

**Considering the Effects of Dogmatism on Giftedness and Talent Development**

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### Abstract

In the field of gifted education there is lack of consensus about definitions (who are the gifted) and identification (how should the gifted be “selected” for gifted programs). The unsettled, contested nature of the conceptual foundations for gifted education causes problems for educators who do the practical work of program development, curricular refinement, and instruction. Moreover, lack of conceptual clarity hampers the efforts of professionals in the field when it comes to advocacy for the needs of the gifted and securing the necessary resources for program implementation. This chapter explores ways in which narrow-minded, shortsighted thinking might be exacerbating the conceptual turbulence in the field. After a discussion of these conceptual problems we discuss the contributions in this volume and the ways in which they can establish more clarity about the nature and nuances of giftedness and talent.

Conceptions of giftedness have been disputed for decades. Giftedness has been viewed broadly as varying clusters of outstanding abilities, and as narrowly as a single score on a standardized test. Leading scholars in the field of gifted education have argued that lack of clarity about the essence of giftedness has hindered progress in the field (see Ambrose, 2009; Cohen, 1988; Coleman, Sanders, & Cross, 1997; Dai, 2005, 2010; Gagné, 1985; Grant & Piechowski, 1999; Piirto, 1999; Renzulli, 1999; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005; Winner, 1996). This book is an attempt to clarify the reasons why thinkers in the field have experienced such difficulty in elucidating the core phenomena of interest to theorists, researchers, and practitioners. For the most part, we are not ambitious enough in this volume to attempt to clarify the key concepts of the field themselves. Our purpose is to tease out and clarify the conceptual stumbling blocks--the barriers that often imprison our thinking.

Interest in big-picture conceptual frameworks and the thought entrenchment that plagues them has been growing considerably in gifted education; consequently, there have been numerous attempts to identify and redress confusion and conflicts in the field. For example, major journals have run special issues on topics that overlap significantly with our emphasis on conceptual entrenchment. The Roeper Review recently ran three special issues on “conceptual frameworks” and one on “global awareness”; The Gifted Child Quarterly recently ran a special issue on “demythologizing gifted education.” The Journal for the Education of the Gifted recently featured a collection of articles attempting to clarify the nettlesome, contested issue of identification. Many of the articles in these issues addressed various dimensions of theoretic, philosophical, ideological, or paradigmatic entrenchment. In addition, two special-interest networks of the National Association for Gifted Children (conceptual foundations and global awareness) offer many presentations and discussion forums on issues related to conceptual entrenchment, dogmatism, and their influences on the development of high ability. Overall, professionals in gifted education are interested in these issues because they are frustrated by the conceptual calcification in the field.

### **Gifted Education as Fragmented, Porous, and Contested**

The structure and dynamics of the field of gifted education could be causing problems that lead to conceptual stagnation and dogmatism. In a recent macro-analysis of the field of gifted education, Ambrose, VanTassel-Baska, Coleman, and Cross (2010) argued that the field fits a pattern identified by a group of social scientists and scholars of the humanities. In a collaborative attempt to determine the structure and dynamics of four academic disciplines--economics, philosophy, English literature, and political science--scholars from these disciplines eventually determined that two of the disciplines were unified, insular, and firmly policed while the other two were fragmented, porous, and contested (see Bender & Schorske, 1997).

Classical economics and analytic philosophy fit the former pattern. They tend to be unified because they are dominated by a favored theoretical perspective and any other theories have little influence. They are insular because they are not open to influence from ideas originating in other disciplines. Consequently, their conceptual borders are closed. They are firmly policed because the gatekeepers of these fields (e.g., journal editors) punish and marginalize those who deviate from the orthodoxy.

In contrast, the disciplines of political science and English literature tend to be fragmented because no single theory dominates. They are porous because ideas from

foreign disciplines easily wend their way through the conceptual borders of these disciplines and exert influence on theories and practices. They are contested because the lack of a dominant, central theory enables numerous subgroups to form around various theories, which end up competing with each other.

Entrenched thinking can plague both kinds of academic disciplines. The potential for dogmatism is more obvious in the unified, insular, firmly policed disciplines because they are dominated by a single theoretical perspective or conceptual framework. If the dominant theory isn't an absolutely perfect representation of human behavior, then the tendency for leading scholars and practitioners in the field to align their work religiously with the tenets of that theory reveals at least some dogmatism, which can seriously hinder progress.

Philosophers of science have long warned that theories are tentative representations of reality and should not become calcified (see Popper, 1959). Coleman (2003) made similar arguments about theory in gifted education. Theories should be tentative placeholders for better explanations of phenomena, which will emerge as new evidence comes forth. Faith-based adherence to a theory arises when scholars tweak the theory here and patch it there to protect it from anomalous new evidence. Such tweaking and patching ultimately creates a cumbersome theory that does not represent reality very well. The centuries-long dominance of the Ptolemaic, earth-centered model of the structure of the universe, which persisted in spite of the increasing weight of anomalous evidence, provides a classic example of dogmatic theory protection from the natural sciences. A more recent example in the social sciences comes from neoclassical economic theory, which portrays the human as a rational actor making perfectly rational, emotionless decisions based on perfect sets of information for selfish purposes. Various critics of this model have revealed its weaknesses and ill effects, which include the tilting of the world economy toward hyper-materialistic, exploitative, environmentally destructive, selfish greed (see Chang, 2007; Madrick, 2008; Marglin, 2008; Sen, 2009; Stiglitz, 2004).

The emergence of dogmatic theorizing might seem less obvious in fragmented, porous, contested disciplines because no single theory dominates. Such a situation should create more room for open dialogue about theoretic refinement. Nevertheless, entrenched thinking can arise in these disciplines as well because warring camps tend to form around multiple, competing theories and theoretic interchange becomes conflict prone, when it occurs.

Gifted education seems to be a fragmented, porous, and contested field (Ambrose, VanTassel-Baska, Coleman, & Cross, 2010) so no single theory dominates conceptions of giftedness. Consequently, dogmatism in the field takes the form of insular or competing camps, each promoting a particular perspective and either ignoring or denigrating the others. The result has been an unsettled field with practical program development and curricular and instructional initiatives insufficiently grounded in research and theory. The following is a non-comprehensive list of constructs and phenomena in gifted education that have been prone to misconception and contestation: giftedness as a stable trait over the long term; giftedness as high IQ; the use of high-stakes, standardized testing to identify and sort the gifted; the impact of social and emotional problems on the gifted; the extent to which specialists are needed in the education of gifted; the extent to which differing investigative paradigms (e.g., positivist

versus post-positivist paradigms, holistic vs. reductive; quantitative versus qualitative research) can generate productive discoveries in the field; and creativity as important and measurable in programs for the gifted. For elaboration on these and other topics see Ambrose, 2009; Borland, 2003; Coleman, et al., 1997; Dai, 2010; Heller, Mönks, Sternberg, & Subotnik, 2000; Shavinina, 2009; Treffinger, 2009; Winner, 1996). We cannot treat all of these issues effectively in this chapter but fortunately our collaborators in later chapters engage in some interesting explorations of these and other important subjects.

### **Perspectives on Thought Entrenchment and Giftedness in This Volume**

After this brief introduction to the project, the rest of the chapters in this first section address various ways in which insular, habit-bound, dogmatic thinking has plagued the field of gifted education over the long term. Contributors to this section attempt to clear away the conceptual fog obscuring clear, big-picture perception of high ability by questioning fundamental assumptions in the field including notions about the wellsprings from which giftedness and talent arise, and the ways in which students are selected for gifted programs. They also analyze conceptual shifts in the field and some ways in which those shifts might be facilitated and made more productive.

James Borland illustrates some aspects of the closed, passive, dogmatic mind in chapter 2, *Inherent Contradictions and Collective Dogmatism in Gifted Education* and then applies these insights to the field of gifted education. He makes the case that the field is influenced by its own form of dogmatism, which shapes its basic conceptions and practices. After outlining the nature of these dogmatic influences, he argues for the establishment of a fundamentally different, contradiction-free system for the development of concepts and practical applications pertinent to high ability.

David Yun Dai explores some of the dogmatism in the conceptual foundations of the gifted-education field in chapter 3, “The Nature-Nurture Debate Regarding High Potential: Beyond Dichotomous Thinking.” Arguing that researchers fall prey to conceptual entrenchment in their alignment with established ontological beliefs, epistemic positions, and investigative paradigms, Dai teases out some of the thinking behind scientific and social dogmatism and the ways in which it prevents us from seeing more dynamic, complex pluralistic visions of gifted potential.

Jean Peterson employs the analogy of an overcorrecting driver on icy roads to argue that the field of gifted education has navigated somewhat erratically between attention to academic concerns and emphases on the inner world of the gifted child. In chapter 4, “Overcorrecting: Spinning Out and Missing Many,” she assesses the dogmatism that can emerge when dynamic tensions between quantitative and qualitative inquiry, and between measurable versus somewhat less tangible abilities are not well understood.

In chapter 5, “Dogmatism, Policy, and Gifted Students,” James Gallagher explores some of the dogmatism that has saturated national policy pertaining to provisions for the gifted. As a scholar who has straddled the fields of gifted education and special education while contributing significantly to both, Gallagher provides specific examples of ways in which local and national trends and influences often have worked against the best interests of bright young people. His recommendations provide some ways in which the gifted can be better served by providing corrections to national priorities.

Section 2 of the volume includes chapters dealing with the nettlesome issues of identification and fairness. For decades, the field of gifted education has grappled with

these issues and at times it appears that little progress has been made. The authors in this section provide some suggestions about how the field can get beyond simplistic and unfair identification processes.

Taisir Subhi-Yamin explores the methods employed in identifying young people for gifted services throughout the past 50 years in chapter 6, “Dogmatism and Identification: The Consequences.” Focusing specifically on Middle Eastern nations, he unravels some of the dogmatic thinking that gave rise to narrowly confined identification practices instead of procedures that would be more dynamic, flexible, and likely to recognize diverse, hidden abilities. Some of the dogmatism he reveals emerges from entrapment within metaphorical constructs.

In chapter 7, “Equity Issues and Multiculturalism in the Under-Representation of Black Students in Gifted Education: Dogmatism at its Worst,” Donna Ford reveals some of the dogmatism that has plagued the field of gifted education since its inception. The dogmatism of individual scholars contributes to the persistence of underrepresentation by limiting the flexibility needed for the assessment and revision of definitions, identification criteria, and other important issues that could make provisions for the gifted more authentic and equitable.

Section 3 explores ways in which contexts beyond the field of gifted education shape or warp the development of bright young minds. More specifically, authors in this section address the influences of entrenched thinking on manifestations of high ability in large-scale socioeconomic systems, in the minds of individuals, and in the knowledge production of academic disciplines.

The recent worldwide economic collapse largely derived from the folly of powerful, greedy individuals who fully aligned themselves with the tenets of neoclassical economic theory. In chapter 8, “The Not-So-Invisible Hand of Economics and Its Impact on High Ability,” economist Tom Green and Don Ambrose employ an environmental-economics perspective to explore the narrow-minded, shortsighted selfishness that saturates the neoclassical paradigm in economics. While capitalism arose as a large-scale method for distributing prosperity throughout previously marginalized populations, the dogmatic neoclassical framework has done much to pervert the socioeconomic system. This perversion has warping effects on the aspiration development of many gifted young people.

In a related work, Ai-Girl Tan also extends the scope of our inquiry to encompass large-scale international differences in ethical thought and behavior. In chapter 9, “Broadening the Minds of High Ability for Integrative Worlds” she argues that the evolving 21<sup>st</sup>-century context demands a more integrative approach to the development of gifted minds: an approach that would incline bright young people to become more outreaching and altruistic as opposed to self-centered, self-aggrandizing, and atomistic.

Scrutinizing another large-scale context influencing the development of high ability, Bharath Sriraman explores the dynamics of knowledge production in the academic world in chapter 10, “Dogmatism and the Knowledge Industry.” Based on his analysis of the ways in which citation indexes, impact factors, and other bibliometric figures are used to manage the knowledge industry he concludes that knowledge production is plagued with subjectivity and fallibility. As a consequence, some of the most gifted thinkers might be marginalized in academics while other highly proficient but somewhat more pedestrian minds stand in the spotlight. Shortsighted, narrow-minded

thinking might be obscuring some high-potential talent in academia.

Jennifer Riedl Cross and Tracy Cross look at some of the psychological dynamics behind dogmatism in Chapter 11, “Motivated Dogmatism: Psychological Needs and the High-Ability Dogmatic.” Premature, cognitive closure tends to occur when an individual settles on a particular conclusion pertaining to an issue or problem. A number of psychological needs reinforce this tendency to seek closure and creatively intelligent individuals certainly are not immune to these needs. The implications of premature closure operating on bright minds can be serious.

Challenging predominant conceptions of reality appeals to some if not many creatively intelligent individuals. Concluding section 3, Diane Montgomery mounts such a challenge in chapter 12, “Facing Dogmatic Influences With Consciousness.” Drawing from work in depth psychology as well as other sources, she suggests ways in which researchers and educators can become trapped by stagnant ideas about giftedness and talent. Overall, she argues for expansions of our creative and critical consciousness.

Section 4 includes chapters that explore the influences of entrenched thinking on curriculum development, instructional implementation, and scholarly inquiry in the field of gifted education, and to some extent general education. Joyce VanTassel-Baska turns to the curricular dimensions of gifted education in Chapter 13, “Curriculum as a System of Thinking About Learning: The Dangers of Dogmatic Interpretation.” Operating simultaneously at several levels of analysis, she draws connections between practical applications and deeper conceptual frameworks, arguing that curriculum in American education as a whole is locked in modernist philosophy and misses some fruitful insights that could come from postmodern perspectives. Extending beyond currently dominant reductionist, discipline-bound notions, the more context-sensitive visions of education could enrich the structure and dynamics of curricula for the gifted.

Kathleen Pierce and Laurie Kash narrow the curricular scope by looking deeply into one academic subject area. They illustrate the dynamics of secondary English curriculum and instruction in chapter 14, “Paralysis from Analysis: Arguing for More Varied Activities and Creation In English Class.” The inertia of established, historical practice often prevails in this niche of the educational system, buttressing traditional literary analysis while marginalizing more creative instructional options that can enliven the minds of the brightest students.

Laurence Coleman concludes this section by taking us in another direction that reveals some potential dogmatism in research strategies and theory development. In chapter 15, “Loosening Dogmatism by Using Disciplined Inquiry,” he navigates through the procedures employed in a creative process of analytic theoretical inquiry, which reveals the logical and empirical nuances in the works of established scholars. The process enables novice investigators to discover these often hidden and taken-for-granted dimensions of inquiry.

Finally, in chapter 16, “Stagnant, Calcified Thought About Giftedness: A View From a Height,” Robert Sternberg concludes the volume by highlighting some patterns that emerge from our collective exploration of the conceptual landscape in the field of gifted education. He generates some embryonic syntheses and tentative recommendations that can help theorists, researchers, and practitioners steer clear of entrenched thinking as they strive to improve the education of gifted students.

Of course, the ideas in this volume do not leave us with a complete, detailed



roadmap for future work in the field. Some of our ideas can and should be challenged. If they are, that likely is a positive development because it will prevent us from establishing just another set of ideas that will calcify and limit future progress. Consistent with the advice about holding theory lightly and using it as a springboard to further development of better ideas (see Popper, 1959; Coleman, 2003), we hope that readers will hold our ideas lightly and use them to inspire their own thinking about theory development, new research trajectories, and stronger development of curriculum and instruction. If this occurs, we should make some progress toward clarifying panoramic views in the field of gifted education while also making it more likely that we will more effectively and efficiently develop more young minds of high ability.

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