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Response to article 'Innate talents; reality or myth?' by Howe, M.J.A., Davidson, J.W. and Sloboda, J.A.

Inborn Talent Exists **Joan Freeman**

Abstract

Evidence shows that outstanding talent is more than the product of determined effort by people of much the same inborn ability. Indications of inborn individual differences come from very early and childhood studies. No randomly selected child has ever reached world-class achievement by practice alone, which though essential cannot itself produce greatness.

In their attempt to demolish the idea of the generally accepted "talent account", that outstanding performance comes from innate potential, Howe, Davidson and Sloboda have set up two straw men:

1. They write, "some people believe that talent is based on an inborn ability that makes it certain that its possessor will excel" (1.1). But in all my many years of research in this field, I have never heard or seen this supposed belief that excellence follows potential without the means to develop it.
2. It is widely assumed, they say, that talent "can be detected in early childhood" (1). But one might equally say that there is a widespread assumption that it is never too late to develop unrecognised talent, Grandma Moses style.

The authors cannot find any "firm" evidence of early manifestations of advanced abilities, which must emerge "in the absence of special opportunities to learn." (3.1). However, as all children have some opportunities it is necessary to look at the strong indications from very early development. For example, work at the Fels Institute (Lewis & Michalson, 1985) found that by 2-4 months measured infant memory could indicate future IQ, early motor development could predict subsequent physical aptitude, and there are distinct but related paths of development which are stable over the first three years of life. The strongest path, which can be traced from three months, is verbal. Even newborns who habituate faster are providing indications of future higher level intelligence (Messer, 1993; Colombo, 1993), and they do have innate preferences, such as for flavour and colour (Rosenblith, 1992).

This denial of early signs appears to be based on questionnaire responses from the parents of 257 children selected for a prestigious school of music: no such signs were recalled. But when I had carried out similar research at the same school of music with personal

interviews of the parents of 24 children, they often recalled distinct early signs, which was why they had taken the trouble to encourage them (Freeman, 1995). All the children I investigated had enjoyed equal and virtually free access to instruments and tuition, but those who were selected for the school had indeed received more family support and practised harder than the controls. However, later follow-up work with adolescent pupils at the school (Freeman, 1991) showed that what had appeared as great promise was at times the mistaken result of effort. That early advancement was not sustainable at an outstanding level, no matter how hard the youngsters worked. In fact, the music school has been forced to broaden its initially highly focused music education to accommodate such pupils who discovered that talent is more than practice and enthusiasm. This also happened in Feldman's study of 6 boy prodigies (Feldman with Goldsmith, 1986): in spite of heavy tutoring and practice, their advancement fizzled out.

The authors are right to question historical claims of exceptional precocity, but stating that early reading has only ever been reported at second-hand (including presumably Galton's) is not acceptable. For example, Zha Zi-Xiu (1985) in China found three year-olds reading very complicated characters, Gross (1993) in Australia found three year-olds reading and calculating, and Clark (1976) in her classic British study of early readers, reported under-fives starting school as already reading fluently. However, very early reading is not in itself a sure sign of talent, as it depends on access to reading material and parental involvement (Jackson, 1988).

The thrust of the authors' thesis is that those at the top of the talented achievement scale are not inherently different from those much lower down, though no mention is made of slow learners. Yet, nobody has ever taken a number of children at random and obliged them to practice to a world-class level of talent in any area. Until the authors can produce some evidence that inborn talent is not necessary for outstanding adult performance, as distinct from an improvement in skill, then the 'talent account' will remain in force among researchers. Indeed, in the end, the authors not only have to accept the existence of innate individual differences, but also state that there are certain attributes which can be called 'talent' which may only be possessed by a few individuals. Either inborn talent exists or it does not, and the evidence and arguments presented do not illuminate that concept any further. One can only conclude that although dedicated effort might be essential for world-class performance, it cannot of itself produce it.

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