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## Misplaced: Mistreating Developmental Difference

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New York City's Independent Budget Office (IBO) recently issued a study showing that the late calendar year birth dates of some of the city's public school students were strongly correlated with those students' placements in special education programs. NYC's birthdate cut-off for kindergarten is December 31st, much later than in many other large school districts. The IBO study found that children born and admitted to kindergarten in the last two months (November-December) of the year were 65% more likely to be classified as having learning disabilities than those born during the first two months (January-February).

The IBO study didn't establish causality, but it has many implications. Because young children develop at widely varying rates, academic and socio-emotional learning in early childhood varies enormously. The IBO study suggests that, for the youngest children in a class and grade, a Special Education assignment may be responding to those varying developmental rates rather than to actual disabilities. We've long known that the range of children's developmental differences in early education classrooms demands levels of instructional differentiation that challenge most teachers. The traditional nostrum, "teaching to the middle," describes a standard solution that often jeopardizes the achievement of students on either end of the development continuum. For those children with lagging developmental rates because of late calendar year birth dates, the IBO study suggests that a Special Education label and placement can be one result. Other less dire results often await children on the high cusp of the developmental arc. In NYC schools, for example, such students used to be routinely skipped a grade, while currently they are often labelled gifted and talented and educated in special classes and schools. Though these responses generate very different educational trajectories, both may be less preferable than enriched classrooms that can effectively meet the full range of children's developmental arc, especially in early childhood.

Thinking about the IBO study's implications stirred some memories of my own schooling. I attended a small neighborhood public elementary school in Camden, New Jersey, an industrial appendage to Philadelphia, separated from the much larger city by the Delaware River. My elementary school was divided into two tracks. Each of those tracks had one class on each grade from kindergarten through sixth grade. One of my third-grade classmates, whose mother was a

teacher in another Camden school, told me that one of our school's tracks used the Winnetka Plan, a program designed for smart kids. But both my classmate and I were in the regular track. (Back then I'd only known "track" as something railway cars rode on; the more complex uses of track and tracking were unknown to me.)

Years later I checked out the Winnetka Plan. It was developed by Carleton Washburne, superintendent of schools in Winnetka, Illinois in the early 20th century. Washburne had been a student of Dewey's at the University of Chicago, and devised the Winnetka Plan to implement Dewey's progressive education philosophy. Washburne's Winnetka Plan emphasized individualized ungraded learning and differential progress – students could be working simultaneously at several grade levels in different subject areas. The Winnetka Plan's curriculum was divided into common essentials and creative group activities, to ensure that the whole child was engaged in all aspects of schooling. Washburne's plan was specifically developed as a more sensitive instructional response to the developmental needs of all students, especially those in early childhood classes.

In hindsight, I think it was highly unlikely that my elementary school's Winnetka program served the school's smart kids. Dewey opposed tracking or separating children by their supposed abilities; he was a passionate and uncompromising egalitarian. "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children," he famously argued. Moreover, I don't think my school assessed its students at entry to identify who the smart kids were, and then assigned them to the Winnetka program. I have no memory of being tested for abilities of any kind at kindergarten entry, and I doubt any of my friends were.

I also doubt that assignment to the Winnetka program was based on some form of observable race or class criteria as a proxy for intelligence. In my memory, admittedly fallible, my school was quite homogenous, serving a small predominantly white neighborhood of working and lower middle-class families in those years during and after the Second World War. There was not enough race or class diversity to yield discriminations among students based on any observable characteristics. So I think my classmate got it wrong. My school was indeed divided into two tracks, but assignment to each track was most likely random, rather than by some criteria supposedly signifying potential intelligence.

But back then in the third grade, I believed my classmate when he told me we were in the regular track and that the Winnetka track was for the smart kids. And I was not upset to discover that my school perceived me as not one of those smart kids. I had never thought of myself as particularly smart. My homework was always criticized by my teachers as careless and sloppy, probably because I rushed to get it done as quickly as possible. My class tests were often marred by my terrible handwriting. And though I knew the answers to almost all the questions posed by my teachers, I rarely raised my hand to answer because I didn't want to be perceived as a know-it-all by my classmates.

I kept the knowledge that I wasn't one of the school's smart kids to myself. I knew that if I told my mother, she'd rush to the school and demand to know why I wasn't in the Winnetka program. Being smart was a critical value for my mother. She was a first-generation immigrant who'd left the Ukraine, then part of Russia, with her family when she was four, perfected her English and, by her teenage years had shed all traces of her immigrant past. After an undistinguished public school education, she got a bookkeeping degree from a local business college and became the bookkeeper and then the office manager of a large Philadelphia dress-manufacturing company. She rose to become the company president's key assistant; one of her key tasks was selecting and buying high-fashion dresses from upscale NYC department stores – Bergdorf Goodman, Bendel, Altman Brothers, Bonwit Teller — that the dress firm could copy and reproduce as cheaper mass-market items. When the company president retired and became the board chair of his favorite charity, my mother became a very successful fund-raiser for that charity. Crediting her smarts for her success, my mother judged her family, workmates, friends and associates accordingly. Saying that someone was "just not very smart," even if she was simply reading about them in the newspaper, was my mother's favorite form of dismissal. I was never sure whether she thought I was smart or could become so if only I applied myself sufficiently. But I dreaded her descent on my school to insist on my inclusion in the Winnetka program.

When I was in fourth grade my mother came back from a PTA meeting and demanded to know why I hadn't informed her that I'd taken an IQ test at school. I told her I didn't know what an IQ test was, but that my class had recently taken some kind of test from a booklet with printed questions that my teacher told us was important. My mother stared at me. "That test was designed to find out how intelligent you are," she told me. "IQ stands for intelligence quota. I just met with your school's guidance counselor. She said your IQ test score puts you at the genius level." Genius was a very important word in my mother's universe, reserved for Albert Einstein, Jascha Heifetz, Felix Frankfurter and other Jewish luminaries. It was immediately clear to me that I was definitely not a genius. "I think I guessed a lot on that test," I told her. "Maybe I just got lucky."

My mother continued to stare at me, as if she'd discovered I'd grown an extra head. "Your teacher and your guidance counselor say you are seriously under-performing. They are convinced you're not being challenged enough. They want to skip you a grade."

I was immediately terrified. Skipping a grade meant that I would move from my comfortable niche as a middle-of-the-road student to being the youngest kid in a higher grade class. And as the smallest kid in the class, I would undoubtedly be picked on. Worse, because I was supposedly a genius, I would be expected to hand in perfect homework and volunteer correct answers to all my teacher's questions.

"I don't think I want to skip a grade," I said. "Can't I stay where I am? I like my class. I have lots of friends."

My mother kept staring at me. "I got skipped in second grade," she told me. "I was already the smallest kid in my class." My mother was barely five feet tall in the high heels she always wore. "When they skipped me I became the youngest as well as the smallest girl in all my classes. I hated it. I was miserable. I told them I was totally opposed to skipping you. Luckily they need my signed permission, and I refused."

Relief flooded me; she'd saved me from a fate I could barely imagine. "But that doesn't mean you can go on coasting the way you clearly have been," she said. "From now on I expect perfect report cards. You clearly belong at the top of your class."

So because of the results of one test, my school and home life changed significantly. Not only did I have to navigate a new set of teacher expectations, but I also had to meet a new level of my mother's demands. "You can do better than that," she'd scold me whenever I forgot my chores or completed them, in her view, too carelessly. "You're supposedly a genius." She bragged about me to her friends, in my presence, and she used my newfound status against my father. "Wherever he gets it from," she'd tell him repeatedly, often at the height of their arguments, "it certainly wasn't from you."

Moreover, though IQ results were supposed to be kept confidential, someone must have leaked my score, because the genius label followed me through my elementary school career. That meant I was expected to act like The Great Brain by my teachers, and become the object of all the varieties of scorn classmates directed at the kids deemed too smart for their own good. At first I tried to solve this dilemma by sullenness; I refused to talk in class, messed up my homework assignments even more, and submitted a lot of wrong answers in the quizzes imposed on us. After my teacher threatened to summon my mother to a conference with the principal, I evolved a compromise strategy. I raised my hand to answer one out of every four or five teacher questions, cleaned up my homework act, and did just well enough on class tests to meet my teachers' expectations without getting all A's. And I dramatically elevated my misbehavior quotient, hoping that acting out in class might be compatible with the genius label. I talked incessantly to my classmates, and cracked jokes and puns under my breath but loud enough for my closest seatmates to react to. I took to constantly slipping off my desk-chair, hitting the floor and shouting, "Shoot," like the baseball players in my favorite John R. Tunis novels.

I don't know how much my life in school and at home was immeasurably altered by the results of that 4th grade IQ test. What I experienced cannot be compared to what happens to a child born

late in the calendar year who gets assigned to a Special Education placement because her lagging developmental pace is misread as a disability. Thanks to my mother, I was spared the opposite fate, being skipped a grade and winding up on the lagging curve of my own developmental arc. But my experience of having to negotiate the genius label a single IQ test imposed on me, to normalize my schooling experience and render it bearable, dramatized the considerable power that a label can impose.

In NYC schools, labels produced by misjudgments of young students' lagging developmental pace could be significantly reduced if the NYC Department of Education changed its birthdate enrollment cut-off from December 31st to September 1st. Such a change would reduce the risk that newly enrolled students born late in the calendar year would have their developmental pace conflated with their learning capacity. But what about all the other school labeling practices that flow from testing that may be measuring children's highly varying rates of development, rather than their actual learning capacities? My instinct is that we don't need more test-identified geniuses, as opposed to those inspired creators who engage the world's muck and successfully improve or enrich it for all the rest of us.