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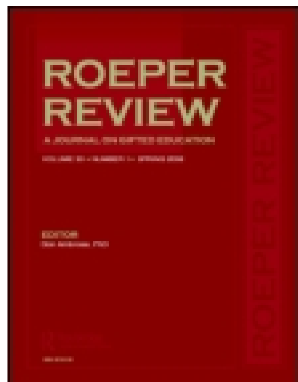

Roeper Review
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uror20

The place of achievement in the life of the spirit and the education of gifted students

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Available online: 20 Jan 2010

To cite this article: Barry Grant (1995): The place of achievement in the life of the spirit and the education of gifted students, Roeper Review, 18:2, 132-134

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02783199509553715

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The Place of Achievement in the Life of the Spirit and the Education of Gifted Students

Barry Grant

This essay argues that academic achievement for gifted students should be viewed in the context of the life of the spirit—life guided by a desire to realize oneself, find and live a vocation, and embody great virtues, such as generosity and love of life.

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"A vocation [is] an ardent and exclusive passion for something in which there is no prospect of money, the consciousness of being able to do something better than others, and being able to love this thing more than anything else. . . . And what is a human being's vocation but the highest expression of his love of life?"

—Natalia Ginzburg, *Little Virtues*

In the education of gifted students, achievement in the form of good grades and high test scores is sought after, programmed for, and measured; its presence celebrated; its absence lamented, diagnosed, and treated. Teachers and parents take academic achievement very seriously. They honor it in practice above self-realization, love of learning, virtue, independence of thought, service to others, and other values that can guide and sustain teaching and learning. It's not surprising that academic achievement is important in gifted education. Good grades and high test scores and the well-paying jobs they may yield are popular goals. Gifted education reflects this.

Though parents and teachers may act as if academic achievement is the most important value in education, most of them have values that transcend academic achievement and worldly success. In this broader and usually private vision of life, they place academic achievement in a hierarchy of values, below some values, above others. Some of them define their values from within what the Italian essayist and novelist Natalia Ginzburg (1985) calls "the life of the spirit." The life of the spirit is life lived in a free and open encounter with the world, secured in a sense of mystery, and motivated by love and a desire to be one's best self.

In the life of the spirit, academic achievement is not an end, or even a means, but a *consequence* of pursuing certain goals and enacting certain motivations. Love of learning, curiosity about the natural world, the pursuit of a vocation; the desire to create, improve the world, develop oneself, devise a philosophy of life, acquire virtue, and find truth—these are motivations and goals of the spirit. Academic achievement may or may not accompany them.

Grades and the Great Virtues

When we are preoccupied with what Ginzburg calls the "little virtues," among which she includes thrift, caution, and a desire for worldly and academic success, the "great virtues," generosity, love of truth, love of one's neighbor, and love of life, lose their force and shape. Instead of being the passionate centers of teaching and learning, the great virtues seem distant, impractical, even dangerous. Or they appear as sort of ghostly spirits that we dimly imagine will (somehow) ennoble our efforts without our paying much attention to them. When the little virtues assume the importance of the great ones, the work of teaching and learning is distorted.

Most of us see generosity, kindness, truthfulness, and self-realization as more important than money and status. Yet we are far more involved with the latter than the former. We believe grades and test scores are necessary to worldly success. Yet, cautious, afraid to be ourselves, afraid to abandon the conventional and safe, afraid to risk following our passions and ideals, we cling to success as a goal and an achievement, for ourselves and our children and our students.

Honoring the great virtues, yet living by the little ones appears in the field of gifted as a kind of ambivalence or confusion. For example, Clark (1988) in her popular textbook argues in one section that grades don't predict success in life, don't motivate most gifted students, and aren't meaningful, then in the next section discusses underachievement and how it can be remedied. She believes that creativity is the highest expression of giftedness and that gifted children are capable of reaching a transcendent level of development, but her discussion of underachievement makes no mention of creativity and transcendence. Will students who consistently perform below measured intelligence fail to be creative and self-actualized? Is achievement more important than creativity and self-actualization? She doesn't say where she thinks academic achievement stands in relationship to her other values, and why.

Parents and educators lament that many gifted young children lose their passion for knowledge and curiosity after some years in school. Passion and curiosity are precious, and schools should cherish and encourage them. But they may not be missing. We may be looking for them in the wrong place. Webb, Mechstroth, and Tolan (1982), authors of another popular book, offer these two quotes from gifted children: "I have this burning desire to learn!" "I can remember having mad desires to learn how certain things worked, were put together. . ." They then ask how this spark of passion gets lost and how it is that so many gifted students don't perform up to potential, and then discuss underachievement and what can be done about it.

Here is another point in which a little virtue is mistaken for a great one. Poor grades and lack of motivation to succeed in school aren't evidence that the spark of passion for learning is lost. It may not be burning in the classroom, but it may be sitting warmly inside the

Manuscript submitted January, 1995. Revision accepted May, 1995.

child waiting for time and circumstance to ignite a blaze, or it may be fueling private pursuits. Ginzburg says this wonderfully:

> If [our children] wish to spend the best of their skills on things outside school—collecting Coleoptera or learning Turkish—that is their business and we have no right to reproach them, or to show that our pride has been hurt or that we feel dissatisfied with them. If at the moment the best of their skills do not seem to be applied to anything, then we do not have the right to shout at them very much in that case either; who knows, perhaps what seems laziness to us is really a kind of daydreaming and thoughtfulness that will bear fruit tomorrow. If it seems they are wasting the best of their energies and skills lying on the sofa reading ridiculous novels or charging around a football pitch, then again we cannot know whether this is really a waste of energy and skill or whether tomorrow this too will bear fruit in some way that we have not yet suspected. Because there are an infinite number of possibilities open to the spirit. (p. 107)

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What is a Person's Potential?

On Ginzburg's view, development is a mystery. We can't know what any individual is capable of, or what paths, straight or twisting and doubling back, lead to a satisfying, decent, creative life. We can't know what possibilities a person can realize. We can't know whether poor grades or good grades lie on a child's path to self-realization. On Ginzburg's view, unrealized potential is not a problem of academic underachievement.

Typically, when we talk about how important it is for students to develop their potential, we refer to their potential for those things we measure in school, and we chart the realization of that potential by recording grades and test scores. What we mean, then, when we say a student fails to work up to potential is that he or she isn't doing as well as we think possible in some areas that we value and monitor.

Narrowing our conception of potential and its realization in this way leads us to view schools as instruments for developing ability and acquiring skills, rather than as places where students encounter certain resources and have relationships they can use to develop themselves. This view splits talents and abilities off from the rest of the person and leads to ignoring, even severing, the links between the individual, the individual's projects of self-development, and the knowledge and learning taken from school.

But, "there are an infinite number of possibilities open to the spirit." That's a lot more than IQ tests and achievement tests and grades can assess. This suggests we should see potential not as potential for being good at the handful of skills and acquisitions that can be developed at or gotten from school, but as the potential for realizing the possibilities of the spirit, the potential, more specifically, for selecting from and integrating school learning and other learning into a meaningful, worthy, passionate, and satisfying life path. Isn't this what we want for all students? To realize their potential as an achievement of the spirit, not of achievement tests?

Characteristics of Gifted Persons

Research and experience show that gifted students are most able to develop personal goals, to approach texts and tasks personally, and to be passionate about their education. For them the life of the spirit may be deeply compelling. Research by Piechowski and others who have extended the work of Kazimierz Dabrowski (e.g., Piechowski, 1986, 1991; Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985; Piirto, 1992; Schiever, 1985) suggests that intellectually gifted persons as a group (of course there are exceptions) have more intense intellectual, emotional, sensual, and imaginational lives than non-gifted persons. Most significantly, their emotional lives are richly complex and intense. They experience life more deeply than others do. They being "flooded by unexpected waves of joy"; "feeling incredibly alive—every cell, muscle, etc., [feeling] stimulated"; and experiencing "even the greatest pain... [as] ecstatic and full of life" (Piechowski, 1991, p. 289). Roeper (1982) echoes Piechowski in her description of giftedness as "a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences" (p. 21). Their intellectual lives are equally passionate; they don't just consume knowledge, they seek it, knock it about, synthesize it, and find problems in it. These characteristics help gifted students put their intelligence to use in unique ways and give them the potential for high levels of character development.

Can we justify seeing grades and tests scores as the most important thing or a very important thing about the education of such individuals? To do so is to mistake evidence for one relatively unimportant way that development and progress are shown, grades and test scores, or the goal itself, the realization of potential as an achievement of the spirit.

How to Proceed

Diminishing the importance of tests and grades seems to leave parents and teachers with little definite to hold on to. It's easy to look at a report card or test results and make a judgment about how well a student is achieving academically and maybe then recommend or require more study, additional school work, tutoring, more discipline, or psychotherapy if the student doesn't measure up. How does a parent or teacher promote the development of the spirit?

How one does this turns in part on what one considers to be the great virtues. We can and do and should differ on what we consider to be our highest values. I have used Ginzburg's term "spirit" as a metaphor or place holder for a point of view on life, a set of values, that posits something beyond instrumental, mercenary values, something that is absolutely of value and deserving of love for it own sake, not for what it profits. I have offered some of Ginzburg's and some of my views on this, but there is not a universal set of great virtues, and certainly place for disagreement.

But if one more or less accepts the idea that education is primarily about developing oneself, fueling a vocation and passions, and creating a personal hierarchy of values, and not primarily about doing well in school and preparing for a career, and if one has a set of great virtues, then the first thing to do is to live one's virtues and passions. Growth of the spirit can't be fostered by guidelines, or workbooks, or lesson plans, or techniques... by any of the things we usually look to from experts. It is fostered by the absolutely demanding requirement of pursuing the same path that we want our children and students to follow. The other things have their place, but they aren't of the

essence. Ginzburg writes, "This is perhaps the one real chance we have of giving [children] some kind of help in their search for a vocation—to have a vocation ourselves, to know it, to love it and serve it passionately; because love of life begets love of life" (p. 110).

If one doesn't, or doesn't clearly, have a set of virtues or a vocation, then one starts by developing a philosophy of life and getting to know oneself (a big job, but one starts). Most parents and teachers do have at least one solid and passionately held great virtue, love for their children and students. This is a route to helping children develop themselves that doesn't require a developed philosophy of life. Ginzburg writes: "Education is only a certain relationship which we establish between ourselves and our children, a certain climate in which feelings instincts and thoughts can flourish" (p. 98). This remarkable statement can be the starting point for the perfection of one's love for ones' children and students and one's own self-development. Ginzburg shows how this work can continue:

> What chance do we have of awakening and stimulating in our children the birth and development of a vocation? We do not have much; however there is one way open to us. The birth and development of a vocation needs space, space and silence, the free silence of space. Our relationship with our children should be a living exchange of thoughts and feelings, but it should also include deep areas of silence. . . . We must be important to our children and yet not too important; they must like us a little, and yet not like us too much—so that it does not enter their heads to be identical to us, to copy us. . . . And we must be there to help them, if help should be necessary; they must realize that they do not belong to us, but that we belong to them. (pp. 108-109)

This advice, this song fragment, almost, of parenting, and teaching as well, exhilarates and saddens and frightens us. It exhilarates with its call to a deeper relationship with children and students, a relationship suffused with great virtues, courage and patience and truthfulness, and to the now silent spaces within ourselves where we may discover ourselves anew. It is saddening and frightening in its reminder that our children and students are not us and do not belong to us and that we should not aspire that they become like us. We can offer ourselves, what we have learned and can teach, and what we value. It is none of our business if it is rejected or accepted. The important work in life is inner work, and we cannot do this for anyone but ourselves. There are "an infinite number of possibilities open to the spirit." Our responsibility is to our own development and to sharing ourselves and our lives with our children and students so that they can make use of what we have accomplished and who we are. In this "living exchange of thoughts and feelings," in the common dwelling in the life of the spirit, academic achievement takes its proper place as a relatively unimportant value.

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On Gifted Education: *What Do We Really Know?*

Felice A. Kaufman

Foreward

The author is quite up front at the outset in pointing out that this is not your usual article on the gifted or gifted education. Instead, she tells a very personal story about herself and her father, drawing on her insights from years of writing, lecturing, and consulting about the gifted.

The article captures only a small part of the author's experience over the past four years caring for her 85 year old father who had survived the Holocaust and Nazi Germany. The advice of "the authorities" seemed sterile to her, so she fell back on what she knows - gifted education. Few of us would think of creativity, mind-mapping, Renzulli's Total Talent Portfolio and his Enrichment Triad Model, when pondering the care of an 85 year old parent dying of cancer. Yet that is what the author did - used the Triad Model to create "today's program" and keep her Father not only alive but "too busy and too curious to die." Last I heard, he was still busily engaged in "today's program."

*Does this belong in the **Roeper Review?** I think it does for if nothing else, this brief article might get us to think beyond the usual parameters of gifted education. It provides an illustration of how one can apply meaningfully some of the rhetoric of the field. "We do know a lot" and the author has reminded us of some of the things we do know if we would only get out of our routine thinking paths. One would be interested in seeing how the readers respond to such an offbeat piece.*

A. Harry Passow

This is not the kind of article you think it is going to be. It is not a critical review of the literature. Not a treatise on school reform. Not a discussion of key features of gifted education.

This article, in fact, doesn't directly deal with gifted education at all – at least not until the very end. It is, instead, a personal story – one that you would never expect to find in an education magazine, much less a scholarly journal. Even so, it is a story about how our profession – under attack from many sides – can feel proud of the skills we have developed and the good those skills can do.