVE summers and can genuinely say that it changed my life; it allowed me to understand that I wasn't alone and could connect with other gifted people authentically.

Fast forward, I attended Wake Forest University for undergrad and then worked at Harvard University as a research intern for a summer. At both places, I saw different types of gifted kids, from the artists to the high achievers to the multipotentialities, but it always came down to connecting with the right community to make you feel supported. I got a little bit burned out on academia after working at Harvard and ended up working in educational travel at EF Tours for four years; honestly, it was a fantastic job (I got to travel all over the world!) but I started to miss working with kids. I moved to Philadelphia, got a job working with severely autistic kids at Bancroft's Lindens Program and learned a lot of tough professional lessons. As hard as it was, I loved it more days than not (though getting knocked unconscious wasn't fun), and it helped me get into graduate school.

I attended Widener University in Chester, PA for grad school. During my first year, I had an opportunity to work as a counselor with kids at a school for neurodivergent learners (Hill Top Prep School) and loved it. Looking back on it, my whole professional career launched in that moment. I sought out as many opportunities as possible to work with kids, learn about neurodivergence, and develop the skills as an IQ tester. I found some amazing mentors along the way who guided me in asking the right questions and understanding where the field was heading. Additionally, I was able to do my post-doctoral training at The Grayson School, a school for gifted learners in Pennsylvania.

After completing my post-doctoral training, I opened my own therapy and consultation practice, the Neurodiversity Collective. I wanted to center mental health and educational practices in neurodivergence and provide a space for neurodivergent people to get what they needed. Meanwhile, I was submitting proposals for conferences all over the country and getting to speak on all manner of topics in social and emotional learning (SEL) for neurodivergent kids, from impostor syndrome to emotional regulation to gamifying social skills. I never saw myself doing as many talks as I do, but I absolutely love it. It's such a pleasure to be able to help educators and parents all over the country.

At this point of my career, I've gotten to speak over 300 times all over the world. I've done thousands of therapy sessions, some good and some.... Not so good. I've gotten to do hundreds of psycho-educational evaluations, helping kids to learn how their brains work and getting their academic accommodations met. More and more schools are contacting me to ask for my help in creating systems that better support gifted and neurodivergent learners, which is really cool to be able to do. There is so much need out there and I suppose I embrace all of it.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** Hopefully COVID is now over- but what impact has it had on gifted kids and gifted education?

**Matt Zakreski:** I truly hope that COVID is over, but I don't think that it will ever truly leave us. We will have to learn to live with this virus and understand that we, as a global society, are far more susceptible to pandemics than we believed. The COVID impacts are varied and multisystemic, and I think will continue to emerge more and more as we move forward. As a psychologist, I saw three major impacts of COVID on gifted kids and education. The first is a positive one, actually. The first positive impact that I saw from COVID was that it really normalized and demystified the process of telehealth and tele-education. A lot of my colleagues had already started working in the online space, both in education and in mental health, but there were a lot of people, (myself included) who really believed that the best therapeutic work got done in person. But when COVID took that away from us, all of a sudden we were all forced to adapt to not sharing a room but suddenly sharing a Zoom Room. And I realized very quickly that even if therapy is only 80%, as good online as it is in person, that's still pretty darn good. And for a lot of kids, who either live in mental health deserts or don't have access to specialists, telehealth is the best option. Now, telehealth is not a good fit for every kid, of course, and I wouldn't think anybody would want to think about it that way. But it lowers the threshold and the barrier to entry, and that's a huge thing.

The second thing I noticed was that there are a lot of incredible resources online. And for all we know about the internet and its incredible, almost infinite potential, a lot of the dialogue around being online is around the negatives, social media comment sections, porn, spam, etc. And I can pretend that those things aren't real because they are. But the best thing about being online is that there are all these beautiful little pockets of affirming and welcoming space; there are communities that have sprung up around niche interests and learning styles and people seeking connection.

These communities allow for not only people to connect and feel less alone, but to share resources and advice and support and language. And it's really amazing to watch people find each other in those spaces.

While I knew some of them existed before COVID, being thrown into an almost solely virtual world very quickly forced my hand to learn a lot more about what was going on in these different online spaces. And the vast majority I found were not just good, it was great. So, places like Outschool and Life of Fred and the Gifted Homeschoolers Forum really became go-tos for me, almost like lighthouses, right? I could see them in the distance and they gave me a point of reference when I felt like I needed an additional tool to offer a kid therapeutically.

The third and final thing that I saw was that COVID laid bare a lot of this country's mental health infrastructure. And while that finding or is not a new thing, (many of my colleagues have known that the mental health infrastructure in this country has been faulty for a long time), now it is out there in the public discourse. Because all of a sudden there was this invisible, insidious deadly thing that was killing 1000s of people, basically daily. And we didn't know what to do with it. And it completely disrupted our lives and our routines and our connections.

All of a sudden, we saw this incredible spike in anxiety, and depression and trauma. And thankfully, a lot of people turned to therapy and mental health support as a way of navigating those challenges, which is something that I don't know what have happened earlier in American history. As a reference point, 20 years ago, I was a senior in high school during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. And for as traumatic as that was, I don't remember a lot of people rushing to the therapy office.

This COVID moment felt different. And I think it's created an incredible awareness around the need for mental health awareness and its impact on our lives. But unfortunately, it's also laid bare the fact that there are not enough therapists and not enough school counselors, and insurance doesn't cover these things enough. Strangely, we went from there being too many therapists and not enough awareness to plenty of awareness and not enough therapists. So, you know, there's still a lot of work to be done. But COVID really peel back the curtain on the bubbling and burgeoning mental health problems that are going on, especially in our kids and teens. And now it's up to us to figure out what to do with that.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** A clarifying point- what is your main thrust of interest-gifted, talented or creative?

**Matt Zakreski:** My main focus is on giftedness, but there has always been a strange relationship between giftedness and talent. Often I find myself saying to parents when I give talks that every kid has gifts and talents, but not all kids are gifted and talented. It is important to note here that gifted and talented is a statistical designation as much as it is anything else, for students in the top 98th percentile for the various types of intelligence and the top 90th percentile for those with particular skills.

Frankly, I love seeing all the different ways that giftedness can manifest in kids and teens. To use myself as an example for a moment, I am a gifted individual; I was identified in 2nd grade and have an IQ of 144. And I am a gifted artist. So, I have gifts in the verbal types of thinking; I've always been a strong writer and reader. Unlike a lot of my STEM genius clients, I'm strong in the humanities, but I also am a gifted cartoonist and illustrator. I think those are two completely different skill sets. And the research on the gifted brain backs that up.

So anybody who brings exceptionalities to the table, be they in thinking or dancing, or drawing or parkour, or math, or something I've never even heard of. I want to meet with those kids and learn about them and learn from them. So I can help them fully operationalize the gifts they have in the way that feels most authentic to them.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** An opinion- are gifted kids, in general getting an appropriate education?

**Matt Zakreski:** Hahahahaha oh boy, no. Gifted kids do not receive an appropriate education for many reasons, most of which is based in the design of the American education system. The American education system is built for neurotypical learners, the 68% of people with an IQ of between 85 and 115. And if you were going to build a logical system that was designed to educate as many people as possible, frankly, you could do a loss worse than the system that we have. The American education system is built on redundancy and repetition and moving at a slow and steady pace. Many people learn well this way!

The problem is that gifted learners learn quickly, require less repetition, want deeper dives and more engagement, seek enrichment opportunities, and push back against the commonly accepted ideas of how kids should learn. So oftentimes, gifted kids get on the nerves of teachers and administrators, because they're asking for different things and in different ways than the way the system is built. Many regular education classroom teachers (where the majority of gifted education takes place, by the way) report that they don't like their gifted students, probably for the above reasons. The fact is that we really need to argue that gifted education is special education. We do a great job in this country of touting the importance of special education for kids on the lower end of the IQ spectrum. And you will never hear me say that those kids don't deserve all the support and respect in the world, because they do. All I'm saying is that we have to do as good of a job of advocating for the educational needs of kids on the higher end of the IQ spectrum. The Tier Three educational changes that are common in special education can be as applied as thoroughly for gifted learners as they can for kids with learning disabilities. So, when we push gifted education into every school and every classroom, then we're going to make the necessary changes for gifted kids to get what they need. Because when gifted kids don't get what they need, they develop bad habits, they don't have the opportunity to lose their sense of fear, they don't develop resiliency as quickly, and they may not get the opportunities necessary to hone their skills.

All learners want and deserve to develop their skills as thoroughly as they can; for gifted kids, seeking their interests is a deeper passion that needs to be served. It isn't enough to say "oh they'll just be fine;" we must push for gifted education, more and more, because for our gifted population, getting the right kind of education isn't just a nice thing to do. It's a priority.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** If not what can be done ?

**Matt Zakreski:** I think that's a huge question, and I will try to give a meaningful summary. I think that serving any population starts with education. Since there is so much misinformation about gifted kids out there, if we start by getting meaningful, contemporary information about giftedness (specifically as a piece of broader neurodivergence) into the hands of parents, teachers, principals, and policymakers, then we are creating a meaningful foundation to make change. If the grown-ups in charge understand that giftedness isn't just what you do, it's who you are, then I think that real change will come.

Second, we continue the push for Universal Screening. I think that every kid needs to learn more about their learning style, strengths, and weaknesses. And we have the tools! When we cast a wider net for testing (because right now, it mostly goes for kids who are major behavior problems or for kids who have demanding parents), we give more kids (and their families) more information about how their brains work. And when families are empowered with that information, then it is easier to make appropriate changes to how they are being taught in public school.

Lastly, I want the broader education (and mental health) field to understand the giftedness, like all neurodivergence, is an all-day thing. Our interventions in these areas must be broader and more pervasive than the drips and drabs that we are currently trying. One hour every other week with a gifted specialist is something, but it's not enough. Gifted kids are gifted all the time. They deserve educational systems (in addition to pedagogy) that incorporates that information. We need more schools with acceleration, enrichment, mentorship, understanding of sensory needs, project-based learning, makers spaces, compacted curriculum, and integrated social-emotional learning techniques.

And if you're saying that it isn't fair that only gifted kids would get those resources, I'll let you in on a little secret: the best practices in gifted education are just the best practices in education, full stop. All kids deserve access to best practice.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** It seems that the conceptualization of "giftedness" shifts and changes over the years. Have you noticed this also?

**Matt Zakreski:** Definitely! I have seen a huge change in my own life, from being a gifted kid growing up in the 90s to where things are today. The biggest changes that I've seen are the integration of the brain and shifting to a strengths-based approach to learning. I think that understanding that giftedness is a piece of broader neurodivergence (literally a

gifted brain is a different brain), rather than just “being smart” is a huge shift. I truly believe that when gifted is a thing that you are, rather than a piece of how your brain works, it’s easier to take a lot more things personally.

I think that a lot of gifted people see their failures and struggles as personal failures, because they lack the informational context of neurodivergence. When I was researching giftedness for my dissertation, I kept saying “I wish that I had known that!” over and over, just because we know so much more now about the gifted brain, neurodivergence, twice-exceptionality, pedagogy, etc. But since I can’t go back in time and help me 30 years ago, I want to use that contemporary knowledge to help this generation of students.

The other shift that I’ve noticed is the move away from the “eminence” path towards letting kids live their own values. I remember growing up that everyone told me that I had to go to Harvard (or Princeton as a “safety school” hahah) and that I was going to “change the world.” It was inspiring but also totally overwhelming! Eminence puts a lot of pressure on kids, because it implies that there is a “right” way to be gifted or neurodivergent. The fact remains that many of the “right” paths that exist are built by neurotypical people and are easier for neurotypical people to follow.

For example, I once worked with a young man who got an interview for a major scholarship to Harvard, and when he was meeting with the alumnus tasked with vetting him, it was a disaster. My client, who was very direct and not great at reading the room, was asked why he wanted to go to Harvard. And instead of giving the “right” answer, where he espoused that Harvard was his “lifelong dream” or something, he spoke his personal truth: He wants to make a lot of money as a businessman and Harvard is the best place to make those professional contacts. The alumnus got huffy and ended the interview; my client was shattered. After a while, though, I pointed out to him that he can make business connections anywhere, and if he went to a cheaper school, he would have less debt (he ended up getting a full ride to his local state University).

And now? He’s got a very successful business and his field is unusual: aquariums. He loves them! And while he has a brain that probably could have won a Fields Medal at some point, he doesn’t owe the world anything at that level. He is happy and successful running his fish business. Moving away from the eminence mode allowed him to chase his dreams in a way that felt authentic to him. If you let kids follow their interests, they may still eminence, but in their own way on their own terms, and that almost certainly leads to happier, more well-adjusted adults.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** Parenting the gifted what are the challenges that parents face in this day and age?

**Matt Zakreski:** So many. So, so, so many. Emotional regulation is probably at the top of the list for me. Gifted kids have big feelings, and they max out the scales on what we in psychology call “the big three:” frequency, intensity, and duration. To wit, gifted kids are more emotionally intense, more often, for longer periods of time. Helping our kids co-regulate through their big feelings is exhausting and demanding for any parent, but if the parent happens to be neurodivergent themselves (with similar or, even worse, competing quirks), then the challenge can feel impossible.

We’ve covered the educational challenges above, but it is worth noting that finding the right school and/or education models for your children can feel like a full-time job. I work with kids who are homeschooled, unschooled, in public school, in private school, hybrid program, cyber school, college programs, and in educational collectives. The fact is that we are all trying to find a tribe for our gifted learners, and education is often the biggest bang for our buck.

Lastly, there’s the social piece of raising gifted learners. Due to developmental asynchrony, gifted kids can be all over the place. My mentor, Dr. Jean Peterson, used to say that every gifted kid is five kids, due in no small part to the different developmental levels of neurodivergent kids. To focus on social skills for a moment, gifted kids often do not play well with others. Sure, they can be remarkably mature and precocious one moment, but then they’re having a fifty-minute meltdown over the next episode of NOVA being unavailable to stream. These social challenges can make it remarkably difficult for parents to know who can serve their kids, let alone understand them, which can increase feelings of loneliness and helplessness. The good answer is that there are infinitely more communities for neurodivergent folk these days (online and in person), and you can connect your kiddos with as many as they can handle.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** Mentoring the gifted- who should be doing it and how important is it?

**Matt Zakreski:** Anyone can mentor a gifted person; they don't have to be gifted or neurodivergent to do so. To be effective mentor you need to be two things: passionate and authentic. Gifted kids crave authenticity and can learn from anyone who shows up with genuine passion. These traits are consistent with the Vygotsky's "Zones of Proximal Development" theory piece of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). Their skills and desire may outpace yours at some point, but that's OK. The best way to engage a gifted learner is to follow their passion (or passions), which means that there is likely only so far that you can take your student as a parent or a teacher. And there's nothing wrong with that! You simply cannot be an expert at everything. True mentorship is passing things along when your piece of the journey is over, like passing a baton in a relay race.

Mentoring is extremely important for gifted learners, and I think that it should be placed in a much higher importance than it is currently considered. Teachers are amazing and they do so much, but teaching does not only take place in the classroom. Mentors can step in and facilitate growth outside of the traditional classroom activities. Mentors can provide personal, individualized challenges and support, without the politics and complexities of working within the traditional education system. If you're going to work with a mentor, I would highly suggest this: know what you'd like to accomplish (your goal) and what you need from a mentor (i.e., specific instruction, networking, opportunity) to get there. A more targeted approach will make for the more efficient use of everyone's time.

It is also helpful to explicitly state how much you want to be pushed and held accountable, and in what way. Mentors can create personal relationships and really give that individualized attention, but they are fully optimized as a tool when they find your comfort zones and push you through them. My mentor in graduate school, Dr. Michael Cassano, once said to me, "You are good at a lot of things; you wouldn't have gotten into grad school if you weren't. My job is to make sure that you don't hide in your skills, that you continue to grow to be the best version of yourself you can."

**Michael Shaughnessy:** Difficult question -IQ testing- in the big scheme of things- how important is it?

**Matt Zakreski:** IQ testing is a means to an end. When we talk about giftedness as a construct, there are many ways to conceptualize it and define it. The problem is that we need some sort of unified definition or structure to provide a check point for giftedness to either exist or not exist. And since giftedness has traditionally been associated with intelligence, IQ scores were a natural place to insert that checkpoint. Now we know given the theory of multiple intelligences, that giftedness is far more than intelligence, however, we must start somewhere. So, if we are going to look at IQ as a marker of giftedness, then we need to be able to consider its impact from a verbal intelligence perspective, a nonverbal intelligence perspective and also skills that are harder to define like drawing, painting, singing, dancing, etc.

Now IQ is certainly a flawed measure. It tends to benefit educated people, it tends to benefit affluent people, and it definitely benefits people whose first language is English. The problem is that our schools are filled with kids who do not meet those criteria and are just as likely to be gifted themselves. If the test isn't designed to "see" those kids, we risk missing them completely.

A good therapist or a good psychologist will know those things and can consider that one writing up the test report. The problem is that most organizations don't have the skills training or knowledge to be able to parse out some of those intersectional factors. When I do a report, I always include an IQ test, an achievement test, and a test of nonverbal intelligence, non-verbal intelligence really does a nice job of cutting across language differences and learning styles. Because the ability to problem solve and make connections. That's a skill that exists outside of traditional measures of IQ of intelligence.

So, is IQ important? It serves a purpose. And I'm interested in IQ because of what it represents and the fact that it's a scaled measure so we can compare it to previous scores and other people. But I don't think that's where the conversation should stop, and assessments for giftedness must consider other measures and psycho-social factors.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** Social skills is it that gifted kids are lacking in social skills or it is that they have difficulty finding like-minded friends with similar interests?

**Matt Zakreski:** Gifted kids struggle with social relationships for many reasons. The first is developmental asynchrony. We could give an entire interview on this concept, but in the interest of brevity, I'll say that neurotypical kids develop in line with their expected age norms. So a 10 year old will be 10 socially, emotionally, academically, physically, etc.

A neurodivergent kid will often develop asynchronously. So that same 10 year old kid might have the intelligence of a 15 year old, the academic skills of a 14 year old, the emotional skills of a nine year old, and the social skills of a seven year old. There are many complicated reasons for why this phenomenon occurs. But the simplest answer is that when the brain is developing, there's only so much energy to go around. And as the cerebral cortex develops, some other things lag, mostly social and emotional skills.

This asynchrony impacts gifted kids in two ways the first is that while they are a certain chronological age, their intellectual age is often much greater than their peers. So gifted kids will seek out intellectual peers rather than chronological peers, which puts them in different social groups and activities that may be harder to find or navigate. For example, one of my clients is a very talented musician, and like a lot of talented musicians, he had outpaced the music instruction available to him in his current school. We successfully got him involved in the high school's marching band even though he's in middle school. And he enjoys spending time with these students and talking about music, and music theory, and performance. But when they start talking about high school drama, the prom, dating, and parties, he's completely left out. So, they're an intellectual appear in some ways, but not in other ways.

The second way that this asynchrony impacts gifted kids is their social skills often lag their other skills. And you'll see a kid who is poised and articulate and thoughtful in class become a silly, immature, weird person when trying to interact with friends. This weirdness creates anxiety, which of course exacerbates the behaviors in the first place. So gifted kids often get stuck in these sort of negative feedback loops, where they feel anxious about making friends which causes them to act weird, which pushes their friends away, which makes them more anxious, which makes them act weirder, which pushes more people away. It can be a really painful cycle to watch.

One of the ways we deal with this is by connecting gifted kids to other gifted peers. Now, just because gifted kids are all gifted, that doesn't mean that they're going to be friends, it may not even mean that they get along at all. But there is a phenomenon that occurs when you see kids who are all a synchronous realizing that they are all different together. And that platform can allow for deep and meaningful connections. So while gifted education is important for intellectual and academic development, I would argue that it is just as important for social and emotional development, because you're giving kids the option and the opportunity to connect with like-minded peers.

It is also worth noting that due to the way their brains work, and the fact that there just aren't that many gifted kids statistically speaking, it is important to help gifted kids find like-minded peers. And given the different developmental ages of gifted kids and their varied interests. It may mean that they have many different peer groups for many different activities on very on many different levels. I have kids who play chess against adults, and go to birthday parties with their homeroom class, and take social skills courses with kids who are a little bit younger, while taking online college courses. All of these interventions combine to scratch all of their various itches in all their various domains of functioning.

Now an intervention like this can be exhausting and challenging, logistically difficult, and expensive. So, we must out balance the different points of this and focus on what is possible and practical. But if you're a parent struggling for helping your gifted kid, make friends, the best practice is always to start with their interests. You're going to be much more successful in giving your kid meaningful social connection if you follow their interests, because in those interests they will find their places and then their people.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** The Internet -can it be used to nurture and support gifted kids- if so how?

**Matt Zakreski:** The Internet can be a tremendous tool for gifted kids. It can serve their education, social skills, and special interests. The best thing about the internet is that it is endless. There are constantly new platforms being developed, new organizations carving out their little corner and more information is available more readily to more people. than it ever has been in human history.

The internet can serve that intellectual black hole that gifted kids often present with. If your kid has read every single book in your local library about the Roman Empire, you might feel stuck as a parent. I guarantee you there are articles, resources, YouTube videos, etc. on the Roman Empire online that the kid has not seen before. If we point them in that direction, we feed their intellectual curiosity while also giving us an opportunity to talk about limits and boundaries.

Secondly, the internet has transformed into a place where many traditionally marginalized communities have staked out areas for themselves. Many gifted kids are drawn to computers in technology anyway. And in those spaces in through those tools, they have found areas of connection. I can't even begin to tell you how many online resources there are for gifted kids, gifted teachers, and the parents of gifted kids. People share resources, information, conferences, and tips and tricks. And this sharing of information not only lifts everybody up, but it makes us all feel less alone.

One of the other nice things about the internet when it comes to gifted kids is the prevalence of high-level academic instruction. Many gifted kids can't work in public schools. The way they learn is just too dissimilar then to how schools are developed, and that disconnect means that sometimes parents will have to move to get the kids the education they need. But if the family can't move, online school has become a viable option that it really wasn't for a long time. Some schools are entirely online so the child will be enrolled just in the cyber school and sometimes gifted kids are homeschooled, and their education is supplemented through online resources. The upshot is that parents aren't alone in educating gifted kids. They can lean on online resources, cyber school and educational professionals who make their work accessible in the various virtual spaces. So more gifted kids are getting what they need from wherever they are and thus everyone benefits.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** The age old question- acceleration vs enrichment- any thoughts on which is superior?

**Matt Zakreski:** Can I pick both? If not, I am all about enrichment. There is so much redundancy built into the American education system that sometimes acceleration can end up being more of the same stuff, but in a different classroom. Acceleration also can be a thornier proposal within the school district; for some reason, people often get resistant and combative around ideas of acceleration, especially grade skipping. It obviously can and does work, but I tend to lean more on the side of enrichment.

Enrichment, as a practice, is all about making education come alive. After all, education really is about connecting to the material. And while there are great PowerPoints out there, and there are wonderful worksheets and really cool spelling tests, those aren't the lessons that we remember. Think back to your own education. You probably remember science fairs, and doing labs, and the egg drop, and History Day, and the time that you made your own ice cream, etc. Those sorts of activities are consistent with enrichment. They take educational principles and apply them to something tangible and meaningful and frankly, more interesting than any chapter textbook ever could be.

Enrichment is the best way to educate all kids but especially gifted kids. Why sit there and memorize every piece of information about a blue whale, when you could go see a blue whale at a museum, or build a scale model of a blue whale when compared to a scaled down version of a human, or talk to a marine biologist? There are so many more interesting ways to talk about education engage kids with information than traditional didactic lecture ever could be. And that's why I think you're seeing education move from the "sage on the stage" model to the "guide on the side" model. We can point kids through differentiation to the topics and methods of delivery that feel the best to them. Then we can challenge them to learn the information as they go and use that connection to facilitate deep and meaningful learning.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** Self care seems to be a pervasive theme how will this impact gifted ed?

**Matt Zakreski:** Self-care is an important thing, but the problem with it is that it seems so impossible even though it is so simple. In this day and age, we are all overwhelmed, overworked, exhausted and parents perilously close to burnout. If we don't take care of ourselves than we can't show up for the people and things that matter most to us, let alone ourselves. How can you possibly find time to take care of yourself if you're so busy and overworked and overwhelmed? Since it feels impossible, we push it off and push it away and never end up doing it. And as such, get more burned out and exhausted.

So, when it comes to self-care, I always tell my clients three things. The first off, the first is that you have to carve out time for self-care. If you don't carve out time for it, it's **not** going to happen. We push it until what I like to call "the magical land of later," as in we'll do it later, after all the other things are done. And it never happens because the work either never ends, or it finally does and by that point we're exhausted. So self-care has to be a priority.

The second thing I tell my clients is that self-care must be personal. It must feed your personal strengths and your personal interests. I had a client once talk to me about how he had to do yoga and how he didn't really like yoga but yoga was so important. After a while, I asked him why he had to do yoga if he didn't like it and he said, "Well, that's what calms people down, right? And I want to be calmer." And I told him that if you don't like yoga, then it's not going to be helpful for you. The key question is what sort of things calm you down. We hemmed and hawed for a while, but ultimately, he came up to playing music. So, I made him carve out a half hour a day to play his acoustic guitar on his back porch. And that was much more therapeutic for him than doing the "right" thing of doing yoga.

Lastly, self-care is all about being the right kind of selfish. You've probably heard someone say that you can't pour from an empty cup. And that's true. The problem is that there are always people asking to have a pour from your cup. And if you don't learn how to set boundaries and limits and learn how to say no to people, then the constant asking for your time and space becomes itself a detriment.

So, self-care is putting yourself first, which is a concept that is very challenging for a lot of people. It doesn't always feel great to put yourself first, but that's why I call it the right kind of selfish you must be selfish to be selfless. You have to take care of yourself to be able to take care of other people. Whether your self-care is watching cartoons or playing frisbee or going for a walk or guided meditation or cooking an omelet. Whatever those things are for you, you must make that sacred time because those activities are going to fuel your soul and recover you enough to keep doing the high level intellectually and emotionally draining work that we've all chosen to do.

After all, you're worth it. I promise.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** What have I neglected to ask about your work and involvement with gifted kids?

**Matt Zakreski:** You are gifted all the time. I think that we still tend to think about giftedness as it pertains to school and education. But if you have a gifted brain, you are always carrying that brain with you. So, you are gifted at soccer practice, during play rehearsal, at the dinner table, on a road trip, etc. You'll note that I didn't say that you're gifted at *doing* these things; rather, you have the idiosyncrasies of the gifted brain with you at those moments. Gifted people aren't good at everything. And their intensities can make for the perception that their weaknesses are even worse because of how they see the world. Using the information that we know about how the gifted brain works to inform and set expectations for the people in our lives goes a long way towards making many things easier, from work to school to dating to recreation. Knowledge, as they say, is power.

**Michael Shaughnessy:** Thanks

### Autobiography of Todd Lubart



**Matt Zakreski**, PsyD is a high energy, creative clinical psychologist who utilizes an eclectic approach to meet the needs of his neurodiverse clients. He is proud to serve as a consultant, a professor, a speaker at national and international conferences, and a researcher on Giftedness. Dr. Zakreski is a member of Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted and the National Association for Gifted Children, as well as Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education and the New Jersey Association for Gifted Children. Dr. Zakreski is the co-founder and lead clinician at The Neurodiversity Collective (Web 1).

### Biodata of Author



Prof. Dr. **Michael F. Shaughnessy** is currently Professor of Educational Studies at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, New Mexico USA. He has served as Editor in Chief of Gifted Education International and can be reached electronically at Michael.Shaughnessy@enmu.edu. His orcid i.d. is 0000 0002 1877 1319. His current research interests include talent development and intellectual assessment as well as the role of personality in giftedness, talent and creativity.

## **References**

**Web 1.** <https://www.tesummit.org/tespeaker/matthew-zakreski/>