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**A History of American gifted education** by Jennifer L. Jolly, New York, Routledge, 2018, vi + 210 pp., £120.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-13-892427-7, £33.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-13-894291-1

Jennifer Jolly's *A History of American Gifted Education* comprises an introduction and epilogue bookending four untitled sections (one of which is co-authored by Jennifer H. Robins) collectively including a further 26 chapters. However, despite having 28 distinct chapters, it is not a massive tome, as the author has chosen to keep chapters succinct. The theme of gifted education in the United States (as 'American' in the title means the nation, not the Americas more generally) is explored from its outset to the present time. The book is suitable for a non-specialist audience, and should be accessible to all working in education. Indeed, the volume seems intended for anyone with an interest in gifted education, or education policy more generally, at least as much as for the historian of education. The book does include a short index, but this is far from comprehensive, and it is unfortunate that this is not more extensive.

The book is generally arranged chronologically, and Jolly has done a good job of treating themes that recur over time against a background of exploring specific episodes. The reader will learn, in particular, about the contributions to the field of a range of scholars and educators (with biographical background to offer some context,) and also about the activities of organisations that are influential in the story being told. These accounts of the work of specific characters and groups build into a narrative that gives a picture of an area of educational work subject to the whims of political policies and trends. Indeed, key legislation and federal policies could be considered to be important characters in the history being constructed.

In this review, I will highlight some particular themes and issues that came across strongly in the book, before briefly considering why the volume should be of interest to readers in the USA and elsewhere. I came away from reading this book thinking its key messages related to the nature of national educational policy; developments in thinking about intelligence and its association with giftedness; shifts in understanding giftedness, especially in relation to relative disadvantage and how the extent to which gifted education has been foregrounded within educational communities seems subject to cultural fashions.

In the early chapters of the book the reference to 'American' gifted education seems a little out of place. The discussion of early influential thinkers is not limited to Americans, and the Americans discussed often spent substantive periods of time studying or working outside the US. However, this perception shifts as the book moves on from considering early intelligence theorists (in effect primarily working in psychology or philosophy) to early gifted educators themselves. Indeed, the contrast is stark: the impression given is that the

community of educators concerned with gifted education in the US is insular, having very little cooperation, collaboration, or cross-fertilisation, with gifted educators elsewhere.

In seeking to characterise gifted education as a field with its own identity, Jolly uses the ideas of Peter J. Fensham in *Defining an Identity: The evolution of science education as a field of research* (Dordrecht, 2004) who takes as his example the development of science education as a research field. In this sense, there seems quite a contrast as science education developed into a field that is genuinely international in terms of its research agenda and active programmes of work. However, a strong theme that is represented in Jolly's text relates to how the United States is a federation of somewhat autonomous states, such that many aspects of educational policy are primarily the concern of the state, so that within 'American' gifted education there has often been considerable diversity of both policy and practice.

Shifts in how giftedness has been understood, and so identified and measured, is a key recurring theme in the book. There are at least two major, distinct, strands here. Giftedness is often associated with intelligence, and for a long period IQ measurements were widely considered a sufficient proxy for intelligence. Moreover, intelligence was usually considered something largely inherent to an individual, and, indeed, to a large extent inherited from that individual's parents.

Jolly's book discusses such ideas, and how they influenced policy and practice. She considers how these ideas were challenged, and how this shifted the understanding of who might be considered gifted. The increasing focus on creativity as an indicator of giftedness, and the influence of the ideas and models of thinkers such as Gardner, Sternberg, and Renzulli in challenging conceptualisations of giftedness are discussed - although the late appearance of those names, so familiar to those working in gifted education today, puts into context just how insidious the dominant, simplistic, model of giftedness at work for most of the history of the subject has proved to be.

Equating giftedness with a notion of inherited high intelligence does not only limit the kinds of skills and competences that 'count' for giftedness, but also implies that once there is a valid measure of giftedness available it becomes straightforward to recognise the gifted. And those that become identified as gifted in this way usually do indeed come from distinguished families, reinforcing the association with genetics (and, indeed, at one time eugenics). Jolly's account shows just how much resistance there was to acknowledging that such an approach neglected many of those with great potential when the social conditions of their early lives did not support the development of that potential into something that would register in the top percentiles of scales of intelligence.

The disadvantaged gifted only became visible once the importance of environmental conditions was recognised and accounted for. The reader finds that, for example, for much of the twentieth century, being black effectively meant not being considered a gifted child in the US, and when gifted black youngsters started to be recognised, they were from higher than average socio-economic backgrounds, and often showed other indicators of strong social capital.

That the existence of what might be called the 'disadvantaged gifted' challenged existing policy and practice in gifted education seems obvious. Jolly's account shows, however, that recognition of this compound could not only expand the conceptualisation of gifted learners by including students with social disadvantage in gifted education programmes, but, at times could also be used in the opposite sense, as leverage to support provision for the gifted.

Jolly's history offers an account of the development of a gifted education movement in the US that progressed fairly smoothly as a community of educators and others concerned about the education of the gifted. Yet, what was much more uneven was the support available from the public purse to provide particular provision for gifted students. Even once federal legislation provided a basis (albeit one unevenly built upon across states) for educational policy addressing the needs of the gifted, the extent to which federal funds were directed to this cause was subject to shifting political fashions. At times when the education of the disadvantaged was seen as priority for funding, this could be used as a source for supporting initiatives for some gifted learners.

This is a very informative book, and despite its national focus, makes an interesting read for educators outside the United States who have an interest in gifted education. It links to core issues found elsewhere. History is an account of contingencies. Reading how support for carrying out gifted education policies ebbed and flowed in response to unrelated political imperatives in the US brings to mind parallels elsewhere. Shifts in thinking about the gifted have played out internationally, even if policy responses may have been less coordinated. Jolly refers to a long-lived common perspective that gifted learners should not be a priority for education systems as they were already advantaged, so support should be directed to those falling behind. This has resonances with a popular view in England during the height of the comprehensive education movement, where the worthy aims of equal access and opportunity sometimes became confused with an illogical desire for equal outcomes.

Behind all of this is the question of why particular educational provision for the gifted matters. Jolly reports how one impetus in the US in the post-second world war decades was the so-called Sputnik effect and the importance of developing talent for the good of the nation. Educators acknowledge this, but tend to put more focus on the good of the learners themselves. For some practitioners, the core issue is concern for those highly capable students who are clearly not sufficiently benefitting from standard curriculum fare. This links back to aspects of the comprehensive debate: if there are social benefits of learning in highly diverse groups that reflect the wider community, then does this justify rejecting any kind of gifted provision that requires separate provision?

Ultimately, educators should aspire to develop all learners to their full potential and provide educative learning experiences that offer sufficient challenge *and* support for all learners to make progress (Taber, K. S., & Riga, F. (2016). [From each according to her capabilities; to each according to her needs: fully including the gifted in school science education](#). In S. Markic & S. Abels (Eds.), *Science Education Towards Inclusion* (pp. 195-219). New York: Nova Publishers.) There are important principles and debates here that continue to challenge all teachers and policy makers. Jolly's interesting account of this aspect of American education demonstrates just how long-standing these questions are, and how difficult it can be to address such questions both in policy terms, and in actual classroom practice.

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