

## IDENTIFYING AND DEALING WITH EXCEPTIONALLY GIFTED CHILDREN: THE HALF-BLIND LEADING THE SIGHTED\*

Richard M. Felder\*\*

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The function of gifted education is the same as that of any other branch of special education—to serve children whose needs are not adequately met by the regular curriculum. The author argues, on the basis of his own educational experiences and those of his children, that intelligence testing is an invaluable and irreplaceable tool for identifying gifted children and obtaining a measure of the urgency of their special educational needs. He also offers several ideas for how parents of exceptionally gifted children can create an environment in which their children's gifts can flourish.

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### A Short Family History

I was once considered a gifted child...at least by those close relatives whom I dazzled by reciting word-perfect Gilbert and Sullivan patter songs at some absurdly early age.

Unfortunately, while the Termans and Hollingworths of the world had already done their pioneering work when I was growing up, word of it apparently never got through to Buffalo and Miami, and so I experienced nothing but the lock-step approach to education. Few thought of me as gifted once I started school—you can get only so much mileage out of patter songs. I took tests of one kind or another—possibly including IQ tests, I'm not sure—that indicated high intelligence, but you never would have guessed it from my academic record.

Quite the contrary, in fact. I spent a rather miserable childhood/early adolescence as the skinny misfit in the back row, doing poorly in every subject—almost poorly enough to be left behind in several grades—and getting into trouble in a variety of ways. The main way was trying to escape into my imagination. I always loved to read, and would bring a book to class, slip it onto my lap, and begin to sneak looks at it while trying to keep up with what was going on in class. It was no contest, however; the sneaked looks would get longer and longer, and before long I was gone—until I found myself being called on or tested, with no earthly idea of what I was supposed to have been paying attention to. The result was a procession of abysmal report cards, trips to the principal's office, and conferences with my parents about my poor attitude and my failure to live up to my potential. [As an adult, for a number of years I kept a placard on my desk showing Linus, clutching his blanket and looking wistful; the caption was "There's no heavier burden than a great potential.")

So went my early education. I could relate any number of anecdotes that would collectively constitute a "How Not To" guide to educators, but it suffices to say that my experience with school gave me an academic and social self-concept close to zero for most of my formative years. I got a great deal of love from my parents, but they had no way of knowing that I needed something I wasn't getting in the schools. All they could do was assume that "The Authorities" knew what they were doing, and if I was making poor grades and trouble there must either have been something wrong with me or with them as parents.

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\*\* Richard M. Felder, Ph.D., is Alumni Distinguished Professor of Chemical Engineering at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC. He is the father of three gifted children: Kenneth, a college sophomore; Elena, a high school senior; and Gary, a high school sophomore.

Obviously I survived, and went on to become what many would consider a high achiever. However, without going into details, I'll just say that I'm still paying heavy dues for the first 12 years of my educational life. And, of course, countless others were subjected to the same treatment, many of whom didn't come out nearly as well as I did.

The subject of gifted education formally entered my consciousness when my oldest child was about four years old. A question came up that lent itself to being set up and solved as a simple algebra problem. On a whim, I suggested to Kenny that he do it that way; I gave him about 30 seconds on how to do it, and he did it. I gave him a similar problem, and he did that one too. I called my wife Barbara over—a mathematician by training—and we went through a few more problems. By then, we were both aware that we had something unusual on our hands.

If we had been looking for it, we would have realized Kenny was exceptionally gifted well before then. He went from two words to complete articulate sentences with essentially no transition period at 18 months; he played a mean game of chess at two; and before he was three he could reel off the most formidable Gilbert and Sullivan patter songs with barely a pause for breath. But we weren't looking, and only realized it when we were hit on the head with it.

Then we started looking. With Gary, our youngest, it was easy: he has if anything a greater gift for mathematics than Kenny does, and a long-standing propensity for asking questions that stretch and often go beyond the limits of my scientific knowledge. (He loves the time-shift paradoxes of relativity theory, for example, and for a good part of his life I've had to deal with folks moving close to the speed of light with stopwatches in their hands—that sort of thing.) With Elena, our middle child, it was more difficult. She was somewhat intimidated growing up between the two boys, and resisted anything that might label her as gifted and therefore put her in competition with them. As a result, she didn't learn to read until the first grade, and for the next eight or nine years she spent a lot of energy trying to convince everyone how terrible she was in math and how mediocre she was in everything else. She did a good job persuading the schools of her ordinariness, too: she was in the middle of the pack in most subjects, and was even put into a remedial math group in the third grade,

In hindsight I can also see that Elena's giftedness should have been clear to me early in the game. Although she resisted learning to read early and was initially placed in the slowest reading group in the first grade, shortly afterwards she announced that she was ready to read—and she did within a few days. She did a number of things like that—resisting acquiring a skill, then deciding she was ready to do it, and then doing it with astonishing ease and rapidity. Also, she would sometimes ask questions at home having to do with advanced concepts in subjects that she was supposedly slow in, and absorb and understand the explanations with no difficulty whatever.

As good as I am at hindsight, though, at the time I didn't recognize her pattern...and although Barbara never fell for her protestations of incompetence, I have to confess that Elena had me wondering whether I was overestimating her abilities. However, when later she began to produce superbly crafted essays, and to read and love good literature and to discuss it with astonishing insight, we both realized that she too was truly gifted.

Unfortunately, the negative messages about herself that Elena bought into early in her life put down deep roots, and it took her much longer to realize her specialness than it took us. She was tested in the fourth grade and showed up with a very high IQ, which qualified her for the G&T magnet program instituted in Raleigh in 1975. She didn't want to be in it, however,

believing that she wasn't really qualified, and only agreed to try it a year later. Her self-concept began to turn around with her successes in the program, but only recently has she truly begun to believe in herself—and her high grades, writing and academic awards, and success in a summer program at Harvard reflect this improved self-concept.

As my children moved up the educational ladder into and through high school, their educational experiences got better and better, largely because of the magnet program. However, even after the program was in place, it was often necessary for us to be “pushy parents” to make sure they were getting what they needed.

I'll just relate one example. While in kindergarten, Kenny and Gary had each taken word problems (e.g., I have 17 nickels and dimes, and a total of \$1.30—how many of each coin do I have?), converted them into simultaneous equations, and solved the equations, sometimes in their heads. “The algebra game,” we called it, and we could and did play it for hours on car trips and during our nightly private times. Nonetheless, in school the boys were expected to spend hours a week solving repetitive arithmetic problems, writing out every step of the solution, even though they could often give the answers simply by inspection. They were predictably bored silly, and it was beginning to color their attitudes toward school in general. I talked to teachers, math coordinators, and principals, frequently encountering resistance or hostility, but eventually getting understanding and cooperation. The end result was that both boys were accelerated in mathematics; they moved ahead several grade levels each year, were transported to higher-level schools when necessary, and each completed an introductory calculus course by the end of the ninth grade. (Similar arrangements have since been made for other students in Wake County, so the struggle was well worth the effort.)

I'm pleased to say that all three of my children are doing beautifully now. They're all enthusiastic about learning—thanks mostly to a few inspiring teachers they've had in high school and to their mother, who has an incredibly broad reservoir of knowledge and wisdom and infinite patience for imparting both. They have friends who share their interests and abilities, and they are continually making more. And, despite the periodic external worries and self-doubts that come with the territory of adolescence, they all seem to like who they are.

However, they were lucky, as I was, and as Barbara was: many other children with equal or greater gifts go unrecognized or unprovided for, in some cases with catastrophic results. (I have not told Barbara's story in this article; I would only say that her history of unrecognized giftedness is similar to mine, except that she is more gifted and got even less support at home and in school than I did.) The key is timely identification by parents and educators. When I think about how the five of us—Kenny, Elena, Gary, Barbara, and I—might have been identified early, the only common trait that comes to mind is that we all scored highly on intelligence tests. At least in the cases of Elena, Barbara, and me, almost no other objective identification procedure would have labeled us as gifted.

### **To Test or Not to Test—Yet Another Opinion**

I am aware of the growing opposition to the use of IQ as an indicator of giftedness, and of the related tendency to democratize programs for the gifted. In my local school district, I've seen eligibility criteria for the G&T program ever broadened, stopping just short of “If it breathes, it's gifted.” I have heard all the anti-IQ pronouncements: “elitist,” “culturally biased,” and “uncorrelated with achievement in life”; “Intelligence isn't just one quantity like IQ—it's really

three factors [or seven, or 120]”; “IQ tests are just elaborate achievement tests that measure environmental advantage, not aptitude,” and so on.

By nature I tend to sympathize with appeals to democratic principles. However, like so many other unassailable ideals, democracy can be used as the basis for justifying a variety of positions, not all of which are equally unassailable. As the definition of giftedness becomes increasingly broad, educational programs for the gifted are progressively watered down (especially since the funding base rarely expands to cover the increased population) and the children at the high end of the intellectual spectrum once again get short-changed. Further, it seems to me that many psychologists and educators, in their well-meant zeal to make gifted education accessible to as broad a population as possible and to compensate for possible misuse and overinterpretation of IQ tests in the past, are seeking to trash an invaluable and—at least at the present time—irreplaceable identification tool.

My view of the utility of IQ tests stems from my belief about the purpose of gifted education. I believe we should have gifted education for exactly the same reason that we should have special education for all identifiable exceptionalities. It’s not so we can produce more Newtons and Einsteins, or so we can keep up with the Russians or the Japanese. It is that intellectually gifted children—like artistically gifted children, physically handicapped children, learning-disabled children, and emotionally disturbed children—have educational needs that cannot be met in the context of the regular school curriculum. If these needs are not addressed, the emotional well-being of the children may be adversely affected.

Whatever its defects, the IQ test clearly identifies many children with such needs. If a child scores 50 on the Binet, few would argue that he or she should not receive special treatment. A child who scores 150 has equally urgent special needs, whether he or she is getting A’s or D’s, performing or not performing, culturally advantaged or deprived. The high IQ may result from intrinsic gifts or a highly supportive environment or both, and indeed it may not be a reliable indicator that the child will do well in college or in a career. Regardless of its origin or predictive capability, however, the 150 IQ means that the education appropriate for the child is not the same as that appropriate for a child with a score of 100. While the nature of the required support may differ considerably from one group to another, all children—academically disabled, “normal,” or academically gifted—are equally deserving of all the support our schools can provide.

This to me is the true democratic approach: each student receives the provisions dictated by his or her needs. The earlier those needs are established, the more likely it is that they will be appropriately addressed and met. Anything that can be done to provide early effective identification of exceptional children should therefore be employed. In the case of intellectual giftedness, intelligence testing is the best method we have for early identification—and it may be the only way to identify underachieving gifted and to discover the full range of abilities of exceptionally gifted children.

The strength of my feeling about this issue originates in my own educational experiences and those of my children. I did not get an appropriate primary or secondary school education, since I didn’t attend schools where anything was done for gifted students. However, even if there had been programs for the gifted, if achievement-based identification criteria were used that required sustained performance at a gifted level, I would never have qualified. If IQ tests had not been used as part of the criteria for giftedness in Wake County, Elena might not have been identified and admitted to the G&T program. If the results of IQ tests were taken more seriously,

she might have been identified earlier and had her scholastic needs (which are clear in retrospect) attended to—and I would not have to fight, year after year, to keep the schools from dumping endless trivial math exercises on Kenny and Gary, boring them and possibly squelching their enthusiasm for learning.

When you are trying to identify a specified subset of a large population, whether exceptional children in a school district or potentially hazardous chemicals in a process plant stack (an area in which my credentials are somewhat more substantial), you use whatever methods have been found effective. In both of those cases, the optimal procedure usually involves using a variety of measurement instruments. If an identification method works well in some cases but has limitations in others, you don't discard it until you find another one with the same strengths and fewer limitations.

In this light, it seems reasonable to me to use a variety of means to identify those who would benefit most from programs for the gifted. The criteria should include class performance and achievement (the least reliable indicator, at least for exceptional giftedness), teacher nomination, parent nomination (a most underrated method), results of valid tests of creativity (if any are ever found), and intelligence test results. And if the IQ is greater than a specified minimum, it should be taken as *prima facie* evidence of need for a gifted program.

This is not to say that current efforts to find something better than IQ are inappropriate. Efforts to find something better are never inappropriate. Also, it is not to quarrel with those who argue that IQ tests miss some students who would benefit from gifted programs: the instrument that can identify all deserving students has never been found and probably never will be. The point is that intelligence tests serve to identify children as gifted who should be so identified, including many who are in urgent need of gifted programming and who could not be identified by any other means. These tests should therefore not be abandoned or downgraded until something else comes along that can do what they do better than they do it. Whatever instrument or technique this may turn out to be, it hasn't come along yet.

### **Parenting the Gifted**

Parenting is one of only two skilled vocations I know for which no qualification or experience is required and no training is provided. You just get in there and do it, and hope that by some combination of intuition, common sense, and luck, you don't mess things up disastrously or irrecoverably. (The other such vocation is college teaching.) Barbara and I are no exceptions. We began with no idea of what we were doing and worked it out as we went along. Judging by how our children are turning out, we seem to have done all right; however, we did most of what we did with essentially no guidance, and we could have used some on many occasions.

Several years ago Gary was tested by Dr. Linda Silverman of the Gifted Child Testing Service, Denver, Colorado, who provided us with a list of guidelines for parenting the gifted. I have made many copies of the list and given it to every parent I have met of children who are or might be gifted, and I believe it would be well placed in the hands of everyone involved with teaching, counseling, or parenting gifted children.

Most of the recommendations I would make to parents of gifted children are on this list and are familiar to most counselors: for example, don't talk down to the children; provide a stimulating home environment; give the children a real voice in family planning and decision-

making; provide opportunities and materials for unstructured creativity (drawing, modeling, tinkering, etc.); and reward effort, exploration, and risk-taking more than achievement and competitive success. In addition to doing these things to the best of our ability, we did several other things in our home that I think may have been particularly beneficial to our children. I offer them as suggestions to parents.

### **1. Provide the children with learning experiences as soon as they are old enough to talk.**

These experiences might include learning to read, memorizing and reciting poetry (I recommend Gilbert and Sullivan patter songs, myself), playing games of logic and skill, playing the algebra game or some equivalent, etc. These activities should be offered, not pushed, and they should be presented as games, not required exercises. If there is no interest, the activities should be dropped, and perhaps brought up again after a year or two.

The object is not to create superbabies for the gratification of parental egos. It is to allow the children to experience the fulfillment that comes when interests, abilities, and gifts are allowed to develop naturally, and not according to someone's arbitrary schedule of when learning is supposed to occur.

### **2. Recognize that giftedness manifests itself in different ways, and honor all of them.**

I believe we might have fallen down on this one: if we had not been conditioned by Kenny's mathematical and verbal precocity, we might have been alert to Elena's imaginative and interpretive precocity earlier in her life, and we might thereby have sped up her own self-acceptance.

### **3. Set up a schedule of private times for each child.**

Every night at bedtime, each of our children had a half-hour with one or the other of us, to do with whatever he or she wanted. Sometimes we read to them, sometimes they read to us, sometimes we listened to music, or played games, or sang songs, or just chatted about burning or trivial issues in the world or in their lives.

### **4. Put limits on potentially harmful addictions, such as sugar, caffeine, and television.**

We allowed one little box of trashy breakfast cereal per month per child, to be eaten in one sitting or rationed out, as they preferred; soda one night a week; and something like three hours of television during the week and a few more on weekends, with exceptions made for programs we thought they would benefit from watching. Since we provided ready substitutes—like books, games, and conversation—they never got used to having television as a nonstop pacifier. Even today, when we're long past restrictions of this type, they hardly ever watch TV. (Unfortunately, one of them almost lives on Coca Cola now, so there are no guarantees.)

### **5. Be an advocate for the children in school.**

I was as obnoxious as I had to be when my kids' welfare was concerned. If I felt that something inappropriate was being done (or something appropriate wasn't being done), I was not shy about raising the issue with everyone concerned, moving as high up the administrative ladder as I needed to move. Eventually, unless the parent is completely off base, someone will listen and respond. The other side of the coin is that when appropriate education is provided, the parent should do everything possible to assure that those responsible for providing it are recognized and rewarded by their administrative superiors.

## Epilogue: The Hidden Agenda

The thrust of my argument in this paper may be summarized as follows. A goal of our society is to provide an appropriate education to every child. In order to meet this goal, suitable provisions must be made for those who have special needs stemming from identifiable exceptionalities, whether handicaps or gifts. The provisions we offer to exceptional students—both handicapped and gifted—should be based on those students' demonstrated needs, and not on their current performance levels or potential achievements in school or society. To serve exceptional students we must first identify them, as early as possible in their lives. We can best do so by using a combination of all identification methods known to be effective. These methods should include intelligence tests, which consistently provide positive identification of deserving gifted students, many of whom could not be identified by any other available means. Once the gifted have been identified, every possible effort should be made in the home and in school to nurture and honor their gifts, and to encourage them to develop and enjoy those gifts to the greatest extent possible.

I have an impetus for arguing these positions that goes beyond the justifications so far offered. My wife and I used to joke about how we were spending our lives just waiting for the time when we could sit at our children's feet and soak up wisdom. Interestingly, we still say things like that, only we're no longer so sure that we're joking.

Somehow, though not through any means we consciously employed, we've raised children with senses of ethics and morality that sometimes amaze me. It may be that they got their political consciousness from us—our values are classically liberal and so are theirs. Several instances of their going far beyond us quickly come to mind, however...like the reproachful looks they've always bestowed on questionable moral practices (e.g., getting a 13-year-old into a movie at a 12-and-under price, a practice I quickly abandoned), and Elena's ethical vegetarianism (which, however, she wouldn't think of trying to impose on us or anyone else), and the extraordinary sensitivity and compassion all three have shown in their dealings with their friends since they were old enough to have friends. As proud as I am of my children's intellectual gifts, I am even prouder of the strengths of character that these and other examples I could cite illustrate. And as strongly as I feel that intellectual gifts should be nurtured for the good of the individual, I feel that moral development must be facilitated for the good of society.

I also believe that these goals are related. I don't know where my children got their highly developed moral sensitivities, but I can speculate. My experience as both a child and a father suggest to me that early recognition and nurturance of giftedness lead to emotional well-being, to the development of that sense of self-worth that provides the foundation for both intellectual and moral development. It therefore seems to me that in creating a proper emotional climate for the development of our children's gifts, we could be sowing the seeds of moral leadership in our society for generations to come.

Hence, my ultimate argument. We have an obligation to identify and provide early recognition and support for our exceptionally gifted children if for no other reason than that they are our children and have special needs. By providing this recognition and support, we serve them, and do honor to ourselves as parents and educators. Perhaps more importantly, our serving our gifted children in this manner may be the greatest contribution we can make to the others whom they will touch and inspire in their lives, and to the society they will collectively build.