

Do We Really Want to Avoid Denny's?: The perils of defying the crowd

JAMES C. KAUFMAN & JOHN BAER

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to Sternberg's excellent paper proposing the WICS model for identifying gifted individuals. This model broadens the standard conception of giftedness and makes many helpful suggestions how to conceptualize and assess the relevant dimensions of giftedness.

There is one area, however, where we would propose an alternate viewpoint. 'In a sense, this essay is about how to avoid selecting the "Denny's" of the world', Sternberg writes (p. 5), in reference to a former gifted student who seemed primed for success—but then committed suicide. Our question is whether it really is best to try and avoid selecting the 'Denny's'.

Creativity—one of Sternberg's key elements—often involves the potentially scary and daunting task of 'defying the crowd' (Sternberg & Lubart, 1996; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2000). Perhaps as a result, creativity is often correlated with less desirable traits, such as mental illness (Kaufman, 2001b, 2002; Kaufman & Baer, 2002). The more creative and eminent one is, the higher the risk may be for psychiatric problems (Ludwig, 1995; Kaufman, 2001a). If gifted programmes decide to make avoiding someone like Denny one of their goals, then they run the risk of missing opportunities to provide these gifted but troubled young people the kind of programmes that will best meet their unique needs. This lost chance may make it more likely that the Denny's of the world will squander their gifts and even be harmed by their creative and intellectual abilities. Might it not be wiser to nurture the gifts of such creative individuals, so that they are better equipped to battle their demons and overcome potentially self-destructive tendencies?

This question leads to the larger issue of what the proper goals of gifted education programmes should be. Is the goal of gifted education programmes to predict future success—to pick the most likely winners, as it were? Or should the goal be to include all students whose unique gifts require special programmes to develop fully?¹ Rather than aiming for more perfect prediction by avoiding the selection of those likely to fail despite their obvious giftedness, we believe that gifted education programmes, and especially those for younger students, should focus on finding *all* students of high ability and helping them develop their talents (National Association for Gifted Children, 1998). In doing so we also hope the number of Denny's in the world might be reduced—not by *excluding* them from gifted programmes, but by *including*

Author's addresses: J. C. Kaufman (corresponding author), Learning Research Institute, California State University at San Bernardino, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino CA 92407, USA (e-mail: jkaufman@csusb.edu). J. Baer, Rider University.

them and better preparing them to deal both with the positive and negative consequences of giftedness.

This concern is not meant to detract from the overall viability of the WICS model of giftedness, which we applaud, but to caution ways that it—and all models of giftedness used to screen students for gifted education programmes—might best be applied to also serve highly gifted, if sometimes fragile, young people. We believe the WICS model makes a significant contribution to discussions of how giftedness should be conceived.

Notes

1. In a statement on ‘Gifted Education Program Design’, the National Association for Gifted Children (1998) states that ‘Gifted programming services must be accessible to all gifted learners’, which suggests that they would oppose *any* selection criteria that would systematically avoid inclusion of the Denny’s of the world. In fact, this quote represents the *lowest* acceptable level that the National Association for Gifted Children lists for the scope of services that should be offered. Going beyond this minimum standard, they further recommend that the kinds of services provided for all gifted learners be matched to their individual needs ‘through the provision of a full continuum of services’.

References

- KAUFMAN, J. C. (2001a) Genius, lunatics, and poets: Mental illness in prize-winning authors. *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, 20, 305–314.
- KAUFMAN, J. C. (2001b) The Sylvia Plath effect: Mental illness in eminent creative writers. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 35, 37–50.
- KAUFMAN, J. C. (2002) Creativity and confidence: Price of achievement? *American Psychologist*, 57, 375–376.
- KAUFMAN, J. C. & BAER, J. (2002) I bask in dreams of suicide: Mental illness, poetry, and women. *Journal of General Psychology*, 6, 271–286.
- KAUFMAN, J. C. & STERNBERG, R. J. (2000) Are there mental costs to creativity? *Bulletin of Psychology and the Arts*, 1, 38.
- LUDWIG, A. M. (1995) *The price of greatness*. New York: Guilford Press.
- NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR GIFTED CHILDREN (1998) *Gifted education programming criterion: Program design*. Retrieved 6 June 2003 from the National Association for Gifted Children Web site <http://Rwww.nagc.org/table3.htm>.
- STERNBERG, R. J. & LUBART, T. I. (1996) Investing in creativity. *American Psychologist*, 51, 677–688.