

Justifying Education for the Gifted

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Laura Purdy's conclusions about education for the gifted can be stated simply. First, special treatment for the gifted is justified both empirically and morally, and second, acceleration is a more justified approach to providing such special treatment than is enrichment.

Purdy spends most of her energy developing the second conclusion. Although several issues about the details of her arguments over acceleration and enrichment might be raised — for example, her reliance on evidence that is over twenty years old, her failure to distinguish among the various forms of acceleration and enrichment, and her failure to consider forms of special treatment that cannot be classified neatly into either of these categories — none of these concerns is of central importance. For the validity of the second conclusion clearly rests upon the first, that we have good reason to make some sort of special provision for the education of the gifted.

Here Purdy's argument is far more sketchy. She seems to advance three reasons to support this sweeping conclusion. First, the welfare of the gifted would be enhanced by special educational provisions. Second, the welfare of the non-gifted, or society more generally, would be enhanced by such provisions. And finally, considerations of equality are not a conclusive objection to special treatment for the gifted; in fact, such treatment may be required by these considerations.

Most of the evidence that Purdy considers applies to the welfare of gifted students. The ordinary public school curriculum and standard policies of promotion from grade to grade at annual intervals through that curriculum impose certain barriers to the intellectual, personal, and social development of gifted students, she asserts. The evidence she cites suggests that alternative curricula and especially alternative promotion policies can remove those barriers and can lead to improved levels of development and greater satisfaction among that group of students. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that the evidence is conclusive in this regard (although, as noted above, there are reasons to be skeptical about the adequacy of the evidence). The basic point here is that a demonstration that a policy would be beneficial to a particular individual or group is never sufficient to justify that policy on moral grounds. Otherwise, it would be possible to justify the transfer of all property and power to a single individual on the sole ground that such a transfer would be in the interests of that person. Therefore, the remaining reasons that Purdy asserts are crucial to her case. Here she considers, on the one hand, whether special treatment for the gifted has collectively beneficial consequences and, on the other, whether it is permitted or even necessitated by a right to equal consideration independently of its individual and collective consequences. Unfortunately, Purdy provides only the barest indication of the arguments that might be made and evidence that might be developed on either of these two critical issues. Nevertheless,

we can start with the suggestive materials that she supplies in order to consider where a fuller exploration of these issues might take us.

Purdy's view of the social benefit of special treatment asserts that the higher levels of development and productivity it ostensibly gives rise to among the gifted provide resources of competence and imagination to the society at large. Even assuming that special treatment does generate these higher levels of skill among the gifted, the conclusion regarding social benefit that Purdy wishes to draw does not automatically follow for at least three reasons. First, the benefit that derives from such consequences is not necessarily an externality, to use a term from economics. That is, this benefit in terms of higher income or increased satisfaction, say, may redound entirely to the gifted themselves. Clearly, the increased satisfaction about which Purdy provides evidence is entirely personal to the gifted. Moreover, free markets do reward competence with income and other advantages to its possessor. Purdy needs to demonstrate then that the consequences of special treatment are not entirely internal; otherwise, the claim of a benefit beyond the gifted themselves is unwarranted. From what I can see, she provides no evidence or argument to this effect. At the very least, she might have called upon human capital theory for support.

Second, even if a policy can be shown to generate an external benefit, it is not necessarily justified because of its potential opportunity costs. That is, if the policy consumes resources that might be deployed otherwise to produce even more external benefits, or if it imposes negative externalities that exceed its positive externalities, then the policy is not justified on consequentialist grounds. Purdy seems sensitive to this issue both directly and indirectly. She notes that acceleration can reduce the length of some students' public educational careers, thus ostensibly saving the public the costs associated with a longer period of schooling. At best, this argument is incomplete because, if the number of accelerants is small enough, the marginal cost of educating them for a longer period of time may actually be nothing. That is, adding a single child to a class of twenty-five or thirty third-graders, say, may have no cost to the public since the teacher, the classroom, and the bureaucratic infrastructure are already in place. At the very least, then, Purdy must say something about the frequency of acceleration in order to support her claim of public savings. Although she does not say so explicitly, I suspect that her preference for acceleration is based partly upon considerations of this kind. Enrichment usually does require the expenditure of public funds beyond what is required to maintain ordinary classrooms, funds to provide the extended curriculum and additional instruction that enrichment requires. Acceleration does not seem to require additional resources because accelerants are simply added to existing classes at higher grade levels. Thus, it might seem that acceleration is a cost-free way of producing benefits for gifted children. Yet, if the number of accelerants is sufficiently large, they may cause the public to incur additional costs for a more elaborate system of student screening for giftedness or, more plausibly, for added advanced classes at the high school level. Taking these two lines of argument together, the number of accelerants must be large enough to save the public money at the lower grades but not so large to cost them

more money at the higher grades. In other words, a complex (and probably speculative) argument about the frequency of acceleration is needed in order to substantiate the claim of public cost savings that ostensibly derive from special treatment for the gifted. Further, Purdy does not provide any evidence about the negative externalities that special treatment may impose upon the non-gifted. Enrichment programs clearly impose such effects because of their additional costs. Here, we must consider whether those additional resources spent to enhance the competence of non-gifted children would have higher external benefits for the society's productivity than those spent on the gifted. Even if a form of special treatment does not consume more public resources, as Purdy assumes to be the case with acceleration, it still might impose negative externalities on the non-gifted. One might speculate, for example, that a liberal system of voluntary acceleration might encourage many unqualified students (or more likely their parents) to attempt acceleration unsuccessfully, with possibly negative consequences for these students' self-confidence and motivation. Or perhaps widespread acceleration might create a two-class system in the public schools, which might depress the non-accelerants' levels of motivation and achievement. I do not pretend to have more evidence about these, or dozens of other possibilities one might imagine, than Purdy does. The point is that the very existence of these possibilities increases the complexity of the empirical argument that must be made in favor of the claim that special treatment for the gifted produces social benefits and not just benefits to the gifted themselves.

Third, the social benefit argument does not succeed because of the implausibility of the hope that it can escape from this morass of empirical argument and evidence. Purdy does not articulate this hope explicitly, but she hints at it in her reference to the high levels of competence and imagination to which the improved development of the gifted is supposed to lead. This is the hope that special treatment of the gifted might in some way increase the incidence of the sorts of geniuses that revolutionize our civilization so dramatically that everyone thereafter will lead dramatically improved lives — people like Louis Pasteur or Marie Curie, for instance. Because of the magnitude of their achievements, increasing the probability of these geniuses' emergence promises such an extraordinary social benefit that it is unnecessary to engage in the complex empirical argumentation suggested above. But as I have argued elsewhere, this hope must be forever disappointed, for it is logically impossible for us to select for giftedness on the basis of the potential to revolutionize our civilization.¹ We simply cannot know just what combination of talent, knowledge, insight, and character might enable someone to do that, for if we did we would already be able to revolutionize our civilization in precisely that way.

Finally, then, we must consider Purdy's argument that the principle of equal consideration may imply that the gifted have a right to special treatment, whatever the consequences of that treatment may prove to be. Purdy quite rightly rejects an interpretation of this principle that implies that all children must receive an identical education. After all, such an interpretation would mean that special education for students with disabilities is unjustified. Instead, she embraces an interpretation that

calls for maximal development of all children's potential. As many authors have pointed out, however, this is not a morally plausible, or even a logically possible, interpretation of equal consideration. Israel Scheffler observed that this interpretation relies on an incoherent conception of the realization of human potential since any such effort to realize one aspect of a child's potential inevitably closes doors to the realization of other aspects of that potential.² Amy Gutmann argued that this interpretation imposes morally inappropriate strictures on a society because, taken literally, it implies that a society is unjustified in any public undertaking (such as fighting a war or establishing a public park) as long as one more increment of any child's potential remains to be realized.³ I am not prepared to argue for a particular interpretation of this principle, but whatever interpretation we find appropriate must inevitably imply that our obligations in this regard at most call for partial realization of children's potential. Without further argument, it is not obvious that gifted children's rights to such partial development support special treatment, especially when we do not understand the costs and benefits of such treatment any better than appears to be the case.

1. Barry Bull, "Eminence and Precocity: An Examination of the Justification of Education for the Gifted and Talented," *Teachers College Record* 87, no. 1 (1985): 1-19.

2. Israel Scheffler, *Of Human Potential: An Essay in the Philosophy of Education* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 10-16.

3. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 129-31.