

Critically evaluate the 'talent account' of giftedness

Winner (1998) states that '... it seems certain that gifts are hardwired in the infant brain, as savants and gifted children exhibit extremely high abilities from a very young age before they have spent much time working at their gift'. Such a statement is seen as supporting the talent account of giftedness. This maintains that the likelihood of becoming exceptionally competent depends upon the presence or absence of inborn attributes. To describe one as talented is therefore only half the story, as being talented is also seen as an explanation for exceptional abilities.

Clearly the 'talent account' of giftedness is rooted in innate abilities and biology. Howe *et al.* (1998) suggest that innate talent relies on certain assumptions. These assumptions include that the talent is genetically transmitted, the full effects of the talent may not be evident from an early age even though there are indicators of exceptional talent, these indications will help people predict who is likely to excel, such talent will only exist in a limited number of people, and, finally, that talents are usually domain-specific. Further evidence for this innate view of giftedness comes from Gardner (1993), who saw talent as a precocious biopsychological potential in a particular discipline, and Winner (1996), who sees talent as an unlearned ability, it cannot be manufactured.

Such biological standpoints are not without criticism. Genetic contributions to human behaviour are very complex and indirect. By investigating accepted geniuses such as Newton and Mozart, it becomes clear that there are certain qualities, such as being highly temperamental, persistent, dogged in approach etc, which are common traits. Indeed, Darwin and Einstein denied possessing a superior inherent intelligence. Interestingly none has ever denied possessing such attributes as having a healthy curiosity. Howe (1999) states '... it is just as likely that those – conceivably largely inherited – human qualities that make the larger contributions towards setting geniuses apart from other people are ones of temperament and personality rather than being narrowly intellectual ones...' There seems to be an almost mystical quality to geniuses, that less-talented people cannot understand, yet Howe believes that by unravelling this mysticism, we will begin to comprehend exceptional talents.

Howe takes an environmental and behavioural approach to talent even further. He sees little evidence for innate explanations for talent but instead points to differences in early experiences, training, habits and other environmental factors. By concentrating upon the environmental factor of practice, it can be seen how much we want to believe in an innate explanation for giftedness. According to Sloboda (1999), by the time top violinists are 20, they have practised for more than 10,000 hours in total, exploding the myth that giftedness is innate and illustrating the exceptional workload some geniuses undertake on a regular basis. Other environmental factors, such as parents, illustrate what an effect this can have, e.g. Mozart's father was a composer and pressured his son in a musical direction. An ever-progressing world has also created exceptional talent. In the world of sport, greater knowledge of sports science, nutrition and medical care can explain improvements in athletic performance, not genetics.

To take the 'talent account' hypothesis to its furthest extension would raise serious ethical consequences with regard to those who are 'unfortunate' not to possess such special talents. If geniuses are born and not made, if talent is wholly the result of genetic inheritance then why nurture children without such biological predispositions? Seeing people, especially children, as innately talented is discriminatory to those without such a talent. As Howe states '... such categorisation is unfair and wasteful, preventing young people from pursuing a goal because of the unjustified conviction of teachers or parents

that certain children would not benefit from the superior opportunities given to those who are deemed talented'.