

GIFTEDNESS IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

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Gifts and talents can only exist in a cultural context – a collection of references made up of expectations, behaviour, values and meanings shared by members of a community. Those historical and social forces shape both the individual's psychology and the way that giftedness is defined. Cultural outlook also influences all the research into giftedness in the design of investigations, the questions asked and the way findings are interpreted. Unfortunately, not all of these cultural influences are recognised by the people who use them and so findings may not be transferable across cultures.

For example, in the USA, the dominant view of giftedness in children still most widely used was set out in the 1972 Marland Report in which the checklist includes 'valued by society', 'rarity' and 'yield a product', so very much depending on what each one shows what they can do. This is a typically Western view which stresses individual and competitive achievement rather than perhaps fitting in with others or striking out on an apparently wild new line of thought. Einstein would have been missed at school on these criteria.

There is a further split between that Western acceptance of an ability spectrum which is based on a bell curve with a lower and an upper end. The gifted are usually just a few children selected from the upper right end. The Eastern view, though, is that most children have that potential. Indian, Chinese or Japanese parents and teachers believe that children can succeed at a high level because of their culture of hard work, clear focus and support. So culture influences whether all children or just a selected few can have access to high level learning opportunities. Each of these two approaches brings extreme differences of in practice and outcomes.

Excellence can come from a wide variety of special provision - and even from none. For example, although educational programmes for the gifted in Scandinavia and Japan are rare, on international surveys the children's achievements in those countries are often superior to of countries which do have special programmes. China provides widespread enrichment for volunteer children via its Children's Palaces, and the outstanding results show on the world stage, whether in sport or in economic progress. Self-selection to higher-level learning is used in both New Zealand and Israel where the governments provide generously. The UK is taking outlook and provision for the gifted into all schools to be watched for by all teachers. Germany and much of Eastern Europe self-select via competitions, funded both federally and privately. Brazilian help goes to finding seriously deprived children who are potentially talented.

The underlying assumption of Talent Searches wherever they are held is that only a tiny proportion of children are gifted and should be treated specially, harking back to fixed ideas of ability. That began with Galton in the mid 19th century and continued into the early 20th century by Spearman, Goddard, Yerkes, Terman and Burt. US findings report that poor and minority students are far less likely to be selected for special gifted programmes compared with children from advantageous backgrounds. As yet, there is no scientific comparison,

either cross-nationally or even within one country, between aspects of any programme for the gifted and any other programme for the gifted, so it is hard to say what type of provision would be the most appropriate in any cultural situation.

Yet some fundamental issues in ideas of giftedness in different cultures confront researchers and policy makers everywhere. Here are four prominent issues:

Issue 1: Upsetting the conventional profile

Conventional ways of identifying and providing activities for the gifted have been designed by people whose values and ideas tend to replicate the dominant culture, yet might alienate others. Where the outlook of the child's cultural group does not match that of the school, there may be deliberate non-compliance. In many cultures gifts are associated with social handicap (e.g. lack of friends), though this view is diminishing with increasing evidence to the contrary. Disaffection and social exclusion are problems worldwide, and affect the potentially gifted.

It is only in cultures which have a long history of concern for the gifted that the idea that disability and impairment can disguise and block exceptional talents is becoming active. It is becoming recognised that without targeted support, complications such as learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders and hyperactivity are liable to handicap gifted student's success rates in formal schooling.

Issue 2: Early Childhood

In education, the very youngest participants are often the last priority. Kindergarten and nursery workers usually have less voice in educational discussions. There are some rare exceptions to this, such as Reggio Emilia in Italy or cultures where the community shares responsibility for bringing up its youngest members. It is not easy to test the abilities of very little children, but those who are obviously very advanced pose specific educational problems from the start of school life. When a child is reading and writing fluently at age five, for example, how can a teacher help them fit into a classroom of others who are effectively years behind?

Issue 3: Access to high-quality education

Cultural controls, often unrecognised, mean that around the world there is limited access to enrichment and challenge in education for some potentially gifted. Selection can be via tests or expert judgement, or self-selection where individuals can decide for themselves to experiment and learn in a challenging educational environment. Although there are practical reasons for rationing high-quality education, there are often ways to be found which could enable a wider range of learners to progress.

Issue 4: Educating teachers

Culture affects all educational concerns, such as mixed ability teaching, grade-skipping, vocational guidance, gender issues and parents' influence. Additionally, because the most able learn at a swifter pace and greater depth than other children, this causes problems of educational management and selection for their curriculum. This suggests the need for changes to the style of teaching, discipline, organisation, communication and the overall approach to the highly able.

Educators need access to sound evidence as well as sharing others' experiences which may be adaptable across cultures. They need to know what has worked where, what cannot be said to work anywhere, and how to adapt this knowledge to local conditions. Currently, there is little evidenced cross-cultural work for practitioners to draw on. Such information should cover a great variety of educational approaches and recognise the wider outcomes of different styles and levels of provision. The key is in networking.

Further reading:

- Freeman, J. (1998) *Educating the Very Able: Current International Research*. London: The Stationery Office. (Translated into Thai) (Free on www.joanfreeman.com)
- Freeman, J. (2002) 'Out of School Educational Provision for the Gifted and Talented around the World', Report for the Department for Education (UK Government). (On www.joanfreeman.com)
- Freeman, J. (2005) 'Permission to be gifted: how conceptions of giftedness can change lives', in R. Sternberg & J. Davidson, *Conceptions of Giftedness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp 80-97. (Free on www.joanfreeman.com)
- Freeman, J. (2010) *Gifted Lives: What happens when gifted children grow up*, London: Routledge/Psychology Press and Kindle (Translated into Hungarian)
- Freeman, J. (2015), 'Cultural Variations in Ideas of Gifts and Talents With Special Regard to the Eastern and Western Worlds' (p. 231-244), in Dai, D.Y. & Ching, C.K. (Eds.) *Gifted Education in Asia*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. (Free on www.joanfreeman.com)
- Stevenson, H. W. (2002) Cultural Interpretations of Giftedness: The Case of East Asia. In Friedman, R. & Rogers, K. B. (Eds.) *Talent in Context: Historical and Social Perspectives on Giftedness*. Washington: APA Books.