

Book Review (1)

Giftedness 101

Linda Kreger Silverman (2013)

Book Review by Trevor J. Tebbs

Firstly, Nancy Hale, James Kaufman and the Springer Publishing Company must be commended for providing the opportunity and forum for the consideration of this often divisive yet vitally important topic. Psych 101 texts cover a variety of interesting and important subjects, e.g., creativity, psychological testing, leadership. Having enjoyed reading a number of books in the series and having taught a college course using one of them, I appreciate their readability and usefulness. Giftedness 101 is no exception and I consider it a privilege to review what I consider an important and significant contribution to our field.

The name and work of Linda Kreger Silverman has been synonymous with giftedness for several decades. She was respected and her leadership in the field well-established before I began my graduate work at the University of Connecticut with Joseph Renzulli in the mid-90s. I remember attending a talk she gave in Burlington, Vermont, and now looking back, I realize the event was seminal in terms of my own learning. Her knowledge, expertise and commitment to the gifted population was unmistakable and inspiring.

Webmasters and numbers of publishers worldwide provide giftedness-related websites, texts and journals of varying depth, interest and complexity aimed at different audiences ranging from individual gifted students through to university-bound researchers immersed in their latest data. With so much material emanating from knowledgeable authors possessed of diverse opinions and, or philosophical perspectives, it is relatively easy for those with a personal or professional interest to actually become quite well informed with respect to the characteristics, traits, patterns of behavior, intensities, personalities, educational and social emotional needs, learning styles and much more about the population of gifted children. However, I would suggest there is also a danger of becoming somewhat confused, even dispirited by discrepancies between what we learn and what may be observed and, or experienced in the real world with respect to the life and times of a largely misunderstood population of children. In terms of this particular possibility, over the past few years public interest in the exceptionality of highly able children has waned. Resulting misperceptions have been as unfortunate as they have been significant.

Silverman is of the opinion that more and more gifted and creative children are being born (p.232) but admits she can't prove it. Whatever the case, we not only know a substantial population of highly able children exists in the US and elsewhere in the world, but also that no miraculous event has drastically altered the real and pressing nature of their educational and social emotional needs. Yet, sadly, a lack of commitment is all too evident with respect to funding activities relating to this population, e.g., 'enrichment' programming in school through to government support for teacher training and research in the field. In these circumstances, it has become harder for advocates of highly able children to have the case for proper accommodations, however imperative, seriously considered.

It is in this context, Giftedness 101 is not only readable and useful, but also timely. I would like to see this inexpensive, relatively brief but information-packed book placed in every college and university library, widely distributed elsewhere, read and inwardly digested by anyone who is either

directly or peripherally responsible for the educational and social emotional wellbeing of all children and young people. While I suspect Silverman presents a great deal that may be common knowledge to the relatively small group of dedicated experts in field, much more will be new and necessarily eye-opening to legions of professionals educating or working with children in some other way throughout the United States and elsewhere worldwide. With this in mind, it has been tempting to present an overview, not only of each chapter, but also every section – each is so important. However, a review such as this has its limitations and thus restraint is called for and therefore I will delve into just a few aspects found especially arresting from a personal and professional point of view.

Over the years I have been privileged to gain similar (though admittedly not so extensive, rich and salubrious) experience and insight as Silverman in the context of giftedness. It has been, and remains a distinct privilege to meet, teach, counsel and assess gifted young people, educate educators, and involve myself in research. It also remains a privilege to work with mothers and fathers who day-by-day work hard parenting and advocating for their children.

On the other hand it is has become increasingly frustrating to encounter individual professionals and communities seemingly oblivious to the real and pressing needs of the highly able. Experience in schools supposedly responsible for providing an appropriate education for *all* children typically confirm what moms, dads and the young people themselves constantly face, i.e., a pervading ignorance with respect to children at the *other* end of the normal curve. Silverman's own encounter with, and understanding of, this phenomenon is clearly reflected throughout her book.

In the introduction and first chapter – *Invisible Gifts*, Silverman examines a telling condition, *invisibility*. It is not unfamiliar in the lives of so many children who, for multiple reasons, either sink out of sight or never appear on the surface in the first place. Silverman catalogues various groups of children who comprise this Hidden Gifted population. For example, she refers to exceptionally gifted children and quotes Leta Stetter Hollingworth, who, in 1942, wrote: "*Children of 140 IQ waste half their time in school. Those above 170 IQ waste almost all their time.*" Seventy years later this appears, for the most part, true. Almost every individual I have met with in my office has mentioned 'waiting.' For a number of reasons - often mythical, such children and young people may be disregarded, perhaps assumed to be perfectly capable of success by their own efforts or somehow weird enough and so needy as to be left to their own devices and, or referred to a local psychiatrist for questionable treatment.

Children fully or partially homeschooled are also mentioned as part of this group and based on my own New England experience, it is true. These children and their parents are caught on the horns of a terrible dilemma. If the public, and even private, schools in a particular district cannot or *will not*, for various reasons, serve the children and their needs appropriately, what are parents supposed to do? The same question may be asked with respect to children and young people whose giftedness-related needs are exacerbated by other concerns. For example, Silverman focusses on those who must overcome ignorant and myopic reactions to cultural, ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity; gender bias or preference, personality type; children living in rural areas; underachievers, those with a different learning style and the twice exceptional. Overall she considers these children, who although in aggregate amount to a vast crowd, nevertheless remain largely invisible.

Chapter Two, *What is Giftedness?* is an excellent chapter. It is divided in several sections that open up opportunity for important and fascinating discussion. Having spent several satisfying years studying in the camp of Joseph Renzulli and his colleagues, one cannot help but be aware of

the wide array of robust beliefs and attitudes held by experts and which, in my opinion, plague the field of giftedness. Disagreement to a point of hostility between individuals and groups adds a level of confusion detrimental to a better understanding of the needs of our highly able youth – now and in the future.

One of the more thorny concerns revolves around the nature-versus-nurture issue. Arguments basically reduce down to whether giftedness is: a) genetic and thus, in multiple ways, evident from birth, or b) whether it is *only* evident when and *if*, an individual achieves notable success in some realm of human activity. Silverman asks: “*Is giftedness born or made?* While she recognizes people differ in how they view such issues, for example, noting: “Academic psychologists favor the emphasis on motivation and achievement, while practitioners who evaluate gifted children are often struck by their developmental differences” (p.26), Silverman clearly has her own naturalistic, holistic and developmental perspective. This is hardly surprising considering Giftedness 101 is dedicated to the memory of her mentor Annemarie Roeper. We are told that not long before she passed away in 2012 Annemarie Roeper wrote: “Giftedness is a personal characteristic, in born – possibly enhanced by environmental factors. Achievement is often based on outside expectations” (p. 26).

Later in this second chapter Silverman explains that Giftedness 101 is *designed* more around the notion of giftedness as ability rather a matter of achievement (p. 49) It is clear her position is not aligned with those who consider gifted children may only be considered as such to the degree they become successful, i.e., realize some outstanding achievement or position of eminence. In this context, her response to Subotnik¹ (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kublius, and Worrell, 2011, p.3) is revealing: “Outstanding achievement or eminence should be the chief goal of gifted education.” It is a ‘read my lips’ moment when Silverman writes, “It follows that there are no gifted children; there can only be promising children with the potential for greatness in a specific domain. In short, you are not born gifted; giftedness is accomplished through effort. Nurture rules” (p. 23). Later on, in Chapter Four, Silverman further underlines her position. In the context of giftedness in adults she considers it “Problematic to have been identified for a gifted program as a child and then learn that you can only be a gifted adult if you’re eminent” (page 114). She then asks, “If you aren’t eminent, does that mean you were never gifted in the first place?” (page 114).

As noted previously, in my opinion, this is an excellent chapter. In addition to the nature/nurture question her focus includes the role cognitive ability testing plays in establishing the presence of giftedness, definitions that are currently operational, what the true definition might be, whether men or women view giftedness differently, development and giftedness as asynchronous development, and, finally how different definitions ultimately have a profound effect on how these children are provided for in the real world. She concludes the chapter simply. She writes, “Their differences need to be taken seriously” (p.49). To that I would add, “Amen and amen.”

In the previous chapter (page 33) Silverman refers to Marland’s (1971/1972), who, after conducting a study on gifted children, wrote: “Gifted and Talented children are, in fact, deprived and can suffer psychological damage and permanent impairment of their abilities to function well ...” (p.VIII-3). From my perspective, despite considerable change having taken place in certain geographical areas of the world, including the US, the situation overall is little different. Gifted and talented children are still deprived and they still may suffer psychological damage. As Silverman implies in the title of Chapter Three - *The Crusade to Vanquish Prejudice Against the Gifted*, prejudice is alive and well.

Silverman takes the opportunity to review perceptions of giftedness from the historical perspective. Involvement in the lives of highly able children day-to-day either as parents, or teachers or some other professionals can be all-absorbing. History may not be the very first thing that comes

to mind! But ... spare the time because this chapter is fascinating. She visits, albeit briefly, times when, and places where, giftedness was not typically allied with shame. On the contrary she reminds us how gifted and talented individuals served in high places and contributed to their society while recognized for their importance in the context of Chinese, Egyptian, European and Ottoman empires. She notes such past luminaries and leaders as Daniel, Solomon, Jesus, Plato, Charlemagne, and, more recently in American history, Jefferson.

In the section of this chapter entitled, *Nature's Ideal or Nature's Mistake*, Silverman shifts from past history and reviews the perspectives that began to take shape in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the science of the mind and measurement of intelligence began to attract considerable attention. Predictably we are reminded of the seminal work done by Galton, Binet and Terman - individuals whose contributions greatly influenced our early understanding of, and need for psychological evaluation – not just specifically in terms of high ability but cognitive ability in general. The presence and influence of Binet and Terman in particular continues in terms of testing and knowledge of highly able individuals.

Silverman, like many of us involved in this field, is strongly influenced by Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Experience has led me to conclude that women are far more active than men in the field in many ways. Of course, there are notable exceptions, and men are not exactly inactive, but overall it appears that it is the women who have led the way in studying and writing specifically about the gifted. Silverman is a highly regarded exemplar in this regard. With this in mind it was interesting to note her respect and admiration for Hollingworth when she mentions how she “‘altered’ the thinking of Terman and Thorndike on the question of gender and race” (Rosenberg, 1982); and how she helped “encourage environmental understandings of human behavior” (Fagan, 1990). Even though I have taught courses on giftedness, admittedly this particular information was new to me. As such it underlines the richness of *Giftedness 101* not only as a source of information, but also in the way it adds historical substance and credibility to the field.

In the next section of Chapter Three Silverman builds upon well-established foundations as she debunks several of the older and more recent myths associated with giftedness. This is an extremely useful section for anyone contemplating a career in the field or simply interested in the realities children and their parents have to face day-to-day. Prejudice can so easily grow, be perpetuated and undermine the seriousness and credibility of giftedness. Having attended many school conferences in order to argue the case for accommodations for highly able clients before as many as 10 – 14 professionals typically dedicated to servicing the needs of disabled children, I know myths abound. It is not always possible to conduct a *Giftedness 101* seminar in the 30 - 45 minutes allotted for such a meeting!

A particularly pervasive myth is constantly encountered especially when meeting with administrators, teachers, school psychologists, school counselors and other professionals, to argue the case for some level of acceleration. It is an issue that features large in misunderstandings that can lead to misdiagnosis. Basically the mantra is: *Gifted kids need socialization*, and, of course, they do! But all too often the response to even a well-reasoned, psychometrically-supported case goes along these lines: “She must learn to get along with her peers!” “We cannot accelerate this child because he does not have his social skills in order.” “She will not fit with an older group of children – she does not even communicate with her own age group!” I have experienced times when teachers have exited the meeting red-faced and very angry. Myths are powerful and at times difficult to dispel.

Thank goodness for the debunking! Silverman makes it abundantly clear that it is not just socialization for the sake of socialization. She writes: “In general, gifted children are well adjusted, but making friends becomes more difficult the further the child’s abilities veer from the norm” (p.81).

She looks towards the foundations in support for the credibility of her statement. She refers to Terman's findings after his study of preadolescent children and as discussed in Robinson & Noble (1999, p. 62), e.g., "as a group, gifted children were seen as more trustworthy, honest, socially competent, assured and comfortable with self, courteous, cooperative, stable and harmonious." Silverman pursues the issue a little further and in doing so highlights why these children *may not* actually conduct themselves in such a fashion. She echoes Hollingworth's contention that given gifted children are socially advanced, they find it easier to make friends when able to interact with their intellectual peers.

At the time of writing I am due to meet the parents of a 5-year old child. Over the past few months prior to reading *Giftedness 101* several sets of parents along with their preschool or kindergarten-aged children have visited my office. This little guy, like all the others, is experiencing problems that are perplexing and distressing. He just does not fit in with his kindergarten peers. He has no friends. He reads at 4th grade level. He has relatively advanced numeracy skills. He asks questions that apparently test the patience of his teacher. When he comes home he presents, what his parents describe as, explosive behavior. This all too common scenario leads into a brief consideration of the section entitled, *The Importance of Early Detection* found in Chapter Four - *Life at the Extremes*. Silverman asks a vitally important question, "At what age should exceptional children be identified?" (p. 110). It is a question with which I am familiar to myself, as I am sure, it is to colleagues in the field who work with young parents.

Silverman answers the question unequivocally, "The earlier the better" (p.110). She then proceeds to call upon past and present leaders in the field to justify her conclusion. She references Hollingworth who more than seventy years ago argued for the early identification of highly gifted children because she considered it benefitted their development. She then turns to the relatively recent science of neuroplasticity and its salience to development in children. In this context she mentions the sensitivity of the developing brain and quotes from an article written by Henderson and Ebner (1997) entitled, *The Biological Basis for Early Intervention with Gifted Children*:

The period from 1 to 3 years of age is especially critical for typically developing children, as well as those with developmental delay. We suggest that the critical time frame for gifted children may be even earlier ... adjustments may be needed to accommodate the precocious development time many gifted children follow. (p.59)

This sort of information is so important. When, and if, a school system does choose to recognize the need for some level of curriculum differentiation because of giftedness, it may be provided once a child reaches 3rd or 4th grade. Too late or at least not soon enough! A parent of a 3rd grader I recently evaluated (IQ 150) explained how she had tried hard over the years to gain attention to her son's needs and how they could be best served in school. To no avail. She reported that her son, while waiting for the school bus said tearfully, "Yet another wasted day ... they don't teach me anything I don't know!"

Conclusions

It is with such sad comments ringing in my ears and with the certain knowledge that teachers and other professionals, e.g., psychologists, school psychologists, counselors, pediatricians and psychiatrists, have remained blissfully ignorant of such children and their needs, that I fully endorse this book. As the reader may gather, this reviewer has read *Giftedness 101* with gathering enthusiasm. The enthusiasm is warranted. Silverman has presented so much material that has needed to be presented in this format for a long time. Doubtless information - both fact and fiction - has been circulating within and beyond the field and accessible to all who cared enough to enrich and enhance their own knowledge relative to this field. However, it seems clear to me that this book has provided a golden opportunity for the gathering and sifting 'wheat from flax.' It was necessary for an expert in the field rendered credible by virtue of years of experience to gather, sift,

and present the substance in a balanced and readily accessible and digestible way. Silverman was well chosen.

In my estimation *Giftedness 101* ranks high among authoritative texts devoted to this particular population of children. It not only offers thorough experience and knowledge-based insights to those who are already or are contemplating serving the social emotional needs of these children in the future, but also those who profess to educate future teachers , those who would venture out into classrooms charged with the teaching and many others besides. It should be required reading for politicians - especially those who shape educational policy.

I am aware that this review only scratches the surface. I am hopeful, however, that what has been shared here will induce many to read *Giftedness 101*, learn from it and pass it onto others who need the information. I will conclude with Silverman's own question and concluding thought. She writes, "Where do we go from here? The future is up to you" (p. 233). She hopes the book helps the reader "get it" and in turn helps others "get it" to.

Amen.

Reference

Silverman, L. K. (2013). *Giftedness 101*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, LLC.

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