

Giftedness As Asynchronous Development

by Stephanie S. Tolan

We identify and then measure unusual intelligence ("giftedness") by externals -- performance and achievement. Sometimes we do this by personal observation, noting that a nine month old is speaking in full sentences or a toddler is picking out the words on cereal boxes. Sometimes we do it formally with standardized tests of one kind or another. Or we may assess portfolios of children's writing or other sorts of hands-on projects. No matter what method we use, we must inevitably focus on performance and/or achievement as we identify the gifted.

All too often we then go on to define the children themselves by the externals we have measured. Giftedness becomes achievement, and so seems to reside outside the individual, a reality having to do with grades, awards, scholarships, and ultimately career choice, position, wealth, success or eminence.

It is vital to remember that giftedness (in childhood and beyond) is an internal reality, mental processing that is outside of norms. Achievement, as important as it is, is merely an expression of that mental processing. Achievement may fluctuate depending on a student's immediate situation, his relationship with a particular teacher, the availability of courses of sufficient challenge and interest, even physical health. Giftedness does not depend on such variables. Whether or not it finds expression in achievement or unusual performance the internal difference remains.

That internal difference is likely to include emotional intensity, unusual awareness and tolerance of complexity and paradox, and a potential for extraordinary moral development. During childhood and beyond these innate attributes may enhance or interfere with performance on various tasks, depending in part on how well they are recognized, understood and guided by the adults in the child's environment.

The child who perceives typical rough and tumble competition on the playground as purposeless violence and connects that violence to persistent ethnic warfare on a global scale may become depressed and cynical about the future of humanity. He may withdraw and become a bitter, self-isolating loner. Or he may, instead, set himself the task of attempting to understand the roots of conflict, and commit himself to a life of peace-making and diplomacy.

A young adult able to grasp the astonishing complexity of the universe may hide from that complexity in the simpler details of a conventional daily life, or she may become a scientist dedicated to answering thus far unanswered questions about how the universe works. The capacities of mind that make up giftedness can create oddity or eminence, the unremarkable or the spectacular. For the individual they can create fulfillment and success or pain and confusion. Sometimes they create all of the above.

Often the products of gifted children's special mental capacities are valued while the traits that come with those capacities are not. For example, winning an essay contest on the dangers of global warming may get a student lots of attention and praise while her intense emotional

reaction to the threat technology poses to the planet and its life forms may be considered excessive, overly dramatic, even neurotic. If she tries to act on her beliefs by going on strike to force her family or school to renounce what she considers harmful technology, she may be ridiculed, scolded or even punished. Writing a winning essay is deemed not only okay, but admirable; being the sort of person she had to be to write it may not be considered okay.

When we focus only on what gifted children can do rather than on who they are, we ignore vital aspects of their developing selves and risk stunting their growth and muddying or distorting their sense of themselves and their worth.

Recently, to counteract the growing focus on achievement, a group of theorists, practitioners, and parents suggested a new definition of giftedness in children:

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991).

This view suggests that gifted children are on a developmental trajectory that is outside of norms from infancy onward. They reach recognized milestones of development on a schedule that is unique to them, putting them out of sync with society's expectations. In addition, they may be out of sync internally, with cognitive, social and emotional development on separate and sometimes quite different timetables.

The young gifted child may appear to be many ages at once. He may be eight (his chronological age) when riding a bicycle, twelve when playing chess, fifteen when studying algebra, ten when collecting fossils and two when asked to share his chocolate chip cookie with his sister. This variability in behavior and perception is difficult for parents and schools to handle and difficult for the child as well. It is hard to "fit in" consistently when so much of the child's environment is structured by chronological age, an age which may be for the gifted child the least relevant aspect of his development.

Many parents and teachers would like the gifted child to be perfectly "normal" in every way except the ability to perform academic tasks. Life would be so much easier that way. Over and over we see in media reports on gifted and highly gifted kids the assurance that (except for taking college courses in calculus while in the eighth grade) this child is just like everybody else. Even those who work in gifted education often spend a great deal of time and energy assuring people that gifted children are children first and gifted only secondarily, that they're "just kids" who need a little extra challenge in school.

This is simply not the case. Though they are clearly children, with children's needs for play, nurturing, structure and exploration, they have definite differences. A child who reads early and voraciously cannot be said simply to have attained a particular skill earlier than others. His life experience is different from that of other children his age who do not read. Reading expands his cognitive skills at a faster rate, and at the same time exposes him to information, to the feelings,

thoughts and experiences of fictional characters, and to the imaginations and ideas of adult writers. All this input is processed and sets the stage for the processing of more.

The same can be said of early language acquisition, since language plays a part not only in activating cognitive abilities, but also in the biological organization of the brain. Early abstract reasoning also means more to development than mere precocity. The earlier the child develops the psychological tools of higher thought, the more of his life experience will be processed with those tools. As the developmental trajectory diverges from the norm (very early in life) it takes on a unique shape that will remain unique.

Many gifted children are able to develop their gifts and use them productively. But some of these achievers, as adults, live their lives with a nagging discomfort with themselves. They focus, as the people in their childhood environment did, only on what they can do because they are ignorant of (or uncomfortable with) who they are.

The winner of the global warming essay contest may go on to a successful and lucrative career as an environmental lawyer. But she may condemn in herself the intensity of her emotional responses, just as they were condemned by family and others. She may choose to shut them down as best she can and so shut down important aspects of the energy that drives her.

Understanding giftedness as a stable aspect of the self, an issue of differential development, helps us to understand and support the whole gifted child, rather than only her accomplishments. Understanding and support makes it possible for a child to develop not only her ability to get good grades, win awards, and move ahead on the career path she chooses, but to feel comfortable with herself and valuable as a person.