
AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH KOHAN-MASS: ON GIFTEDNESS IN ISRAEL

Prof. **Michael F. Shaughnessy**

1) Judith, first of all, can you tell us a little bit about your background, education and experience?

I am a faculty member of the Education Department of the College for Academic Studies – Or Yehuda, and a teaching fellow at the Hebrew University's Department of Teacher Training in Jerusalem. I earned my PhD from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on gender differences in cognitive performance of gifted children, and completed my post-doctorate at Haifa University, studying gifted girls in single-sex math classes. My main research interests include individual differences and gender differences in the cognitive processes involved in learning and thinking in general, and in gifted children, in particular. I also serve on numerous public and private committees on education as an expert on thinking-based learning. Recently, my interest focuses on neurocognition and education.

2) When did you first get involved in education?

My involvement in education began at a young age, when I entered the school system! I never really felt that I belonged in the system. Even though I was a good student, I didn't really understand the point of it all. Since I felt a need to express my discontent with the education system, I spent a lot of time in the school library because most of my teachers didn't want me to sit in their classroom...

Although I attended a very prestigious high school in Jerusalem, the only reason I survived was that I had one very significant role model, the deputy principal, who was a teacher of life.

As an adult, I felt that I wanted to contribute to the field of education in order to make a change and I had no original plans to study beyond a BA. I continued to study because university studies seduced me - I found that I wanted to understand more and more about various issues related to education, and I actually was on the Dean's List and completed my degree with honors, so it was a good deal all around.

3) Now, when did you first get involved in gifted education?

Even though I have been asked that question many times, I don't really have a clear answer. Most people who know me think that I entered this field because of a personal interest because I identified with this group, or because my daughter was identified as a gifted child. I imagine that all three answers are right.

I feel that I have a mission to explain gifted children to educators in general, and to my own students in particular – these are children who have special needs and require different responses from us. The most I find myself in this field, the stronger I feel that the difference between gifted and so-called ordinary children is

not merely a quantitative difference, it is a qualitative difference. They are not ordinary children who are quick learners, their thinking and reasoning is fundamentally different. Such an assumption has implications for learning, that is true, but it also has implications for how these children perceive and understand the world, because of their high abilities of abstract thinking, for example.

I recently participated in a study of parents of gifted children and I was asked about what I expect from my daughter. I said that I expect her to find her own way in the world. This is my answer for all my children, but especially for her, because when you're different, your opportunities to gain a sense of belonging are more limited, and it is much more challenging to find your place in life.

4) How would you characterize the current "state of the art" of education in Israel? Who are some of the main leaders?

Israel is a country that has given birth to the greatest number of Nobel Prize winners (when you compare Nobel prizes to the size of the population) but it still doesn't know how it does that. There is nothing systematic that you can point to. There is no oral or written recipe.

This fact is actually evidence of the instability of the country's educational goals and policy.

Some of the reasons for this may be traced to the government in Israel, which is not stable. Elections take place frequently, and the minister of education is replaced too frequently. Every minister of education comes to the job with his own agenda and tries to fit this agenda to the length of his term, without any long-range thinking or planning.

In general, Israel would very much like to adopt a constructivist approach to learning and teaching, that includes investments in the development of thinking. At the same time, a change like that is very complicated and in many respects, it entails the adoption of new educational paradigms concerning teaching, learning, training, assessment, etc.

Today, the standardization culture (illustrated by the popularity of various national and international comparative studies) is gaining purchase in education, which is a complete contradiction to efforts to adopt a constructivist approach. After all, we cannot talk about using customized learning in order to cultivate individual differences that are reflected in creative thinking and critical thinking skills, for example, and at the same time, give standardized tests to everyone!

5) What specific research interests do you have and what are you investigating?

My research interests focus on intelligence, cognition, higher order thinking skills, giftedness, and gender. My recent research has been on gender differences in gifted children.

This comes from an attempt to understand why there is a male majority in gifted classes, and the desire to explore whether the tests used to identify gifted children are biased in favour of male thinking styles.

I can't help but talking a bit about the fact that girls are a minority in the gifted population. This is observed both in the United States and in Israel. Despite all the explanations that the literature offers for this – from neurocognitive differences to socialization – we see no evidence for this among the Arab population of Israel, for example. In this population, girls account for 50% if not more of the classes of gifted children!

Not only does this fact challenge all the theories that deal with gender differences, it is extremely interesting in that Arab society is a traditional society, where we would expect to see a male majority. So this interesting phenomenon really calls for a follow-up study that is fundamentally different from studies conducted to date. This is a very interesting finding, one that might even change our thinking about gender.

Another study focused on how we can encourage gifted girls to study STEM subjects. This study explored whether girls are more encouraged to continue to study STEM subjects after attending an single-sex all-girl math class (although all the other classes they attend in school are co-ed). This study begins with the assumption that class climate, which is competitive by nature, inhibits gifted girls from making outstanding achievements in these subjects.

In the near future, I plan to focus on research in neurocognition and especially post-formal thinking, executive functions and the brain. The goal is to understand what distinguishes ordinary people from people who have very high intellectual capabilities – who usually are characterized by a high level of abstract thinking skills and a highly developed ability to manage their cognitive processes – and how these differences are reflected in the brain's functioning.

6) How has technology impacted education in your country?

In Israel, technology is very advanced and it has also penetrated the field of education. Technology is undoubtedly a wonderful tool that can make a powerful contribution to the advancement of education.

Like everything else, it has benefits and drawbacks. The ease of access to information on any topic, at any time, from anywhere is an enormous advantage, especially for gifted children who do not get enough intellectual stimulation at school from the school staff.

At the same time, we have to remember that technology is a tool – it doesn't change the essence of learning or teaching. It does change the teacher's role in the process – the teacher no longer has absolute knowledge of a subject.

Another point is that we have to be aware of encouraging individual learning so much that we lose the enormous advantages of collaborative learning. This is also a sensitive point for gifted children, who typically tend to avoid working in groups and prefer to work alone. Today, in the twenty-first century, there is no doubt that the ability to work in a team is a critical skill for success in life.

7) We are aware of some of the turmoil in your country. How are you and your fellow educators coping on a daily basis?

The situation is very complex, and the extremists on both sides, among the Israelis and among the Palestinians, only make it worse. And, sad to say, in the end, it is these extremists who leave their mark through extreme actions on both sides. Very few people remember the efforts toward peace, but will remember the acts of violence. This fact only polarizes the opinions in both nations.

We had a very difficult summer, but sadly this is not a new situation for us.

One of the challenges for all educators around the world is the need to address the special needs that emerge in sensitive situations to which children are exposed.

8) Who has influenced you or impacted you?

There are several people who have made intellectual mark on me through the books that they wrote. But if I address the people in my life, the real people, there are two who have accompanied me along my career as mentors, both in a personal and a professional sense. The first is Professor Diane Halpern. After I read most of her books, which inspired my own work, I met her at a conference in Belfast, Ireland, and the connection we made was truly meaningful for me. Although Professor Halpern is an extremely busy woman and holds a very senior position as the Dean of Social Science at Minerva Schools at Keck Graduate Institute, she is also very human and warm.

She has accompanied me through all my career decisions, and sometimes through personal decisions, too. She is without doubt my (female) role model.

The second figure is Professor David Chen, who is the Dean of the School of Education at the Center of Academic Studies. In addition to being my superior, he is a constant source of intellectual and personal inspiration.

9) What have I neglected to ask?

Another concern that I have is the automatic connection that many people tend to make between giftedness and STEM subjects. I think that we shouldn't restrict ourselves and view the gifted population exclusively as the STEM geniuses of tomorrow. A belief like that misses the entire theoretical underpinning of giftedness: After all, these children were identified on the basis of their outstanding general intelligence. Therefore, their contribution cannot, and should not, be channelled exclusively to these fields. Every country needs intellectuals that will inspire cultural development as well.