

THE ROEPER SCHOOL ARCHIVES

“Thoughts and Questions Raised by the World Conference
for Gifted Children”

August 1985
By Annemarie Roeper

© Roeper City and Country School, Inc.

The Roeper School Archives, Bloomfield Hills, MI

ABSTRACT

In an article inspired by conversations at a conference for gifted children held in Hamburg, Germany, Annemarie suggests that gifted child education must be coupled with a moral and humanistic point of view.

THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE WORLD CONFERENCE FOR GIFTED CHILDREN

By Annemarie Roeper

It was a strange experience for my husband, George Roeper, and me to participate in a conference in Hamburg, Germany, because Hamburg and its environment was the place where we spent our childhood and the place, which we had to leave as young adults because of the Nazis. As usual, it brought back memories of those particular days, as well as concerns about mankind in general. Against this background we attended the World Conference for the Gifted.

Attending it felt most unreal. Although we were back in Germany, it felt as though we were still back in America. The feeling of an American experience was absolutely overwhelming. Out of the 1,000 participants, more than 400 were Americans. The conference itself took place in a modern hotel, which could have been anywhere in the world. The language spoken was mostly English and one did not even have to close one's eyes to think that one was back in America. Probably one of the most outstanding impressions that we gained from the conference was a feeling of isolation, a lack of contact with the world, its beauty as well as its problems. It was as if a new world had been created, a world modeled on America, taking place in Germany.

The conference opened on the day of the 40th anniversary of Hiroshima. German newspapers as well as American newspapers and those around the world reported on memorial services to remember the event, to renew the hope that mankind would find ways to move out of the nuclear shadow. But back at the conference that did not exist.

To me it seemed that this would have been an appropriate occasion to focus on the problems of the world and express the hope that the gifted children of today will be the leaders of tomorrow working toward world peace. But that did not happen. It was in many ways a conference similar to many others that we had attended in the past. It

was dominated by Americans with most of the sessions in English and relating to specific research and observation that took place in America. Americans would attend each other's sessions and it seemed strange to realize that people had travelled to Europe just to see each other. I could not help but feel that here was an opportunity missed to expand the horizon and to learn from each other and become aware of the world community. Of course, this tendency toward isolation was not true for everybody; there were also those who tried to make good use of the opportunities and there were some exciting experiences to be made.

First of all, the whole concept of a world organization for the gifted tells us many things, among them that there is an interest and a need in the world to take care of their gifted population. There were people represented from 47 countries all over the world. In addition to the 400 Americans, there were a little over 200 Germans, and the rest were represented by up to 20 delegates. Most countries were represented by only one or two people. They divided into three groups: the developing countries, the Communist countries and the Western countries. Each had their own needs, problems and solutions.

A Mexican educator pointed out that the problem of the developing countries was their brain drain; that most of the gifted children from these countries were sent to the West to be educated, often did not return, and therefore were lost to those countries. The Communist countries tried to do much for their gifted children because they considered them a valuable resource. Their approach is quite different from the Western ones, because of the difference in ideology. Many opportunities exist to support the gifted as can be seen in the Pioneer organizations in Russia. Several representatives of West Germany discussed a particular school that exists there for gifted children which offers a great many learning opportunities. Europeans more than Americans include other areas in addition to the academic in their concept of and offerings to gifted children. Much emphasis is placed on music, drama, ballet and sports. It seemed that they are truly given as much emphasis as the three R's.

There was a specific German debate about gifted child education as relevant to West Germany, based on German history and the concept of democracy, as well as the specific needs of the gifted child. The discussion included several high-level people in the German government. They divided up into “for gifted” and “against gifted.” The education minister of Germany was very supportive of gifted child education. The education minister of Hamburg brought up many reasons against it. In addition there were many different individuals, educators and psychologists who spoke for either the one or the other side. The question of elitism was debated furiously from all points of view: political, psychological, educational, and from the point of view of the needs of the individual as well as the needs of the country and the world.

It felt at times as though we were attending two conferences that were intermingled but not really relating to each other. An American one and a German one with a sprinkling of others in between. By now the Americans have a rather long tradition in gifted child education. It has in some ways “come of age.” In many parts of America, the question of elitism has long been settled, although it always keeps cropping up. Americans can look back on experience, research and development, and have many exciting things to say to each other. This also means that certain questions, such as elitism, are not looked at any more, are now taken for granted. It also means that gifted child educators often talk to each other, and go on developing, sometimes even leaving the rest of the country behind them, not interacting with them. We have learned a great deal about gifted children, have become sophisticated, and have much to offer to other countries. But I did not see enough of these interactions happening. In fact, I truly believe that at times many Americans forgot that they were not in their country.

When the Germans were debating the whole matter of elitism, and the pros and cons of gifted child education itself, several Americans attending the session made such remarks as, “I thought we had settled these questions long ago.” The question may have been settled in their part of America, but they had not been settled in Germany, and important points had been made that were worth hearing. I personally learned an

important lesson; I became very much aware that the question of elitism in education of the gifted is one that we must continue to take seriously.

The Germans debated whether giftedness and ability was of value in themselves or only in connection with ethical values. They brought up the fact that the Germans were always known as a very able people. There is in fact a word for it, which does not translate into other languages. It is called German *Teuchtigkeit*, which means German efficiency, thoroughness and ability. They reminded each other that the Nazis never could have accomplished what they did in terms of concentration camps and torture if they did not have the ability to be very well organized, to be very thorough, to solve problems of logistics and so on. Obviously, to do this takes a certain kind of giftedness. They also pointed out that the atom bomb could never have been invented if there weren't gifted people to invent it. On the other hand, they did not forget the progress being made in medicine and many other areas.

They had serious discussion on the conditions under which gifted child education was a positive thing and how elitism could be avoided. They brought up the question of gifted children who were identified and were being exploited by their parents, their teachers and their schools. They were concerned that we might be raising technocrats.

All of this seemed valid to me. It is something one needs to be informed about and needs to keep in mind. These are real dangers that exist in gifted child education. On the other hand, it was pointed out, gifted children do have special needs; they function differently from other children and because of our desire to be democratic, to avoid elitism, these children are suffering. They talked about whether or not gifted child education was compatible with democracy.

I was impressed with the fact that these matters were discussed. It seemed to me that in the end, they more or less arrived at the formulation that gifted child education is valid but must be coupled with a moral and humanistic point of view. It does not have value in itself. We have never had a thorough debate in America on these

concerns, with the exception of the question of elitism. It would have been interesting to hear these questions discussed between all participants of the conference. There would have been much we could have learned from each other. Americans could have learned from the Germans that the gifted child does not exist in isolation, that one has to look out – not in; that problems of the world do have an impact on the individual gifted child as well as on the whole approach to gifted child education.

In pondering my experience at the world conference for the gifted, many questions arise. Is there a conscious purpose for these conferences? Is there a philosophy that governs them? And my next question: Is there a purpose in the whole gifted child movement and the gifted child organizations in general? It is my impression from my involvement in the gifted child movement that we have not concerned ourselves enough with our goals, our mission. It seems that some of the questions that arose in the German debate might well have been asked by all.

Are we hoping to educate people who will make an impact on the world? Do we believe that gifted child education must be coupled with moral and humanistic involvement in mankind? Does a conference in Germany, with its history, not make us feel these obligations? Don't the gifted children themselves hope that we will move into the direction of a philosophy of gifted child education? Isn't one of the reasons for the comparatively large number of suicides among gifted children the fact that they are so desperate about the state of the world and do not see how they can bring about changes? Are we isolating ourselves in a safe position by avoiding dealing with more philosophical questions? Are we becoming technocrats? Why do other organizations such as OMEP (a world organization) and NAEYC find it possible to take an official stand on the nuclear problems and the gifted child movement does not?

Is our isolation morally defensible? Should education for peace and conflict resolution as well as opportunity for self-actualization have a prominent place in our national and international conferences and literature? Are we not in fact even moving unwittingly out of this neutrality into supporting the militarization? Should we support attempts to draw the gifted into fields that are used to support militarization such as

nuclear and space research? Should gifted child education be coupled with a concept of humanistic education? We talk about the outstanding sense of justice of the gifted; should that be matched by a passion for justice for all among the adults? Educators of gifted children may be unwitting participants in a nuclear holocaust just as German intellectuals participated in the Nazi Holocaust by not stepping in before it was too late.