

## **“Everyone Is Gifted”**

**by Michael Clay Thompson**

*The keynote speech delivered at the Indiana Association for the Gifted 1998 Annual Conference by Michael Clay Thompson has been quoted numerous times on the internet and elsewhere in answer to questions about giftedness. This is the original speech.*

In a 1994 issue of the *Roeper Review*, Dierdre Lovecky described an interchange between a gifted second grader and his mother:

Mom: We have to eat and run.

Son: Like carnivorous pantyhose?

These are the times that try gifted educators’ souls. These are the times when gifted education is under attack as never before.

It is not unusual for gifted education to come under attack. Gifted education has frequently been the target of opposition and misunderstanding, such as the confounded idea that equity is threatened by the excellence of gifted education, when everyone knows that historically, excellent minds have always been in the vanguard of the demand for equity.

It is not unusual for gifted education to come under attack. Gifted education has frequently been the target of charges of elitism by those who themselves glorified elite talents and accomplishments in every other form of human endeavor.

It is not unusual for gifted education to come under attack. Gifted education has had to struggle with serious problems of identification and process that have been criticized by well-intentioned and acute minds.

What is unusual, what tries our souls at this moment in the history of gifted education, is that gifted education is under intellectual attack, an intellectual attack aimed at its very foundation.

For perhaps the first time in many of our careers, we are hearing scholars and educators question whether gifted education is even valid, whether gifted children even exist. We are seeing the word *gifted* deleted from documents by leaders in gifted education. We are hearing that gifted education “used to be called” gifted education, but is called that no longer. We are hearing that our mission as gifted educators is no longer to educate gifted children but to develop the talents of all children. Perhaps most amazingly, we are hearing that there is no such thing as intelligence; rather, there are multiple intelligences—more, apparently, than eight—and that we should change our curricula and pedagogy to reflect each individual’s profile of intelligences.

If we believe the words of the critics, we might come to the conclusion that there are no gifted children. We might come to the conclusion that gifted classes could rightfully be canceled. We

might come to the conclusion that it is not necessary to differentiate instruction for gifted children.

We might believe that since all children have talent to develop, and since all children have their own intelligences, there are no gifted children.

We might, in fact, believe something that I hear often in my travels. In fact, I heard it just weeks ago, when a teacher raised her hand in the middle of my presentation and said, “All children are gifted.” She said, “I think everyone is gifted. I think everyone is gifted in their own way.”

Now, this is a moving and humane expression. But as educators of gifted children, we must ask, “What does it mean, and is it true?”

“Everyone is gifted in their own way.” Let’s examine that idea.

Never mind, sniff, that the plural possessive pronoun *their* cannot properly be used with the singular antecedent *everyone*; that is the wording that one hears. “Everyone is gifted in their own way.”

What are we to make of this proposition? What do people intend to mean by it? What if we abstract the structure of the logic and denude the sentence of its particularity? Here is the logic of the idea:

Everyone is X in their own way.

A simple declarative proposition with a subject complement equated to the universal subject by a linking verb, followed by a prepositional phrase that modifies the verb.

Everyone is X. Everyone. The sentence has a comfy, democratic acceptability that is appealing; we long to be a sport, to assent with a wink and goodnaturedly allow everyone to be X in their own way. And yet, in his grave, the modern language philosopher Wittgenstein is beginning to stir uncomfortably. Everyone, as my favorite football coach says, means everyone, but in their own way means....

Everyone is gifted in their own way. Do we hear similar propositions about things other than giftedness? Everyone is six-foot-four in their own way. Everyone is brunette in their own way. Everyone is Michael Jordan in their own way. Everyone is exhausted in their own way. Everyone is female in their own way. Everyone does calculus in their own way. Everyone is a great writer in their own way.

How about: Everyone is identical in their own way? The mind reels.

Is it politically invalid to attach any identifying description to anyone because everyone must be called it, too?

Must we call everyone everything in their own way? No, and no one says so. In these bizarre substitute sentences, when the word *gifted* is replaced by a different word, the logical nonsense of the sentence is more salient.

It is only when giftedness is discussed that someone feels the need to make it a universal attribute; someone may not be gifted—everyone must be.

But just as everyone is not tall, even in their own way, everyone is not gifted, even when we twist the idea by saying “in their own way.”

Everyone is not gifted.

It isn't true.

And those who say it must, at some level, know that.

Raise your hand if you like to tell the truth.

Raise your hand if you like to tell the truth in your own way.

Raise your hand if you can dunk a basketball. No one would say that everyone can dunk.

Raise your hand if you can dunk in your own way.

Notice: To say that you can dunk in your own way does not mean that you can dunk. It means that you have moved from the objective plane of discourse to the metaphorical plane.

What if those who say everyone-is-gifted had argued that everyone has gifts? Well, that is different. The words *gift* and *gifted* occupy different levels of meaning. *Gift* is a colloquial term that we use to describe people's best qualities, whereas *giftedness* is a technical, professional term that educators use to describe really smart kids who require differentiated educations.

When people argue that everyone is gifted in their own way, they are confounding educational and social planes of meaning, logical and emotional planes of articulation, and objective and metaphorical planes of intent. Perhaps in a social sense everyone has gifts, and perhaps many of these gifts should be valued as highly or more highly than educational giftedness. The gift of kindness, for instance, is a benediction devoutly to be wished. But having gifts in the social sense does not make you gifted in an educational sense.

If deep down they know that not everyone is gifted, then what do the everyone-is-gifteds mean? Why do they insist that everyone is gifted, when they would never insist that everyone has perfect pitch? Why does the subject of giftedness generate this compulsive response?

Well, notice that everyone-is-gifted never initiates a conversation. No one comes up to you in the lobby and says, “By the way, I think everyone is gifted!” Everyone-is-gifted is always a response. It occurs during a conversation when someone has been discussing giftedness, and a look of discomfort spreads over another person's face, and then we hear the inexorable words: “Well, I think everyone is gifted in their own way.”

It seems clear to me that this response is not a scientific proposition but a defense. Its motivation is moral and emotional. It is a defense of the value of children who are not gifted, and it is

possibly a self-defense by a person who does not feel gifted and who is threatened by the implied comparison of the giftedness of others. Everyone-is-gifted is a defense.

As a defense, the claim that everyone is gifted must win our notice and sympathy, for though everyone is not gifted, as we mean the word in gifted education, the deepest intention of the everyone-is-gifted proposition is not meaningless. Technically, everyone is not gifted, but philosophically and metaphorically, everyone is a gift. Everyone is equally someone—someone who should not be neglected, or diminished, or overlooked, or relegated to a lesser life by any system of definitions.

And there's Hamlet's rub. In standing up for the gifted, we must not care, or even appear to care, only for the gifted.

Do we appear to care only for the gifted? This idea is fundamentally unfair to gifted educators. If this were a conference of physicians meeting to discuss the appropriate care for children with cerebral palsy, would that indicate we were indifferent to the needs of children with leukemia? The idea is manifestly absurd.

Like those who say that everyone is gifted, we too feel protective of the lives and happiness of children and with them draw our swords against the firebreathing definitions that would diminish the identity of anyone. That is what those who say everyone-is-gifted are doing, at logic's expense: protecting all children from the threat of menacing language that seems to sort children by value.

Somehow, in our egalitarian society, the fact of gifted intelligence puts us in a state of ethical dissonance. What we know about gifted children appears to clash with what we know about social equality and universal human value. But the clash is artificial; it is illusory. It is a mis-clash. We are mixing the poles of high intellectual ability with the oranges of human equality. We are all equal, but we are not all identical; these properties exist at different levels of meaning.

No, being gifted is not a property pertaining to everyone. Giftedness is not ordinary; giftedness is extraordinary; this is the very pith and marrow of the term. Mozart, Shakespeare, Catherine the Great, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Sylvia Plath were gifted. Like gifted children in our schools, these people had special abilities and special needs, and as a society we must be able to say so, to admire ability, to support ability, to celebrate ability, and to nurture ability. It must be as socially acceptable to support genius that is intellectual as it is to support genius that is athletic.

Tragically, intellectual genius does not gather the public support that other forms of genius do. Even the word *gifted* is a weasel-word, equivocating about the value of intelligence. Intelligence is only a gift, the word suggests, a gift that was given to the recipient through no merit of his or her own. It was only a gift; it was not paid for. Intelligence is a gift that was given from without and is not a meritorious characteristic. If you are gifted, you shouldn't deserve any credit for something that was only a gift.

It's just a gift.

Gifted children are only children, and they did not choose to be gifted. They can't help it. Gifted children are those who require a differentiated educational program if their exceptional needs are

to be met. Their ability is not just a socially undesirable characteristic, an unfair advantage that they have over other children; it is often a disadvantage; it often creates serious problems. Gifted children won't "get everything on their own"; they need us to understand them, support them, and provide differentiated instruction for them, just as other children with exceptional learning characteristics need our specific understanding and support.

Differentiation is the critical fact; gifted children are at risk; they need us to provide them with an education that is appropriate in rigorous, accelerated content and advanced thinking processes if they are not to wither in the muting and stifling environment of the regular, textbook-driven, age-graded classroom.

Look at the lovely ink painting by Rembrandt entitled *A Woman Sleeping*. With a softness that only artistic genius could employ, Rembrandt made his image of the sleeping woman from the gentlest of strokes, as though by painting her too roughly he would wake her up. The brushwork is so delicate and subtle that the painting seems almost Japanese. Look at the economy of brushstrokes; with only a few dozen strokes, some of them barely touching the paper, Rembrandt rendered the form of the woman's curled-up posture. Her face, closed eyes, and hair are somehow real, paradoxically, in spite of the fact that they don't look real at all close up. She rests there, sleeping forever on her pillow of ink and paper, a sleeping woman whose peaceful repose will never be spoiled.

How did Rembrandt know to do these things? He took an art course?

No. Everybody takes an art course. Not everybody will paint *A Sleeping Woman*. How did Rembrandt know to do these things?

Well, he was Rembrandt. And if we look long at his lovely brushwork and try to understand how this real woman emerges as a misty visual average of unreal brushstrokes, we can begin to see something besides the woman; we begin to see the genius of Rembrandt.

This is much more profound than it seems because the actual complete etching of Rembrandt's face is only the size of a postage stamp. Rembrandt was gifted.

What would the young Rembrandt's experience have been if he had entered a school in the United States this year? Of course, it depends what school, but Rembrandt might have found a school that used to have a gifted program but has since mainstreamed all the gifted kids back into heterogeneous classes in a county that used to have thirteen specialists working in gifted education but now only has one, who is also halftime coordinator of system-wide faculty development. He may have entered the same class entered by everyone else who is his chronological age and have been assigned the same textbook exercises that everyone in the class was assigned, and if his extraordinary abilities were recognized, he might have been instructed to work in a cooperative group where he would have tutored other students.

If young Mozart went to Rembrandt's school as a second grader, having just completed writing his first concerto, would they let him take music? Or would they schedule him into some other "enrichment" class because all second graders get that class?

And if he did get put into a music class, would he have to fill out the big-print worksheets on the names of the notes because it wouldn't be fair for anyone to be treated special? Would Mozart have to sit in a circle and call out the names of the notes with his group? Would that be fair to Mozart?

Fairness.

If a child had a physical problem and had lost his legs or the use of his legs, would we require him to meet the P.E. requirement for height jumped in order to uphold our equal standards?

Or would we make an exception because we are human beings, and the requirement is impossible for the child?

If a gifted child had a specific learning disability and, despite his enormous IQ, could spell few words correctly, would we deduct points from all of his assignments and tests, ruining his grade average and self-image in order to defend our equal standards?

Or would we make an exception because we are human beings, and the spelling requirement is impossible for the child, regardless of how hard he studies and regardless of how much he learns about the content of the knowledge?

When the Russians launched Sputnik, and the nation trembled, we called on our gifted children, and they responded. We went to the moon and threw off calculators and desktop computers as a byproduct. But The Wall is down, and the Russians are divided, and why should gifted kids get differentiated instruction now? Back to the workbooks now. In the absence of the Cold War, the national mood has changed, and support for differentiated instruction to meet the specific learning characteristics of gifted children has diminished.

It has diminished in the name of mistaken concepts of fairness and equity. Steve Schroeder Davis has argued eloquently that our educational system is in the grip of "coercive egalitarianism," a spurious concept of fairness that leads us to abandon giving all children the appropriate education they need.

Fairness.

Welcome to the doctor's office. Doctor Fairness is in and will see you now. And good news: Doctor Fairness treats all his patients alike. Appendectomies, that's it. Everybody gets appendectomies. Got a broken leg? Appendectomy. Pneumonia? Appendectomy. Nearsighted? It's an appendectomy for you. Got to treat everybody fairly, you know. Give everybody what they need, and you'd have to treat every individual individually! We don't treat what you need; you get what we offer. When you wake up, you'll be in the recovery room with the twenty-seven other patients, and you can all receive your post-appendectomy treatments in unison. Won't that be fun?

In medicine, we treat the condition, and it would seem absurd to disregard it.

In education, we often disregard the condition of giftedness, and it seems absurd to many to treat it.

Words. Everyone in education will say that we must do everything we can to help the individual student. The difficulty is the difficulty. It is extraordinarily complicated to be flexible when you have a vastly heterogeneous chronological age group and you are determined to put them in the same instructional program, regardless of their intellectual age, regardless of their high or low motivation, regardless of their previous exposure to content, regardless of their interest in material, regardless of their characteristics.

Uniform processing is not the equity required in education. Doctors do not give every patient uniform processing. Each year, a hospital will perform hundreds of appendectomies, but only on patients who need appendectomies. And each appendectomy might require different details. In a different part of the hospital, another specialist will treat patients with respiratory ailments. And in a different wing, doctors will deliver babies.

Educational patients don't get anything so logical. In too many schools, all of the education patients are treated for Algebra I, everyone has their civics removed, and each patient gets an Englishotomy.

Depending on their age.

But education should not be about age; it should be about need.

Need. Gifted children should receive professional educational treatment. The educational curricula and practices they receive should be the educational curricula and practices that they need.

Need. Hollingworth did pioneering work showing that in an undifferentiated school setting, moderately gifted children waste half their time, and highly gifted children waste almost all their time.

Need. What kinds of instructional differentiation do gifted children need? They need instruction that responds to their extra curiosity, to their urgency for meaning, to their advanced vocabularies, to their interest in complexity, to their fast comprehensions, to their vast memories. Gifted children need choice—individualized and self-regulating experiences that are appropriate to their self-motivated independence. They need higher-order thinking activities that give their abstract minds a workout. They need Socratic questioning. They need advanced levels of subject matter, because they can learn them, and short instructions, because they will understand them immediately, and quick paces through difficult material, because they don't need many things repeated. Gifted kids do need research; they don't need many workbooks. They do need a variety of learning experiences; they don't need just more of the same problems in the textbook.

Everyone does not need these kinds of differentiation. Gifted kids do. Gifted children need educations that would defeat and obstruct many other students, and other students need educations that stop gifted students, leaving them bored and defeated.

James Gallagher said at this year's NAGC that many schools for the gifted, such as the North Carolina School of Science and Math, could not run the rigorous programs they do if they were required to admit heterogeneous groups of students. Since they can group gifted students together, they can differentiate their programs to the necessary level of rigor.

The language of differentiation, in gifted research, features terms such as *choice*, *rigor*, *complexity*, *depth*, *individualization*, and *faster pace*. These are critical concepts; they are useful in using and constructing models of differentiation, but we must still be careful because any differentiation model will fail if it is teacher-centered. Choice allows students to self-differentiate in ways we cannot begin to predict.

Gifted education is under attack, and if we, who intend to educate gifted children, do not come forward and advocate for their interests, there will be no one else to do so.

In his book *The Road Ahead*, Bill Gates discusses the coming Information Highway revolution. Gates tells us that the advance elements of the revolution are arriving now and that the information revolution will transform our lives as much as the invention of printing, the Industrial Revolution, or the Scientific Revolution. It will change how we work, how we live, how we communicate, how often we travel, how we gather information, and what we are able to know. Electronically, it will bring everything everywhere. The planet will become an electronic social hologram.

Do you have any doubt that Gates is either right or so close to right that the difference is meaningless?

That being the case, I am not prepared to abandon the concept of academic giftedness. Certainly multiple abilities and talents combine to make up our humanity, but I want school systems to target academic ability. I want school systems that do not abandon the great Aristotelian disciplines. I want school systems to increase, not decrease, their emphasis on the great subjects of science, mathematics, language, foreign language, and history.

One of history's great changes is at hand, and I want school systems that will prepare students for the onrushing world. The United States cannot afford what we saw in the TIMSS Report: for its brightest students to be thirty-first out of thirty-four nations in science and math.

Academic intelligence will continue to be central and critical in our efforts to keep pace.

For all of their problems, individual IQ tests still provide valuable information about a student's academic ability. While we cannot rely on them exclusively, it makes no sense to abandon them completely.

For all of its limitations, a rigorous education that is soaked in literature, foreign language, mathematics, science, computer science, and history is still the most valuable possession a young person can carry into the new millennium.

Gifted education was, and is still, called gifted education. Heterogeneous cooperative learning does not offer a sufficient differentiated program for gifted children. Let gifted children cooperate with each other on academic work that is appropriately complex, abstract, fast-paced, and deep.

Talent development strategies designed for everyone do not offer an acceptable differentiated program for gifted children. The best ways of developing the talents of struggling learners will not provide differentiated ways of developing the talents of gifted learners.

Multiple intelligences theory does not offer a strong intellectual foundation for the education of gifted children. Multiple intelligences theory has been interesting, but it is time to move on. It is time to move beyond these intellectual challenges to gifted education. It is time to refocus our efforts on the education of gifted children.

One evening I heard a presentation by Miraca Gross. Many of you have heard Miraca speak. She is the CHIP (Children of High Intellectual Potential) Lecturer in Education at the University of Melbourne, Australia. In 1987 she won the Hollingworth Award for her research on Australian children of IQ 160+. She is dynamic, direct, and an advocate of special programs for gifted children.

Among the other things that Miraca accomplished that night was that she made me think more profoundly about what it means for someone to be different—to be different from everyone else. Miraca presented statistics for IQ tests, and as I heard her review these statistics, I began to wonder what those numbers would look like.

For example, Miraca observed that one person in six can score 115 on an individual IQ test.

Everyone is not gifted. Children who are have very real and important needs, and they must have our help and support if they are not to be thrown away by a system that denies their exceptional characteristics as learners.

If all of us work together, our gifted children will get the education they truly need.