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## under her spell: an analysis of the creativity of JK Rowling

Mr and Mrs Dursley of number four Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense...The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that someone would discover it.

(ROWLING, 1998, p.1)

Thus begins one of the most famous introductions to the phenomenon that is the Harry Potter fiction series by British writer, J.K. Rowling. No series of children's books have caused quite the discussion, the stir, and renewed passion for reading as the Harry Potter series. Her four previous books have sold more than 90 million copies worldwide and have been translated into 55 languages. Rowling's newest book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003) promises to have a similar success and readership.

Not surprisingly, gifted children have been particularly dedicated to reading the Harry Potter series. Australian scholar Miraca Gross considers the Harry Potter series a contribution to the genre of "high fantasy" and points out that, "Children with wide, rich vocabularies enjoy the humour which often involves sophisticated word play, and the invented language of spells

derived from Latin. There are countless allusions to Greek and Roman mythology with which many gifted students may already be familiar" (Gross, 2002, p.25).

As a scholar in the field of talent development and eminence, I was curious to investigate the life of Joanne Kathleen Rowling, to examine influences in her life - especially in the early years- and to apply scholarly theories of creativity (past and present) to her life experiences and behaviors. Surprisingly, as I involved myself in some reading of the latest Harry Potter book, there seemed to be stunning parallels between Hogwarts and issues that we face in education today, both in the United States and in England.

This paper follows several others by this author on the subject of eminent individuals, and the influence of parents, siblings, schools and schoolteachers as well as the role

of interests and collections in the development of their varied talents (McGreevy, 2000). Previous articles center on the mentorship between Darwin and his teacher, John Henslow (McGreevy, 1990), the creative childhood of Lewis Carroll (McGreevy, 1992), and the literary lives of the young Bronte children (McGreevy, 1995). All pieces illustrate an archival approach to the study of talent and the creative process.

Joanne Kathleen Rowling was born on July 31st (Harry Potter's birthday as well), 1966 to middle class parents, Ann and Peter Rowling, in the small town of Chipping Sodbury, England. Both parents were readers and read often to Joanne and to her younger sister, Diane. Joanne always demonstrated an interest in reading and writing and a vivid imagination. On reflecting about Rowling and the creative process, the starting point for me was Wallas' theory of creativity from his book *The Art of Thought* (1926). Briefly, his four stages in the creative process are as follows:

1. *Preparation* - In this stage one "clarifies the mess" (Davis, 1994). Both formal and informal work is done in this stage. One defines / clarifies the problem, gathers information that is relevant, and examines materials. One readies for the act of creation by studying, thinking, researching, etc... Preparation can take place over a period of weeks, months, or years.
2. *Incubation* - In this process the entire process rests in gestation - in one's subconscious, the unconscious mind works on the problem. Incubation takes place during reflective, quiet periods.
3. *Illumination* - A solution emerges - often seemingly out of nowhere. A light seems to have been thrown on the problem.

People often talk about an "Ah-ha" or "Eureka" experience. Suddenly, the solution comes together.

4. *Verification* - In this stage a person must bring creation to fulfilment; they must prove the theory, create the product, verify their creative thinking in some way. This final step affirms the creative act, and it takes a certain amount of both discipline and passion to focus and bring creation to life.

One reads of Rowling's life in varied interviews in newspapers, magazines, on television, and in conversations in her own words (Fraser, 2000), and a small unauthorized biography (Shapiro, 2000). There is no authorized biography yet. The following are observations on Wallas's creative model as reflected in Rowling's life.

There was *preparation* for this remarkable career. Rowling followed her "bents" early in her life. When young, her interests were in playing games of witches and wizards and broomsticks. She dressed up in capes and tall, pointy hats and made unusual potions with a brother and sister named "Potter" (Yes!) who lived nearby. She was fed a steady diet of fairy tales and fantasy books and read the popular series books such as Narnia Chronicles of C.S. Lewis, "Wind in the Willows" by Kenneth Grahame. Around the age of nine, she was devouring the James Bond series. When a bit older, she read Jane Austen and Charles Dickens' books. It is worth noting that there are seven books in the Narnia series as there will be in the Harry Potter books.

At the young age of five, Rowling began writing a series of rabbit stories about a Rabbit who came down with the measles and had a bevy of visitors coming round to visit. She has called it her "rabbit fixation".

One wonders if this experience provided the groundwork for her later ability to focus and fixate on one character and their world. Her younger years were filled with playing imaginary games, creating folders of notes and ideas for writing, and reading voraciously. Rowling *incubated*, if you will, the image of herself as writer for many years.

Ever since Rabbit and Miss Bee, I knew I wanted to be a writer. I cannot overstate how much I wanted that. But I would rarely tell anyone. I just never really spoke about it, because I was embarrassed. And because my parents were the kind of parents who would have thought, "Ah, yes, that's very nice, dear, but where's the pension plan?"

(Shapiro, p.24).

I would also suggest that Rowling's studies at Exeter University (Oxford rejected her!) in languages and classics provided her with interesting names from Latin etymology, medieval maps, and a study of cultures that "brewed" in the subconscious through the years. Then there is the "British factor"!

About being British, Rowling herself says, "I do think being British is important. Because we have a motley, mongrel folklore here, and I was interested in it and collected it. And then got the idea for 'Harry' (Jones, 2003, p.53). There is also in the British culture the tradition (in upper and aristocracy classes) to send children to boarding schools similar to Hogwarts. This was seen in children's comics and magazines and book series when Joanne was growing up.

As Rowling has told the story in interviews, the *illumination*, or "ah-ha" for Harry slipped into her subconscious while she was gazing at cows! While traveling between Manchester and London, there was

a mechanical problem with the train. In the few hours that she waited for the repair, the concept for the boy wizard slipped into her mind. "I can't tell you why or what really triggered it, but I saw the idea of Harry and the wizard school very plainly. I suddenly had this idea of a boy who didn't know what he was" (Shapiro, p.55). Rowling played with names, characters, and story lines, and by the time the train stopped at King's Cross Station in London, she had developed the basic outline for her first novel.

It is worth noting the extraordinary visual imagination of J.K. Rowling. In televised interviews she has shared her drawings/illustrations for her stories. They are remarkably detailed, clever, and well done. Rowling writes as an artist. It is her astute ability to "see" as she writes and actually sketch her scenes and characters that contributes to the vivid detail of the Harry Potter series.

And bringing Harry Potter and his world of wizardry to life was the supreme act of *verification*. So many of our creative adventures remain in the illumination/incubation stage where we know we have a good idea and think about it quite a bit, but we never get around to bringing it to fruition. A good part of verification is having the persistence to see something through. In his definition of "gifted behavior", Renzulli has acknowledged the vital role of persistence and task commitment in creative production (Renzulli & Reis, 1985).

In an expanded definition of giftedness, Renzulli discusses a new framework, "Operation Houndstooth" that includes such components as "Romance with a Topic or Discipline" (Renzulli, 2002). No doubt, Rowling was "in love", for that is the only way to describe the passion and excitement that she felt about the idea of this boy

wizard. She recalls the moment:

I have never felt such a huge rush of excitement. I knew immediately that this was going to be such fun to write. I just knew that I had this boy, Harry...Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was the first thing I concentrated on...I wrote lists of all subjects to be studied...The characters came first, and then I had to find names to fit them...I have complete histories for my characters. If I put all the detail in, each book would be the size of the Encyclopedia Britannica!"

(Fraser, 2000 p.20).

Renzulli also includes "Sensitivity to Human Concerns" in Operation Houndstooth a trait that encompasses altruism and empathy. As a result of her creative productions, J.K. Rowling is now worth approximately \$280 million dollars - more than the Queen of England. She admits to feeling somewhat guilty about her fortune. Her challenge now is to use her wealth for the betterment of mankind. Joanne has a trust fund that has now benefited hundreds and is a patron of the Multiple Sclerosis Society and a patron of the National Council for One Parent Families.

Also, in the creative process Alan Jacobs refers to as "that mysterious gift so prized among storytellers and lovers of stories...of world-making...a world that must have its own rules, rules that are peculiar to it and that generate consequences that are also peculiar to it. J.K. Rowling has created such a world in the Harry Potter series - a thoroughly imagined Universe" (Jacobs, 2000). Rowling's world-making has had strong models in British literature.

Liz Rosenberg, children's book critic, writes that "British children's fantasy is

especially good at creating whole societies, from the top (Queen of Hearts) to the smallest deuce card in the pack; from the aristocratic Badger to the struggling, middle-class Mole" (Rosenberg, 2000). Along with Lewis Carroll, C.S. Lewis, Kenneth Grahame and J.R.R. Tolkien, there were the Brontes — as children! Emily, Charlotte, Branwell and Anne Bronte created virtual universes in their Glasstown tales and created worlds of Angria and Gondol for years into late adolescence (McGreevy, 1995).

And what of schools and schoolteachers as influence in Rowling's life? Rowling often speaks of one teacher — her secondary English teacher — Miss Shepherd.

She was strict and could be quite caustic, but she was very conscientious. I respected her, because she was a teacher who was passionate about teaching us. She was a feminist and clever with an incredibly no-nonsense approach...Miss Shepherd was hot on structure and refused to allow us to be the least sloppy. She showed us what gave writing structure and pace. I learned a lot from her...She inspired trust.

(Fraser, 2000,p. 6-7)

Incidentally, Rowling did get a letter from Miss Shepherd when the first Harry Potter book was published. She liked the book! "Her comments meant more to me than any newspaper review, because she never would have written anything unless she meant it" (Fraser, 2000, p.7).

In addition, there is research that connects experiences in nature — freedom in the outside world at certain ages in middle childhood - with adult creativity. In his book "Children's Special Places" (1993) David Sobel examines connections between children's experiences in the natural world

and the source of energy that becomes an inspiration to artists as adults. He discusses the research of the late Edith Cobb who was a researcher and environmental psychologist. Cobb believed that we have an innate need to bond with the natural world in middle childhood, and that this bonding serves as an important stage in our self-identity and creative development.

Cobb revised over three hundred volumes of autobiographical recollections of childhoods (albeit a limited study in that the subjects were mostly 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century European thinkers - and were mostly men). She discovered that it was to this middle range of their early life that her subjects said they returned in memory in order to create.

....there is a special period of childhood, approximately from six to twelve... when the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of profound continuity with natural processes and presenting overt evidence of a biological basis of intuition. (Cobb, 1959, pp. 123-124)

Were the subjects of her study happiest at this age and in this natural environment? Does playing in the natural world at this developmental stage provide a kind of freedom - both a physical freedom from home and watchful parents and a creative freedom as well? Are children more authentically "themselves" in middle childhood before adolescence "kicks in"? Are we more open and receptive at those ages? What about J.K. Rowling's experiences in middle childhood?

At the age of nine Joanne moved with her family to the little village of Tutshill in South Wales. Their home was a cottage next to a church and a graveyard. For Joanne, the graveyard was a great source of names. She

and Diane played for hours by the river, made up fantasy games and explored amongst the surrounding fields. Did these experiences in middle childhood in the natural world play a part later on in the creative development of the Harry Potter books? Her years spent in the country occurred at the right span of middle childhood years as suggested by Cobb's research studies, and Rowling admits to always feeling a keen sense of comfort at being age eleven — the age of Harry when the series begins.

In addition, noted psychologist Robert Sternberg argues that creativity is a decision - that whether one is an adult or a child, one decides for creativity! He examines ten decisions that people can make to decide in favor of creative development. Several of those apply to J.K. Rowling and to the decisions that she made in her life, such as "surmounting obstacles, believing in yourself, and tolerating ambiguity". Another one of the ten that Sternberg suggests is that, "Creatively gifted people are willing, even eager to take sensible risks. They have an attitude of nothing ventured, nothing gained" (Sternberg, 2000, p. 62 ).

When she returned to Scotland as a single mother, Rowling made a significant creative decision to finish writing the first Harry Potter book in one year and try to find a publisher. I would argue that it was a "sensible risk". With her training in foreign languages, she knew that she could find a teaching position, but then, Rowling reasoned, she would have no time to focus on her writing. To take a chance now would not put her in a worse predicament, but she said, "I knew that I could not afford the luxury of writer's block!" (Shapiro, 2000).

This decision reflects Rowling's belief in herself that she could indeed finish this piece

of creative work. Eventually, she was awarded a grant from the Scottish Arts Council that enabled her to get proper daycare for her young daughter and focus on her book. The support of the Scottish Arts Council came at a critical time in her development. It was an affirmation that this project was well worth sponsoring.

Paula Olszewski-Kubilius has also examined a number of psychological characteristics that affect adult creative, productive achievement. Stress caused by parental loss is one of those characteristics. When she was 12, Joanne noticed her mother having difficulty picking up a teacup. A few years later, her mother was diagnosed with MS. "Home became an increasingly sad place as Anne (mother) went from walker to wheelchair to helplessness" (Harmon, 2003, p.84). Ten years later, Rowling lost her 45 year-old mother to MS. She never knew about Harry Potter. Joanne was stunned and devastated. "It was a nightmare period", she said, "and writing about Harry was the only thing that got me through it" (Shapiro, 1999, p.57).

In the midst of enduring stress, the act of retreating to a solitary, intellectual activity is one way that a person often seeks a more controllable situation (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2000). This seems to be the case for Rowling at this time. Therival (1999a) suggests that different types of childhood misfortunes result in different types of results — creative and otherwise. Parental loss is an example of a tragic misfortune that creates a challenge for a child but does not elicit antagonism.

Finally, a word about educational reform! Rowling has made the U.K.'s education system a target of satire in her latest book. This creative insight at what is happening in many school systems internationally (including the USA) should not be missed.

Fifteen year old Harry takes his Ordinary Wizardry Level (OWL) exams. The staff at Hogwarts are teaching to the test, focusing on less creative spells and magical beasts that are predictable. The Ministry of Magic intervenes at Hogwarts and curtails the extra curricular activities. Enter a new teacher of the Defense Against the Dark Arts (sent by the Ministry) who takes the magic out of her curriculum by offering a structured, theory centered, Ministry-approved program of defensive magic! She infuriates Hermione by insisting that there is no need to create or practice and apply what they learn! The importance of awe and wonder in teaching, so valued by those of us in gifted education, is not lost on J.K. Rowling.

In conclusion, as educators we need to teach prospective teachers about the creative process so they will be able to guide the children they teach and encourage a creative attitude toward work and life. We also need to teach children about the creative process. Creativity does not emerge from a vacuum, but rather from elements that are woven into our lives from many sources - from our playtime, our hobbies and collections, our childhood upbringing, our environment, our education, our friendships and our culture. Creative productivity evolves when we build on our strengths. J.K. Rowling found what she loved to do, and did it! "I never set out to make a mark", she said. "I set out to do the thing I love best in the world and find out whether I was any good at it" (Gibbs, 2003, p.67).

In a recent BBC television interview, Rowling brought out and shared her array of boxes of notebooks, illustrations, and charts and mapping of the Harry Potter series. I was stunned by the creativity in the design, the plot-segments, the depth of research and attention to details of each plot and sub-plot, and the history of each character that she has



# News around the world

Belle Wallace\* and Verity Donnelly\*\*

## **a curriculum of opportunity: developing potential into performance Meeting the needs of more able and talented pupils within a policy of inclusion**

### Abstract

The following paper summarises the guidance document produced by ACCAC (Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales). The document provides guidance to schools on meeting the needs of more able pupils. The main points are outlined below, but the actual document abounds with case studies of good practice. The document was compiled by a Working Party representative of schools and advisers in conjunction with Belle Wallace and Johanna Raffan (NACE: National Association of Able Children in Education). The full document can be obtained from ACCAC Publications, PO Box 2129 Erdington Birmingham B24 8TH Fax 0121 325 9052 or from the ACCAC website [www.accac.org.uk](http://www.accac.org.uk)

The Welsh Guidance Document is a celebration of a policy of Inclusion with Differentiation.

'Let me first have the opportunity to discover what I can do - then give me the support and encouragement to develop the capacities I have, not only for myself but also in the service to others. I need to know that I can reach for the stars, but I need you to show me how.'

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so brilliantly conceived. She deserves as many accolades for the background production and design as for the front-end stories. These pieces would make an exceptional book and would reveal much about the creative process in action.

Our lives are all the richer and much more fun because of Joanne Rowling's remarkable, imaginative contributions to the world of children's fantasy. I truly salute her!

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