

There is No Evil in Using the Term Gifted

The field of gifted education continues to vacillate on its use of the term “gifted.” First used 154 years ago by Sir Francis Galton, the term continues to be associated with elitism despite the field’s efforts to uncouple the perceived relationship between elite talents and elitist attitudes. Much like “he-who-must-not-be-named” in the *Harry Potter* series, gifted is the term that many gifted programs feel they must avoid. In some North Dakota districts, the gifted program goes by a name like “schoolwide enrichment.” Some districts with gifted in the program name want to replace the gifted term with something more inclusive (though with no intent to change the content of the program). National discussions suggest terms like “talent development” or “high performance.” This rebranding has always been in consideration as the perceived value of gifted programming fluctuates with changing political priorities between excellence and equity. Even those trying to save the term gifted want, in the name of equity and inclusion, to label behaviors, not students, as gifted.

The historical and original meaning of giftedness did not emphasize the behaviors of gifted individuals, but rather the personality of the gifted person. Early researchers of giftedness were psychologists - not educators - interested in understanding the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of individuals who demonstrate exceptionality. Experimental psychologists like Sir Francis Galton, Alfred Binet, and Lewis Terman studied gifted individuals and deduced the inherited nature of high intelligence and its association with success. Educational psychologists like Leta Stetter Hollingworth believed that environment contributed more to gifted intelligence than genetics and that gifted students needed a specialized educational curriculum to support their special needs in the classroom. Meanwhile, personality psychologists like Annemarie Roeper, one of the namesakes of the Roeper Review, focused her research on the psychological experiences of gifted children and their inner unconscious and conscious wonderings.

Annemarie Roeper's friend, Linda Silverman, a psychologist at the Gifted Development Center, eloquently summarized the contributions of psychologists to the gifted movement by saying that: psychologists seek to understand the individuality of each gifted child. They apply a whole person perspective that puts emphasis on who these children are and not on what they contribute or can contribute to the world. They see value in gifted children irrespective of how they perform. They see value in understanding how their emotional needs are different from other children's needs—an essential task when working with twice-exceptional gifted students in particular. This emphasis on the gifted person spotlights giftedness as a genetic and stable feature of a gifted child's identity that must be addressed well into adulthood. Silverman called this central feature of the gifted personality "asynchronous development," that should function much like the North Star when considering any intervention for gifted children.

It is my belief that our current trend to put emphasis on gifted behaviors, talents, and achievement is shortsighted from a psychological and historical point of view. To cultivate talented behaviors, if that is a goal, one cannot neglect the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of our gifted children, which drive performance outcomes. More importantly, helping our children understand and appreciate their giftedness as a stable part of their personality and identity, whether this leads to achievement or not, should be a goal in itself. We cannot do this if forced to separate the gifted person from their gifted behaviors.

Gifted education should function as a safe haven that helps a gifted student feel understood. This framework is not elitist in attitude, approach, or outcome because the goal toward self-actualization is not comparative. Rather than rebranding the term gifted, gifted education should embrace it, applying the meaning of the term as originally intended—to help the world see and understand a population of children with exceptional and unique developmental needs. In this application, the field should strive

even further to help gifted students and the world see the ways they are gifted. In other words, help these children understand the particulars of their giftedness. The more adept at understanding the strengths and vulnerabilities associated with their gifts, the more empowered gifted students will become in managing, directing, and cultivating them. There is no evil in using the term gifted.

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