

Comment

on "Special Programs for the Gifted: A critique of some arguments"

*Denis Cassivi's article appeared in the last issue of this Journal:
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I was pleased to read this timely charge to those of us who advocate differential education for the gifted, that we be kept honest and on our toes. I am nonetheless concerned that unless the article was intended to be tongue-in-cheek it may fan the very fires of misconception it was intended to quench. This suspicion is heightened by the editor's presumption, from this text, that gifted child education is a fad; it is not now (though it might have been in 1960).

I therefore have some strong objections to the manner in which the six arguments were presented as "straw men" to be criticized. I do not object to the categories in which they are presented, since there is necessarily arbitrariness in such choices. I do object to the way the six arguments were raised, as though they would be found in that form in any of the current literature in support of gifted child education. My points of reply are these, in order.

"The Argument: *The gifted as a group have a higher claim to special attention than others.*" No-one says that. The claim is that the gifted as a group have an equal claim to special attention, though, as for other "groups," this attention may sometimes have to be highly individualized. Why identify the gifted as a group at all? Because, given the way our school systems are organized, it is a convenient way of allocating resources to a need. It does not imply that the identification of such a group takes any priority over the need to provide an appropriate curriculum for all.

"The gifted child can do many things that other children cannot, and therefore should have an 'enriched' curriculum." There is a wide leap between this premise and its conclusion. I would accept the premise and conclude only that we should in school and elsewhere encourage and not thwart these strengths. "Enrichment" is only a useful term in that it says we do not adequately serve the needs of most gifted children, and I would be content that this admission be extended to all, gifted or not. What is relevant is that the gifted may

be the least well served in these terms. The richness, sophistication, and eclecticism which should underlie the enriched curriculum of any child is not a point of controversy at all (even if it is practically impossible).

"Because the gifted are so advanced intellectually, they need special attention to ensure that they develop emotionally and socially in a healthy manner." Yes, hogwash. I agree with many of the article's comments on this issue, but wonder why the issue was raised in this form. The principal flaw in this point is simply that there is no finite limit on these kinds of development and no reason to presume that a strength in one must be accompanied by weaknesses in another.

"The gifted need a special kind of education because of their future role as 'leaders'." I share objections to this recurring theme especially in *some* legislation and writing, though the more common form is to describe gifted children as a critical natural resource, akin to a major oil field. In my opinion the ethical challenge is how we can continue to ignore the educational (and other) needs of any gifted children because of some myth that they do well anyway. The link made in the article to moral education, however, astounds me. In the curricula I have seen, the major ethical content has been to suggest to the gifted that their advantages in ability bring responsibilities not privileges, and that some of these responsibilities are to themselves. I have never seen any suggestion that the gifted be "freed from any moral responsibility" so as to lord it over their inferiors, even in the historically (and in no other way) relevant or interesting early writings by Galton and others.

"Special classes must be provided for gifted students because the regular teacher in the normal class could not possibly deal with such students." I agree that this is nonsense. The problem is that no respected advocate of differentiated education for the gifted has ever made such a sweeping claim, and the rapidly spreading availability of intensive training for classroom teachers testifies to its fallacy, or at least to the unlikelihood of its being a guiding principle in programs now evolving.

Even given that, what are the disadvantages that outweigh the advantages of the Juillard School, the National Theatre School, and of special classes (even part-time) for students greatly excelling in some subject? One requires a large menu of solutions to the problems of gifted children; the classroom teacher is one of these, but not alone. Nor are all the solutions to be found in school at all.

"We must initiate special programs for gifted children as early on as possible, so that we do not 'lose them'." Another straw man, I fear. The stem is fine, the conclusion illogical. We should serve *all* the youngest children with unserved needs because they have rights too. Furthermore, no-one ever said that one must serve gifted children in school with more of the same, or indeed necessarily with any academic content. Esthetic, recreational, vocational, and other lifelong

concerns offer possibilities for some of the most exciting special attention for these children.

The author correctly acknowledges that he is vulnerable to the accusation of being negative. I am content to accept his word that he is not trying to impede progress, but that could nonetheless be the consequence. The six issues raised do indeed represent reasonable problems to be addressed. "The arguments" used to lead off the discussion of each of the sections are misleading and are presented so as to appear to be advocated by supporters of differential education for the gifted. To that I most strongly object. Had there been even one line disclaiming such a representation I would not have bothered to write this reply.

The article then makes a jump to seven concluding points which are generally acceptable. They do not, however, follow directly from the preceding portions. I would prefer to have read a straightforward article in their support, and would like to see such a sequel. But I would offer a few minor qualifications to those guidelines. First, beware of the so-called "basic literature." The notion of giftedness has evolved considerably in the past century, and the Galton papers, even the classic Terman studies, examine populations not representative of today (or perhaps even of their day). They do provide important insights and shatter some myths about the gifted. Other myths remain.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is indeed important that the issues be discussed in an open and informal manner. I would therefore gladly send any reader a list of some major books on the topic and of periodicals devoted to the gifted. There are also active and growing parents' and professional associations across Canada (and elsewhere). If "asking around" fails to make contact then I have a list of these also which I try to keep up to date.

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