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# Special Programs for the Gifted

## A critique of some arguments

*Concern that the more gifted children are not getting due attention is one of the current novelties in the shop-window of educational discussion. The issue has some genuine challenge and significance for education; but a commodity that has been in short supply for some time and for which the public has acquired a genuine appetite is in serious danger of being too eagerly pulled from the oven half-baked. Denis Cassivi here performs a service all too rarely offered in education, a timely and comprehensive critique of an emerging fad, with the object not of destroying it but of saving it. By raising questions about the assumption that special education is needed for special groups, his arguments anticipate some of the problems to which the Journal's next issue, on "Special Education," will address itself.*

A number of articles related to gifted children have appeared in both the popular press and professional journals over the past year. In addition, some professional organizations have sponsored meetings and conferences on the gifted child. Both reflect, presumably, a renewal of interest in the gifted, and will lead no doubt to the development of special programs.

This paper examines critically six arguments which call for increased attention to special programs for gifted children. The six fall under these general headings: the gifted as a special group; the curriculum; the intellectual-social-emotional categorization; the ethical question; the teacher; and the continuing education question.

These particular arguments have been chosen for two reasons. First, they are conspicuous by their obvious aversion to logic, reason and sensitivity. Second, they share the common feature of ignoring any 'educational' perspective. The purpose of this paper is to consider some of the limitations in these

arguments, and hopefully to delineate and delimit the educational issues. The intent, however, is not to present a case against working with gifted children in a special way. On the contrary, it is to draw attention with some urgency to the questionable value of programs for gifted children that are based on vacuous arguments. Moreover, no suggestion is implied that *all* arguments for working with gifted children are weak arguments (and there are others), but rather that weak arguments simply will not do.

### **The gifted as a special group**

**The Argument:** *The gifted as a group have a higher claim to special attention than others.*

There seems to be no adequate argument for providing special services for the gifted as a *group*, any more than should be provided any other group. That is, no logical, rational statement has appeared lately for providing special attention to the gifted group, instead of the immigrant-children group, or the physically-handicapped group or the colour-blind group. This is not to be confused, of course, with saying that there are no adequate arguments for providing for the individual differences of children. There are. This distinction deserves more than a cursory glance, if only because it can help to clarify motives.

For example, it is now said that the time has come to concentrate on the gifted since “slow learners” have been emphasized for such a long time. Such an argument surely ignores any reasons *in esse* for working with “gifted” children — unless, that is, an acceptable argument for setting educational priorities is one analagous to the impatient child waiting in line for his turn on the one bicycle available. “You had two turns and I haven’t had one.”

Another argument is that gifted children become frustrated and bored with their schoolwork. Is it to be assumed that *all* or most gifted children become frustrated? Or that only *gifted* children become bored? Would it be a daring intuitive leap to postulate that a child does not have to be particularly bright to become bored with school? When discussion inevitably turns to bored students, and how they need someone to provide enrichment, is it possible that the real concern is for a smooth-running classroom or school, rather than providing a richer learning experience for a certain group of children? A smooth-running school is justifiably a central concern of teachers and administrators. Nevertheless, it does not alter the fact that to argue for a smooth-running school is fundamentally irrelevant to putting emphasis on the gifted as a group.

There are many perspectives from which the selection of groups of any kind may be analyzed, and there are, of course, many reasons for such selections. Probably the most rational response to the question “Why emphasize gifted children?” is that from a colleague who answered “Why not?” For from the

simplicity and the almost arrogant disinterest of the “Why not?” there emerges an acknowledgement that any kind of grouping or selection in education is done invariably for a variety of motives, some of which are educational, many of which are not.<sup>1</sup>

## The curriculum

**The Argument:** *The gifted child can do many things that other children cannot, and therefore should have an “enriched” curriculum.*

The difficulty with this argument is the confusion caused by the term “enriched.” It raises questions of epistemology and justification of a substantive nature. Such questions ultimately issue in action in arguments which deal with the kinds of knowledge that ought to be promoted in the schools. This becomes particularly important when decisions are made about gifted children as the result of differences in epistemology. Moreover, it is most evident when those involved in such decisions are not aware of the practical manifestations of such differences. For example, those who would adhere to what is often called the romantic tradition in education — that is, openness, human emphasis, creativity, etc. — are moved by, among other things (for example, a maturational psychology), an existentialist or phenomenological epistemology.<sup>2</sup> That is, they would define knowledge in reference to the immediate inner experience of the self. The romantics would maintain that skills, achievements, and performances are not important in themselves, but only as a means to inner awareness, happiness, or mental health.

On the other hand, those who adhere to the behaviourist tradition would lean towards epistemologies which stress knowledge as objective, and subject to measurement. They would tend to eliminate references to internal or subjective experience as non-scientific.

These illustrations represent, of course, opposite poles. The basis of the stark contrast between the two is rooted in the fundamentally conflicting views of what in fact counts as knowledge. These differences can in turn influence the gifted in a number of ways. First, they may determine who counts as gifted. Those who profess a certain epistemology will allow that only certain knowledge counts, and therefore only certain children will be selected (that is, those children who had experienced a curriculum based on the tutelage of the selecting epistemology).

Second, they (the differences) may determine for some time the kind of curriculum that both the gifted (the selected) and the non-gifted (those not selected) will work with. It is reasonable to assume that the curriculum of the two groups would be different in substance and not simply vary in degrees of enrichment only. From an educational perspective such exclusive exposure must be seen

as a limitation. A curriculum which emerges from a synthesis of these and other epistemologies, and which presumes an awareness of a number of epistemologies, would seem to be more favorable.

### **The intellectual-social-emotional categorization**

**The Argument:** *Because the gifted are so advanced intellectually, they need special attention to ensure that they also develop emotionally and socially in a healthy manner.*

Many recent references to gifted children have discussed a curious separation of intellectual-social-emotional components in human beings. Statements such as these have been made: "The difficulties of the gifted are emotional and social;" or "Emotional development must keep pace with intellectual development."

Two questions immediately come to mind. First, why is it said that the problems of the gifted are emotional and social when approximately eighty percent of children with superior intelligence are healthier, emotionally more stable, physically stronger, and athletically more competent than the average child?<sup>3</sup> This contradiction remains a mystery, unless the emphasis is to be put on the unfortunate twenty percent. If that is the case, then one may justifiably ask: "Why *that* twenty percent? Why not the twenty percent of 'average' children with emotional and social problems?"

A second question is perhaps more fundamental. If emphasis is to be put on gifted children because of their special need for social and emotional development, then we have adopted a certain assumption about human beings that could, at the very least, lead to some conceptual difficulties. For what is being said is that the development of the child proceeds in separate *categories* — intellectual, social, emotional, and physical.<sup>4</sup> The questions which logically arise have to do with how these different components are distinguished. How do we distinguish emotional development from social development? How do we distinguish intellectual development from either? This latter question is particularly crucial. Take as an illustration an "emotion" such as hatred. Surely if one "hates," then one has engaged in an intellectual or cognitive activity, clearly manifested in an appraisal of something. An appraisal is the result of *assessing* a situation with the result that one sees a person or thing, in the case of this illustration, in a bad light. Such a discrimination has been learned (cognitive-intellectual) through an understanding of the actions of numbers of people. The "hatred" then is based on an intellectual-cognitive activity.

The issue that gradually takes shape is not that the emotional and social development of gifted children might be stunted, but rather that their *intellectual* development might be. The problem is that a very limited view of intellec-

tual development has dominated schools, particularly in their failing to teach students to make appraisals and discriminations. The task then is not to speed up the emotional or social development of the child (or indeed conversely to slow down the intellectual development), but rather to do the intellectual task properly, and not in a narrow, irrelevant way. The sense must be cleared out from the nonsense, and the important concern of understanding ourselves and others must be made a part of the children's intellectual studies.

One further point should be mentioned about the implications of developing children emotionally and socially. It has to do with our need to educate for conformity — to render extinct the outsider or the real artist in our increasingly bland and antiseptic society. The artist in the true sense is the embodiment of internal harmony and resists being bashed into shape by educators like you and me. When we speak of “development,” a slight note of aggression appears, an apparently innocuous push to conformity. This, of course, tends to spell the death of art and the person that we know as the artist. It is tragic, and should be fought by anyone who claims to be an educator. Alas, it is not a simple matter, and society, as E. M. Forster suggested, “is certainly not inclined to subsidize madness; the state exists for the sane who have learned to fit in.”<sup>5</sup> If the gifted do not fit in, we should be content to acknowledge that as yet another strength.

## The ethical question

**The Argument:** *The gifted need a special kind of education because of their future role as “leaders”.*

In response to this argument the reader will be spared any repetition of the vacuous argument that working with the gifted is “undemocratic,” or even worse, that it violates vague principles of equality. Such arguments only serve to divert attention away from the pernicious influence of those who have shrunk from their responsibility to address questions which are of a moral kind.

The first of these questions is essentially sociological and centres on the matter of limiting access to knowledge. Notwithstanding the importance of a philosophical analysis of knowledge, it cannot be ignored that knowledge is to some extent (some would say to considerable extent) socially determined. One of the more obvious results of this is that some social strata have only limited access to knowledge, or as Karl Mannheim argued, “they have limited ways of perceiving reality.”<sup>6</sup>

If one of the aims of education is to provide individuals with an opportunity to transcend their own reality, it follows that special programs for the gifted may act as a barrier, which leads to a kind of epistemological narcissism. The *special* group succeeds not only in confirming its own select view of reality to itself, but to those of other social groups as well. The result is that the different

strata become ever more acutely separate. As educators, we may be guilty of attempting to ensure that the self-perceptions of a group are maintained at an early stage when we initiate such programs for the gifted. Berger and Luckman identified the issue precisely: "The concern is not that people will end up with different kinds of knowledge, but rather that an emphasis on such groups predetermines *who* ends up with *what* knowledge."<sup>7</sup>

A second moral issue is disturbing in a more blatant way. At a recent conference on the gifted child it was argued that this special education for leadership should also include a good moral education, an argument which evokes the very stuff of an Orwellian novel. For it suggests, with all the subtlety of a political manifesto, that not everyone needs a good moral education, only those who will be leaders. The assumption is that the gifted, armed with this moral education, will not only express their genius in the furthering of science and technology, but will ensure that it is always guarded from improper use and evil excess. The frontiers of genetic science will be explored, but always for the good of mankind.

The sad reality is that we do not have to search for the results of the abdication of individual responsibility on such a dramatic scale. Examples of the widespread belief that it is impossible to distinguish right from wrong, or good from bad, or tasteful from tasteless, are all around us. The bitter irony, of course, is that those who speak for this special moral education are often those who are least capable of even conceiving it. One shudders to think of what this special education will include when the many protagonists of a "good moral education" include those who are reluctant to say that a Beethoven Symphony is better than punk rock, that the scribbles of a lazy fool are no worse than the sonnets of Shakespeare, that the graffiti of an art student on the walls around a construction site equal the beauty of a Rubens. Not only is it indefensible that individuals are apparently freed from any moral responsibility, but paradoxically that ethical anarchists, with only a history of cowardly neglect to present as credentials, can claim to devise a good moral education program.

## The teacher

**The Argument:** *Special classes must be provided for gifted students because the regular teacher in the normal class could not possibly deal with such students.*

There appears to be an extraordinary mixup over children's varying abilities to learn and teachers' varying abilities to teach. What seems to emerge all too frequently is a confusion between circumstances of a unique nature that require some reorganization on the one hand, and the competency or skills of a teacher to deal with individual differences on the other.

There are a number of aspects to this question. First, teachers may have an

inadequate understanding of certain fundamental curriculum questions. For example, a teacher (or administrator) may ignore the important relationship between culture and curriculum.<sup>8</sup> (There is no need to document here the cruel results of that neglect, particularly as it applies to the native peoples of Canada.) Or problems may develop in a classroom, particularly among bright students, because the work is poorly structured, or the materials are badly chosen, or the ideas, as Whitehead said, are “inert.” All of these are curriculum problems with which the teacher should be familiar, and if not, should be made a part of his training. Yet they seem to be ignored in favor of a reorganization which may be inappropriate and perhaps unnecessary.

Second, even those who accept and attempt to accommodate the individual differences of students may be confused about the term “mixed ability teaching.” Mixed-ability teaching is not the same thing as teaching in mixed ability groups. The former implies a certain kind of teaching, a kind that focuses on individuals, and is based on an awareness of pupils as individuals. In the latter (teaching in mixed ability groups) any kind of teaching can go on. “Teaching all pupils in the class the same thing at the same time may go on in mixed ability groups but it is not mixed ability teaching.”<sup>9</sup> If the distinction is not absolutely clear to the teacher, then mixed ability teaching becomes another meaningless label like “continuous progress” or “non-grading.” You continue doing what you always did, but you believe that somehow you are doing it differently.

Third, there may be instances where pressure from parents can have a direct influence on the organization of teaching. For example, some parents have accused teachers of being defensive in dealing with gifted children. Aside from the fact that most of us mortals are a little intimidated by the intelligent, the fact of the matter is that this defensiveness should not lead to a reorganization of the educational program. Such defensiveness, if out of the ordinary — that is, having a bad effect on a child — may be a problem of an incompetent teacher and should be treated as such. To reorganize the program may be totally inappropriate.

## **The continuing education issue**

**The Argument:** *We must initiate special programs for gifted children as early on as possible, so that we do not “lose them.”*

To say that there is little time to lose in planning programs for the gifted child suggests that the public school life of that person is crucial to his success and happiness. In one sense, of course, it is. The argument breaks down, however, for two reasons. First, it gives an extraordinary importance to educators, both teachers and others who generally speaking would not be put in the gifted group, that might be unwarranted. For the firmly-rooted belief in the argument of those who call for immediate action is that, unless we teachers are

doing something for the gifted, then they are somehow losing out. Might it be possible, in one sense at least, that the opposite is true? Have we not strayed a considerable distance from that dimension of education which emphasized insight and wisdom in the most traditional sense? The influence of the philosophy of logical positivism, which became the chief protagonist for linking philosophy with the exact sciences, has made its mark (not altogether negative by any means) on education. Unfortunately, it has created an illusion of progress, if we consider insight and wisdom as general aims of education. If we insist that something be done for the gifted, we may just limit the possibilities for cultural growth that can only emerge in a climate of leisure where reflection and even meditation are most important.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is healthy to consider the scepticism of Bertrand Russell whenever we are consumed by the uncontrollable urge to intervene: "We are faced with the paradoxical fact that education has become one of the chief obstacles to intelligence and freedom of thought."<sup>11</sup>

The second weakness, in exaggerating the claim for the value of public school experience, is that it fails to see education as a lifelong process, or if it does, there is no acknowledgement of it. Such a limited view is inexcusable. Surely the public school life is to be considered only one segment of an education that continues in many different cycles at many different levels. Indeed, if this is the case,<sup>12</sup> the function of those planning programs for the gifted is to ensure that they are incorporated into a rational system, in which all possible resources, both within the formal educational system at all levels and outside, are utilized.

### **Some concluding thoughts**

There is at present no general governmental policy in any of Canada's provinces or territories for dealing with gifted children specifically. Neither are there any teacher-education programs which focus on gifted children, other than those which form a part of special-education courses on exceptionality. It is apparent, nevertheless, that a considerable emphasis will be put on the gifted in the coming months and years by many education authorities in Canada. While this paper has done nothing more than raise a few questions, and point to a few issues, it should provide at least a simple reference point from which to begin debating such an important concern in a rational way.

As mentioned at the outset, the intent of the paper is not to argue against working with the gifted. Neither is it intended by its critical stance to convey any dissatisfaction with those who are now working with the gifted. One of the limitations of a paper of this kind is that it leaves the writer vulnerable to accusations of being negative, and trying to impede progress. I have written this with the full knowledge of its limitation, but this is balanced by the hope that it might initiate a discussion in which issues are analyzed with greater clarity and precision.



In conclusion, I would offer the following guidelines to those who are considering the development of programs for the gifted:

1. Return to some of the basic literature. Go back to the classic Francis Galton essay of 1869, and survey the major works up to the present day. Try to get a clear picture of precisely what we have learned about the gifted over the years, with a critical eye on the most vulnerable arguments, even in the hard research. Bibliographies are easily available.

2. Maintain a critical stance in the face of those who make reference to the U.S.A. or Great Britain as exemplars. The former has a history of moulding its education system in light of international political developments. The latter has until recently considered education primarily in terms of the country's aristocracy.

3. Take a good look at the broad curriculum before developing a special curriculum for this special group.

4. Examine the programs now available for the continuing education of your teachers. Are there aspects of your inservice programs which might be better developed so that the regular classroom teacher could deal with the gifted?

5. Try to be very rigorous in considering your own motives for emphasizing gifted children. Personal interest? Professional interest? Administrative convenience? Parental or political pressure?

6. Ask whether any of the suggested activities and programs for the gifted would not be beneficial for *all* children.

7. Discuss the ideas, in the earliest stages, with a wide circle of parents and professionals at different levels. Consider programs for the gifted from a long-term, integrated point of view.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Julia Evetts, *The Sociology of Educational Ideas* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973). See especially Chapter 5, "Selection in Education."
2. For a proper statement of this argument, refer as I did to Lawrence Kohlberg and Rochelle Mayer, "Development as the Aim of Education," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (November 1972), p. 460.
3. See H. Orlick, "The Gifted Child," *Journal of Education* (Summer 1977).

4. P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters, *The Logic of Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970). This book gives a much more thorough presentation of the argument in Chapter 3, "Development." In this paper I have done nothing more than point to the argument.
5. E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), p. 107.
6. K. Mannheim, *Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950).
7. P. Berger and T. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Allen Lane, 1967).
8. I believe this to be an area of such overwhelming importance that I shall not even pretend to deal with it here. The reader will note for example the omission of any direct reference to the work of Basil Bernstein and others on language and social class. That was not an oversight. It would be simply impossible to launch into a topic of such importance with a sentence or two. Suffice to say that "culture" is, or should be, the foundation of all educational programs in the multilingual, multi-cultural, regionally-variant country of Canada.
9. The *Cambridge Journal of Education* devoted two complete combined issues (Vol. 6, No. 1/2, Lent 1976) to "mixed ability teaching." This quotation is from "The Problems and Dilemmas of Mixed Ability Teaching and the Issue of Teacher Accountability" by John Elliott, which appeared in that issue.
10. Josef Pieper has, of course, presented this case in his book, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1963).
11. Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1935).
12. Many would argue that it certainly is. See especially Vincent Houghton and Ken Richardson (eds.), *Recurrent Education* (London: Ward Lock, 1974), and the Secretariat Synthesis, *Conference on Developments in Recurrent Education* (Chateau De La Muette, OECD, Paris, 28-31, March 1977).