Gifted girls: Dispelling the misconception of gender equity in gifted education

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Abstract

In the field of education, specialised programs for gifted students are paramount to ensuring an appropriately challenging and rigorous learning experience. Unfortunately, these programs are not always equitable. With regard to gifted girls, gender disparity and preconceived societal stereotypes of female students can inhibit girls' access to such educational opportunities. This paper intends to dispel the misconception that gifted girls receive equitable access to gifted programs. This will be achieved through an evaluation of their characteristics, identification practices, and underachievement. Effective strategies will subsequently be proposed to address this prevailing issue in the field of gifted education.

Key words: gifted education, girls, gender stereotypes, identification, equity

Why Gifted Girls?

Despite advances in gender equality in recent history (Kerr, 2003; Reis, 2003), disparity remains on many levels, directly affecting the success, achievement, and development of girls and women. It is naïve to operate on the assumption that gender inequality is an issue of the past: women still earn less than men overall (Nelson & Smith, 2001), encounter greater personal choices about relationships, and face more challenges with regard to career choice and advancement (Reis & Hébert, 2008). The perception that gender inequality is irrelevant to contemporary discourse also pervades the domain of education. Many educators are still confounded by the ongoing nature of the debate (Sadker, 2000) and question its relevance in the twenty-first century classroom. According to Fox, Sadker, and Engle (1999), given recent (at the time) societal gains, it made sense that many people would assume gender parity had already been achieved. While gender bias is significantly less problematic in today's society,

its impact is no less potent (Sadker, 2000) on the development of young people – especially girls.

Historically, women have been neglected in the field of education and have faced greater challenges regarding equal access to appropriate programs (Bianco, Harris, Garrison-Wade, & Leech, 2011; O'Neil, 2011). This is especially pertinent for girls placed in gifted education programs, who face additional barriers and challenges in order to achieve their goals (Davidson, 2012; Fox, Sadker, & Engle, 1999; Kerr & Multon, 2015; O'Neil, 2011; Sadker, 2000). While this perspective may appear to contradict the overarching philosophy and inherent values of a modern-day education (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008; Petersen, 2013), it highlights the need for continued research, development, and systemic change in this field. Moreover, it reinforces Reis and Callahan's (1989) view that while ability may be equal, such equal opportunity is never guaranteed. This decades-old standpoint, while admittedly applicable to a range of disparities, remains glaringly appropriate in the discussion of gifted girls.

This article intends to dispel misconceptions about the accepted equity of girls in gifted education. First, an evaluation of the characteristics of gifted girls, identification, and underachievement will be conducted in relation to relevant literature on gifted education. Parallels will be subsequently drawn to identify how misconceptions about gifted girls may influence teaching practice, school policy, and government policy. Finally, effective strategies will be recommended to address the misconception surrounding the equitable education and achievement of gifted girls.

Characteristics of Gifted Girls

Gifted children differ from one another in a wide range of ways. This includes, but is not limited to, students' possible learning styles, motivation, energy levels, language skills, and background (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018). Additionally, gifted children differ in their patterns of educational needs (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018). When considering the issue of gender equity in gifted education, it is imperative to distinguish between the characteristics of boys and girls. Reis and Hébert (2008) supported this, arguing that males and females differ in fundamental ways. For the purpose of this study, the characteristics of gifted girls will be evaluated in greater depth.

While an understanding of specific traits of gifted students from both sexes is important to note (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018), there are some characteristics, which gifted girls

possess, that distinguish them from their male counterparts. Reis and Hébert (2008) argued that gifted girls possess a number of distinct personality factors, personal priorities, and social and emotional issues, and that these factors may illuminate why many gifted girls cannot realise their potential. Similarly, Reis, Callahan, and Goldsmith (1994) deduced that the expectations of girls differed from that of boys with regard to future education, career, family, school, achievement, and their individual concepts of gender difference. Additionally, Fox, Sadker, and Engle (1999) identified that girls begin to lose self-esteem in the early high school years, which can contribute to their lack of self-concept. It is clear that these varied assumptions reflect stereotypical gender expectations held within society. For gifted girls, who may appear precocious in thought, are logical thinkers, display ability in mathematics and science, have more advanced moral development and greater empathy, and are independent and self-confident (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018), traditional, expected characteristics propagated by society can be wildly confounding. Importantly, these conflicting messages can inhibit the potential of gifted females (Reis, 2001) and hinder equal access to gifted education programs.

It is important to note that while gifted girls appear to display stereotypically feminine characteristics and conform to societal expectations (Arms, Bickett, & Graf, 2008; Fox, Sadker, & Engle, 1999), they have also been found to share common traits with gifted boys. Kerr and Multon (2015) noted that while gifted girls may be less inclined to take challenging academic risks, they tend to have interests more aligned with gifted boys, than typical girls. This creates inherent issues for gifted girls, who ultimately face social and peer challenges pertaining to acceptance. O'Neil (2011) supported this, arguing that girls respond to social cues and demands that reward the nice, humble, well-mannered girl with social acceptance. Despite the shared characteristics between gifted boys and girls (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018), it is evident that pre-conceived gender characteristics and stereotypes can greatly influence girls' access and placement in gifted educational programs.

Identification of Gifted Girls

It has been stated that gifted girls face many potential hurdles that ultimately prevent them from participating in selective, gifted programs (Preckel & Brüll, 2008). One such hindrance is recognised in teacher referrals, which remains a key avenue in the identification of gifted students (Persson, 1998). Considering this, it is important to address the impact of teacher perceptions and gender biases in this process (Baudson & Preckel, 2016). According to Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008), deficit thinking is a contributing factor to a lack of diversity

in gifted education programs. Thus, it can be argued that when teachers view students through a deficit lens, their focus becomes on what the student cannot accomplish (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). Applying this concept to misconceptions about gifted girls, teachers may focus on oppositional behaviours including arrogance and bossiness (Bianco et al., 2011), thus deeming them unsuitable for a rigorous, challenging gifted education program. Arms, Bickett, and Graf (2008) supported this statement, emphasising that girls are less likely to be identified through the referral process.

Findings from a study of gender biases in teacher referrals (Bianco et al., 2011) asserted that teachers' biases existed when nominating students for gifted services. When teachers were asked to evaluate the appropriateness of a referral for an identically described male and female student, the female student was deemed unprepared for the gifted program, due to perceived social incompetence (Bianco et al., 2011). Interestingly, such commentary did not apply to the male student, who was identified by teachers as needing to be challenged, and possessing strong leadership skills (Bianco et al., 2011). This study affirms the gender inequity that pervades gifted education programs. Moreover, it reiterates the continued prevalence of gender stereotypes within the classroom (Reis, 2001).

Additionally, researchers have identified that teachers possess varying beliefs about domains of excellence, based on a student's gender (Hernández-Torrano & Tursunbayeva, 2016). According to Gagné (1993), teachers determined that boys were more adept in physical and technical skills, whilst girls' talents were more pronounced in the arts and socio-emotional skills. These beliefs ultimately contribute to a gender imbalance in the classroom, with teacher nominations often growing from these societal typecasts. Thus, the research makes clear the inequity that resides in the identification of gifted girls.

Underachievement in Gifted Girls

While the concept of underachievement in gifted students is complex (Reis & McCoach, 2000) and can contradict common perceptions of gifted students (Rubenstein, Siegle, Reis, Greene Burton, & McCoach, 2012), it can be understood in relation to gifted girls. According to Reis and McCoach (2000), underachievers exhibit a discrepancy between expected achievement and the actual achievement outcome. Rimm (2008) echoed this sentiment, but drew parallels with students' motivation, arguing that underachievers display a lack of confidence to succeed. Furthermore, Rubenstein, Siegle, Reis, Greene Burton and McCoach

(2012) argued that the effects of underachievement can directly impinge students' lives and pursuit of self-actualisation.

According to Peterson (2001), underachieving students identified negative influences on their lives including absent or disinterested adult figures, gaining unwanted attention, and being misunderstood by others. Reis and Hébert (2008) agreed, suggesting that in the context of gifted girls societal pressures and influences significantly contribute to female students' potential for underachievement. Considering the available research pertaining to the inequity of gifted girls' education, it is evident how underachievement may arise for female students. Reis and Hébert (2008) supported this, emphasising that being identified as gifted may present social challenges for girls and result in unwanted attention (Peterson, 2001). Furthermore, researchers have indicated that gifted girls view being gifted as a disadvantage, due to negative reactions from their peers (Reis & Hébert, 2008). Reis and McCoach (2000) concurred, articulating that peer issues can contribute to both the achievement and underachievement of gifted students. As a result, girls may hide their intelligence and mask their abilities, so as to gain social approval from their peers (Reis & Hébert, 2008). Tannen (1990) echoed this, emphasising that girls are reluctant to display their achievements in a public sphere to avoid appearing unlikeable amongst their social groups.

While there are many additional factors and characteristics to broadly consider in the underachievement of gifted students (Reis & McCoach, 2000), it is evident from the literature that social and emotional influences are particularly pertinent in the context of gifted girls, notably with regard to underachievement. Thus, the literature serves to illustrate the extent to which girls may be disadvantaged in gifted education as a result of pre-determined and socially accepted gender roles.

Implicit and Explicit Influences of Gifted Girls

It can be deduced from the literature that gender disparity in gifted education perseveres in the contemporary classroom (Bianco et al., 2011; Fox, Sadker, & Engle, 1999; Reis, 2001). The misconception surrounding gifted girls – that they receive equitable access to programs and curriculum – has an inevitable influence on teaching practice, school policy, and government policy. An understanding of these implicit and explicit influences is paramount in effecting systemic change in the education of gifted girls.

Misconception surrounding gifted girls can have an implicit effect on the practice of teachers. This perspective aligns with the literature and research findings pertaining to the

identification of gifted girls, and reiterates the resounding influence of gender stereotypes in education. In their study, Bianco et al. (2011) found that despite teachers striving to provide a balanced, equitable education for boys and girls, they continue to receive different treatment, based on their gender. This presents in teaching practice in a seemingly subtle manner; however the impact on the education of gifted girls becomes much more profound. According to Fox, Sadker, and Engle (1999), teachers are more inclined to question boys more frequently than girls, thus providing them with more active teaching attention. Bianco et al. (2011) reiterated this argument, stipulating that boys are regularly given more instructional time, teacher attention, and positive feedback than girls. Moreover, according to Cooley, Chauvin, and Karnes (1984), teachers have higher expectations from their interactions with gifted boys than gifted girls. Additionally, teachers may unknowingly perpetuate gender stereotypes through textbooks or curriculum resource selection (Reis, 2001), thus negatively impacting female students. These subtleties, whilst seemingly minute, converge to perpetuate disparity and hinder the success and achievement of gifted girls.

At a school-wide level, gender equity is yet to be achieved (Reis, 2001). This therefore raises questions pertaining to equitable educational opportunities for boys and girls within schools. Implicit influences can be noted through school programming and curriculum (Reis, 2001), which inherently connect with teachers' classroom practice. This can be identified in the selection of teaching resources as well as broader classroom activities (Reis, 2001). It is also important to note the pertinence of school climate and culture (Patterson & Pahlke, 2011) in dispelling myths relating to equitable education for gifted boys and girls. Again, parallels can be drawn between this factor and a teacher's perception or bias toward one gender over another. Bianco et al. (2011) articulated that an explicit influence on school policy could be noted in the form of targeted teacher training and professional development opportunities, or through specific student wellbeing policies. Lassig (2009) also emphasised the influential role of teacher training and development programs to dispel misconceptions about gifted education; this includes teachers' preconceived gender biases. While drawing on the importance of school culture and climate, it is also important to acknowledge the current educational landscape, particularly in Australia, where single-sex schools are highly common (Patterson & Pahlke, 2011). Evidently, further research is required to determine the effects of gender inequity in gifted education if the male variable was removed. Then again, gendered stereotypes could still be propagated through classroom teaching practice (Reis, 2001) and preconceived teacher biases (Bianco et al., 2011).

Assessing misconceptions about gifted girls from a government policy perspective highlights explicit concerns, which are noted through published guidelines and policies regarding the right to a fair and challenging education for every child (MCEETYA, 2008). Importantly, without a federal mandate or funding for gifted education, individual states and territories are able to devise their own frameworks for the delivery of such programs (Walsh & Jolly, 2018). While not directly inhibiting the education of gifted girls, it ultimately contributes to a lack of clarity and equity with regard to a universal approach within the Australian context. It should be noted that the evolution of an Australian Curriculum presents opportunities for national cohesion with regard to education (Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2015); however, within this framework lie numerous definitions for giftedness, which again highlights discrepancies surrounding gifted education. Alongside the explicit influences that can be produced by offering appropriate teacher development opportunities in schools (Lassig, 2009), government-mandated teacher education and pre-service programs that specifically address gifted education are lacking in the Australian context (Walsh & Jolly, 2018). If the field of gifted education is not fully understood or acknowledged at a government level, this undoubtedly raises important questions about equal opportunities for gifted girls. Thus, it can be argued that without adequate federal policies, gender disparity within gifted programs will remain ingrained across all echelons of the education sector.

Recommendations and Strategies for Gifted Girls

There are several strategies and responses that can support the equitable learning, development, and achievement of gifted girls. The following recommendations do not provide an exhaustive list of strategies; rather, they offer a foundation for teachers and other professionals in the sector to meet the diverse needs of gifted girls. Ultimately, these recommendations aim to effect systemic change and foster equitable gifted education for all students.

Government-level recommendations
- Updated policy pertaining to gifted education (Walsh & Jolly, 2018), including providing a unified definition and expectations for individual state education bodies that meets the needs of all gifted students, regardless of gender.
- Federal provisions and funding provided to enhance gifted education programs (Walsh & Jolly, 2018).

- Compulsory pre-service teacher tertiary education courses in gifted education (Walsh & Jolly, 2018), including providing an awareness of identification biases relating to gifted girls.

- Modification of the teaching standards to explicitly include the teaching of gifted students (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011).

School-level recommendations

- School-wide familiarisation with the concept and domain of gifted education, including identification practice, student characteristics, and provisions (O'Neil, 2011).

- Championing of gifted programming and targeted co curricular and extra curricular pursuits (Reis, 2001).

- Modification of school culture and climate, including dispelling sexism, gender stereotypes, and biases (Patterson & Pahlke, 2011).

- Providing adequate opportunities for girls to discuss their career paths and aspirations. This can include the employ of a designated careers counsellor, careers fairs, and work experience placements (Reis, 2001).

- Providing teachers with opportunities for professional development in gifted education, including: teaching gifted students, strategies for identifying gifted students, and fostering achievement in gifted girls (Bianco et al., 2011).

- Encourage female students' involvement in leadership roles (Reis, 2001).

- Model positive female leadership for students through the promotion of female teachers and professional services staff members (Reis, 2001).

- Provide an opportunity for parents to engage with teachers to support students' achievements (Nelson & Smith, 2001).

- Encourage parents to send positive messages about gender stereotypes (Reis & Hébert, 2008).

Classroom-level recommendations

- Practice equitable teaching strategies. This can include distributing teacher attention fairly, providing equitable wait time for student responses, and providing equal and effective teacher feedback to all students, regardless of gender or ability (Fox, Sadker, & Engle, 1999).

- Combat gender bias through discouraging conformity, adjusting instructional language, raising classroom expectations, celebrating student achievement, celebrating achieving women, and selecting teaching resources thoughtfully (O'Neil, 2011).

- Grouping gifted females homogenously, and encouraging positive relationships with other gifted girls (Reis, 2001).
- Provide opportunities for creative expression across several modalities (Reis, 2001).
- Provide specific feedback that teaches gifted girls their success is due to more than luck, and their failure is not due to a lack of ability (Heller & Ziegler, 1996; Randall, 1997).
- Provide opportunities to teach problem solving (Randall, 1997).
- Model a strong work ethic for students (Davidson, 2018).
- Understand the nature of gifted girls to help teachers identify signs of giftedness and social aptitude, their internal and external barriers, their tendency toward perfectionism, and their internalisation of gender bias (O'Neil, 2011).

Conclusion

Sadker (2000) articulated that the issue of gender equity still evades many educators. Considering the gains women have made over the past half-century (Kerr, 2003; Reis, 2003), it may be understandable how they might arrive at that assumption, however warped it may be. What is most explicit from the literature and empirical research is that gender equality is far from resolved. Sexism lingers between the pages of classroom textbooks (Fox, Sadker, & Engle, 1999), and pre-conceived societal gender stereotypes are frequently propagated in the contexts of the classroom, school, and wider community. With regard to gifted education, female students remain in the minority (Preckel & Brüll, 2008). Additionally, teacher perceptions can inhibit the identification and advancement of gifted girls (Bianco et al., 2011), and parental messaging can implicitly reinforce traditional gender roles (Reis & Hébert, 2008).

This article aims to highlight some key issues regarding misconceptions about gifted girls, and their equitable access to specialised education programs. This has been achieved by evaluating some of the characteristics of gifted girls, issues relating to identification practices, and the prevalence of underachievement in gifted education. Moreover, the implicit and explicit influences on teaching practice, school policy, and government policy were discussed to dispel the myth that gifted girls and boys receive equal representation in educational programs. Finally, a range of strategies across various levels of the education spectrum has been proposed. These strategies intend to break down the internal and external barriers faced by girls in gifted education. While it is a start, it is clear from the literature that there is still ground to be covered in the quest for parity.

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