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Justin's Genius

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By James R. Delisle

Giftedness has long been an enigma. In the early part of the 20th century, when giftedness was equated with genius, an IQ of 140 was all that was required to earn the label of "gifted." Then, as education and psychology became more enmeshed with equity and political correctness, the notion of giftedness grew fuzzier. First, Joseph Renzulli, whose work helped propel

When giftedness is ignored or inflated, the results can be equally tragic.

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the field of gifted child education in the 1970s, concluded that a high IQ and giftedness were related, but separate, entities. Then, in 1983, Howard Gardner proposed that people were "multiply intelligent" in so many ways that the term "gifted" seemed to become anachronistic, an artifact of a time when it was still OK to believe in the merits of the bell curve. It's no wonder that minds reeled: Giftedness, that long-held concept of high intelligence as measured by an IQ score, was on the chopping block as a psychological construct. Now, everyone was gifted at something, it seemed, and no one was more intelligent than anyone else—we just showed our smarts in different ways.

And then along came Justin Chapman. At the age of 6, Justin was tested as having an IQ of 298—the highest ever recorded—and a math SAT score of 800. He spoke at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at age 5, interviewed Gov. George E. Pataki of New York on age discrimination at age 7 ("Shouldn't I be able to vote because of my abilities, not how long I've been alive?"), and mesmerized a nation with his uncanny ability to understand complex concepts that even adults found difficult to master. Some called him an angel (as in the biblical sense), a messenger from another time to deliver us from evil. Others were simply awed by Justin's genius.

Me? I knew Justin only as a little boy.

Justin entered my life, albeit briefly, two years ago. I spent a weekend with him, his mom, and lots of other gifted children and their parents. Justin spoke little, and participated in our group activities reluctantly, yet when he warmed up to me and to his surroundings, Justin "talked the talk" of a gifted child. A little

boy, yes, but a very bright one, without question.

I saw Justin again about one year later, and he seemed more comfortable wearing his intellectual skin. Following my keynote address—Justin had listened intently—he ran to me, unashamedly and unabashedly, and hugged my neck for so long a time that I let go first. He thanked me for talking about the emotional parts of growing up gifted, and the tears he shed were real, filled with salt and joy and recognition. I was talking about him, and he knew it.

I began to wonder about the newfangled views of intelligence, and how their two main proponents would react to the fragility of this genius child, Justin Chapman.

Less than a year later—November 2001—I saw Justin one more time. He didn't acknowledge me; indeed, he didn't recognize me. This ever-fragile young man, as physically frail as a hickory limb in a windstorm, had hit bottom. Perhaps he was tired, maybe he felt stressed, but this Justin was not the boy I had hugged months earlier. Shortly thereafter, Justin's

whole world began to collapse. Following extensive news coverage of this 8-year-old wunderkind, Justin's mother admitted that she had given her son answers to the IQ test on which he scored 298 (a score many psychologists found difficult to accept even before this turmoil). Justin's perfect SAT score in math? It belonged to a neighbor's son, and Justin's mom merely replaced that name with Justin's. And the college course Justin supposedly enrolled in at age 5? The professor of that course remembers no such case (... and who could forget it?), adding more suspicion to the veracity of Elizabeth Chapman's tale of her son's brilliance. The emperor was laid bare, at least

to the untrained eye.

It was at this point that I began to wonder about the newfangled views of intelligence, and how their two main proponents would react to the fragility of this genius child, Justin Chapman. Might Howard Gardner say that Justin's linguistic panache had gone awry? Would Joseph Renzulli contend that Justin's "task commitment" was diminished? Might both men assert that the label of "genius child" was Justin's ultimate downfall? However they would choose to respond, my deepest hope is this: that neither Mr. Gardner or Mr. Renzulli would use this sad case of Justin Chapman to convince others of the validity of their theories of intelligence and giftedness for, truth be told, Justin does more to refute their work than bolster it.

My personal views? Well, despite knowing Justin and his mother, I confess that I have no clear answer to the question of the strength of his intellectual prowess. I do know that he was bright enough to be able to hold conversations with the likes of psychologists, educators, physicists, and a New York governor, and this is seldom the case with most 7- year-olds I've met. What I also know is that the life of Justin Chapman sends messages to all of us about the lives of gifted children; messages that we ignore at our peril, both as educators and parents. Even more important, we ignore Justin's cries for help and attention at a personal peril to him and others like him, who still differ enough from children of average intellectual abilities to require a different set of lenses with which to be examined and understood. Lenses like these:

- *Giftedness exists in some children, and it does not exist in others.*

Despite the naive assumption that the multiple-intelligences theory spreads the wealth of genius among many, giftedness is still as rare a commodity as is mental retardation. Howard Gardner should know better than to call his **kinesthetic**, **linguistic**, **naturalistic**, and **ad nauseum** abilities

"intelligences." They are "talents," pure and simple, and they may or may not **relate to general intellectual functioning**. His ever-growing list of human attributes is no more a list of intelligences than a cubic zirconium is a diamond. Flash does not equal substance.

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- *Giftedness is more a matter of who you are than what talents you possess.*

Gifted children think and feel more deeply than others their age. They may or may not manifest their high intelligence in advanced school performance or exceptional productivity, but they do show their adeptness in other ways—by the questions they ask, the humor they understand, the inequities they uncover, and the logical inconsistencies that are vividly real to them. Case in point: How would you respond to the 5-year-old girl who condemned the logic of the death penalty this way: "It makes no sense **to kill someone for what they did wrong**, because when you die, you go to a better place. Wouldn't it make more sense to put a murderer in a yard surrounded by an electric fence? Then, for the rest of his life, whenever he touched that fence, he'd be reminded of what he did that was

bad." What this young child expresses is a vivid understanding of adult concepts at an age when most children still think that Barney is real. Try to categorize that observation into some multiply-intelligent category.

- *Giftedness does not imply emotional maturity, nor is it angelic in nature.*

The most gifted 7-year-old in the world still feels shallow if no one will sit next to her at lunch, and even the brightest 11-year-old will wince if picked last for a recess kickball team, even if he can rationalize that it matters little in life's bigger picture. They hurt, they bleed, they cry; and when gifted children are dismissed as being just like everyone else, they are bright enough to know this is wrong, but fragile enough to hurt from this insult to their intelligence.

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Conversely, gifted children must not be given the added burden of having to change the world because they were sent on some psychic mission to improve our global relations. To call them "Millennium Children" or "Indigo Children," or to superimpose upon them angelic or otherworldly qualities is both a sham and a shame. They are children—very bright children—and they can be taken advantage of by a society in desperate need of repair. This chicanery **must not be allowed** to take place.

- *IQ tests still matter.*

Justin's IQ of 298 may be inflated, the result of being given the answers for the test by an intellectual stage mother, but who

can refute that it takes a pretty sharp mind to remember all the answers to the Stanford-Binet? Individual IQ tests, more than any other method yet devised by psychologists, do tell us which children excel in relation to their agemates. Denying this reality, as espoused by Mr. Renzulli and Mr. Gardner, is the result of conjecture and wishful thinking, not research or clinical evidence.

- *Justin still hurts.*

Underneath all the arguments about what giftedness is, who qualifies for it, and how we should serve it in our schools, there remains a personal and important reality: Justin Chapman, and others like him, have always existed and always will. Stating that Justin is smarter than most kids his age does not imply that he is any better, intrinsically, than any other human being who has ever graced this Earth. What it does imply, though, is that when giftedness is ignored or inflated, the results can be equally tragic. Justin, and other gifted children, want nothing more than to be accepted as the intelligent beings that they are. Special treatment? No. Treatment commensurate with abilities? Yes.

I've studied, counseled, taught, raised, and admired gifted children for 25 years. To tell me they do not exist, or that their intellectual and emotional needs aren't unique, or that "everyone is gifted at something" is more than a denial of reality, it is a decision of disrespect. And if we are to heed any warning from the ill-treatment of Justin Chapman by the supposed good intentions of others, it is the need to respect gifted children, first and foremost, as children. But if we choose to ignore the impact of intellectual acumen on the lives they lead now and will lead as adults, we are being naive, duplicitous, and ignorant.

Justin, and other gifted children, deserve better. They deserve to be acknowledged as real.

James R. Delisle is a professor of education at Kent State University in Ohio and a part-time teacher of gifted children, grades 6-8, in the Twinsburg, Ohio, city schools. His most recent books are When Gifted Children Don't Have All the Answers (with Judy Galbraith), published by Free Spirit Publishing, and Barefoot Irreverence: A Guide to Critical Issues in Gifted Child Education (Prufrock Press).

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