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Reconsidering the Ambitions and Position of Gifted Education

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Abstract

This article is a scholarly response and a theoretical commentary to Robert J. Sternberg's ACCEL-Model as published in the Roeper Review. While the proposed model is attractive, and a formidable attempt to reform education in a politically and economically turbulent World, all too often ignoring ethics, wisdom, and increasingly shunning also critical thinking, this article focuses on the two equally formidable obstacles in implementing the model, namely systems inertia and evolutionary dynamics, neither of which is addressed by Sternberg. In conclusion, a suggestion is made for the re-evaluation of ambitions and position in the light of what the ACCEL-Model is proposed to potentially achieve.

Keywords: Educational policy, giftedness, Liberal Arts, evolutionary dynamics, flawed ambitions, Flynn effect, human universals, cultural differences

Reconsidering the Ambitions and Position of Gifted Education

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I have spent several days on Robert Sternberg's formidable article. It contains much to ponder and digest. It is an article not to be taken lightly. A commentary of a mere 2000 words, therefore, cannot possibly do full justice to the article and to such a complex subject matter.

It is difficult to not agree with what Sternberg has to say. The article is erudite, wise, and constitutes a compassionate plea for a better World through the knowledge and talent we actually have at our disposal. However, one question has haunted me as I have pondered the content of this article. Sternberg's proposed ACCEL-model has monumental implications but can it indeed be generally accepted as a model to follow and in consequence be put into practice? I see two related obstacles difficult, if not impossible, to overcome. These are social systems inertia and the forces generating and keeping such systems in place. Few have phrased the possible threats of such obstacles to passionate, well-meaning, and knowledgeable gifted individuals better than Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1942; p. 259):

A lesson which many gifted persons never learn as long as they live is that human beings in general are inherently very different from themselves in thought, in action, in general intention, and in interests. Many a reformer has died at the hands of a mob, which he was trying to improve in the belief that other human beings can and should enjoy what he enjoys. This is one of the most painful and difficult lessons that each gifted child must learn, if personal development is to proceed successfully. It is more necessary that this be learned than that any school subject be mastered. Failure to learn how to tolerate in a reasonable fashion the foolishness of others leads to bitterness, disillusionment, and misanthropy.

Her sad conclusion has been conveniently forgotten, perhaps even ignored, by a research community obsessed with outlining roads to success for the gifted or success in various ways by means of giftedness (e.g., Clinkenbeard, 2007; Shavinina, 2009). Whenever I have commented on this darker side of gifted lives I am consistently accused of being a defeatist. I shall continue to bring this into focus undeterred when need be, however, because I share Hollingworth's findings in my own research and experience. In addition, since I began questioning the often unfounded optimism regarding the assumed societal possibilities of the gifted and talented, I have discovered much research in disciplines other than education and psychology painting quite a different picture than the one we are usually presented with in conferences and journals devoted to gifted education.

For starters, it is perhaps not necessarily the case that humankind is becoming increasingly IQ-intelligent. Research in behavioral genetics suggests, for example, that the Victorians were more intelligent than we are in our day and time (Woodley, Nijenhuis & Murphy, 2013). Also, IQ-levels may perhaps not be rising in the population but could, in fact, be dropping by about one point per decade (e. g., Woodley, 2015). We may well be in the process of becoming increasingly unintelligent instead of the other way around. But, as Sternberg rightly points out, if anything, we have become acutely aware of the shortcomings of the IQ-measure as representing the construct of giftedness.

But back to the ACCEL-model, the issue of feasibility, and the two obstacles likely to hamper its general implementation.

Systems inertia

I have no doubt that there are schools, colleges, or universities, in the United States, that would be more than willing to adopt, or at least be inspired by, the ACCEL-model. The content of the model, however, is construed largely with American culture and society in mind, which limits its application considerably elsewhere. I doubt it could be implemented

successfully in collectivist cultures having values, societal structure, the nature and purpose of development and goals in life, being very different than those typical of American society.

Steering educational efforts in accordance with the ACCEL-model would be difficult also in Europe, but for other reasons than in Asia. European education--on all levels--is usually tied to the state and tend to, in one way or another, be directly or indirectly dependent on budgets allocated by politicians. No college or school board would be able to alter anything unless it was first ordered by a government agency, legislated by parliament, and receiving a suitable budget for such change. Unlike the virtues of Liberal Arts education, the significance of which is strongly emphasized by the ACCEL-model, its European Union equivalent: 'Bildung' through the Humanities, is currently, at all levels of the various national education systems, being systematically abandoned in favor of an increasing focus on STEM-education. This development is motivated by the belief that an economy based on technology and innovation will provide not only a competitive edge in a global economy but happiness and future welfare as well. This is indeed an unqualified assumption when considering mounting evidence on how this development has affected the mental health of the European population so far (European Commission, 2005; Verhaeghe, 2014), but it is nevertheless an ideology being quite forcefully made into a societal reality with little room for changes of content and direction as proposed by Sternberg. For as long as education remains instrumental in implementing economic policy any change deviating from stated values and their objectives will be futile (Pereyra, Kothoff & Cohen, 2011). It is sadly also true that politicians have a troublesome tendency to be somewhat immune to research evidence, no matter how convincing, if these happen to disagree with stated policy or personal ambitions; of which the annual report of the Scholars at Risk Network (2016) is a dire reminder, bringing me to the forces motivating the emergence and upholding of societal systems.

Evolutionary obstacles

We tend to ignore that Homo Sapiens is a social animal moving around and about largely *unaware* as a collective, in a predictable fashion, irrespective of cultural values, individual preferences, and different abilities, in the interest of species survival and propagation only (Batty, 2013; Bourke, 2011). Anthropologists know about 400 such universal behaviors to date (Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). Some of the global challenges listed by Sternberg to stress the need for ACCEL-educated gifted individuals must be seen in the light of collective behaviors and the evolutionary dynamics influencing them.

No formidable individual, no matter how astounding their wisdom, passion, insight, training, and altruism, will be able to change an entire World Order as generated by the evolutionary nature of Homo Sapiens. The ACCEL-model assumes this to be possible, given there are suitably prepared and gifted individuals.

It seems to me that the current World Order has very different ambitions than to uphold ‘inalienable rights to pursue life, liberty, and happiness’ of each individual or group in society, and I cannot see how this state of affairs could be changed by any volitional means. The process of dehumanizing society mechanistically, construing individuals as machines for production and as human capital existentially defined by the economic value they represent, is increasingly becoming a problem in education as well as on the labor market all over the world in the wake of global economy. Education now serves to ‘improve’ individuals for economic benefit and the profit of others rather than for their own benefit and empowerment (Haslam, 2006; Schultz, 1981). It is becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile humanistic values and concern for human welfare with current technological development and the growth of global economy, as several prominent authors have already observed (e.g., Bostrom & Cirkovic, 2012; Nussbaum, 2010; Persson & Savulescu, 2014).

This development is quite opposite to what the ACCEL-model endeavors to achieve over time. To assume that we can control collective societal development and mass behavior over a longer period of time is an illusion in evolutionary terms (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989) as well as an illusion in historical terms (Harari, 2016; Kennedy, 1988).

Re-evaluating ambitions and our position

Regardless of the consequences of our largely unaware and collective pattern of behaviour all is not necessarily lost to uncontrollable chaos and callously avaricious anarchy. But we do need to re-evaluate our ambitions and where we stand in terms of what gifted education should lead to and contain. I propose the following principle to consider:

The larger and more global the group we endeavour to influence the lower the probability of success, and the smaller and more local the group we aim at influencing the higher the probability of successfully implementing change.

Guarantees never exist, only probabilities. Development of any kind rests more on chance than we like to accept. For the ACCEL-model to function, apart from needing cultural adaptation and consideration beyond American culture and values, as I see it, it cannot have ambitions to change a World Order no matter how commendable and ethical its motives. Such ambition is highly likely to fail. If on the other hand, it was to focus on smaller, and probably local groups, this would offer a better chance of success. However, it would also be a much less glamorous undertaking!

Perhaps the gifted and talented belong elsewhere than on the center stage of national or world politics and power?

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