BOOK REVIEW


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One big advantage of submitting a book review a few months late is that the reviewer has the opportunity to survey a wide range of reaction to the book, especially when that book has created a bit of a stir. That has certainly been the case with this review of Ungifted, although I also discovered that it is difficult to review the book and not also review the many reactions to it. And, indeed, there have been strong reactions to it.

Dr. Kaufman’s argument is aimed at the mass market and a much broader population than academics’ work usually reaches (an audience he successfully targets in his other work). There is growing evidence that his work in this area is having an impact on policymakers and educators, which is a major accomplishment.

From my perspective, the main theme of this weighty tome is the need to question our long-held assumptions about how we apply psychological principles to work with children. Dr. Kaufman specifically calls educational labeling practices into question, noting the rather severe impact labels—for example, learning disabled, gifted—can have on individual students. I also liked that he questioned whether the absence of labels can also have serious repercussions; I found this aspect of his argument most convincing, as it implies a need to move away from labeling and toward more effective service delivery for students.

The approach to the material and general tone is refreshing. The intellectual exploration—and struggle—that Dr. Kaufman shares is revealing in its honesty and frankness. I have no idea who originally said that the true sign of intelligence is the ability to change one’s mind, but that cliché popped into my head frequently as I read this book. The author questions his assumptions throughout the book (admittedly more upfront than near the end, which is understandable), and he feels comfortable sharing his intellectual struggles over certain points. More than once, I found myself thinking, “Oh good, he asks himself that question, too.”

In addition, the conventional wisdom appears to be that academics can only have a major public impact if they adopt strident (preferably controversial) opinions—and defend those positions to the death. I could provide examples, but it would be easier if you just opened a web browser or turned on your TV. Dr. Kaufman provides ample evidence, both in this book and his other public scholarship, that one can be have an influence, all while being intellectually curious, honest, open-minded, and rigorous.

It would be difficult to read the book and not come away with an appreciation for Dr. Kaufman’s breadth and depth of psychological knowledge. He is well-versed in theory and research across a number of psychological and educational fields, and he has worked directly with many of the world’s top psychology scholars. In this book, his deep knowledge of psychology occasionally comes across as name-dropping, but again I found this imperfection to be reasonable. A knee-jerk reaction to ideas as bold as those in Ungifted is that “the author doesn’t really know the research.” The numerous citations and mentions of specific scholars’ work makes that a difficult claim in this case; he knows the research, he just doesn’t view it the same way as his critics.

The call for rethinking special education is provocative. It can be stated, arguably, that improvements in special education policy and practice are one of the United States’ major accomplishments over the past 50 years. But that’s also a long time, and Scott points at some areas that could use rethinking. He goes after labeling wholeheartedly, which is fair given his experiences, although I suspect that many special education experts would point to Response to Intervention as a serious attempt to get us away from lifetime labeling of students. The field of gifted education (which comes in for much criticism in Ungifted) has begun this difficult self-examination process, with recent, provocative thinking about how the field should think about talent and special services for students (e.g., see Peters et al., 2014; Subotnik et al., 2011). Much of this work was starting to appear as Dr. Kaufman’s book was going to press, so its omission is not surprising. Here’s hoping it appears in the second edition.

As noted above, this is a weighty tome, and some sections are densely written, making them less engaging than the more personal sections of the book. However, given that the author is openly questioning long-held assumptions in intelligence, special education, and gifted education, among other controversial areas, the heavily academic sections effectively hang a sign that says, “I’m not a talking head, I really know this stuff.” But this material does make this book less of a “page turner” and more of a “pick it up and read it over several sittings” book.

The sections on stereotype threat, expertise, and elite performance, Godfrey Thomson, the contrasting Spearman and Gardner quotes (pp. 214–215), the final chapter on redefining intelligence, and the framing device of the author’s educational experiences all work well for me, and the section on giftedness has many excellent points. In particular, the heavy criticism directed at New York City’s procedure for identifying giftedness is completely justified. Indeed, Dr. Kaufman makes the case that a large number of best practices are directly violated in the New York City system; as a colleague and I recently observed, if one set out to design an identification system that was most likely to create large demographic differences in identified gifted students (i.e., lots of White, Asian, and wealthier students, fewer Black, Hispanic, and poor children), they would design something similar to the New York City procedures (Plucker & Callahan, in press). It is a credit to the author that, by the time the reader gets to this section (p. 70), the odd characteristics of the New York system are almost self-evident.

I was less enamored with the chapter on talent, which is not as tight as the other chapters, and the creativity chapter lacked a certain degree of synthesis, giving it the feel of an annotated bibliography (e.g., So-and-so did a study and found this . . . . These
other people did a study and found something else . . .). A more succinct summary of the research in the talent and creativity chapters may have taken away from the conversational narrative and tone, but it would have freed up room to dig deeper in a few areas. For example, Dr. Kaufman notes that pencil-and-paper assessments of Gardner’s MI Theory haven’t panned out as predicted, but he does not cite available research suggesting that the performance-based assessment approach offered by Gardner and others as a potential solution does not necessarily provide convincing evidence, either. In a similar boat, a few scholars have offered reconceptualizations of constructs such as giftedness and talent (e.g., Barab & Plucker, 2002; Plucker & Barab, 2005), approaches that are roughly similar to what Dr. Kaufman calls for.

My only other minor criticism is that sometimes important details are sacrificed for narrative flow. For example, the book contains a good, colorful overview of the development of modern intelligence testing, but like many critics before him, Dr. Kaufman paints a negative picture at times when it suits his narrative but probably goes a little too far. It can be argued that Binet developed his test primarily to identify students who would benefit from special needs, and Goddard, while indeed a major player in the eugenics of his time, largely questioned that work later in his career and was also a major supporter of the creation of New Jersey’s cutting-edge special education laws in the early 1900s. Those are all inarguably good things, from my perspective, and mentioning them would humanize these two scholars. I wish there were a little more of that in this book, but the need to cut details to keep the book from becoming an encyclopedia is understandable.

Since the book’s publication, I have heard several responses to the concerns raised by Dr. Kaufman, with the major counterpoint being that the fields of special education and gifted education have tried to reform themselves, with some success: Definitions are broader, testing procedures and practices are more refined and inclusive, and interventions are more broadly targeted. These are all fair statements. However, I keep coming back to the closing paragraph of Chapter 5, which states in part, Even with all the nuanced debates and expanded definitions of “learning disabilities” and “giftedness,” no one is winning. . . . Strict IQ cutoffs are still used on a regular basis all around the globe. Global IQ scores still take precedence over the many specific CHC cognitive abilities and nonacademic talents (such as music, art) . . . Testing is still a one-shot deal—either you were born gifted or you weren’t. Morality, intensity, sensitivity, compassion, creativity, and leadership are almost completely absent from both the stated definitions of giftedness and actual identification procedures. . . . Looks like we still have a long way to go. (emphasis in original, p. 94)

I would quibble with the degree to which all of these observations are accurate, but I don’t think we, as psychologists, educators, and parents, can say that these statements are wrong. For all of our progress, we do indeed still have a long way to go. Kudos to Ungifted for pushing this difficult but necessary conversation to the forefront.

References


