

Gifted Development Center

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The False Accusation of Elitism

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A continuing problem that haunts the field of gifted education is the claim of elitism. Hollingworth (1926; 1930) also enlightened us on this topic based upon her careful study of homogeneously grouped gifted children.

Work with competitors of one's own caliber tends to starve conceit, rather than feed it. Observers have recorded that a pupil coming into special classes often meets a successful rival for the first time. (1926, p. 31)

If he remains in the special class, he is likely to leave it far less conceited than when he entered it. (1926, p. 302)

Many of our pupils had their first experience of being equaled or surpassed at school work when they entered the special class. Several interesting episodes arose to suggest that conceit was corrected, rather than fostered, by the experience of daily contact with a large number of equals. No child was found who could not endure this experience, but a few parents were unable to withstand the humiliation of having a child reduced from "the head of the class," and withdrew their children to the regular classes again, where they could continue unrivaled. (1930, p. 445)

Earnest Newland (1976), 50 years later, announced that elitism was in the eyes of the beholder. In his analysis, he found that there was no evidence whatsoever to support the notion that classes for the gifted breed elitism. Contrary to popular public opinion, when the gifted are placed in classes together, they do not come to the conclusion that they are "better than everyone else." Rather, they are humbled by finding peers who know more than they do.

My own observations of the last 30 years concur with Hollingworth's. If we really want to create a young man with elitist attitudes, all we have to do is place him in an unchallenging program for 12 years and allow him to be the smartest one in the class with no one in second place. Let him get by doing his homework in class, never taking home a book, and acing the tests without having to study. By the time he graduates, he will be convinced that he's the "top banana": he will have a ballooned sense of his own importance and place in the universe. And he will either become aggressive toward anyone who might challenge his position or fall apart and threaten to jump out the window when he goes off to some ivy league college and discovers there are hundreds of other students as smart as he is or even smarter.

The gifted in our country are the backbone of social reform and egalitarianism. They care desperately about injustice. Last year, I tested a 9-year-old boy in California who picked fruits and vegetables all summer long and sold them in his neighborhood to collect food for the homeless. He initiated this project on his own because he felt he had to do something to help. Children are involved in countless projects today to improve the environment, to save the rainforests, to help the homeless and infirm, to promote peace. And which children do you think are initiating these projects? They are our gifted children—because they care so much.

For years, I used to respond to accusations of “elitism” because I thought that the charge was simply derived from lack of exposure to gifted students and their values, and that knowledge of the truth would change these erroneous impressions. But two years ago “elitism” took on a new color. I went to Boston for the first time in my life, and learned from the woman who taught the first course on gifted education at Harvard University that her course, although highly successful, had been abandoned, since Harvard considered giftedness “elitist”. Now, I don’t know how that strikes you, but when a place like Harvard calls another group “elitist”, somehow the word loses any sense of meaning. My whole body went on “tilt” when I heard this. Clearly, something smelled rotten here.

It dawned on me then that elitism has nothing to do with giftedness. It is, and always has been, rooted in **socio-economic differences, not intellectual differences**. Scapegoating the gifted has been a very effective way of focusing attention away from the real issue. We have a society divided into haves and have nots, economically. It would be much simpler to find a way to distribute our country’s wealth more equitably than it would be to try to distribute one group’s intelligence more equitably. So we now have one reason for the scapegoating. It is a convenient way to sidestep the real problem by pointing a finger somewhere else. Scapegoating has always served that purpose. It’s a wonder that we haven’t seen through the sham in all these years of false accusations.

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