# 1

## *Underserved and Over-Deserving: Rationales for the Support of Gifted Education*

Why are there gifted programs? What are some of the stated rationales for identifying a subset of children as "gifted" and providing differentially for their education? This chapter reviews and challenges some of the typical arguments advanced in support of gifted programs, exploring both the stated purposes and the unspoken assumptions which buttress such programs. For each argument, I also examine how the structure and the content of that argument constrains subsequent critique and rebuttal, silences the discourse, and narrows the range of discussion. Although there is tremendous overlap in the arguments used to support gifted education, for the purposes of exploration here, I have divided these arguments into three categories: educational arguments, justice arguments, and political and economic arguments.

### Educational Arguments

Although it is a tautology, the most persistent explanation for having "gifted programs" is the existence of identified "gifted children." Gifted programs exist because the educational community typically sorts and identifies different "kinds" of students and provides for them differentially. Programs of bilingual education, remedial reading, and accelerated math all stem from the view that there are different kinds of children who have different educational needs and that it is the responsibility of schools to provide appropriate education to meet the needs of different learners. Typically, support for the process of identifying and providing special programming for gifted and talented students progresses through the following arguments: there are certain children who are gifted;

these children have unique educational needs; and these needs can only be met within the confines of gifted programs. Let's examine each of these more carefully:

First, there is the belief that gifted children represent a unique group of students, members of an objectively definable population who can and must be "found" and labeled in order for their needs to be met. Tolan (1987) explains:

> A gifted child is not a normal child whose differences are secondary—interesting decorative frills that can for the most part be ignored.[ . . . ] To deal with the gifted child in exactly the same way one deals with a normal child is to deal *inappropriately* and so to cause harm, as it would cause harm to give a person with pneumonia only aspirin simply because colds are so much more common. (pp. 186–187)

Although there is considerable discussion and debate within the field of gifted education concerning how giftedness should be defined and gifted children identified, the underlying assumption is that gifted students represent an objectively identifiable population, that they are "out there," and that the first step in serving this population is to "find them." There is a significant emphasis within the field on "identifying gifted students"—on casting a wide net, on talent searches.

As questions have been raised concerning the "fairness" of gifted programs, the validity of the identification measures used, and the narrowness of the target population, there has been increasing emphasis on identifying a more diverse group of students as gifted. Thus, there are special tests and strategies for identifying "the handicapped gifted," "bilingual gifted students," "poor and minority gifted students," and "the underachieving gifted students" (see Whitmore, 1980).

The focus, however, remains on finding that population that is truly "gifted" and rarely on the integrity or reality of the category itself. "Who is gifted?" and "How do we best find and identify gifted children?" are considered legitimate questions; "Does it make sense to call any children gifted?" is not a similarly sanctioned inquiry.

The use of the term "gifted" provides a scientific explanation or label for difference, and, as such, it comes to replace commonsense meaning and understandings of children's behavior and differences. By describing a group of children in ways that emphasize their differences from typical or "nongifted" children, we are encouraged to

believe that giftedness is something foreign, outside our daily, commonsense frameworks. The parent who exclaims, "Well, I knew my daughter was very smart, but I had no idea she was gifted!" provides evidence of the ways in which official, scientific-sounding, technical terminology replaces our commonsense ways of thinking about and talking about children's differences. As will be explored later, books on "how to raise your gifted child" or "how to live with gifted children" encourage us to see children who are labeled as "gifted" as "others," outside our experience and thus outside our capacity to think about or plan for. This "othering" contributes to the idea that educational programming for children labeled "gifted" is logically considered separate from or apart from educational programming for typical children—"they're different—they need something special."

The most common way in which children are identified as gifted is on the basis of standardized testing, usually including or focussed largely on intelligence testing. It is easy and comfortable for some to seek refuge in numbers—"it wasn't my decision to include or exclude certain children—it was based on tests." But, in reality, identifying certain children as gifted represents a decision. It represents a decision to attempt to sort children according to specific variables, a decision about how to assess those variables, and, then, a decision about what to do with the results of that assessment. Each of these represents a discrete set of decisions. Deciding to identify children as gifted on the basis of tested intelligence is a decision; so is deciding to measure intelligence using a standardized IQ test; and so is the decision to arbitrarily establish a cut-off point along a continuum of scores or behavior and to then act as though those above that point are qualitatively (rather than quantitatively) different from those below.

Giftedness is typically defined as the top 3–5 percent of the population. Some choose to further subdivide the population into the "gifted," the "highly gifted," and the "exceptionally gifted," and each of these is also generally defined in terms of a percentage of the general population. Efforts by some gifted educators to "liberalize" definitions of giftedness in order to include greater percentages of children have been harshly criticized by others. Colangelo (1984), for example, is concerned that the liberalization of the definition (that is, including too many children within it) will lead to a time when we view every child as either gifted or "potentially gifted" and thereby deny meaning to the term "gifted." Educator Barbara Clark expresses concern that "throwing a wider net may

result in more children being less well served. . . . The attempt to serve 25 percent of the students must not be allowed to reduce the all-too-inadequate support that is given the top 5 percent" (cited in Feldman, 1985, p. 66).

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1986) illustrate how the measurement of giftedness through IQ testing leads to debates about whether 3 percent or 5 percent of the population is actually gifted and where those cut-offs should be made. They explain that such questions (3 or 5 percent) can have either "naturalistic" or "attributional" meanings.

> The naturalistic assumption is that giftedness is a natural fact, and therefore the number of gifted children can be counted, as one might count white herons or panda bears. *If this is the sense in which people are asking the question, the question is meaningless.* The attributional assumption recognizes that giftedness is not an objective fact but a result jointly constituted by social expectations and individual abilities. From this perspective, it is obvious that the question, "What proportion of the population is gifted?" means "What proportion of the population have we agreed to call gifted?" (p. 266)

Rather than viewing giftedness as a "natural fact," we can see the category of "giftedness" as a social construct, a way of thinking and describing that exists in the eyes of the definers. Children vary along many dimensions; it is a decision (rather than a fact) to decide to focus on one of these varying differences and then to label children according to that dimension. People vary tremendously in height and can be measured with relatively good reliability; nonetheless, deciding to create categories of the "profoundly tall" and the "profoundly short" would mean both deciding that height was a salient characteristic appropriate for describing people and determining where to make the cut-offs along a continuum of heights.

"Giftedness" is a label based on a measurement of intelligence, but it would be far harder to get a group of educators to agree on what constitutes intelligence and how to measure it. Even if one scale of intelligence could be agreed upon and even if we were satisfied that the measurement of 130 IQ was reliable, we would still have to decide where to draw the line between average, high-average, and gifted and what meaning we would attach to that discrimination. We would have to decide to form a category and to define it in a way that would discriminate between those who were inside the category and those who were outside it.

Other disability labels such as "mentally retarded" and "learning disabled" have been analyzed as social constructs in a way that the label "gifted" has not. In *Handicapping the Handicapped*, a study on decision making in students' educational careers, Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls (1986) describe the ways in which the category of "learning disabilities" is socially constructed as well as the inevitable definitional unreliability and fuzziness of the category:

> The variability in teachers' interpretations of students' classroom behavior and in the complex basis for referrals seem to be the result of a confusion between brute facts and institutional facts. The teachers in our study seemed to be treating learning disabilities and educational handicaps as brute facts. They saw educational handicaps either as labels for an observable behavior in their students, or as a disease mediated by behavioral symptoms. . . . Now consider the possibility that educational handicaps and learning disabilities are neither internal states with labels attached to them by ostensive definition, nor diseases with mediating symptoms. Instead, they derive their meaning from their participation in an institutional variety of a cultural meaning system. Viewed in this way, learning disabilities are more like touchdowns and property rights than like chicken pox and asthma. They are defined as real by a complex set of legal and educational practices and governed by school rules and policies. They are objects that are culturally constructed by the rules of the school, its laws and daily educational practices. . . . Without the institutional practices serving and guiding special education, we would not have learning disabilities or handicaps. (p. 85)

We can draw illuminating parallels between the category of "giftedness" and the relatively new, fast-growing category of students "at risk." Students labeled "at risk" are generally poor, students of color who are perceived in danger of school failure. Like the label of "gifted," the category of "at risk" is a broad, ill-defined label used to generate support and programming without careful examination of the accuracy of the label, the intention of the user, or the effects of basing school programming on such a paradigm.

Recognizing giftedness as a social construct means acknowledging that without school rules and policies, legal and educational practices designed to provide services to gifted students, this category, per se, would not exist. This is not to say that we would not have tremendous variation in the ways in which children present themselves in schools or even in the rates or ways in which they

learn, but the characteristic of giftedness, possessed exclusively by an identifiable group of students, only exists within a system that, for a variety of reasons, wishes to measure, select, and sort students in this manner.

In discussing the etiology of the category of "at risk," Swadener (1990) asks the following questions:

> "What if we devoted the same energy we are now devoting to finding better early interventions for "at risk" children to changing curricula and teaching practices to those which are more culturally sensitive, inclusive, and relevant to all children? (p. 34)
>
> "What if we changed the label "at risk" to "gifted" and provided similar enrichment programs, activities, opportunities and expectations? (p. 34)

Swadener challenges us to scrutinize the label of "at risk" and to ask: "Who decided who's "at risk"? Who are the "stakeholders" in the "at risk" notion and whose interests are being served? And we must ask similar questions about who benefits from labeling students as gifted and who are the stakeholders. We must ask why, historically, politically, and economically, the label "at risk" has achieved such prominence and why the category of giftedness is becoming salient again.

The most pervasive method of identifying children as "gifted" is based on the use of standardized intelligence tests. But intelligence testing has come under serious attack as both unreliable and culturally biased. Intelligence tests typically measure a limited range of verbal skills, and these skills are associated with exposure to education and membership in the dominant cultural group of our society. Thus, various cultural groups are disproportionately represented in those categories of exceptionality that are determined primarily by performance on intelligence tests. Children of color and lower socioeconomic levels are overrepresented in classes for the "mentally retarded" and underrepresented in classes for the "gifted."

But because standardized IQ tests are generally viewed as "objective" and free from the bias we assume would be present if children were identified as "mentally retarded" or "gifted" by their teachers, we neglect both the origins and the continuing uses of intelligence testing to facilitate educational and social stratification. Jeannie Oakes (1985), in *Keeping Track,* cites test developer Lewis Terman, who explained the utility of intelligence testing.

> At every step in the child's progress the school should take account of his vocational possibilities. Preliminary investigations indicate that an IQ below 70 rarely permits anything better than unskilled labor; that the range from 70 to 80 is pre-eminently that of semi-skilled labor, from 80 to 100 that of the skilled or ordinary clerical labor, from 100 to 110 or 115 that of semi-professional pursuits; and that above all these are the grades of intelligence which permit one to enter the professions or the larger fields of business . . . This information will be a great value in planning the education of a particular child and also in planning the differentiated curriculum here recommended. (Terman, 1923, pp. 27–28)

One of the original uses of intelligence testing (and a major impetus for the development of the testing industry) was to sort out the flood of recent immigrants to this country. Eighty percent of the immigrants tested by Terman were adjudged "feeble-minded" (Oakes, 1985, p. 36) and channeled into low status, limited educational and employment options. The legacy of defining intelligence as those characteristics possessed by white, upper-middle class students, and the subsequent sorting and selecting of students according to this scale, continues to define gifted education in this country.

Acting as though intelligence is a single continuum along which people can be located masks the embedded decisions to value and measure only certain kinds of intelligence. In fact, the narrow ways in which giftedness is defined and the subsequent limitations on which children are served by gifted programs is directly related to the ways in which classrooms are organized and instruction delivered. Susan Rosenholtz and Carl Simpson (1984) have demonstrated through their research that

> "unidimensional" classrooms—classrooms that narrowly define academic ability—increase the amount of stratification within them. By stratification we mean the hierarchical arrangement of students into groups according to status as determined by perceived ability. Students' performance levels, their perceptions of their own abilities, and their perception of classmates' ability levels will all be more highly differentiated in unidimensional classrooms. That is, these classrooms will produce greater inequality among students' perceptions of their own and others' ability levels than will "multidimensional" classrooms. In addition, more unidimensional classrooms will produce a narrower definition of what is properly "academic," will lead students' perceptions of peers' social standing to be closely associated with academic ability level and will cause students' feelings about school to be closely associated with academic ability level." (pp. 21–22)

Classrooms and schools that define achievement and ability narrowly produce students who rank one another according to limited variables. When classrooms are organized in multidimensional ways, when many kinds of skill and performance are acknowledged and valued, the kinds of global stratification ("He's smart; she's not") present in unidimensional classrooms is sharply limited.

Elizabeth Cohen's Program for Complex Instruction at Stanford University (Cohen and Deslonde, 1978; Cohen, 1990) specifically addresses the need to provide both a Multiple Ability Curriculum (MAC) and Expectation Training (ET) for teachers in order to improve the performance of low-achieving students and alter existing status hierarchies within the classroom. Rosenholtz and Cohen (1983) argue that the conventional "back to basics" classroom structures a narrow view of curriculum and reliance on comparative marking and grading as the sole method of evaluation reinforces racist beliefs about the intellectual incompetence of minority children.

Identifying children as gifted on the basis of intelligence testing is a decision that also tends to silence discussion among those who aren't officially licensed or credentialed. Anyone can talk about kids who are "smart," but only people who have professional training can identify "gifted children." A person who says, "That kid sure doesn't seem gifted to me" is likely to be treated with the same scorn most of us are met with by an auto mechanic if we say, "The engine doesn't sound sick to me."

The belief that there are certain children who are "gifted" (as opposed to saying that there are certain children we choose to label as gifted) is further fueled by a belief in the inborn, hereditary nature of intelligence. If intelligence is something that you are "born with," then measuring that intelligence is a scientific process (like taking someone's temperature to find out how warm they are) rather than a subjective valuation.

Identifying giftedness as an inborn, hereditary quality of the individual that can be objectively verified further connects the process of identification to "science" and further removes the decision from commonsense discourse. According to this position, we are not defining intelligence nor making decisions about what kinds of skills we value but are simply identifying and labeling inherent, immutable human characteristics, some of which happen to be highly valued.

The belief that certain children are "born gifted" is also used to support gifted education as part of a social justice argument. If cer-

tain people are just "born gifted" then you shouldn't discriminate against them because of a characteristic over which they have no control. So, if Jacob was "born gifted," it would be unfair to treat him like "normal" children by providing him with a typical education, just as it would be unfair to penalize children who have diabetes by forcing them to eat a typical sugar-laden diet. The parallel actually raises a compelling set of issues, because it assumes that the typical sugar-laden diet is appropriate for "regular" children who don't have diabetes, just as we assume that the "typical" education provided for students is appropriate for those who aren't identified as gifted.

Steve Selden (1989) has written about the extent to which biology has been used to legitimate other forms of unequal treatment. In one extreme and horrifying example, he describes specifically the eugenics movement that resulted in the forced sterilization of thousands who were deemed of "low stock" and who should not reproduce. If biology is destiny, then identifying peoples' genetics, biological make-up, and educational potential is descriptive, objective and neutral, rather than evaluative, arbitrary, and value-laden.

Many advocates of gifted education make the argument that those in special education have received services without the same kinds of controversy that surrounds special programs for the gifted. In fact, however, the category of "mental retardation" *has* been increasingly challenged (as have the categories of "emotional disturbance," "behavior disorders," and "learning disabilities"). The validity of using IQ scores to identify people as "retarded," the utility of sorting or educating people according to IQ scores ("educable," "trainable," and so forth) and even the concept of intelligence as performance ability have all been critiqued extensively. There is increasing evidence that the use of IQ scores to categorize individuals as "mentally retarded" is both prejudicial and of limited educational value, and many districts have attempted to eliminate or minimize the role of IQ tests in determining the need for special education services. Knowing that a child is labeled "retarded" based on an IQ test tells us little about that child's specific educational needs, and lumping together children who have in common only the label of "mental retardation" rarely contributes to productive instructional planning or service delivery. If IQ scores are questionably valid, unidimensional, and educationally irrelevant for students at the lower end of the spectrum, it would be surprising and illogical for those same IQ scores to be valid, complete, and educationally significant at the other end of the spectrum. But the

parallels have not been made clear; while it has become increasingly unacceptable to "send children to the dungeon" (isolated in segregated special education classes), a similar uproar has not been raised about the justice of sending only some children to the tower.

Typically, IQ scores are seen as a measure of ability, capacity, and optimum performance level. Thus, we say that a child who is doing poorly in school but has a high IQ is underachieving, that is, capable of more. But if that same poorly performing child has an IQ of 78, we might decide that the child was performing "at capacity," or perhaps even "overachieving." We can, however, look at the relationship between expected outcomes and actual outcomes very differently; Marc Gold (1980), a pioneer in education for persons with mental retardation, characterized "retarded students" as those who require more intensive teaching. He evaluated levels of retardation in terms of the willingness of educators to extend the time, energy, and commitment necessary to bring retarded students to higher levels of achievement. This same logic could be extended to gifted children, defining *not* the children but rather the resources that schools and educators would be willing to commit in order to make all children "gifted." Such a definition would see all children as underachieving gifted students, and all students would be described as varying in terms of the resources needed to help them achieve at high levels. This would substantially alter the conversation, since it would require an explicit discussion of resource allocation and the values that underlie deciding whom to spend money on and who is worth what.

By focusing on the accuracy of IQ tests administered and on correlations between IQ and other standardized achievement measures, or even on attempts to "throw the net wider" and include more children, the question has become "Is this child really gifted?" rather than the more challenging questions, "How was the decision made to call this child gifted and why?" or "What are the consequences of labeling this child as gifted?" Characterizing gifted children as a subgroup of children that can be discriminated from other children leads many gifted education advocates to argue that gifted children require qualitatively different kinds of educational experiences from those provided to "average" or "typical" students within the regular classroom. Since regular classrooms are conceptualized as being geared to the "norm," some gifted educators like Steinbach (1981) argue that "a good program for everyone else by definition couldn't be good for the gifted" (p. 5).

A careful examination of the rhetoric of "what gifted children need" reveals problems not with that wish list of optimum educational options but with its characterization of distinctiveness. Educators of the gifted are counseled that appropriate goals for gifted children include mental flexibility, openness to information, capacity to systematize knowledge, capacity for abstract thought, fluency, sense of humor, positive thinking, intellectual courage, resistance to enculturation, and emotional resilience (Albrecht, in Davis and Rimm, 1983). Talented children and adolescents are said to need:

- a maximum level of achievement in basic skills and concepts
- learning activities at an appropriate level and pace
- experience in creative thinking and problem solving
- convergent thinking skills
- self-awareness
- exposure to a variety of fields
- the development of independence, self-direction, and discipline in learning.

(Feldhusen and Wyman, 1980, pp. 15–21)

It is difficult to find much in the above list that is objectionable. The only problem with this list is these are recommendations for "gifted students," rather than for *all* students. If gifted children need all these things, then what do nongifted children need? Ironically, recent research literature on the educational needs of students identified as "at-risk" and "low achieving" has produced lists of desirable educational outcomes almost identical to the above list. If gifted students and low-achieving, at-risk students all need hands-on, participatory, enrichment activities, then who are all the worksheets for? Who are the typical kids for whom the standard curriculum is supposedly geared? What evidence do we have that an enriched curriculum and a dynamic environment are not stimulating and educationally appropriate for all students?

Not only are the educational needs of gifted students seen as significantly different from those of typical children but many gifted educators argue that the unique needs of gifted students cannot be met within the regular classroom; gifted children must be grouped

together in order to receive appropriate education. For example, Ward (1975) argues:

> Only through ability grouping can the gifted student engage in discourse and debate with his intellectual peers. This needed high-level engagement of like minds cannot be carried on effectively or efficiently in the typically heterogeneous classroom. (p. 296)

Gifted education proponents argue that the regular classroom as currently organized and implemented is largely not amenable to change, and many teachers and students are hostile to gifted students, thus necessitating the removal of gifted students to a "safe haven" where they can be with other students like them. Davis and Rimm (1989) explain:

> Because regular classes group students according to chronological age, not mental age, gifted students often find themselves in situation which meet neither their social nor their intellectual needs. They may develop poor social skills from their inability to find "true peers" with similar abilities, interests and needs. Many experience feelings of isolation and social frustration. [ . . . ] As a solution to problems of social isolation and lack of academic stimulation, one dependable strategy is to bring gifted students together. . . . because they are experiencing many of the same problems, gifted peers offer strong understanding and social and academic support for each other. (pp. 136–37)

While I would never argue that the narrow, often-rigid ways in which many regular education classrooms are currently organized make them ideal for meeting the needs of students identified as gifted (or any other students), deciding to remove some children from that setting in order to meet their putative educational needs elsewhere has significant implications. First, it communicates a hopelessness and despair about the ability of teachers to create inclusive, stimulating, multilevel, diverse learning communities that meet the needs of a wide range of students within a unified setting. The message is: third grade was terrible for this child, so we removed him to a better setting. The question should be, however, if third grade was terrible for this child, how was it for other children, and how can we change third grade to make it good for all children?

Second, differentially removing some children whose perceived needs are not being met in the typical classroom makes clear the fact that some parents have the possibility of removing their chil-

dren from nonideal settings, while others do not. Wealthy parents who are dissatisfied with the education their children are receiving in public schools have often removed their children to private school settings; poor parents dissatisfied with their children's education do not have the same set of choices. Similarly, children whose test scores qualify them for gifted programs have the option of removal and differential educational opportunities; children whose measured scores are not high enough do not have the same options.

Most significant, however, is that the removal of gifted children in order to meet their educational needs leaves untouched the nature and quality of the regular education classroom. Defining giftedness in such a way that it leads to the identification of a discrete, finite group leads to other educational assumptions:

1. **What is inappropriate for gifted students is appropriate for everyone else.** Analyses of the undesirable situation gifted students face in school (boredom, repetitive curricula, uncaring teachers, lack of understanding of their divergent thinking) are rarely extended to nongifted students as well. In other words, such an analysis implies that dittos and workbooks may be inappropriate for gifted students, but they are acceptable for other students.

2. **What is inappropriate for nongifted students is not the same as what is inappropriate for gifted students.** General, broad-ranging critiques of the current educational system are typically distinct from analyses of what's wrong with education from the gifted child's perspective. Two separate analyses are put forward: those things that keep many children from succeeding in school (lowered standards, discipline problems, nonstandardized curricula) and those things that keep gifted children from reaching their full potential (lack of flexibility, lack of appreciation for divergent thinking, rigidity of school staff, and so on). This kind of dual-thinking does not allow the formulation of a common set of problems that impede school success and happiness for all students and fuels the notion that it is impossible to make schoolwide changes that would somehow meet the needs of all students.

3. **What is good for gifted students would not be good for everyone.** I have already challenged this assumption at the level of individual students—why wouldn't exciting enrichment programs be good for all students? But this assumption must be challenged at a more systemic level as well. Some educators of the gifted argue that gifted education presents a model of how all education should be (Fetterman, 1988) and that carefully articulated gifted programs can serve as prototypes for more expansive, whole-school change

efforts. Although I do not doubt that this is possible, the current reality of how gifted education is constructed mitigates against that possibility. As long as gifted programs are described as programs for "gifted children," then their boundaries are arbitrarily and narrowly defined. Books on "Language Arts Activities for Gifted Students," teacher workshops on "Creativity for the Gifted," and similarly labeled efforts all circumscribe the set of students to whom such programing and educational efforts will be directed. Even exemplary gifted programs may impede whole-school reform that is solidly grounded in broader economic and social concerns because they give the illusion that "something is being done." By siphoning off the efforts and commitment of concerned parents, teachers, and administrators, such stop-gap or partial measures may keep schools from hitting "rock bottom" and thus facing the magnitude and embededness of their problems.

Eliminating gifted programs will not solve school or societal problems, because the problems do not result from the gifted programs. Rather, gifted programs are a response to the inappropriateness and inflexibility of schools—a response that creates as many problems as it solves—and to an economic system that depends on the schools to maintain social, educational, and economic stratification. Parents whose children are not well served in regular classrooms often support removing their children to separate programs because they have little or no faith that the typical classroom can be altered sufficiently to meet their child's needs. As one parent explained to me, "In the long haul, of course we need better schools for everyone, but for now, I have to think about my child." As will be explored throughout this book, this reaction, although understandable, nonetheless contributes to maintaining the status quo. Removing the irritating or irritated child (or parent) does nothing to alter the nature of the overall educational system and sometimes masks the breadth and depth of the problem. The focus becomes on finding a "better fit" for Kyle, rather than on examining the system as a whole. Furthermore, removing the children whose parents typically have the knowledge, resources, and influence to result in their placement in gifted classrooms further segregates the schools and results in even greater disparity between the educational opportunities open to children of varying socioeconomic and racial groups. Removing gifted children and providing a differential education for them will not improve the overall quality of schooling for all children nor will it encourage us to analyze the relationship between schools and broader societal and economic inequities.

4. **What is good for education in general will not be good for the gifted.** In other words, general school reform will not be sufficient to help gifted students get what they need and deserve. John Goodlad's *A Place Called School* was criticized because its advocacy of broad-based reform was not seen as addressing the needs of gifted children (Feldhusen and Hoover, 1984) and gifted educators have stated that "a good program for everyone else, by definition couldn't be good for the gifted" (Steinbach, 1981, p. 5). An orientation that states that gifted students are qualitatively different from other students and can't be educated in the same way invariably means that general school reform efforts will be dismissed as not specific to the target population, and will therefore require that special gifted education initiatives be implemented.

### Justice Arguments:

In addition to arguments related to the educational needs of gifted children, gifted advocates use arguments related to the "fairness" of providing gifted programs and the need for just treatment of children who are different; they maintain that it's only fair to treat different children differently. Gifted children have been described "as the most underserved minority group in the country," as "deprived," and as suffering "psychological damage and permanent impairment of their abilities to function well" (Marland, 1971). The promotional brochure for a gifted and talented program in a small Midwest city begins with this quote from a Los Angeles county judge:

> Equal education is the foundation of the right to be a human being. . . . This does not mean that any child or any other gifted child having a greater capacity to learn may or shall be deprived of his or her opportunity of learning more. It does mean that every child shall have the equal opportunity to learn to the best of his or her ability. That opportunity must be made available on equal terms.
>
> Alfred Gitelson, Judge
> County of Los Angeles
> Superior Court Case 822854

By adopting a rhetoric of special needs that parallels that of special education, gifted advocates encourage us to view gifted chil-

dren as needing and deserving services that are different from those typically provided; just as blind children need instruction in braille, hearing-impaired children need to learn sign language, and children labeled as "mentally retarded," may need individualized instruction, gifted children need educational programs tailored to their unique skills and abilities. The Marland Report (1971) defines gifted and talented children as follows:

> Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These children require differentiated educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society.

Much of the advocacy material in support of gifted education draws direct parallels with other special education categories, arguing that P.L. 94–142 (the Education of all Handicapped Children Act) mandated that all handicapped children be provided with a free, appropriate, public education and that gifted children deserve no less. This argument is, of course, highly related to the belief that giftedness represents an objective characteristic and that one should not discriminate against people simply because they are born different. This equity argument is further buttressed by the assertion that, just as a handicapped child can occur in any family, regardless of race, ethnicity, economic, or social background, giftedness (if it is an organic or biological characteristic) can "happen" to anyone. Since, according to this logic, everyone has an equal chance of being gifted, and some children from terrible backgrounds and impoverished families do make it into gifted programs, the educational system must be fair and open. Just as we would not consider it appropriate to deny services to children with cystic fibrosis, even though almost all of them are white, how can we think of denying gifted programs to gifted children, even though a disproportionate number of them are white and upper-middle class? Gallagher and Weiss (1979) in describing America's "love-hate relationship with giftedness and talent," state that "we revere the gifted individual who has risen from humble background. We are proud to live in a society where talent can triumph over poor environment or limited family status" (p. 1).

The belief in random distribution of giftedness ("you never know where you'll find these kids") also fuels the talent-search men-

tality and the use of standardized tests in order to uncover exceptionality. If "giftedness" can occur anywhere and if we test everyone with the same instrument, then the children chosen by it appear to have been chosen "fairly." This assertion ignores research on which children do well on standardized tests (white, upper-middle class) and the very nonrandom distribution of who gets into gifted programs (white, upper-middle class). Freedman (1989), in discussing the identification of children categorized as talented in art, links the talent-search mentality to the rhetoric of public responsibility; it is important to our society to identify and specially educate talented children, and since this is much too important a job to be left to teachers, it must be objectified through testing. She explains how the search for artistic talent was objectified and tested, with the assumption that appraisal through testing would reveal natural merit.

Not all advocates focus entirely on heredity and on natural talent. However, those gifted advocates who do acknowledge the crucial role of the environment and of education in producing "giftedness" often do so in terms of the further urgency of finding and nurturing native talent lest it be wasted. Gallagher and Weiss (1979) for example, argue that:

> We have tried to find methods to uncover the talent that will always be there, just as one might lift up a basket and find a lantern shining beneath it. A contradictory explanation, however, is more in line with known facts. Since ability in young children is the product of both environment and native ability, a poor environment experienced over time can substantially reduce, or even eliminate, the high talent or ability originally present. The notion that superior talent can, in fact, be suppressed or destroyed lends additional urgency to the need to discover ways to provide stimulating educational experiences. (p. 30)

Later in the same monograph, the authors acknowledge that one of the unsolved programs in gifted education is "the concept of giftedness as a genetic trait."

> Quite clearly giftedness is, in part, a genetic trait, as a substantial body of evidence indicates. There is also a substantial body of evidence to suggest that it is not only genetics, but genetics married to opportunity, that produces gifted children. Such a finding may make educators breathe more easily, because it enables them to explain troublesome differences shown by research but not widely

> understood. There have been major sex, racial, and ethnic differences in the proportions of youngsters identified as gifted and talented. When one adds opportunity to the formula, then such differences become understandable and explainable. (pp. 32–33)

The "troublesome differences" alluded to above are the gross inequalities in who gets labeled as "gifted"; conceptualizing giftedness as "genetics married to opportunity" may make such differences more tolerable to some, but these differences actually confirm the ways in which differentiated opportunities further compound whatever inequalities children bring to school. Such arguments fail to address that while a poor environment over time (as described above) certainly can suppress and destroy those with "superior talent," there are unquestionably negative effects of poor educational opportunities on all children. The "urgency of discovering ways to provide stimulating educational experiences" need not hinge on finding and developing those with "superior talents."

Another argument for providing special services for students labeled as gifted has been that they face special challenges in school and that if their needs are not met, there can be devastating emotional and psychological consequences. Thus, "fair treatment" (treating them like others) can turn out to be very "unfair." Historically, attempts to garner support for gifted children on the basis of their unique and special needs have not always been successful; there are no gifted poster children, and it has been difficult to make broadly based appeals on behalf of children who some see as uniquely privileged. In order to draw support for this group of "underserved" children, gifted advocates have adopted alternative strategies for appealing for public support. One is to make a case for the pain experienced by those who are exceptionally bright. In the book *Guiding the Gifted Child* (Webb, Meckstroth, and Tolan, 1982), the authors attempt to convey the frustrations that gifted children experience in their daily lives; they argue that the pain of a gifted child having to live in a "normal" world can be equated with what a normal person would have to experience in a world of retarded people:

> Imagine living in a world where the average IQ was 50 or 60, where most others are actually retarded. Imagine that there is no other world to live in, and much of the world's productions are, in fact, mediocre. The challenge, then, is whether we could learn to live gladly in that world, with personal contentment, sharing, and

> joy, or whether we would be angry, depressed, withdrawn and miserable . . . perhaps finally deciding that such a life was not worth living. (p. 26)

Other effects of "unrecognized giftedness" are listed as everything from inattention, restlessness, mischievous behavior, hyperactivity, withdrawal, imaginary illness and refusal to attend school for the individual, and the loss of talent and leadership for the country (Ehrlich, 1982, pp. 33–34).

When I challenged this rhetoric as inaccurate and not conducive to developing positive attitudes toward differences, including to those labeled as "retarded" (Sapon-Shevin, 1987a), the counter-accusation was leveled that my failure to be sympathetic to the plight of the gifted who must "suffer fools gladly" denies the pain of those who have been treated poorly because of their differences.

> Sapon-Shevin treats the label "gifted" as though it were a badge of admission to an exclusive club whose members have advantages over nonmembers, so that everyone naturally wishes to belong. One wonders how many parents she has listened to, how many times she has heard the stories we hear from all over the country of children rejected by classmates, put down by defensive teachers, "taken down a peg" by adults and age peers, and taunted with names like "smarty-pants." "nerd," "brain" and "weirdo." [ . . . ] for children, unusual intellectual abilities are more likely to be felt as burdens than as gifts. [ . . . ] it is difficult to get support for gifted children in pain when the prevailing attitude (even among professionals who work for the gifted) is that gifted children are lucky, privileged and better off than anyone else. (Tolan, 1987, p. 185)

Attempts to be thoughtful about the ways in which advocates solicit support for gifted education and the consequences of such rhetoric are dismissed as insensitivity and a failure to recognize the ways in which gifted children are at risk rather than legitimate questions about institutional inequity.

If teachers and students are often or even sometimes hostile to students who are "different" in terms of their physical characteristics or intellectual skills, removing those children to a "safe haven" does little to address this bleak picture of unaccepting, intolerant classrooms. We have to look instead to creating classrooms that expect, accept, and celebrate differences and that model inclusion and respect for all children. While removing any students who are experiencing failure or who are miserable in the regular classroom

may constitute an emergency stop-gap solution, glorifying such solutions as "best educational practice" dooms broader school reform efforts before they begin.

The concept of fairness as it relates to gifted education is a complex one: when is differentiation "fair" and when is it "unfair"? Does equity require treating everyone the same or treating people differently? In order to understand the ethical dilemmas created by providing differentiated programming for gifted students (and the potential consequences of alternative conceptualizations), it is helpful to look at different ways in which the concepts of "equity" or "equality" have been interpreted. The three possibilities most often discussed are equal access, equal treatment, and equal outcomes.

One might argue that gifted education programs are fair, because all students have equal access to admission to the program; that is, all students take the same test and all high scorers are admitted. However, the reality is that high performance on IQ tests (that are ethnically and culturally biased) and that depend on equal exposure to high quality teaching is not randomly distributed. An examination of the sparse representation of poor, Hispanic, black, Native American or other minority children in gifted programs eliminates the argument that all children have an equal shot at such programs. It may be true that any child who scored 140 on an IQ test would be admitted to a gifted program, but each child's chances of achieving that score are strongly influenced by socioeconomic status, racial and cultural background, and previous educational experience. In reality, however, even children who score equally on tests may not be treated equally. In many gifted programs, such as the one described in detail in this book, high performance on an IQ test is only a preliminary criterion for consideration for the program. Often that high score must be coupled with a teacher's recommendation. That recommendation may be based on the child's classroom performance, an assessment of the child's ability to miss (and then make up) work in the regular classroom, and the teacher's judgment about the child's personality, leadership skills, overall potential, and so on. Gallagher (1985), one of the leaders in gifted education, explains that it is possible to provide teachers with special training that will make them more "effective" in identifying gifted students and that this can be done without increasing "over-referrals." He concludes that "it is possible to provide systematic training that will bring the teachers to a level of effectiveness that is impressive and functional for a school system" (p. 17). Functional for what? For whom? For deciding which children

should be admitted into gifted programs without letting too many children in? Too many for whom? For the system as currently designed? Using teacher referrals to determine entry into the gifted program does not resolve fundamental inequalities in such programming; teachers' values and biases are still reflected in the selection process even when it goes beyond standardized testing. Some families have less access to the knowledge that there even is a program and may also have cultural values that make them less likely to pursue or accept such programs. Mrs. Irving, the principal of a multiracial, multiethnic elementary school reported that although her school is 35 percent African-American, the program participants are almost completely white children. She said that of the few African-American children who are accepted into the program, most have dropped out, finding that they were uncomfortable as a small minority within a minority and feeling that their experiences and values were not honored within the program. Thus, even equal access to gifted programs as evidence of their fairness is not enough to prove their benign quality and equality of opportunity.

Arguments that all children are entitled to "equal treatment" become problematic as justice arguments as well. Do we mean that all children should be treated the same, or do we mean that all children should be treated "equally differently" according to some set of needs or judgments about them? Few educators would advocate equal treatment if by that we meant giving every child the same kinds of educational experiences at the same pace, using the same materials, and so on. To do so would be to deny individual differences—providing a uniform curriculum for all students would result in highly differentiated achievement, a problem related to equal access. The problem lies in determining which differences should be attended to and how. What is the difference between appropriate differentiation based on a valid difference and elitism or prejudicial treatment based on an assumed difference or a value-laden description of that difference? The key issue here is the determination of whether gifted programs provide differentiation that is clearly linked to the child's difference (in the same way that we give a larger portion of food to a twelve year old than to a four year old) or whether the differentiation is not only based on faulty, questionable assumptions about inherent differences among children but also results in further, continuing, and more deeply embedded discrimination in the future.

Kenneth Strike (1983) in an article on fairness and ability grouping, discriminates between ability grouping, which may be le-

gitimate if the allocation to groups is based on "relevant criteria that have a connection to a legitimate purpose" and "meritocracy"; "normally, we describe a decision as meritocratic when it results in the distribution of some desired but scarce benefit to those who deserve it. Meritocratic selection is often thought to be justified in that it results in an efficient distribution of scarce resources to the benefit of all" (p. 127). He goes on to state, "A given classification can be regarded as successful when each student is in the group which is best for that student, not when the most desirable group is occupied by the most deserving students" (p. 127). He suggests that ability grouping should be disassociated from later meritocratic choices and that if this is impossible, it is a mark against ability grouping per se: "If ability grouping is the first stage in a meritocratic selection process, and if the initial advantage (say, ability to profit from reading instruction) was acquired unfairly, then the whole process is unfair" (p. 128). According to this analysis, clearly gifted programs are not "fair" since it is impossible to separate the ability grouping that is part of gifted programs from a meritocratic selection process. In looking at which students are selected for programs for the gifted, it is evident that the initial advantage that places students in these programs is not acquired fairly, that is, without regard to issues of wealth and resources. Wealthier children are far more likely to find themselves in programs for the gifted.

Perhaps an argument for "equal treatment" might be recast as the need for "equally good treatment" or "equally responsive treatment." Or, it may be that arguing that gifted programs are "fair" is a red herring, leading us away from a careful examination of the context in which such programs occur and the effects of such programs on children, teachers, parents, schools, and society. Secada (1989) writes:

> If educational equity becomes equality of education, then arguments about justice are in danger of being recast as technical arguments about equality. Such a transformation may limit, severely, our ability to consider other fundamental issues that should fall under the rubric of educational equity. (p. 74)

## Political and Economic Arguments

In order to understand the renewed interest in gifted education and the increasing number of programs available, we must look be-

yond educational rhetoric to some of the social, political, and economic factors contributing to concern for "our Nation's best and brightest" (Sapon-Shevin, 1987b). The political and economic pressures and pulls toward focusing on giftedness must be examined at both a micro-level (schools and school districts) and at a macro-level (the nation and the world).

One reason schools and school districts have gifted programs is that there is often a parental demand for such services. When an adjacent school district has a gifted program, other districts feel considerable pressure to implement some kind of differential programming or risk the departure of those families whose children might have enrolled in such a program. Within large urban districts, particularly those characterized by impoverished, struggling schools and large, ethnically diverse populations, gifted programs (including gifted magnet programs) have served (and sometimes been promoted) as a way of stemming *white flight;* by providing segregated programming for "gifted students," some white parents—whose children are in the gifted program—will remain within the district (and the tax assessment area). The Massachusetts Advocacy Center (1990) describes the situation in Boston:

> One middle school principal tried to entice a parent . . . into enrolling his daughter into the school's Advanced Work Class by assuring the parent that the program would be located in an isolated wing of the building and that his daughter would rarely mix with "regular" students. Obviously, the use of segregation as a selling point for any high-status program conveys more than just the value placed on the learning of selected students; it also transmits a negative message about the rest of the school. (p. 25)

Parental demand for and the increased interest in gifted programming can be traced directly to the increasing racial integration of many schools and communities. Gifted programs provide a way to resegregate schools without requiring people to move. Furthermore, having one's child identified as "gifted and talented" is an important source of parental pride, largely due to the assumption that gifted children are the products of gifted or exceptional parents. Unlike other labels that children acquire in school ("slow learner," "learning disabled," "emotionally disturbed"), the "gifted" label is usually welcomed by parents and sometimes actively solicited. One principal, in describing pressure from affluent parents for a gifted program, commented facetiously that he thought many of the par-

ents would be satisfied if he printed up T-shirts with the child's name on the front and his/her I.Q. score on the back.

Recent national concerns about the United States's loss of preeminence in the economic and political world have led to pressure to reorder educational priorities. Some educational leaders have strongly supported the need to "invest" in gifted children as a way of ensuring America's recovery of economic and political prominence. A changing political climate that attributes many of the nation's educational problems to overinvestment in poor, disadvantaged, and minority students (at the expense of those who are more academically talented) also provides impetus for increased gifted programming. In tracing the history of gifted education in America, Davis and Rimm (1989) describe the effects of the Russian launching of the satellite Sputnik in 1957 as a landmark event. Suddenly, it appeared that the Russians were gaining on the United States in the fields of science and technology and that we had better pay more attention (and give more money) to promote high achievement in these areas. Davis and Rimm report, however, that "the scare of Sputnik and the keen interest in educating gifted and talented students wore off in about five years" (p. 7). As the United States took the lead in the space race in the 1960s, the panicked need to cultivate gifted students diminished, only to come alive again in the 1970s with the publication of the Marland Report in 1972, which declared gifted students to be a vastly underserved population.

The spate of national educational reports that appeared in the 1980s (Boyer, 1983; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985; Sizer, 1984; Twentieth Century Fund Task Force, 1983; Goodlad, 1983; Heritage Foundation, 1984), proclaiming us to be a "nation at risk of educational failure," again gave rise to new fears about the crisis in the U.S. educational system manifested by its failure to keep pace with other nations. Now the scare came from the progress and successes of the Japanese. While the majority of these reports gave lip service to the twin goals of excellence and equality, some warned that our inadequate educational production was a direct result of "over-investing" in poor, disadvantaged, and minority students. The Heritage Foundation (1984) stated: "For the past twenty years, federal mandates have favored 'disadvantaged' pupils at the expense of those who have the highest potential to contribute to society," implying that it had been our nation's misguided focus on equality that had led to our crisis of excellence. Others said that we need to focus on excellence without sacrificing equality but rarely

gave any specific proposals. The authors of the reports wrote as though the channels to equality were already open and did not require our further attention; i.e., we already have equality, now let's work for excellence. Diane Ravitch, a leading conservative and a member of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force blamed the decline in achievement and basic skills on "loss of authority" stemming from "confused ideas, irresolute standards," and "cultural relativism" (Cited in Bastian et al., 1986).

Many educators of the gifted felt that the needs of students identified as "gifted and talented" were neglected in the reports; Boston (1985) complained that

> None of these reports sees the education of gifted and talented students as a high priority. Nor does any of them see the neglect of their education as much of a calamity. None devotes a significant amount of space to gifted and talented students and the pedagogical concerns they raise. [ . . . ] Reading through the reports, there is an unwitting failure to make plain the connection between the need for academic excellence in our schools and the contribution to that excellence from special provisions for the gifted/talented." (p. 19)

And other gifted education advocates called directly for more focus on the needs of students labeled "gifted." Maker and Schiever (1984), for example, argued that: "Now, as education in general is examined and means of improvement are sought, the gifted population should again be given special attention" (p. 6). And Gallagher, a leader in the field of gifted education, supported a renewed focus on gifted students, stating, "Since we are all committed to looking at excellence and its factors, then groups of gifted and talented youngsters should be a good place to do a pilot study" (Buescher, 1984, p. 234).

Others are more blatant in acknowledging how they use economic arguments to buttress support for gifted education. At a meeting of parents of gifted children, a parent advocate said: "I can't compete on an emotional level for gifted children. If my neighbor brings her Down's syndrome child, I'll get nothing. I sell gifted children to the legislature on the basis of producing a labor force . . . on economic issues."

But at the same time that educators of the gifted were distressed by the failure of the national reports to make a stronger case for the need for more gifted education, the lack of attention

to equity issues in the reports was prominent to others. Bastian et al. (1986) and the report by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students made it clear that we are far from achieving educational equity in our schools. We cannot assume that we are working from a base of equality on which we can build excellence; gross educational inequities still separate rich and poor, black and white. Shirley Malcolm (1984), Program Head of the Office of Opportunities in Science of the American Association for the Advancement of Science stated:

> Equity was an invisible issue in the recent reports [ . . . ] equity was part of the (political) rhetoric, not a concrete goal. In "A Nation at Risk," for example, minority and handicapped students are discussed, but with the implication that their different needs lead to different educational outcomes. (p. 1)

And John Hardin Best (1985) in a paper titled "The Retreat from Equity in American Education" noted with alarm:

> Evidence is overwhelming that in spite of our rhetoric of equality of opportunity, American schools have endorsed and promoted the children of advantage and restrained and discouraged those of disadvantage. Our rhetoric of equality of opportunity, our American dream, is at stake. [ . . . ] Americans need to examine what a society such as ours means by a standard of excellence in schooling. We need to consider the social ideas that we hold for ourselves, the standard of equity that we have always maintained to be important to our society's well being in relation to our ideas of excellence. (p. 1)

Current initiatives in education can be seen as constituting the "reconstruction of the elitist form of meritocracy" (Bastian, 1985, p. 11); gifted education programs are the perfect vehicle for that orientation. Providing gifted programs (i.e., excellent educations) to a small, select group constitutes the formation of a new meritocracy but maintains a rhetoric of egalitarianism ("anyone can be gifted") that is in the best interests of everyone ("providing appropriately for all students"). While some educators are critical of the ways in which America has retreated from equity, they still cite the need to develop "the best minds," disparaging one kind of meritocracy and substituting another for it. There is little recognition that there are many ways for a child to be "advantaged" and that the overlap between material advantage and perceived educational and intellec-

tual abilities is extensive. Gifted programs allow society to support differential treatment for a limited group of students and to do so in a way that appears to have a quantitative, unbiased, reasoned, scientific basis. While we would be singularly uncomfortable saying, "We believe rich children deserve a better education than poor children," we are not uncomfortable enough about setting up structures that maintain exactly that outcome.

Combining educational, justice, and political and economic rationales for gifted education make such programs appear instructionally sound, fair, and politically sound. Such rationales, however, mask the effects of such programs and limit the subsequent critique and analysis. By setting the stage with certain kinds of arguments in support of gifted education, advocates circumscribe the dialogue that follows. Thus, we must address not only stated rationales but the process of silencing as well.