

TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND THE LUCK PROBLEM

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INTRODUCTION

Interest in the identification and support of the most talented sports players dates back many years, and presumably can be traced to the points in the ancient past when individuals were selected to represent their group or state in competitive activities. Certainly, strategies to predict and promote outstanding performance emerged from the formative years of scientific approaches to sport, and continue to the present day, when rewards for elite performance is often extreme (Abbott, et al, 2002; Miller and Kerr, 2002). In comparison, talent within the context of school physical education has been rather overlooked, with guidance amounting to little more than a suggestion that the teacher directs their most able students towards the nearest community sports club (Bailey and Morley, 2006).

This is starting to change in the UK, however, as recent years have witnessed a radical change in both policy and practice related to the development of our most talented young people in schools, supported by significant financial investment. The UK Government has recently made clear its expectation that schools identify and develop 'Gifted and Talented' (G&T) pupils in all curriculum subjects, including 'Physical Education and Sport' (DfEE, 2000) as part of its Excellence in Cities scheme (DFEE, 2000). The G&T strand required schools to identify the most able 5 and 10% of pupils, and to provide

them distinct curricular and extra-curricular programmes. Through this scheme, the Government aimed to bring about “the largest culture shift of any part of the programme” (ibid., p. 16), towards an education system in which excellence and outstanding achievement were identified, developed and celebrated. Implicit within this stated aim was an attempt to deflect a predictable charge: “The idea that all children had the same rights to develop their abilities led too easily to the doctrine that all had the same ability. The pursuit of excellence was too often equated with elitism” (DFEE, 1997, p. 11). This difficult balancing act of articulating a vision of schooling in which high ability was celebrated and supported, whilst deflecting accusations of elitism has become a running theme in advocacy statements from politicians and their agencies (Miliband, 2004a; Eyre, 2004b), as it was when Prime Minister Tony Blair first offered his vision of G&T education:

“We believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth or advantages of privilege. We understand that people are not all born into equal circumstances, so one role of state education is to open up opportunities for all, regardless of their background. This means we need to provide high standards of basics for all, but also recognise the different abilities of different children, and tailor education to meet their needs and develop their potential.” (Tony Blair, 1996, cited in Eyre, 2004a)

Since then, there has emerged a supplementary scheme to promote specifically and uniquely the development of talentedⁱ students in Physical Education through its luxuriantly funded Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links scheme (PESSCL;

DfES / DCMS, 2003). Launched in 2002, PESSCL involved eight initiatives aimed at raising levels of participation. Alongside an explicit G&T strand, the scheme offered a range of other forms of support for talented players, such as a National Competition Framework, the appointment of dedicated Competition Managers in schools, progressively more selective ‘multi-skills’ clubs, academies and camps beginning in Primary Schools, and a host of new jobs with a clear talent identification remit, based at the new Specialist Sports College (Flintoff, 2003; YST, 2004). These strategies are intended to supplement the existing talent development frameworks already in place in National Governing Bodies for Sport. So, the elements are put in place for spotting talented children early (during infant school, apparently) and “squeezing” them through a joined-up school-and-club system, towards elite sporting success (Campbell, cited in Kay, 2005).

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Taken together, these strategies and initiatives represent ‘the English Model’ of G&T education (Eyre, 2004a), which offers, or aspires to offer, a coordinated approach to the support of the most able students from all backgrounds so that they might fulfil their true potential (ibid.).

I do not wish to examine the details of these specific strategies and their implementation (see, for example, Bailey and Morley, 2006). Rather, I would like to consider some of the implicit assumptions that characterise much of these discussions of high ability among policy makers and their implementers:

1. That there are talented students who are qualitatively different from the rest of the school population;
2. That it is relatively easy to spot these talented students;
3. That early prodigious performance tracks to elite adult performance;
4. That the point of talent development in Physical Education is preparation for elite adult performance.

The first statement seems, depending on who says it, to be either a metaphysical claim about human nature, or, more commonly, a folk pedagogic theory (Bruner, 1996). This is not a point on which I wish to linger, apart from to say that empirical research suggests that it is an extremely widely held view among coaches and teachers (Gagné and Nadeau, 1985). Interestingly, it is a less commonly held view among the athletes and students themselves, who tend to emphasise the central importance of practice, parental support and mental toughness (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002).

With regard to the second claim, it is worth noting that, to date, guidance materials both from central governments and their emissaries (like the Youth Sport Trust in the UK) is almost solely concerned with the provision for and support of talented young people, and barely mention their identification, at all (Dismore, Bailey and Morley, 2005). In other words, teachers and coaches are given lots of ideas for what to do with their talented youngsters; it is apparently taken for granted that they know who they are in the first place. But this is a highly dubious assumption, since a host of environmental factors, such as family, peers and schooling, mean that a significant number of potentially

talented children are never able to realise their potential because they have never been presented with the opportunities to do so (Perleth, Schatz and Mönks, 2000). If you have never played tennis, or have never been given the necessary support, encouragement and licence to develop even its rudimentary skills, any ability you might otherwise have exhibited will remain undiscovered.

On the third statement, I simply suggest that it is not the case:

- The vast majority of young people identified as talented do not go on to elite, or even sub-elite, careers (Abbott, et al, 2002);
- Conversely, many adult elite performers were not identified through the standard talent pathways, nor were they precociously gifted as young children (Bloom, 1985).

As for the fourth claim – physical education as a preparation for elite adult sport, what can one say? One might accept elite sports performance as one possible beneficiary of a comprehensive and effective physical education curriculum, without subscribing to the view recently expressed to me by a local government council leader – in a meeting about the future of school physical education in the region – “let’s be honest; we’re talking about more medals”. David Morley and I recently informally surveyed UK National Governing Bodies for Sport, asking about the total number of representative places they were able to support, either through professional status or through funding in amateur sports. We extrapolated that only 0.001% of the current school population could *possibly*

reach the highest level within one of these sports. If adult elite sport is the goal of physical education, it is an extraordinarily inefficient goal.

So, there are certain empirical difficulties with the English model. There is also, I think, a serious philosophical problem, which I will call the “Luck Problem”.

SLICING UP LUCK

I need to be a little cautious in my use of the word “luck” in this context. The word is used in a dazzling variety of ways. Perhaps the best-known discussion of luck in the philosophy literature is from a pair of articles, both called ‘Moral Luck’, by Thomas Nagel (1979) and Bernard Williams (1981), in which they comment on the Kantian notion that morality must be independent of luck in some sense. Both suggest that it is basic to our intuitive moral sense that what people are morally responsible for cannot depend on mere luck.

Dennett (1984) criticises both Nagel and Williams for taking the concept of luck for granted, and this seems a fair criticism, since a host of typologies have subsequently emerged which highlight Dennett’s assertion that luck is a curious and treacherous concept. Susan Hurley (2003), for example, distinguishes between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ luck, with the former being the “inverse correlate of responsibility”; in other words, it refers to those things for which an individual is not responsible: “What is a matter of thin luck for an agent is what he is not responsible for, and what he is responsible for is not a matter of thin luck for him” (Hurley, 2003, p. 107). Thick luck, on the other hand, is not

simply the inverse of responsibility. Rather, if something is a matter of thick luck it is a somewhat open question whether an agent is responsible or not for it. An example of this might be a lottery.

Another approach of slicing up luck is as follows (cf. Lippert-Rasmussen, 2005; Statman, 1993):

- 1) Resultant Luck – the outcomes of our actions are affected by luck. E.g., training to be a philosopher of sport just prior to the sudden creation of a number of appointments in the area;
- 2) Circumstantial luck – the circumstances in which one acts introduces luck. E.g., by chance, a young athlete finds himself attending a club run by an expert coach for a certain sport, and his career benefits as a result of this.
- 3) Constitutive luck – luck affects the kind of person you are. E.g., some long-distance runners and cyclists have freakishly low resting heart rates, and because of this, it makes sense to say that they were genetically lucky, within the context of cycling or running.
- 4) Antecedent causal luck – there is luck in the way one's actions are determined by antecedent circumstances. E.g., children born into 'sporty' and supportive families are more likely to be motivated and better prepared to engage with sport than those who are not so fortunateⁱⁱ.

In light of a list like this, one might argue, as does Nagel (1979) that, when we add up these different types of luck, that we are faced with an apparent paradox: on the one hand,

it is suggested that we can be held responsible only for what is under our control; on the other hand, when we add up these different types of luck, the space that is left over that is free of luck seems to shrink “to an extensionless point” (p. 35). Eventually nothing seems to be left within our responsibility!

Yet another way of thinking about luck, which highlights what I think is the central issue at stake is that of Dworkin (1981) and Cohen (1989) who distinguish between ‘brute’ and ‘option’ luck. Option luck refers to that for which we are responsible, by choosing to take risks, for example. But we are not responsible for brute luck. There is a significant body of literature within egalitarian and social justice theorising that suggests that their most fundamental aim is to neutralise luck (Roemer, 1998; Arneson, 1989). And this has predominantly been taken to mean brute luck (Cohen, 1989). In other words, egalitarians aim to neutralise the influences on distribution for which we are not responsible.

LUCK AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT

So, why is this relevant to the discussion of talent development? It is because the whole presentation of the UK Government’s agenda, from its formal introduction in 1998, to the present day, has been within a discourse of social justice and equality. While there are fairly obvious instrumental arguments for developing our talented youth – such as providing society’s future champions, leaders or innovators - none of these is not the formal, explicit justification, which is summarised by Haight (2004, p. 1): “Issues of distributive justice informed government policy in locating the main funding for Gifted and Talented education in areas of social, economic and educational deprivation”.

It might be strange to suppose that the demands for equality and social justice can be met by a policy that only ever intended to reach, by the government's own reckoning, 5% of the school population (www.nagty.org.uk). But that is certainly the claim being made. The head of the centrally funded National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth characterises her 'English Model' in terms of "equality, social justice, meritocracy" (Eyre 2004a, p. 3), suggesting that it "gives a much better deal for gifted and talented generally and at the same time tackles the social justice agenda" (2004b, p. unpagged).

Interestingly, egalitarian theorists do have something to say about the relationship between talent and equality, but it is somewhat different than Blair, Eyre, et al, imply. This is because, from the social justice perspective, "the fundamental distinction for an egalitarian is between choice and luck in the shaping of people's fate" (Cohen, 1989, p. 907), and talent is attributable to luck. For example, Dworkin (2000, p. 92) argues that differences in wealth generated by differences "traceable to genetic luck" are unfair, and discusses a hypothetical insurance device that, on the one hand, neutralises "the effects of differential talents", and on the other is insensitive to the different ambitions people have in their lives. Likewise, Cohen (1989, p. 907) writes that "anyone who thinks that initial advantage and inherent capability are unjust distributors thinks so because he believes that they make a person's fate depend too much on sheer luck".

Often implicit in these sentiments is the equation of talent with genetic advantage. Thus Loland (2002, p. 68) suggests that "Abilities develop to a certain extent according to

genetic programming in all ‘normal’ human beings. This genetic programming can be ‘read’ from the genome ...”. Consequently talent is to some extent a matter of *luck*. Effort, commitment and dedication to an activity are not accountable in terms of luck. So, temporarily putting to one side the fact that one’s present level of talent reflects past effort, and that one’s level of effort reflects, to some extent, good or bad luck (Rawls, 1971)ⁱⁱⁱ, it is possible to summarise the relationships between talent, luck and rewards to the individual as follows, by considering the success of four individuals, with different endowments of talent and who invest different amounts of effort into a certain task (cf. Hurley, 2003; Roemer, 1996).

Table 1: Relationships between Luck, Effort and Rewards

	Effort: workaholic (<i>W</i>)	Effort: slacker (<i>S</i>)
Luck: talented (<i>T</i>)	<i>Best off</i>	<i>2nd Best Off</i>
Luck: untalented (<i>U</i>)	<i>3rd Best Off</i>	<i>Worst Off</i>

The difference between being a member of *T* and *U* is a matter of luck. The difference between being a member of *W* and *S* is not.

How might this relate to matters of social justice? According to Roemer (1996), distinctions of this kind form the basis of our judgements about how to redistribute justly. If, as is assumed by this position, differences in effort ought to be rewarded, but differences in talent should not, we are in a position to identify a ‘luck-neutralising’ distribution (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2005). To illustrate this, we might consider again our

four hypothesised individuals, who are blessed with different levels of talent and who invest a different amount of effort into their shared activity. How might they be rewarded by an egalitarian, luck-neutralising policy?

Table 2: Luck-neutralising distribution associated with talent and effort

	Luck	Effort	Unadjusted Rewards	Luck-neutralising distribution of rewards
1	<i>Talented</i>	<i>Workaholic</i>	40	30
2	<i>Talented</i>	<i>Slacker</i>	30	20
3	<i>Untalented</i>	<i>Workaholic</i>	20	30
4	<i>Untalented</i>	<i>Slacker</i>	10	20

Individuals 1 and 3, despite different levels of talent, put in the same amount of effort and get the same level of reward. The same is true of individuals 2 and 4. The rewards for 1 and 3 are highest, reflecting their higher levels of effort.

The advocates of the UK's approach to G&T education seem to share the view that talent is, to some extent, the result of brute luck. David Miliband (2004b), when Minister responsible for Schools, said that talent is "randomly distributed" among the population, whilst Prime Minister Tony Blair (1996, cited in Eyre, 2004a) somewhat self-contradictorily stated that "we believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth", but ultimately came down in favour of a luck-based view of talent

when he concluded that “we need to ... recognise the different abilities of different children” (unpaged).

The UK government’s policy of providing additional or enhanced opportunities for the most able pupils, that is, opportunities that are not available to the rest of the school population, seems to turn the luck-neutralisation equations on their heads. In fact, they actually result in *luck exaggeration* because they reward something for which individuals are not responsible.

Consider what this might look like in terms of the equations of redistribution, used above. Once again, we have our four individuals, with different levels of talent and effort.

Table 3: Luck-exaggerating distribution associated with talent and effort

	Luck	Effort	Unadjusted rewards	Luck-exaggerating distribution of rewards
1	<i>Talented</i>	<i>Workaholic</i>	40	45
2	<i>Talented</i>	<i>Slacker</i>	30	35
3	<i>Untalented</i>	<i>Workaholic</i>	20	15
4	<i>Untalented</i>	<i>Slacker</i>	10	5

In this scenario it is talent that is rewarded rather than effort. In other words, the redistribution of rewards favours those already benefiting by luck: advantage is mounted

on advantage; those untouched by talent are left untouched by the redistribution of rewards. In other words, the consequences of the UK government's 'English Model' of talent development seem to be precisely the opposite of those one might expect of a strategy founded on a social justice philosophy.

TALENT, LUCK AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

I have not sought to argue against the advocates of talent development in their policy of seeking to support G&T young people. Nor am I suggesting that talent development is wrong or indefensible, in some way. I accept that there are other forms of justification for such provision that are not vulnerable to my central argument (Bailey and Morley, 2006; Winstanley, 2006). Rather, I am questioning the justification of such actions primarily in terms of egalitarianism and social justice political theory. It is not difficult to see why these advocates have turned to social justice: such claims are made as rhetorical ripostes to what is presumed to be the critic's immediate line of attack: talent development is elitist (Ball, 2003). This rhetorical strategy seems to underlie ex-Secretary of State for Education, Estelle Morris' complaint that "Britain has always confused elitism with excellence" (2002, unpag^{iv}). Likewise, the government's National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth report: "Ideology has played a part .. in that making special provision for G&T pupils is commonly constructed as elitist in academic discourse" (Campbell, Eyre, Muijs, Neelands and Robinson, 2004, p. 2^v).

The language of equality and justice, in this context, seems to be little more than adopting 'success words' to ward off attacks, by using words and phrases with which many of the

likely critics would associate. But that will not do. Since we are talking about policy that relatively disadvantages the great majority of young people (and will absolutely disadvantage them in a context of constant sum of rewards), a rather more complete justification is required than has been offered to date.

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FOOTNOTES

- ⁱ In this paper, ‘G&T’, ‘talented’, ‘gifted’ and ‘very able’ are used as synonyms.
- ⁱⁱ Typologies of luck are, as might already be apparent, rather numerous and sometimes incommensurable. However, it is worth adding to the mix reference to the work of Rescher (1995), who distinguishes between pure chance, which cannot be predicted and controlled (like genetic variation) and forms of luck that merely seem unpredictable and uncontrollable due to ignorance. I mention Rescher’s work because it seems to have influenced Sigmund Loland’s (2002) nuanced discussion of the role of luck in sports competitions. Whilst this discussion does not relate directly to the concerns of the present paper, it might reasonably be supposed to be of interest to many of the same readers.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The empirical difficulties of separating ability from effort is not as problematic for the present discussion as it might first appear, since the analyses that follow are based on those aspects of performance / outcome for which individuals can be held responsible and those for which they cannot. Much the same applies to the insuperable empirical difficulties of factoring out environment conditions from genetic ‘dispositions’ when discussing athletic performance.
- ^{iv} Indeed in this short speech, she distances herself from charges of elitism seven times!
- ^v No evidence is given in support of this bold claim. Empirical research with both teachers (Bailey, Tan and Morley, 2004) and pupils (Morley, Copley and Bailey, 2006) do not offer support for the assertion of elitism is confused with excellence.