

Playing Favorites

Gifted Education and the
Disruption of Community



Mara Sapon-Shevin

foreword by
Jeannie Oakes & Martin Lipton

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Foreword

For years, schools have put children into classes and programs based on their estimate of childrens' ability—a practice commonly known as ability grouping or tracking. At the top of the tracking hierarchy, gifted classes and programs exist for children whose capacity for learning and creative expression is thought to exceed the challenges that typical classrooms provide. Mara Sapon-Shevin's study, reported here, provides what may be the first (surely the most piercing) empirical and critical insight into the ideology that creates and maintains the "gifted" track, and is, in turn, itself sustained by it.

Common sense tells many educators and parents that "gifted" or "gifted and talented" or "honors" classes offer exceptional educational opportunities to students who can profit from them. Often (though not always) that's true enough. But over the past ten years or so, the practice of tracking has been challenged in a way that the educational status quo and "common sense" rarely are. It turns out that tracking works to the *disadvantage* of most children; and it also turns out that tracking is not essential to maintain educational benefits for the few children who participate in the highest tracks.

Importantly, the problematic nature of tracking did not emerge on a stable educational scene; rather, challenges to tracking picked up steam precisely when schools were adding more tracked classes as a solution to increasingly complex and perplexing school problems. Just at the time when schools were thinking that they had a rational and legal process for distributing their few qualified science teachers, or for keeping white and wealthy parents from fleeing the school district, or for responding to charges of mediocrity, or for providing help to children with special needs, and much more, they realized their "cure" was not merely worse than the disease—it was *part of* the disease.

This account of a seemingly innocent, one-day-a-week “pull-out” program for highly capable elementary school children cuts to the heart of a fundamental dilemma for public schools in the 1990s: their struggle to remain viable institutions in the face of public disaffection, shrinking resources, and threats of increasing privatization through “choice” policies. Sapon-Shevin’s challenge to the practice and the symbolism of gifted education is a challenge to the way that schools distribute their resources and opportunities. This is no quibble over bad ideology—take it or leave it; this is an attack on bad education—pay attention! To the substantial weight of research evidence that discredits tracking in general and gifted programs in particular, Sapon-Shevin adds, from her own study, the human voices of children, their parents, and their teachers. These voices are from decent and caring folks, consigned to argue for special benefits and privileges because they can think of no other path to the good and learned life.

Tracking itself emerged out of an early twentieth-century American culture that was captivated by the philosophy of “scientific management.” The schooling assumption then was that a high degree of learning for all children was not merely unlikely, it was undesirable. The apex of scientific management was manifest in the assembly line. One line, with efficient methods and quality control, might turn steel and rubber into Fords—to be sure, all running well and doing what Fords should do. Another line, with somewhat different expertise and procedures, as well as higher standards, would turn higher quality raw materials into Lincolns—clearly a superior product. The apex of scientific schooling was to track a few of the “best and brightest” for high status learning and careers, and to expect good citizenship and work habits from the rest. Yes, there were exceptions to this “rule,” and some unlikely prospects (although many fewer members of racial minorities) were able to gain rich benefits from public education. But then, as now, exceptions were few; then, as now, when schools made predictions about a child’s failure or success, they usually were able to make good on their promise.

Then, outmoded notions of intelligence bolstered arguments for “differentiated” education. Now, though the limits and abuses of intelligence testing are widely documented, tests remain the chief tool for common sense “scientific” differentiation. So even today we hear adults in Sapon-Shevin’s study arguing as if IQ points were like inches or pounds with each unit containing an equal measure or quantum of intelligence. In order to imagine what it is like to be a

gifted child, we normal folks are asked in one of Sapon-Shevin's citations to imagine "living in a world where the average IQ was 50 or 60."

Early views of scientific management and scientific measures of intelligence or "potential" merge smoothly into today's equally flawed misconceptions and misplaced faith that sorting and separating children is a rational way of educating them. For example, most parents and policymakers assume that the processes of identifying gifted and talented children (like track assignments, generally) are accurate and fair. Who is gifted? Technically, the "gifted" child is one who meets the state's or the school's criteria for being gifted. So much for the easy part. The particular criteria are constantly changing and vary from place to place. What all programs share is their attempt to identify children they think are especially deserving of extra opportunities. States usually distribute funding for gifted students according to a fixed percentage of total students enrolled. Some states and school districts designate 2 percent of their students as gifted. Others choose 5 percent, and others set the figure according to the funding they have. In this sense *who* is gifted may be decided in the halls of the state legislatures.

Cut-off scores on intelligence or aptitude tests are the primary method for determining which children qualify. One problem is that intelligence tests aren't very accurate in discriminating among people at the upper end. Further, the normal variations in IQ are especially wide for bright children. As a result, who is gifted may vary from day to day, year to year, and state to state, all for the same child. On a good day the child might be gifted. If tested on another day, she could fall short. If she moves to a different state, she may be gifted again. And if she stays where she is, the following year the cutoff scores might change. California once raised its qualifying score from an IQ of 130 to 132—disqualifying thousands of children who might have been gifted the year before.

IQ may not be the sole criterion for giftedness. Some states and school districts include teacher observations of leadership, creativity, or other special abilities. Some allow for assessments of academic or performance skills that are less formal than standardized tests—thus they include "talented" children in these programs. Each of these methods can be described—can be written about in official school documents—and made to sound rational and orderly, even egalitarian. These practices are often put in place to counter the limitations of IQ tests mentioned above, but they introduce their own bias. In the end, most schools are like Prairieview: interpretation of who is gifted varies within schools and is based on

adults' widely varying perceptions and attitudes toward giftedness and toward children.

National statistics reveal that children identified as gifted and talented come overwhelmingly from white, economically and socially advantaged families, and much of the increasing furor over gifted programs relates to the exclusion of minority students. While fewer people blame bad biology than once did, many still look to racial or genetic explanations for differences in children's performance. Today, however, environment and culture are more popular and socially acceptable explanations. And surely, environment, family, and neighborhood matter a lot when it comes to influencing which children are equipped to do well on measures of giftedness when they begin school.

This concern is extraordinarily weighty for a culture struggling to be both diverse and democratic. Yet, Sapon-Shevin's study reveals disturbing facets of the phenomenon of "giftedness" in a community not divided by race and class. The children of Prairieview share strikingly similar backgrounds; they experience in common the culture of their small Midwest town; many think they are supposed to be "smart." Yet, a few are singled out. They are judged as "truly gifted" and needing something different, even though neither their teachers nor their classmates can easily see or comfortably explain why. There is considerable pain, confusion, and, most of all, silence in Prairieview. The school cannot hide its practices within the anonymity of urban size nor can racial and cultural diversity (and its attendant prejudice) provide easy, offhand explanations and justifications for sorting.

Mara Sapon-Shevin's work makes it painfully clear that the very existence of a gifted and talented identification communicates, even in communities where children are remarkably similar, that those not identified are *not gifted*. The result can be children's unrealistically low self-concepts and schools' low expectations. "Gifted" is a global definition—just like "A student" or "remedial." Both children and adults mistake the labels for certification of overall ability or worth. The subtlety of giftedness as a professional, legal, or administrative team is usually lost. Many see the gifted child as one who was born deserving the special status and the special advantages the school provides. For some exceptionally bright children, this perception of "birthright" short-circuits their discovery that effort and persistence matter more than high scores on tests.

Precisely because this is a study of what some might judge a "best case" scenario it exposes fundamental flaws in the construct of

giftedness itself, not merely in its often racist and classist implementation. Moreover, in Prairieview, as in gifted programs in more “difficult” school systems that provide a safe haven for white and wealthy children, savvy parents’ efforts to have their children identified are also fueled by the nagging fear that there isn’t enough really good education to go around.

That special “gifted” programs for children *can* work well for identified students should be obvious. Certainly, it is possible to create excellent classes in the midst of mediocre ones. Start by providing better teachers, the most successful students, and, often, smaller class sizes. Add special resources, a sense of superior academic mission, perhaps a parent support group. These top students, some claim, need special grooming to be our future scientists and business and government leaders. With such advantages these top students will get the best education in town. As a parent, a gifted program that offered your child just some of the above advantages would be hard to pass up. One that offered these advantages to other children but not yours might cause resentment, perhaps due to the general societal awareness of the link between giftedness and family background that confers a “seal of approval” on the families whose children are classified gifted. No wonder “giftedness” is so eagerly sought.

Neither is it surprising that parents find it difficult to accept schools’ rejection of their children for special programs, especially when a child barely misses a cutoff. Indeed, our own research reveals that next to the group of parents with children who are in gifted programs, parents most likely to exert heavy pressure and go to extraordinary lengths to influence the school are the parents who want their rejected child admitted to the gifted program. The parents of the accepted and many parents of those who are near-misses are heard loud and often in the school’s classrooms and offices. But what of those who are not heard—those who are silenced? Does it surprise us to observe some of the Prairieview teachers’ discomfort when they must deal with children’s questions about their exclusion from programs they see their classmates attend? Does it surprise us when teachers express their relief when the nongifted children don’t ask and when the gifted children don’t tell about their periodic absences? It does not surprise us, but it makes us worry, with Sapon-Shevin, about what this silencing means to the entire school community.

Why do such programs persist? Is it too strong to say that many people think it is okay (tolerable, and perhaps desirable) for school

policies to ensure that resources and learning will *not* be evenly distributed, especially with so little protest from those who come up short? Recently, the *Los Angeles Times* issued a disturbing report on the political progress of “opportunity-to-learn” standards—proposed federal standards that would require states to report on how they distribute educational resources among their school children (and we assume reveal which states and which populations of students receive more and less):

Over the Administration’s objections . . . House Democrats voted in committee that states could not receive federal grants to help meet the national academic standards unless they establish specific policies for improving schools that don’t meet the new opportunity-to-learn standards. Local officials fear this requirement could become a back-door federal mandate to equalize all education spending, or could spur lawsuits from parents whose children attend schools that don’t meet the federal standards.*

In spite of the fine intentions of many gifted educators and the understandable preferences of many parents who believe their children benefit from gifted programs, gifted education classes can be seen as nothing short of a “back-door” policy mandate to unequalize spending and other resources in favor of students who often have considerable other advantages. Mara Sapon-Shevin allows us to listen in on the private musings of parents, teachers, and children, as they struggle through convoluted rationale to justify their gifted classes and giftedness. Alas, they are no less rational than “local officials” who fear being sued if they don’t provide classes that meet federal standards.

Well, we are all entitled to our preferences. We, and we suspect Sapon-Shevin, would *prefer* cooperation to competition, sharing to privacy, consensus to majority rule, school parties to school dances, games where everyone wins to games with losers, classrooms in which complex lessons meet a variety of skill levels to classrooms geared to what the teacher determines is the single and only acceptable skill level. We would prefer a school that focused on building a stronger sense of community to a school that focused on building a stronger sense of individualism. Others might prefer the opposite.

But, such matters go beyond “preferences”—ours or others. Rather, these are matters that must be settled by communities and

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schools in which the forces of the most sincere and rational arguments are put forth and heard. We are confident about decisions that communities will reach when all are informed by serious discussions with their neighbors, studying their own school, and examining the empirical evidence. In that process, they must come to terms with research on tracking and grouping that demonstrates how, over the years of schooling, ability-grouped classes can exaggerate children's earlier developmental and motivational differences; how younger children who are initially fairly similar in background and skills become *increasingly* different in achievement when they are separated into classes for students with different abilities; and how their hopes for the future change in ways that are consistent with their track placement. At the same time, they must confront the evidence that top students can and often do learn just as well in mixed ability classes. In the end, they must confront whether, as the community's educational policymakers, they can support a structure that offers advantages to some children and not to others, especially when those opportunities are ones that can benefit *all* children.

The characteristics of most gifted programs—field trips to museums, plays, and so on; special films or lecturers; opportunities to do arts and crafts; special equipment, computers, books, and project supplies—should give even the most ardent supporters of gifted classes pause. So, however, should those that provide special access to higher-order thinking and problem solving. We shouldn't look at these opportunities as a pedagogical bonus for exceptional children taught by exceptional teachers. There is no evidence that only very bright children can learn critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Neither do they need separate classes to learn them. A wealth of research has yet to find evidence to support either tracking's effectiveness or fairness.

Even so, seriously considering "detracking" requires dramatically altered assumptions about nearly everything at school: students, learning, and the purposes of schooling. To create successful mixed ability classes, schools need to stop sorting for the future and concentrate on giving the best education to all children.

Children, of course, do differ in their backgrounds, developmental levels, interests, and learning styles. Not all students will benefit equally from lessons. There is nothing particularly unfair about that. The question schools face is not whether children are different but how schools should respond to differences. With enough determination, schools, parents, and policymakers could bring the ad-

vantages of gifted programs to all children, but simply mixing up students and leaving everything else the same is no answer. Effective alternatives require fundamental changes in school organization and classroom practices. Schools without tracking require curriculum and teaching strategies quite different from typical school practice.

Do children have access to rich learning opportunities? Are expectations high for children? Is the school staffed by professionals who feel confident and powerful enough to make a difference in children's learning? Do classroom opportunities include those dimensions that help children feel capable and in charge of their learning? Do the adults believe that all children can learn? Are lessons filled with socially valued knowledge that is rich in meaning? Do children work cooperatively? Do evaluations promote hard work and learning? All children—gifted, retarded, physically handicapped, non-English speaking, or poor—have needs that are best met when their schooling includes these critical characteristics. If schools increased their efforts to offer all children a rich and varied curriculum, much tracking would erode. The distinctions of high, average, and low ability would become far less essential to running the school. Children would be more likely to believe they are capable and behave that way.

Even more telling is whether the school can question conventional beliefs and practices with a careful, open, and tolerant probing of assumptions and values. Whether and how such questions are asked and answered will reveal much about a school's commitment to all its children. Such an inquiry is an arduous, courageous, and rarely attempted undertaking in education. Yet, we must expect to do no less if we intend to make schools humane, equitable, and truly educational places. This book can help break the silence.

Jeannie Oakes
Martin Lipton

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Preface

Silence is a lie. Silence has a loud voice. It shouts, 'Nothing important is happening—don't worry.' So, when something important is going on, silence is a lie.

A. M. Rosenthal

This book is about something important that is happening in our nation's schools, a phenomenon called "gifted education," which identifies certain children as eligible to receive particular kinds of educational experiences, often segregated from their "nongifted" peers. These programs speak to us of unequal educational opportunities, racism, elitism, and exclusion, but somehow we have learned these are things we're "not supposed to talk about." And so, this book is about silence and about silencing, and it is about breaking the silence.

Much has been written about gifted education; there are numerous textbooks and journal articles detailing how to identify gifted children, how to provide programs for them, and how to evaluate their success. But little has been written that is critical of the field itself or that questions why we have gifted programs or the effects of such programs. How do we account for the fact that we hear discussions about gifted programs, and whose child is and whose isn't gifted, at the grocery store and on the playground but not in "professional" circles? Why are the questions that I hear children and parents and teachers raise—"How come my daughter didn't get in?" "How will this label affect my child and our family?" "Is it right to do this for certain children only?"—raised in private and not often in public? How do we open the discourse that would bring these questions to the forefront of our professional and educational movements?

My struggles in writing this book have made clear to me not only the power and the pervasiveness of the silence around gifted education but also something about the process of silencing. And so, I will begin with my own particular history in how I came to write this book, the challenges to breaking the silence.

Like most children growing up in the age of Sputnik, I was aware that there were children who were "gifted." I don't think I considered anyone I knew to be in that category, but I was sure that such people existed. Occasionally one would see headlines about a nine-year-old boy completing college or a four year old who had read all of Shakespeare, and I assumed that those children were the geniuses, the gifted children of whom adults spoke either reverentially or somewhat scornfully. I was told that I was "smart," but going to schools that had no "gifted programs," I never really thought about my relationship to that category, other than to know I wasn't included.

Although I completed an undergraduate degree in elementary education and in psychology, a master's degree in applied behavior analysis, and a doctorate in teacher education, "gifted education" was not something I attended to. Two things, however, brought gifted education into my personal and professional focus. Professionally, my area of interest and expertise became the integration of children identified as "handicapped" into regular education settings, an approach then identified as "mainstreaming." I taught courses in this area and spent a lot of time thinking about and observing the ways in which children are labeled and identified as handicapped and the effects that had on their subsequent schooling. And, ironically, at a point in my life when I was moving closer and closer to the belief that all children needed and deserved to be served in richly stimulating, nurturing, heterogeneous classrooms—that diversity was enriching and not something to be avoided and that democratic education demanded providing high quality educational programs for all children—there was increasing national attention to gifted education and to the need for specialized, often segregated programs for children identified as "gifted." I was beginning to see some real absurdities in the competing notions that "handicapped children need to be educated with their nonhandicapped peers in the least restrictive environment," (the language of P.L. 94-142, *The Education of All Handicapped Children Act*, passed in 1975) and fervent pleas for more attention to "the most unserved minority group in our country—gifted children" (the *Marland Report on Gifted Education*, published in 1972).

I wondered about who these gifted children were and why some thought they needed and deserved a different kind of education. I wondered about accuracy in labeling and the effects of the gifted label on children, parents, and teachers. I wrestled with reconciling a vision of "inclusive schools," rich with diversity and cooperation, with a movement toward segregation and isolation. The seeds of my skepticism and discontent had been planted.

In 1979 I became a mother and began to interface with the educational community in a whole new set of ways. When my daughter Dalia was almost three, I began searching for preschool programs for her. I visited over a dozen private and parochial preschools in search of a good educational setting for her. I had almost decided to place her in a three-mornings-a-week program at the local Jewish Community Center when a chance meeting in the park changed my course. While our daughters played on the swings together, a mother I had met in a "Mom-and-Me" class told me that next year *her* daughter was going to a new preschool for "gifted children," and perhaps I should explore that possibility for Dalia. I was hesitant. Such early labeling of children bothered me, and I did not really feel comfortable with the idea of a "segregated" program, but I was also intrigued. Certainly, motherly pride told me, my daughter was as "smart" as *her* daughter; perhaps I should look into it.

Because the gifted preschool program was part of the local school district, the next step in my exploration involved having my daughter take an individual IQ test from the district school psychologist to determine her "eligibility." Dalia's score on the test made her eligible for the program, and I met with the teachers in the new program. I was pleased with their focus on student involvement, creativity, parent involvement, and letting the children pursue individual interests. At the time I thought that the program sounded like it would be a great one for *all* children, but it certainly sounded excellent for Dalia. One of the determining factors was that while the Jewish Community Center preschool in which she was already enrolled for fall was only three mornings a week (they insisted that this was all three year olds could handle), the Pegasus program was five mornings; since I was expecting a new baby shortly and returning to work in the fall, this seemed like a strong factor in favor of the Pegasus program. But, to be honest, the possibility of having my child in the "gifted program" was heady stuff, enticing, difficult to reject. I had never thought of my child as "gifted." She was smart, certainly, and lovable, but I had always assumed that "gifted" was

something really different, truly exceptional. And so, Dalia was enrolled in the Pegasus preschool where she went for two years.

I share this particular history, not to brag about my “gifted child,” but because the process of having Dalia admitted to and enrolled in such a program gave me tremendous insight into the appeal of such programs, the ways in which they are advertised and “sold,” and the effects of such programs on children and parents, both those who are in the program and those who are not (including those rejected from such programs). Living in various places in which there have been or haven’t been gifted programs and in places where I was told my children were eligible or ineligible and having to decide about what it meant to accept or reject such opportunities for my children has helped me to understand the dilemma parents face and the ways in which they often feel caught.

I also share this history because part of the silencing that goes on about gifted education relates to notions of who is in, who is out, and who has a right to speak. Parents with children in a gifted program are often hesitant to criticize or find fault lest they lose the advantages their child is provided; parents with children not in the program often hesitate to speak, convinced they will be identified as “jealous” or exhibiting “sour grapes.” And so I share my own background as a way of owning my own voice and of not hiding behind professional jargon and rationality—ways of thinking and talking that tell others that they have no right to speak because they don’t understand, they are, in fact, “too stupid” (or not gifted enough) to be capable of an informed opinion.

I share my own background because in spite of my apparent credibility in this area (as an educator and as a parent), writing this book has been difficult for me. I have spent hundreds of hours pacing, rearranging my pencils on the desk, turning the computer on and off, and finding errands that I had to run. Part of the paralysis could be attributed to “writer’s block” but only a small part. During the same period that I was not writing this book, I was writing lots of other things—book chapters on diversity and inclusive classrooms, articles on cooperative learning and prejudice reduction—so something else was standing in my way. Something kept me from finding the time, energy, and inclination to write about my analysis and critique of gifted education in America.

Over time, I began to understand my own voicelessness, my difficulties in finding a voice for this book, my own disinclination to write what I knew and what I wanted to say. And that burgeoning