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Pink or Paris? Giftedness in popular culture

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Abstract*

In gifted education there is a significant body of research that focuses on the socialising influences that enable gifted children to translate their potential into performance. However, there is very little research that has examined what role popular culture plays in the development of talent. This paper reports on the first phase of a research project investigating the impact of popular culture on gifted children and youth. It involves an analysis of the images of giftedness presented in a selection of popular culture texts. This analysis reveals that gifted young people are often stereotypically portrayed as female, studious, non-sporting and not popular. Further, gifted programs are portrayed as undesirable settings peopled with obnoxious characters. The implications for gifted girls, in particular, need attention.

Introduction

Why giftedness in popular culture? As I was thinking about an appropriate topic for the Eminent Australian address, I realised that popular culture was an area that hadn't been talked about very often in gifted education circles. My initial attempts to find literature on the topic confirmed that this is an under-researched area. From those humble, almost accidental, beginnings has sprung a productive area for investigation.

But I will begin by telling a story that highlights why it is important for educators to consider how popular culture impacts on young people generally, and gifted young people in particular. I live and work in Wollongong, which is a large city in New South Wales. It is not as large as the capital city, Sydney, but it is very close in proximity to Sydney and it has a large population. A number of years ago, a few schools in Wollongong decided to pool their resources and hire an itinerant teacher who would focus on gifted education. That person's role was to work with the teachers in the five schools to improve their skills in differentiating for gifted students. She also provided programs for the gifted students in those schools. One of the activities

that this itinerant teacher organised was to have day-long workshops that were run by professional people in different fields, one of which involved bringing in an author to work with gifted students. Each of the five schools nominated students that they thought were gifted in the creative writing realm and sent them off to this workshop.

An evaluation of the workshop included a question that asked "What was the most important thing that you found out today in this workshop?" In response, one 11-year-old boy had written, "The best thing I found out today was that I'm not the only boy who likes to write." This was not a remote country area where the opportunities to mix with others of like mind may be rare. This was a large city; this was a large primary school; and within that large population, there was a gifted boy who felt alone, and who had never realised that there were other people similar to him. This raises a number of questions: How do young gifted people find friendships? How are attitudes and stereotypes regarding giftedness shaped? It would seem that popular culture plays a critical role in this.

Gifted role models?

The title of this paper is "Pink or Paris?", chosen not for its alliterative qualities but because these two women's profiles ensure that they are potential role models to today's young people. However, their messages are quite different. Paris Hilton represents the empty-headed quintessential blonde, who has been widely quoted with such statements as "I don't really think, I just walk". Pink, by contrast, sends a more positive message with her song "I don't wanna be a stupid girl" in which she criticises her contemporaries:

*Go to Fred Segal, you'll find them there
Laughing loud so all the little people stare
Looking for a daddy to pay for the
champagne
(Drop a name)
What happened to the dreams of a girl
president
She's dancing in the video next to 50 Cent
They travel in packs of two or three
With their itzy bitsy doggies and their
teeny-weeny tees*

* This paper is based on the Eminent Australian address delivered by the author at the AAEGT conference in Fremantle, September 2006.

*Where, oh where, have the smart people gone?
Oh where, oh where could they be?*

*Maybe if I act like that, that guy will call me back
Porno Paparazzi girl, I don't wanna be a stupid girl
Baby if I act like that, flipping my blond hair back
Push up my bra like that, I don't wanna be a stupid girl.*

From the perspective of gifted education, Pink's message is clearly preferable.

The development of talent

Every state in Australia and many countries throughout the world have accepted Gagné's (2000) definition of giftedness and talent. In this model, giftedness is defined as potential and talent is the performance or realisation of that potential. Between giftedness and talent is a range of catalysts that facilitate the translation of potential into performance. One set of catalysts relates to the socialising influences on gifted children and youth. An analysis of the gifted literature reveals a sound body of research that tells us how these socialising influences affect the development of talent. For example, we know about the kinds of things that parents and families can do to promote the development of talent in their gifted youngsters.

We also know about the role that teachers and schools can play in this talent development. For example, one of my lines of research was to look at the characteristics of effective teachers of gifted students from the point of view of the students themselves (see, for example, Vialle & Quigley, 2002; Vialle & Tischler, 2005). The students in my research attended academically selective high schools and were asked to describe an effective teacher, a good teacher—and they differentiated between those two—and teachers who were not effective. Among the recurring themes in that research was the very strong belief from the students that there was some kind of conspiracy in terms of the selection of teachers going into selective high schools. They would say things like "We had to sit a test to get into this school, why don't the teachers?" or "I reckon the government just thinks they're gifted kids so we'll just put any old teacher there."

On a more positive note, gifted students highlighted several qualities of effective teachers. For example, one of the US students responded, "A good teacher is not only an expert

at his or her subject but is also passionate about teaching" (Vialle & Tischler, 2005). The notion of passion was the most dominant characteristic cited by the students across the three countries researched. There were two components to the students' descriptions. First, they used the term in relation to teachers' passion for the subject disciplines that they were teaching. Second, the students used the term to refer to teachers' passion for teaching, generally, and for teaching bright students. One Austrian student commented: "The teacher could be an expert but if he or she doesn't like to teach, students would most likely not want to learn because they can see if a teacher likes his or her job or not." The Australian students expressed this sentiment more bluntly: "A teacher that actually has a background in the subject and maybe even likes the subject."

Nevertheless, the Australian students were able to name teachers they thought exemplified effective teaching. The research aimed to differentiate whether the teacher's personal characteristics or their intellectual characteristics were more important to gifted students. What we found was that although the students' questionnaire responses tended more towards the personality end of the spectrum than the intellectual end, when we analysed the qualitative data, we found that this distinction was irrelevant. The personality of the teacher was important but the intellectual qualities and attitudes that the teacher brought with them, along with their teaching strategies, were inextricably woven together. For example, in a focus group interview, the Australian students described a mathematics teacher thus: "Mr D. was just interested in everything" That was the first thing that was said. His own intellectual interests are being acknowledged by the students. They continued: "He was a maths teacher with a [large] dictionary in his room." Again, that's an acknowledgement of the teacher's wide intellectual interests—he teaches mathematics so he doesn't really need a dictionary, but he's got a dictionary on his desk. "He relates everything." In other words, he's making it meaningful, he's embedding it in things that are useful and make sense to them. "He makes it so easy to understand. He's really entertaining. He teaches the topic then he'd take it a step further, a bit more challenging." From the students' perspectives, then, Mr D is the whole package—somebody who combines the right blend of personal and intellectual qualities with a range of effective teaching strategies.

Researching giftedness and popular culture

In summary, then, teachers and schools along with parents and families have a huge part to play in the realisation of gifted students' potential. By contrast, in terms of research, we know virtually nothing about the impact that media and popular culture have on gifted students. There is a lot of research on popular culture and media generally, including their impact on young people. However, in terms of how these messages are received and interpreted by gifted students, there is very little research.

The first step in investigating this topic entailed thinking about how young people are being shaped by the media generally. Giroux (1998) commented: "It's useful for educators to comprehend the changing conditions of identity formation within electronically mediated cultures and how they are producing a new generation of youth" (cited by Paule, 2006). Educators need to recognise that today's students have grown up with sophisticated electronic technologies and so the way that they think and learn is going to be somewhat different from those of us who represent older generations.

In order to understand the impact of popular culture on gifted students, the first task was to analyse the images of giftedness in popular culture texts. Using recommendations from gifted young people, I selected three texts for analysis: the television series, *The Simpsons*; the television series, *Daria*; and, the books and films in the Harry Potter series.

The Simpsons is an interesting phenomenon. My personal antipathy to the series stems from experience. I was in the United States completing my doctorate when *The Simpsons* was first aired on television. Given my original doctoral research focussed on gifted underachievers, I admit to taking offence to the Bart Simpson "Underachiever and proud of it, man" t-shirts that proliferated at the time. Nevertheless, the show is watched by highly intelligent young people who admire its intertextuality and witty satire. My continued objection to the show is based on my belief that a significant percentage of people who watch the show do not understand these deeper layers and instead respond to the superficial images it portrays.

The Simpsons has been running since 1988 and is now the longest-running television sitcoms of all time. It is played in sixty different countries around the world; it has won at least fifteen Emmy awards and a Peabody; Time magazine

voted it the best television program in the history of television. The original seasons of the show were written by Harvard graduates, most of whom were highly gifted in mathematics so the early episodes have lots of subtle mathematical references.

The primary characters in the show include the patriarch, Homer Simpson, who is a blue collar worker. Marge Simpson is the mother and, in many respects, the moral compass of the family. Their son, Bart, is the "underachiever and proud of it" and is the one who promotes an image of being mischievous and not being very bright. The daughter, Lisa, is the gifted member of the family and she is often depicted carrying books or playing her saxophone. She's a well-rounded gifted girl who has strong ethical principles, which come through in her conscious decision to be a vegetarian. There are other gifted characters such as Martin Prince, the nerdy boy in Bart's class. However, in terms of the Simpson family, Lisa stands out for her giftedness. Her stance is evident in the following excerpt:

Millions of girls will grow up thinking that this is the right way to act, that they can never be more than vacuous ninnies whose only goal is to look pretty, land a rich husband, and spend all day on the phone with their equally vacuous friends talking about how damn terrific it is to look pretty and have a rich husband. (The Simpsons: Lisa v Malibu Stacey, 5.14)

There are some hints in the early programs that Maggie might be gifted as well even though she spends all her time sucking on a dummy. For example, in one episode she arranges her building blocks to spell out "E=MCSQ" (*The Simpsons: Bart the Genius, 1.2*).

The episode of *The Simpsons* which I will use to illustrate how giftedness is portrayed is the second episode from the first series, entitled *Bart the Genius*. The show opens with the family engaged in a game of Scrabble designed to give Bart practice for the aptitude test he has to sit at school the following day. In the opening scene, Lisa stands out with her knowledge of Freud's 'id', contrasting sharply with her father's complaint about his "lousy letters" which are clearly arranged on the rack as 'oxidize'; he finally plays 'do'. Bart's mischievous side is revealed when he brings the game to a premature close by playing the non-word 'kwyjibo'.

The next day, Bart typically is doing everything except that which he is supposed to be doing while the test is being administered. While the teacher is distracted, Bart swaps his papers with

Martin Prince. As a result of this sleight of hand, Bart is identified as a gifted child. There follows a scene in which the district psychiatrist, armed with various measuring devices, is informing Bart's parents and principal that Bart has an IQ of 216 and that his atrocious behaviour at school is motivated by boredom and the lack of intellectual challenge. At the end of the scene, Homer asks the psychiatrist where genius comes from. The psychiatrist indicates that both nature and nurture play a role, but after looking at Homer, concludes that "sometimes it's a complete mystery." The scene clearly satirises the measurement of intelligence and standardised testing, with the psychiatrist's behaviours eerily reminiscent of a phrenologist measuring Bart's head. Interestingly, too, now that Bart has been given the label of a genius, his behaviours are immediately reinterpreted.

The psychiatrist recommends that Bart transfer to a gifted school and the ensuing scenes focus on what is portrayed as a negative environment. The teacher invites students to "discover their desks"; there is a great deal of freedom for the students; the students, including Bart, are dressed in shirts and ties; and, chess boards, "high-brow" literature and experimental hamsters fill the environment. The gifted children, the teacher and the classroom are presented with a preciousness that draws a negative stereotype of giftedness and gifted programs.

The second text is the animated television series, *Daria*, a spin-off based on the character of Daria Morgendorffer, a highly gifted and sharply cynical young woman, from an earlier series, *Beavis and Butt-head*. *Daria* aims to satirise popular culture and the obsession with self-image, fashion and so on with much of the satire coming through the protagonist, Daria. Daria's sister, Quinn, represents the conformist fashion-obsessed individual, born to shop and driven by the need for popularity. The favouring of sporting achievements over academic or artistic accomplishments is a recurring theme throughout the series. Art is marginalised in the same way that intellect is marginalised in this environment. In essence, the series critiques the general conformist mentality of Daria's contemporaries.

An early episode in the series deals with giftedness and gifted schools (*Daria: Gifted*, 2.08). The show opens on the regular classroom with the teacher announcing that two students have been selected to visit a gifted school. The students are Daria and an African-American girl, Jodie.

In the *Beavis and Butt-head* series, Daria was portrayed as a very bright cynical kind of kid, who derives amusement from the imbecilic Beavis and Butt-head. In the spin-off series, Daria has moved town and is new in the local high school. Interestingly, Daria has now "slimmed down"; in *Beavis and Butt-head* she was more rounded. So in her own series, she is drawn with a physical sharpness that echoes her cynicism. It is important to note, too, that she is depicted with dark hair and glasses.

Jane Lane is Daria's best friend in this new school and she is also different from the other students, being artistically gifted. At the announcement that Daria and Jodie are to visit the gifted school, Jane quips, "I knew those straight Cs in Maths would pay off some day!" She thereby establishes that going to a gifted school is not desirable. Daria's parents are highly in favour of her attending but Daria herself is not excited by the prospect, stating "I'm tired of being at a school where the kids just think they're cooler than me, I want to go to one where they think they're smarter than me also."

The students that Daria and Jodie meet at the gifted school are portrayed as arrogant and obnoxious with Daria observing that they may be "intellectually gifted but morally bankrupt". In another scene, she cynically states, "Thank God for standardised tests. Otherwise you'd never know who your real friends are."

This episode also contains a poignant scene between Daria and Jodie where the latter describes what it is like to be gifted, black and female in a white suburban school. Both girls subsequently make the decision to stay at their regular school and not to transfer to the gifted school:

Jodie - So, Lawndale or Grove Hills?
Daria - I'm sticking with Lawndale. If I came here, I'd end up poisoning the sloppy joe mix.
Jodie - Yeah, you're right. I'm pushed to the breaking point being Miss Model Student at Lawndale. A year here might kill me. (Daria: Gifted, 2.08)

Throughout the series, Daria has no fear about showing her intelligence, is very critical of other people and cynical in her approach. She consciously conceals her beauty behind a sharp tongue, big glasses and shapeless clothing. There are indications that Daria's sister, Quinn, is also gifted but she focusses on being a social butterfly, wearing all the right clothes and "hanging out" with the right crowd. She chooses to hide her giftedness for the sake of popularity. The different approaches taken by Daria and

Quinn parallel Gross's (1989) observation of the forced-choice dilemma, that some gifted students face, between meeting their intellectual needs or "dumbing down" in order to fit in and to have friends.

Daria also raises the question of the respective roles of nature and nurture in giftedness. In the *Beavis and Butt-head* series, Daria stated, "And so we raise an age-old question: Idiocy - Genetic or Environmental? I think our examples of Beavis and Butt-head indicate that both are contributing factors" (*Beavis and Butt-head: Scientific Stuff*, 2. 14).

The third text for analysis is the Harry Potter series, and I focus on the key characters of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. They both may be considered gifted, albeit in different ways. Harry Potter's giftedness, however, may be questioned by some. As the central character and the only one who has been able to survive an attack by Voldemort, he has been set up as being special in some way. He is clearly gifted in the sport of Quidditch, being selected in the team at a much younger age than the norm. However, throughout the book series, it is clear that he is not metacognitively aware and that calls into question his academic giftedness.

Harry fits many of the stereotypes about boys with his focus on sporting achievement and his non-studious approach to his schoolwork. He and Ron Weasley are always completing their homework at the last minute or rushing it; they've always got more interesting things they need to be doing rather than studying.

Hermione Granger, by contrast, is unequivocally gifted but generally unpopular in the early books, although this shifts later in the series. Much of this stems from her enthusiasm in class and her studiousness. Even some teachers are critical of her knowledge and ability, although others encourage her — for example, she is given a time-turner that allows her to be in two classes simultaneously. Hermione, then, is depicted as a smart young woman whose two best friends even mock her studiousness. Hermione is also isolated or marginalised by the fact that she does not come from a wizarding family, a cultural difference that may be read as part of her motivation to do well.

The contrast between Harry and Hermione is reminiscent of the research around attitudes towards gifted adolescents, which demonstrated that the preferred adolescent was average, non-studious and athletic while the least popular was brilliant, studious and non-athletic (Carrington & Bailey, 2000; Cramond & Martin, 1987; Tannenbaum, 1962). The question that arises

here is whether the author, J. K. Rowling, is highlighting an existing stereotype and how much popular culture texts such as the Harry Potter series reinforce those stereotypes.

Smartgirls.tv

Michele Paule from Oxford Brookes University in the United Kingdom has been researching gifted girls and their reactions to the images presented in popular television series. Her analyses of television shows and responses from focus groups of gifted girls resulted in a television lexicon on giftedness (Paule, 2006). The terms for anybody who is gifted are largely negative: freak, geek, egghead, nerd, rain man, ghost world or brain. Stigmatised activities in television shows are maths, science, chess, debate, art, band or after-school classes. The things that are good for girls to do include grooming themselves or each other and doing each other's hair, cheerleading, writing, fashion design, shopping, "hanging", dating. On the website, www.smartgirls.tv, Paule poses questions such as "Who are TV's smartest girls? What do smart girls watch? Do smart girls see themselves on TV or do they think the small screen is short on role models?" One of the surprising outcomes of that research is that a lot of the smart girls read giftedness into some of the characters that we would not necessarily see as being intelligent. For example, they attributed giftedness of different types to the three female characters from *Friends*.

The gendered image of giftedness

A recurring theme in popular culture is that giftedness is frequently "dumbed down" in order to achieve popularity or romantic success. The following excerpt from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* illustrates this clearly:

Xander: I'm just worried it may hurt my standing as campus stud when people find out I'm dating a brain.

Cordelia: Please, I do have some experience in covering these things up. (BtVS: Lovers' Walk, 3.8)

Paule (2006) concludes that there is an element of delayed gratification for gifted girls with negative portrayals of gifted adolescents counter-balanced by more positive portrayals of gifted women in television. She observed that gifted girls may have to get through adolescence with the lack of positive role models on television but this ceases to be a problem with gifted women portrayed in shows such as *CSI* and *NCIS*.

The case of Arianne Caoili

The treatment of Arianne Caoili on a recent television program illustrates another way that giftedness is not well understood in popular media. Caoili is one of the top chess players, not only in Australia but also in the world. She's an extremely bright young woman with wide-ranging interests across intellectual pursuits and avocations such as music, modelling and dance. In an interview published online, Caoili stated, "I want to be known as the Sharapova of chess, rather than the Kournikova - known for both my brains and beauty" (O'Fee & Keene, 2006).

However, the 18-year-old Caoili shot to prominence in the media in 2006, not for her chess achievements but because two male chess players came to physical blows over her at a Turin night-club following the World Chess Olympiad in Italy. Subsequently, she was selected to appear in *Dancing with the Stars*, a program that links celebrities (such as Caoili) with professional dancers and then eliminates the lowest-rated partnerships on a weekly basis. Caoili made it through to the final, at which point one of the judges attempted to derail her by accusing her of lying about her previous dance experience. Interestingly, they didn't do the same thing to another contestant Jamie Durie, who had actually made a living from being a dancer. The judge's actions, too, revealed a distinct lack of understanding of the nature of giftedness and, particularly, how it is possible for highly gifted people to learn some skills very quickly.

Other media representations

The stereotypical treatment of girls versus boys is also evident in other media such as the comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes. Again there is the juxtaposition of an underachieving bright, creative boy who creates havoc in the classroom and the home. Contrasting with Calvin is the teacher-pleasing girl, Susie, who is a hard-working, high-achieving student. The stereotypes discussed earlier are strongly evident in this series.

Finally, the print media also distorts information in favour of the attention-grabbing headline. For example, in the Sydney Morning Herald a report on gifted students' music preferences was reported with this headline, "Metalheads not meatheads but scholars" (23rd March, 2007). The article reports on research conducted in the United Kingdom (Cadwallader, 2007). The newspaper report draws attention to the stereotype that associates heavy metal music with underachievement, disenchantment at

school, poor academic potential, and so on. Against this stereotype, there is the "surprising revelation" that gifted youth also enjoy heavy metal.

However, the original research (Cadwallader, 2007) is not as dramatic as the headline would predict. The research was conducted with 1057 students aged between eleven and nineteen, who were asked to select their top five styles of music from a list of nine musical genres. Only six percent of those 1057 students ranked heavy metal as their number one choice, while a third of the students put it in their top five. However, this is not really surprising given that there were only nine from which to choose.

The substance of the newspaper article was taken from online interviews of 19 students, 17 of whom reported a preference for heavy metal. These students were reported as having lower self-esteem and poorer adjustment in school and stated that they used heavy metal as their escape from stress, anger and frustration. The sample size is far too small to warrant the headline that this report received.

Conclusion

Based on my analysis of popular culture texts, the research findings of Paule (2006), and reflections on other media examples, some consistent themes emerge. The gifted person tends to be portrayed as female, studious, not cool, and may dumb down to achieve friendship, popularity or romantic success. Gifted programs are depicted as specialised settings, catering to very privileged students in terms of social status. Daria's mother, for example, proclaims that going to a gifted school is Daria's opportunity to get ahead through the social contacts she could forge. Daria's response was: "...why study when you can network." The gifted schools depicted in *The Simpsons* and *Daria* are filled with obnoxious characters that make these undesirable locations. Another recurring theme is that sport is highly regarded and leads to social acceptance. Finally, there seems to be some delayed gratification for gifted girls between adolescence and adulthood.

Each of these themes resonates with research regarding attitudes towards gifted students. Irrespective of whether popular culture reflects society's beliefs or shapes or reinforces those beliefs, gifted educators need to understand how gifted students respond to these messages. This is an area greatly need of continued investigation.

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projects include an international study of effective teachers of the gifted, a longitudinal study of adolescent academic and social-emotional outcomes, the development of expertise in competitive Scrabble players, popular culture and giftedness, and the development of spiritual understanding in children. In 2006 Wilma was awarded the Eminent Australian award by the AAEGT and in 2007 will take on the role of AAEGT President.

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