

Conceptions of Giftedness

R. Sternberg and J. Davidson, Eds.
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Analytic teaching methods, like all teaching methods, are based on assumptions about the ways people learn. We should be clear about what these assumptions are and how they mesh with current research. What better way to do that than through the systematic study of what distinguishes successful learners – those whom society labels its gifted?

Until now, there has been a dearth of such information, but editors Janet Davidson and Robert Sternberg have filled that gap with *Conceptions of Giftedness*, their collection of 17 contemporary essays which define giftedness. This readable and remarkably jargon-free book provides the theoretical background which can serve as the practical framework for nurturing the talent of all children, not just those labeled as gifted.

The principles to which the editors have turned to guide us in defining giftedness derive especially from branches of psychology deeply rooted in traditional philosophy. The volume's contributors represent social, cognitive and developmental approaches to the study of human behavior. Social psychologists typically perceive that social factors strongly shape the differences among individuals; developmentalists measure individual differences by seeing distinctions in the way a person proceeds through normal developmental stages; cognitivists typically see the thought functions of humans as the benchmark for measuring individual differences.

By bringing together contributions from a representative, though not exhaustive, set of current 'philosophies' of psychology, the editors provide readers a rare opportunity – to compare and contrast within a single volume the assumptions made by different approaches to learning and giftedness. Indeed, one of the editors' primary goals for this book is to promote "unity and forward movement of the field." Given the vast amount we do not yet know with certainty, though, unity might promote premature closure. This reviewer prefers the analytic study of different approaches for the synergy that can come from juxtaposing multiple perspectives rather than rushing just yet toward synthesis.

Each contributor's definition of giftedness both reflects the theoretical orientation he/she espouses within the field and reveals important distinctions among persons in the same school. For those who are

primarily interested in implications for understanding the nature of giftedness, however, the book's most significant contribution may be its ability to reveal the emerging agreements that transcend the boundaries of any school. These agreements may ultimately form the basis for some universally accepted definition of giftedness.

As we would expect, social psychologists see social factors as the primary force in recognizing and developing talent. Tannebaum's provocative opening essay does just that, suggesting it is society, something extrinsic to the individual, that defines who and what is considered gifted by placing a value on talent. Persons are defined as gifted if they happen to possess a talent which, at the moment, is scarce, valued, perceived as meeting a social need, or just happens to catch the public's fancy; changing socio-cultural conditions lead to changing definitions of social value, hence of giftedness.

Although this model addresses the limitations of a culture-bound definition of giftedness, it minimizes the individual's potential to overcome those limitations and credits, perhaps unduly, those who demonstrate excellence as defined by their culture. What of the individuals whose ultimate contributions to society are great but are not recognized during their lifetime? How does this definition, which relies so heavily on demonstrated talent, assist those of us who work with children and who must make some assumptions about this elusive potential before it can be fully tested?

Renzulli has tried to address this concern with his three-ringed definition of giftedness, which defines as gifted the individual who combines native ability with demonstrated creativity and task commitment. Feldheusen's essay outlining research data substantiating the importance of the combination of ability, creativity and motivation supports Renzulli's position. Although this approach assumes individuals have more power and control over developing their talents than Tannenbaum's does, it, too, falls prey to the tautology between demonstrated and potential talent: the only way we can know children are talented is to see them demonstrate it.

Feldman and Benjamin, who identify themselves as developmentalists, offer an alternative perspective based on a chronological study of several prodigies. Even those rare individuals born with the potential for an exceptional level of talent in some few areas will fully develop that talent, they say, only if they are nurtured by a supportive environment and valued by the wider society.

Going beyond these psychosocial and developmental approaches, Sternberg and Davidson, who are cognitive theorists, define giftedness in the context of Sternberg's triarchic theory of intelligence. Informa-

tion processing, he writes, involves the *selective* encoding, combination and comparison of information. Giftedness emerges in the different ways individuals handle both novel and routine tasks. Individuals can learn to be more skillful in these differences, which can be found across cultures.

Exploration of common themes and points of agreement may in the end prove more productive than examining epistemological differences. Haensly, Reynolds, and Nash suggest four such themes: (1) nature and nurture combine to develop talent, (2) definitions of giftedness are culture-bound, (3) using only narrow predictors of measurable success unnecessarily limits our ability to define giftedness, and (4) being open to broader, more inclusive definitions of giftedness is especially important. Exploring these four themes illustrates both commonalities and differences among the contributors.

Nature and nurture remain complexly intertwined; now, as in prescientific times, it continues to be all but impossible to separate the effects of the one from the other. Although the contributors agreed that some differences in ability are present at birth, they differed on how to measure and nurture those differences. Some look for predictors of potential, others for ways to evaluate demonstrated talent. Developmentalists like Walters and Gardner believe we can understand giftedness only in retrospect, by asking gifted adults to describe the "crystallizing experience" that led them to commit to their gift. Others, like Stanley and Benbow in their article on mathematically precocious children and Bamberger on music, believe that we can define giftedness as it is demonstrated by the children and study it while we are nurturing it.

Culture inevitably affects our intellectual constructs. Write Davidson and Sternberg:

Giftedness is something we invent, not something we discover: It is what one society or another wants it to be, and hence its conceptualization can change over time and place. If the definition of giftedness is a useful one, it can lead to favorable consequences of many kinds, both for the society and for its individuals.

Gallagher and Courtright's psychosocial historical summary of the evolution of the definition of giftedness illustrates the limitations imposed by a culturally-bound definition of giftedness as well as the difficulty of identifying an adequate alternative to traditional IQ measures. The consensus among current researchers is that giftedness is innate, that it is more than what can be measured by IQ alone, and that to nurture it requires more than just hard work – but the full equation has yet to be written.

Perhaps the third theme, which deplores the fact that educational programming past and present has often relied on accurate prediction of future performance through identification of measurable characteristics, arose in response to this recognized need to nurture human potential. We usually include or exclude children in gifted programming based on their performance on standardized tests and on teacher observation. Not surprisingly, research shows that students selected on these bases tend to succeed in academics; that success, though, may not correlate with success in life. Something more is needed, but what?

Essays by the cognitive psychologists offer some interesting alternatives to IQ alone. Sternberg suggests that we work with students to help them decide how to identify the real problem to be solved, how to prioritize information, and how to evaluate solutions, then monitor the students' improvements in their ability to apply these thinking skills. Sternberg and Davidson isolate the skills of insight and intuition as being key ones. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson suggest there may be different types of thinking skills which are necessary for different levels of thinking. A student might, for example, excel in the thinking skills needed at the knowledge level of Bloom's taxonomy but not at the different skills needed at the analysis level.

We must have a manageable definition of giftedness in order to work with it, but many in the field remind us that we must constantly seek deeper understanding of the genesis and development of giftedness even if the concept becomes more complex as a result of our efforts. Tannenbaum exhorts us to consider the nature of the talent, the potential of the diversity of talent potential within an individual and for any given society, to be open to nonintellectual talents as well as more traditionally valued intellectual ones, and to consider the effect of environmental influences and chance factors. He suggests that giftedness can be demonstrated in producing new and important ideas, performing brilliantly, or providing an extraordinary service.

Sternberg and Davidson compiled *Conceptions of Giftedness* because they felt it was time to reassess what we mean by giftedness. The clear, provocative, cohesive, and representative background the essays provide prepares the reader to become a more knowledgeable participant in the dialogue which was initiated by Aristotle and continues today – to define the nature of giftedness.

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