

Cory Jennerjohn: Hello and welcome to another WATG Podcast. I'm your host Cory Jennerjohn. And I am excited to be joined by Dr. Matt Zakreski. Dr. Matt thanks for having, thanks for stopping by today, we really appreciate it.

Dr. Matt Zakreski: Oh man I am so excited to be here and talking to you and, you know, getting started to get excited for this conference

Cory: Exactly, that's coming up in the fall very quickly.

Before we get started Dr. Matt, just give us a quick, quick snapshot of who you are. Give us a quick glimpse in. in terms of who, who you are Dr. Matt.

Dr. Matt: Well, I'm a clinical psychologist. I'm out in New Jersey and I, you know, I always say that I'm a grown-up gifted kid. So you know I did the gifted kid thing. I was identified in second grade and you know my whole story with this is that both of my parents are clinical psychologists. They allowed me a lot of understanding and resources so you know I got to live this whole experience with a lot of advantages and I still got my butt kicked. So when I had the opportunity to go to grad school, I thought, this is the population I want to work with because I, I had all of these advantages and I still struggled. I'm gonna go out on a limb and guess most people don't have two clinical psychologists as parents, who were trained at the University of Virginia by Carolyn Callahan. So, like you know, so I use that lived experience to bring some authenticity to this work, you know, and I always say this work is personal and professional for me. So you know, many years later I, you know, have a clinical psychology practice. I get to do some consulting. I get to do some talks. It's, you know, I get to spread the word. It's a pretty great gig.

Cory: That's really interesting. First of all, there's been a lot of talk back and forth about the value of accelerated learning. Let's just, let's just kind of get, get to that first. What is the true value of accelerated learning?

Dr. Matt: So the, the biggest value of accelerated learning is this concept that we need to give kids, we need to meet kids where they are, and school is built to move along in a very particular way, right? It's like, you know, every year gets a little bit harder and there's sort of a gradual progression and that works really well for neurotypical kids but for gifted kids and neurodiverse

kids, in general, their, their highs are higher and their lows are lower. So if you have a kid who's a second grader and is capable of doing fifth grade math, the idea there is to say, well everybody else is doing this thing, we should make you do this thing too, right? And that's silly. You know if you're, if you've shown capability to do something higher and more accelerated, that's where we should teach you. You know the, the example that I often use to adults and, this works really well in administrator meetings, you know as I say, you know to the older people who are usually at the table with me like, well how long have you been driving a car? They're all 40 years, right, 40 years. So you've been driving a car 40 years, so I decide, arbitrarily, that you need to learn how to use your left turn signal. So you and I are going to spend a year learning how to use your left turn signal. How does that feel? And they sputter. They're like, well but, I mean, but I know how to use my left, I mean like, I'm like, right because that is a thing you have shown competence at so I'm not going to waste my time in teaching you a thing you already know.

Cory: That's interesting

Dr. Matt: Right. So let me tell, let me ask you guys, what do you want to learn. Like, well, I would love to learn how to drive better in the rain. Awesome. So I'm going to bring an expert in and we're going to teach you defensive driving in the rain. That's an accelerated, intentional intervention, in the education world, that allows kids to marry their high-level potential with their interests and give them the skill that they actually want as opposed to, you know, what the system we've built says they should need.

Cory: That is, that's a really interesting way to think about that. Yeah, because all the conversations that I've had in the past, there's been, like I said, there's been a lot of conversations back and forth. The New York City decision to end gifted programs and it really, it really kind of strikes me, it's very surprising that people would want to think that way but when you take it from a perspective like that, Dr. Matt, that's a whole new, that's really eye-opening. Like, that just, just to kind of more or less, like you said, more or less, like, challenge yourself as opposed to, I don't know, like you said, with the left turn signal, make your brain be more or less, like, content if you will.

Dr. Matt: Yeah,

Cory: So, so that like, where, you know, where is accelerated learning going? I mean are we, are we in a good spot right now? Would you say?

Dr. Matt: So, I would argue that we are in a better spot now than we've ever been and, and the fascinating thing about this is, it's an, one of the weird things and as we sit here today, right on the, basically, the official, you know second, two year anniversary of the world shutting down for COVID, right? I mean, more or less, right? One of the things that COVID gave us was the normalization of online learning and, I mean, rapidly, overnight, with many of us dragged kicking and screaming into this world. A lot of people in the gifted world, twice exceptional world, were like, I'm already doing unschooled Khan Academy. Life of Fred, you know. Join me. Like, let me show you what I know. And what we found, I think, I don't think we're putting this genie back in the bottle, is that the resources that exist online, either as full forced education or as complementary supplementary things, not only exist in great quantities but in existing great quality as well. You know. and, and I remember even three or four years ago in my practice, I would talk about online learning processes and, well you know, are they any good? And you know you, you sort of try and hem and haw and say, like I wouldn't recommend it if it wasn't, but I get where your, your concern is coming from. Now, it's, you know, parents sometimes know more than I do. Like, oh have you been on this site? I haven't been on that site. So you know the, the there are more doors open to families of gifted learners now than, I would argue ever have been you know, and you know, I, because of the way I built my practice, I can see kids from all over the country and a lot of times people will come to see me because, from a mental health perspective right, there, there aren't a lot of therapists in their community let alone someone who specializes in giftedness neurodiversity, right? So that, you know, the online platform allows me to skype in from my house in New Jersey to rural Illinois or, you know, or the northwest corner of Montana. That's really cool, right? That's awesome. And now we're using that same connectivity to say, yeah you've, you've outpaced your entire district in math, okay, that's cool. You're a seventh-grader. They have nothing left to teach you. Here's a great online platform where you can learn multivariate calculus from the comfort of your living room (cough), you know, and I think that, from a logistics perspective, from a cost perspective, you know, things are more accessible to families than they've ever been, which is pretty cool.

Cory: That's, that's really interesting. As we open up more doors, you know, via the web, you know, Zoom, you know, Webex. All those other platforms that we have, which has been amazing.

Something that I hear over and over that giftedness and accelerated learning really needs to work on is inclusion with minorities and socioeconomics. How do we, how do we balance that and how do we, how do we bridge that gap?

Dr. Matt: (Cough) Excuse me. So one of the, there are three ways in my mind that we, that we bridge that gap. The first is a broad level stuff. We need to keep banging the drum and sounding the alarm on giftedness. We need to keep talking about this to shareholders and stakeholders and say this is, these kids exist. They may not look like you think they look like but they exist and here's how to find them. And one of the ways that we like to do that (cough) is talk about the social-emotional aspects of giftedness, in addition to the behavioral aspects of giftedness, in addition to the academic pieces of it. Because, you know, there's this, still this perception that a lot of people have of, like, the gifted kid who shows up in glass and folds their hands and sits there and answers all the questions and is smarter than the teacher and you know, basically, it's an episode of Young Sheldon, right? And we all shake our hands. We move on with our lives. Yeah and giftedness doesn't always show up that way. I would even argue it doesn't often show up that way. So, you know, I, I spent over a decade in greater Philadelphia Pennsylvania and I got a an opportunity to speak to the school board there and I said, you know, we have this many kids in your district, right, and if gifted kids are the top two percent of any collective, right, by the numbers you guys should have this many gifted kids, right? And just to make the numbers easy, like let's say it was a hundred thousand kids. Obviously, the top two percent of that's gonna be two thousand kids, right, so in your identify gifted program you have a little more than 800 kids. So it's, like, just by the bare math of it, we're missing 1200 kids.

Cory: Wow.

Dr. Matt: And they were, like, wow. I said that's not anybody's fault, right? It just means we're not looking with the right tools. So here's how we broaden these concepts, right? (Cough) Here's how we find the kids who are artistically or linguistically or musically or kinesthetically gifted. Here's how we give kids opportunities to show you the kind of learning they're capable of doing because many gifted kids they don't show up really well on the sit in the chair do 100 math problems, call it a day thing. But, if you ask them to solve a really complicated and interesting problem, they'll be the first one up on the chalkboard so it's like we need to have different ways to catch these kids and when we catch them we need to give them access to these programs.

So, you know, there's this, there's this concept that we need to be much more intentional with the tools at our disposal to find as many of these kids as we can.

Cory: That's, I think, that's amazing because I agree a 100 percent. Not every single gifted kid looks, acts and is the same, you know, and that kind of gets to the heart of the issue with a universal test. You know, you know there's been a lot of people saying, you know, we have to have a universal test to determine, you know, if kids are gifted or not. And I, I get that, but at the same time, like what you were saying, you know what is, what is that really going to say if we're, we're also leaving out x amount of kids and we're not really focusing on the whole, the whole amount. Would you agree with that? I mean, we have to have something else, another determining factor. I feel like

Dr. Matt: Yeah, and when we have, when we have multiple determining factors, you know I always tell districts this, we want to have multiple determining factors as a, as a knowing that each tool we use is swiss cheese, right, so if we stagger the slices of swiss cheese we catch everybody, when they slip through certain holes and not other holes, right?

Cory: Okay

Dr. Matt: Because there's no one thing that's perfect. The problem is, is that sometimes districts, when they use this sort of matrix model, they use that to, they can, they can weaponize that against kids, you know? I have a kid that I've worked with who met criteria for their intelligence testing, their state testing and their GATES Rated Scales but the, he wasn't able to get three letters of recommendation because he's a pain in the butt. Yeah, I mean, I love this kid and I think if he was listening he might be able to figure out who I'm talking about.

Cory: (Laughs)

Dr. Matt: But, but, so they said well, you don't meet our matrix and, and I said, by any stretch, right, by any quantitative measure, he's a, he's a gifted kid. I understand that letters of recommendation scratch a particular itch but let's, you know, instead of saying you must meet all of these criteria let's say if you meet one of these criteria let us at least have that conversation.

Cory: Yeah.

Dr. Matt: Yeah, you know, I mean, it's like online dating, right? If you put they've got to be a Packers fan, enjoy bratwurst... I'm using a lot of Wisconsin stereotypes here and I'm not terribly sad about it, you know. I'm a Giannis fan, right. I, I have a very particular great lake. I like high school hockey.

Cory: That's right.

Dr. Matt: And you go through all them, like oh they like all these things, but they don't like bratwurst they like sausage. You know, are you going to not go on a date with that person, right? Like you, you think you at least click on the profile, right, you know? And so it's the sort of thing where because neurodiversity is so diverse, right, it's so idiosyncratic we need to have broader nets not more, not more narrow nets. Because the broader the net the more we catch kids with neurodiversity who benefit from these kinds of educational and social emotional interventions.

Cory: So that's, that's interesting. So Dr. Matt I actually have a, I've got a, my oldest son is gifted. He does really well in math and reading. He's in accelerated math and the one issue that we're running into that we're seeing now is perfectionism. He's everything's got to be right, when you get one, when he gets one wrong he gets really really upset. I was just wondering, are there any tips you know out there, how do you handle perfectionism in accelerated students? You know, how do you make it that you know mistakes are, you know, learning and growing and that's, that's, that's an okay thing?

Dr. Matt: Yeah, well, you know, I think the first thing we do there is we, we bring conversations about perfectionism into the home or to the classroom, right? As a case it might be. You know that, you know there's a big power in, in all mental health interventions, right, about naming the thing. You know I always say that if therapy is anything it's making unspoken things spoken. So we say, like, not from a, not from a shaming perspective like, oh you're being so perfectionistic right now but from a, hey this sounds like your perfectionism is showing up. Let me help you walk through this. Once we name it, it changes the way that we're interacting with it, right? Because it's not about your kid is, is doing this. It's your kid's perfectionism is doing this, right? It adds a layer of removal.

Cory: Okay.

Dr. Matt: The second piece is that we have to conceptualize, reconceptualize failure. You know perfection is an anxiety disorder, right? I mean I'm scared of failing so I have to be perfect. I'm scared of the repercussions if I'm not perfect, right? There's, it's you know, there's a fear element to it. So if we treat it as an emotional piece, not a behavioral or a god forbid a personality piece, it allows us to shift that focus to, if we manage the anxiety, we manage the behaviors. So I'll tell kids, like all right, perfectionism intervention, right? First thing we're gonna talk about is the word. What the word fail means. The word fail is frequent attempts in learning. F-A-I-L. And, like, no failure means I get an F. I'm like, well, but we don't always get F's, right? One of my favorite things to say is you either win or you learn. I'm asking you to learn. I'm asking you to lean into the learning here and, yeah, it's probably going to feel a little clunky. It's probably going to feel a little gross but that is how we learn, right? So you know one of my favorite perfectionism interventions is, do it in 30 seconds. So I'll set a timer and I'll say alright now. I am acknowledging there's no way you can do this successfully in 30 seconds, right, but give me as much of this as you can in 30 seconds and the kids go... and then they'll give me something, right? You know, my favorite is I had a kid who was really anxious about an audition and I said we have to give you a whole audition in 30 seconds. And he's like, it's a 10-minute monologue. I'm like tough, go, and I set my timer and he basically ran through the whole second act of *Our Town* in 30 seconds. And, and you know at the end he's panting and he's red in the face and I, and I looked at him and I burst out laughing. And he's like god, that was, that was so much fun. And yeah it was because the idea here is that you know the function of anxiety disorders, in general, and I would include maladaptive perfectionism in there, is keeping kids locked into freeze mode. We're not fighting it. We're not running away from it. We're just frozen. We cannot do the thing. I would prefer a kid say I can't do this physics project. I threw my physics notebook in the trash. And, you know, I'm doing something else because the idea is like you're just frozen rigidly to this. I can't, but I can't also, can't leave somehow, you know? When we do any kind of committed action we break free from that a little bit. And it may not be like flipping a light switch, like, oh choirs of angels, all right. We solved the problem.

Cory: (Laughs) Doves are flying yeah.

Dr. Matt: No, it's, it's probably a little bit more like I'm willing to give it a shot and maybe not a whole shot, maybe a 30 second shot but I'll take 30 seconds over nothing and then, then we try

it again. Then we try it again and we try it again. But, you know, so you know, naming it as perfectionism, understanding the role of anxiety and then pushing some sort of committed action are three basic steps that we can go to get kids unstuck.

Cory: Okay that's interesting. Dr. Matt, what, I mean, how much of a change have you seen from kids just being able to be challenged. You know, for example, if you've seen a kid not, not be, not, you know, not go through accelerated learning before being enrolled in accelerated learning. And then see that process, how much of a change have you seen in kids and, and what do you, how to use that, those behaviors to sell the benefits and growth of giftedness?

Dr. Matt: I mean the changes are unbelievable and, and it's the sort of thing that, you know, one of the things I'll tell parents and I'll tell schools is this is the biggest bang for our buck. You know, kids spend the more time at school or in school activities than they do with their families. They certainly spend more time in school than they do with me. You know, I'll get a kid an hour a week, maybe, usually, usually in my practice, it's an hour every other week. School you've got 40-ish hours a week plus the friends you make from that school so that's expanding those ripple effects right? So, you know, and the research is very clear on this right? If you give a kid what they need they feel better, they do better, they act better. I mean it's, it is quite, quite literally the biggest bang for our buck. The first intervention I try to do when I work with gifted and neurodiverse kids is find the right school. Because you know the bigger, you know, it's a dose response effect, right? The bigger the dose the bigger the response. The bigger the response the more positive changes we see. You know, there's a kid that I work with who attends, it's a camp for gifted and twice exceptional learners in northeast Pennsylvania called Camp Ballibay. And they do an amazing job out there. (Coughs) And, you know, we've also gotten this kid into a school that's a better fit for their learning style. But, you know, having that three-week camp, a place where they can really sort of flex their gifted brain is unbelievable, right? I mean it's, it's the biggest change I've seen in this kid, simply because that's the place where they feel best. And since they know that exists and they know they can return to it there's so much intrinsic motivation to get there, get back there and do well there.

Cory: That's interesting. So, you said the biggest bang for your buck so then, what's the argument to school districts that say the obvious? Oh you know, we can't afford that. You know that's, you know accelerated, accelerated gifted learning. You know we can't, we can't afford all that. All those resources. What, you know, what do you say to, to those districts?

Dr. Matt: Well, other than, other than bringing my “you're lying cowbell” to a meeting... Ding ding ding ding, you're lying... That gets me not invited back to schools. What I often say is, alright, so I have a, I have a logistic answer and I have a aspirational answer. The aspirational answer is if you don't give kids what they want or what they need you gotta deal with them. They are more behavioral problems in class. They are more problems with their peers. They are less happy at school.

So, yes, it takes time and energy and money to get kids what they need. But I'll tell you this, either way or the other, you're spending the time. Wouldn't you rather spend the time on something that gives the kid what they need and allows them to be less of a problem?

Cory: Yeah, I mean a good point, right.

Dr. Matt: I mean it's like you're gonna spend the time either way you might as well spend that time and money on, on solving the problem not just prolonging the problem. The other piece of it is if you can't hire a gifted specialist, if you can't hire, bring in the speakers or give the kid the resources and, and I would argue, that those things are cheaper and easier than almost every school district thinks they are. But that's another podcast, right? So just have me back, Cory and we'll talk about that some other time you know. But instead of that simple solution, is just walk down the hall if your second grader has tapped out of second grade math, walk down the hall to third grade math, walk down the hall to fourth grade math, right? It's in the same building, right? You don't need to do bussing, you don't need to bring in a specialist. I mean, if the, if the worst thing we can do is walk a kid down the hallway that is still a lot better than, than nothing, right? And you know, and I don't know if it's like this in Wisconsin, though I would wager it probably is, we actually do this all the time you know in youth sports. A kid who's playing u10 soccer, who's just dominating u10 soccer, what do we do with the u10 soccer player, Cory?

Cory: Move them up to u11.

Dr. Matt: Right and nobody bats an eye, right? I know that the one of the easiest interventions I can do is that if i have a musically talented kid, you know, okay play in high school band. You know I've got a sixth grader in high school marching band right now that I work with. And he's crushing it, right? I mean, he's adorable. Like the tuba is basically bigger than he is, but he's,

and it's great and he's in the adult orchestra, right? Nobody goes, oh I don't know, but he's 12, right? Nobody's batting an eye in those spaces, you know, it's the sort of thing like there, there, there's no reason not to do it academically. If we do it in extracurriculars and sports and the arts, right, so I, and I say this to districts all the time, like, here's the thing. Try it. If it fails, if it blows up in our faces then we know that the thing that didn't work. But if we don't try it we don't get the data and if we don't get the data then you're saying a thing can't work simply because you don't think it will work. Not because it didn't work.

Cory: Yeah you're right and that's what, and that's what we do here. We have kids, yeah, you're right, we just have kids walk down the hall and you said that's an easy, it's such an easy solution. Kids, we have second grade kids taking third grade math. Third grade taking fourth grade. It's, you know, it's, I think, I think having kids challenged is such a better model than having them be bored. And like you said earlier, having them, having to, you know, work on their behavior or other problems. I think that's, you hit the nail right on the head there. That's, that's exactly the right answer.

I don't want to take any more of your time, Dr. Matt Zakreski. I really appreciate it and I really appreciate all of the, the broad references to the Packers and the Bucks. Very, very much appreciated.

Dr. Matt: I do my homework. What can I tell you?

Cory: Yes you do. I hope you have all of your NCAA tournament stuff taken care of. That's this week, so.

Dr. Matt: Well my beloved Wake Forest Demon Deacons slid right off the bubble, you know, so I guess I have to pay attention to the NIT this year. But yes, but, I mean like, it's gonna be a great bracket. I'm actually the defending champion in our, in our bracket out here so I'm very excited (cough) to see how that shakes out for me.

Cory: Nice. Alright, well hopefully you keep that alive and we look forward to having, like you said, we look forward to having you at the, the conference in, in the fall in October. This is just a small snippet of, of Dr. Matt and he's, his effervescent personality and this is, this is really a

treat. I really appreciate it and, and thanks for coming on The WATG Podcast. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Matt: It's my great pleasure and I really look forward to seeing everybody in person.

Cory: Alright, take care.

Dr. Matt: Cheers.