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### **ABSTRACT**

Some forces that undermine programs for the gifted--misguided fiscal policies, simplistic teaching methodologies, and a resurgence of the philosophy of egalitarianism--are reviewed. Analogous to the demise (and possible resurgence) of programs for the gifted is the evolution of women's sports since the 1920s.

Recently, at an open house in a neighborhood school, the principal addressed a contingent of parents. "During any time of day, I know exactly what each one of my teachers is doing, what page they are on, what part of the curriculum they are covering, what state objectives are being met. Are our programs successful? We have one of the highest pass rates for the exam in the state!"

The principal's brief statements reveal two assumptions: 1) She believes a lockstep approach to learning is desirable and effective: 2) She thinks that a high overall pass rate on minimal competency exams indicates something about the quality of instruction.

Although much has been written about the benefits of sculpting curriculum so that the academic task is comparable to a student's ability (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Fasko, 2001; Vygotsky, 1990), the principal was heralding a one-size-fits-all approach. If a teacher predetermines to cover curriculum at a prescribed pace, the relative ability levels of students become irrelevant. Most state assessments (such as the one in Texas, where the principal resided) measure minimal competencies, not intellectual growth or the percentage of students who earn the highest scores. In wealthy districts, most students could pass grade level exams on the first day of class in late August.

To be sure, the quality of instruction at a school cannot be measured merely by counting up the number of students who pass minimal competency exams. A twelve-year-old who reads, enjoys, and comprehends college-level books, but who is forced to work from a sixth-grade basal all year would learn little, though his standardized test scores still would bolster the overall pass rate for the school. Because many states use the overall pass rate as the only indicator of quality (McNeil, 2000; McWalters & Cheek 2000), and because the overall pass rate is increasingly being tied to teacher and administrator salaries, the emphasis in many schools has shifted from addressing the potential of the individual student to getting a majority of students up to a minimal level of competency.

The new focus upon inculcating masses of students with minimal competencies is worrisome for a number of reasons. In this article, we will argue that gifted students are being shortchanged through fiscal policies, teaching methodologies, and the resurgence of egalitarianism. We will then present the case of women's collegiate athletics, whose history provides a startling analogy for public education in the early twenty-first century.

### **BUDGETARY PRIORITIES**

In the last twenty-five years researchers have made significant strides in understanding the needs of the academically gifted. During this same period, a series of legislative mandates has created budgetary and administrative priorities that have worked at cross purposes with the goals of gifted education. Students who possess talent and drive seem to have become extraneous to the purported goals of public education--to educate all children, to foster equity, and to satisfy minimum competencies. The burgeoning initiatives for home schooling, charter schools, and school choice are often being championed by parents and politicians who have an interest in keeping gifted students in the public schools.

Some education critics think that gifted education missed out on a golden opportunity when P.L. 94-142 was passed in 1975. Unfortunately, this movement that emphasized individual differences only had an impact on students in special education (Corn, 1999). As a nation, we spend \$30 billion on special education; sometimes at the rate of \$100,000 or more per child per annum. In contrast, funding for gifted and talented programs is minimal, at best. Of the over \$2

billion spent on instruction in the Chicago Public Schools in 2000, one-tenth of one percent was spent on the gifted (\$3 million). In comparison, spending on special education totaled approximately \$531 million or 177 times the rate of gifted; vocational education was funded at \$69 million, 35 times the rate of gifted education, and bilingual education was funded at \$45 million, 15 times the rate of gifted education (Chicago Public Schools, 2001). Funding for gifted education gets 1% or less of the amount for special and compensatory education in most districts, including those in Houston, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Dallas, Philadelphia, and New York.

This is not to begrudge funding to special education students who desperately need it, but to note the sizeable amount of money required to keep such programs afloat. Once the school district's business manager funds the federal requirement of providing students with "the least restrictive environment," he or she must also find money for state mandates on class size, character education, technology infusion, and other initiatives. Whatever money is left after these debits must go to transportation, team sports, building maintenance, and... oh yes... academics.

The clear victims of fixed budgets and increasingly cumbersome legal requirements have been America's brightest children. A recent study of Texas schools, for example, revealed that districts routinely spent one-third of their budgets on special education while allocating less than one percent for gifted programs (*Baines, Muire, & Stanley, 1999*). The message is clear: if a ten-year-old can only learn what a six-year-old can, money will be spent, but if a six-year-old can learn what a ten-year-old can, nothing is done. If the rationale for differentiated instruction is variance from the mean, then differentiated instruction for gifted students is as defensible as it is for those in special education (*Winebrenner, 1999*).

While parents and teachers of gifted students hear the dour pronouncements that there is no money for gifted programs, they cannot help but notice that districts somehow manage to fund new stadiums, uniforms, computers, ESL programs, and other initiatives. We marvel that parents of the best and brightest students have reacted to their children's second class status with such quiet resignation.

### **ANTI-ELITISM = ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM?**

Perhaps the most sinister force undermining gifted education programs is the re-emergence of the concept of egalitarianism. In practice, egalitarianism has come to mean that all students should get the same educational experience. States have spent millions determining baseline competencies, funding lawsuits have erupted across the nation, and "tracking" has become a dirty word. The one-size-fits-all approach has become de rigueur in American public schools. Perhaps a more appropriate definition of equity would stress that all students have an equal opportunity to actualize their learning potential. Once we can acknowledge that abilities are not equally distributed, perhaps we can admit that a one-size-fits-all curriculum is absurd.

The obsessive anti-elitism so prevalent in schools is not as apparent in other sectors of American society. We support excellence in athletics. Sports journalists do not denounce as undemocratic basketball players at the University of Kentucky who receive more intensive coaching than do their counterparts at Albany Junior College. Americans also support excellence in their professions. We like to know that our surgeons, attorneys, and architects have had the finest preparation available. Only in the American public school is the quest for homogenized mediocrity valued over excellence.

Somehow, in the quest to document minimum competency levels and to provide universal opportunities, public schools have ignored, or even deplored, the gifted. In a study of the effects of progressive reforms (most notably detracking) on academic achievement among students in Japan, it was found that parents of the brightest students were the first to abandon public schools in favor of private academies. As a result, the reputations of public schools, once the finest educational institutions in Japan, began to wither. Detracking reforms succeeded in creating greater equality among the public high schools, but were accompanied by an even greater achievement gap between private and public schools, poor and rich, majority and minority (*Kariya & Rosenbaum, 1999*). A flight of the gifted from public schools in America could lead to similar consequences.

## **DUMBING DOWN THE GIFTED: HOW LOW CAN WE GO?**

Anyone who doubts that textbook publishers have dumbed down textbooks only need peruse any previous generation of adopted texts (published anytime from 1910 to 1985) for evidence. To conform to the standards of minimal competencies and the new objectives of equity, textbook publishers have replaced text with full color images, extensive use of graphics, and color-coded sidebars to ensure that even the slowest learners can understand (Loewen, 1995).

Concomitantly, the "evolution" of instructional delivery—the transition of the teacher from sage to "guide on the side" and the proliferation of cooperative learning strategies—have further enervated the learning environment for the gifted. With egalitarianism, the teacher becomes more interested in socialization than learning; the mean becomes more important than the individual score. When a teacher "teaches to the lower middle," below average students learn at the target pace while gifted students become tutors for the slower learners in the group. This "helper methodology" has become so widespread in public schools that it is now virtually ubiquitous.

Defenders of heterogeneous grouping say that having bright students serve as peer tutors validates the group experience and builds leadership skills. But do we really produce future Edisons or Einsteins by forcing them to spend large amounts of their time tutoring students who have no interest in the material? One veteran advanced placement teacher told us recently, "The idea that the good student will pull up everyone else in a cooperative setting is a stark falsehood. What usually happens is that the good student ends up doing the other students work." Is intellectual development for gifted students being bartered away so that teachers have a cadre of unpaid tutors at their disposal?

Teaching to the lower middle simply does not provide the level of challenge needed by gifted students. As a result, the smartest students are often unproductive and bored. Tolan (2001) compares underchallenged gifted students to cheetahs. A cheetah running forty miles per hour might be impressive to some observers, but it is drastically underachieving in comparison to its potential. Similarly, if a cheetah only has to chase after rabbits who run 20 m.p.h., it won't run 70 m.p.h.

Adumbed down curriculum and a heavy reliance on gifted-student-as-tutor has produced another methodologically-induced disaster—gifted students as wallflowers. Because relatively few benefits and additional, inglorious responsibilities seem to accrue to those identified as gifted, many have opted for invisibility. Once a student is identified as gifted, he or she may suffer barbs from less talented classmates. Contrary to the contentions of supporters of the new equity, some oppositional adolescents may not greet help from an intellectually gifted peer with enthusiasm. In such a setting, gifted learners may see their intelligence as a stigma rather than an asset and act to camouflage their abilities, an obvious impediment to their intellectual development (Coleman & Sanders, 1993).

The tendency to hide talent may be especially prevalent in males. Many gifted boys start their academic underachievement earlier than gifted girls (Davis & Rimm, 1997). In a school environment that prizes athletic achievement, where schools hire coaches regardless of their academic backgrounds, is it any wonder that many of the smartest male students hide their talents to avoid being labeled as geeks, nerds, or sissies? Given the number of men who serve as coaches, it is possible for students in many districts to go through twelve years of school without encountering a male teacher who is certified in his field (Ingersoll, 2001; Stanley, 2001).

## **COACHING TO THE MIDDLE?**

Parents and teachers are quick to notice that the various philosophies that limit the intellectual growth of gifted students are not to be found on the athletic playing fields. Yet, for the sake of discussion, what if they did? Suppose that football coaches coached to the middle. Would we insist that their offensive scheme be simple enough so that even the most intellectually challenged player could understand? Because star athletes are already more talented, would we denounce special coaching for them as undemocratic? Would we put the star quarterback with the third team so he could tutor them while the coach facilitated learning from the sidelines? Would we insist that everyone should have the right to equal playing time so as not to appear elitist? Would we allow every team member to play quarterback while insisting that there was no right or wrong outcome?

The answer to all of these questions is obviously no. We prize excellence in scholastic sports.

Athletics are frequently the highest profile activity in school and most students and teachers do not object to athletes taking pride in their accomplishments.

### **EGALITARIANISM RUN AMOK**

Applying egalitarian principles to the world of sport is not outside the realm of historical precedent. One only has to look back to the opening decades of the twentieth century to see what happened when competition and excellence in athletics were denounced as elitist, undemocratic, and destructive. Starting early in the century and peaking in the 1920s, several women's physical education associations attacked competitive sports for women and succeeded in ridding most colleges of them. Leading the battle were such organizations as the American Physical Education Association (APEA) and the Women's Division of the National American Athletic Federation (NAAF). Spokeswomen for these groups wrote that sports should be available for every girl, providing the "greatest good for the greatest number." Varsity sports, however, were "blatantly undemocratic." Under this system, coaches chose a small group of girls representing a small percentage of the student body, and gave them intensive preparation, thus depriving the larger number of girls of their opportunities. The irony here, supporters of the ban on competition stated, was that these select few did not need the extra training to achieve fitness. The attention of the coaches could be better spent promoting activities for all students rather than for a limited number chosen for their unnatural physical prowess.

The NAAF and APEA had tremendous support among collegiate professors of women's physical education. By the end of the 1920s, they had succeeded in eliminating most varsity sports for women. Writing to the president of her university in 1928, University of Kentucky's Women's PE Director claimed that "Now that Kentucky like most of the colleges in the country has given up the varsity team with its emphasis on star players, we have been able to accomplish the bigger purpose of having every girl participate in some sport." Blanding further claimed that the ban on intercollegiate basketball had, in fact, produced better athletes (Stanley, 1996).

The Dean of Women wrote to the Board of Trustees endorsing the ban on competition. She stressed that "we want to promote physical culture in the girls and not to make athletes of them." Yet missing from her pronouncements were the voices of the girls, themselves. They did not think their basketball games (which predated the now-famous men's team by a year) were hazardous, undemocratic, or unladylike. Players from the defunct women's team withdrew from the Athletic Association in protest. Neither did they participate in the newly restructured Play Day intramural contests. Players from other schools responded similarly, in several cases burning their uniforms in protest (Stanley, 1995).

The results of this nationwide campaign were disastrous for women's sports. At the University of Kentucky, varsity sports did not return to the campus for over fifty years. Two generations of young girls grew up without positive role models in women's sports. By the 1970s, women athletes had become, in many places, novelties.

### **CONCLUSION**

In many ways, the egalitarian movement in women's sports shares eerie similarities with current movements in educational reform that purposefully subvert gifted education. If immediate action is not taken, schools will continue to gravitate toward a kind of homogenized mediocrity centered on getting a majority of students up to a minimal level of achievement. Fortunately, women's sports were revived from their egalitarian nightmare by public outrage and the passage of Title IX. While it is acceptable to celebrate the excellence of Olympic-class female athletes and to praise their coaches, it has become blasphemous to suggest similar treatment for the intellectually gifted and the teachers who wish to teach them.

Although identifying and challenging America's best and brightest students would seem to be essential functions of a public school, the money and support for gifted education in most districts is negligible. If a cheetah is kept in a small cage and fed only a steady diet of zoo chow, it will cease to run at all. By not providing special instruction, schools offer gifted students the academic equivalent of zoo chow.

Clearly, the time has come for an expansion of the concept of democratic education. Schooling in a democracy should not mandate identical programs of study for every student, irrespective of

their special needs, intellect, or talent. Instead, schools should provide a curriculum that allows all learners to reach their full potential. America's champion of individual liberty, Thomas Jefferson, wrote both of a democracy of opportunity and an aristocracy of talent. Accordingly, our gifted students have as much right to have their unique needs met as students anywhere else along the talent scale.

#### ADDED MATERIAL

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