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Introduction

Girls, Women, and Giftedness

John M. Willinsky

This book brings together a group of counsellors, educators, and scholars who are committed to the gifted education of girls and women. The authors take human potential as something that is vast and varied, and they understand that this potential benefits immensely from the sort of nurturing and guidance which the education system is in a position to provide. But this book is also strongly motivated by a sense that gifted education has yet to come fully to grips with the forms of gender bias in education, and that it is the responsibility of educators to seek the best means of improving the opportunities of all students to take advantage of gifted education programs. The contributors to this volume have each taken up a different perspective on the subject of girls, women, and giftedness. Yet out of the composite picture which emerges from this work, a focus is afforded which will, we believe, advance both the conception and practice of gifted education.

In introducing this question of giftedness and gender, we can do no better than return to the extraordinary courage, perseverance, and acuity of Leta Stetter Hollingworth. In her contribution to this volume, Linda Silverman vividly portrays Hollingworth's diligent efforts to overcome deep-set prejudices against gifts and talents in women during the early years of this century. Hollingworth first had to demolish the fundamental fallacy that the eminence of men in field after field testifies to the fact that giftedness was a male trait. In her position as psychologist for the City of New York, she developed a program of research and scholarship that challenged a host of patriarchal biases in order to create the first opportunities for an enriched program that recognized their gifts and talents.

One of the essential issues at stake in her work and one that remains with us is the meaning of "giftedness." The definition of the term "giftedness" has by no means been fixed or remained static over the course of this century. Since the early 1920s, the dominant conception of giftedness has been a superior performance on such measures as *IQ* or achievement tests. This conception lends itself to controlling the number of "gifted" students in any given population, but is unduly narrow in its understanding of what might count as a gift. Since Hollingworth's time, gifted educators have been struggling to replace the tendency to rely on a single academic measure to identify students for gifted programs. Their hope has been to cast a wider net over the talents of the young, but also to compensate for the biases that have been so clearly implicated in the testing movement (Gould, 1981). The broader conceptions of identification which developed as a result of these concerns recognize a wider range of creative and personal gifts, some of which may lie latent as a potential in the child rather

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than having been exhibited in some form of exceptional performance. The aim has also been to extend the search for exceptionality among students into the arts and such untapped areas among the young as leadership.

The promise of these gifted education programs lies in their actively seeking out qualities that are in danger of otherwise being overlooked in students that are in danger of otherwise being overlooked. These programs create a space for qualities that do not neatly fall within the traditional bounds of subject areas. Although the effort has been to broaden the reach of gifted programs, there remains one dismaying statistic which continues to turn up, and that is the fact that girls continue to be under-represented in many of these programs, sometimes constituting as little as 30 to 40% of their enrollment. This pattern is explored in one community by the Daignault, Edwards, Pohlman and McCabe study, "Selection for Gifted Programs," included in this collection; their analysis of gender differences of selection and testing process provides helpful insight into the educational procedures that can encode elements of prejudice. It would seem that the prejudices against the abilities of girls and women are not as often openly expressed as they were at the turn of the century, when Leta Stetter Hollingworth faced them, but the ramifications of this thinking are still to be found reflected in institutional practices. These differences in representation can be attributed, at the first level, to the superior performance of boys in maths and sciences, which appears to exceed the girls' advantage in verbal creativity and performance. But such differences in test scores are continuing to decrease (Mansnerus, 1989). And, at any rate, these differences do not form an adequate stopping point on this question; they merely open further points of inquiry into our operating concepts of education in these different areas.

Now, as a number of contributors point out, it is all too true that this misrepresentation of girls is no less the case outside of the schools, in other areas of prestige and accomplishment. Yet these educational programs have to be judged on a different basis; they are not simply mirroring what are, much to our dismay, continuing inequalities in the society at large. These programs were designed to make something of a potential that might otherwise be lost; they were meant to recover talents and gifts that need nurturing and that will, in turn, benefit the society at large. In other words, programs in gifted education might seem just the vehicle for correcting problems of under-representation in fulfilling the democratic dream of an educational system that offered an equal opportunity for all.

Unfortunately, there are numerous indications that programs in gifted education, with a few special exceptions at this point, are continuing rather than correcting the social process which has produced a preponderance of men in positions of power and achievement. The benefits which gifted programs are intended to render society are not yet being fully realized if the programs are consistently overlooking gifts and talents among one major segment of the population.