Why Does Denmark Need Gifted Education?

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At 2 weeks old, Camilla smiled on cue. At 14 months, she spoke in sentences and had a vocabulary of over 250 words. By the age of 2 she could do a 60-piece puzzle. She was so far beyond the other children in her daycare that she became the teacher's helper. At three, Camilla taught herself to read.

What happens when children like Camilla enter school? Are schools prepared to allow her to progress at her own rate? Unfortunately, too often the answer to this question is no. Camilla is expected to wait patiently while other children learn skills and knowledge she has already mastered. She is implicitly taught to slow down her natural rate of learning to make the teacher and the other students more comfortable. But Camilla pays a price for her social adaptation (Kerr, 1994). She learns to be less than she can be, to slide by without stretching herself, to deny her talents, and, eventually, to trade her dreams for simpler, less demanding goals. This tragic waste of Camilla’s potential affects not only her, but all of society, for we have all lost whatever gifts she might have contributed. Instead of teaching to the lowest common denominator, schools need to become a place where individual differences are appreciated, and where talents are recognized and nurtured. Our world needs Camilla’s gifts, and the fully developed abilities of all gifted and talented children.

Are the Gifted Being Considered in Denmark?

Denmark’s educational system is in crisis. Students and teachers are being asked to spend considerably more time in school in the hope that extra time will result in better education for all. But have the needs of the gifted been taken into account in this initiative? More work—piled on higher and thicker—has no educational value for gifted students if it is MOTS (More Of The Same). When students have already mastered the material being taught, school can be pure torture. Many gifted students endure school, waiting for the time when their real learning occurs: after school hours at their computers. Adding more hours to their tedium, with disgruntled teachers who don’t want to be there, is likely to turn off Denmark’s brightest students. What a waste for these individuals and for Denmark. Limiting the development of gifted children limits the potential of Denmark’s development. Where does innovation come from, if not from the gifted sector?

So what is the solution? Recognition that gifted children are a special needs group. Giftedness is atypical development. It requires specially trained teachers who enjoy these fine minds, more abstract material, a different curriculum, faster paced instruction, grouping with one’s peers, independent study, opportunities to explore topics in depth, opportunities to pursue one’s passions, learning research skills so that one can be a producer of new knowledge (Silverman, 2013). The number of hours of education is irrelevant unless students receive quality education geared to their abilities.

Giftedness requires gifted education. Without specialized instruction, gifted children gain daily practice in underachievement. Like Camilla, they languish and eventually give up their dreams. Unhealthy for them and unhealthy for Denmark.

The Attack against the Gifted
Many believe that giftedness is an advantage that needs to be squelched so that all the others can “catch up” and have a fair chance at success. However, equal opportunity can never mean equal outcomes without obliterating individual differences. In the name of egalitarianism, gifted children are punished for being advanced.

Some believe that giftedness is a function of wealth, and it would be unfair to the others to give them even more advantages by offering them specialized education. In actuality, the gifted come from all social classes and children from low income and low education backgrounds have less opportunity to achieve academic success (Dickinson, 1970). They depend on public schools to identify their special abilities and develop their potential.

The refusal to acknowledge the existence of gifted children, and actively create environments where they can thrive, is a form of discrimination. Persecution of people of different religions, races, nationalities, and those with physical handicaps is not tolerated, but the gifted are still fair game. Kathi Kearney writes:

> Each time a taunt based on a child's exceptionality…is permitted in the classroom or on the playground, each time a highly gifted child is deliberately held back academically, each time a school policy prohibits academic acceleration or continuous progress, we need to ask, “What messages are we giving all children about developing talents, about the value of academic achievement, and about intellectual diversity?” The school climate needs to support all students—including the most gifted. We would never allow racial or ethnic slurs to go on unchecked in today’s schools, nor would we deliberately thwart the intellectual growth of a child with a disability. Yet, profoundly gifted children (and their families) routinely must deal with these issues…. (Kearney, 1993, p. 16)

School needs to be a safe place for gifted children. They need to be protected from bullying, teasing, ostracism (Silverman, 2013). Developmentally advanced children, like developmentally delayed children, are at risk in societies that prize sameness.

**The False Accusation of Elitism**

Much of the fear of elitism is based on the assumption that if individuals discover that they are unusually able, they will develop aristocratic values, caring little for the plight of others. However, research indicates that exactly the opposite is true. Giftedness often is accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility, empathy, moral concern and compassion (Dabrowski, 1972; Hollingworth, 1942; Marland, 1972; Passow, 1988; Terman, 1925; Ward, 1985). The gifted are the backbone of social reform and egalitarianism. They care desperately about injustice (Roeper, 1988). Programming for gifted students enhances these higher values, rather than creating an aristocracy.

When gifted students are placed in classes together, they do not come to the conclusion that they are “better than everyone else.” Rather, they are humbled by finding peers who know more than they do. Over 80 years ago, Hollingworth (1930) observed:

> Many of our pupils had their first experience of being equaled or surpassed at school
work when they entered the special class. Several interesting episodes arose to suggest that conceit was corrected, rather than fostered, by the experience of daily contact with a large number of equals. No child was found who could not endure this experience, but a few parents were unable to withstand the humiliation of having a child reduced from "the head of the class," and withdrew their children to the regular classes again, where they could continue unrivaled. (1930, p. 445, emphasis added)

Continental Airlines had it right when they called first class service “the elite class.” They didn’t give people IQ tests to sit up front—they just paid more. Elitism is, always has been, and always will be, a function of socio-economic differences, not intellectual ones. If elitism is an economic problem, only an economic shift can solve the problem. It is far easier to divide financial resources more equitably than it is to divide one child’s intelligence among the other students in the class.

Here is a surefire recipe for creating elitism. Students who are the smartest in their class throughout school, never open a book or take home homework, never interact with anyone nearly as bright as themselves, and achieve the highest marks without studying, can get a ballooned sense of their own importance and place in the universe. Separating gifted students from each other and ignoring their needs actually fosters elitism to a greater extent than congregating them for advanced instruction.

Parallels at the Extremes

When we look at the normal curve of intelligence, we see that the vast majority of the population (68%) is within one standard deviation (s.d.) of 100 IQ. Each standard deviation in either direction puts the child at risk for peer rejection and a lack of fit with the rate of learning in the regular classroom. At 2 s.d. below the norm (approximately 70 IQ), children often qualify for special education. A little over 2% of the population is considered to have needs so clearly differentiated from the norm that they are protected by federal mandates in many countries. In the United States, children who are 2 s.d. below the mean have access to individual intelligence tests as part of comprehensive psychological assessment, individualized education plans created by a staff of specialists, certified teachers, modified curriculum and teaching strategies, and due process, if the parents do not agree with the professionals. At 3 s.d. below the mean (approximately 55 IQ), even greater intervention is needed. There is a continuum of services depending upon whether a child’s abilities fall in the mildly, moderately, severely, or profoundly disabled range. Yet, children who are 2, 3, 4, even 5 standard deviations above the norm, are often placed in regular classrooms with no modifications of any kind (Silverman, 1993).

Like intellectual disability, giftedness is a different ground that affects all of life’s experiences. No one imagines that intellectual disability affects only learning rate, but many believe that the gifted are just like everyone else except that they learn faster. No one suggests that children who are developmentally delayed are “children first,” and that their delay is irrelevant. However, parents of children who are developmentally advanced are frequently admonished to remember that their children are “children first,” as if their giftedness were tangential to parental decisions.

More than one parent has heard, “Let’s take giftedness out of the equation,” from a well-meaning psychologist. You cannot buy pants without knowing the child’s height any more than you can deny the role that giftedness plays in one’s difficulties. (Amend & Beljan, 2009, pp. 133-134)
No one assumes that people outgrow intellectual impairment. Yet, I’ve heard many adults say, “I used to be gifted.” It is also worth noting that no other exceptionality is challenged to live up to its potential, nor is the rationale for funding based on the population’s potential to contribute to society.

**Giftedness as Asynchrony**

When giftedness is defined as high achievement in school or the potential for recognized accomplishment in adult life, it weakens the rationale for defensible gifted programs. For the better part of a century, we have known that achievement is very much a function of opportunity (Hollingworth, 1926), and greater opportunities for success are available to those who have greater financial resources. Recognized individual achievement is culturally determined (Silverman, 2013).

Another way of understanding giftedness is to see it as developmental advancement. In every culture, there are children who develop at a faster pace from early childhood on, are inquisitive to a greater degree than their agemates, generalize concepts earlier than their peers, demonstrate advanced verbal or spatial capacities at an early age, have superb memories, grasp abstract concepts, love to learn, have a sophisticated sense of humor, prefer complexity, are extraordinarily insightful, have a passion for justice, are profoundly aware, and experience life with great intensity.

This alternative way of perceiving giftedness has been captured by the Columbus Group in the following definition:

*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. (Columbus Group, 1991; Neville, Tolan & Piechowski, 2013)*

Internal asynchrony is due to differences in rates of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and skill development in the gifted child. Uneven development is mirrored in external adjustment difficulties since the gifted person often feels different from, or out of place with, others. External asynchrony, then, is the lack of fit of the gifted child with other same-aged children and with the age-related expectations of the culture.

Uneven development is a universal characteristic of giftedness. Gifted children, in any cultural milieu, have greater discrepancies among various facets of their development than average children (Silverman, 1993; 2002a). The clearest example of this unevenness is the rate at which mental development outstrips physical development. Binet constructed the *mental age* as a means of capturing the degree to which a child’s mental abilities differ from those of other children his or her chronological age (Binet & Simon, 1908). The concept of mental age has proved enormously helpful in the understanding of intellectual disability. We recognize the inherent difficulties of having a 17-year-old body with a 9-year-old mind. However, we still do not understand that it is equally problematic to have a 17-year-old mind trapped in the body of a 9 year old. This type of asynchrony doesn't arouse much sympathy.

A child’s mental age predicts the amount of knowledge he or she has mastered, the rate at which
the child learns, sophistication of play, age of true peers, maturity of the child’s sense of humor, ethical judgment, and awareness of the world. In contrast, chronological age predicts the child’s height, physical coordination, handwriting speed, emotional needs, and social skills. The greater the degree to which cognitive development outstrips physical development, the more “out-of-sync” the child feels internally, in social relations, and in relation to the school curriculum.

The intelligence quotient, originally named the “mental quotient” by William Stern (1910), is simply the ratio of mental age to chronological age multiplied by 100. Like Stern, Binet never claimed that the IQ test could measure the totality of intelligence. He viewed intelligence as a rich, complex, multifaceted gestalt—a myriad of dynamically interrelated abilities. Emotion and personality also played critical roles in his conception of intellectual ability. He believed that intelligence was highly influenced by the environment, and that it could be improved through appropriate instruction. From Binet’s developmental perspective, intelligence is a continuously evolving process, not a static amount of raw material that stays the same throughout life. Yet, intelligence testing is viewed today as a method of rigidly determining the limits of one's abilities—quite different from Binet’s intent. Consistent with Binet’s philosophy, the IQ should be seen as a minimal estimate of asynchrony—the extent to which cognitive development (mental age) diverges from physical development (chronological age).

A child of 9 with an IQ of 135 has a 12-year-old mind, while an exceptionally gifted 9 year old, with an IQ of 170, has a 15-year-old mind. Asynchrony also increases with age. At 6 years old, the child with an IQ of 135 had a mental age of 8, and at 12, the same child will be mentally 16. The child with an IQ score of 170 was four years advanced mentally at the age of 6, and at the age of 12, this child will be eight years older mentally than physically. So asynchrony cannot be thought of as static; it is dynamic, constantly changing.

The situation becomes even more complicated when it is understood that psychologically the child is an amalgam of many developmental ages (Tolan, 1989) and may appear to be different ages in different situations:

In terms of development chronological age may be the least relevant piece of information to consider. Kate, with an IQ score of 170, may be six, but she has a “mental age” of ten and a half.... Unfortunately, Kate, like every highly gifted child, is an amalgam of many developmental ages. She may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine while debating rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still. How can such a child be expected to fit into a classroom designed around norms for six year olds? (p. 7)

There is even a more challenging form of asynchrony: twice exceptionality. The most asynchronous child is highly gifted and learning disabled. A remarkable and growing number of gifted children have either recognized or undetected learning disabilities, such as auditory processing weaknesses (Silverman, 2002b), writing disabilities (Silverman, 2003), visual perception difficulties (Silverman, 2001), spatial disorientation, dyslexia, attentional deficits and Asperger Syndrome (Lovecky, 2004). Marked discrepancies between strengths and weaknesses continue into adult life.

The concept of giftedness as asynchrony is very useful in attempting to gain understanding and support for the gifted. The perennial concern about elitism is bypassed by adopting this perspective. Asynchrony is not a competitive concept. More asynchrony is not better.
If we recognize that giftedness is the mirror image of intellectual disability, the 2 to 3% at the other extreme of the curve, then we can appreciate the vulnerability of this group and the critical need for special provisions to insure their optimal development. One of the greatest hindrances to this awareness is that the gifted are the only ones with special needs who can pretend to be just like everyone else. Most gifted people expend an inordinate amount of energy their entire lives trying to hide their differences, all the while knowing in the inner recesses of their being that they are not like everyone else. Instead of feeling better than everyone else because they are smart, more often they feel that their differences make them defective. These feelings are expressed by a teenager in the book, *On Being Gifted*:

> We are not “normal” and we know it; it can be fun sometimes but not funny always. We tend to be much more sensitive than other people. Multiple meanings, innuendos, and self-consciousness plague us. Intensive self-analysis, self-criticism, and the inability to recognize that we have limits make us despondent. (American Association for Gifted Children, 1978, p. 9)

The gifted are “too” everything: too sensitive, too intense, too driven, too honest, too idealist, too moral, too perfectionistic, too much for other people! So they live with the great secret, instilled from early childhood on, that there is something inherently wrong with being who they are because they don’t fit in. It is emotionally damaging to be unacceptable in the place one must spend 5 hours of every day during the critical years of one’s development.

**Why is Gifted Education Needed?**

Because gifted children exist and they will continue to exist despite their lack of popularity. In fact, there are more and more gifted children being born each day, and we have a moral obligation to meet their needs. They need the opportunity for continuous progress; this as a basic educational right. *All children have the right to learn new concepts in school every day.*

Because, even though it is commonly believed that gifted children do not need any special provisions (Assouline, Foley Nicpon & Huber, 2006), many gifted children do *not* make it on their own. Estimates of the numbers of gifted students who drop out of school range from less than 1% to 5% of the U.S. gifted population (Matthews, 2009; Renzulli & Park, 2000), amounting to a conservative estimate of 200,000 gifted students. The exceptionally and profoundly gifted may be at higher risk of dropping out of school (Gross, 2009). Depression and suicidal ideation are not uncommon in the gifted (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). A considerable number of gifted youth find their way into juvenile courts (Harvey & Seeley, 1984; Seeley, 2003). Underachievement is a pervasive problem (Rimm, 2008). For every child with recognized gifts, still another goes unrecognized (Dickinson, 1970). Gifted children may have learning disabilities or other handicaps, and these dual exceptionalities tend to mask each other so that the child appears average (Silverman, 2009). And then there are countless cases of vanishing giftedness—those children whose talents are lost through lack of detection and nurturing (J. Gallagher, 1979; M. Lewis & Louis, 1991). Unrecognized and undeveloped talents may be lost permanently. The potential concert violinist must have a violin and continuous nurturing of this ability to fulfill his or her potential.

Because giftedness does not develop in a vacuum. We have romanticized the “self-made man,”
but research indicates that native ability requires considerable cultivation to develop fully (Bloom, 1985; Feldman, 1986). We cannot know how much talent has been lost for lack of discovery and development; nor can we assess the magnitude of that loss to the world—the music that was never composed, the medical cure that was never discovered, the political strategy that might have averted a war.

Because it is unethical to deny services to any special needs population. If children who are developmentally advanced had the same protection under the law as children who are developmentally delayed, it would also be illegal. It is unrealistic to expect a regular classroom teacher to teach one child addition and another pre-calculus. Yet, children of the same age may differ to that degree in their development. Special programs are essential for the welfare of children with special needs.

Because the vitality of Denmark is endangered when socialization is substituted for education. “Dumbing down” the curriculum prevents gifted students from being challenged. A one-size curriculum is as ill-fitting as putting everyone is the same size shoe. It is unconscionable to use the most capable students to serve as assistant teachers instead of allowing them to progress and develop their abilities.

Because it is misguided to believe that holding back the brightest students magically helps the slower ones; bringing the top down does not bring the bottom up.

Gifted children need a bill of rights:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Bill of Rights for Gifted Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➢ The gifted have the right to continuous progress in every subject area.</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ They have the right to early identification, individual assessment, and early intervention in order to promote their optimal development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ They have the right to be taught by teachers who have received training in the learning and emotional differences of gifted children.</td>
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<td>➢ They have the right to be placed with true peers who have similar abilities, interests, and pace of learning, in order to foster their social, emotional and academic development.</td>
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<td>➢ They have the right to individualized education designed to accommodate their asynchronous (uneven) development.</td>
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<td>➢ They have the right to be respected members of their school communities and to be protected from abuse.</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ They have the right to be listened to regarding their own needs.</td>
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Thank you for joining me in this important mission to create a solid foundation of support for the full development of all children, including gifted children.

References

are misinterpreted as pathological. Gifted Education International, 25, 131-143.
devlopement of twice-exceptional students : A message to counselors. Professional School Counseling, 10(1), 14-24.
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