Don't All Children Have Gifts?

David Myers

Ninety-five percent or more of children are ungifted." That's what my local school district's newsletter told me the other day. Moreover, it went on to explain, this ungifted majority--nearly all our children--has trouble grasping and retaining knowledge, working independently, forming good relationships, even appreciating social values. My school system, like many others across America, therefore proudly proclaims that it serves society by protecting these dullards from challenge and enrichment. None of the overstimulation (or expense) of extra field trips, independent reading, "hands-on learning," or "vocational mentoring." And, one presumes, none of the toys, games, and books in The Gifted Children's Catalog, which arrived by the same day's mail.

At least, this is what my school district said in so many words. What they literally said--and this surely marks the 143rd time I've read these words--is "educational experts say that as many as 5 percent of all children may be gifted" and that these talented few have special qualities and needs. Framed this way, it sounds much nicer--like when the heart surgeon tells patients they have a 90 percent chance of survival (rather than a 10 percent chance of death), or when the grocer tells customers the ground beef is 75 percent lean (rather than 25 percent fat). Said either way, the information is the same. But the effect is not, because the nice way of saying it hides an ugly message.

Likewise, when someone tells us the giftedness glass is 5 percent full, we needn't be gifted to know what that implies about the other 95 percent. Although well-intentioned, what it implies is offensive and wrong-headed. So much so that it's time someone dared to declare that the emperor of gifted education is wearing no clothes.

Why? First, the "5-percent-are-gifted" maxim perpetuates the old idea that giftedness can be defined by a single test score. In reality, gifts come in many different packages. Intelligence researchers are approaching a near consensus: We have not so much an intelligence as multiple intelligences, each largely independent of the other. Some children have distinct aptitudes for verbal reasoning, others for music, others for perceptual judgment, others for social insight. Thus the one who has the academic smarts to excel on school aptitude tests is often not the one who shows the most creativity or has the street-smarts for managing people. Mozart was a genius at composing music, as was Einstein at physics, but who knows their potential at poetry, painting, or politics. (We do know that Einstein was slow in talking and Benjamin Franklin failed arithmetic.) Having had children whom the schools classified on both sides of the gifted divide, I can appreciate what today's intelligence researchers emphasize: that nearly all children--not just the celebrated 5 percent--have special talents.

Second, there are hidden costs to labeling children as winners and losers, gifted and ungifted. Such labels can create their own reality. In experiments, labeling people as hostile, outgoing, or brilliant induces others to treat them in ways that elicit hostility, outgoingness, or apparent brilliance. Labels may be fables, but even fables can be self-fulfilling.

Moreover, people often accept the labels hung on them, causing some to believe they have the right stuff, others to view themselves as merely mediocre. After her slightly brighter friend Sarah began special out-of-classroom activities for "smart kids," Maria, an able 8-year-old, began
calling herself "unsmart." Aldous Huxley's eerily familiar Brave New World sorted, labelled, and
grouped children, all of whom learned their place: "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."

Third, gifted education segregates the advantaged from those less advantaged, and often those
white from those black and brown. How ironic that a society founded on the idea that all are
created equal and deserving of equal opportunity at every step, should now be regressing toward
the discarded medieval system of separating elite from non-elite children and pointing both
groups towards their social destiny. I understand why those who believe their children gifted
(and who typically are among the privileged and influential folk of their communities) lobby so
forcefully to get their children the best teachers, the best education, with the "best kids." But is
this fair to those whose parents are less privileged, influential, and vocal? And is this new
segregation healthy preparation for working and living in an increasingly multicultural society?

If academic segregation benefitted students then we would face a dilemma. But half a century of
educational research reveals no such benefits. The recent report of the Carnegie Council on
Adolescent Development therefore condemned academic tracking as "one of the most divisive
and damaging school practices in existence." Denying "ungifted" students equal opportunities for
computer work, museum visits, and short-story writing serves only to promote social isolation
and resentment. No wonder the more communal societies of Japan and China have no tracking in
their schools.

We needn't succumb to gifted education's yearnings for intellectual aristocracy to thank the
movement for reminding us that not every 3rd grader should be taking the same spelling test or
working the same math problems. Lenny Ng, who scored a perfect 800 on the sat math test at age
10, does have special educational needs. We can accelerate him to a grade level closer to his
mental age--something done with great success with youths who have a special aptitude for
mathematics. Within classrooms, we can individualize instruction without creating an academic
caste system that tells Sarah she is a gifted person and Maria she is an ungifted person. Besides,
reading superstars may be unexceptional in math, art, and pe, and some talents blossom late. So
real children just don't fit neatly into our arbitrarily-labelled boxes.

Ergo, let's drop these pernicious labels. Let's instead affirm all children's gifts. And let's get on
with answering the question posed by John Gardner 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?"

After hearing an address on education entitled, "First, Teach Them to Read," Martin Luther King
Jr. leaned over to a friend and said, "First teach them to believe in themselves." By encouraging
all children to believe in themselves--to define and develop their gifts--we keep faith with our
democratic ideals while strengthening our creativity as a society.

David G. Myers is a research psychologist and professor of psychology at Hope College in
Michigan. Among the many books he has authored is the widely used textbook, Social
Psychology, now in its third edition.