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# **Negative Attitudes Toward Gifted Education**

## **Abstract**

*This article examines some of the negative attitudes toward gifted programs. The author raises some provocative questions and sometimes stridently expresses the biases underlying problems regarding educating the gifted. Finally, the ramifications of these attitudes on the future leadership of a country are discussed.*

Education of the gifted student has met with substantial resistance and apathy. A survey of recent literature in the field identifies many negative attitudes in general toward education of the gifted. This article examines these specific issues and some possible ramifications of these attitudes on the education of the gifted in the future.

## **Negative Attitudes Toward Gifted Education**

No one thinks it is strange for the high school athlete to receive extra attention and assistance from coaches and trainers to develop his special talents, nor does anyone begrudge him the special help he often requires from teachers and/or tutors to keep up with his academic subjects. Likewise, few people resent the hiring of specially trained and qualified instructors to encourage and develop the special abilities of musically or artistically talented youngsters (although most regard the athlete's needs as a higher priority). Why then do we encounter such widespread popular resistance to the idea that intellectually gifted students are entitled to an academic program that challenges and maximizes their mental capabilities? In this article, the causes of this perplexing phenomenon and its detrimental effects on one of the country's greatest assets, its intellectually brightest youth will be discussed.

*Fear of elitism*

One explanation for the trend away from gifted programs focuses on an almost pathological fear of elitism in Western society. Bruce Mitchell and William Williams, in a recent article for *Gifted Education*, describe a 1984-85 survey of UNESCO members which yielded some interesting results. Of the democratic nations surveyed, only Israel and South Africa are currently providing concerted, well-funded gifted and talented programs, presumably because these beleaguered countries have recognized how much their future survival depends upon intelligent leadership.

However, the vast majority of western European countries give minor emphasis at best to programs for gifted and talented youngsters, and many have scrupulously culled such programs from their schools. According to the authors: "The major concern [since World War II] has been to overcome a traditional system of privilege and elitism," (Mitchell & Williams, 1987, p. 531). The Scandinavian countries seem particularly resistant to the idea of gifted education. One Danish official predicted that "more harm than good" (p. 532) would come of singling out certain students as being particularly gifted or talented. Danish national policy calls instead for differentiated teaching in heterogeneous classes, a method that research has shown to be ineffective in promoting higher level cognitive processes (Golden, 1970, p. 6).

It is in Asian and Eastern Block countries that the greatest efforts are currently being made. Despite official emphasis on egalitarian socialist doctrine, gifted and talented Soviet youngsters are provided with special advanced instruction in such areas as math, physics, chemistry, and the visual and performing arts. The government also sponsors annual contests, called Olympiads, in which students compete for national and even international honours.

The People's Republic of China, in keeping with the new post-Mao pragmatism, has embarked on an innovative plan to establish "key schools" at both the elementary and secondary levels. These schools, especially designed to provide for high-ability students, are usually affiliated with a major university and receive extra funds, ultra-modern facilities, and the best available personnel.

In Japan no special provisions are made for gifted children in elementary school; however, high ability students are sifted out at the secondary level and sent to one of several highly prestigious special schools, where a tracking system allows for advanced placement and specialized instruction for top students (Mitchell & Williams, 1987, p. 532).

Two possible explanations for the discrepancy between East/West attitudes suggest themselves. First, such efforts meet with wider acceptance in China and Japan because in the traditional Oriental value system high scholastic achievement has always been seen as a way to bring honour to one's family and community. Secondly, the Eastern countries share neither the brooding guilt complex that still haunts western Europe in the wake of Nazi atrocities nor our own collective anxiety over compensating American blacks and other minorities for their former disenfranchisement. For this reason, educators in the East (socialist or not) feel less compelled to concentrate their efforts on leveling the socio-economic strata and less apprehensive about recognizing the special capabilities of some individuals.

### *Anti-intellectualism*

Another even more insidious reason for the de-emphasis on gifted education both here and abroad can only be described as a general trend toward anti-intellectualism. North Americans, like most Europeans, tend to consider the mere acknowledgement of mental superiority to be in bad taste – something one just doesn't mention. Furthermore, ironic as it seems in view of the intellectual ferment of the American Revolutionary period, modern Americans see mental rigor as antonymous to the macho image so emblematic of the 1980s.

While the political and fiscal conservatism of the Reagan years may well have played a role in promoting an overall climate of disinterest in gifted education, the basic problem may go even deeper. Some authorities believe that a deep-rooted antipathy exists between intellectuals and this country's power elite. They describe a generalized fear of the challenge that a strong, independent, and cohesive intellectual community might pose to penetrating article for the *Journal of Education* (1986), makes the following provocative statement:

The apparent elitism of irrelevant gifted programs is not a direct representation of the elitism of power in the larger society. Rather, as a symbol of our society, these programs contribute to widespread acceptance of social and economic hierarchies. Ironically, they also contribute to a pervasive attitude of anti-intellectualism in U.S. pedagogy, business, and government. (p. 123)

Howley further posits that members of the American Power elite are not necessarily themselves gifted, nor are their children. Despite our cherished belief in the doctrine of "meritocracy" (the idea that in a "free" society individuals will reap social, economic, and political rewards commensurate with their merits), the fact is that, generally speaking, intellectuals rank

relatively low on the economic scale and receive precious little recognition from the public at large. Most positions of wealth, power, and privilege are either inherited or held by virtue of political and/or social networking. This is a culture that values and rewards those who entertain us or provide some utilitarian service for us – make the touchdown, develop the perfect diet pill – but does not equally reward for scholarly, aesthetic, or even purely scientific achievement. In fact, those who allow their intellectual gifts to be too conspicuous often find their progress blocked. Despite Ted Turner's well-known admonition to "...lead, follow, or get out of the way," obstructionism is regrettably common.

Neither do we choose intellectuals for our national leadership. John Gardner (1987), writing for *Liberal Education*, cites three basic qualities we seek in a leader: a) someone whom we believe (consciously or unconsciously) to be capable of solving our problems and meeting our needs; b) someone who symbolizes our cultural norms; and c) someone whose image (authentic or not) corresponds to our inner environment of myth and legend (p.5).

Adlai Stevenson, one of the finest minds the United States has produced, and a distinguished statesman in every sense of the word, was twice denied the Presidency ostensibly because of his "egghead" image, while on the basis of vague but lofty rhetoric, carefully orchestrated image-making, and the latest Madison Avenue advertising techniques, Ronald Reagan, a man of very average intellect, was elected President by two successive landslide votes.

### *Perceived inefficacy*

Another reason for the general lack of enthusiasm for gifted education among professionals and lay people alike is the perceived inefficacy of many so-called "enrichment" programs which, admittedly, too often revolve around games, puzzles, and field trips instead of spirited intellectual inquiry. On the other hand there is little evidence of benefit in talented and gifted programs that isolate the gifted individual in a library carrell or behind a computer terminal in hopes he or she will somehow stumble upon enlightenment. Such programs, while no doubt well-intentioned, reflect an overall lack of understanding regarding the real needs of gifted students, leaving them either under-stimulated or under-socialized, or both.

### *Staffing problems*

The inevitable fact is, we do not and probably cannot staff our schools with gifted personnel. Lenore Higgins Worcester, in a 1981 article for *Gifted/Creative/Talented (G/C/T)*, makes this point in clear-cut terms:

The logistics of attempting to place a gifted teacher within commuting distance to a reasonable number of *g/c/t* students would be a formidable task. But, more to the point, *g/c/t* persons do not enter the teaching profession, particularly not at the grade school level. (p. 6)

Furthermore, schools are, by their very nature, profoundly conservative institutions, their primary business being to promote and perpetuate the attitudes and values of the larger society. The not-so-silent majority that comprises education's prime constituency is at least subliminally influenced by the media, which is, in turn, influenced by the interests of large corporate and/or political sponsors for whom a passive, conformist clientele is most malleable and, therefore, most desirable. Consequently individualists, analytical thinkers, performers, innovators, and creative people in general are regarded with some degree of suspicion. They ask questions, demand justice, challenge authority, make waves; and these are definitely not the traits that most schools reward.

### *Fears of maladjustment*

Yet another objection to special programs for the gifted centres around concern for the social adjustment of the enrollees. It is often suggested that separating these students from the mainstream, even for part of the school day, will result in their becoming alienated, either by their own choice or that of their non-gifted peers. Critics raise the spectre of the frail, bespectacled child trudging about forlornly with his briefcase and his calculator, an estranged, preoccupied look on his face.

Research findings do not bear this out, however. A 1979 study of academic and attitudinal outcomes, conducted by Claire Tremaine in her own California school district, yielded the following interesting results: a) students enrolled in gifted programs performed statistically higher on achievement tests and received more scholarships and academic honours than did gifted non-enrollees, and b) furthermore enrollees (as compared to non-enrollees) had significantly more positive attitudes toward work, college, and travel, as well as school and community involvement. Tremaine writes:

The criticism that enrollment in gifted programs narrows and inhibits friendships was not validated by the study. Instead, evidence was revealed that the enrolled gifted have as many friendly contacts in as wide a school setting as the unenrolled. (pp. 501-2)

As regards overall attitudes toward their schoolmates, when asked about their feelings toward other students at their school, 71.7% of the gifted enrollees chose the response, "Most of the kids are pretty good people," as opposed to 61.5% of their unenrolled classmates.

### *Intellectual community's role*

Finally, we must consider the responsibility (or lack of it) of the intellectual community itself. Twenty years ago involved and committed scholars, educators, clergy, scientists, and other professionals rallied to present a coherent and cohesive force for social, economic, and political change in the United States. In the politically vital sixties American intellectuals led the way, speaking eloquently for worldwide peace, freedom, and justice. It was a time of high ideals and high expectations, and the emblematic wire-rimmed spectacles of the reader and thinker were considered "hip," not "geek."

By contrast, the majority of intellectuals of the 1980s have systematically insulated themselves from the "messy" business of public controversy. Even in the world of applied science, work goes on discreetly behind the laboratory doors, and it is the rare scientist indeed who would risk his career by daring to speak out against "establishment" interests. As for arts and letters, products that do not pander to the lowest common denominator of public taste, they simply do not attract the attention of major publishers, producers, or dealers, so writers and artists either conform or sink quietly into nameless obscurity.

In the universities concerted efforts have been made to de-politicize the American campus. "Radical" professors have been nudged out, and reactionary administrators have been installed, people who will take a "firm stand" against the kind of publicity that might reduce alumni contributions, private and business sponsorship, and other means of financial support. Fiscal matters now take unrivaled priority in the minds of most university board members, and such peripheral issues as intellectual integrity, moral leadership, and political involvement must "stay on the back burner" while schools fight for survival.

In short, now more than ever before, money talks. The anthem of today's "Yuppies," the in-group of the 1980s, is a corruption of the Golden Rule: "He who has the gold makes the rules." Such cynicism would have been grossly out of place twenty years ago when Young Urban Professionals were organizing peace marches and making political speeches, but today's bright young people are too often being trained to perform tasks, not to ask questions. They have been encouraged to get ahead by playing the game, not by thinking for themselves. They have been told to look out for

number-one; not to be suckers, like those "bleeding hearts." They have been taught to follow directions, fall into step, submit to authority, pursue a brand of blind, chauvinistic patriotism that is downright dangerous to the safety of our species.

And where has this intellectual community been while all this was going on? Locked away in the "ivory tower," amusing itself with exhaustive exegesis and endless polemical discourse on such esoteric irrelevancies as the *Kantian Sublime* and the *Dialectic of Being*, while they are oblivious to the actual business of living going on around them.

Catherine Gallagher, in a 1985 article for the philosophical journal *Diacritics*, describes the "contentless universalism" of much critical thought. Intellectuals, in an effort to free themselves of bias and achieve a broader vision, have disavowed any specific moral, ethical, or aesthetic interest and couched their ideals in such vague and generalized terms that no real-life application follows. This abstract universalism is, according to Gallagher, the reason intellectuals have fallen out of the social mainstream and are consequently unable to exert any meaningful influence on broad-based culture. Gallagher goes on to assert that it is the critic's responsibility to "define the culture" and undercut the fixed power relationships that prevent social and political progress (p. 32).

This is not to argue against mental calisthenics as a viable sport, but we do suggest that a more profound social, educational, and philosophical contribution might be made if proportionate time were devoted to practical consideration of modern value systems, their origins, and their ramifications, particularly in view of the perilously mindless course of current world politics. Why should it be beneath the dignity of intellectuals to lead the fight for a better, happier, more moral, more enlightened world? If not this, what indeed are their goals and objectives?

With such ineffectual role models, it is not surprising that the general public takes a jaundiced view of philosophy, little wonder that young people look elsewhere for inspiration. Meanwhile, public schools, bristling with rules and regulations, obsessed with quantitatively measured task mastery, determined to produce uniformity rather than exceptionality, continue to practise their rites of intellectual castration on our sacred braintrust, confident that they are doing society a favour by keeping any one element of the population from "getting out of hand." And the gifted individual, caught between the babble of academia and the cacophony of commerce, too often becomes frustrated, disenchanted, and ultimately cynical.

### **Conclusion**

It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to outline a specific course of action to counteract the unfortunate set of conditions described above. The most carefully organized and orchestrated plans to systematically change attitudes are dangerous anyway, because as soon as such a plan becomes institutionalized it begins to founder in the same kind of bureaucratic morass that created the mess to begin with. Perhaps it is enough to simply expose the underlying attitudes and values that promote ignorance, suspicion, and misunderstanding of gifted education, that keep us from realizing our full potential, as individuals and as a nation. At least it is a start.

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