THE DISTRIBUTION OF TALENT

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This is a brief overview of a proposal submitted for funding at Indiana University. It is an effort to investigate talent as a normally distributed attribute. It is based on the observed use of the concept rather than on theoretical or ideological use, though it is derived initially from the work of Clark suggesting that talent is normally distributed. It is intended not to define talent, but to put to the test the way in which term is commonly used informally, and to develop that into a conception of talent that is analogous to that of intelligence.

The question of who is talented and who is not is relevant to art education since it is commonly assumed that those who do art well are characterized by some personal difference that we call talent. Monies are appropriated for the education of the talented and schools are called upon to decide who is talented.

There are two common conceptions of talent. In the one, talent is attributed to a few, but not to others. In this conception talent can be said to be normally distributed; either you have it or you do not. In the other, talent is evenly distributed. All have talent and the job of art teacher is to bring out the talent hidden in every student. The literature of art education generally depends on one conceptualization or the other.

A few people have suggested that talent is normally distributed. In this conception talent is something that people have in varying degrees, a few having a lot, and few having little, and most having some amount in between. Suggestions along this line have been made by Goodenough, Burt, Munro, and Clark. It also may be noted that our use of the term talent seems to be derived from the Gospel of Saint Matthew in which servants are entrusted with quantities of money called, in older translations, talents. The talents were entrusted by the master in varying amounts, and the servants returned varying amounts of profit to the master on his return.

If we ask someone to determine from a set of drawings which children are talented we find the results predictable and interesting. If we give someone a set of drawings by children of the same age and ask them to sort them according to talent we find that those judged as most talented are those who produce drawings that correspond to higher levels of development, while those judged as least talented produce drawings that correspond to lower levels of development. If we ask people to sort the drawings by developmental level we get similar sortings. This suggests that people judge talent and developmental level according to similar criteria.

This conception of talent is strikingly similar to that of intelligence as it is measured in IQ tests, a comparison of developmental level with age norms. Talent may well be, therefore, an analogous concept. If we can consider it so, then since we know that intelligence is normally distributed, we would expect that talent also is so distributed.

If we want to test this expectation we could develop criteria for sorting the drawings. To do that we would have to look at the drawings judged as representative of high and low talent to define the features in them that distinguish the two groups. We would note such things as the representation of space, complexity and specificity of form, and expression. Such features are known to be, or believed to be, related to development.

There is a considerable literature on the representation of space in children's drawings. The famous "Draw-a-Man" test is based on complexity and specificity of form. Arnheim describes the development of representation in terms of increasing specificity of form. The subject of expression is somewhat more contentious, but a scale of expressiveness could be devised based on the work of Piaget and others using the concept of expression as defined by Nelson Goodman in terms of exemplification. In such a scale we would be concerned with what qualities of the subject matter are exemplified by the picture, ranging from topographic to metaphorical.

Drawings could be sorted by the criteria developed to determine the distribution overall, and to compare the sorting by different criteria of the same picture. If talent is related to all these different features of the drawings we would expect the sortings to be the same.

Such a test would also be useful in developing a test of talent based on production rather than appreciation. If you look at schools that have attempted to determine which students are talented you find that in practice they are asking the children to make drawings and then choosing the best drawers by obscure criteria. The selecting is being done by professional judgement. As suggested above, the sorting of these children's drawings is likely to be made on the basis of developmental level. While professional judgement is probably reliable, it would seem useful to have a scale of sorting criteria by which such judgements could be made in a systematic and replicable way.

If such a scale were developed and applied to a set of children's drawings we would have some support for the concept of talent as a normally distributed attribute, and be in a better position to tell which qualities are most indicative of talent in drawing.