



Giftedness 101

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Are you gifted if no one can see it? Some would say no, you are only gifted when you do something others deem remarkable. When giftedness is removed from the competitive realm of recognized achievement, it becomes clear that it is a form of atypical development, which leads to unique experiences throughout the life cycle.

What exactly is giftedness? This topic is mired in controversy and mythology. These are some of the perennial misconceptions with which the gifted, their parents and their advocates must contend:

- ✚ Is there such a thing as giftedness?
- ✚ Aren't all people gifted in some way?
- ✚ Doesn't this type of labeling give a child a swelled head?
- ✚ Is giftedness just the result of "hothousing" by helicopter parents?
- ✚ Are programs for gifted children elitist and undemocratic?
- ✚ Can't smart kids make it on their own?
- ✚ Won't the other kids catch up eventually?
- ✚ Does giftedness disappear or cause untimely death ("Early ripe, early rot")?
- ✚ Are people with unusual gifts born with some sort of compensating handicap?
- ✚ Is there a link between giftedness and insanity?
- ✚ Is the notion of giftedness obsolete?
- ✚ Shouldn't we be talking instead about talents in different domains or multiple intelligences or expertise developed through years of effort and practice?

Few topics engender such strong reactions. While it is comfortable to acknowledge that some individuals are less intelligent than we are, the idea that some individuals are smarter than us poses an emotional threat to the insecure (Persson, 2009). Tannenbaum (1983) discloses the history of "persistent undercurrents of suspicion and negativism"—widespread resentment—toward those who are highly intelligent (p. 3). The gifted are lonely in a world of misunderstanding.

It is not uncommon to hear an educator say to a parent in a patronizing tone, "We believe *all* our children are gifted." While all children are a gift to the world, saying "all children are gifted," robs the term of any meaning. It would be equally absurd to say, "We believe *all* our children are intellectually disabled." Individuals with impaired intellectual development, whose intelligence measures 2, 3 or 4 standard deviations below the norm, deal with specific psychological issues. The same is true for those who are

developmentally advanced, with IQ scores 2, 3, 4 or more standard deviations above the norm. Those whose abstract reasoning is significantly keener than the majority have qualitatively different life experiences and qualitatively different psychological needs.

Is Giftedness the Potential for Eminence?

There is a “new” movement in the field of gifted education that equates giftedness with recognized achievement. “Outstanding achievement or eminence should be the chief goal of gifted education” (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011, p 3). We’ve been here before. Howard Gardner (1983) ushered in a host of achievement-oriented definitions of giftedness. In 1992, David Feldman called for a “paradigm shift,” which replaced the term “gifted” with “talented” and urged us to abolish IQ testing. Why? Because IQ tests do not predict fame.

Defining giftedness as eminence is the legacy of Sir Frances Galton. Galton inaugurated the study of giftedness in 1869 with the publication of his book, *Hereditary Genius*. He ranked men according to the prestige they had attained as statesmen, commanders, literary figures, men of science, poets, musicians, and painters. He selected men of whom history makes mention and men whose biographies were accessible. His plan was to show that reputation is an accurate test of high ability, and that unusual ability runs in families (particularly his family: his cousin was Charles Darwin). “By reputation, I mean the opinion of contemporaries, revised by posterity—the favourable result of a critical analysis of each man’s character, by many biographers...” (Galton, 1869, p. 33).

As Galton suggests, it is not possible to accurately assess the impact of a life until the person isn’t living any more and other people are writing about him (or her, but most biographies about him). So we should wait until people die to determine if they were gifted? This “posthumous” determination of giftedness is not particularly useful for selecting and serving gifted children, or for nourishing their emotional growth.

The equation of giftedness with eminence has built-in sexist, cultural, socio-economic, and racial biases, since women, all nationalities, all racial and ethnic groups, all socio-economic levels, are not equally represented among the eminent (Silverman, 2013). Not all cultures value individual recognition. Eminence is a competitive concept—not a universal goal.

Galton’s notions were challenged a century ago by Leta Stetter Hollingworth, who argued that eminence is largely the result of opportunity, closely linked to social position in the society, and generally inaccessible to women.

If opportunity were indeed the prime determinant of eminence, then we should expect those who belong to socially inferior categories to be excluded from it. This is just what we do find, since the uncultured, the poor, servants, and women are very seldom found to have achieved eminence. (Hollingworth, 1926, p. 11)

It is undesirable to seek for the cause of sex differences in eminence in ultimate and obscure affective and intellectual differences until we have exhausted as a cause the known, obvious, and inescapable fact that women bear and rear the children, and that this has had as an inevitable sequel the occupation of housekeeping, a field where eminence is not possible. (Hollingworth, 1914, p. 529)

How can we be back where we were 100 years ago? Can gifted education really believe that the elusive golden ring of eminence is a fairer, more equitable criterion of giftedness than IQ tests?

And how does it serve children? There are no eminent children. If you were identified as gifted in childhood and you do not become eminent, does that mean that you were never gifted in the first place? The disconnection between giftedness in childhood and giftedness in adulthood is illogical and does not exist in any other branch of exceptionality.

Rather than asking what children need who are developing differently, the emphasis has shifted to a totally different question: “What does it take to become successful?” Many popular journalists preach that everyone is equally endowed with intelligence, and, therefore, everyone has an equal opportunity for success (e.g., Gladwell, 2008). In Scandinavia, some researchers assert that there are no differences in ability. It’s all about practice, practice, practice (Ericsson, 2006).

The doctrine that we all have equal intelligence sounds deliciously seductive in fiercely egalitarian societies, but is it true? Are we really all the same? For the last century, we have known that there are vast differences in intelligence in the population. At the Gifted Development Center, we have found children who score beyond 260 IQ. Does this have no meaning unless they grow up to be famous?

And does a “gift” imply an obligation? Many of the arguments in favor of educational provisions for the gifted are based on the value of this group to society. Gifted education is marketed as an investment in future leaders. “In current thinking in giftedness and education, the utility value reigns and the intrinsic value of the gift is virtually nonexistent” (Besjes-de Bock & de Ruyter, 2011, p. 205). Prized as a utility, the gifted are expected to yield a return on society’s investment that is advantageous to the social order. Little attention is paid to their inner lives; “emotions are of minor importance” (p. 199). While some gifted children covet the goal of achieving high grades and crave the accolades of success in school and adult life, others march to their own drummers. One mother wrote:

We say that A doesn’t march to the beat of a different drummer—she has her own band.

A Psychology of Giftedness

I see giftedness as a psychological reality. It can be observed in very young children and documented on measures of general intelligence. The capacity for abstract thought, insightfulness, compassion, sensitivity, perfectionism, intensity, creative imagination, sophisticated sense of humor and unusual energy typify the gifted individual throughout the life span and result in unusual life experiences. These lifelong characteristics mark the gifted as outsiders in society, and make them vulnerable.

Giftedness is color-blind, is found in equal proportions in males and females, is present in all cultures, and is distributed across all socio-economic levels. There are many more gifted children in the world living in poverty than those who are wealthy (Zigler & Farber, 1985).

Giftedness indicates significantly different needs from the norm; it requires early identification, intervention and accommodations to assure healthy development. In contrast to popular beliefs, the gifted do not make it on their own. Most hide and underachieve. Some commit suicide. And some “tall poppies” are beheaded to preserve the fiction that we are all alike.

Giftedness 101 is an attempt to re-establish giftedness as a legitimate branch of psychology. Every other field of exceptionality has been embraced by psychology, but this child has been abandoned. Gifted education does not address the inner life of the gifted. It is usually focused on how successful these students are in school. The only role of psychology is motivation.

When my book, *Giftedness 101*, was submitted to the United States Library of Congress for cataloguing, it was classified as “Gifted children” and “Gifted children—Education.” What happens to gifted children when they are no longer children or when they are no longer in school? There is no category for “the psychology of giftedness.” The gifted are not represented as a division of the American Psychological Association, or the psychological associations of other countries. They are simply forgotten.

Within psychology, there has always been an interest in outliers; they show us the range of human abilities and illuminate the possibilities of human development. When psychology was in its infancy, giftedness was an integral part of the family of issues investigated. Alfred Binet, Lewis Terman, Leta Stetter Hollingworth, Peter Stern, and many other psychologists who studied individual differences, were curious about both ends of the intellectual spectrum. The psychology of giftedness was born of this intellectual curiosity.

No one appears to doubt the existence of individuals who are intellectually disabled. Psychologists have been at the forefront of identifying this group and special educators have been trained to provide appropriate educational services. Why should there be derision and neglect of those who are intellectually advanced? Why do we allow this? It is time to extend our hand to a neglected group that needs our understanding and support.

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