



## “Gifted lives”: An Interview with Professor Joan Freeman

By Mojca Juriševič\*  
 University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education

**Professor Joan Freeman** is a chartered Psychologist with a private practice in London specialising in the potential of young children. She obtained her PhD in gifted children at the Manchester University and is currently Visiting Professor at Middlesex University (London), Founding President of the European Council for High Ability (ECHA), Honorary Fellow of the College of Teachers and Patron of the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE), and an elected Fellow of the British Psychological Society, which has honoured her in 2007 with a Lifetime Achievement Award for her work with the gifted and talented. She has recently become the Founder and Chair of the think-tank, the Tower Education Group, which is carrying out the world-wide research on gifted and talented. Joan Freeman has conducted and supervised substantial research, notably her continuing study of gifted children since 1974, and has published widely in this area: 17 books (many of them translated into other languages, none of them in Slovenian yet), two government reports on educating the gifted and talented, more than 140 refereed publications and 350 non-academic articles and book reviews on child development and general psychology.

But on the whole, chatting with Professor Joan Freeman I have found her a very pleasant, modest and charismatic woman, a mother who raised four children, and a scientist who travels around the world to share the knowledge and expertise to help professionals and parents to understand giftedness better. She has also her own web page ([www.joanfreeman.com](http://www.joanfreeman.com)) where you can find further information about her work and also free publications which is a rare example but worthy of imitation.

In her most recent book *Gifted Lives: What Happens when Gifted Children Grow Up*, she describes the dramatic lives of 20 of the 210 adults (gifted and non-gifted) she followed for 35 years since they were aged five to 14. She shows how those 20 people, who all had IQs over 160, lived with such amazing gifts. Such a long intimate study has never been done before in psychology and science in general. It is unique both in its use of matched comparison groups and in its deep one-to-one approach to understand the development and lives of the gifted.

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\*Naslov / Address: Mojca Juriševič, Oddelek za temeljni pedagoški študij, Pedagoška fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani, Kardeljeva ploščad 16, 1000 Ljubljana; [mojca.jurisevic@pef.uni-lj.si](mailto:mojca.jurisevic@pef.uni-lj.si)

*Professor Freeman, my sincere congratulations for the Gifted lives. You have received many excellent reviews from different psychological journals (e.g., British Journal of Educational Psychology, Psychology Today, The Psychology of Education Review...). What value has this book for you personally? What was your main message of the “research report” to the world? Is there some special message for psychologists?*

For me, as for any researcher, it is thrilling to have one’s lifetime work highly praised by all the important media, both professional and general. My main message is quite simply that the gifted and talented are normal individuals – but with exceptional abilities that make differences to their lives. My 35-year intimate follow-up has shown the deep effects of long-term aspects of high ability, such as acceleration in school, but most of all it has shown what it is to be labelled gifted with all the expectations that so often go with it.

*You started your research on gifted children more than 40 years ago and the research circumstances and the research climate were quite different to the ones we live in today. Could you tell us more about how it was to start a psychological research on the gifted at that time? What attracted you most in this area of research? Has somebody or something had special influence on you?*

It was not so long ago that the gifted were considered to be very rare and strange, so much so that it was impossible to compare them with other children. So research would look at, say, six advanced boys (few girls were seen as gifted then) without any comparison with other children. Even now, much research is trapped by this idea that comparisons are unnecessary. Case studies are always interesting and informative, but there is a great need for comparisons. Perhaps it was the scientist in me which found so much poor research to be irritating because it was influencing ideas and the lives of the brightest children. A scientist searches for the truth and for what can be put to use.

*How do you differentiate the two concepts: giftedness and talents? In my opinion, we have reached a very high level of “terminological democracy” in last century with the development of different conceptual models, from psychometrical to developmental ones (e.g. Feldhusen, Gagné, Tannebaum), which may cause misunderstandings also at the conceptual level. What is your view on this?*

Using different meanings for exceptionally high ability is confused. Prof. Gagné, for example, has changed the normally used meanings of gifts and talents. Talents, he says, are the end product of gifts – or maybe the other way round! I cannot see the usefulness of this proposal. If we cannot agree on what our terms mean, each researcher has to define their understanding of those words, and each reader has to

understand what the researcher means by them. Rather a waste of energy. In general, gifts are normally referred to as intellectual potential, and talents refer to the arts. Although the two understandings overlap, there is an international basis of common understanding.

*As one of the most established researchers on gifted population you reject the equality principle in the area of human potentials. This view contradicts directly with current educational mainstream view which was also expressed at the last conference in Budapest<sup>1</sup>, namely that we are all gifted in something. Could you explain this controversy?*

I accept absolutely that we are all different, but I insist that some of us are outstandingly better at doing some things than others are. I do not believe that we are all gifted (or talented) at something. It makes no sense because those adjectives imply a comparison - gifted compared with who else? Every normal person has strengths in particular areas, such as drawing or being empathetic. But that does not mean they are gifted in those areas, whether in comparison with the population they live in or internationally.

*In your longitudinal research you have used intelligence tests to identify giftedness in children. On the other hand, in your recent international study<sup>2</sup> you have found out that the most important identification criteria world-wide are teachers' judgements (80%), as the sole or as a combined procedure, and that psychological instruments are much less rarely used, i.e. intelligence tests (55%) and creativity tests (22%), also in comparison with grade marks (62%) and parents' opinion (62%). How do you comment on these findings? What is the best way to measure giftedness in children and adolescents in school?*

It is one of the unavoidable problems of long-term research that what was acceptable at its start is not so at its end, as in any developing science. Marie Curie, for example, would no longer be boiling up huge barrels of tar to extract radium. Intelligence tests are not only less in favour than they were, but can only be used by psychologists. It was surprising to me from the world-wide survey of educating the gifted, that 55% of teachers use intelligence tests for selection. But then ... an intelligence test is the most reliable measure of all for school success. I find it rather shocking that 80% of teachers choose children as gifted without objective measurement and with all the unconscious stereotypes they may have in their minds.

<sup>1</sup>Hungarian EU Presidential Conference on Talent Support and First European Talent Day, 7.-9.4.2011, Budapest, Hungary.

<sup>2</sup>Freeman, J., Raffan, J. & Warwick, I. (2010). *World-wide Provision to Develop Gifts and Talents: An International Survey*. Berkshire: CfBT Education Trust.

*What are the main obstacles for psychologists in researching giftedness?*

The great problem in researching giftedness is its definition, which you have referred to. What is gifted to one person is not gifted to another because the circumstances are always different. As I wrote in *Permission to be Gifted*<sup>3</sup>. Often unrecognised cultural and political expectations, as well as provision, change the choice of who is chosen. In research, the sample, as well as the methodology, makes all the difference to the findings. Too much research into gifts and talents is concerned with tiny samples of children with no comparisons, drawn from comfortable Western communities, by far the most being North American involving cultural influences which may be very different elsewhere.

*Your evidence-based study confirmed the fact that some of the gifted children fell by the wayside whilst others reached fame and happiness in adult life which was already proven by Terman. Who or what has a key role in this dynamic considering your research experience?*

To succeed at a high level in life you need three wonderful things - extremely high ability, a strong personality and a good dose of luck. When any one of them is missing the path may be too difficult to negotiate. Advancement in school is not necessarily a sure route to adult excellence for many reasons in a culture. In real life, one has to spend time earning a living. For example, Terman found that in 1920s America, women had to give up family life if they were to succeed in the wider world, which is no longer the case there. Although in Saudi Arabia where a woman is put in prison for driving a car, not covering her face or getting permission to leave the house, it is unlikely that her gifts and talents can be developed outside the home.

*What does it mean to be gifted in childhood and what in adulthood?*

Gifted in childhood normally means being advanced over others of the same age. In adulthood it means pushing back the frontiers of knowledge or producing high level creative endeavour, which (although built on a great deal of preparation) is different and startling.

*The fear of elitism is constantly present in the area of gifted education. It is really elitism when we identify gifted children in school and provide them with a more personalized education? What does elitism in gifted education mean to you? How could you define it?*

<sup>3</sup>Freeman, J. (2005). *Permission to be gifted: how conceptions of giftedness can change lives*. In R. Sternberg & J. Davidson, *Conceptions of Giftedness* (pp. 8–97), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Elitism implies some sort of privilege; that the children of the rich or those who know how to work the system will get more than their fair share. It certainly exists. But to me, providing every child with a suitable education is not elitism – it is the opposite. If the highly able need something special, it is no more elitist than providing the less able with something special. The key is to look at potential rather than giftedness, which implies achievement.

*There are many myths about giftedness that impede our deeper understanding and more effective provision for gifted students in school. Which are the most dangerous and why?*

The most dangerous are the emotional myths, that the gifted are emotionally fragile, unable to make friends and grow up socially normal. It is something I have shown to be false, yet it lives on. Perhaps because somehow it makes other people feel better, and parents can blame a child's unhappiness on giftedness. Children's difficult behaviour is not a product of giftedness, but I've found is normally due to other reasons. This myth is so strong that parents bring their children to see me in my private practice because of their children's behaviour which they hopefully blame on potential gifts when the child may not be gifted.

*Gifted individuals in your study have obtained different modes of provision during their schooling. You have recently<sup>2</sup> pointed out world-wide different types of provision, from full inclusion to special schools (e.g. grouping, pull-out programmes, enrichment, acceleration...). Which provision is the most worthwhile in your opinion? Which one emerged as more effective than others in your studies?*

Above all, a gifted child's education must be appropriate for that particular individual. Although this depends on what is available, some moves, such as grade-skipping can be detrimental, especially in the years to come. Almost all research on this has taken place within education. Pull-out classes work very well and do not take the child away from friends. They are probably the best compromise.

*How do you see the contemporary trends and further developments in gifted education? Which are the main research and educational issues that have to be faced in the future?*

The old problems of elitism, stereotyping and choosing only already advanced children as gifted are fading, although in some cultures this is almost too slow to notice. The trend in the search for giftedness is more concerned with potential in all children while allowing for the effects of their circumstances on their achievements.

It is becoming more acceptable to see the gifted as normal, but with special needs. International provision is broadening to cover voluntary entrance to higher level teaching, particularly within specialist subject areas, such as mathematics.

*Would you like to add anything else that would be relevant for psychologists who work with gifted students? Please, welcome.*

When children are encouraged to see themselves as worthy human beings, they feel they have the right to aim higher and function at their best. Accordingly, their achievements are also likely to be higher. The big comparative example is gender. In areas of the world where girls are refused the same opportunities (and even food) as boys, the girls do less well. But in most modern countries where this discrimination has largely gone, girls are achieving at a higher level than the boys, even in the sciences. Given the opportunity, and with encouragement and moral support, it is amazing how any child can develop and take their place in the world, each in the best way for them as individual people.

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