

Mind and Giftedness: A Philosophical Examination of Gifted Education

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Abstract

A common episode in the philosophies of education is the phenomenon called mind. The Lockean declaration that the mind derives its ideas from experience firmly established the place of the mind in the process of education. The paper attempts to examine the nexus between mind and education. With particular reference to the idea of promoting the ideals and practices of Gifted Education, the paper attempts a conceptual analysis of the concept mind. This critical examination of the concept mind, in an historical and analytic manner, positioned the foundation for the submission, among others, that the mentally gifted is nature's endowment to humanity. The paper accordingly recommended a roadmap for nurturing the gifted.

Keywords: Gifted, Education, Mind, Philosophy, Mental

Introduction

Attempts to proffer justificatory explanations for the ideals and practices of Gifted Education are founded on the view that some minds are more prepared for learning on a faster pace than some other minds. It is on the basis of this belief that perennial attempts have been made to identify these 'gifted' minds for some kind of special education (Piirto, J. 1999). Attempt is made in this paper to identify, if any, the philosophical basis for Gifted Education. This attempt to establish the philosophical basis for gifted education is founded on the need to also identify the nexus between Gifted Education and the concept *mind* (Sriraman, and Dahl, 2007).

Gifted Education: An exposition

Gifted Education is that aspect of Special Education that is concerned with those distinctive practices, procedures and theories used in the education of children who have been identified as gifted or talented (Culatta and Tompkins 1998). Thus, this branch of education studies is often referred to as Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) or Talented and Gifted (TAG) in some discourse.

Advocates of Gifted and Talented Education are of the view that human potentials are not uniformly distributed. Some individuals are accordingly believed to be more endowed with certain potentials than others (Calvin, 1996). It is against this background of the view of the non-uniformity of human potentials that proponents of Gifted and Talented Education argue for some kind of non-generalist form of education for children who exhibit high potentials.

When advocates of Gifted and Talented Education use the term 'gifted' with respect to students, children, or youth, they refer to those who show evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop such capabilities (Callahan, 2008).

Proponents of Gifted Education hinge their arguments further on the belief that education is a means by which every individual has the opportunity to reach his or her fullest potential. A corollary argument is to the effect that every child has a right to educational experiences that challenge his or her individual development, which may be below, at, or beyond the level of his or her age peers (Cooper, 2011).

Hence, the argument continues, children that are motivationally or intellectually prepared for challenges not offered in the standard curriculum should have their lessons paced to meet their level of preparedness. Such students, it is contended are entitled to enriched and accelerated educational programs (Colangelo & Davis, 1997).

There exists historical and observational support for Gifted Education (Robinson and Pamela R. Clinkenbeard 2008). It is documented for example that in China's Tang Dynasty (circa 618 CE) child prodigies were summoned to the imperial court for specialized education. Plato (c. 427–

c. 347 BCE) is also renowned for his advocacy of specialized education for intellectually gifted young men and women. The Renaissance was also characterized with the practice of identifying those who exhibit creative talent in art, architecture and literature for support by the state and wealthy individuals.

Research findings of renowned scholars also seem to buttress the necessity of Gifted Education. Sir Francis Galton's studies of high functions in humans (between 1888 and 1894) led him to categorize people into the gifted, the capable, the average and the degenerate. Adapting Alfred Binet's intelligence test Lewis Terman created the term intelligence quotient (IQ) to refer to one's mental age compared to one's physical age, as compared to a sampling of other people within one's age range. More importantly, for Lewis Terman, intelligence refers to "the ability to carry on abstract thinking".

The research efforts of Terman's colleague, Leta Stetter Hollingworth emphasized the importance of early identification, daily contact, and grouping of gifted children with others with similar abilities. While Hollingworth's findings were geared, among others, towards dispelling the pervasive belief that "bright children take care of themselves", Hollingworth's studies also attempted to demonstrate how best to approach the education of children with high performance on tests.

Finally, one important document that has influenced the landscape of Gifted Education is the United State's Marland Report. The report, *inter alia*, defined gifted as "Children capable of high performance". Such children would "include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas, singly or in combination: General intellectual ability, Specific academic aptitude Creative or productive thinking, Leadership ability, Visual and performing arts, or Psychomotor ability." (Callahan, 2007).

One can then safely conclude that the underlying general principle behind arguments for Gifted Education is that each child should receive a challenge appropriate to his or her preparedness and motivation (Natcharian, 2016). It is precisely on the basis of these arguments that scholars of Gifted Education attempt to articulate and provide educational programs that recognize and make provisions for the special needs of gifted students (NAGC, 2011).

Gifted Education and the concept of mind

The historic-philosophical foundation of education is suggestive of the fact that education is, in some sense, a phenomenon that is inexorably associated with the concept of mind. The history of education is replete with the philosophies of thinkers who had addressed their attention to questions like: what is education? What ought to be the aim of education? What is the best method of education? Who is an educator? What, if any, is the difference between education and indoctrination? (Noddings, 1995). In the ultimate, these are questions that bother on the quintessential question: how best do we affect the human mind for individual and collective development? Classical, modern and post-Modernist responses to these questions, among others, form the body of thought of that branch of education studies now known as the Philosophy of Education. We find in the works of Plato, for example, the classical expression of the view that the aim of education is that of the pursuit of true knowledge (about the ideal, absolute and unchanging reality). For medieval scholars in general, the aim of education was, in general, that of evolving God-conscious individuals who shall understand all things within a particular metaphysical context, the religious.

During the Renaissance, the goal of education was viewed as that of developing the individual's talents in all intellectual and physical areas (scholarship, swordsmanship and wrestling, among others.). Thus for Renaissance thinkers, the educated person is not one bound to a specific discipline. The 17th Century British Empiricist Philosopher John Locke affected the landscape of the history of education with his view that the aim of education is that of practically preparing people to manage their social, economic, and political affairs efficiently.

The effect of Locke's conception of the goal of education is palpably felt in virtually all post-Lockean philosophies of education: Jean Jacques Rousseau's emphasis on the power of reason and critical thinking; Benjamin Franklin's emphasis of the utilitarian and scientific aim of education; Thomas Jefferson's aim of education as that of facilitating the emergence of a democratic nation; the twentieth century Montessori-Russellian view that education should serve the purpose of identifying and developing the needs and potentials of the child, among others.

It is noticeable that discussions about education in general and about Gifted Education in particular are characterized by the use of mental-referring terms such as perception, motivation, ability and abstract thinking, among others. These mental-referring concepts also characterize discourse in that sub-branch of philosophy called the Philosophy of Mind (Amodu, 2002).

The Philosophy of Mind is in general concerned with mental phenomena such as memory and imagination, with particular reference to how these phenomena are related to physical phenomena, such as motion. It is therefore instructive that attempt is made to explore the nexus between the nature of mind and the use of mind-dependent concepts (like ability and memory) in Gifted Education discourse. We are going to approach this task of further clarifying the relationship between mind-dependent phenomena and the practice of Gifted Education by attempting a conceptual comprehension of the concept mind.

Mind: A Conceptual Clarification

Technically speaking, reason is the essence of the mind. Thus, conceived the mind is the seat of thought and other mental activities. The human being is taken to be unique because of his presumed ability to reason, such that to deny any man of this ability of the mind is to deny him of his essence or personhood thereby de-robing him of his claim to humanity and all the privileges – moral, legal, social and political that go with belonging to the human race (Amodu, 2002).

The pertinent question at this juncture is: 'what is the nature of mind?' This question, among others, has occupied the attention of philosophers of mind over the years. Literatures on the philosophy of mind indicate for example that there exists a plethora of theories on the nature of mental activities (Uriah, 2006). Otherwise called theories of mind, these theories are the results of the continued application of the analytical techniques of philosophy on mental phenomena. Generally employed to refer to human mental activities such as thoughts, feelings, desires and emotions among others, a broad classification of the theories of mind can be made along two lines: substance (or entity) theories of mind and non-substance (or non-entity) theories of mind.

Substance theories of mind will refer to all those theories of mind that conceive the mind to be an entity. These, for example, will include the Lockean and the Cartesian conceptions of mind. In Locke's view for example, the mind is a substance in which are found ideas, this substance theory of mind in fact sees the mind as a storehouse of ideas. Thus, substance theory of mind informed Locke's momentous declaration that 'no proposition can be in the mind which it was never conscious of'. The substance theory of mind sees the mind as a substance or entity that forms an essential part of the person. This theory of mind, that there is a part of the person (mind) that perceives, reasons and understands, is a common view of the nature of mind.

This common sense theory of mind finds philosophical articulations in the thoughts of Plato and Descartes for example. Descartes conceives the mind as a thinking substance – *res cogitans* – the "thinking thing", the substance in man, that knows. The mind is a non-material, and as such a non-spatio-temporal entity. The activities of the mind are not subject to mechanical laws. Therefore, the mind as traditionally conceived, is an un-extended immaterial substance capable of thinking. This conception of mind follows from Descartes' famous 'I think, therefore I exist' thesis. The mind on this account is the seat of thought, reasoning, and other mental activities.

The non-substance theories of mind depart from what has been identified as the substance or entity theory of mind. In the tradition of analytic behaviorism, for example, the 'mind' is conceived not as a substantial entity but rather as an abstraction. What is called the mind refers to a dispositional state and not any substantial object. The 'mind' in this sense is conceptual (or abstract) and not, granted the usage, 'concrete' (or particular).

Furthermore, there is the brain state or brain function account of the 'mind' (Pribram, 2007). This account shares intellectual affinity with the logical constructionist thesis that rather than being an entity, the 'mind' is non-substantive. The mind in this sense is nothing over and above brain processes or brain states. According to this tradition, the *objectual* usage of the concept 'mind' will become old-fashioned in due course. A deeper scientific understanding of man, cognitive science, for

example, believes, might reveal that there is nothing about man's mental experiences that cannot be explained in terms of brain processes or brain states (Bailey, 1996).

The emergent scientific conception of 'mind' is also lent credence in the ordinary English language usage of the concept 'mind'. In declaring that a person is intelligent for example, it is permissible to say 'he is brainy'. Similarly the word 'brainchild' is used to refer to a person's idea, intellection or plan. 'Brainstorm' refers to 'a violent disturbance: a sudden mental lapse; bright idea; a spontaneous discussion in search of new ideas'.

One theory of mind that actually seem to have laid the foundation for Gifted Education, however, is the one that proffers a normative account of the causal role of mental processes. According to the normative account, rather than being a process, the mind is either a state or a kind of disposition or ability to carry out, or demonstrate the possession of certain capacities – intelligence, emotion and abstract thinking, among others.

The intellectual advantage of the normative conception of mind is best appreciated against a background of what Aristotle identified as rational powers. According to Aristotle, rational power is peculiar to human beings, it embodies potentiality or ability. For Aristotle, as Antony Kenny sees it for example, the vehicle of *an* ability is the physical ingredient, structure in view of which the possessor of an ability possesses the ability and is able to exercise it... Ability has neither length nor breadth nor location (Antony, 1981).

Conclusion: Gifted Education for Gifted Minds

What the above conceptual clarification of mind aptly demonstrates is the fact that giftedness is a mental phenomenon. Giftedness is inseparable from mind-dependent phenomena such as consciousness, intelligence and critical or abstract thinking. Being gifted, refers, to a large extent to having the potentiality for performance or the ability to perform. The key words in the definition of giftedness – potentiality, ability, intelligence – derives from *mentality*. The state of mind of a child – his or her mindset is indicative of how that mind should be educated. A mind that demonstrates preparedness for learning advanced mathematics and is still being bothered with memorizing and counting numbers is a mind abused.

Thus, to commit child abuse is not only to physically mistreat a child. The worst kind of child abuse is the one that refuses to take cognizance of the child's mental preparedness for advanced learning. The side-effects of *mental abuse* (or, abuse of the mind) is the child's development of a sense of neglect, isolation and deprivation.

To deny a child the right to education appropriate to his or her *mental preparedness* is to deny him / her of his or her humanity. A civil, compassionate and humane system of education cannot but then recognize the place of gifted education in the quest for human development.

Questions and answers arising from discourse about giftedness are inexorably philosophical. While philosophers of mind are interested in questions about the nature of mind or giftedness in itself, philosophers of education raise questions about how we ought to train gifted minds. It is precisely the question 'how we ought to train gifted minds?' that, among others, dictate the necessity of the discipline Philosophy of Gifted Education. The same reasons that justify the study of the Philosophical Foundations of Education are justificatory of the need to study the Philosophical Foundations of Gifted Education. It is desirable, therefore, that a study of Philosophy of Gifted Education or Philosophical Foundations of Gifted Education be made compulsory for would-be teachers in general.

If indeed the mind is a terrible thing to waste, it is even more terrible to waste the mind of the gifted. The gifted and talented are nature's *gifts* to humanity. The identification and nurturing of such gifted and talented minds is a veritable platform for further enriching our humanity.

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