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Gifted Education Without Gifted Children

The Case for No Conception of Giftedness

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I am quite confident that the conception of giftedness set forth in this chapter differs significantly from those found in the other chapters of this book in that the conception I advance is no conception at all. By that, I do not mean that I have chosen not to advance a conception of giftedness. Rather, I am actively advancing the idea of no conception of giftedness as a positive development for the field of gifted education.

To be clear about what I am advocating, let me state my position unequivocally. I believe that the concept of the gifted child is logically, pragmatically, and – with respect to the consequences of its application in American education – morally untenable and that the aims of the field of gifted education would have a greater likelihood of being realized if we were to dispense with it altogether.

Because I realize that this is a radical position for a contributor to this book to take, I want to clarify my motivation and my positionality before advancing my argument. I write as one who considers himself to be a scholar in and of the field of gifted education. I have taught in programs for gifted students, and my doctorate is in this field. I believe that there are individual differences in elementary and secondary students' school performance that probably derive from a complex of ability and motivational, social, cultural, sociopolitical, and other factors and that these have important educational implications. In other words, although I believe that all students are equal in their right to and need for an appropriate education, I do not believe that what constitutes an appropriate education is the same for all students born in a given calendar year. Educators must, to be effective and ethical, provide educational experiences that reflect the inescapable fact of individual differences in how and how well school students learn at a given time in a given subject. A one-size-fits-all curriculum makes no more sense to me than would a one-size-fits-all shoe.

Moreover, along with my colleagues in the gifted-education field, I believe that high-achieving or high-ability students are among those who are

the most ill-served when curriculum and instruction are not differentiated. The basic beliefs that undergird the field, such as the conviction that it is wrong to think that bright students can succeed on their own if treated with a policy of benign neglect, are ones that I share. In other words, insofar as advocating for the educational needs of students who have historically been the recipients of services in this field, I think I differ from those who subscribe to the admittedly foundational belief that we cannot have gifted education without gifted children only with respect to means, not ends. That is, whereas we agree that it is essential to provide an appropriate education for students who have traditionally been labeled *gifted*, we disagree as to whether this requires gifted programs or even the concept of gifted children.

I also want to make it clear that my interest in gifted education is focused on educational programs intended to provide differentiated curriculum and instruction, not the development of precocious talent. I concede that there are gifted people, even gifted children, whose abilities in various pursuits clearly merit that label. A 10-year-old violinist who performs Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* with a major orchestra is indisputably a gifted child, as is a child who demonstrates prodigious accomplishment in chess or basketball or any demanding domain. However, these are not the people to whom the term "gifted child" is typically applied. That term is usually used to designate an appreciable number of students in a school with a "gifted program" who have been chosen to fill that program's annual quota. It is in that context, the context of educational policy and practice, that I believe that the concept of giftedness has outlived whatever usefulness it once may have had.

Each contributor to this volume was asked to address a series of five questions. The first, "What is giftedness?" is most central to my thesis, and I devote most of my space to it.

WHAT IS GIFTEDNESS?

My short answer to this question is that giftedness, in the context of the schools, is a chimera. But, because I am an academic, there is a predictably longer answer. I believe that the concept of the gifted student is incoherent and untenable on a number of grounds. The first of these is that the concept of the gifted child in American education is a social construct of questionable validity. The second is that educational practice predicated on the existence of the gifted child has been largely ineffective. The third is that this practice has exacerbated the inequitable allocation of educational resources in this country. I elaborate on each of these assertions in this section of the chapter.

The fourth component of my thesis is that the construct of the gifted child is not necessary for, and perhaps is a barrier to, achieving the goals

that brought this field into existence in the first place. In other words, I argue that we can, and should, have gifted education without gifted children. I discuss this in the following section in responding to another of the questions we were asked to address, "How should gifted individuals be instructed in school and elsewhere?"[1]

THE QUESTIONABLE VALIDITY OF THE CONSTRUCT OF THE GIFTED CHILD

There were no "gifted" children in the 19th century, simply because the construct of the gifted child had not yet been dreamed up. Gifted children began to exist, as far as I can tell, in the second decade of the 20th century as a result of a confluence of sociocultural and sociopolitical factors that made the creation of the construct useful. With the publication of *Classroom Problems in the Education of Gifted Children. The Nineteenth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* (Henry, 1920) at the end of that decade, the educational establishment signaled that it had acceded to the belief that there were, indeed, gifted children in our schools.

By situating the construction of giftedness in a particular place and time, I mean to suggest its historical contingency. That is, giftedness did not happen to be discovered in the second decade of the 20th century and to become progressively better understood in the third decade. Rather, the construct that emerged from that period reflects specific forces that served sociopolitical interests as they played out in the educational system. If the construction of the notion of gifted children was necessary, it was as a result of historical, not empirical, necessity. Giftedness emerged in the manner that it did, and has more or less remained, because it served, and continues to serve, the interests of those in control of the schools and the disciplines that informed and guided American education at that time.

Of the factors that I believe led to the invention of the construct of the gifted child, one, the mental testing movement, which began in the early 20th century, is frequently acknowledged. It is no coincidence that the person regarded as being the "father" of gifted education in this country, Lewis M. Terman, was also the developer of the Stanford–Binet Intelligence Scale and one of those most responsible for the widespread use of mental testing in American schools. The enthusiasm for the use of mental tests, especially IQ tests, at this time is not difficult to understand. These instruments were

[1] Although we were asked to address five questions, I will implicitly respond to three of them in addressing the two I have identified here. The question "How does your conception of giftedness compare with other conceptions?" has been discussed earlier and will be obvious to all but the most somnolent readers. "How should gifted individuals be identified?" and "How should the achievement of gifted individuals be assessed?" should also be obvious from the discussion that follows.

seen as being "scientific" at a time when that term was unambiguously one of approbation. Intelligence, another recently constructed concept, was widely believed to be general and quantitative; it was the same thing for everyone, and everyone had a certain amount of it, as Spearman (e.g., 1927), among others, argued. Mental tests were seen as modern tools that allowed professionals to assess the amount of this universal intelligence a person possessed, regardless of his or her life circumstances.

This modernist view of mental tests may seem quaint and naïve to us today, as so many things do through the lens of history, but the acceptance of these tests as valuable tools of objective science led to their extensive use in the schools to classify, guide, group, and, as some have argued, control children. And control was seen as a desideratum, owing to the increasing diversity of the school population, the second of the major factors that I see as creating the circumstances leading to the construction of the concept of the gifted child.

In the decade before World War I and again in the early 1920s, what is usually described as a "wave" of immigrants came to this country, not from the Western European nations from which most previous new arrivals had hailed, but from countries such as Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Russia. There were many children among these newcomers and many more born after the immigrants settled into their new homes. With respect to language, dress, religious beliefs, and a number of other cultural factors, these children were unlike the children with whom educators were used to dealing. This created a new set of challenges for public school authorities, who responded by making the "Americanization" of these children – that is, the homogenization of the school-age population through a set of common school experiences designed in large part to inculcate cultural norms derived from the Western European heritage of those in power – an explicit goal of American public education.

The diversity of the school population was increasing as a result of other factors as well. For example, greater differences in classroom performance were noted as compulsory education laws were enacted and enforced. One result of such laws was that students who would previously have eschewed school for the factory or the farm remained in school longer, despite having little interest in or apparent aptitude for formal schooling. There was also considerable variance in performance on the aforementioned mental tests, which is not surprising in retrospect, in light of the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic heterogeneity of the school population being tested. As testing became more common after the use of the Army Alpha and Army Beta tests in World War I, and as IQs were arrayed on the normal distribution, appreciable and predictable numbers of children fell one, two, three, or more standard deviations above and below the mean of 100.

The advent of widespread mental testing in the schools and a much more diverse student population were factors that nourished each other in

a symbiotic fashion. The more diverse the population, the greater was the need for tools, such as tests, to quantify and control students. And the more students were tested and quantified, the more their linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity was reflected in variance in test scores, that is, in greater diversity in the school population.

One way to understand how this led to the construction of such concepts as giftedness is by referring to the work of Foucault (e.g., 1995; Gallagher, 1999). Foucault believed that control in modern society is not exerted through raw displays of state power (public executions, regal processions, and so forth) but through knowledge-producing disciplines. For Foucault, knowledge and power are inseparable. He wrote that "power and knowledge directly imply one another; . . . there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (1995, p. 27).

Foucault believed that power develops through a number of processes, "small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion," that satisfy the need for knowledge on which discipline depends: "the success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination" (1995, p. 170). These are his well-known "technologies of power."

Coming back to our discussion of testing and the growing diversity in the school population in the early 20th century, one can relate Foucault's first technology of power, *hierarchical observation*, to mental testing. Foucault discussed hierarchical observation in reference to the *panopticon*, Jeremy Bentham's plan for an ideal prison, in which each inmate lives, and is aware that he lives, under the ceaseless gaze of an anonymous guard "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (1995, p. 201). By testing students, Foucault would argue, educators do essentially the same thing, reminding students that they are subordinate to adults who have the power to observe them from a position of power. Moreover, students internalize the knowledge that they are constantly being observed, that is, tested, and that the consequences of being observed are quite serious. This awareness is a powerful means of control.

Foucault's second technology of power, *normalizing judgment*, is, I believe, evident in the way educators responded to the growing heterogeneity of the school-age population in the early 20th century, specifically to the heterogeneity in test scores. Normalizing judgment is the process that "measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the 'nature' of individuals . . . [and] traces the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal" (Foucault, 1995, p. 183).

Normalizing judgment was manifested, first, in the reduction of multidimensional human diversity to a bipolar continuum and, second, in the labeling of certain regions of this continuum as the "normal" range and the rest as the "abnormal." Thus did students whose IQs fell below a certain score become "the subnormal" (Goddard's infamous "idiots," "imbeciles," and "morons," 1919), whereas students whose IQs exceeded a certain threshold (e.g., 140 in Terman's study, 1925/1959) became, in the original terminology, the "supernormal" and then, by the time of the publication of the *Classroom Problems in the Education of Gifted Children* (Henry, 1920), the "gifted."

It is important to stress that the central concept in this process, the *normal*, is, as Foucault demonstrates, an invention, not a discovery. It is imposed as an exercise of disciplinary (in both senses) power, as a way to control, even, to cite Foucault's most influential work, to discipline and punish. Foucault writes of the examination (the third technology of power, hierarchical observation combined with normalizing judgment) that "with it are ritualized those disciplines that may be characterized in a word by saying that they are a modality of power for which *individual difference* is relevant" (1995, p. 192, emphasis added). In other words, the disciplines of psychometrics and education made certain students "normal," "subnormal," and "supernormal" (or gifted).

It is useful to think about the genesis of the concept of giftedness and whether its advent in the field of education was inevitable or necessary (in an educational, psychological, or philosophical sense; a critical theorist might well argue that the creation of giftedness was a historical necessity arising from power relations playing out in an inequitable society). The concept did not arise *ex nihilo*. Clearly there was, and is, a situation in public education that could not be ignored. Children develop at different rates and in different ways, and this affects how and how well they deal with the traditional formal curriculum. To the extent that we are concerned with educational effectiveness and fairness, we need to make appropriate instructional and curricular modifications to respond to individual needs. The question is how to do this.

One possible response is to make curriculum and instruction flexible enough to accommodate the needs of all children, foregoing classification, labeling, and the examination in the Foucaultian sense that incorporates the normalizing gaze. This assumes that human variation is multifaceted, multidimensional – indeed, "normal" – and that the "average child" is different in many ways, some of them educationally significant, from other "average" children. However, the social and political conditions at the time the field of gifted education was created and the ascendant social efficiency movement in American public education (Kliebard, 1995) ensured that technologies of power, rather than more democratic forces, would shape the field.

Thus, the profession's response to the fact that children differ in the ways in which they interact with the school curriculum (or curricula, including the informal curriculum) was to believe that at least some of this difference is the result of the existence of distinct groups of children, including gifted children, who possess characteristics that separate them from the average. Once one accepts that there exist separate, qualitatively different groups, the inevitable next steps are to try to fashion a workable definition of the populations whose existence has been posited, to develop and implement identification procedures to locate these populations, and then to develop and implement separate educational provisions to meet their needs. This is the course of action that was adopted and, I would argue, why we have gifted children today.

There is an inescapable circularity in the reasoning here, especially with respect to giftedness. Sapon-Shevin writes, "Participants agree – sometimes explicitly and sometimes tacitly – to a common definition and then act as though that definition represents an objectifiably identifiable category. In this way, the category assumes a life of its own, and members of the school organization learn common definitions and rules" (1994, p. 121). The category was created in advance of the identification of its members, and the identification of the members of the category both is predicated on the belief that the category exists and serves, tautologically, to confirm the category's existence.

This simplistic dichotomization of humanity into two distinct, mutually exclusive groups, the gifted and the rest (the ungifted?), is so contrary to our experience in a variety of other spheres of human endeavor as to cause one to wonder how it has survived so long in this one. Is anything in human life that simple, that easily dichotomized? And are these two groups – the gifted and the rest – the discrete, discontinuous, structured wholes this crude taxonomy implies? That is, is giftedness really its own thing, qualitatively different from normality, making those who possess it markedly different, different in kind, from the rest of humanity? Can such a notion, expressed in those terms at least, really ring true for many people?

However implausible, these beliefs are implicit in the manner in which the word *gifted* is employed in both professional and everyday discourse. We glibly talk about "identifying *the* gifted"; about so-and-so being "truly gifted"; about the "mildly," "moderately," even "severely." In other words, we treat giftedness as a thing, a reality, something people, especially children, either have or do not have, something with an existence of its own, independent of our conceiving or naming of it.

Even a casual examination of the field of gifted education illustrates how difficult this dichotomy is to put into consistent and ultimately defensible practice. I frequently talk to my students about something I facetiously call "geographical giftedness," the not-uncommon phenomenon whereby a gifted child, so labeled by his or her school district, finds himself or herself

no longer gifted after moving to another school system. If we hold on to the notion of two discrete classes of humans, defined by measurable traits into which children can be placed through correct educational assessment, we can explain this child's existential crisis only in terms of measurement error or one school system's adherence to an "incorrect" definition of giftedness.

But what is a "correct" definition of giftedness? Our failure, as a field, to answer that question is reflected in the multiplicity of definitions that have been proposed over the years. No one, to my knowledge, has as yet counted how many there are, but they are not few in number, nor are the differences between them insignificant. Take, for example, traditional psychometric definitions of academic giftedness that result in students with high IQs and reading and mathematics achievement being identified as gifted. Contrast this with Renzulli's (e.g., 1978) highly influential three-ring definition, in which only "above average" ability is required, combined with creativity and task commitment. Were a school district that had relied on a traditional IQ/achievement-test definition to change to Renzulli's definition, and if both old and new identification practices were based faithfully on the different definitions, there would be a pronounced change in the composition of the group of children labeled gifted. Some "gifted students" would stop being gifted, and some "nongifted students" would suddenly find themselves in the gifted category.

Not only do these two definitions of giftedness vary considerably from each other, but there is no empirical basis for choosing one over the other, or over any of the scores of others that have been proposed, because, I maintain, defining giftedness is a matter of values and policy, not empirical research. And in many, if not most, states, definitions are not mandated. The result is that local educators are free, indeed required, to choose, or write, a definition of giftedness for their program for gifted students, one that, to a large extent, determines who will and who will not be gifted. In other words, giftedness in the schools is something we confer, not something we discover. It is a matter of educational policy, not a matter of scientific diagnosis. It is a social construction, not a fact of nature.

All of this strongly suggests that "the gifted" and "the average," rather than being preexisting human genera, are labels for socially constructed groups that are constituted, in both theory and practice, in ways that are far from consistent and, in many cases, anything but logical, systematic, or scientific. Giftedness has become, and probably always was, what Stuart Hall (e.g., 1997), writing about race, calls a "floating signifier," a semiotic term "variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or nonexistent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean" (Chandler, 2001, p. 33). Thinking about gifted children in the schools is, therefore, not a mirroring of nature but an invented way of categorizing children who must be

judged on a utilitarian or pragmatic basis. Thus, the basic question to ask about giftedness is not whether giftedness exists but whether the outcomes of the application of the construct, especially in the field of education, are beneficial, innocuous, or harmful.

THE QUESTIONABLE VALUE AND EFFICACY OF GIFTED EDUCATION

Some have responded to the assertion that giftedness is a social construct by arguing that most things can be accurately so designated. James Gallagher (1996) writes,

> We should admit that "gifted" is a constructed concept . . . But "opera singer" is a constructed concept, "shortstop" is a constructed concept, "boss" is a constructed concept; every concept that we use to describe human beings is a constructed concept. Is giftedness an educationally useful construct? That is the important question. (p. 235)

I think Gallagher is right to argue that we should apply utilitarian and pragmatic criteria to the construct rather than ontological ones, but I would argue that the application of these criteria to the constructs he equates with giftedness reveals that, unlike giftedness, they are functional categories of demonstrable necessity. Opera exists; without opera singers, there is no opera. Baseball, thankfully, exists as well, and without a shortstop, there is no baseball team. Schools also exist, but can one reasonably argue that without gifted children there would be no schools?

One central question regarding the utility of the construct of the gifted child concerns the efficacy of gifted programs. I believe there is little evidence that such programs are effective. Most programs for gifted students in this country take the form of part-time "pull-out" programs, in which students spend most of their time in regular heterogeneous classrooms that they leave for a period of time each week to meet with a special teacher and other students identified as gifted to receive some form of enrichment (Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991). However, according to Slavin (1990), "well-designed studies of programs for the gifted generally find few effects of separate programs for high achievers unless the programs include acceleration" (p. 486). In other words, there is ample evidence that acceleration, as a means of differentiating the curriculum for high-ability students, does what it is intended to do: match content to the instructional needs of advanced students. Similar evidence that enrichment is an effective means of meeting goals, other than the goal of providing enrichment, is exiguous at best (Horowitz & O'Brien, 1986).

Over a decade ago, Shore et al., in their landmark *Recommended Practices in Gifted Education* (1991), wrote that since "Passow (1958) remarked on the dearth of research on enrichment three decades ago, . . . the situation has changed little" (p. 82). In the absence of empirical data, they concluded

that the frequently recommended practice, "Enrichment should be a program component," was not among those supported, wholly or in part, by research but was instead among the practices "applicable to all children" (p. 286).

Not only is evidence supporting the efficacy of pull-out enrichment programs scanty, but what does exist is not very convincing. Two studies stand out as worthy of serious consideration. In a meta-analysis focusing on the effects of pull-out programs, Vaughn, Feldhusen, and Asher (1991) conclude that "pull-out models in gifted education have significant positive effects" (p. 92). However, this meta-analysis drew on only nine studies and examined outcomes related to four dependent variables. Because a maximum of three studies was used to compute effect sizes, there is reason to question the validity, robustness, and replicability of this conclusion.

An admirable attempt to address the problem of lack of efficacy studies was the Learning Outcomes Study (Delcourt, Loyd, Cornell, & Goldberg, 1994). The subjects of this study were 1,010 students from 10 states who were either in gifted programs, including pull-out programs, or in no program at all. Students in the latter group included students identified as gifted, formally and informally, and others nominated by teachers as comparison subjects. The authors concluded that the students in their sample who were in gifted programs academically outperformed both students given special provisions within heterogeneous classrooms and students receiving no provisions at all.

The problem with this conclusion is that the students whose academic performance was superior were formally identified as gifted and placed in special programs. The students with whom they were compared were either students identified as gifted but not placed in programs or students not identified as gifted at all (and thus not in programs). What Campbell and Stanley (1963) call "selection" is, unfortunately, as good an explanation for achievement differences as is program type or presence of a program. That is, there is reason to suspect that the groups were not comparable, that students formally identified and placed in gifted programs were different in nontrivial ways from students who were not in programs and those who were not identified as gifted, and that these differences, as much as anything else, might have affected the outcomes.

In short, there is remarkably little evidence that the most common type of programming for gifted students is effective. However, as Slavin (1990) argues, and as Shore et al. (1991) agree, the efficacy of one approach advocated for gifted students, acceleration, has research support. Does this not suggest that some gifted programs are effective? I believe not. Few programs identified as gifted programs use acceleration as their primary means of meeting the needs of gifted students because, although it is strongly supported by research data, acceleration is controversial, misunderstood, and even feared (e.g., Coleman & Cross, 2001; Southern & Jones, 1991).