

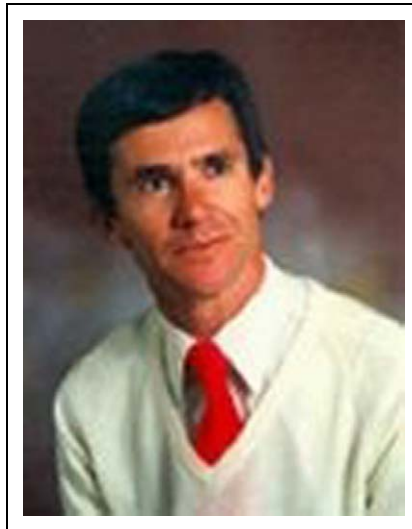
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**A reflective conversation  
with Kobus Maree,  
Faculty of Education,  
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South Africa**

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## Abstract

Always regarded as somewhat of an 'outsider' (the child of an Englishspeaking (Catholic) mother and an Afrikaans (Protestant) father in an exclusively Afrikaans milieu) and growing up extremely poor, seeing the hardship of others and realising how much talent was going to waste, Kobus Maree took a particular interest in gifted disadvantaged persons. A marginalised loner, he almost inevitably developed creative abilities and took a keen interest in creativity, giftedness and the education of gifted, disadvantaged learners. As an adult, his research showed that many teachers in South Africa have to contend with the generally poor socioeconomic background of learners. A dire need for appropriate teacher and learner support materials, and school environments that are not conducive to achievement (including inadequate facilities, overcrowded classrooms, lack of teacher and learner support materials). South Africa is at a critical stage in its education. It is therefore important for educators to teach emotional intelligence in their classrooms. Our biggest challenge will be to maintain and enhance vitality in gifted education in a dynamic, ever-evolving environment. A combination of scholarly leadership and strategic management to support gifted learners is important. We should do all we can to promote societal transformation and diversity, focussing anew on underrepresented groups (women and ethnic groups) who show promise and support them. The widest array of partners possible including the big institutional players, the entire teaching fraternity (including government departments), non-governmental organisations and miscellaneous interest groups together should develop strategic, rolling five-year plans and make gifted education a priority.

## Keywords

Giftedness, emotional intelligence, disadvantaged, transformation and teaching

*First of all, please tell us a bit about yourself and your education.* I have always had the good fortune to be an 'exceptional achiever'. I completed high school in a small country town and passed Grade 12 with five As and two Bs. I obtained all my degrees *cum laude*. Incidentally, I hold three doctorates (the first in career counselling, the second in the didactics of mathematics and the third in psychology).

Currently, I am a professor in the Faculty of Education and past editor of *Perspectives in Education* and the *SA Journal of Psychology*. I like to think that I am internationally recognised for my research in career counselling. My research focuses on optimising the achievement of learners and providing cost-effective career advice and help to all persons. As the author of more than 100 articles and 48 books or chapters in books since the beginning of 2001 and the recipient of a number of awards for my research, I am frequently interviewed on radio and television. I was a finalist in the National Science and Technology Forum Awards in 2006. In 2009, I was awarded the Stals Prize for exceptional research and contributions to psychology, the Chancellor's Medal for Teaching and Learning from the University of Pretoria in 2010, and nominated successfully as an Exceptional Academic Achiever on three consecutive occasions. I have a B rating from the NRF.

*What first got you interested and involved in gifted education?* I have always been interested in the topic. Growing up in an extremely impoverished environment, seeing the hardship of others and realising how much talent was going to waste, I took a particular interest in gifted disadvantaged persons. It may be interesting to note that I was always regarded as somewhat of an ‘outsider’ – one of the reasons being that I was the child of an English-speaking (Catholic) mother and an Afrikaans (Protestant) father in an exclusively Afrikaans milieu.

*Have you also been involved with creativity and talent issues?* I would say so, yes. Much as I believe that giftedness does not automatically imply creativity and vice versa, I do believe that these two talents are not mutually exclusive either. Given that I was a marginalised loner (Van Tassel-Baska (2004) maintains that marginality and adversity often contribute to the shaping of creativity) and that I was ‘born asking questions’, compulsively hardworking and keen to read and learn, it was almost inevitable that I would develop certain creative abilities myself and take a keen interest in creativity and giftedness.

*You recently completed a combined quantitative and qualitative study on educators’ use and implementation of metacognitive skills in the classroom. What did you discover?* My colleagues, Dr Marthie van der Walt and Dr Suria Ellis, and I (2012) investigated the extent to which mathematics teachers implement and teach metacognitive strategies. As you mentioned, we triangulated the quantitative aspects of the study with the results of the qualitative part of the study. Our findings indicate that whereas many mathematics teachers may well possess metacognitive skills and use them intuitively, these skills were not always meaningfully implemented in the classroom. We concur with Ball and Bass (2002) that teachers’ knowledge of their subject, the learners themselves, and the learning facilitating strategies all play a role in the quality of learning that takes place. Planning is essential in respect of (a) the subject concerned, (b) the learners themselves and (c) the learning facilitating strategy. To be sure, it is such planning that makes a teacher a good teacher. Our research findings also corroborate those of Koutselini (1991), who found that when teachers teach learners different strategies to overcome obstacles to problem-solving, and that when learners are encouraged to think aloud – not only to provide a final answer to a problem but also to explain their own thought processes – teachers actively guide learners to become aware of and to use their metacognitive abilities. Relatively little research has been done in South Africa on metacognition in mathematics teaching, and even less has been published in this regard. The possibility that metacognitive skills and strategies may unlock mathematics teaching (Schoenfeld, 1987) is thus relatively unknown to educators in South Africa, which is an untenable situation.

*Why are prediction, evaluation, monitoring and reflection skills so critical to mathematics achievement?* Learners who have acquired (and who actually practise) the skill to predict, evaluate, monitor and reflect on their thought processes in a mathematics class in a sense provide evidence that they are in control of what is happening in the class. Simply put, this means that they are capable of thinking about their own thought processes, which is crucial. But what exactly does it mean to act metacognitively in a mathematics class? In a nutshell, these learners make sure they understand the technical vocabulary of

mathematics. They ‘talk mathematics’, explain concepts to others, are willing to listen to others explaining concepts, and are not afraid of talking about their own mistakes. These learners also make sure they understand exactly what it is that they have to do (what is asked and given) before actually starting to solve a problem in mathematics. They regulate their own mathematical behaviour; in other words, they are keenly aware of the extent to which they are actually heading in the ‘right’ direction when solving problems in mathematics. They know when to relinquish certain problem-solving strategies in favour of others; in other words, they are less likely to step into the pitfall of embarking on ‘wild goose chases’ instead of aborting strategies that clearly do not work. Lastly, they almost routinely reflect on everything they do, including looking back at their own solutions. As the mathematics teacher and cricket coach at a local high school, I often wondered about the following phenomenon: if the learners were asked how many teams the school could enter in a local cricket competition (given that only 40 learners played cricket in a rugby-mad school!), they would without hesitation have responded with three teams, each comprising 11 players plus a reserve (12th man). However, given the same problem to solve in a mathematics test, the answer would inevitably have been 3.33 or  $3\frac{1}{3}$  teams! In other words, learners almost by default fail to realise that mathematics actually exists in ‘real life’ and is not an esoteric phenomenon confined to textbooks.

*Where are educators going wrong in promoting metacognitive skills?* When mathematics teachers plan a learning opportunity, they should also plan the metacognitive strategies according to the content of the particular subject and how they are going to teach the subject. We believe that all mathematics teachers should be guided to function on a metacognitive level themselves before they prepare their learners to deal with mathematical problems metacognitively.

*What are some of the major issues educators are dealing with globally?* In South Africa, we have to contend with the generally poor socioeconomic background of learners, a dire need for appropriate teacher and learner support materials, and school environments that are not conducive to optimal achievement (including inadequate facilities, overcrowded classrooms, lack of teacher support materials and shortages of textbooks). A further major challenge is the poor quality of teachers and teaching (this problem has been exacerbated by the overhasty change to outcomes-based education). Other challenges include lack of time in clogged curricula, a peer environment that does not support those who wish to do well academically, poor communication between teachers and learners (often because the language of teaching and learning is not the learners’ native language or mother tongue), discipline problems and poor communication between teachers and parents.

Furthermore, the emphasis in education is still predominantly on the product of teaching and learning without taking into account the context within which learning takes place. After all, it is not a ‘brain’ that learns – it is a person.

South Africa is also experiencing unacceptably high suicide, poverty and crime levels and is the global epicentre of the HIV and AIDS pandemic with approximately 250,000 HIV- and AIDS-related deaths each year. Yet, South African institutions still focus narrowly on improving cognitive ability, competencies and skills and applying them to reasoning and understanding. In the light of the increasing interest globally in positive

psychology or the study of human strengths and virtues, I would like to make a plea for the development of tests to evaluate emotional intelligence, especially since in changing circumstances, such as those in South Africa, the timely assessment of people's emotional intelligence could reveal strengths and weaknesses and highlight areas for improvement in their ability to deal with change and to adapt to and cope with changing surroundings.

*How does emotional intelligence differ from cognitive intelligence?* I like Professor Reuven Bar-On's definition of emotional intelligence. He believes that emotional intelligence covers the emotional, personal, social and survival dimensions of intelligence, which are so important in daily functioning. Emotional intelligence is a less cognitive part of intelligence; it is concerned with understanding oneself and others, relating to people, and adapting to and coping with one's immediate surroundings. These factors increase our ability to deal with environmental demands more successfully. Emotional intelligence is tactical and immediate and as such reflects a person's 'common sense' and ability to get along in the world (Bar-On, 1996).

*How does emotional intelligence factor into strong leadership? Or does it?* Our research (Herbst et al., 2006) suggests a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and effective leadership. Understanding how emotional intelligence relates to effective leadership may improve our knowledge of such leadership and help us develop authoritative instruments for the selection, training and development of leaders, and thus enhancing organisational wellness and performance. Leaders should be trained to achieve the twin outcomes of intellectual and emotional maturity. However, our research suggests that effective leadership cannot be accomplished by the simple adoption of a rational planning model. Leadership comprises intellectual and emotional intelligence facets, which need to be attended to during the training of leaders to equip them with sufficient management (and, indeed, survival) skills. This may be especially true in times of change and transformation – often characterised by turbulence – and their concomitant, the need for adjustment.

*Why is it so important for educators to teach emotional intelligence?* South Africa is at a critical stage in its education (Maree and Mokhuane, 2007). Years of turmoil have taken their toll, and a myriad of problems continue to plague the education system. The long-term effects could prove disastrous for the country, which is still struggling to find its feet. Despite the fact that the challenges facing South African educators are legion and affect the education system at every level, and despite the fact that unemployment stands conservatively at 36%, provision for the educational–psychological and social–emotional needs of the disadvantaged sector of South African society is minimal. This should be seen against a serious poverty cycle that is causing escalating socioeconomic deprivation, lack of education, joblessness (a large percentage of the population relies on government grants for survival) and high crime levels. Furthermore, the fact that millions of people in South Africa are undernourished prompts us to ask the question: how can we better show emotional intelligence and wisdom (in the Sternbergian sense) than by promoting the idea of striving for the common good (Sternberg, 2001)?

As is the case in the United States (Van Tassel and Wills in Begoray and Slovinsky, 1997), far too many parents are often away from home, engaged in long hours of work in low-paying jobs, and lack even the most basic educational skills resulting in little interest in emotional, social, academic or intellectual pursuits. Thus, a vicious cycle is created, and the situation is at its worst in the rural areas of South Africa (where I conduct most of my research).

Professionals agree that it is crucial for individuals to recognise their own and other people's emotions, to understand these emotions and to express them in a non-destructive way (Maree and Molepo, 2004). This suggests that a high IQ alone does not 'guarantee' satisfactory achievement. The above-mentioned factors have to be taken into account as well when attempting to explain the great variance in human achievement. But this is not happening in South Africa. We frequently observe a marked discrepancy between expected and actual performance, inconsistency in accomplishing goals, impaired levels of self-confidence, feelings of inferiority, blaming others for one's own troubles, evidence of withdrawal and alienation, aggressive and even criminal behaviour and, in the recent past, disturbing instances of xenophobia.

*Most educators are feeling overwhelmed as their roles and the curriculum they need to cover with their students continue to expand while the time they have to complete these tasks remains the same. How can they integrate emotional intelligence training into their daily lessons?* You are so right: many South African educators feel overwhelmed by a myriad of depressing factors. The guidelines that informed my colleagues' and my own attempts to facilitate emotional literacy, that is improve teachers' and learners' emotional and social skills (Stone and Dillehunt in Bar-On and Parker, 2000), included the following: we endeavoured to teach teachers and learners the importance of experiencing the present moment, the here and now of teachers and learners, and to internalise concepts for negotiating their emotions. We also promoted the idea of non-judgemental acceptance and respect, which is central to the process of individual growth. Lastly, we emphasised the importance of appropriate, non-manipulative disclosure of thoughts and feelings about themselves and others. Role playing formed an integral part of our training, which was hands-on and interactive, the idea being to empower/equip teachers to apply workshop principles in their classrooms.

We stressed the fact that emotional literacy could be facilitated without having to acquire expensive aids. During role play, our focus was on simulating real-life situations, and we consistently highlighted the importance of networking with professionals from all walks of life in order to facilitate a supportive, non-threatening and encouraging environment.

*Is emotional intelligence inherited or learned or both?* Emotional intelligence is a non-cognitive part of intelligence and can be learned. While I do not deny that some people are born with a greater capacity to acquire emotional intelligence, I am convinced that it can be learned, and that any person can improve his or her emotional intelligence. One's environment plays a key role in the development of this tactical skill. Factors such as having emotionally intelligent and caring parents and growing up in a home environment that is safe and conducive to the development of social skills contribute significantly to the development of emotional intelligence skills.

*How can educators overcome the influence that negative role models have on their students, considering that often these role models are the students' parents and siblings?* Promoting emotionally intelligent behaviour at home is the first step in nurturing emotionally intelligent children (Stern and Elias, 2005). At school, parents can work with educators and other community members to create a climate that supports social and emotional learning (SEL) in and outside the classroom. Teachers are in an ideal position to influence young and impressionable minds by showcasing (living out) the values enshrined in South Africa's Constitution. Teachers can play a key role in offsetting the influence of negative role models (e.g. criminals). One point needs to be emphasised here: 21st-century learners are very smart, and I am not referring solely to their prowess with cellphones and computer games! No, much more than that. South African learners know which teachers are sincere, which teachers want to make a difference in the world, which teachers are willing to make personal sacrifices, and which teachers are willing to walk the proverbial extra mile. I believe that teachers are central to changing the situation in South Africa and that the country's existence as a democracy will be under threat unless ways are found to recruit the brightest young minds, especially learners who have high personal values, to the teaching profession and keep them there.

*In your part of the world, what are the main approaches to gifted education?* Regrettably, this is a non-question. Current provision for gifted learners in public and private schools in South Africa is totally inadequate despite attempts by some teachers to provide enrichment for such learners. Lack of teacher training in the special needs of gifted learners, and teachers' inability to identify such learners, highlights the failure of the inclusive policy to cater for gifted learners in the regular classroom resulting in the gifted being 'the most neglected children in the education system' (Alston, 2006: 9). Our (Maree and Van der Westhuizen, 2008) recent investigation into the learning environment for gifted learners revealed that teachers tailor learning programmes to enable all learners to comply with minimum standards in the curriculum and that, while some teachers attempt to modify the curriculum for gifted learners, so-called differentiated activities for the gifted are often just 'more of the same' (Stanley in Alston, 2006: 9) resulting in what is described by Toll (2000: 14) as 'misguided independent study'.

Although teachers are meant to promote learners' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, many teachers are not up to the task. The lack of general teacher training among large numbers of already appointed teachers, especially in poorer (previously and currently disadvantaged) areas, is not conducive to the creation of an appropriate learning environment for any learner, gifted or non-gifted.

Almost all gifted learners in South Africa are currently disadvantaged with the exception of the select few who attend special schools and academies created specifically for gifted learners. This can be ascribed largely to the inadequacy of teacher education programmes, the appointment of underqualified or unqualified teachers and teachers' general ignorance regarding the implementation of the outcomes-based curriculum. In addition, teachers who are properly qualified often work from the perspective of cultural deficit and pathological models rather than accept intelligence and educability as issues based on *individual* differences rather than on racial differences (Jenkins in Ford et al., 1997) (also see Naicker, 2000).

In a recent statement, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) stated (2007: 2) that:

[the focus on] one-size-fits-all education has marginalized the uniqueness of our children and eroded their capacity to learn in whole, healthy and connected ways . . . If the whole child were truly at the centre of each educational decision . . . we would create learning conditions that enable all children to develop all their gifts and realize their fullest potential.

*Whom do you see as the leaders in the field of gifted education in your part of the world?* Sadly, as I have already indicated, and despite Archbishop Tutu's comment (Maree, 2007: 192), 'where we have children that are particularly gifted, it would be criminal not to want to develop their potential to the highest possible extent', little is happening in this field at the moment. Professor Shirley Kokot, who was the torchbearer in this regard for some time, has retired from Unisa but is still doing sterling work. The late Dr Carol van der Westhuizen and I are two of the more published authors in the field.

*Who has influenced you and how?* If you are asking about my role models, I would have to say my parents first and foremost. My mother 'lived' emotional intelligence and love, empathy and caring for others, especially the disadvantaged, the vulnerable, the forgotten. Outside of my family, Mother Teresa, because she gave of herself consistently and unendingly without ever expecting anything in return. Over the past few years, though, Professors Reuven Bar-On and Mark Savickas have profoundly influenced my work and my life. Reuven's incredible scholarliness and his massive contributions in the field of emotional intelligence have profoundly impacted on what I do. Likewise, Mark has almost single-handedly changed the course of career counselling by facilitating a shift away from positivist, modern counselling towards third-wave approaches, particularly a narrative style with the emphasis on a storied approach. The importance of life construction as the prime assignment of counsellors and Mark's emphasis on the core value of making a social contribution rather than focusing on one's own, narrow ideals and needs are significant contributions to the field of counselling.

*What is your view of mentoring and how important is it? To what extent is it practised in your country?* I believe mentoring is a crucial facet in the development of every human being. As very little formal, structured mentoring exists in South African schools and tertiary institutions, a unique system of teacher mentoring has been introduced in the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Education where teaching students receive extensive mentoring in their final year of study. Judging by the feedback from these students, lack of mentoring is a serious hiatus in South Africa's education system.

*What question or questions have we neglected to ask?* I would like to add something about the link between emotional intelligence facilitation, giftedness and achievement. Numerous variables have been shown to be related to achievement at school and at tertiary level including motivation, teacher expectations, cultural background and parental attitudes, and they contribute to the difference between achievers and non-achievers. We have to address a vital aspect of the challenge to optimise achievement in life, which falls



outside the cognitive field. A stable affect is needed to support cognitive achievement. Students' feelings, the way in which they experience their significant others and their circumstances at home play a big role in their eventual academic achievement and achievement in life.

A number of interrelated factors play a role in success. Intelligence or IQ on its own accounts for only a small percentage of the variance in achievement. Goleman (1996) maintains that emotional intelligence (including self-motivation, persistence in the face of failure, impulse control and gratification delay, mood regulation, empathy, and the ability to hope and to prevent sadness or distress from interfering with one's thinking process) is a more powerful predictor of achievement and success than IQ. Furthermore, positive feedback and encouragement, significant others who have high expectations of one and who inspire one all appear to make contributions towards helping a person to perform as she or he should perform (Eloff et al., 2006).

Our biggest challenge will be to maintain and enhance vitality in gifted education in a dynamic, ever-evolving environment. From the government, we will need support in terms of providing favourable conditions (e.g. moral, financial and administrative support) to help us ensure the viability of gifted education. Whatever we do should be based on a combination of scholarly leadership and strategic management to support gifted learners. Likewise, we should do all we can to promote societal transformation and diversity in South Africa. This means that we will have to focus anew on under-represented groups (women and ethnic groups) who show promise and support them.

In a nutshell, we (i.e. the widest array of partners possible including the big institutional players, the entire teaching fraternity (including government departments), non-governmental organisations and miscellaneous interest groups) together need to develop strategic, rolling five-year plans and make gifted education a top priority in South Africa. After all, the gifted in any society represent a natural resource that is more valuable than other natural resources such as gold and diamonds. It will be the gifted who will have to help solve the challenge of depleted natural resources and create alternatives in the future – and this can be done only if they are equipped and encouraged to do so (Bar-On, 2007).

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## Biographies

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**Tammy Lynne Moore** is a coordinator for developmental education at Eastern New Mexico University and teaches developmental reading and English, ESL courses, and freshmen composition and research, with an emphasis on logic and argument. She has co-published a variety of interviews and articles, and book chapters concerning gifted education, critical thinking and problem solving, and educational software. Tammy-Lynne has her Master's of Special Education and Bachelor's of Science in Elementary Education.

**Kobus Maree**, until recently, was editor of *Perspectives in Education*, is a triple doctorate, and is internationally recognised for his work in career counselling. He has authored or co-authored 40+ books and chapters in books and 90 articles in accredited scholarly journals. He is frequently interviewed on radio, is a recipient of numerous awards, and he is a member of the South African Academy for Science and Arts the Academy of Science of South Africa.