From the archive

‘The myth of giftedness’ by Caroline Benn

Abstract:

This short piece from the Forum archive introduces Caroline Benn’s detailed critique of ‘The myth of giftedness’. Her starting point is the need to define and then demand comprehensive education as a basic educational right, set alongside a mapping of the modern giftedness movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

Keywords: selection; giftedness; ILEA

Introduced by Jane Martin

Originally presented across two numbers of *FORUM* in 1982, but here published in one number for the first time, the next two articles in our series documenting an ‘An Archive of Success’ are by American-born scholar-activist Caroline Benn (1926-2000). A co-founder of the Comprehensive Schools Committee (CSC) launched in 1965, and editor of *Comprehensive Education*, Benn co-authored – with Brian Simon – *Half Way There,* a research study on comprehensive education published in 1970. The same year she became chair of governors at Holland Park, one of London’s pioneer comprehensive schools (it opened in 1958), when school governance was less open to women and Inner London one of a minority of local authorities with school governing bodies.

As research officer of the national campaign for comprehensive education, Benn produced an annual survey of the gathering momentum towards a genuinely comprehensive education system. So great was her knowledge that, in the 1960s and 1970s, politicians and policy-makers would telephone her for information and she was co-opted as an expert member of the Inner London Education Authority and the education and science subcommittee of the Labour Party’s national executive. Besides being national president of the Socialist Educational Association, she was also a member of the United Kingdom Education Commission of UNESCO.

Educated both in America and in Britain, Benn believed passionately in the need to destroy the myth of ‘fixed innate ability’ and of a giftedness (and talent) limited to a few. That is, the idea that we are all born with a certain amount of ‘ability’ which can then be measured by an intelligence test and used to justify academic selection in the formal educational system. Although she believed in the concept of human genius, she did not think it could be defined and limited to the world of IQ testing, and she opposed all attempts to commandeer it for preserving academic selection and the existence in Britain of a flourishing private school sector designed to educate the traditional British elites.

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An experienced teacher in adult education, here she articulates not only her distrust of selection based on 'merit' but her fundamental opposition to the way fixed 'ability' thinking and discourse regards children. The fatalistic notions of the intelligence testers concerned her, and she contested meritocratic assumptions about the cultural contexts of learning and teaching that renewed emphasis then (and now) on those designated by the system as the exceptional and the clever. As a school governor, she supported the internal dynamic of comprehensive reorganisation as Holland Park began to engage with the problem of how to devise a curriculum through which all children can learn. Always she stressed the educational deficiencies of selective education, urging the need to legislate to realise the learning community explicit in the comprehensive ideal.

The myth of giftedness

Caroline Benn

Part one

This short piece introduces Caroline Benn's detailed critique of 'The myth of giftedness'. Her starting point is the need to define and then demand comprehensive education as a basic educational right, set alongside a mapping of the modern giftedness movement in the 1960s and 1970s. All original references have been reformatted to appear as a single list at the end of the article, and some contextual endnotes added.

The Right to a Comprehensive Education (RiCE) campaign argues that selection will not be ended by merely pleading a cause, asking for 'more' comprehensive schools, or by time wasted demonstrating that the minority in comprehensive schools who sit for the 'grammar' examination of GCE can do as well as the minority of the same age group in grammar schools sitting the same examination, since research shows it can. Comprehensive schools are not supposed to be only as good as grammar schools are for a minority: they are supposed to be as good as comprehensive schools: better for everyone.

RiCE argues that they will not reach this higher standard until we mount a truly popular campaign for certain clear universal educational rights, beginning with the right of every neighbourhood to be served by a genuinely comprehensive school (giving everyone right of access to a named, local comprehensive school or college), followed by the right of everyone to experience a fully comprehensive curriculum, common assessment at leaving age and after this, financially supported education to eighteen, with free choice from a full range of general, vocational and training opportunities.

These are the bare minimum conditions of comprehensive education almost anywhere else in the world. Yet in Britain, hundreds of thousands of children and young people lack most of them, and nowhere yet do all apply, to say nothing of comprehensive rights after eighteen.

Revive critique of selection

If the first requirement is to demand comprehensive education as a basic right (defining it carefully so that it can be demanded easily), the second is to revive the critique of 11-plus selection. The open selection of the 1950s and 1960s – the old 11-plus – was demolished by persistent argument and research; but we have mounted no such campaign against the far more pervasive and dangerous hidden selection which has replaced it between and within schools.

A major barrier is that the new selection is not publicly admitted. Since 1976, all governments and the DES have maintained the fiction that selection has virtually ended. Allocation procedures for secondary education are no longer monitored, the NFER [National Foundation for Educational Research] having stopped its yearly analysis after 1972. Both the popular and educational press, long captive to the Black Papers' directives, if not always to their perspective, were long ago willingly diverted to 'basics', 'standards' and 'discipline'. Few discuss selection now, and all have failed to report the many ways in which it still operates, particularly the way the ubiquitous 'parental choice' campaign has been misused as its cover.

'The choice of school' campaign has now elevated to national policy what is merely one allocation criterion among several. Most of us want choice of school to be one factor, but not the only one. The legal right of those who live near a school or college over those who live further away – all other factors being equal – is central to comprehensive systems anywhere else in the world – coupled with the legal requirement to provide a comprehensive school for every neighbourhood. These two laws are the only way the rights of every parent can be safeguarded. Without them, 'choice' can, and does, become just another way of giving priority to the educationally knowledgeable, or the privileged.

Nothing did more to pave the way for the new selection than the Labour government's (never enacted) Education Bill of 1979, which made parental choice the only allocation factor in school entry – despite repeated requests from Labour party educators and others to balance it with the essential 'living nearest' clause. This refusal allowed Conservatives a year later – in their 1980 Act – to make what was already de facto selection in some authorities the law of the land, by merely writing the clause to this effect: all parents are free to choose comprehensive schools, but only parents whose children pass tests may choose grammar schools (or 'assisted places' or selective comprehensive schools). For

it was in the parental choice clauses that 11-plus selection was written into law for the first time in British history.

Anyone who looks straight at our school system, sees it is still deeply divided between selective and fee-paying schools on the one hand, and, on the other, nonselective schools of many types – with uncontrolled 'parental choice' increasingly misused as the mechanism by which children are now being segregated. Uncontrolled 'market forces' now select those who 'deserve better', thereby leaving the majority to take the increasingly unequal and uncertain lesser opportunities which any selective process always produces. Cuts only accelerate the process of rich getting richer, poor getting poorer.

Anyone looking closer sees that the new selection-by-choice is no longer the open, universal objective process of the old 11-plus, but a covert, self-selecting, subjective activity, far more often depending upon what a single head teacher decides behind a single closed door than upon openly stated criteria monitored and decided by democratically elected education committees. Restrictive as it was, at least the old 11-plus had an honesty about it that the new hidden selection completely lacks. Nor can the new appeals committees change it.

It is time public consciousness on this issue was raised – not only about the socially dangerous way selection is now operating, but about the fraudulent nature of some of the new theories which give it spurious credibility. Chief among these is misuse of the concept of 'giftedness' and the need to fashion the formal education process to serve the so-called 'gifted'.

The 'gifted child' is born

The gifted child is a difficult concept to challenge, since it enjoys a fine public image (one reason it has been misused so easily) and because most of us accept willingly that some children are possessed of extraordinary talent. It is only when we look behind the scenes that we see quite clearly the way 'giftedness' has taken the place of the old 'ability at eleven' as the justification for continuing with academic selection.

Those who support the gifted child cause will quickly say they do not equate giftedness with passing 11-plus tests, nor do they argue that grammar schools are necessarily required to keep giftedness serviced. To this one can only reply that the original idea may have been to further gifted children's interests as an independent exercise in a comprehensive system, but the reality has turned out differently. One has only to hear one local authority after another citing the need to cater for 'giftedness' as the reason for maintaining (or starting) grammar schools, express streams, or private-school place buying, not to mention its use as the justification for national Conservative policy – to which we return later – to know that it is not the education of rare human

genius being discussed, but selection.

Nor is it hard to see how giftedness got misused. The mid 1960s saw the old 11-plus losing credibility. It was not only that testing was unreliable (even before Cyril Burt's research was discredited), but that deciding children's futures at eleven was socially unacceptable. So too were such overt divisions between first and second-class schools as were represented by grammar and secondary modern schools, not to mention evidence that mass testing seemed to favour both white and middle-class children over blacks and the working class.

If selection was to be retained, it urgently needed a new theoretical justification – to single out certain children agreed by all to 'need' a more advanced education and more resources.

The advantage of 'giftedness' was that it looked at first sight as though it could preserve all selection's essential features without its obvious disadvantages. It did not seem to require a divided school system, for giftedness could be forwarded in a diversity of ways. Secondly, it was widely believed to favour no class, race, or sex. Thirdly, it was supposed not to need the crudities of mass testing; it did not appear to threaten anyone or imply those not found gifted were failures. Lastly, its numbers were supposed to be miniscule, so that it created no creaming problem for the new comprehensives.

Every one of these theoretical suppositions has proved false in practice, although it has taken a long time to see just how subtly the giftedness machine, having first won public acceptance for the idea that a substantial minority of children 'need' extra care – extra teacher attention, extra facilities, extra programmes, and some separation socially – devised a system indistinguishable from the old 11-plus system to obtain this.

Perhaps we should have been more alert to the relatively sudden creation – out of the educational blue – of the giftedness movement in the 1960s, the very decade when the nation committed itself to comprehensive reform. It stretches credulity to believe the two events were not connected.

The National Association for Gifted Children,[**1**] formed in 1966, one year after the issue of the comprehensive circular asking all areas to reorganise, has always posed as neutral on the comprehensive issue. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of its newsletter output has sent out subtle counter-comprehensive messages. Its members claimed it was needed because ours was an age of great 'mediocrity', although no evidence was ever produced to justify this (indeed, anyone claiming any age to be mediocre will always find support). If we look back we could say that, if anything, the decade of the 1960s was particularly rich in talent, especially among the young.

The 'mediocrity' complaint was undoubtedly supposed to link in our minds with the campaign against the comprehensive movement – as fostering 'dull uniformity'. The giftedness movement put itself forward as an antidote to a disease no one had yet caught, and having created a demand for itself, went on to involve us all in 'trying to define the

nature and extent of the problem of giftedness'. Note the use of the word 'problem', to which we shall return, suggesting something amiss which attention to giftedness would put right. In short, what was created was a new national guilt at 'neglect' of giftedness.

Harrying comprehensives

Indirectly, the comprehensive idea was harried by the new giftedness guilt in two important ways. First, it was argued that although comprehensives could deal well with the vast majority of children, there were some (the 'truly' exceptional) with which by nature comprehensive education could not deal. No evidence was ever produced (and as we see later, evidence to the contrary was ignored), but the acid implication that comprehensives, even when fully developed, could not really 'cope' with the gifted, was left to fall drop by drop on the struggling new reform.

The second function of the giftedness lobby was to make sure that wherever comprehensives were established, selection was retained in their inner workings. The giftedness lobby appeared to – and did – concede that all abilities could often be admitted to a single school, but constantly argued against further development of the comprehensive idea. For example, many of the articles published argued against mixed ability; or claimed that to end streaming in comprehensives would be 'the death of giftedness' (Crowcroft, 1969).

The giftedness machine, 1970s

By 1970, the giftedness movement had established itself quickly and easily, and had good support in the media (of which more later). What had once been a rare quality called genius, easily recognised but hard to analyse, had become a commodity like the old '11-plus ability'. Not always easily seen, but we were assured nevertheless 'born in' certain people. It could be detected if we tried, and it was the duty of formal education to identify it by special means and then to give a substantially better education to the gifted (not 'needed' by the majority). Like the old grammar entrants, the gifted had to be spotted young. Giftedness in adults or in old age – the Grandma Moses minority – were not included in the new movement. It was a movement arbitrarily relating exclusively to young people – often children before they got to 11-plus age.

The gifted needed separation, although exactly how much and of what kind was open to argument. Just as in 1945 the grammar lobby found that the percentage of grammar places available conveniently matched the numbers selected as having 'grammar ability' – even though these percentages could differ markedly from area to area – so too the 1970s gifted movement was to find that gifted pupils could be accommodated in all kinds of ways: in the grammar schools not yet reorganised, in places bought in private education on the rates, in selective comprehensives, and in express streams

inside schools. The essential vagueness of the giftedness idea was what permitted it to be even more elastic than '11-plus ability'; and this was exploited fully by those who wanted to retain selection.

It was also made the end product of a great deal of the educational industry. By the early 1970s a quality called giftedness that had not existed at all in the formal system ten years earlier had developed into a major responsibility for educators and researchers. By the mid 1970s, the giftedness machine was grinding away in every corner: HMIs were investigating giftedness, local authorities devising special programmes to cope with it, researchers commissioned to study it, colleges of education training teachers to teach it, schools encouraged to organise for it, and parents told to be on the lookout for it from birth.

No definition exists

When we survey all this educational activity and expenditure, we naturally assume everyone involved is in full agreement that they know exactly what they are talking about and that they are all talking about the same thing. However, even the most basic survey of research, opinion and practice reveals there is no agreement whatsoever on what giftedness is, how widespread it is, or what to do about it even supposing we could agree what it is.

Giftedness turns out to be all things to all men, in short. Indeed, the late Edward Boyle, a patron of the Gifted Association [**2**], said he personally knew of 167 definitions of a 'gifted child' (NAGC *Newsletter*, spring 1972). Many are hopelessly generalised: any child

> 'who shows consistently remarkable performance in any worthwhile line of endeavour' (US National Society for the Study of Education, 1958, quoted in Shields, 1968).
>
> Or
>
> 'who is outstanding in either general or specific ability in a relatively broad or narrow field' (Ogilvie, 1973).

These may be good enough for a club of enthusiasts gathering to spend charity funds (the last is from NAGC-sponsored research) but it isn't much use in a formal school system which will immediately want to ask awkward questions on behalf of the taxpayer, like: what is 'worthwhile endeavour' and what is not? What 'general' and 'specific' attainment is meant? How narrow is 'narrow' and how broad is 'broad'?

Parents and teachers want to know what qualities qualify for all this extra expenditure, and schools want to know why what they are already doing isn't good enough, since many think it is.

The myth of giftedness

Part two

Having shown how the birth of the 'gifted' child was concomitant with the momentum toward comprehensive education in Britain, Benn surveys US and British literature to trace different historical traditions in 'giftedness' research. At times, her language is reflective of the era. However, she lays bare the enormous effort expended on studying and encouraging 'giftedness' and its misuse by those who wanted to retain a segregated, elitist school system and to undermine the comprehensive reform.

Fundamental confusion over definition

The late Edward Boyle said he personally knew of 167 definitions of giftedness in children, which gives us a clue to our first problem: two people can be very concerned with giftedness but have completely different objectives (NAGC *Newsletter*, spring 1972).

One problem is that few seem aware of the different historical traditions that make up giftedness work. Some studies have concerned the qualities associated with those already bringing themselves to our attention as highly talented; others look at the fields in which people excel; still others are only concerned with intelligence measured by intelligence tests, either testing those excelling or trying to unearth those whose talents may not be known. A fourth approach comes from those who look for a wide variety of gifts – not merely IQ – using a wide variety of methods.

The different nature of these approaches, particularly their different populations, is rarely recognised by those working in the field and certainly not by those popularising giftedness work, which is put forward as a single, coherent activity, when it is not. The failure to distinguish the different approaches – particularly the two main historical traditions of what could be called 'inclusive' and 'exclusive' giftedness – explains much of the confusion we meet in the modern giftedness movement.

Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the apparent conflict over the personal qualities associated with giftedness in children. The seminal study of giftedness was that by L.M. Terman of Stanford University in the United States, who published his results on genius in the 1920s (Terman, 1925). He chose children already seen to be very exceptional and built up a profile of their characteristics, following them later into adulthood.

Their personalities – and the personality of children emerging from one after another of later studies of those already seen to be excelling – is remarkably consistent. Cyril Burt later characterised Terman's children as taller, healthier and more emotionally stable than other children, conspicuous for their originality, self-confidence, desire to excel, forethought, perseverance, sense of humour and cheerfulness (Burt, 1975). A British

study half a century later [than Terman's] is similarly summarised as showing children 'more adjusted, more stable in their relationships to other children and teachers … not in conflict with their peers; with a zest for life; good physical health; wide interests and unusual hobbies' (Hitchfield, 1973).

Confusion arises because this profile conflicts so sharply, with what has now become another popular image of a gifted child, especially in Britain. The gifted child is a 'misfit'; gifted children are 'less emotionally mature … than peers'; they are 'lonely, arrogant and indifferent' (*Daily Mail*, 9 August 1978; *Women's Journal*, April 1977; *Guardian*, 9 June 1977). Dozens of articles on giftedness spread the idea that gifted children are 'bored', or 'underachieving', 'lazy' or 'indifferent' (*Guardian*, 9 June, 2 August 1977).

The cause of the apparent conflict is the failure to distinguish between giftedness research that describes children already excelling, and that other tradition which seeks to show that children not excelling could have a variety of gifts, which may be hidden, and, moreover, may have little to do with genius, or academic ability, but a lot to do with other sorts of excellence, particularly spatial or social skills or creativity of various kinds. In the United States, where modern giftedness research began, these two main traditions were well separated, as Cyril Burt observed, while in Britain they were not. British giftedness work before the 1960s was entirely concerned with Terman's approach – exclusive giftedness – and not until the 1960s was 'inclusive giftedness', the other American tradition, much discussed. However, in following Terman's exclusive tradition, British psychologists did not stick to Terman's narrow preoccupation with 'genius' – never more than .03 per cent of the child population. They interpreted it more widely. Without apparent embarrassment, Burt explained in the 1970s that this was because British psychologists adopted: ' … a lower border line, usually determined by the requirements of the secondary (grammar) school' (Burt, 1975).

Here is the key: by stretching the tiny percentage, Terman called genius a long, long way, pioneering British psychologists made it take in that far larger population selected for grammar schools. In doing so, they changed the nature of 'exclusive giftedness' altogether – away both from rare genius as well as from the 'inclusive' giftedness that presupposes most of us have gifts; and used it to validate an essentially social, educational arrangement that involved anything up to 20 per cent of the age group.

Later, when the 1960s giftedness movement began, 'inclusive' giftedness became confused with 'exclusive', which allowed the argument to surface that because children whose talents had not been released often seemed bored or unhappy in school, any child who is bored or unhappy may be gifted – in the sense of being a rare genius, an argument that was promptly used for propaganda purposes against comprehensive and in favour of selective and private education. The argument was designed to appeal to, or arose from, parental fear or ambition, about children in state or comprehensive schools. In this propaganda (in the media and some giftedness writing) misfits or

bored pupils never occur in private or selective schools. If your child is bored, he is probably a genius whom the village school is overlooking; if he is not getting on at a comprehensive, he may have the 'problem' of giftedness. It certainly cannot be because he lacks inner resources; what he lacks is the proper type of school; thus the popular libel, rarely countered by gifted researchers, of a sensitive, genteel child, languishing in a comprehensive, only to be miraculously enlivened when fees are paid.

The problem for those who misuse giftedness work in this way, however, is that it means they have to argue for extra resources in the formal education system to be devoted to children who are not showing any talent at all. In the cold light of county hall committee rooms, even in the days of more available funds, this is hard to do.

More definition problems in 'fields of interest'

There are different problems, but no fewer, when campaigners try to approach giftedness by the fields in which children excel. A typical definition (from NAGC-sponsored research) is:

> 'Any child outstanding in either a general or a specific ability … academic, aesthetic, linguistic, mathematic, athletic or musical' (see Ogilvie, 1973).

This narrows the definition, but it doesn't solve the problem of agreeing what 'outstanding' is. This is crucial in definitions, which, like these, tend to line up giftedness with interest in the formal school curriculum. Popular reporting too often suggests that giftedness in any case is about doing well in formal schooling. Hence the *Guardian* speaks of the gifted as those 'who have a deep love of their subject in school' (18 August 1978).

Giftedness approached this way is merely a development of the old grammar child's 'subject mindedness', a theory spawned in the 1943 Norwood Report, which argued for 11-plus, and social segregation of such pupils in selective schools (and claimed the majority were not 'subject minded'). Popular understanding still equates giftedness with subject love and, even more specifically, with love of subjects in the GCE curriculum! But so does the work of professionals researching giftedness; see, for example, the HMIs' analysis of giftedness education in comprehensive schools, which is approached through the traditional subject timetable and where section headings have the titles, 'What is giftedness in history?' followed by 'What is giftedness in geography?', chemistry, and so on (HMI, 1977).

The modern giftedness movement of the 1960s was commandeered from the outset by grammar schools fighting to retain their privileged segregation. For example, the High Master of Manchester Grammar School, Lord James of Rusholme, contributing to a book, not on grammar schools but on gifted children, simply repeated by rote the 'save our grammar school' argument 'that it was possible to identify high ability … by eleven … that we were thinking … of academic ability and not a few spectacular abilities such

as that in music' and that this 'meant some schools devoted to meeting' the academic needs of the gifted (James, 1976).

Many giftedness campaigners disown a narrow, scholastic approach and point to programmes like the NAGC's Explorers Clubs, where young children are encouraged to come to pursue every kind of activity: from swimming to clay modelling to insect collecting. But here there is a new problem: giftedness defined through informal pursuits like those in many camps or projects for gifted children differs little from a lot of good extracurricular activity going on in many other places. What is the line that can be drawn between enthusiastic expertise in a hobby and a gift in the same field? There isn't one. Even if there was, who is to draw it? And for what purpose?

The last refuge: '11-plus ability'

The wide range of definitions, their imprecision, the confusion over types of giftedness, shows just how difficult it is for anyone trying to provide segregated and better education for a minority inside the formal school system based on general evidence of giftedness to succeed. This is why most formal programmes always head back to that area of giftedness activity exclusively preoccupied with the old IQ test. However many definitions of 'gifted' which parents may cite, or however often researchers denounce the limitation of IQ tests, or their use at all for giftedness work, it is to formal intelligence testing that those who wish to use giftedness in formal education, must return. Those who survey giftedness practices in local authorities report that most giftedness programmes rely on 'performance on … tests of general intelligence'; and that giftedness turns out to be 'after all, children who through high intellectual ability, do well in our school system' (Start, 1972). David Hopkinson (1978, p 44) spoke of the great investment Britain had made in the 'construction of an elaborate intelligence scale' which 'no doubt' will be 'used to identify the gifted'.

In other words, we take those who do well in selective systems, define them as gifted, cite the methods which selected them as those that must be retained to meet the needs of the gifted. This is a very convenient circle, but it offends many who work in the field of giftedness. They never intended their work to end up justifying a system of social isolation for gifted pupils; in fact, most conclude this is harmful.

Unfortunately, their own lack of vigilance has meant that this is where their work does end. The old 11-plus may be dead, but the new 'giftedness detection' turns out to 'need' the same selective process. What's more, as a review of a recent book on gifted work (edited by R. Povey) in the NAGC *Newsletter* makes clear, these tests still have to be mass tests: 'group tests, despite their unpopularity and association with the 11-plus, are again prescribed as the only practical method' of deciding who is gifted in formal education. Not only that, but for a lot of independent research on giftedness, it is also

the normal grammar selection process that is used to select the pupils concerned. [**3**]

The reason everyone returns to 11-plus testing is because it is the only way giftedness can be used to retain selection in the formal system, because testing is the only way the formal system can justify decisions to spend more and better money on education for a small minority.

The next problem: What cut-off point?

Narrowing giftedness to that which intelligence tests measure is only the start of problems. Much thornier: what level of intelligence counts as gifted?

This is crucial not only because it sets the level of resources that are needed, but also because we now have, ostensibly, a comprehensive system, and even its worst enemies admit that it can't stand too much 'creaming' and remain genuinely comprehensive. Percentages 'cut' in or out will make or break such a system. Two per cent creaming takes half the university potential from the comprehensive sixth form, a point often made when arguing against the 2 per cent now going to 'assisted places'. 0.5 per cent would take the Oxbridge students; 10 per cent would take virtually all the A-level students.

Which is it to be? If we look to what researchers or giftedness experts advise, once again we find total disarray. There is not only no agreement about what cut-off counts as 'gifted', there are also two different methods of cutting off.

One is to draw a line at a point in the IQ scale, and the problem is that practically everyone draws a different one. Devon's gifted project mentions a cut-off of 160 IQ; others, including Burt in his later days, use 150 IQ; 140 was used by Terman and many others (*Find the Gifted Child*, Devon LEA, 1977; Burt, 1975, p152). HMIs in recent surveys use 130, as have researchers like Ogilvie and Tempest, and the BBC in their popular science programmes (HMI, 1977; Tempest, 1974; 'Tomorrow's World', 11 March 1979). The Plowden Report on primary education put giftedness at 125 or over, as have others; Robin Pedley put it at 128 when discussing creaming; and Mia Kellmer Pringle, in discussing gifted pupils with difficulties, set giftedness out in her title page as between 120 and 200 IQ (*Comprehensive Education*, 1968; Pringle, 1970). These are just a small sample trawl, but it produces a result which ranges from 15 per cent to one of 0.1 per cent of the population – a difference so big that wholly different school systems would result from adopting one expert's cut-off rather than another's. Whose do we choose?

A more popular method of designating cut-off has been to take crude population percentages, where there is even less agreement on cut-off (and none on the method of determining it). The French geniocracy movement and others say it should be .05 per cent. Nottingham authority's erstwhile gifted project set it at 1 per cent; The British Gifted Child Association usually claims 2 per cent are gifted, although it often allows far more in practice, as do other national gifted movements – for example, in New

Zealand it is 5 per cent (*Daily Telegraph*, 12 February, 1978; *Guardian* 18 August 1978; NAGC *Newsletter*, November 1978). R.M. Povey (1980) puts it at between 2 and 3 per cent, as did Conservative Party researchers in the late 1960s, although recent policies suggest up to 10 per cent should be considered. [**4**] In 1915, Cyril Burt set it at 3 per cent but widened it later. Eric Ogilvie (1978) cites percentages between 2 and 15 per cent as those which teachers cited to him; and as many have pointed out, American giftedness researchers (especially those in the 'inclusive giftedness' tradition) set the figure far higher at 20 per cent, 30 per cent, 50 per cent and upwards, depending upon the gift being considered (DeHaan, 1957). When speaking of that inclusive tradition which tries to unearth talent not known (different entirely from studying already excelling pupils) or for ways to enrich talent (different again), Burt himself had to admit that 'the number of gifted children in the population would amount to at least eighty per cent' (Burt, 1975, p50). In fact, we all have some special gift.

Giftedness defined by this 'inclusive' tradition is clearly compatible with a comprehensive system; giftedness defined by Burt at any time, far less so; giftedness defined as what grammar selection produces, not at all. And a range of definitions which runs from 0.3 per cent to 80 per cent of the child population – all ostensibly discussing the same capacity – shows conclusively that not only are we discussing different capacities, but that all cut-off definitions are quite personal, even arbitrary. Yet the giftedness movement persists in arguing as if there is something scientific about them, and HMIs, LEAs, teachers, researchers and governments appear to agree we can count on them. Our gullibility allows us to put up not only with continuing grammar creaming as necessary for 'giftedness work' but to put up with 2 per cent in one place, 5 per cent in another, and 16 per cent in a third place as all being in the same cause, when, in fact, these differing percentages are merely the levels of selective education different localities have managed to hang on to in their local political manoeuvres to retain segregated schooling.

Social class and giftedness

Just as those who try to justify selective schooling on the grounds that it is fair to all social classes, so too are claims made that gifted children are either largely working class or that there is no distinction in race, class or sex among those designated gifted. When examined, these claims fall even more quickly than those based on the existence of a 'scientific definition'. For when the gifted are designated – by whatever means – many studies show they turn out to be heavily biased towards the middle class (Kellmer Pringle, 1970; Burt, 1975, p152; Hitchfeld, 1973; *New Society*, 4 October, 1973; Gath and Gath, 1975). 'Bright children are likely to be from families of higher occupational status' when singled out in giftedness programmes, says Kellmer Pringle (1970, p79). Joan

Freeman, another researcher looking at the social context, found 'no less than sixty nine per cent of the … fathers were in professional and top managerial professions'. Freeman's subjects were drawn from the books of the British Gifted Association, and her research was cited by John Izbicki of the *Telegraph* ('What Makes a Gifted Child', 8 August 1977) who then asked his readers: 'So, what does the mother of the high IQ-gifted child look like?'.

His answer is important for the *Telegraph* leads mass media propaganda against the comprehensive idea, and in favour of the gifted. Izbicki tells readers she reads a lot, has her own interests, may go out to work and 'probably had a tertiary education and possesses a university degree' while her child will 'probably have had extra tuition outside normal school hours, such as music lessons'.

What could be clearer? Gifted children do not turn out to be from the working class, as we are so regularly assured by newspapers like the *Telegraph*, but in real life have mothers with degrees. This means they will be almost entirely middle class (and affluent with it, if they are also having private lessons). Thus, when we finally track down the mystery of who has these God-given gifts, they so often turn out to be those born into privileged circumstances.

As well as being so often predominantly middle class, we find gifted children are also very male. In one study parents were asked to select their own gifted children, twice as many selected were boys; in another research project, only one girl was included in the research (Hitchfield, 1973; Kellmer Pringle, 1970). Almost all research on giftedness or genius has been with white children.

Do these findings occur because nature has designated white, male, middle-class children to be gifted or because our society and culture gives more advantages to them, or because parents aspire more highly for first-born children, which is why the majority of those who appear in so many giftedness programmes also turn out to be first born? A great deal of the giftedness movement's fuel would appear to be parental ambition, and this is not sufficiently acknowledged by those who work in the field, if it is acknowledged at all. We are reminded of a question once put to the minister for education in the Soviet Union, who was asked about Russian schools for the gifted (much misunderstood and over-played in western gifted movements). He said such schools were less favoured than formerly, and when asked why, answered, because it became obvious that they were not so much schools for gifted children as schools for the children of gifted parents. How much is this true of the parents who register their children with the western world's Associations for Gifted Children?

Giftedness as political propaganda

So far in the main we have been discussing 'respectable' academic research and

'respectable' giftedness associations. But giftedness is also used as political propaganda by a Conservative mass media as a stick with which to beat comprehensives. Unlike the genteel gifted supporters clubs, these are not afraid to be ultra-crude. They do not say it is a question of paying more attention to giftedness, but crudely and untruthfully claim that: 'bureaucrats running our state system are … hostile to the gifted children ' *(Daily Mail*, 9 August 1978).

Or that: 'politically motived egalitarians … would readily sacrifice high academic achievement for the sake of mediocrity and ignore the gifted' (*Telegraph*, 2 October 1978).

This kind of talk is constant and no giftedness campaigner ever steps in to correct it. Nor do any counter the propaganda using giftedness to lobby for private education and misusing 'parental choice'. Thus the headline: 'Gifted Child … Given No Choice' (*Daily Mail*, 18 September 1978) from one of a spate of stories about 'bright' children not given the school they wanted, in this case one with a high IQ in a comprehensive system who had chosen a school many miles from her home. It was full, and she was offered one nearer, a school promptly denigrated by the media as 'a local comprehensive with a poor academic reputation' although there was no evidence presented that the school in question could not have done justice by the girl. The offer of the school was quickly made into a refusal to recognise 'giftedness' as part of a deliberate policy of denying parental choice – a particularly ironic media comment, since the city in question, Manchester, was the only major city at that time to be both fully comprehensive and to run 11-plus transfer entirely on parental choice (a method it since discovered polarised schools badly). National clamour on behalf of the girl finally produced a private benefactor offering a place for 'gifted children', which turned out to be nothing more than a place in a mediocre girls' private school in the west country (ibid.).

Giftedness equals fee paying

This kind of media propaganda was designed to reinforce the argument that fee-paying schools were the only ones that could 'help' the gifted. In the late 1970s, stories of parents of gifted children hunting for private schooling to avoid the fate of the comprehensive school became stock in trade (see, for example, *Women's Standard*, 11 May 1981; and 'The IQ Quest', *Guardian*, 2 August 1977). Even in the *Guardian,* we read about agonised parents 'burdened' with a gifted child who asked telling questions at the age of seven, but was unfortunately being educated in the local primary school ('Bright Future', *Guardian*, 14 June 1977). Although the parents were 'dead against' fee-paying, they soon found it necessary to send him to a prep school as a boarder. In this case, they were advised to do so by the LEA educational psychologist. It is quite clear from this article and many others that school psychologists, paid for by the state, often play a key part in recruiting pupils for private schools or private gifted schemes (see, for example, 'Industry Backs

Explorers', NAGC *Newsletter*, March 1979; NAGC *Newsletter*, November 1979).

While the Conservative mass media were doing their political best in the 1970s, national Conservatives were doing theirs. Rhodes Boyson in particular was fuelling parental anxiety about the state system, and although he himself had once been the head of a comprehensive system, he could still say he was terribly concerned for 'bright children from working class homes who had … no prospect of … a lucky escape from comprehensives to private education' (quoted in the *Daily Mail*, 18 September 1978).

By the end of the 1970s, the specific propaganda objective was to convince citizens that the failure to state-subsidise private schools was the root cause of working-class disadvantage in education. From here, it was but a short step to the 'assisted places' scheme, which came hard on its heels. Many who opposed this scheme were the very giftedness campaigners who had allowed their work to be misused without comment for years on end.

Evidence of comprehensives' attainment ignored

This is not to say that all comprehensive schools, particularly those still struggling in a selective system, were equipped by the 1970s to deal adequately with all kinds of talent, but neither were most grammar or private schools. What we do know is that some comprehensives were doing very well with the very students the giftedness movement wanted to single out: the top 2 per cent of the attainment range; and that this evidence was ignored. For example, research (from a member of the NFER team which had undertaken the major national project on comprehensives in the late 1960s) analysed the academic attainment of pupils in the schools which the NFER had used for the last stage of its national research (T.S. Robertson, 'Pupil Progress in Ten Comprehensives', *Comprehensive Education*, No.36, 1977). He followed them from the age of fourteen, when the NFER work ended, through their GCE O- and A-level examinations. Taking the top 2 per cent as a separate group, he found all had achieved excellent GCE results (averaging three A-levels each) and all but two had gone on to the universities of their first choice. Further, he found that among those succeeding best were the working-class pupils. It may not have been conclusive research, but it was certainly pertinent to the national debate raging in 1977. Yet, apart from *The Times* which gave it a passing mention, no media outlet reported these findings at all.

Sometimes it was salient facts in individual stories that went unreported, including one about a remarkable boy, son of a council worker, who was spotted as a mathematical genius at eleven, encouraged to complete his A-level by twelve, his other GCE passes and an Oxbridge place by fifteen (which he later took up and then went on to a career in mathematics). When reporting his spectacular progress at school, no newspaper, including the *Telegraph*, which ran a long column on him, thought it worth mentioning

that the school in question was a large neighbourhood urban comprehensive school – Elliott School in the ILEA – the same school the *Mail* later denigrated in one of the nastiest series of articles ever published in the name of educational journalism (*Telegraph,* 12 November 1970; 'The Comprehensive Jungle', *Daily Mail*, 15 March through 17 March, 1972).

Additional misuse of giftedness theme

But the misuse of giftedness was to get worse still, when the media began writing about schools 'full of immigrants' who required so much attention to their remedial needs that this was being done 'at the expense of gifted children' (*Daily Mail*, 25 November 1978). As usual, no names were given and no colour was cited, but the implications were thoroughly racist.

The Giftedness Association were never irresponsible in their own work, but they never countered this propaganda, and at times they too weighed in with less than happy arguments. One, from a TV programme they made, spoke of money being 'lavished' on the handicapped but little being done for the gifted (BBC, 'Open Door', 1 December 1978). The argument not only knocked the handicapped, but ended up with the mechanistic solution that the top 2 per cent needs as much as the bottom 2 per cent, which appears to argue that the gifted are a set group, not individuals, are of the same order as those who might for some reason not be achieving what we know they could in literacy, might be identified in the same way, and will 'naturally' occupy the same percentages in any school.

Perhaps the least honest of all the propaganda lines is that the gifted are exceptionally disadvantaged in the way poor children from poor homes are. All type of researchers and campaigners use this theme of the gifted as 'the newly recognised … disadvantaged'; or as the *Telegraph* has us believe, the most 'underprivileged of all children'; or from another paper, the children most 'at risk' (NAGC *Newsletter*, March 1979; *Telegraph,* 12 October 1978; *Teachers World*, 18 January 1974). It is constantly suggested that far from being a great joy to parents, gifted children are a terrible personal tragedy. Parents with lively and bright children are brainwashed into believing they are cursed. Women's magazines speak of their bearing 'onerous burdens'; articles in the *Guardian* of their terrible 'plight'; even professionals speak of them as a 'penalty' and 'handicapped' (*Woman's Journal*, April 1977;

Guardian, 2 August 1977; *Teacher*, 8 March 1974). But, as always, the *Daily Mail* tops the propaganda bill: 'Informing parents that they have a gifted child causes almost as much despair as telling them that they have an educationally subnormal child' (9 August 1978).

Does ANYONE know a parent who would prefer to have a child of theirs without its talents or their subnormal child not normal? Common sense tells us that these arguments

are dishonest and that we demean ourselves, our profession and the education service by continuing to let them go unchallenged. The Gifted Movement should disown all propaganda that depicts gifted pupils as a socially or physically disadvantaged group and permits the truly disadvantaged to be depicted as oppressing them.

However, the giftedness movement has one more misuse that needs our attention too. When an HMI spoke at the end of the 1960s to the Giftedness Association and mentioned the need to educate gifted children for social as well as academic purposes, it wasn't much noticed that he talked about the gifted being 'our leaders' and the ones upon whom 'the future of the country depends' because he was advocating a good moral education (J. Burrows, Annual Gifted Lecture, 5 December 1969). 'Heaven help us', he is quoted as saying, 'if gifted children are brought up without integrity'. But would this theme always stay so innocent? Apart from a response we might want to make – why should any child be brought up without integrity, or a good moral education – doesn't democracy depend upon all of us, not just leaders? Today this leader theme is far less benign, and even more prominent. In a recent contribution to the Gifted Association's newsletter, the head of a multinational company, E.R. Nixon, spoke about the need for giftedness work to identify and train leaders because: 'it is leaders who can and will protect our freedom, maintain our stability, nurture our culture, and create our wealth'.

Is it really? From the original idea of the need to encourage that mysterious human quality called genius, giftedness work seems to have let us wander inadvertently in sight of the portals of the master race. [**5**]

Educational consensus and Conservative policy

The giftedness movement could never have been misused to this degree had not giftedness campaigners lapsed in their own self-criticism, and had there not been an educational consensus at the top that comprehensive reform had taken place when it had not, dating from the DES Yellow Paper of 1976. Various speeches from James Callaghan and Shirley Williams all suggested that the uncompleted reform was somehow complete but still to be found wanting. Shirley Williams was the one to mention the giftedness issue, whereupon the Conservative spokesperson, Norman St John Stevas, noted with satisfaction that Mrs Williams 'had admitted gifted children cannot be suitably educated in comprehensive schools' and that she really was a Conservative at heart' (*Times*, 23 September 1977).

By the start of the 1979 Conservative government, full comprehensive change had been abandoned at the top and a new consensus agreed – not around Black Paper policies (which were totally hostile to comprehensives) but on the old terms of the liberal policy of Edward Boyle and younger Conservatives in the 1960s, who had always been prepared to accept comprehensives so long as they were not genuinely so in the

sense that private education and some grammar schools could be retained alongside. In 1967, these Conservatives had said quite clearly that comprehensives were alright for most, but that they could not cope with the 'high fliers' ('Education and the Citizen', op. cit.). For these, selection was needed. What happened in the 1970s was that the Conservatives, under Mrs Thatcher, made this official Conservative policy. As education spokesperson, she did not, as expected, reverse all comprehensive change. Instead, she claimed comprehensives would do for many. The only problem, she told the House of Commons, was that they could not provide for the 'unusually gifted'. Gifted children, she said, had to have other 'options' (12 February 1970).

When Conservatives spelled these out, they turned out to be supporting public schools, retaining most grammar schools, encouraging LEAs to buy places in private education, permitting selective comprehensive schools to develop, and later, introducing the assisted places scheme (which replaced direct grant schools). Locally, many Conservative areas also started giftedness programmes. In Surrey, they involved proposing the straight 'buying' of private school places; in Nottinghamshire, the development of special programmes in certain favoured comprehensive schools; in Devon, extra classes; in the ILEA, special giftedness centres (described in the *Guardian* 5 June 1976, 29 April 1977 and 8 August 1978). There were also proposals from private schools, such as that made by Wellington School, Somerset, to 'share' its sixth form with local pupils having IQs of 140 and over, as a way of making its contribution to giftedness education in the community (*Education*, 19 August 1977; it was opposed by local teachers).

The result of all this activity by national and local Conservatives, and private schools, is there for all to see: giftedness has become the political preserve of the Conservative Party and the private school lobby. Do we hear from our supposedly vigilant media any talk of this 'political football'? Of course not. The most we get are a few anxious articles about the worry giftedness workers now feel because it is so obvious that giftedness programmes are only being pushed in 'strongly Conservative areas' or are wholly identified with Conservative Party politics (*Guardian*, 8 August 1978). As they are.

Giftedness is now used to justify 'assisted places', retention of the 11-plus and public funds diverted to private education. Labour opposes most selective policies done in the name of giftedness, and so do many liberals; and there is widespread mistrust of spurious giftedness schemes (as opposed to giftedness work) among teachers. There is also willingness to act. When a Labour Education Committee was elected in May 1980 in Nottingham, one of its first acts was to cancel the Conservatives' giftedness classes in comprehensives saying: 'We wanted to make sure every school is able to stretch the gifted, not just five comprehensives in predominantly middle-class areas' (quoted in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 5 June 1981).

Nottingham, in effect, opted for the inclusive form of giftedness, and if giftedness

work is to survive in a comprehensive system, it has to show itself compatible with the comprehensive principle. This has not yet been accomplished.

Human gifts too important to be left to the Giftedness Association

We must not end by dismissing all programmes designed to enrich and extend children in comprehensive education just because giftedness has been so misused for political and social ends. Where selection is not involved, and where the enrichment is open to all, such programmes (whether labelled 'gifted' or not) could well turn out to be very valuable. What will make them valuable is what makes so much of the writing, and the programmes of giftedness work, valuable now, including many projects from the NAGC; they help children. What is good about them, is that they are not just good for the so-called gifted, but for ALL children. Many of the NAGC's schemes and articles could be applied to all children in any case; [**6**] and others – like the Schools Council Enrichment Programmes – are valuable because they also could enrich teaching and learning for everyone. Advice given out to gifted parents is advice that ANY parent needs – for example, that 'one factor which contributes most to the development of the clever child is conversation with parents' (Congdon, 'Helping Children of High Intelligence', no date). It is a sad waste of energy and effort to keep good giftedness programmes locked up for the benefit of the few, when all children could benefit, and should.

Ours is not an argument that there are no children with unique talent. Quite the reverse. It is because we believe in human genius that we oppose all attempts to regiment it, or to commandeer it for the purpose of preserving what is basically a school system designed for a social elite. Nor do we regard general 'giftedness' as a distinct property any more than we accepted '11-plus ability' as such. Giftedness is what education itself helps to create and release, and the purpose of the education system is to help foster as many gifts as possible in as many children as possible.

Selection for giftedness which is developed indistinguishably from segregation of pupils in grammar schools or special express streams, is not an exercise in identifying genius or of releasing gifts in all types of pupils. Indeed, it stunts our chances of helping the gifted. We give up our commitment to looking for gifts in the vast majority, once we have accepted the argument that giftedness is limited to the hunt for the few. We also fail the few, particularly the true genius. For true genius cannot be limited to the world of IQ testing and formal education. By definition, it cannot be defined. Nor can genius or talent be limited to a child's world; it is open to all ages.

The way we help giftedness is by encouraging a flexible, alert, high-standard, stimulating, and supportive comprehensive education service for everyone at every stage. A comprehensive system is the only way we can openly ensure attention to all equally and at the same time protect and reveal the full range of human gifts.

Encouraging human genius, and developing human gifts, are just one more reason why we must continue to work to get a genuine comprehensive education safely started in Britain, and to promote it relentlessly when we have.

Notes

1. Several of its members have told the story of the association in many places. This account is from *Teachers World*, 8 March 1974.

2. Eton-educated Edward Boyle (1923-1981) was a British Conservative politician and minister of education from 1962-64.

3. The Brentwood experiment in teaching gifted children, for example, involved children 'who had already been selected for secondary education' ('The Gifted Child in Essex', NAGC *Newsletter*, November 1979).

4. Benn cites a 1967 publication of the then Conservative Political Centre (CPC), 'Education and the Citizen'. The CPC was the party's political education body, established in 1945. The later publication to which she refers is Norman St John Stevas, *Better Schools for All: A Conservative Approach to the Problems of the Comprehensive School*, CPC, 1978.

5. A reference is missing in the original article here and comments are welcome. The HMI in question is John Burrows. See the book by Harold and Pamela Silver, *An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-Making 1960-1980*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

6. See, among others, B. Buckley, 'Beware, Baby at large', NAGC *Newsletter*, November 1980; S. Brownjohn, 'Every Child is Gifted', NAGC *Newsletter*, April 1981; 'Problem Solving', NAGC *Newsletter*, April 1981; 'Underachieving Children', NAGC *Newsletter*, September 1975; and books like B. Jackson (1980) *Your Exceptional Child*, London: Harper Collins.

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