

Commentary on F. Gagné: Academic Talent Development and the Equity Issue in Gifted Education

Where Are the Underachievers in the DMTG's Academic Talent Development?

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Proper assessment of the gifted has been a major issue of concern to professionals for many years, highlighted in Gagné's discussion (2011) on the inequality and underrepresentation of children from low socio-economic and certain ethnic backgrounds. There have always been inadequate procedures for assessing the gifted, and IQ and other achievement tests are now often used only as a last resort to provide evidence of intellectual giftedness (Callahan & Eichner, n.d.). To his credit, Gagné (1985) included underachievers within his model (DMTG), setting the model apart in comparison to other models of giftedness and talent, and defining underachievers as "gifted intellectually, but not talented academically" (p. 108).

Twenty five years on, however, Gagné seems to have reversed his position on underachievers in the target article. He still maintains that the gifted "trademarks" - presumably also found in underachievers - are "ease and speed in learning" (p. 14). However he now argues that "being bright is rarely sufficient to deserve the ... gifted label; students must also show high academic performance" (p. 15). This statement seems to indicate that the inclusion of gifted underachievers in the DMTG was perhaps too difficult to adequately assess, and may now conveniently be dismissed. This is confirmed by the Academic Talent Development (ATD) model presented, which requires high achievement as the single criterion for eligibility. The real equity issue that arises from Gagné's article, therefore, is not whether disadvantaged or ethnic populations are underrepresented in gifted programs, but rather Gagné's promotion of the ATD for only high achievers. If adopted without an alternative pathway for underachievers, it would automatically exclude many gifted children with promise and potential, who have no current capacity to achieve, regardless of their socio-economic or ethnic background.

Gifted underachievers do not necessarily hail from low socio-economic or ethnic minorities, but are nevertheless disadvantaged by learning disabilities (Silverman, 2009), or socio-emotional problems which may be a result of "childhood stress and trauma" (Winner, 2000, p. 165). These socio-emotional problems, as well as a variety of learning disabilities, can create learning barriers that prevent academic high achievement in gifted children (Munro, 2002). For example, Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, and Majeski (2004) demonstrated the significant predictive value of socio-emotional competencies in both high and low academic performance. A recent study also found that children with separation anxiety disorder, social phobia, or generalized anxiety disorder had lower school functioning than others (Mychailyszyn, Mendez, & Kendall, 2010).

Adelman and Taylor (2000) argue for an enabling component in an educational model to target children with learning barriers, as "better achievement surely requires more than good instruction" (p. 16). This suggestion certainly seems relevant to gifted underachievers. Gagné, however, offers no pathway or model that would enable talent development for these children, despite evidence that emotion and cognition are intertwined in human mental function (Adolphs, Tranel, & Damasio, 2003; LeDoux, 1996; Phelps, 2006; Vygotsky, 1987). On the contrary, he proposes that access to talent development opportunities should now be limited to only those "candidates who

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demonstrate good chances of future success” (authors’ italics) by replacing previous tests and assessments with “past performance” as these have “significantly more predictive power than any measure of future potential” (p. 12). If this suggestion is adopted, and traditional assessments such as IQ tests are abandoned and new ways of assessing natural abilities are not developed, it will be even more difficult to identify and assist gifted underachievers. Together, these suggestions will further marginalise the very gifted children who require additional support.

Gagné reminds us not to forget the role of chance in a variety of areas that affect talented performance, including in relation to “a supportive family environment” (p. 18), which is relegated to the “luck of the draw”. It would be tempting to assign developmental problems and relationships with family members that affect talent achievement to chance. However, attachment (Bowlby, 1969) associated with social and emotional adjustment, can hardly be put down to mere chance, as it has been rigorously researched, shown to be highly predictable (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991), and scholars view it as life-shaping. Attachment is both an environmental factor and a developmental necessity that can shape lives and should therefore be seen as a pivotal aspect of the talent development process. As such, it should be considered in a talent development model, particularly in planning for alternative interventions to educational provision. Readers who require more information about the connection between attachment and giftedness are referred to Wellisch (2010).

In summary, Gagné has decided to ignore the problems of an appropriate assessment of the gifted, choosing instead to focus on the even more limited assessment criterion of performance. His ATD approach to the gifted shuts the door on any alternative path to talent development, and excludes many who may be gifted but have no current capacity to achieve.

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