

The Gifted Metaphor from the Perspective of Traditional Civilizations

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The gifted metaphor implies that exceptionally promising abilities or aptitudes are inherited, acquired, or given from some source. This article offers information from ancient and classic cultures (Western and non-Western) relating to beliefs about the specific sources of gifts. These beliefs are used to discuss the images we hold of gifted individuals and the attitudes we have about serving this exceptional population in the school setting.

The term *gifted* has undergone recent challenges to its usefulness in describing students with exceptional abilities. For example, Gallagher (1991a) requested discussion about the term's educational implications and consequences. Foster (1986), on the other hand, believes the time is far past to abandon the term because it has little educational use. Both believe that discussion is due because of expanded knowledge we now have about how human abilities are developed. They suggest, based on our current enlightenment, that we may have outgrown the term.

We must proceed cautiously in considering any change of terms. Many problems we face as educators with providing education for the gifted come from cultural attitudes toward individuals who display exceptional ability, not from the educational implications of the term. A limited review of practices among ancient and classical civilizations illustrates how a cultural concept can have abiding educational implications, regardless of the term used to label the concept.

Cultural Perspectives

This review of cultural attitudes toward exceptional individuals draws on investigations of the religious and educational practices

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of early civilizations including those in Sub-Saharan Africa, Egypt, the Middle East, China, Meso-America, Greece, Rome, and Renaissance Europe. The presentation provides information about their beliefs concerning the origins, development, distribution, and attitudes toward advanced ability. As a cautionary note, it should be remembered in this discussion that while some ideas are stated as generalities, each culture varied from place to place and evolved over time.

Western African Cultures

In traditional African society, God was clearly seen as the source of the abilities of people. Among the Akan (Benin), as accomplished through *okra*, the vitalizing life force given directly by God, destiny was set before birth. Among the Yoruba (Nigeria), a man had to seek his destiny from *Olodumare*, who then directed special divinities to assist in guiding that man's destiny. For priests, herbalists, and diviners, a more-or-less formal calling came in mystic form from a divinity. Among the Igbo (Nigeria), God only approved what a person chose for himself (Quarcoopome, 1987).

Yet this focus on divine endowment did not imply that the traditional Africans did not recognize a role for physical heritability (even though they would not have known the genetics behind it). An ancient Balari (Congo) proverb states, "It is to his father or his mother that the rat owes his long tail" (Erny, 1972, p. 99). Among the Akan, the physical attributes of a child were considered to be passed from the mother, while the life force (*okra*) was given through *ntoro*, an endowment from the father that had a spiritual connotation but that was closely associated with the spermatozoan (Quarcoopome, 1987).

As to the development of special abilities, members of traditional African society were guided by the general principle of providing for the emergence of special abilities through establishing a favorable environment—a view not unlike that held by geneticists during the first half of this century. Thus, education started for the West African child when he wore "only a little scrap of material for a loin-cloth" (Erny, 1972, p. 6). It was further recognized that some children, based on their status or cleverness, needed specialized education (Erny, 1972). For those who would become priests, herbalists, or diviners, once their calling from a divinity came (an experience involving manifestation of certain characteristics recognized by tribal leaders), an extensive and intensive period of training under the direction of the more experienced followed (Quarcoopome, 1987).

Even with the value this culture placed on individuals with special abilities and the efforts expended on their behalves, the general attitude toward them was ambivalent. For example, among the Mande (Mali), a person who inherited *dalilu* (the means or the power to act) was considered a *ngana* (hero). The *dalilu* was always surrounded in secrecy and was highly respected; if everyone knew the secrets, they would also have the power to act, and that would render the acts ordinary rather than heroic. Yet the acts of the *ngana* were considered shameful because they were outside of social control. While the heroic acts associated with the quest for secret or esoteric knowledge as well as warfare and physical prowess were seen as necessary to societal survival, they released dangerous spiritual forces called *nyama* (Bird & Kendall, 1987). A similar attitude was found among the Balari toward their craftsmen, who were sometimes respected, sometimes despised, but always feared because of their specialized knowledge (Erny, 1972).

Egyptian Culture

As with their neighbors in West Africa, early Egyptians viewed the primary source of exceptional ability as coming from God (Springborg, 1990), but they also associate this closely with a heritable transmission (*ka*), as illustrated in the ancient axiom, "My majesty has breeding" (Davis, 1978, p. 156). Davis further points out that the spiritual force, labeled *ba*, was closely allied with personal effort (literally, sweat).

In addition, education was provided to the physically, intellectually, and behaviorally capable from among the upper class. That these were favored by God was clearly evident to the ancient Egyptians, but divine favor was not sufficient for achieving one's destiny. Thus the Egyptians established principles of pedagogy as early as 3000 BC (Brunner, 1981). Schools were organized into three types: (a) temple schools, which taught writing; (b) court schools, which taught etiquette; and (c) department schools, which taught vocations (Mayer, 1973). The best students could receive two special distinctions. Some were sent to the court schools to study with the royal family. Capable young men could also be selected by experts in a given vocation for an intensive apprenticeship preparing them to succeed their mentor (Brunner, 1981).

Despite these efforts with the majority of upper-class boys, only one was considered capable of pulling together all the elements of spiritual and physical endowment and personal and societal effort—

pharaoh (Davis, 1978). The resultant attitude toward pharaoh was an attitude of worship and hope (Springborg, 1990).

Greco-Roman Culture

The Greeks and Romans saw a number of gods as deeply involved in the affairs of humans. Special abilities in intellectual and artistic pursuits were the province of the muses. The stories of the gods and other divinities were told through fate myths. Nonetheless, two other myth types, fertility myths and hero myths, imply a belief in a role for heredity and personal effort (Stapleton, 1978).

It is among the Greeks and Romans, however, that we see the beginning of a major role for the schooling experience. The Spartans began military training for boys at age seven. The best among these boys were singled out to provide leadership and punishment for the rest. This military focus was not maintained in Athenian society. Rather, Athenian schools focused on an education for devotion to city by preparing boys for service as legislators, poets, philosophers, and orators. Eventually, the sophists provided education in dialectic, persuasion, rhetoric, and oratory for the most ambitious and intellectually curious students. The Greeks added the unusual innovation of also educating girls in these topics. The Romans adopted their educational focus from the Greeks and educated their ambitious youth in public speech, grammar, and literature (Castle, 1961; Power, 1991). Luckert (1991) explained the process of selection of those students who were chosen for advanced schooling. Prospective students were first attracted by puzzles and discussions of existential questions, but admission had to be earned through mental dueling in rational discourse about transcendent ideas such as goodness, truth, and beauty.

While the Greek scholars influenced thinking across continents and across time, they were not altogether popular among their fellow Athenians. The philosophers and their students tended to be arrogant, as is illustrated in Aristotle's comment: "The lives of mechanics and shopkeepers [are] ignoble and inimical to virtue" (Castle, 1961, p. 33). This haughtiness was often received with embarrassment that frequently turned to hate (Luckert, 1991).

Semitic Culture

Among Semitic cultures, there was unquestioned faith that God was the source of all gifts and that everyone received a gift from God. The

Old Testament, New Testament, and Koran are replete with such references. Islamic culture provides a particularly poetic reference to this with the following:

It is thou who hast pointed them through thy speech from the Unseen and thy encouragement in which lies their good fortune toward that which—hadst thou covered it from them—their eyes would not have perceived, their ears would not have heard, and their imaginations would not have grasped. (al-'Abidin, 700/1988).

While these cultures spoke little of the inheritance of gifts, though this might be inferred from references to the seed of Abraham in the Torah (see Genesis 22:16–18), the importance of personal effort to their development was recognized in Old Testament texts (e.g., Ecclesiastes 3:13, 9:19) and New Testament texts (e.g., I Corinthians 12:31).

The importance of education was also recognized in these cultures. Hebrew education consisted of moral education at home until age 6 and was followed by religious and basic education till the age of 10. From ages 10 to 16, boys were schooled in law by the rabbi. The more intelligent boys were then chosen to study the intricacies of rabbinic law (Mayer, 1973).

A similar religious focus guided education among Islamic peoples. Early education focused on memorizing passages from the *Koran*. For the more wealthy, private tutors added instruction in the poetic literature of the culture. This instruction began at age six or seven and had no upper limit. Capable students were sent on to superior school where they studied poetry, grammar, calligraphy, calculus, and etiquette. Particularly motivated pupils then began a quest for knowledge during which they traveled throughout the Islamic world from Spain to India to sit with the best teachers (Myers, 1960; Sourdel, 1981).

The scholar was highly respected in each of these societies. Nonetheless, a certain amount of distrust toward the learned is found in early texts that warn of overreliance on human wisdom (see, for example, I Corinthians 2:4; Colossians 2:8). This ambivalence toward scholars is expressed clearly in one of the discourses of Rumi (1250/1961) as follows: "The prophet, on who be peace, said: The worst of scholars is he who visits princes, and the best of princes is he who visits scholars" (p. 13).

Chinese Culture

Chinese civilization has been powerfully influenced by what is called the three teachings: Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism. The Tao was interpreted as a spiritual force that abided in all things as power or virtue. This was the power that energized people for outstanding accomplishments. In addition, Taoists recognized the importance of schooling by creating schools and deifying their most educated. (Jochim, 1986; Overmyer, 1986). The role of environment was further acknowledged through the effort a mother could make during pregnancy. They believed they were more likely to have a gifted child if they sat erect with the pillows arranged a certain way. They also avoided eating strange foods and would listen to or read aloud poetry (Cleverley, 1985).

Confucius (*K'ung-Fu-tzu*), beginning in 213 BC, was particularly instrumental in establishing schools. He believed that leadership should be based on intelligence and high moral principles and not on hereditary status. His schools were rigorous and intended for only the most capable learners (Chai & Chai, 1965; Overmyer, 1986).

The Buddhists also established schools, though much later than Confucians, and began differentiating education for advanced students. Ordinary folk received education in egalitarian moral principles, while the intellectuals were trained in sophisticated philosophy and the challenge of achieving new states of consciousness through meditation (Jochim, 1986; Overmyer, 1986).

Eventually, the Confucian philosophy of education prevailed; and by 600 AD, a system of intense oral exams was in place that permitted different levels of education based on personal capabilities. Passing the exams took great personal effort under the guidance of the teacher. Once these examinations were passed, a student had a choice of specialties to study including law, calligraphy, mathematics, and philosophy (Cartier, 1981).

While scholars themselves were respected, their learning frequently was not. Among the Taoists, for example, intellect was seen as the main obstacle to achieving perfection. Even Confucius was troubled with rejection and spoke of those who were disrespectful to the scholar as mean (Kohn, 1992).

Meso-American Culture

While knowledge of the belief system of the pre-Columbian Meso-Americans is still greatly incomplete, it is certain that God and other

divinities were seen as the source of special abilities. Priests were consulted for discovery of the day sign, day name, and number controlled by the particular deity associated with the day of an Aztec's birth. It was also recognized among the Aztecs that the physical union of male and female played a significant role in determining a child's abilities. The Aztecs also set up schools for the training of noble children to assist them in developing a variety of abilities that were encouraged. Ultimately an Aztec had to recognize his or her own implicit talent. Then he or she could be recognized as a true Toltec, a descendant of the early inhabitants of the land (Clendinnen, 1991).

These children eventually grew to be the priests, warriors, merchants, and heads of state who were so highly respected in this culture. Yet, despite the lofty social position held by these individuals, they received few privileges. Rather, they were expected to subject themselves to uncomfortable living conditions and to take potentially life-ending risks (Tompkins, 1990).

European Renaissance Culture

Some of the most influential thinking in Renaissance Europe on the differences in human abilities came from John Calvin. Primarily, he taught that natural human gifts had been drastically impaired through the Fall of Adam. As a result, humans lacked the rational abilities to discern God. The physical act of creation would then be seen, not as a source of gifts, but as an obstacle to overcome. Thus, men were solely reliant on the gift of God—justification through grace—that would make them part of the body of Christ (McGrath, 1990). Further, while God viewed each soul with equanimity, he had assigned man's mortal capacities in a highly structured way (Morgan, 1986).

Yet, individual effort was not discounted. All humans had to obey God's will to demonstrate that they were on the path to moral improvement. Calvin taught that some were given material or intellectual gifts and some were not. Some were given salvation; some were not. The two were not equivalent. Nonetheless, the reception of the grace of God renewed the recipient, who would then be motivated to perform good works. Good works, and their attendant rewards, were seen as outward signs of God's grace. This doctrine served as the basis of the Puritan work ethic. However, neo-Calvinists soon were teaching that individuals could receive an assurance of their calling by engaging in honest activities that led to gaining intellectual

and material rewards. Thus, the rewards soon came to be associated with God's grace rather than the good works that produced them (McGrath, 1990).

Schools were established for young men from families with social status. Eventually schools to educate the masses were begun; but even then, their primary purpose was to prepare the elite scholar for attendance at the universities. While these scholarly pursuits were encouraged, learning was largely viewed as dangerous (Morgan, 1986; Pounds, 1968).

During this period, artistic gifts were seen in much the same way the Greeks and Romans had viewed them, as a visitation of a spirit. Note, for example, this quote from Shakespeare:

This is a gift that I have, simple, simple; a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, apprehensions, motions, revolutions. These are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in the womb of *pia mater*, and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion. But the gift is good in those in whom it is acute and I am thankful for it. (*Love's Labours Lost*, Act IV, Scene 2)

Educational Implications for Today

From this background information on traditional and classic cultures, at least five themes are raised that need to be considered by those who would solve some of the problems in gifted education by changing the term we use to talk about children with exceptional abilities. These themes are: (a) diversity of gifts, (b) source of giftedness, (c) development of gifts, (d) distribution of gifts, and (e) attitudes toward giftedness. Each of these themes has important implications for educating individuals of exceptional ability today.

Diversity of Gifts

First, what is considered as gifted behavior is culturally imbedded and is usually linked to what a society sees as necessary for its survival. Thus, depending on the needs of their time and place, different societies value different abilities. Tannenbaum (1983) has categorized human abilities into four types specifically related to this survival motif. Scarcity talents are those such as leadership needed to ensure future survival. Quota talents are those such as medical skill

needed to provide for day-to-day survival. Surplus talents are those such as artistic ability that beautify our existence. Anomalous talents are those such as sharp-shooting that merely entertain us. The discussion of the various cultures has illustrated how survival—through spiritual leaders, government leaders, the military, scholars, and craftsmen—was prized in each cultural group in different ways.

The implication for us is to determine what we really prize for our survival through what Gallagher (1991b) calls enlightened self-interest. Unfortunately, our society seems to focus on anomalous talents (e.g., athletics and entertainment) except in times of crises when scarcity and quota talents are sought. This would seem to indicate that, in general, Americans believe their society to be basically secure. As a result, we feel we can afford to reward those who are exceptional in ways that are entertaining while simply tolerating other talents. The failure to value the scarcity and quota talents has created a sense of alarm among many educators who, among other things, have tried to address the problem by emphasizing the use of the term *talented* (Ross, 1993). Whatever term is used, it is important to make clear how the development of exceptional abilities meets the survival demands of our society here and now.

Source of Giftedness

A second major theme relates to the source of giftedness. In general, the cultures explored in this article saw the source of gifts as external to an individual, primarily as a gift from God. In our culture, the external source has come to be seen as our ancestors from whom we have received an infinite variety of genes.

Foster (1986) has pointed out that if we emphasize spiritual or hereditary endowment, which the term *gifted* seems to, our object is to identify who has received great quantities of these endowments and to begin developing the gifts as early as possible. The difficulty with this is how to tell at an early age who has received how much of what endowment. It may be that we should focus on *gifted-level potential* in all individuals until evidence suggests we should do otherwise. That is, school efforts may need to focus on the development of potential in all students. Special opportunities could then be made available to students when their performance so indicates. Currently, there is much that tells us that the potential of all children is enormous (Clark, 1992). Indeed, Diamond (1988) has stated, "We do not yet know the true capacity or potential of the human brain" (p. 161).

Development of Gifts

Closely related to the second theme, the third theme focuses on how abilities are developed, regardless of their source. In the cultural sketches provided, God was seen as a primary source of all gifts, but schooling of abilities was also highly important and began early. In addition, personal effort was valued in many of these cultures.

Our society has now focused on the importance of the interaction of nature and nurture in the development of human abilities. Gallagher (1991a) has suggested that the essential attitude for developing children's abilities should include valuing the tremendous potential children receive through their genetic patterns, providing challenging and interesting educational experiences, and developing motivation within children. The educational term for this would be *talent development*.

Foster (1986) has stated that even with a strong talent development program, a student may not fully utilize his or her abilities until a threshold moment occurs in which "innate aptitudes and life experiences blend in a fashion that allows" (p. 28) significant contribution to society. Such a moment might be an opportunity to be mentored by a master teacher or to participate in an important project. It would be difficult to guess which students will have such experiences. The school's task is to prepare students to be able to apply their exceptional abilities to the experiences that come their way. The view here is that giftedness is a label for history to bestow; the educational responsibility is simply to develop the talents that are there.

Distribution of Gifts

A fourth theme surrounds beliefs about the distribution of exceptional abilities. The cultures reviewed here saw a clear connection between social status, gender, and giftedness. Many of these cultures saw exceptional abilities as being the province of only a few individuals. While some began to deal with education for all, the best education was still reserved for those from families of high station.

This is a problem that we ourselves have not dealt with adequately. We continue to be burdened with a political struggle between excellence and equity. While progress has been made, gifted programs continue to be filled with students from middle-class, mainstream backgrounds. The implication is clear that we must conceive of giftedness in a more global, inclusive way, focusing perhaps more on performance than on status indicators such as IQ test scores.

This concern underlies the difficulty of merely changing terms to solve problems. As education professionals, we operate in a cultural context. Though we may change the way we use terms within our profession through new policies and training, the way terms are used in the culture at large are altered only with great difficulty. Any change of terms must be accompanied by a broadening of the perception in the minds of society's members.

Attitudes Toward Giftedness

Finally, the general attitude toward giftedness in a culture has important educational implications. Most of the cultures discussed in this article had ambivalent feelings toward members of their society who showed exceptional abilities. Sometimes this ambivalence was expressed toward their knowledge; sometimes it was communicated toward their power; at times, the behavior of the gifted themselves produced these feelings.

Gallagher (1986) has identified a similar love-hate relationship with the gifted in modern society. Further discussion of this ambivalence as it relates to the language we use about people with exceptional abilities is needed. Does the term we use create the negative feelings or prevent positive feelings? Is it the term we fear or do we fear the exceptional people and their knowledge? Do the gifted bring these attitudes upon themselves with their behaviors? Will we find ourselves in a cycle of changing terms because attitude changes fail to follow terminology changes? Obviously, major efforts need to be expended on educating the public about the education of individuals of exceptional ability. Regardless of what term is used to describe it, society will need to know the basis on which some are included while others are excluded. If services are seen as privileges for a few, negative attitudes will continue to prevail.

Conclusions

Few of the cultures discussed in this article used the term *gifted* to refer to the group of individuals in their society with exceptional abilities. Yet those with advanced abilities were seen in ways similar to how the gifted are seen in our society. They were considered exceptional because of the hopes people had that they would ensure the continued existence of their culture. Their ability was seen as a divine or inherited gift. Great efforts personally and societally

were needed to develop their abilities, and special opportunities were generally not available to the socially disadvantaged. Finally, the exceptional were the objects of ambivalent feelings directed toward them as persons and toward their knowledge. Beliefs and feelings about individuals of exceptional ability have not changed a great deal from those we inherited from other cultures.

However, we have grown considerably in our knowledge of both the psychology and physiology of human abilities (Diamond, 1988; Fischbach, 1992; Gardner, 1983; Goldman-Rakic, 1992; Sternberg, 1988). This knowledge is beginning to affect our thinking about giftedness, but cultural attitudes are slow to change. The term, *gifted*, is not mere educational jargon; but it is a culturally imbedded term to refer to people's abilities and our attitudes toward them. As we discuss changing *gifted* to some other word better reflecting our knowledge about human abilities and better serving as an educational guide, we must be aware that words are culturally loaded and that it will be necessary to educate society so our educational intentions will become culturally valued.

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Primary Teacher Conceptions of Giftedness: Image, Evidence, and Nonevidence

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This qualitative multisite single case study is designed to explore the conception of giftedness held by four experienced teachers. These teachers were from three school districts piloting the Early Assessment for Exceptional Potential portfolio assessment model (Shaklee, Barbours, Ambrose, Viechnicki, & Rohrer, 1991). Teacher interviews triangulated by multiple secondary sources were analyzed to answer the research question guiding the study: How do primary teachers conceptualize giftedness in young children?

Findings revealed that the four teachers shared a similar image of giftedness. This conception had two dimensions: classroom performance and affective style of the students. Teachers assessed children developmentally against their peers for extremely unusual intellectual and/or academic ability as demonstrated by what children said and did, and a "spark," or qualitative difference in these children characterized by intensity, high visibility, and/or uniqueness. Four strands of evidence created the teachers' image of child potential.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the conception of giftedness held by four primary teachers (two kindergarten and two first grade) as they engaged in the assessment and identification of students with exceptional potential within their classrooms. Specifically, the research question guiding this study was: How do primary teachers conceptualize giftedness in young children: (a) What beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions about gifted students are held by primary teachers? (b) What lines of evidence do primary teachers use to reach the conclusion that a child has exceptional potential? (c) What observable evidence is not used? This study was one strand of a larger study exploring both teacher conceptions of giftedness and the im-

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