

Commentary on F. Gagné: *Academic Talent Development and the Equity Issue in Gifted Education*

Straight Talking Gifted and Talent Education

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Few have the ability to deliver so much relevant substance in such a clear and compelling way as François Gagné! His seminal article “Academic talent development and the equity issue in gifted education” is no doubt one that will be discussed, cited, and hopefully acted upon in years to come. Needless to say, whenever something novel and important is published in the world of science it will also be the focus of considerable criticism for a variety of reasons. I am certain this will be the case also with this article. That said, I find that I have myself, in fact, very little to be critical about in regard to what Gagné so elegantly has written. I agree fully with the arguments presented and the conclusions made as well as the general analysis of the state of affairs in Gifted Education as they pertain to North America.

I initially reacted with some suspicion at using the US school systems as the basis of analysis and conclusions. There are cultural and political issues at stake in every national school system which make cross-cultural comparisons between almost any nation’s educational system difficult at best. Reading on however it soon became clear that Gagné uses the US school system mostly as an example, which certainly has bearing on school systems worldwide, but *only* for as long as other school systems have similar philosophical foundations and a related structure. The US school system is by and large heavily influenced by behaviorist notions which go well with measuring achievement every step of the way and psychometrically evaluating abilities for a variety of purposes; one of which is of course to identify gifted students for gifted programs. It is important, I think, to observe that this foundation is *not* internationally embraced. It does no longer exist in for example Scandinavia, which is currently dominated by a social constructivist understanding of learning and development. There is some development towards the same paradigmatic shift away from behaviorism and psychometric applications towards social constructivism also in South Africa, Australia, Hong Kong as well as in the UK (e.g. Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana, 2002). A school system based on social constructivist notions will have difficulty in relating to the American example that Gagné bases the article on. It will simply not translate.

For one thing the notion of competitiveness between individuals which so saturates the North American culture (e.g. Walker, 1986) and is at the centre also of Gagné’s understanding of giftedness it seems, is much less pronounced in a social constructivist school system where group learning and co-operative efforts are more of a concern than is individual effort. This clashes with the understanding of Academic Talent Development (ATD), which is Gagné’s preferred term, as an individual pursuit towards excellence as based on meritocracy. The gist of the article, however, concerns the political notion of equity and how this relates to giftedness. I agree fully that Gagné’s suggestion to operationalize the DMGT Model as suggested would render the general and international equity debate, known by different labels in different countries, quite meaningless. An entirely merit-based and selective system by which to cater to high-achievers irrespective of their field of excellence and of what demographic group they represent would deflate the problem and create a much-needed change of perspective. But, in regard to what I just pointed out concerning different school systems being based on different values, another problem would arise, namely that of how to relate to elitism.

Elitism as something negative is invariably a culture-related issue with sociobiological underpinnings (Persson, 2009), since elitism presents no problem when relating to sports

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and arts. But elitism in academic fields often raises protests as being “unfair” at the expense of others who are normal achievers or more often low achievers. It is my observation that this is a problem particularly to social constructivist school systems (Palincsar, 1998; Watson, 2001), which often also run on the basis of more or less socialist ideologies.

So, Gagné most certainly addresses problems which are of the utmost concern to the US school systems and others being more or less like it. He also presents an elegant solution to eliminate the equity problem, which should be taken seriously by US policy makers. However, for a school system based on other ideals and structured according to values different than those of the North American school systems, Gagné’s model and its suggested application directly confront the near-sacred *political* principles of an inclusive school system embraced by most of Europe (Mitchell, 1995); especially so if the school system has also adopted a social constructivist basis. Closest to an agreeable and fair solution by which to include high-achievers and cater to their needs in a progressive and meaningful way as an integrated part of the school system is in my understanding currently the school system in Wales. It generously counts 20% of its students as in need of more educational stimulation than regular students. The identification of students eligible for such provision does also not necessarily follow psychometric criteria. They are complimentary rather than primary (cf. Welsh Assembly Government, 2008).

While I would wish that Gagné’s vision of Academic Talent Development became a reality, simply because it makes sense on so many levels, I do also see a current political climate which would not be likely to take meritocracy as described by Gagné to heart when it comes to compulsory education no matter what category of student. Trying to introduce ATD in Europe would at least in some countries very likely be a case for political will over scientific sense and empirical fact. It would not be the first time in history that the scientific community contradicts the political will. However, that is not to say that some aspects of Gagné’s vision cannot transcend political ideology and be made to function at some level in different political climates. This, however, will demand further research and effort.

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