

AREN'T ALL CHILDREN GIFTED?

Alpha children wear grey. They work much harder than we do, because they're so frightfully clever. I'm really awfully glad I'm a Beta, because I don't work so hard. And then we are much better than the Gammas and Deltas. Gammas are stupid.

—Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*.

All children are gifts. Today, unfortunately, we seem more concerned with the gifts they have than with the gifts they are. In the current hoopla over programs for so-called gifted children—virtually all states now have coordinators of programs for the gifted—one senses a new elitism. Misgivings about identifying the gifted seldom get expressed. Parents of children identified as gifted are usually proud of what they have genetically bestowed. Parents of those who don't make the top 5 percent are reluctant to challenge the identification for fear of sounding like bad losers.

Placing some children on a pedestal because they possess a culturally defined gift carries several hidden costs, however. In our culture, judgments of intelligence are central to self-esteem. When a school system labels its students according to their intellectual gifts, the self-esteem of those whose gifts aren't "what they're giving this year" often diminishes.

Any school district that presumes to define who is gifted or talented also implicitly gives a definition of who is *not* gifted or talented—inevitably, most children. Thus, when Dorothy Sisk, former director of the U.S. Office of Gifted and Talented, declared that "approximately 3 to 5 percent of the school-age population . . . could be considered gifted and talented," she implied that at least 95 percent of our children are *not* gifted and talented, a false and pernicious assumption.

The diminution of children's self-esteem that this assumption can cause is one danger of labeling the "gifted." Another danger is that, as recent experiments in social psychology demonstrate, social labels

can create their own reality. The assumption that certain people are hostile, extroverted, or feminine often makes others treat them in ways that cause them to exhibit hostility, extroversion, or femininity.

Labels that are not merely descriptive but connote superiority or inferiority also can be self-confirming. Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer and her associate Ann Benevento had pairs of women solve some arithmetic problems working individually. They then labeled one woman in each pair *boss* and the other *assistant* and directed the women to solve anagrams. Lastly, the women individually solved arithmetic problems exactly as they had in the first phase. Those given the label *boss* during the second phase now solved more arithmetic problems than they had initially. Those given the label *assistant* now solved fewer problems than before—apparently they had developed a false sense of incompetence.

Can teachers' expectations similarly affect their students? We know that teachers *think well* of students who *do well*. But are such judgments the cause of or caused by student performance? A study of 4,300 British schoolchildren by William Crano and Phyllis Mellon of Michigan State University suggests that teachers' beliefs can be as much a cause as a consequence of their students' performance. High evaluations (especially of the child's social development) were more likely to be followed by high academic performance than was high performance to be followed by high evaluations.

Dozens of times in the last 20 years, experimenters have arbitrarily labeled a few randomly selected students *gifted* or *high potential*. The result? Teachers rarely get the opposite of what they expect. More often, they get just what they expect. Harvard's Robert Rosenthal, the leader of this research on self-fulfilling prophecy, reports that teachers look, smile, and nod more often at their supposedly gifted students. They also teach them more content, set for them higher goals, call on them more, and give them more time to answer.

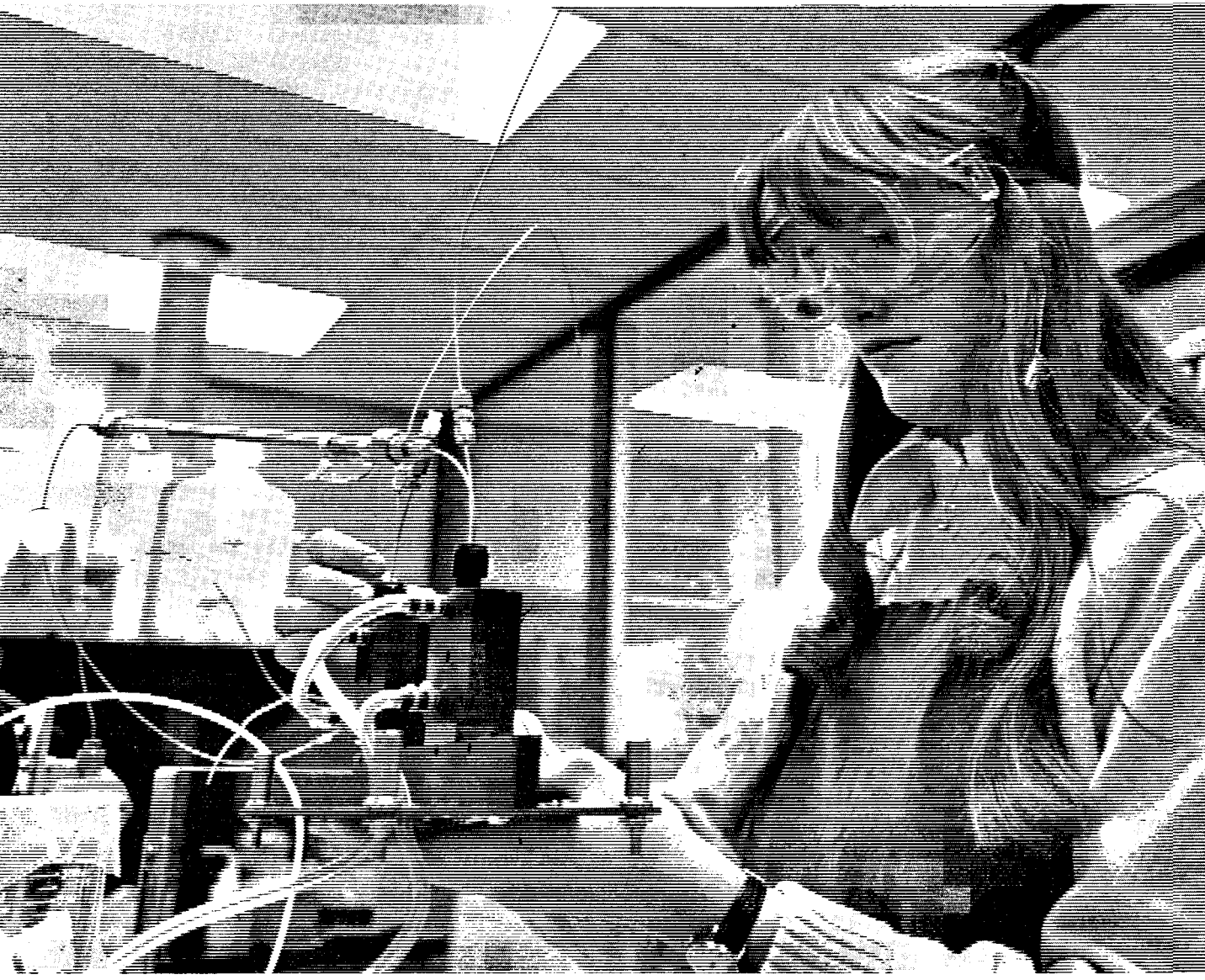
Preconceptions are not only apparently self-fulfilling but likely to be self-perpetuating as well. Once formed, they are surprisingly resistant to evidence that contradicts them. In a recent experiment, William Swann and Mark Snyder had University of Minnesota students instruct one person of supposedly superior ability and one of supposedly moderate ability

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ty how to perform a card trick. In reality, both persons were equally able. When the instruction was over, however, the instructors believed their gifted pupils had outperformed their nongifted pupils, even when the reverse was true. As the nineteenth-century preacher C. H. Spurgeon advised; "Don't rely too much on labels, for too often they are fables."

A final danger of labeling the gifted is that these children—and their parents—will develop the attitude that "*Gifted means better.*" Some even assume

that they are entitled to certain privileges by right of being gifted. (People don't mind being branded if their label is top-of-the-line.) Such self-perceived superiority can degenerate into the notion that one's potential ought not be thwarted by too much contact with the nongifted.

Sorting individuals according to their abilities and talents, if it is undertaken at all, must be done delicately. The plethora of recent articles and booklets advising parents how to spot "the signs of giftedness"

in their children resemble instructional manuals on how to detect the signs of a quality show horse. Such gratuitous guidance can mislead parents into thinking that giftedness is an objective entity, which their child either has or has not.

Consider just one example. A promotional letter from the new *Gifted Children Newsletter* solicits charter subscriptions from any who "have the sneaking suspicion your child is *special* in some way." (If we have a sneaking suspicion our child is not special, do we not subscribe?)

And how do we detect whether our child is indeed gifted? "Did your child walk and talk surprisingly early?" (Early walking indicates giftedness? And what about all the research on the unreliability of preschool IQ measures, or even the letter's own first sentence: "Einstein didn't speak until he was four years old.") The letter offers other telling signs: "Does he persist in his efforts even when the going gets tough? Does he enjoy success?" (Nongifted female children prefer failure?)

Such thinking about the nature of giftedness illustrates a common logical error called *reification*. We name a concept, then delude ourselves into believing it exists in fact. For example, we forget that giftedness is only a concept, artificially defined by scores among the top 3 or 4 percent on some test of aptitude or intelligence. We begin to assume falsely that giftedness really exists out there somewhere. We come to believe it's like red hair: Children either have it, or they do not.

To talk of the gifted, notes Duke University psychologist Michael Wallach, "suggests someone who has received a genetic blessing—a gift from heaven." We forget that giftedness is a decision made in the minds of those who use the word. Nothing is giftedness until someone names it that. Nature has not clustered children into well-defined groups corresponding to our value-laden labels. We, not nature, decide what is a flower, and worse, what is a weed. To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, a weed is but a flower that someone decides doesn't belong in the garden.

The arbitrariness of designating what is and what isn't a gift becomes even more apparent when we try to agree on a practical definition. To the Yanomamo Indians of South America, giftedness is possession of the skills of a great hunter and warrior. To parapsychologists, it is psychic ability. To Suzuki violin teachers, it is musical talent. In middle-class America, one finds almost as many definitions of giftedness as articles on it.

Should we simply set a statistical cutoff point on an IQ test? Should we consider other talents—for example, Andy's artistic talents, Carol's leadership talents, Laurie's physical talents, or Peter's technical talents? The fashion today—reflected in the Gifted and Tal-

ented Children's Education Act of 1978—is to use several criteria for gift display. But in actual practice, assessing giftedness narrows its definition and excludes some domains of competence.

A common way to define giftedness has been to use a score on a one-dimensional device: an aptitude or IQ test. How high a score? It varies. On what test? They vary. Giftedness is in the eye of the beholder.

No matter how giftedness is defined, then, the unreliability of our judgments of one another is bound to cause mistakes in classification. These mistakes are tolerable when giftedness is used merely as a category in research studies, say, on the origins of creative talent. But such arbitrariness becomes pernicious when schools use giftedness as a standard for labeling and grouping children.

Dorothy Weiler, an observer of California's program for "mentally gifted minors," has noted that these students more often than others get to visit computer centers, do special art projects, write short stories, and visit museums. To defend such privileges morally, one must be able to prove that these opportunities are not equally desirable and beneficial for the supposedly nongifted. Otherwise, like children not invited to a party because "there wasn't room enough for all," the nongifted may brood over why they were the ones excluded.

Most know the reason—they are not considered bright or talented. Most, too, come to accept their social destiny, in school and later. Sally, a bright eight-year-old, has been matter-of-factly calling herself "unsmart" ever since Joan, who was selected for the gifted program, "explained" to her that the special activities are for the "smart kids" only.

The separation of gifted from nongifted apparently magnifies the relative advantage of those already socially advantaged. Half a century of educational research, however, has not shown that ability grouping actually produces substantial academic benefits—only that it generally reinforces de facto segregation of socioeconomic classes and, to some extent, of ethnic groups.

Americans are not ignorant of the real differences in inherited ability and motivation among children. Rather than structure an intellectual aristocracy, however, we prefer to give children many fresh chances to demonstrate their abilities. Egalitarian values restrain us from judging and classifying people, lest we establish an academic caste system. This is only wise. Children who are exceptional in reading, after all, are not always exceptional in math, and those who are exceptional today may not be so exceptional tomorrow.

Our schools are committed to giving every stu-

dent, gifted or not, a good education. This we can do without eroding our standards one percentage point deluding ourselves that everyone is equal in inherited abilities or in motivation. Gene Stark, who at the age of four-and-a-half was reading the *New York Times* and at 17 was accepted into M.I.T. graduate school, clearly had different educational needs than most of his peers. Nor does encouraging children for whom success has been elusive necessitate an extreme egalitarianism which protects the slow by hindering the swift. To shun elitism in such a way is elitist, too.

The gifted child movement will have served a valuable purpose if it pushes schools to treat children—all

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children—as individuals. Its legitimate message is that not every third grader should be taking the same spelling tests and working the same math problems. If the label *gifted* were now eliminated, parents and educators might broaden their efforts so that all children will benefit from the message of individual difference. Two existing educational patterns offer exactly that benefit.

The burgeoning of the well-known mastery learning system is enabling thousands of teachers—from Stokesdale, North Carolina, to Chicago, Denver, and New Orleans—to individualize instruction in ways heretofore presumed idealistic. As University of Chicago educator Benjamin Bloom phrases it, mastery learning is “closer to what we would do if we had the resources to teach [children] one at a time.” With it, we “teach each child as though he/she were gifted.”

A second alternative to labeling and grouping the gifted is to skip them to a grade level that is closer to their mental than to their chronological age. Grade acceleration treats children as if they were equally ready for promotion in all subjects, which often isn't

the case. Nevertheless, most educational researchers believe that acceleration has, as the University of Minnesota's Daniel Keating says, “substantial benefits but relatively few demonstrable costs.”

Julian Stanley at The Johns Hopkins University has found, for example, that mathematically precocious children thrive when, instead of placing them in special enrichment classes, their school accelerates the rate at which they pass through levels of math instruction. A number of these extraordinarily able children have entered Johns Hopkins in their early teens. In 1977 three of them were awarded National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowships upon graduation—at age 17.

Do these children—one of whom skipped from sixth grade clear up to Johns Hopkins—become intellectual Olympians but social and emotional misfits? The Johns Hopkins researchers report that “try as we might, we cannot detect such harm.” Moreover, contrary to much popular opinion, the researchers concluded after scrutinizing dozens of previous research studies that—

not a single substantial study has ever shown acceleration to be harmful to the typical accelerant who is intellectually able enough to warrant the use of such procedures. On the average the results are decidedly beneficial, whereas withholding acceleration from able, well-motivated youths is likely to harm their academic, social, and emotional development.

One reason given for this startling conclusion—which was echoed by other participants in a recent American Educational Research Association symposium on acceleration—is that “just as their intellectual peers are not their agemates, their social and emotional peers aren't either.” The interests and play of highly intelligent children tend to be those of older children.

Acceleration (defined not as pushing a reluctant child ahead, but as ceasing to restrain an eager learner) also avoids some of the problems common to gifted education programs. It costs no extra money—in fact, children who spend a year or two less in the public school system obviously save the schools money. Nor does it create de facto segregation.

Whatever the alternatives to gifted education, we need to keep before us the question that John Gardner poses in his book *Excellence*:

How can we provide opportunities and rewards for individuals of every degree of ability so that individuals at every level will realize their full potentialities, perform at their best and harbor no resentment toward any other level?

By encouraging *all* persons to become the persons they could be, Gardner concluded, we “keep faith with our ideal of individual fulfillment and at the same time insure our strength and creativity as a society.” □