How to save the World: Replacing “Giftedness” with “Giftingness” based on individual strengths and interests

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Abstract
This paper is framed as an email conversation between the authors, a lifespan developmental psychologist with expertise in the field of wisdom and an educational scientist with expertise in the field of giftedness. We discuss how giftedness is defined and whether the definition, and the concept in general, is still useful in today’s world. We draw three conclusions. First, “giftedness” has taken on a particularly literal meaning as it tends to favor students that are already privileged. Second, educational systems should aim to identify and promote all students’ individual profiles of strengths and interests instead of focusing on promoting the “gifted” ones. Third, given the current state of the world, educational systems should aim to empower “gifting” students who engage themselves for a greater good, instead of “gifted” students competing for grades and achievements.

Keywords
Giftedness, individualization, common good, educational goals

From: Glück, Judith
To: Tischler, Kornelia
Sent: February 15, 2021
Giftedness???
Hi Kornelia,

I just got an email from Ophélie Desmet and Bob Sternberg. They invited me, of all people, to write a paper for a Special Issue about “Terminological Controversies in Gifted Education.” I’ve always been interested in the topic and I do see some parallels to wisdom, but I really don’t know much about the state of educational research … so I was hoping that you, with your expertise on giftedness, might join me on this. Maybe we could do something on the different perspectives of psychology and educational science? What do you think? Here’s the link to the call for papers.

All the best,
Judith

From: Kornelia To: Judith
Giftedness!!
Hi Judith,

That would certainly be interesting and fun, but I’m terribly busy with administrative things at the moment … on the other hand, the topic is really close to my heart, … so let’s see. At least it doesn’t have to be very long :-) and the deadline is September, so there’s hope…

Cheers, Kornelia

From: Judith To: Kornelia
So what is giftedness?
Great!! Maybe we could make it a conversation between a psychologist and an educational scientist. Let’s see. Their main question is whether we should continue to use the term “giftedness.” Okay, first let’s get the basics clear. Giftedness = IQ > 130, right?

From: Kornelia To: Judith
That’s what some psychologists think :-)
Well, an IQ above 130 is the definition most often used in research and assessment of giftedness. But many educational scientists and psychologists think that’s extremely narrow. There has been a paradigm shift: current models emphasize the interplay of individual potential, supportive environments, and personality factors that lead some people to strive for excellence.

From: Judith To: Kornelia
Makes sense!

I just re-read Anette Lareau’s “Unequal Childhoods” (2011), where she shows how middle-class parents shape their kids for academic success through what Lareau calls concerted cultivation … How kids grow up and what resources they have certainly contributes a lot to an IQ above 130. In fact, one of Lareau’s case reports is about a mother getting her daughter accepted into a gifted program even though she didn’t pass the IQ limit…

From: Kornelia To: Judith
Big Bang Theory giftedness
Exactly, and such sociological theories have been around a while (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971) on the influence of habitus and social capital on school education) … It’s also quite interesting to look at what people outside academia think about “giftedness.”
Their views are largely shaped by TV shows: giftedness is assumed to be innate and associated with typical characteristics that show a lot of gender and cultural bias – the precocious, nerdy white boy with no social skills and no friends.

Unfortunately, such myths affect teachers and professionals, too. In addition, since cognitive competencies are most valued in schools and teachers’ initial assessments are obviously based on school achievement, we get what Renzulli (2002) has called “schoolhouse giftedness:” good test-takers will often be nominated as gifted. Or teachers fall back on traditional IQ testing. The same applies to admission to gifted programs, although some begin to consider factors like motivation, self-concept, or creativity.

From: Judith  
To: Kornelia

But isn’t there also the myth…

… of the little kid growing up in poverty, with no family support whatsoever, and then being discovered as a genius in math or physics or painting at some point in school?

From: Kornelia  
To: Judith

Sure, that happens … but rarely.

Research on what enables some kids to be successful against the odds has identified several factors: student potential, teacher-student relationships, instructional design, classroom climate, and family support (Siegle, 2013). In fact, a single mentor can be a major positive influence. Just one person who recognizes the child’s potential and encourages and challenges him or her can foster achievement and motivation and contribute to a broadened self-image that supports long-term growth (Grassinger et al., 2010). (Interestingly, sometimes the opposite works as well: teachers who dismiss students as ignorant may create a strong motivation to prove them wrong!)

From: Judith  
To: Kornelia

“Giftedness” in quotes?

Looks like it takes a village to raise a gifted kid … As a mother of a kid diagnosed as gifted, my impression is that there may indeed be an early-developing (and probably, to some extent, innate) component. Some kids are just extremely curious, quick at taking in new information, early talkers, etc. But there are obviously other necessary conditions for being identified as gifted. Curious kids need food for their intellectual hunger, and that requires time, resources, and highly supportive adults. So somewhat ironically, “giftedness,” in a literal sense, may be a very suitable word for kids who are just lucky in so many ways. But it may be less suitable for kids who have equally high potential but not as much support … In a way, if access is dependent on IQ only, giftedness programs may have become yet another support system that is more accessible to privileged children, right?

From: Kornelia  
To: Judith

Yes, there is some irony in this…

… although postmodern educational science indeed no longer thinks of “giftedness” in terms of IQ, but acknowledges the heterogeneity of individual dispositions and the multiple external factors that influence it. But teachers still need to learn to pay attention to these differences and set appropriate interventions.

From: Judith  
To: Kornelia

Is “giftedness” really so special?
Actually, what good comes from identifying a few “gifted” kids and then treating them in a special way, instead of developing educational systems that promote every child according to their special strengths and weaknesses? My own “gifted” child attended an inclusive program in elementary school that included several kids with special needs. The teacher told the kids from day one that every child had strengths and weaknesses and no one was better than anyone else. The kids internalized this completely. Over four years, my kid neither knew nor cared who the special-needs children were.

I think it’s not particularly convincing to assume that every kid is equally “gifted,” as some popular authors claim, but so many kids have areas where they shine — where they are endlessly curious, spend hours in complete absorption, and reach extraordinary performance levels. Couldn’t a school system aim to identify those areas and support kids in pursuing them? Of course, every child should get a basic education, but beyond that maybe we could invest more energy in developing children’s individual fascinations and less in forcing them to all study the same things? Much learning could be organized in projects, building connections to the real world, and teaching kids where to find relevant knowledge instead of “binge-learning” (and then quickly forgetting) facts. From this perspective, new words instead of “giftedness” would come easily: “fascination,” “passion,” well, maybe even “talent?”

From: Kornelia
To: Judith

Differentiation is good for the gifted … and everyone else

Two additions to what you said: First, many educational researchers are looking for new terms to replace “gifted” in ways that are less insulting and unjust. But that shows that any educational system still needs a word for students who are developing at a faster pace or want to go deeper in their areas of interest. Second, the concept of “inclusive schooling” echoes your ideas: learning communities based on interests and abilities, achievement-differentiated instruction, and supportive interventions to prepare students for future challenges (Müller-Oppliger, 2021). Such an approach is excellent for supporting high-performing kids. The general idea of “supporting each child according to his or her talents” is often found in the schools’ mission statements, but doesn’t not always translate well into everyday school life … Actually, many researchers and parents are highly concerned that gifted students receive insufficient support in inclusive school settings. If we want more differentiated teaching for kids at all performance levels, we need to empower teachers to see student diversity as an enrichment and to become aware of their own stereotypes and prejudices. If classes are simply divided into gifted, average, and special-needs kids, stereotypes will be reinforced and privileges replicated. Giving up on the concept of giftedness, however, would not help underprivileged kids either, as privileged parents would just seek out support outside the school system.

To make a change, schools would have to start looking at kids as complex individuals with strengths and weaknesses instead of lining them up according to IQ or any other single dimension. Some possibilities include broadening access to programs, introducing more mentoring projects, empowering self-regulated learning, and differentiation with regular changes of group composition (grouping kids within but also across performance levels, regularly re-mixing groups, having different groups for different subjects).
From: Judith  To: Kornelia

That should be a “gift” for all kids!

So we would replace the concept of giftedness with the concept of individual strength and interest profiles? Kids would have to achieve a minimum level in all fields (obviously they need to master reading, writing, and a certain level of math) and beyond that, they would learn to learn – to develop expertise in those areas that fascinate them. I wish all of my students at the university knew how to do that!

From such a perspective, would we even still want to identify gifted kids? I understand that it would be important to find and support those rare prodigies who do not have sufficient support from their environment, but why would we want to focus on kids that are privileged in multiple ways anyway?

From: Kornelia  To: Judith

Historically…

These ideas have a long tradition. In the 1950/60s, the meritocratic education movement demanded equal opportunities for all according to their abilities, which were assumed to be objectively measurable through IQ testing. Later, it turned out that IQ testing favors high-SES students, that different IQ tests measure different (and sometimes rather narrow) sets of abilities, and that IQ mostly predicts success in school and perhaps in work life but is hardly predictive of being able to solve real-life problems.

Since about 2000, educational goals have begun to focus more on a broader common good. How can we enable students to assume social responsibility, identify and analyze real-life problems, and develop sustainable solutions? Sternberg (2019a), Renzulli et al. (2006), and others have argued that education should foster characteristics such as ethics, courage and independent thinking, passion, and a sense of purpose.

From: Judith  To: Kornelia

From giftedness to giftingness?

In my own field, wisdom research, Sternberg (e.g., 2001, 2019b) has long been arguing that schools should teach less for knowledge (after all, today’s kids have access to more knowledge than any earlier generation just by tapping on their phones) and more for wisdom – dealing with uncertain and complex problems, considering and balancing different perspectives and interests, and aiming for a common good, not just one’s own benefit.

So maybe the focus should be more on teaching “gifted” kids to use their gifts for a larger good. Looking at our current global situation, from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change, global inequality, and so on, that would seem like a worthy goal! Perhaps we should move from “giftedness” to “giftingness” … from individualistic competition to collaboration.

From: Kornelia  To: Judith

Sustainable Development

That would be in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which defines 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG; https://sdgs.un.org/goals); one of them is to ensure access to inclusive and equitable quality education for all children. My dream would be an educational system that encourages and teaches all students to recognize and resist simplistic answers and, instead, use their individual strengths to contribute to global
sustainable development. This may be a highly idealistic goal, but our world surely needs it!

Unfortunately, nothing changes more slowly than educational systems ... but the COVID-19 crisis has shown us how fast impressive solutions can be accomplished if the pressure is high enough. If only humanity were to respond with the same urgency to climate change or inequality!

From: Judith To: Kornelia

So what’s our conclusion? We’re approaching the length limit :-) ... and the deadline.

From: Kornelia To: Judith

Conclusions

I guess we have identified three broad ways in which the concept of “giftedness” might indeed be approaching the end of its natural lifetime.

- First, research has shown that “giftedness” as we measure it today represents social and cultural injustice, reinforces multiple privileges, and thus may have taken on a somewhat too literal meaning.
- Second, a focus on “individual strength and interest profiles” could help schools promote all children, including those who are “gifted.”
- Third, educational goals could promote “giftingness” instead of “giftedness,” on a small scale as well as globally.

From: Judith To: Kornelia

I’m glad we’ve found out how to save the world!

Let’s just hope that John Lennon was right: You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one…

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