

EQUITY AND ETHICS IN TALENT DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss four seminal articles in the field of talent development. Three articles call for a complete rethinking about how the field is constituted, including a rethinking of terminology. The authors uphold the concept of talent development as the most efficient and equitable model for gifted programming in schools. The fourth article examines ethics and morality in their roles as contributors to the personal and academic development of high-ability students, and the author argues for the proactive and systematic teaching of ethical behaviour at all educational levels. All articles contain practical suggestions for ways to implement the ideas discussed, and thus could have a lasting influence on the field of talent development.

Introduction

In this article, I nominate four scholarly articles I believe should have a considerable and enduring impact on the field of talent development. Each of these articles adopts a future-oriented perspective and examines issues that are becoming increasingly visible and exigent within education generally. Three of the four articles (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Borland, 2005; Gagné, 2011) deal directly with the issue of equity and access as it applies (or fails to apply) to current practice in gifted education, and call for a complete rethinking about how the field is constituted. In each case, the authors decry the definitional confusion they perceive surrounding notions of giftedness, talent and intelligence, and uphold the concept of talent development as the most efficient and equitable model for gifted programming in schools. Despite the similar concerns expressed by the respective authors, each of these three articles is distinct and unique in both its supporting arguments and consideration of associated themes. The fourth article (Sternberg, 2009) focuses on the issues of ethics and morality as they pertain to the personal and academic development of high-ability students. While keen moral judgment and an awareness of social justice have long been recognised as particular traits of giftedness (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011, *inter alia*), there

has been little attempt in the past to explore how a potential for superior moral performance may be coherently and concretely developed within the specialised context of gifted education (Tirri, 2009). In this article, Sternberg seeks to identify the intersections between character education and gifted education, and argues for the proactive and systematic teaching of ethical behaviour at all educational levels. The importance of this particular article lies in its powerful reminder that nothing occurs within an ethical vacuum, and that ethics and morality can – and should – add context and perspective to the talent development enterprise across an array of ability domains.

Each of the articles considered here outlines practical steps that may be implemented to operationalise the posited theory within schools and other educational contexts. Barab & Plucker (2002) detail a 'new' conception of talent development based on an adapted theory of situated learning, and endorse Renzulli and Reis's (1985) Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) as an appropriately complementary program. Borland suggests the types of curricular modifications that could be introduced in school settings to establish a label-free environment that fosters effective learning for all students. Gagné (2011) links his theoretical perspective on equity to the latest version of his Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT). Sternberg (2009) lists eight definitive steps that precede and facilitate ethical action. The incorporation of practical considerations in these articles further enhances their potentially lasting influence on the field of talent development.

As North America has historically tended to be the locus of much of the research effort and innovation in gifted education, it is perhaps unsurprising that all four articles were written by North American academics. Despite this, the concerns and issues they raise have global applicability. For instance, the ever-present 'specter of elitism' (Gagné, 2011, p. 20), addressed to varying degrees in each article, provides an example of an issue specific to gifted education that undoubtedly extends across borders and cultures. Similarly, all the authors situate their respective arguments within the relevant historical context; in the case of Anglophone and European societies at least, these historical contexts are often largely shared or parallel ones. For the discussion that follows, I will consider each article individually, summarising its content and core arguments, and

defending its inclusion in my pantheon of influential contributions to the field of talent development.

Barab and Plucker (2002)

Barab and Plucker's (2002) complex and rigorous article challenges conventional foundational beliefs about intelligence and giftedness, and proposes an ecological view of talent and its development that 'acknowledges person-in-situation and locates talent fundamentally in the active relations of individual and environment' (p. 168). The authors adopt a multi-disciplinary perspective throughout this article, drawing on such diverse fields as cognitive science and Western philosophy to frame their argument. As well as referencing such ancients as Plato and Aristotle, the authors identify Descartes' Cartesian theory as a pervasive – and pernicious – influence on latter-day educational thought, arguing that its principles of dualism still underlie current praxis and inhibit the full realisation of alternative views and systems. According to the authors, the unexamined acceptance and perpetuation of Cartesian dualism – especially the perceived dichotomy between mind and body – enabled 'the creation of educational systems that focused on transmitting content into individual minds' (p. 165), an agenda that continues to effectively separate the learner from the learning context. Barab and Plucker repudiate the decontextualisation engendered by dualism to assert that ability is not something possessed by, or located within, an individual mind, but arises out of complex interactions between individual and environment. In terms of school-based practice, then, giftedness resides not within the student but within his or her context; talent development is therefore conceived as a series of 'talented transactions' (p. 175).

Barab and Plucker point out that while some contemporary models of giftedness and talent do acknowledge environmental influences, none 'directly articulate (*sic*) explicit processes for how these interactions occur' (p. 166). The authors also contend that contemporary methods for identifying giftedness are largely predicated on objectively testing students in 'impoverished contexts' (p. 166) that bear little relation to the environments in which they function. Instead, Barab and Plucker propose an interactive model that seeks to establish 'rich contexts that engage talented interactions with all individuals' so that each student can become 'an active agent who coproduces meaning and context' (p. 175). The

emphasis on active engagement and co-determination is reflected in choice of terminology as well; throughout the article, the authors favour the term 'knowing', with its connotations of activity, dynamism and process, to the more static and abstract term 'knowledge'.

The article's title refers to 'the age of situated approaches to knowing and learning', which encompasses various innovations and advances in cognitive and educational psychology since the 1980s (p. 168). The authors identify 'five areas of theory and research that hold promise for reconceptualizing talent development' (p. 166), namely ecological psychology, situated cognition, distributed cognition, activity theory, and legitimate peripheral participation. These areas all relate to the wider concept of situated learning, which Sadler (2009, p. 2) describes as:

a theoretical perspective on the nature of knowing and learning, which emphasises the situatedness of learners in specific environments ... [and] suggests that knowing and learning cannot be abstracted from the environments in which they take place.

An important advantage of Barab and Plucker's formulation is that it effectively avoids any deleterious effects of unnecessary categorisation; within this view, it is the *context* that is labelled 'smart', rather than the student. Additionally, such a theory also expands the traditionally narrow conceptions of giftedness and talent development, which accords with other contemporary models that emphasise the multifaceted nature of intelligence.

The ramifications of Barab and Plucker's context-based theory for the development of talent are significant and far-reaching; as the authors note (p.165):

by arguing that ability is part of the individual-environment transaction, we take the potential to appear talented out of the hands (or heads) of the few and instead treat it as an opportunity that is available to all although it might be actualized more frequently by some.

This hyper-democratic stance is more boldly expressed in the conclusion of the article, when

the authors declare: 'nobody has talent, yet everybody has the opportunity to engage in talented transactions' (p. 179). However, in a follow-up article published some three years later (Plucker & Barab 2005), the authors concede a slight moderation of their position, acknowledging that potential does not reside entirely within the 'smart' context but is contingent to a certain extent on a degree of external facilitation and personal agency: 'We would now say that *anyone can be talented, yet one needs the opportunity to engage in talented transactions to realize their giftedness*' (Plucker & Barab, 2005, p. 207, original emphasis).

The value of Barab and Plucker's article lies in the way it interrogates prevailing 'commonsense' notions that underscore, and perhaps constrain, our understandings of what talent development is, and how it should proceed. In doing so, the authors enlist a range of disciplines to sharpen their inquiry and bolster their argument. We are reminded that concepts such as 'giftedness', 'talent' and 'intelligence' are 'hypothesized constructs' (p. 165) which are not immutable, but invariably subject to social negotiation. The authors' declaration that 'all learning can be understood as talent development' (p. 175) does represent something of a polarised (and polarising) view. Yet the radical and totalising vision advanced by Barab and Plucker also raises pertinent, fundamental questions and enlivens debate, both of which can only act to extend and strengthen the field of gifted education generally, and talent development in particular.

Borland (2005)

The title of Borland's article, 'Gifted education without gifted children: The case for no conception of giftedness', is as provocative as it is seemingly paradoxical; throughout the subsequent argument, the author proposes a complete jettisoning of the whole concept of giftedness and gifted education as it is currently constituted, claiming it is a 'chimera' (Borland, 2005, p. 2) that does little to serve the interests of *any* student. Borland's argument hinges on the 'vicious inequities' (p. 12) that he believes are a direct result of the identification and labelling practices commonly associated with school-based gifted and talented programs. The identification of a 'gifted' group within a school population immediately creates a collateral mass of undifferentiated students who are deemed 'non-gifted'. In light of this artificial and 'morally untenable' (p. 1) schism, Borland (2007, p. 7)

starkly poses the question: 'Is anything in life that simple, that easily dichotomized?'

The first section of Borland's article details the historical background to the gifted education movement, the 'invention' of which, Borland contends (2005, p. 3), had more to do with socio-political expediency than empirical or educational necessity. The author locates the advent of the giftedness construct within the particular social, cultural and political milieu of early twentieth-century America. Prior to this time, giftedness did not exist as an area of educational inquiry 'simply because the construct of the gifted child had not yet been dreamed up' (p. 3). The conception of giftedness was also heavily inflected by prevailing misconceptions about cognition; historically, intelligence was viewed in strictly quantitative terms as 'the same thing for everyone, and everyone had a certain amount of it' (p. 3). Like Barab and Plucker (2002, p. 165), Borland identifies a logical fallacy underpinning traditional definitions of giftedness, noting that 'the category was created in advance of the identification of its members, and the identification of the members ... is predicated on the belief that the category exists and serves, tautologically, to confirm the category's existence' (p. 7). By situating giftedness within its historical context, Borland reinforces its status as a socially contrived and negotiable phenomenon, and casts the figure of the gifted child as something of an anachronous artifact.

Borland also invokes Foucauldian theories of knowledge, power and discourse to reveal and explain how the unqualified acceptance of a particular hegemonic view of gifted education can persist. He links Foucault's second technology of power – the 'normalizing gaze' – to attempts in early twentieth-century America to 'quantify and control' (p. 5) a school population that was becoming increasingly multicultural. This type of surveillance, Borland argues, also acted as a prelude to the rise of mental testing as a basis for classifying students, a strategy that continues, if only vestigially, to this day. He notes that a possible educational response to these underlying forces is 'to make curriculum and instruction flexible enough to accommodate the needs of all children, foregoing classification, labeling, and the examination in the Foucaultian (*sic*) sense that incorporates the normalizing gaze' (p. 6). He argues that the implementation of appropriately differentiated curricula eradicates the putative need for special gifted provision, along with the attendant

stigmatisation and accusations of elitism that often ensue. It is this focus on creating the best outcomes for students of all ability levels that marks Borland's article as a worthwhile and seminal contribution to the field of talent development.

Gagné (2011)

It is often claimed that gifted students are among the most misunderstood and underserved members of a school's population (e.g., Borland, 1989; Gross, 2004). At the same time, there have been numerous studies and papers, both in Australia and internationally, that highlight the problem of inequitable access to existing gifted programs, especially for students from low socio-economic status (SES) families and particular ethnic or racial backgrounds (e.g., Borland & Wright, 2000; Chaffey, 2008; Ford, 1996). In this article, Gagné confronts the issue of ethnic disproportion, attempting to account for why this is considered a problem in some talent development situations, yet readily accepted in others. Like Barab and Plucker (2002) and Borland (2005), he challenges commonly held assumptions about giftedness and gifted education that appear to perpetuate and magnify inequity. In light of his examination of the theoretical background, Gagné advocates a re-visioning of the field so that flexible notions of process are privileged over fixed notions of product, a situation he maintains already exists in some areas related to talent development. Gagné (2011, p. 19) further asserts that an emphasis on the developmental aspects of academic talent would foster a meritocratic performance-based ideology that could potentially act to enhance excellence and 'render the equity issue obsolete'.

In this article, Gagné questions why the underrepresentation of certain ethnic minorities in gifted programs is widely documented and lamented, while the *over*representation of other minorities, specifically those from Asian backgrounds, remains largely taken for granted. In positing his argument, Gagné considers three specific talent-related examples where ethnic overrepresentation appears to be accepted without question: the admissions profile at the state-run University of California campuses (mostly European and Asian), ethnic disproportion among postgraduate music students (overwhelmingly Asian), and ethnic representation in various professional sports (mostly Black). Gagné concludes that disproportionate representation in these specific

areas remains widely accepted and unexplored because access is seen to be based purely on a meritocratic ideology.

Gagné criticises the field of gifted education for failing to heed the clues presented in other arenas of talent development and adhering to outmoded and harmful ideologies that shackle the discipline. He refers to 'measurement noise' (p. 14), the cacophony of meaningless figures and quotas that only serve to detract from the 'real business' of talent development. Gagné also points to the inadequacy and inappropriateness of the term 'gifted' and, like Barab and Plucker and Borland, recommends that a more palatable terminology be enlisted. He argues that the DMGT can support the performance ideology necessary to address the equity issue. Certainly, two major strengths of Gagné's model – its allowance for the existence of able underachievers and the espousal of a range of ability domains – tend to lend credence to Gagné's claim.

Does Gagné's proposal render the equity issue irrelevant, as he asserts, or merely invisible? He notes how a 'meritocratic ideology does not address issues of etiology; it focuses on the here and now of achievement' (p. 10). Undoubtedly, some commentators will view Gagné's position in this article as something of a denial, or an attempt to conceal or even excuse the more insidious aspects of a very real and intractable issue. While this criticism may be justifiable to some extent, I believe it does tend to miss Gagné's key point about equity and access: that the abandonment of a 'gifted program' approach in favour of a focus on developing natural gifts into actualised talents could potentially provide a greater range of opportunities for a greater number of students across a greater spectrum of endeavours.

Sternberg (2009)

Sternberg's article perhaps represents something of a departure from the previous three articles examined in this paper in that he does not propose a radical reworking of the discourse surrounding gifted education and talent development. What he does advocate is the *incorporation* of ethical behaviour education into existing and future programs for highly able students. Although students of high ability are often credited with a greater sense of moral awareness, knowledge of what constitutes ethical behaviour does not necessarily translate into its execution (Bandura, 1999; Sternberg, 2003,

2008, 2009; Tirri, 2011); Sternberg (2009, p. 129) insists that 'children need to be taught the sequence of processes leading to ethical thinking and to inoculate themselves against pressures – both external and internal – to behave in unethical ways.' In response to the apparent difficulty of transmuted moral theory into practice, Sternberg presents a practical model comprising eight distinct, sequential phases to enact ethical behaviour. The process begins with recognising whether a particular problem has an ethical dimension in the first place, and subsequently includes evaluating the merit of responding, generating possible solutions, applying learnt or known rules and, prior to completing the ethical action, 'counteracting contextual forces that lead one *not* to act in an ethical manner' (p. 123, emphasis added). While I have paraphrased the stages involved here, Sternberg spends much of the article delineating and discussing each step. He also connects ethics to wisdom, a concept he has previously hypothesised in detail (Sternberg, 2003, 2008) and which he defines as 'a decision to use one's intelligence, creativity, and knowledge for a common good' (Sternberg, 2009, p. 128).

Sternberg's article first appeared in a special issue of *High Ability Studies* (2009) devoted to character education and giftedness, edited by Finnish academic Kirsi Tirri. Tirri (2009, p. 117) notes how both moral and character development 'have been quite neglected fields of study among high ability students'. She also points to the pressing need for more research and discussion in this area. I believe the enduring value of Sternberg's article is that it provides such a spur for further inquiry. It also reminds us that ethical behaviour, like giftedness, cannot flourish in an environment of what Borland (2005, p. 2) calls 'benign neglect' but requires active, structured intervention. The fields of ethics and character education are undergoing something of a resurgence (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; Lapsley & Power, 2005) and, in many ways, Sternberg's article captures the educational *zeitgeist*. Certainly, the notion of a 'moral talent' that complements, contextualises and informs other fields of endeavour seems to be a talent worth developing in highly able students.

Conclusion

The four articles that I have examined were selected partly because they engage with issues confronting education generally, both in Australia and overseas. Equitable access to schooling and the role of ethics seem to me to be

issues that can only become more manifest and urgent in an increasingly complicated, globalised world where societies are viewing their populations more and more as 'human capital'. At the same time, the field of gifted education is facing its own challenges, not the least of which is a crisis of identity. The first three articles question the validity of the gifted education construct, exposing its inherent flaws and advocating change at the paradigmatic level. The authors of these articles embrace the notion of talent development as a more beneficial and just way to cater for students, whether they are deemed highly able or not. While Sternberg's article does not concentrate on talent development *per se*, I feel its emphasis on *ethical* development illuminates other dimensions and possibilities within the field. Together, all four articles seek to expunge the taint of exclusivity often surrounding gifted education and talent development programs, offering pragmatic solutions that ensure all students receive educational opportunities commensurate with their aptitudes and needs. This pragmatism, along with the debate-generating visions these articles offer, will guarantee that their impact is felt well into the future.

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