Annie Haight

The 'high ability' debate: introduction to the special issue, *International Studies in Sociology of Education* (2014)
Taylor and Francis Online
DOI: 10.1080/09620214.2014.995896
This version is available: https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/items/d65d194c-0cfb-4637-b526-acaeeb3f4963/1/
Available on RADAR: 12.05.2016

The 'high ability' debate: Introduction to the special issue

Annie Haight, guest editor

Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

ahaight@brookes.ac.uk

Sociology of education has tended to spurn questions of high ability and the educational responses they generate. The latter's past and current associations with crucial areas of concern for sociologists of education, most notably with forms of educational inequality including those of class, gender and race, go a long way to justify this. Policy responses to perceived high ability have often produced overtly discriminatory outcomes, for example in the selective schooling system in Britain in the mid-twentieth century and more recently in the under-representation of minority ethnic children in gifted education programmes in both the United Kingdom and the United States (Ball 2013; Gillborn 2008; Ford 2012). The motivations behind such recent gifted education programmes can be deeply instrumental, justified by ambitions to improve global economic competitiveness, maintain or increase geopolitical power and status (often expressed thorough proxy indicators such as the PISA and TIMSS rankings), or appeal to certain groups of voters.

Nor have the crimes of gifted education and its cognate fields been confined to policy makers. Tainted scholarship and the specious use of research mechanisms underpinned Hernnstein and Murray's grotesque claims about the racial origins of cognitive inferiority in *The Bell Curve* (1994). Critics have condemned gifted education for exemplifying a neoliberal degradation of education that hollows out the collaborative and relational aspects of learning in favour of atomistic, competitive individual performance (Sapon-Shevin 1994; Tomlinson 2008; Francis et al 2012). At the level of individual experience and classroom practice, parents, teachers, school leaders and the public are often concerned that gifted education programmes introduce invidious, unnecessary and suspect distinctions (reminiscent of the castes in Huxley's *Brave New World*), with the potential to imprison learners in predetermined categories that curtail and undermine life chances.

The term 'gifted' is objectionable on many levels, and was pilloried by the American satirist Lewis Burke Frumkes who claimed in *How to raise your IQ by eating gifted children* that 'studies have shown gifted children to be larger and more attractive in the main than ordinary children, ... [and that] gifted children just taste different' (Frumkes 1983: 11). The title selected for this special issue represents an effort to shift focus from egregious terminology and allow new voices to join the debate from the point of view of sociology of education. Nevertheless, the papers in this issue engage with and problematise contemporary educational responses to high ability, primarily in the field and practices of so-called gifted education.

The problematical aspects of gifted education have been recognised for some time by what might be called the progressive wing of the field, scholars attentive to the detrimental effects

of its ideas and practices on issues of social justice and the common good (as well as, potentially, to individual lives). James Borland, one of the leaders of this movement, advocates 'the death of giftedness' and 'gifted education without gifted children' (that is, appropriately differentiated provision for all learners, including those who learn more quickly than age peers) (Borland 2003, 2005). David Yun Dai, one of the contributors to this issue, has noted the bifurcation of the field into 'reductionist' and 'emergentist' conceptions (Dai 2005).

Gifted education is a 'baggy' category which holds a number of concepts from different disciplines, as well as corresponding educational policies, practices and underlying value positions. Sociological insights jostle for position with contributions from other fields such as psychology, philosophy and, increasingly, neuroscience. This portmanteau field exemplifies a variety of responses to the challenge presented by individual differences in learners' capabilities, notably the capacity for unusually high levels of academic or creative performance in relation to age peers.

Variations in performance in different fields are a staple of human experience. In the aftermath of the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics, the commentator Akandadi Dass observed that 'Sport is a celebration of inequality' (Dass 2012). Inequalities in academic performance are more troubling and controversial, in part because the long-term stakes may be higher in terms of employment and income over the life course, in part because of deep-seated tensions between issues of equity and excellence in our social, political and cultural context. To date the sociological contribution to this field has been dominated by scholarship interrogating the ways in which gifted education arises from and entrenches existing privilege.

The authors of the papers in this special issue represent a variety of positions and address a number of the questions raised in the high ability debate. Dona Matthews and David Yun Dai provide an overview of current scholarship in the field of gifted education, noting the shift from 'categorical homogeneity' to 'developmental diversity' in understandings of ability and outlining the implications of this for practice. Laura Mazzoli-Smith considers the issue of theorisation in the sociological research on gifted education and calls for more nuanced, interdisciplinary thinking that combines epistemological and axiological approaches in order to attend to the lived experience and 'ethically situated meaning of high ability for individuals'. One aspect of lived experience, parental attitudes to the term 'gifted' in American education, is considered in the contribution by Michael Matthews, Jennifer Ritchotte and Jennifer Jolly. Lauren Stark examines questions of race and gifted education in the United States through the lens of critical whiteness studies, arguing that since its inception, the discourse of giftedness continues to be framed through racial projects. Letitia Hahn considers recent critiques of gifted education within the current context of materialism and globalisation and urges the refocusing of talent development programmes explicitly to foster social engagement and responsibility and to promote social justice.

Current developments in the scholarship of high ability studies see an increasing degree of reflexivity about the field itself, including the observation that gifted education, like

humanities disciplines such as philosophy and English literature, is 'fragmented, porous, and contested' (Ambrose et al 2010, cited in Ambrose, Sternberg and Sriraman (2012: 4). Sociologists of education do and should join the debate over high ability and the educational responses to it. It is hoped that the contributions in this issue extend and illuminate understandings in this complex and contested field.

Key words: high ability, gifted education, sociology of education

References

Ambrose, D, Sternberg, R. and Sriraman, B. (eds.). (2012). Considering the effects of dogmatism on giftedness and talent development. In *Confronting dogmatism in gifted education*. New York: Routledge, pp. 3-10.

Ambrose, D., VanTassel-Baska, J., Coleman, L.J. & Cross, T.L. (2010) Unified, insular, firmly policed, or fractured, porous, contested, gifted education?' *Journal for the Education of the Gifted 33*, pp. 453-478.

Ball, S. (2013). *The education debate* (2nd edn.). Bristol: The Policy Press.

Borland, J. (2003). The death of giftedness. in Borland, J. (ed.) *Rethinking gifted education*. New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 105-124.

Borland, J. (2005). Gifted education without gifted children: The case for no conception of giftedness. In Sternberg, R. and Davidson, J. (eds.) *Conceptions of giftedness* (2nd edn). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-19.

Dai, D.Y. (2005). Reductionism versus emergentism: A framework for understanding conceptions of giftedness. *Roeper Review 27*, pp. 144-151.

Dass, A. (2012). *Thought for the Day*. BBC Radio 4. 5th September.

Gillborn, D. (2008). *Racism and education: Coincidence or conspiracy?* London: Routledge.

Francis, B. Skelton, C. and Read, B. (2012). *The identities and practices of high achieving pupils: Negotiating achievement and peer cultures*. London: Continuum.

Ford, D. (2012). Equity issues and multiculturalism in the under-representation of black students in gifted education: Dogmatism at its worst. In Ambrose et al. *Confronting dogmatism in gifted education*. New York: Routledge, pp. 80-94.

Frumkes, L. B. (1983). *How to raise your IQ by eating gifted children*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Herrnstein, R. J., & Murray, C. A. (1994). *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Free Press.

Sapon-Shevin, M. (1994). *Playing favorites: Gifted education and the disruption of community*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Tomlinson, S. (2008). Gifted, talented, and high ability: Selection for education in a one-dimensional world. *Oxford Review of Education* 34: 59-74.