

## THE CONCEPT OF GIFTEDNESS IN A FIRST NATIONS CULTURAL CONTEXT

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Educators are continually discovering that techniques and strategies long considered “reliable” may need to be revamped in light of new cultural data. Required shifts in approach are not necessarily accomplished quickly, however, and for a variety of reasons. Some educators, like other practitioners in the human domain, simply resist change as matter of course. Others, adopting a more “scientific” approach, may want to wait and see what the research says. Still others, unsure of what the nature of their new role will be may simply hesitate to change their ways. A final line of rationale may be that past practices constitute a sufficient basis on which to meet any new challenges that may arise from a specific cultural context.

Among the “old reliables” of the established educational process is the notion of giftedness, which for many probably constitutes one of the more firmly supported concepts of pedagogical practice. As this paper will show, however, some surprises are in store for those care to investigate the meaning of that concept in a First Nations context.

To accomplish this goal, the following discussion is based on a search of relevant literature and a series of interviews, first, with 20 university students (some of whom are teachers) with Blackfoot Indian background who were registered in the Faculty of Education at The University of Calgary, and second, with 14 non-Native students at the U of C also enrolled in the Faculty of Education.

Particularly useful literature sources included the Journal of Canadian Native Education (a joint publication of the University of Alberta and The University of British Columbia), and the Journal of American Indian Education (published by Arizona State University). Results of the student interviews will be entwined in the discussion with parallels drawn with the literature emanating from other tribal contexts.

## Defining Giftedness

The Dictionary of Education (Good, 1959) defines giftedness in an individual as featuring high intellectual ability with a mental age well above the norm, that is, a high IQ. A more intricately elaborated definition (Torrance, 1981) specifies a series of six types of giftedness as meriting special attention with the underlying assumption that gifted individuals are generally more educable. The six types include: (i) general intellectual ability, (ii) specific academic aptitude, (iii) creative and productive thinking, (iv) leadership ability, (v) visual and performing arts, and (vi) psychomotor abilities.

To make things more complicated (except to a psychologist, perhaps), a variety of variables auger in the scenario of giftedness including aptitude, creativity, and personality/motivation (Lamkins, 1977). Creativity differs from giftedness in that it is more commonly identified as the ability to produce ideas that are both novel and valuable. In the Aboriginal context, creativity is often functional and utilitarian in nature, and grows out of the basic skills associated with the maintenance of shelter, food and warmth. Once the individual has learned these skills from an elder he or she may decide to "refine" them (Irwin and Reynolds, 1992). Aptitude in visual and performing arts is also a high indicator of giftedness.

The notion of "production" in educational circles is usually taken to imply associative, ideational fluency, originality, adaptive, spontaneous flexibility, and the ability to make logical evaluations. In terms of intelligence per se, it has also been observed that a gifted individual's capacity for "goal-directed adaptive behavior" is enhanced--behavior that successfully meets challenges and achieves its aims (Sternberg and Salter, 1982, 3).

Sloat (1990) differentiates three sectors of giftedness, namely (i) gifted, (ii) talented, and (iii) creative, each featuring several subcategories. The breakdown is as follows: (i) creative (product-oriented), (ii) gifted-creative (product and process-oriented), (iii) creative-talented (product-audience-oriented), and, if you mix them altogether, (iv) gifted-creative-talented is (process-product-performance oriented).

While this kind of model is useful in illustrating the complexity of the concept of giftedness, it is of little assistance in alleviating the challenge of effective teaching that targets maximum student learning. In addition, as LaBatte (1991) points out, it fails to sufficiently emphasize

the category of creative/artistic expression that is an arena in which many First Nations students thrive. Thankfully, some educators, instead of spending an undue amount of time attempting to label the various dimensions of excellence observable in student performance, simply try to teach to the point of need expressed by the child. Tonemah (1991) recommends that in a Native context approaches such as role modeling, self-confidence building, holistic design, cooperative learning and exclusive grouping be emphasized. As Myers (1987) suggests:

In labeling children as “gifted” or “not gifted”, rather than calling attention to their specific abilities, we may be committing a common logical error called reification--regarding an abstract concept, give it a name, and then convince ourselves that such a thing objectively exists in the world. Once we develop the idea of “giftedness” we begin thinking that children are naturally clustered into two well-defined groups, “gifted” and “non-gifted”....It is a concept we have invented to explain why some people perform more effectively than others, especially on cognitive tasks (315).

#### Towards A First Nations Definition

The determination of such characteristics as giftedness and creativity becomes a value-laden process when placed into a cultural context (Irwin and Reynolds, 1992). Definitions of giftedness in a First Nations context, for example, are quite different from those usually utilized by psychologists and educators who primarily function in the institutions of dominant society. Christensen (1991) suggests that all gifts or advanced skills possessed by Indian children go unrecognized as something of worth in the dominant school system. Christensen points out that there are many instances where public educators, including skilled practitioners in testing, sorting and defining student abilities, have not routinely accepted or studied North American Indian children with regard to the cultural differences unique to the various tribal groups.

Traditionally, Aboriginal communities had no need for the exercise of giftedness as we understand it.

In a traditional Native context, no merit is given to distinguishing or highlighting of individuals in terms of value or worth. Thus, the conventional concept of gifted which connotes the possession of superior abilities in comparison to others, is an alien and foreign concept in the traditional Keresan society. In fact, no Keresan

terms exists for gifted. Instead, one finds descriptive terms which prefer to the possession of unique and special abilities and/or talents in specific areas which retain their significance only in the pueblo value system. The possession of one or more of these abilities is not equated with superiority over others or utilized as a basis for exclusive status (Romero, 1994, 41).

Furthermore, traditional First Nations "education" was always highlighted by holistic learning (Pepper and Henry, 1991; Friesen, 1995; 1997; 1999; 2000).

The students learn how concepts affect the entire person, including one's philosophy. Learning the global picture first gives significance to the details that are learned later. This is in contrast to the usual method of teaching in America's public schools wherein details are taught first and the global picture in which the details contribute are realized later (Tonemah, 1991, 7-8).

Cultural teachers in First Nations communities (who are usually grandparents or elders), place a great deal of emphasis on spirituality--not to be confused with forms of organized religion! These teachers stress that each individual human has been designed by the Creator, and each of us has a specific purpose to fulfill on earth (Sterling, 1994). They emphasize that it is the duty of every individual to learn what their unique role is in the scheme of things (Friesen, et. al, 1980).

As Couture (1991) illustrates, Elder sayings can be quite thought-provoking:

Everybody has a song to sing which is no song at all; it is a process of singing, and when you sing, you are where you are.

There are only two things you have to remember about being Indian. One is that everything is alive, and the second is that we are all related.

Its up to you; you have all the answers within you. What is Life but a journey into the Light.... At the center of life is the Light.

There is within me a voice which tells me who I am and where I am (61).

Insights, helpful messages and other forms of encouragement for the fulfillment of the specific role each of us is called on to play can be gleaned from a variety of sources; these potential message-givers have no limit, and may include animal and bird life, natural phenomena and dreams or visions. You never know where you might learn something. Try teaching that kind of thing in a "normal" public school and see how long before the principal calls you into his/her office and suggests a visit with the local psychologist.

In an Aboriginal context, spiritual knowledge ranks on par with or above cultural knowledge. Knowing about sacred traditional ways is a manifestation of giftedness. As Romero (1994) explains:

In a traditional Native context, these unique and special cultural abilities, traits, and talents are recognized as unique abilities, traits and talents only, and are not utilized as a basis for distinction or highlighting one individual over another. The concept of possessing unique and special abilities or talents in specific areas are is meaningful only as they are applied and utilized in a way which benefits others (8).

This concept is paralleled in Blackfoot culture:

In Blackfoot culture "the gifted child" is every child. There is not one who is more important than the other. Each child has his or her own different views and beliefs. The teacher should be looking for their beliefs so they can understand them better. The teacher should respect and not put down their beliefs even when they don't understand or agree with them (Blackfoot Interviewee).

The quotation makes reference to "outside" teachers, non-Natives, who find employment in Native communities. At times, despite their best efforts to hide their surprise, these teachers appear shocked at the cultural behavioral differences they encounter in an Aboriginal setting. First Nations people request that they respect Native ways and try to understand them. It has been a long battle to see any results to his concern, and heeding the thrust of this objective is of fairly recent origin. Much of traditional schooling targeted a First Nations students simply put down Native culture and aimed at assimilating the young. As one Blackfoot teacher suggested:

Giftedness in the Blackfoot culture is usually when a child has some special qualities about himself or herself. If the child is kind and friendly, and has compassion and respect for everybody, especially the elders. This person is usually considered a gifted child. If the child learns early in life to seek advice from the leaders and thinks twice before they do anything they might regret. Usually such a child has wisdom. The elders usually consider this to be a gifted child especially if they speak the Blackfoot language.

Robbins (1991) similarly emphasizes how important it is that teachers try to understand Indian ways and how important it is for Native youth to learn those ways.

First, it is important to maintain, and in many instances, retrieve Tribal ways of thinking about the underlying mystical assumptions about human beings' relation to nature. The connectedness to the land and animals that Indians have always stressed, would not only ensure the survival of the planet if universally accepted, it would also offer a foundation for sanity which people on the whole have lost.... Secondly, gifted and talented Indian students should be encouraged to balance their individuation with family and tribal participation (22-23).

### Characteristics of Giftedness

The telltale signs of giftedness in a Native context are markedly different from those "normally" associated with that characteristic. In a Native context a gifted child may be expected to manifest the following traits:

To be a gifted child in Blackfoot culture they would have to be able to grasp what they are being taught, like in nature know what things mean and relate them without thinking about it and come up with the good thing to do. The person should know their culture and practice it and even pass it on to their friends (Blackfoot Interviewee).

Further:

Across tribal lines, it is clear that the attribute of persuasion

continues to be valued in the daily life of Tribal people. I would cite this characteristics as a gift that ought to be early identified, nurtured, and assisted with special teachers or mentors from Tribal society. Such a gift, if used properly, could not only assist Tribal people, but it could make a real difference in broader society as well. (Christensen, 1991, 12).

And again:

We do not see their talents because we are not looking for them. Our elders recognize them in the student and call it "Naitsit piyankakiwa" translated as "real Siksika knowledge and wisdom." I have seen a lot of students demonstrate their "giftedness in their respect for elders, for each other and for property. Some students show their giftedness through their participation in cultural events --dancing, singing, and drumming (Blackfoot Interviewee).

Hartley (1991, 58-58) points out that in Navaho culture a gifted/ talented child may exhibit a number of specific traits. For example, the child may:

- (1) be humble (not boastful or assertive about one's accomplishments. On a parallel note; The gifted child in Blackfoot culture is a child who is very reserved and would know the answer to a question right away. This does not mean, however, that the child would provide the answer unless he/she would deem in appropriate to respond. For one thing, the child would not give the answer if it might embarrass another student who did not know the answer. The gifted individual would also act more group-oriented than his/her playmates or friends.
- (2) manifest an improved aural/oral memory over visual memory.
- (3) be quiet and reserved. Parenthetically, a Blackfoot interviewee indicated that in their community a gifted child may be mistaken for a lazy or "unwilling to learn" kind of child. This child appears to take the attitude of not wanting to learn. In actuality, the child learns too fast for the average teacher to pick up on it, and he/she may therefore be labelled a troublemaker or shiftless. As the interviewee suggested, giftedness

as it is now defined was traditionally never recognized among the Blackfoot because there were never any special things that really needed learning except things like becoming a medicine man or shaman.

- (4) not be competitive with peers for leadership roles.
- (5) need more concrete situations in which to learn than is conventionally thought to be the case.
- (6) use traditional ways of dealing with personal issues (e.g. sing, using a medicine wheel or other methods unconventional by white middle-class standards).
- (7) not assertively or readily suggest better ways of doing things.
- (8) not readily or openly express feelings.
- (9) value family and religious or spiritual activities as having precedence over school functions.
- (10) not challenge something they know is incorrect.
- 11) prefer to do some work with others but prefer to practice independently.
- 12) not be comfortable with public speaking.
- (13) not ask a lot of questions - just enough to get the necessary information.
- (14) need time to reflect and practice before they produce (57-58).

In Blackfoot culture, the degree of familiarity with the old ways--with culture, custom and tradition is thought to exhibit giftedness or valued behavior. As one Blackfoot teacher described it:

A gifted child in Blackfoot culture should be able to speak the Blackfoot language well. He/she must understand the values, customs, beliefs and traditions of the culture. He/she must

participate in Native religion and the duties that come with it. He/she must be tolerant and knowledgeable--in wisdom.

Another offered this description:

The characteristic of giftedness is speaking the Blackfoot language at home and in public. They hold no shame for speaking it. Also, the child is knowledgeable in Blackfoot culture and history. In other words, he/she is proud to be who they are.

Still another suggested that:

The gifted child must have total awareness of Indigenous culture and in particular Siksika culture. This child must understand and be fluent in our Native language and be knowledgeable of our cultural practices (the ways of the people) and history through being a believer. The traits are having shown patience, tolerance, commitment, contentment and displaying hard work. Giftedness is having all characteristics and being able to do just about anything set before them while gaining an incredible amount of satisfaction from it.

And one more:

A gifted child in Blackfoot culture is one who is rich in his or her culture and language. The characteristics of giftedness are respect, honor, love, and knowledge of tradition and language. A teacher should look for traits of cultural knowledge, Native awareness, kindness to one another and respect for all individuals.

And finally,

A gifted child in Blackfoot culture should be able to speak the Blackfoot language well, understand the values, customs, beliefs, and traditions of the culture. The child must participate in Native religion and the duties that come with it. The child must be tolerant and acknowledge wisdom.

The Blackfoot emphasis on the importance of knowing cultural content is paralleled further south in Pueblo country. Romero (1994) says that

Fundamental values, cognitive and social developmental experiences, and other aspects of Keresan Pueblo culture create cultural notions of giftedness notably different from the mainstream notions of giftedness. This difference between Keresan Pueblo and mainstream notions of giftedness is a reflection of the values and goals of the respective societies and contributes to the under-representation of Native Pueblo learners in New Mexico's gifted programs (36).

The primary need to translate educational concepts (including giftedness) in relevant terms to local communities is based on the educator's concern for maximum student learning. This objective is enhanced when schools work in harmony with community goals and not against them (Pepper and Henry, 1991). As the Aboriginal cultural renaissance begun in the 1960s in First Nations communities continues to gather steam, the demand for relevance will increase. One way to ensure that is to be in tune with community wants, goals, and interpretations. It is well to keep in mind that North American Indian children have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group in the country and current statistics suggest that as many as 50% of them currently enrolled in school may not graduate (Bowker, 1993). Therefore we must be concerned about developing valid ways of identifying specific cultural interpretations of giftedness and talent so students of Indian heritage can become also the beneficiaries of modern education. This approach will ensure a fair and equitable opportunity to all students (Christensen, 1991).

#### Identifying Giftedness

The strong preference in First Nations communities to stress community instead of individualism makes it a very complex matter for the uninitiated to decipher the exact role that the "gifted" individual plays in the community. Charles Ulrey (1991) a teen-aged Ottawa Indian suggests:

Being gifted or talented means, to me, to be just normal. Everyone has a special gift or talent, even if it is not visible. Everyone can contribute in some way to make this a better world (25).

Christensen (1991) is more specific:

All "gifts" or advanced skills possessed by Indian children as

something of worth go unrecognized in the American school system....Tribal people noted as shamans, holy men, or medicine people, are the only persons actually defined or perceived as gifted by Tribal people. Tribal people create norms of behavior within Tribal society that allow for such gifts to be exercised and recognized, but with certain restraints. The gifted people understand their responsibilities for the abilities given them by the Creator. Thus, the person is humble and not termed “gifted” or “special” in mainstream gifted and talented programs (11).

The behavior of a Zia Pueblo woman (Romero, 1994), identified by her peers as being talented or “traditionally gifted” would reflect four domains:

- (i) she possesses cultural knowledge of food preparation including song and prayer (knowledge-ingenuity domain);
- (ii) she is articulate and fluent in her Native language (linguistic domain);
- (iii) she has mastered piki bread-making, and is a noted seamstress (creativity-psychomotor domain); and,
- (iv) she freely gives of her time, knowledge, effort and energy as exemplified by her consistent participation in various tribal activities or functions, her sharing of knowledge, (sharing) her talents to others (affective-heart domain) and teaching (43).

These behaviors are quite simple to identify because they reflect very fundamental everyday virtues performed to a very high level of achievement. A similar expectation is evident in Blackfoot culture: A gifted child in Blackfoot culture is knowledgeable in his/her culture. This child is able to identify all or most of the aspects and values of who and where he/she is from. These children are quite talented in what they do. They also follow the principles of life in the medicine wheel (Blackfoot Interviewee).

Giftedness then, in a First Nations context, then has to do with maximization of cultural knowledge and exemplary parallel behavior. The expectation is that exhibited attitudes and behaviors will parallel and fulfill

traditional expectations--not go beyond them. In fact, going beyond them would be equated with pride or ego-fulfillment, and severe repercussions would occur. Ridicule, teasing and even shunning would be enacted to assure that the party committing the infractions would soon toe the line.

#### The Function of Giftedness

In the Native context, giftedness, like all other behaviors has an obligatory side. As a Blackfoot teacher put it, "In Blackfoot culture, giftedness means that the individual has special talent in sharing with others." Christensen (1991) is forthright on this:

To American Indians and Alaska Natives, all gifts and talents are not theirs by earned right. They are distributed by the Creator with care instructions from the Master of life, and should be practiced properly within the Circle and for purposes of enhancing the life experiences of unborn generations.... [Italics mine] During the years of required education, the gifts and talents given to Indians people, must be nurtured and not destroyed. Because of cultural differences which are not understood, an unkind classroom environment often develops and contributes to the high percentage of dropout and "push-out" Indian students beginning as early as the fourth grade (13).

Tonemah (1991) also emphasizes the obligatory aspect of Indian giftedness:

They were taught in an environment in which they learned by example, learned at their own pace, learned by discovery, and learned from grandparents and uncles or aunts with whom they shared a symbiotic relationship. The knowledge of skills passed on from one to another in a non-threatening and open environment until the teacher/mentor passed on, and the "student" became the mentor/teacher to another generation (3).

A Blackfoot teacher cautioned that "to be gifted in the Siksika culture is to be able to help, heal and counsel your people." Romero (1994) carries this thought even further:

Giftedness is viewed as global human quality encompassed by all individuals and manifested through one's contribution to the well-

being of the community. In Keresan Pueblo society, community contribution or “giving back” is described as an inner desire to contribute to the well-being of one’s people and to the perpetuation and preservation of the Native way of life....”Giving back” is an integral part of a Keresan Pueblo perspective of giftedness (37)

In light of these outlined mandates it soon becomes obvious that unless cultural definitions for concepts such as giftedness are locally operationalized, educators run the risk of miseducating children for the environments in which they will eventually function as adults.

#### Extraordinary Gifts in the Native Context

There are, of course, exceptions to every rule, and it is true that several very special gifts more like a calling were traditionally revered in First Nations cultures, that is, medicine man or medicine woman (priest or spiritual leader) or the role of elder. Many cultures are actively engaged in bringing back respect for these virtuous offices. Among Plains Indians it has become customary to differentiate four uses of the term "elder;" (i) all elderly people might be spoken of as elders but only in the sense that one was expected to "respect one's elders"; (ii) individuals who appear in public as "elders" for a price with the purpose of saying prayers or elucidating aspects of First Nations culture to non-Natives; (iii) men and women of wisdom who through their experiences gained a reputation as being men and women of wisdom; they gave advice and provided guidance to those who sought them out; and, (iv) men or women who gained expertise in the art of special healing techniques and knew when to apply them. Individuals in the latter two categories were often considered teaching elders who took on apprentices and imparted to them the secrets of their years of learning.

Among some tribes there were special designations for limited term positions such as war chief or hunting chief (not to be confused with hereditary chiefs). These individuals would be called on to perform specific tasks as the need arose. When the task was complete their special recognition would cease (Snow, 1977). Tonemah (1991) elaborates this concept further:

From the earliest memory of tribal people, mostly related in our stories of creation to stories of how things came to be, there have been gifted people and talented people among us. They were not designated as such by our people, but they were accorded exalted status by virtue of what they could do as peacemakers, religious persons, warriors, orators, planners, logicians, healers, singers,

dancers, and artisans to name a few (3).

Hartley (1991) echoes this sentiment, carefully distinguishing between the words, "gifted" and "outstanding".

Traditional parents have difficulty understanding the word "gifted". In Navajo there is no single word that means "gifted". The term "outstanding" is used in conjunction with a specific ability (59).

Hartley also emphasizes the need for gifted persons to remain humble and relevant in the sense that their gifts would be deployed for the good of the community. Misused gifts have the potential to become the downfall of the individual.

Traditional parents expressed the desire for their children to do well at school, as long as they didn't brag about it and, thus, stay out of trouble.... Outstanding behaviors were perceived to be acceptable if they remained in harmony with the functioning of the community...gifted children should be careful lest their gifts get them into trouble (59).

A Blackfoot interpretation underscores the notion that individual gifts are bestowed by the Creator. They are not to be exercised solely for the benefit of the individual, and they must never be exercised in a manner that would elevate the individual possessing them.

A gifted child in a Native setting would be a child with a gift from the Creator. He/she would be able to use their gift to cure people of sickness and harm. This individual would not brag of this/her gift, but respect and honor it. The child would not be secretive about it but respect its privacy. A teacher would not necessarily be able to identify this form of giftedness but an elder or other gifted person could (Blackfoot Interviewee).

And again:

In Siksika culture a gifted child is one who is mature beyond his/her age level. These are quiet children who grasp knowledge quickly. They are leaders who the other children will look up to. They understand the concept of respect and practice it. They make

friends with others. Children like this are viewed as gifted by the elders, they are gifted by the Creator to help the people (Blackfoot Interviewee).

Quite uniquely, one Blackfoot informant described this scenario:

The gifted child in Blackfoot culture is often a first-born grandchild. Usually this child will be given an Indian name and taught the values and traditions of the culture right away. This child is easily recognized; he/she has good manners, and knows the meaning of respect and practices it. This child is full of wisdom and knowledge as taught by the grandparents. The child participates in cultural activities. The child is not spoiled, but has a lot to offer the community and the outside world. This child always succeeds.

While some of us can probably identify with the advantages of being a first-born grandchild, it is probably of no special benefit to be at the receiving end of undue grandparental attention. In the Blackfoot community, however, there is a corollary note to the reality of grandparents showering their attention on the first grandchild. This is the matter of underlying responsibility of the grandparents to pass along cultural ways. Since they are the primary teachers with this mandate, and are charged with the major responsibility of assuring cultural perpetuity, they will naturally initiate their practice with the arrival of their first grandchild. The undue attention that child receives will result in the community being impressed with his/her "giftedness". Clearly this child will be much-taught and therefore obviously a maximized learner of cultural ways.

#### Conclusion

The principle of cultural relativity intimates that educators "in the know" attempt to remain on the growing edge of relevance, that is, we need to shift gears when something becomes irrelevant or simply does not work. It is all very well to formulate definitions, for example, definitions that seem to fit the general educational contexts within which most of us operate. However, when something clearly does not fit, we have three choices: (i) promote it without regard for relevance (ii) , abandon the notion, or (iii) modify it to suit the context. When it comes to the definition of giftedness in a First Nations context, we would be well advised to give our working definitions a hard second look.

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