

Elitism

Matthews, D. J. (2009). Elitism. In B. A. Kerr (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of giftedness, creativity, and talent* (pp. 307-309). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Elitism is the belief that a select few are superior to others. Charges of elitism have been made against gifted education since the field's inception, and the history of attitudes, assumptions, policies, and practices suggests that too often the charges have been justified. Over the past 25 years, however, there has been a shift in definition, identification, and programming policies, such that the charge of elitism is considerably less valid than it once was.

Early work that focused on exceptionally advanced ability assumed that giftedness, creativity, and talent were innate and permanent. It focused on attempts to measure and quantify these attributes in order to identify certain people as gifted, creative, and/or talented relative to others, and advocated that labeled children be provided with enriched learning opportunities, often in segregated classrooms or special schools. Not surprisingly, many educators, as well as parents of children excluded from the special categories, considered the enterprise elitist, and found it untenable. The fact that children from certain minorities, and from rural and less privileged backgrounds, were less likely to be assigned to the preferred categories added to the weight of the claims of elitism. Somewhat predictably, all of this led to political pressures to reduce or eliminate funding and support for gifted programs.

Over the past quarter century or so, many factors came together to challenge the perspective that some children are born more intelligent, creative, or talented than others. One factor was the popularity of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, the idea that people can be intelligent in a number of different domains. Another challenge came from the

neurosciences, with discoveries that the human brain is built by a complex and dynamic interaction between constitutional and environmental factors. Research findings in cognitive psychology and brain development show that intelligence is not as unidimensional or as fixed at birth as had been assumed, but is considerably more domain-specific, plastic, and environmentally responsive.

Similarly, researchers studying expertise have discovered that ability is incrementally developed, built on effort, practice, and persistence, along with attitudes of problem-finding and problem-solving. Allied with this, studies of motivation are demonstrating that attitudes toward intelligence make an enormous difference in achievement outcomes. There is now a robust body of evidence demonstrating that people with a growth mindset—believing that intelligence develops, that ability is constructed one step at a time, with appropriate opportunities to learn and hard work over time—do better academically, as well as in many other areas of their lives, than do those with a fixed mindset, who believe that intelligence is fixed at birth, and differentially apportioned.

Another difference between the historic approach and the developmental approach concerns perceptions of the origins of giftedness, creativity, and talent. Although the historic emphasis was on genetic superiority, most psychology and education professionals today agree that both nature and nurture are critically important, and are increasingly focused on the developmental nature of intelligence, its dependence on opportunities to learn, and the importance of the goodness of fit with the environment. As we move from a notion of innate genetic causality and toward understanding the importance of environmental dimensions interacting over time, giftedness, creativity, and talent become less mysterious and exclusive, and more widely available.

For many years, critics argued that gifted education exacerbated social, economic, and racial disparities. What observers have been noting recently, however, is that when educators provide a curriculum match for advanced learners, not only are students' academic needs better met, but there are also fewer concerns about elitism. That is, when educators employ a special education approach, and address individual students' domain-specific gifted learning needs, the resulting programs are more consistent with emerging knowledge of human development, and foster giftedness more broadly across the population. Over the past 25 years, we have learned that the gifts, creativity, and talent that were previously seen as mysteriously bestowed on a select few, are actually not so mysterious at all, but rather a function of appropriate opportunities to learn, in combination with psychosocial factors like motivation, drive, confidence, and persistence.

The models differ significantly in implications for educational placement. Under the historic mystery model, the first choice was a fulltime segregated classroom, where a gifted, creative, or talented child was educated with categorically similar children. Increasingly, however, experts are advocating a broad range of learning options that support learning mastery, including many kinds of acceleration, extracurricular and enrichment opportunities, online learning, and also fulltime special classes for those who are highly gifted or talented in a specific domain, as appropriate to the child's learning needs at a given point in time.

Because of the mastery model's flexible responsiveness to individual differences, and more fluid connections with general education, it encompasses racial, economic, gender, and cultural diversity. When gifted learning options are flexibly targeted to special learning needs, giftedness can be found in every school in every district, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, language, or culture. This approach not only better addresses the learning needs of students who

demonstrate exceptionally advanced ability, but also encourages high-level learning in those whose exceptionality might not otherwise be identified.

Increasingly, then, accepted practice in education and psychology is moving away from a categorization of some children as “gifted”, “creative”, or “talented” (with all others implicitly assigned then to the “not gifted”, “not creative”, and/or “not talented” categories), and toward a focus on individual differences in developmental trajectories, recognizing that pathways to high-level achievement are diverse, domain-specific, and incremental. It appears that exceptional abilities are not bestowed on a select elite after all, and that parents, educators, and individuals have considerably more influence on their development than previously realized.

Dona Matthews

To read more about the shift away from elitism:

Balchin, T., Hymer, B., & Matthews, D. J. (Eds.) (in press). *The RoutledgeFalmer Companion to Gifted Education: Toward a conceptualisation fit for the 21st century*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.

Ericsson, K. A., Charness, N., Feltovich, P. J., & Hoffman, R. J. (Eds.). (2006). *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Matthews, D. J., & Foster, J. F. (2005). *Being smart about gifted children: A guidebook for parents and educators*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

See also *Diversity, Domains of Talent, Expertise, Multiple Intelligences, Optimal Development, Talent Development, Underrepresentation of Minorities*