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Joyce VanTassel-Baska: The Talent Development of a Researcher

Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska is the Executive Director of the Center for Gifted Education at The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA. She is the current president of the National Association for Gifted Children. Prior to coming to William & Mary, Dr. VanTassel-Baska founded and directed the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University. Dr. VanTassel-Baska has authored more than 350 monographs, book chapters, and articles in refereed journals, and she has written or edited 18 books. Dr. VanTassel-Baska has received many national and international awards, including a Phi Beta Kappa Faculty Award at William & Mary, a Distinguished Scholar Award from the National Association for Gifted Children (1997), two International Mensa Awards (1995, 2002), a Fulbright Award, and the Richard Riley Award in Gifted Education from the South Carolina Consortium in 2002. She began her career as an English and Latin teacher, and holds her B.A., M.Ed., and Ed.D. degrees from the University of Toledo.

I first met Joyce VanTassel-Baska in Williamsburg, VA, in January 2000, when she arrived back from her sabbatical. I was just beginning the doctoral program at The College of William & Mary. What could I say to someone whose research studies had inspired me to enter gifted education? Was it possible to connect with someone whose intellectual landscape ranged from Charlotte Brontë to Albert Einstein? I nervously glanced around her office at the carefully organized shelves of books, the photograph of her daughter, Ariel, and the diploma from the University of Toledo hanging on the wall.

Our conversation flowed easily, and it became apparent to me that Joyce was intent upon welcoming me into the program. Her work as a researcher was inherently linked to mentoring students. Six years later, Joyce still takes great pleasure in watch-

ing students, colleagues, and friends develop their own abilities, and talent development has been a guiding force in much of her research. Her research continues to be dynamic, creative, and altruistic.

Please tell me about your childhood/background, particularly details that are relevant to your development as an eminent researcher.

My background (growing up in a single parent home as an only child, living in a poor neighborhood, being one of only a few White children to attend school with African American students in my first few years, and being the first member of my family to graduate from college) all shape who I am now, and my interest in low-income students, minority students, and students who have risk factors in their profile. I grew up in Toledo, OH, a moderate size industrial city of 400,000 people in the Midwest and attended standard schools where less than one fifth of the student body attended college. These factors would seem to suggest that I would never have become a professor or researcher, yet working against the grain and against the odds have always been a feature of my personality. Out of 483 students, I am the only graduate of my high school class with a doctorate, for example.

If possible, describe a few moments from your childhood when you became engaged with learning/discovery.

I always loved to read from a very early age. I think I taught myself to read in kindergarten, and I loved books and what I could get from books—a view of possible worlds. I always loved the sound of words. I spent a lot of time at the public library at an early age and reading. I recited *The Night Before Christmas* at a church service at age 4. I also had a movie star

collection during my elementary years. I would go down in the basement of our house where I had a little corner with a few personal items, and I would go in the corner and work on the collection, cut out pictures and texts from magazines about movie stars and movies they starred in—it was a major organizational project. I used to spend time organizing it all in different ways. It was a very solitary activity that characterized my early years. At that time, based on my family circumstance, there were no extra possibilities for programs. I started dance classes when I was 9, but then there was not enough money for the costume [for] the recital. That was the one attempt at extracurricular lessons, but that did not come to fruition, although dancing was something I did informally on my own for a number of years.

I also learned resilience early. Because my grandmother became ill and was placed in a sanitarium when I was 13, I became in charge of myself and the house at that age. Because my mother worked at night, I was an early example of today's "latchkey kids" who are forced to come to terms with life's realities early. This stage of my life was crucial in my developing survival skills and being resourceful and independent. Our class valedictorian, seeing me at a class reunion years later, remembered that of our group of academically able girls, I stood out most because of my independent ways. Independence and resourcefulness have continued to be important dimensions of my work, as well.

Please tell me a bit about how you progressed in the field of research as an undergraduate, graduate, and young professor.

I think the best experience in terms of research preparation came at

Northwestern University where I was hired as the director of the talent search and ultimately became a nontenured professor there. What I learned from working at a research institution was a great deal about the processes of conducting research, setting up a research agenda, and thinking about methodology. I rubbed elbows with people like Ben Bloom and Tom Cooke, both of whom are world-renowned researchers, and Bernice Newgarten, a leading researcher in gerontology at the time. I took seminars with each of them. Even though it was not a formalized postdoctoral experience, it was an excellent experience. The opportunity to have people around me who were world-class researchers, to participate at a deep and meaningful level in conversations about research, and to be able to ask questions of these luminaries was very important. In the absence of that, I probably would not have done much beyond my dissertation.

How did you connect with your mentors? Who were they?

The mentor who was most influential was John Feldhusen. John and I worked together on a number of projects, but most of them were not research projects—curriculum development, book projects, professional development projects, but not specific research studies. My second mentor was Julian Stanley, and again, the majority of the direct work with Julian was more developmental than research. Julian did pull me into a number of things he was doing with research, and I was able to follow up in terms of a dissertation that used a quasi-experimental design to assess growth in English vocabulary and language as a result of taking one year of fast-paced Latin. My research continues to assess the value of advanced curriculum interventions for students

at various ages and in diverse areas of their curriculum. Julian was a mentor from afar.

What did you write your dissertation about?

The dissertation process was challenging for me because it was done long distance, because I had moved to Illinois to take a job in the middle of my program. Unlike at William & Mary, where you have a lot of faculty support, at my institution once you get approval for your topic, you are on your own, and even more so if you are no longer within commuting distance. But, the study itself was one that ultimately became a basis for my future research work. It was looking at the efficacy of curriculum intervention with precocious students at a specific grade level. I have continued to work on using the same quasi-experimental design methodology. It was extremely useful for my future research and it focused on a content area that I have continued to care a lot about—the teaching of Latin to middle school students.

Please tell me a bit about how you began in the field of education, and how you gradually transitioned from a high school English and Latin teacher into an eminent researcher and educator.

I went from being a teacher of high school English and Latin, to an administrator in gifted education at the local level, to being a state administrator, then a regional administrator, and then a university administrator. My research work for my dissertation began when I was a regional administrator although my interest in research started when I was a teacher and administrator at the local level doing applied studies in my

district and administering a Title III grant on enhancing student learning in low-income high schools. It really wasn't until I went to Northwestern, however, that I started to think about myself as a researcher. I never really made that transition in my own mind until then. It then became clear to me that research was an important part of what I would be doing for my life. That was one kind of transition. The dissertation was a turning point or transition in my thinking about what kinds of things I would continue to study in some form or way. Northwestern was a training ground for that. My 5 years there, looking back, were the most significant in terms of readying me for continuing on a trajectory of published research. When I came to William & Mary 18 years ago, I was expected to be able to mount a national initiative in gifted education. Without the experience at Northwestern, I could not have created the Center [for Gifted Education] or research agenda here. My time at Northwestern provided the most important basis for my work today.

How do you feel when you are researching? Is it easy or difficult for you?

I think research is one of the most challenging human activities that one can engage in. I also think teaching is, as well. You can't do anything in research if you don't know a field or area in that field really well so it is incredibly important that you have deep knowledge in order to be a really good researcher, but that takes a while in order to do that, so it is an investment of time and energy. The other thing that makes research hard is coming up with the right question. Even to this day, I struggle with wording research questions just right

so I can focus on what I really want to know. I find mounting multiple studies at the same time is challenging. I find methodology challenging because of the arguments that can be mounted for using different methodologies to answer the same question and deciding on what is really the best way to go. Because I believe strongly that educational research should have application value, I am always concerned about generalizability issues and ensuring that studies are designed to promote it. I always find it challenging to interpret and think about prior findings when crafting the next study. Interpretation of findings is an underrated part of the research process, especially as it frames how future studies are crafted.

One of the things I find most satisfying about research at William & Mary is that I am able to do it in a collaborative context. Knowing myself and where I came from, it would have been much more difficult to do a lot of independent studies without a support team around me. I think the collaborative support structure for doing research makes it easier and more enjoyable. You have someone to talk with about the design of the study, the analysis, and the findings. I'm not the kind of person who would ever want to be a totally independent researcher. Educational problems are challenging because they are multifaceted and many times intractable. How do you improve learning for kids from low-income backgrounds? The last 12 years I have tried to answer that question. How do you compensate for deficits students bring from lacking certain kinds of experiences so that they can advance to higher levels in equal numbers with those who come from more advanced backgrounds? What are the things that can jumpstart or trigger that? Another important intervention question is what

works for gifted students at different stages of development. This question has not been answered in a satisfying way, partially because of the implications for individual differences [that] manifest at different stages of development and in different learning areas.

What kinds of practice and training do you do, on a regular basis, to improve your ability as a researcher?

I attend research conferences every year with an eye to presenting and learning from different researchers in areas outside my field. AERA is a conference where you can learn a lot about different approaches to research, ways research is conducted in different areas of education, and also about new findings in related fields. I like thinking about new findings in special education or recent research related to our research in gifted education. I try every year to attend one, if not two, research conferences that will keep me in touch with the larger world of educational research. I also read regularly. I like to read new books that come out on research findings in education and about qualitative and quantitative methodology. I also belong to a qualitative research group here at William & Mary. I like to hold special seminars for doctoral and master's students annually on different aspects of conducting research. I just did one session this week on constructing a research review. I like to continue to construct new instrumentation—interview protocols on the qualitative side, [and] new surveys or different types of inventories on the quantitative side. I present research and do publications on research findings. I typically publish two refereed journal articles a year and [conduct] two to four presentations a year on research. So, those are ways that I

keep very involved and active in the research process—it is an accrual process: the more you do it, the more you learn, the more you learn, the more involved you become in it, so it does ultimately lead to an improvement of skills in targeted areas such as asking the right questions.

Has your research improved? Why or why not?

I wouldn't say it has improved as much as I have a deeper understanding of the research process and the kinds of researchable problems to work on. I also have now learned how much I do not know, as well, leading to a stronger appreciation for differentiated talent working on research projects.

What sort of environment do you work best in?

I work best in a collaborative, center-based environment where several people are interested in what I am interested in and can bring their skills and ideas to the process.

What kind of educational opportunities do you wish you could have? Why?

In retrospect, I wish I was born into an intact family with at least one sibling and grew up in a middle-class neighborhood that allowed me to attend a really good school and have the opportunity for extra programs or services. I wish I could have had the kind of environment that I have been able to provide my only child with. The earlier you get started with having necessary skills and developing your talents, the better; but those are things over which you have no control.

The things over which I started to have control—choice of college and

choice of graduate school—I wish I had made different choices. Because of coming out of a low-income family, I had no choice of what I could afford at the undergraduate level. My undergraduate education was paid for with scholarships and work dollars. In retrospect, I wish I had known or that someone had counseled me to apply beyond the local university. I lived 40 miles from the University of Michigan, where a different level of education would have been attainable. I also regret getting married at age 19 and not living in a dormitory or joining clubs, as a result of that. At the doctoral level, I regret not deliberately searching for the strongest doctoral program that would meet my needs rather than settling for the hometown institution, because I never felt as if I could leave Toledo. I regret not looking around and thinking about the best match for my abilities.

However, I probably would never have worked as hard or produced as much had I had a more typical preparation pattern. I would never have had the mentality of compensating for what I did not have. In my research on [Charlotte] Brontë and [Virginia] Woolf, I make the point of saying their talent was fueled by adverse circumstances. It may have been a significant factor in my life too, but adversity was not so overwhelming that it held me back.

What other insights do you have into your own development as a researcher?

Early publication helped along with staying in the mode of a researcher right after finishing my degree. Always publish from your dissertation. This point has to do with your own perception of yourself. You need to perceive of yourself as a researcher based not only on doing the disserta-

tion. By converting it to publication, you gain confidence and credibility for yourself. Now I know I am really a researcher—this wasn't just an exercise, this was the real thing. Publishing what you do as a Ph.D. student is a critical connection to becoming a researcher later. There is even research that suggests that students who don't publish from their dissertation, never publish. I encourage my students to publish during their doctoral study, even if it is not original research.

Please describe the process of mentoring other people through the research process, particularly graduate students.

I work with students on various research projects at the Center leading up to their dissertation and find this to be one good way to mentor them. Trying to encourage students to identify what their research interests are is another strategy. I am also an editor, which gives my students an opportunity to publish book reviews and other articles. I started a journal called *Current Issues in Gifted Education* as an outlet for student publication so that students can feel that they are part of the professional community at the university. Routinely taking doctoral students to research conferences is also a major part of the mentoring process. Holding informal seminars and colloquia also contributes to the process. Introducing students to my colleagues so they know the big names in research—both their work and their personality is another strategy. And, then [I conduct] informal conversations about their interests and what they are doing and working on. I try as much as possible to model what it means to be a professor who conducts research in front of my students. **GCT**