



### **Socioeconomic inequality and giftedness: Suppression and distortion of high ability**

Ambrose, D. (2013). Socioeconomic inequality and giftedness: Suppression and distortion of high ability. *Roeper Review*, 35(2), 81-92.

There is a Figure presented early on in this article by Don Ambrose (2013) that should cause all New Zealanders to feel very concerned. It is reprinted with permission from the book *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always do Better* (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and shows that health and social problems are worse in more unequal countries. And there is New Zealand – starkly, right near the top of the most unequal countries, although the USA, where the article comes from, is way out in front.

I was interested in this article because it explored two of the areas around which my research passions lie – that of social justice and inequality, and giftedness and talent. The focus of Ambrose’s discussion is the impact of socioeconomic inequality on both the emergence of giftedness and talent, and the development of such talent. This is an important premise because there have long been underlying ideological assumptions that gifted and talented young people are overly represented among the higher socioeconomic groups in our society. Like Ambrose, I can understand the reasoning behind these assumptions – giftedness and talent will often lead to success in the work force; to higher paid, higher status jobs particularly in what he calls a “materialistic meritocracy” (p. 82). But it is also important to understand that there are just as many gifted and talented young people who live below the upper-middle class, and that in highly stratified societies this can represent a very large number. Basically, in unequal societies there are more gifted and talented poor people than there are rich people, simply because there are more poor people!

In his article, Ambrose talks about the “pernicious effects of inequality on the gifted” (p. 86). He notes that for gifted and talented youth who experience deprived environments with little support from significant adults there is far less chance of them achieving the success to which they might aspire. Their opportunities for social mobility are limited, despite their talents. The abilities of underprivileged youth are often hidden in a highly unequal society. Ambrose also discusses the ways in which material deprivation suppresses aspiration development. Children who lack resources such as education and good nutrition do not have the same lofty aspirations as children who are not deprived in this way. Ambrose describes this as “socioeconomic barriers to aspiration discovery and talent development” (p. 88).

Although Ambrose was drawing his arguments from another unequal society - the United States - many of these ideas resonated with me in relation to our own issues of social inequality and gifted youth. The work of Jill Bevan-Brown, Melinda Webber, Nadine Ballam and others remind us of the issues faced by many gifted and talented youth here in Aotearoa New Zealand who also experience deprived environments and who need the support of educators and their local communities to both aspire and to achieve. In his article, Ambrose gives the example of a programme by McCluskey, Baker and McCluskey (2005) called the Lost Prizes initiative. The programme focuses on the strengths of underprivileged but talented youth and supports them through creative problem solving and a focus on future careers. I know that there are similar programmes for gifted and talented youth in this country but sadly, not nearly enough.

Ambrose does point out that the problems around socioeconomic equality are much greater than those that are specific to the field of gifted education – an obvious conclusion, one would think! But I did like his concluding remarks, which encourage those who support gifted and talented young people who may experience deprivation in their lives to take actions to ameliorate the effects of social inequality on the aspiration discovery and the development of these gifted youth.

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## References

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