

# The Abdication of Childhood

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*This article provides information on young children who are viewed as gifted. The authors contend that there are disparities in the abilities of young children and that sound educational practices are needed to respond to these disparities. There are numerous practices used with young gifted children that are neither necessary nor sound. Also, young children perceived as gifted are vulnerable to attitudes and practices that can deprive them of their full sense of childhood.*

There has been growing concern over the last several years about schools meeting the needs of gifted students. This special issue of the *Journal* is one indication of such concern in the area of education for teachers, administrators, and counselors. Our comments center on the learning and affective needs of preschool and early elementary (up to fourth grade) children who have exceptional ability. We focus on issues of identification, labeling, early entry, and childhood in general.

Our perspective is that even at early ages, there are disparities in academic readiness, abilities, and emotional maturity among children of similar chronological age. Childhood is an exceptionally rich time for learning, and schools need to provide opportunities for gifted children. We argue that a number of practices associated with gifted children are neither necessary nor sound. In fact, so called "gifted education," especially with young children, is becoming mired in educational and political practices that hold little promise for the well-being of gifted children.

## EARLY IDENTIFICATION

Attempting a discussion on young gifted children without focusing on early identification procedures is the equivalent of starting a young children's story without saying "Once upon a time." The difference is that after you say "Once upon a time," you do get on with the story. In the education of gifted students, it seems that educators get stuck in the identification problems and never do get on with the real story.

Giftedness is extraordinary ability in one or more areas, including academics, the arts, social leadership, and sports. Although all of these areas are important, our focus is primarily on academics. The problem is, How extraordinary must an ability be to qualify as gifted? We have a history of psychometric gymnastics associated with attempts to devise formulas that will "assure" us that one score signals the commencement of giftedness and one point below that means the upper end of non-giftedness. We hope to show that such attempts at quantifying "the point of giftedness" are futile and have hampered us in providing needed educational opportunities to children who are ready and capable.

McFarland (1980) provided numerous suggestions and evaluations for use of standardized tests, nomination and various uses of performance, and projects in attempting to identify gifted children. In reviewing identification procedures used with young, gifted children (preschool and early elementary school years), we found that procedures fall into the following categories: (a) individualized intelligence tests (e.g., Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children—ages 6–15, Wechsler Preschool Scale—ages 2–6); (b) group intelligence tests (e.g., Otis Mental Ability Test—K–12, Cognitive Abilities Test—K–3); (c) stan-

dardized achievement tests (e.g., Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Peabody Individual Achievement Test); (d) tests of creativity (e.g., Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking—ages 5–adult; Structure of Intellect (SOI) tests—early elementary school and above); (e) checklists and scales (a number of commercially used and locally developed checklists—perhaps best known is the Renzulli and Hartman Scale for Rating Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students); (f) grades and performance (e.g., actual work done, tasks performed, or grades received); and (g) nominations (e.g., input from teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, peers, and self) (Richert, 1982).

The problem with all forms of identification systems with young children is that they are less than perfect. The younger the child, the less confident we can be about the reliability and validity of measures. When we use the term *gifted* in describing young children, we are essentially talking about potential rather than accomplishment and we are guessing about the future with limited information. On the other hand, there is a certain amount of confidence in attributing gifted status to an adult who has received a Nobel Prize in medicine or a Pulitzer Prize in writing. When a 4-year-old or 8-year-old child is labeled as gifted on the basis of a test score, or a test score in combination with checklists, grades, and nominations, the label does not have the same ring of confidence as the previous example. As Tannenbaum (1983) has indicated, achievement is dependent on environmental support and luck as well as on inherent ability and motivation. There are simply too many factors (e.g., ability, motivation, opportunity, chance, nurturance) that enter into "inordinate achievement in life" beyond IQ scores and early school performance.

We are not saying that efforts should not be made to identify strengths in young children; however, we are saying that giftedness is entirely too bogged down in the assessment process. The real issue is providing opportunities that will allow for the extension of abilities and interests. For instance, if a boy in the third grade is ready to do some fifth-grade mathematics, do educators need the assessment of "gifted" to justify this boy doing mathematics work beyond his grade level? Must a child be assessed as gifted to receive appropriate enrichment and acceleration activities? If we could answer no to these questions, then we could eliminate most of the problems concerning the assessment of gifted children.

The question of who is and who is not gifted is a dead-end line of thinking, especially with young children. The questions should be, "What is this boy or girl ready for?" and "Are we as educators willing to provide what is needed?" Assessment procedures are necessary to determine readiness in specific academic areas; however, these procedures are different from a global assessment of giftedness.

Thus, identification has become a self-defeating cycle. The fear is that there may be too many gifted children by certain standards or not enough by others. Federal and state funds may be tied to a "head count" of children identified as gifted. Also, because identification procedures are imperfect, a school may be criticized for including or not including a particular child. All

of these issues are socially and politically realistic, but they miss the point in regard to education. The purpose of identification systems is to justify who is and who is not gifted; the focus is incorrectly on children. The focus should be on curriculum and the school environment. The question that must be addressed is, "Do schools have the preparation, resources, and willingness to actively nurture potential in young children who demonstrate inordinate abilities?"

### LABELING

The issue of labeling is complex and multifaceted. Although labels are necessary in classifying children according to their learning needs, Hobbs (1975) and Cornell (1983) noted that they can create problems because children often become identified with such labels. Stereotypical attitudes and beliefs associated with the label can be falsely attributed to each labeled student. This in turn shapes the way others interact with the student and influences that student's self-perceptions. The adverse effects of labels on special education students have been acknowledged by numerous authors (e.g., Jones, 1972; Rist & Harrell, 1982).

The effects of labeling a student as gifted (typically viewed as a positive label) have not been widely and systematically studied. The few studies on the effects of the gifted label indicate a cautious and mixed reaction (Frierson, 1965; Whitmore, 1981). Although students typically like having high academic abilities, they are hesitant about peer reactions to the label of gifted (Colangelo & Kelly, 1983; Fisher, 1981; Krueger, 1978; Tannenbaum, 1983).

The evidence on labeling (particularly with young children) demands that educators and parents be cautious. Research indicates that labels used for students in special education have had adverse effects (Hobbs, 1975), and the same may be true for young students labeled as gifted.

It has been the experience of the senior author, in working with parents of young schoolchildren over the last decade, that parents have an eroding confidence that the regular curriculum is adequate to meet the needs of gifted students. Numerous parents express the sentiment that a bright child's learning needs will not be attended to in the regular classroom and that the typical classroom teacher is not trained or concerned with gifted children. The solution is to get the child into the gifted category so that "special" efforts will be made. We believe that fewer parents will push for the gifted label if there is more assurance that the curriculum needed will be provided without the label. Under these circumstances, the only parents who would continue to press for the gifted label would be those who receive fulfillment from such labels. Although such parents exist, we do not believe they exist in significant numbers.

We can hardly justify any use of the gifted label with young children. The term is devoid of useful meaning. Educators should take the posture that meeting a child's cognitive and affective needs is the primary goal, and there is no need to force a label to bring this about.

### EARLY ENTRY

There is compelling evidence that the first few years of a child's life are critical in terms of psychological, intellectual, and motor development (Brazelton, 1978; Fish, 1984; Lewis, 1970; Miller, 1981). Bloom (1964) contended that approximately 50% of intellectual development occurs before age 4. The Better Baby Institute (Seliger, 1983) has demonstrated that infants less than 18 months of age have capabilities (in both cognitive and motor coordination) previously unknown to educators. Proponents of early education for gifted youngsters have argued that these early, important years should be used to provide enriched, supportive, and stimulating environments (Bloom, 1964; Fox, 1971; Hunt, 1964; Johnson, 1983). Special preschool programs or early

entry into schools have been shown to be highly valuable to children who are "ready" (Braga, 1971; Delahanty, 1984; Gallagher, 1975; Mathews, 1984; Reynolds, Birch, & Treseth, 1962).

Other researchers and educators have been cautious and have discouraged early entry for children in general (DiPasquale, Moule, & Flewelling, 1980; Elkind, 1982; Langer, Kalk, & Sears, 1984). Maddux (1983) concluded that although research studies are contradictory, the majority of well-designed studies indicate that early entry has a negative effect on school achievement. In a comparative study of 118 academically gifted students in the fifth through eighth grades, Maddux and his associates found that over 60% of those labeled as gifted had entered first grade between the ages of 6.6 and 6.11 years (Maddux, Stacy, & Scott, 1981). Maddux (1983) also found early entrance to be a variable in the diagnosis of children as learning disabled.

Leading child developmentalist David Elkind (1971, 1982) has strongly discouraged formal education for very young children. He claimed that the bright child will quickly progress to his or her maximum level at a later age and that children of average and lower abilities will learn what they need to know when they are ready to learn it without developing low self-esteem early in their school experiences. Neither Elkind (1981) nor Maddux (1983) expressed opposition to early, informal education; however, Elkind (1981) advocated that parents focus on the child's feelings of self-worth as a person as much as on the child's scholastic achievements (see also Davidson, 1981; Miller, 1981).

Our reviews of the literature on effects of early entry indicate mixed results. It seems that gifted children or children later labeled as gifted did well whether they began school early or not. Also, they did well whether they attended preschools or not. The primary issues are whether they were in an enriched environment (opportunities for exploration and stimulation) and whether they received parental and teacher support in terms of self-esteem. These factors seem to outweigh the advantages or disadvantages of early or later school entry.

### ABDICATION OF CHILDHOOD

Our nation is presently in a "race." The firing of the starting gun was the publication of the report, *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). This report indicated that American schools are in trouble and that students are falling behind students of international competitors. Students perceived as gifted and talented will receive increased attention and resources and will be more vulnerable to being "used" to make up lost ground. When you are behind (whether in sports or academics), you look to your best to pull you ahead.

In reviewing a number of publications in the last few years and listening to presentations at conferences, we have noticed how often gifted children have been referred to as the nation's most "precious natural resource." The danger is that gifted children will be seen first as natural resources and second as children. Childhood may become an accelerated training period for adulthood rather than an entity of its own requiring time and inefficiency.

As we argued above, labeling of young children is practically never useful. Labels help educators, parents, and society at large to forget that gifted children are normal children with exceptional ability, not abnormal children.

Counselors, perhaps more than other educators, are in a position to advocate the recognition of children as, first and foremost, children. Counselors should also help school officials recognize that children may have rather extraordinary variations in abilities, even at a very young age. These abilities should be developed for the good of the child. As Elkind (1982) noted, "Educational practice is rarely, if ever, governed by what we know is in the best interest of children" (p. 497). In the move-

ment toward excellence in schools, the focus should be on what is in the best interest of children.

### CONCLUSION

We have addressed unnecessary and unsound practices in gifted education, focusing on the imperfect assessment procedures used to identify young children as gifted. We have also discussed our concern that young children labeled and perceived as gifted are vulnerable to being used by society to resolve its problems. Childhood should be a time of exploration and inefficiency. The often needless (and inaccurate) labeling of children as gifted and the concomitant accelerated expectations endanger such a vision of childhood.

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