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Interview Article

An interview with Dr. Joanne Foster: igniting creativity in childhood and beyond

Michael F. Shaughnessy[1]

Educational Studies, Eastern New Mexico University, United States

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Abstract

The nurturing of creativity and talent seems increasingly apparent and needed. In this interview, Dr. Joanne Foster calls on several decades of experience working with teachers, parents and children to foster the creative potential of children. She discusses the elements that promote creativity and enhance the development and learning of the child. Some suggestions for future reference are noted.

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Michael F. Shaughnessy: How did you first get involved with creativity?

Joanne Foster: I've always loved creative writing. I'm very curious, and I enjoy asking questions and discovering new perspectives. When I became a teacher, I realized that creative expression inevitably invigorated my work with children, and motivated them to be creative, too. Whenever I taught prospective teachers, I found that the best classroom dynamics were those that catapulted from initiatives that tapped the imagination and invited free-wheeling ideas.

As an author, I seek information from different sources, collaborate with others, and incorporate fresh ideas into my work—all of which serves to infuse creative vibes. I'm not afraid to pivot, or to try going in unchartered directions because I've always believed that creativity lies at the core of forward momentum. And, if I'm not going forward then

[1] Prof.Dr., Educational Studies, Eastern New Mexico University, United States. E-mail: Michael.Shaughnessy@enmu.edu ORCID: 0000-0002-1877-1319

I'm standing still, and I know I can do better than that! For me, creativity is incendiary—like fuel for the many sparks that ignite my mind, and the sizzle that enlivens my days.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Let's start with parents. What do they need to be aware of in terms of their child's potential? And what are your top tips for fostering kids' creativity, talent, and intellect?

Joanne Foster: We can't determine what anyone's potential might be because it's an unknown. Potential is a horizon of sorts, with unpredictable and fluctuating trajectories enroute, and over time. However, parents can encourage children to develop a creative outlook, to push beyond the status quo, and to embrace new ways of doing things—and those initiatives can certainly enhance kids' potential. Here are three tips: 1) match tasks to your child's abilities and interests across subject areas; 2) support your child's efforts, and their investment in learning; 3) co-create with your child an environment that's welcoming, safe, inclusive, supportive, and accepting of diversity.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: How can educators support gifted/high-ability learners—those who excel in the sciences, or in other areas of study—and also those whose development varies across different domains?

Joanne Foster: Stay attuned to a student's individual learning needs. These are always changing, in concert with support mechanisms, developmental pathways, asynchrony, shifting circumstances, and more. Advancement in the sciences, languages, the arts, social/emotional growth, or other facets of development demands an understanding of an evolving landscape relating to instruction, assessment, provisions, and encouragement. It requires appreciation of inquiry, and critical and creative thought processes.

Albert Einstein said, "To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science." I interpret this as awareness of the promise of possibilities—and the vast scope of that promise—which is foundational for teaching and learning. It can, and should, underlie what educators do, and the dynamic they create. Afterall, there are no limits to when or where learning can happen. Moreover, technology is empowering, and informational sources are everywhere.

Throughout all that, educators can instill a love of learning, and then be attentive to the nuances as these relate to the individual. That's vital for supporting gifted/high-ability learners!

I'm reminded of the following words by Astronaut Sally Ride, who appreciated the importance of scientific endeavors, and opportunities for excellence in many pursuits. She said, "Science is fun. Science is curiosity. We all have natural curiosity. Science is a process of investigating. It's posing questions and coming up with a method. It's delving in." I believe learning of any kind can be fun—embracing curiosity, investigation, problem-solving, effort, and agency. When educators encourage these ways of thinking and doing, it can lead to wonderful outcomes!

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Let's face it, teachers have impossible jobs. How can educators best work with parents to encourage children's creative, critical, divergent, and flexible thinking?

Joanne Foster: Teachers can model effective coping skills, solid attitudes, and strong work habits, including how to prioritize, respond effectively to adversity, and be resilient. In *Being Smart about Gifted Learning* (p. 37), Dona Matthews and I write that each child needs "*learning opportunities that challenge them sufficiently and appropriately, along with the right kinds of guidance and support so they can meet and enjoy those challenges, and feel good about themselves at home and at school*" (p. 36).

Therefore, it's important for teachers to seek, select, and offer a suitable array of options to nurture individuals' high-level development—and this can happen in regular classrooms. "*The objective is to find a good match between the learning needs of the child, and the range of learning opportunities that are available, thinking as broadly as possible*" (p. 209).

Working together, parents and teachers can stretch boundaries. For example, they can participate in conferences and workshops; form study groups; stay apprised of current resources (including journals such as this one!); network with others in gifted associations and community organizations; observe and share exemplary and emerging practices; increase competency in technology; and collaborate with educational specialists in areas they want or need to know more about. Respectful connectivity, and engagement in advocacy for gifted-related provisions and services, are paramount.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: As noted in your response above, in "*Being Smart about Gifted Learning, 3rd Edition*," you and co-author Dona Matthews emphasize the importance of "matching" a child's learning opportunities and their developmental needs, over time. Can you briefly summarize how you structured the book, what you convey—and why it matters?

Joanne Foster: On page 37 say: *"There's so much about human development that remains mysterious, so much we still don't know about what fosters expertise, exceptional accomplishment, and creativity, all components of gifted-level development. There's much we do know, however, about how to nurture interest into ability, and then to support ability into gifted-level achievement."*

To that end, we begin by discussing perspectives and paradigm shifts pertaining to giftedness, and the role of creativity. We move on to diagnostic considerations, wherein we address questions and answers about testing, and clarify understandings about assessment processes, and also labeling issues. Then, over the course of two chapters, we present myriad suggestions for meeting gifted learning needs—including differentiation in regular classrooms, plus lots of other options. The focus of the next section is gifted-level development, and we pay attention to motivation and achievement; to social, emotional, and behavioral considerations; and to parents' roles and responsibilities in helping to further children's abilities. The final section of the book is about changing realities in gifted education, including how parents and teachers can support optimal learning in an increasingly challenging world. The book concludes with 24 pages of endnotes, and 30 pages of reference material. Readers will also find informative charts and real-life anecdotes strategically located within the 460 pages.

Throughout the twelve chapters, we raise awareness about "*the authentic, interactive, and dynamic nature of learning*" (p. 90). We are pleased that Kirkus Review hailed the book as "*an authoritative, up-to-date- and comprehensive manual*."

Michael F. Shaughnessy: You also have a book *for kids, Ignite Your Ideas*, wherein you empower them to "spark" creativity—and thereby enhance their skills and abilities. Why is it important for kids to engage in creative expression? How can they maximize their creativity?

Joanne Foster: Creativity empowers humankind. It underlies all endeavors and discoveries. Creativity is a *choice*—something to embrace. Whether it is *"softly lit, smouldering, or scorching*," creativity is open-ended! It warms the soul and brightens the day.

There are endless ways kids can invigorate their creativity. For example, they can build upon what they already know; amplify fun factors; find purpose that gives meaning to their creative pursuits; collaborate and share ideas; welcome spontaneity and aha! moments; look for opportunities to tap resources; and use the imagination across different domains.

In *Ignite Your Ideas*, I discuss the essence, limitlessness, and value of creativity so kids can appreciate that it's like having a superpower! I discuss several questions and answers that readers want to know about; offer suggestions for seizing creativity and nurturing it in the context of everyday family life; and convey how kids can overcome struggles with creativity (such as impatience, embarrassment, lack of provisions, perceived risk, and more). The final segment of this book for kids includes 100 sure-fire strategies to ignite creativity—and there is a 15-page resources and references section as well. The information applies to sciences, the arts, languages, and other areas.

For kids to become invested in creativity, they have to put forth time, patience, and effort. However, those who appreciate a creative edge, and who are willing to crack open doors to the imagination, reap joyful benefits, including learning possibilities that will resonate now, and into the future.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: We all know about "science fairs"—typically in middle school—which provide outlets for students to highlight their thinking and creativity. Any ideas here?

Joanne Foster: Science is fundamentally the pursuit and study of discovery—and any opportunity to advance that kind of learning is advantageous for the here-and-now, and for the future. Ideally, the emphasis should not be narrowed to

science fairs; it should pervade the daily activities and learning experiences in which kids engage all the time, at home, school, and elsewhere.

There's technology, inquiry, data collection, and countless other aspects of science that children can investigate. However, science is not only about facts and research. It's about exploration, trial and error, perseverance, and more. For example, composer Vangelis notes, *"Music is science more than art, and it is the main code of the universe."* And astrophysicist Carl Sagan wrote, *"Science is a way of thinking much more than it is a body of knowledge*."

Most importantly, science is about imagination, and curiosity–which need not be restricted to science fairs!

So yes, let's continue with those fairs but let's stretch far beyond them, too, because our future depends on it. I'll sum up this answer with the words of theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking who said, "*Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge*." It is a calling, and a necessity!

Michael F. Shaughnessy: How can parents demonstrate their own creativity in the sciences (and elsewhere), and act as models for their kids?

Joanne Foster: Regardless of age, we're all active agents in creating our own intelligence. And we're influenced by those around us. Thus, parents are well-positioned to "show the way" as kids embark on various activities. Parents can share their experiences about how to maximize learning environments; appreciate cultural, generational, developmental, and other differences; maintain life-balance; and navigate day-to-day circumstances. Parents can demonstrate the power of resilience, creativity, and a positive attitude. They can emphasize the importance of reading and reflection. They can enable kids to have choices, providing them with safe and nurturing milieux as they make those choices, venture into unfamiliar territory, and gain independence and confidence.

Each family has its own unique blend of individuals (immediate and extended), mode of functioning, and constellation of interests, priorities, challenges, problem solving approaches, and skill sets. There's no one blueprint for parents to follow, or beacon to hold aloft. Nevertheless, parents can (and should) demonstrate a lifelong love of learning, a willingness to embrace creativity, a desire to ask questions and ponder answers, and a healthy respect for the aspirations of others—most notably their children!

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Some kids procrastinate, and this can interfere with their learning and creativity. You've written extensively about procrastination. What underlies it, and what suggestions do you have to help children and teens become happily productive?

Joanne Foster: Procrastination involves willfully putting things off. It's a form of avoidance behavior. However, people can take control of their actions and attitudes, and choose what to do.

Why do kids procrastinate? There are *personal reasons* (such as too many demands, boredom, perfectionism, or fear of failure or success); *skill-related reasons* (such as disorganization, or trouble with goal-setting, prioritizing, or time management); and *external reasons* (such as distractions, lack of materials, insufficient structure, or being influenced by others who procrastinate).

An upside to procrastination is that it can allow a person to plan carefully, think things through, acquire resources, and pay attention to detail. The downside is that procrastination can compromise achievements, relationships, and productivity.

In my books on procrastination, I share hundreds of tips for overcoming avoidance behavior. These align with various underlying causes and circumstances, and I include recommendations to help children and teens develop personal strengths.

For now, though, here are three key suggestions:

Value attribution: When kids see a task or activity as worthwhile, they're more likely to become invested, and to see it through. Let's say they have a science project relating to robotics, aerodynamics, physics, or marine conservation. If they can appreciate value in the learning process (and if expectations are fair), they will be more motivated to engage.

Supports: Who can encourage and assist? Friends, family, teachers, mentors? Consider who might be able to offer useful feedback, and help kids explore options, make sensible decisions, find resources, and aspire toward reachable and fulfilling outcomes.

First steps: Kids can proceed bit by bit, take pride in their initial steps, and then continue. As they do so, they can envision progress and positive goals, set manageable timelines, pace themselves, and check things off along the way. Kids may be able to start a task with an aspect that seems most enjoyable, or cluster things together, and also take short breaks as needed.

There's an old saying, "*Every great journey starts with one small step*."

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Do you have a web for parents and teachers to get more information and resources, and what will they find there?

Joanne Foster: Yes, my website is https://joannefoster.ca. I provide an extensive assortment of articles and blogs, under the overarching headings of creativity; learning and development; motivation and productivity; and children's well-being. There's podcast and interview material, presentation descriptors, and information about each of my books (including tables of contents, reviews, short excerpts, and more). Visitors to my website can also subscribe to my free quarterly newsletter, and they can connect with me directly through my contact page.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What have I neglected to ask?

Joanne Foster: I think we are good! Your questions were interesting, and I enjoyed answering them. Thank you for inviting me to share my views in your esteemed journal!

Biodata of Joanne Foster

Joanne Foster, Ed.D. has worked in the field of Educational Psychology, and also Gifted Education, for over 35 years. She has a Master's degree in Special Education and Adaptive Instruction, and a Doctoral degree in Human Development and Applied Psychology. She taught for many years in the teacher training program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, where she also served as the gifted liaison, and provided broad-based community support and targeted expertise relating to learning, teaching, and high-level development. She's the award-winning author of eight books. Her writing reflects her extensive experience as a parent, teacher, consultant, university instructor, and community advocate.

Dr. Foster's most recent book is *Ignite your Ideas: Creativity for Kids*(August, 2023). She co-authored (with Dona Matthews) the multiple award-winning *Being Smart* series , including the fully updated 3rd edition entitled *Being Smart about Gifted Learning: Empowering Parents and Kids Through Challenge and Change*. (Fall 2021). Dr. Foster also wrote *ABCs of Raising Smarter Kids: Hundreds of Ways to Inspire Your Child* (2019 Award Finalist, American Best Books), *Bust Your BUTS: Tips for Teens Who Procrastinate* (recipient of the Independent Book Publishers Association's 2018 Silver Benjamin Franklin Award for teen non-fiction), and *Not Now, Maybe Later: Helping Children Overcome Procrastination* (2015).

She is co-author (with Dona Matthews), of *Beyond Intelligence: Secrets for Raising Happily Productive Kids* (2014).Dr. Foster's articles are featured in numerous publications, including online in her column at *The Creativity Post*, for *First Time Parent Magazine*, and in issues of *Best Version Media's* Neighbours Magazines across many regional areas. She offers a Master Class on Igniting Your Child's Creativity—and Why It's Important in association with *BabySparks,* an online parenting platform that is used by millions of parents around the world. She is also listed on the Writers Directory for *Parenting Media Association*.

Dr. Foster gives keynote addresses, offers presentations on a wide range of topics, and shares information and insights on podcasts, in interviews, and in interactive forums. Throughout her writing, and in the course of her work with parents, teachers, and other professionals across North America and beyond, she provides leadership in areas of learning, children's well-being, and optimal educational processes for supporting gifted/high-level development. Dr. Foster also provides lots of resource material, listed here, which is updated regularly.

Web: https://joannefoster.ca/

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.

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Web 1. https://joannefoster.ca/