

Gifted Development Center

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Gifted Education: An Endangered Species

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At 2 weeks old, Jessica smiled on cue. At 14 months, she spoke in sentences and had a vocabulary of over 250 words. By the age of 2 she could do a 60 piece puzzle. She was so far beyond the other children in her daycare that she became the teacher's helper. At three, Jessie taught herself to read.

What happens when children like Jessie enter school? Are schools prepared to allow her to progress at her own rate? Unfortunately, too often the answer to this question is no. Jessie is expected to wait patiently while other children learn skills and knowledge she has already mastered. She is implicitly taught to slow down her natural rate of learning to make the teacher and the other students more comfortable. But Jessie pays a price for her social adaptation. She learns to be less than she can be, to slide by without stretching herself, to deny her talents, and, eventually, to trade her dreams for simpler, less demanding goals. This tragic waste of Jessie's potential affects not only her, but also society, for we have all lost whatever gifts she might have contributed. Instead of teaching to the lowest common denominator, schools need to become a place where individual differences are appreciated, and where talents are recognized and nurtured.

Attitudes toward the gifted and talented in this country have been on a perpetual roller coaster. This group has been alternately applauded, attacked, "mined" as a natural resource, and abandoned. Programs for the gifted currently are perceived as politically incorrect or as unnecessary frills to be discarded when budgets are tight. These attitudes are costly for the children involved and for society in general. In the 1980s there were steady gains in state appropriations, state mandates, administrative personnel, teacher certification requirements, individual educational plans for students, and graduate training programs. By 1990, 26 states had mandatory services for the gifted and talented (K-12 in 21 states), 21 states had due process rights for the identification of gifted students, 25 states allowed early entrance to school, 39 states had at least one full time state coordinator, 18 states had certification or endorsement requirements for teachers, and 12 states required individualized educational plans for gifted students (Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted, 1991).

However, the 1990s ushered in the school reform movement which called for an end to tracking and ability grouping and brought with it a wholesale attack on gifted education. Programs for advanced students are quickly becoming an endangered species in our schools. Tracking and ability grouping have been used as interchangeable terms, and the distinction between gifted and

high achieving students has been equally blurred. The rhetoric against programs for the gifted assumes that they are extra privileges for the privileged. Zealots of cooperative learning claim that mixed ability groups are best for **all** children. However, while we have 60 years of research supporting the benefits of special programs for the gifted, there is no evidence that the gifted profit from heterogeneous groups.

The extent to which zeal has won over logic is nowhere more apparent than in Gainesville, Florida, where all seventh graders learn algebra together, even if some haven't mastered addition and others are ready for calculus. The orchestrator of this plan has launched a vitriolic attack against parents of gifted children, deriding them for attempting to secure "special treatment" for their children (George, 1988). He gives advice to school personnel on how to handle these parents (dismissively, of course) (George, 1992). One can only guess how such blatant bigotry would be addressed by the School Board and state legislature if it were aimed at parents of any other group with exceptional needs. In his monograph entitled *How to Untrack Your School*, published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), George (1992, pp. v, 4) stated that "no school should tolerate organizational arrangements that build on or contribute to the belief that some students are better than others" and "all students [should be] deemed worthy and capable of learning everything the school has to offer." The implication is clear. If one child is ready and eager to read Shakespeare and another is not, it is "not fair" to allow that child to read Shakespeare, because that would deem those who are not ready as "unworthy." So schools should no longer offer Shakespeare unless **every** student can grasp it? How can ASCD endorse prejudice against individual differences?

Currently, the field is so enshrouded by myths, misinformation and discrimination against bright children that many exemplary programs throughout the country are being discontinued (Benbow, 1992). These myths must be dispelled if the needs of gifted children are to be met within the school system.

The Myths

- ✎ Tracking and ability grouping are synonymous.
- ✎ Gifted students are all high achievers.
- ✎ Provisions for the gifted are undemocratic.
- ✎ Special attention to the gifted fosters elitism.
- ✎ Gifted children can make it on their own; they don't need assistance.

First, the difference between tracking and ability grouping needs to be clarified. Tracking involves the permanent placement of students into low, average, and high achieving groups. It is an organizational plan designed for students in the mid-range of abilities, and it has been questioned for years. However, ability grouping at both extremes has been found to be beneficial (Kulik & Kulik, 1991; Rogers, 1991). As far back as the 1920s, Hollingworth distinguished between these two very different concepts:

Professor Hollingworth was convinced that homogeneous grouping offers the most effective type of education in populous centers...large enough for the organization of special classes. It is important to emphasize that Hollingworth did not interpret homogeneous grouping as advocating the sectioning of all students in the educational system on an ability basis. She repeatedly stated that in the distribution of intelligence only the extremes are so far removed from the average that regular school cannot meet their needs. (Pritchard, 1951, p. 53)

Part of the problem lies in the confusion about the meaning of giftedness. The research on cooperative learning that undergirds the attack against ability grouping is all based upon the division of students into high, average and low achieving groups. When the gifted are defined as the top third of the school population, a notion meant to democratize the concept, then the anti-ability grouping arguments apply. However, when the gifted are defined as a special education population, comprising a small portion of the school population (2-5%), the existing research base is *not appropriate*. "The research base for applications of cooperative learning to the truly gifted is weak. Knowing this area well, I'd characterize it as virtually non-existent" (Slavin, 1990, p. 28).

Perhaps the most pernicious belief is that gifted students are economically advantaged. The gifted come from all social classes (Dickinson, 1970), and poor children have less opportunity to achieve academic success. While the percentage of gifted students among the upper classes may be higher, there is a much greater number of gifted children among the lower classes (Zigler & Farber, 1985), because the poor far outnumber the rich. If we abandon gifted programs, gifted children from culturally diverse groups and low socio-economic circumstances will be the ones to suffer most. Affluent parents can send their children to private schools or some two parent families can opt to homeschool their children. But the majority of gifted children will not have those options. These children are prevented from fulfilling their potential when public school provisions for the gifted are eliminated. Instead, greater efforts must be made to include bright children from all socio-economic classes in gifted programs.

Provisions for the gifted are as democratic as provisions for any other exceptional child. A gifted child is a child with special needs. Because giftedness occurs on a continuum, the more the child's abilities vary from the norm, the greater is the need for an individually tailored program and accompanying support services. A child whose IQ is 3 standard deviations above the norm (145) has learning needs as unique as those of a child whose IQ is 3 standard deviations below the norm (55). There are profoundly gifted children, just as there are profoundly retarded children. However, most gifted children are found in regular classrooms without the benefit of special provisions or teachers with special training.

The claim that special services for gifted students create elitism also is unsupported by research (Newland, 1976). Elitism is a function of *socio-economic* differences, not intellectual ones. In teaching and counseling gifted students, I have found that feelings of inferiority in the gifted are much more prevalent than feelings of superiority. Those children who act superior usually feel isolated and use their verbal abilities as a defense against the rejection of their agemates. Separating gifted students and ignoring their needs actually fosters elitism to a greater extent than congregating them for advanced instruction. Students who are the smartest in their class for 12

years, never crack a book or take home homework, and ace all the tests without studying, can get a ballooned sense of their own importance and place in the universe. When gifted students 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. "Conceit was corrected, rather than fostered, by the experience of daily contact with a large number of equals" (Hollingworth, 1930, p. 445).

Much of the fear of elitism is based on the assumption that if individuals discover that they are unusually able, they will develop aristocratic values, caring little for the plight of others. However, research indicates that exactly the opposite is true. Giftedness often is accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility, empathy, moral concern and compassion (Dabrowski, 1972; Hollingworth, 1942; Marland, 1972; Passow, 1988; Terman, 1925; Ward, 1985). The gifted in our country are the backbone of social reform and egalitarianism. They care desperately about injustice (Roeper, 1988). Programming for gifted students enhances these higher values, rather than creating an aristocracy.

Many gifted children do *not* make it on their own. Some become dropouts (Marland, 1972), delinquents (Seeley & Mahoney, 1981), underachievers (Supplee, 1990; Whitmore, 1989), depressed (Kerr, 1991) and victims of suicide (Delisle, 1990). For every child with recognized gifts, still another goes unrecognized (Dickinson, 1970). Gifted children may have learning disabilities or other handicaps, and these dual exceptionalities tend to mask each other so that the child appears average (Silverman, 1989). Unrecognized and undeveloped talents may be lost permanently. The potential concert violinist must have a violin and continuous nurturing of this ability to fulfill its potential.

Despite myths to the contrary, giftedness does not develop in a vacuum. We have romanticized the "self-made man," but research indicates that talent requires considerable cultivation to develop fully (Bloom, 1985; Feldman, 1986). We cannot know how much talent has been lost for lack of discovery and development; nor can we assess the magnitude of that loss to our society--the music that was never composed, the medical cure that was never discovered, the political strategy that might have averted a war.

Eliminating programs for the gifted is as unethical as eliminating programs for the retarded. If children who are developmentally advanced had the same protection under the law as children who are developmentally delayed, it would also be illegal. It is unrealistic to expect a regular classroom teacher to teach one child addition and another pre-calculus. Yet, children of the same age may differ to that degree in their development. Special programs are essential for the welfare of children with special needs.

Gifted children are the sacrificial lambs of the new movement in school reform. It is misguided to believe that holding back the brightest students magically helps the slower ones; *bringing the top down does not bring the bottom up*. Our democracy, as well as our position as a world leader, is being endangered by substituting socialization for education. While other countries enable their brightest students to go as far as possible in their learning, we have adopted the notion that one

curriculum fits all, and are using our most capable students to serve as assistant teachers instead of allowing them to progress and develop their abilities.

Unless those who recognize the special needs of the gifted unite and mobilize their energies to preserve gifted education, all of the gains of the last 20 years may be lost in the '90s. *All children have the right to learn new concepts in school every day.* When the school reformers can prove that this is happening for gifted children, I will support school reform.

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