

Where's my role model? Gifted girls' responses to popular culture

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In this presentation, I will examine how gifted girls are depicted in popular culture and how they respond to such characterisations. Once viewed as the antithesis of high cultural art forms (e.g. opera, literature or classical music), popular culture was a term coined to describe the art and communication forms that were aimed at the masses. As such, popular culture includes forms such as newspapers, television, advertising, popular music, 'low-brow' novels, film, and so on. Inherent in this delineation between 'high' and 'low' art is an assumption that the latter forms are of lesser quality. In the last couple of decades, however, a high level of academic interest has been directed to popular culture, which confirms the need for educationalists to seriously consider the topic and its impact for young people. Popular culture is an important topic for gifted education because, while a great deal is known about how parents, peers, teachers and schools influence the development of talent, little is known about the role that popular culture plays in this process. In previous work, I explored how giftedness is depicted in popular culture. Educators need to know what role models gifted students can access in popular culture texts because these depictions play a key role in the creation and maintenance of stereotypical notions of giftedness in the general population. A second line of research relates to the impact that popular culture has on gifted students. It is useful to know what they watch, read, and listen to and how they respond to its messages, particularly if those messages are negatively impacting their academic outcomes and their social-emotional well-being.

A key theme in the research on popular culture and giftedness has been directed at the depiction of intelligent females in television and the potential this has for impacting the outcomes for gifted girls. Writers have suggested that issues and debates related to women's role in society—and particularly, the conflict between femininity and feminism—derive from the conflicting messages for girls presented in the mass media. For our gifted girls, the messages in popular culture, thus, are contradictory and highlight the dilemma experienced by many gifted youth in having to choose between their intellectual needs and the need for social acceptance. If popular culture is viewed as a reflection of society's beliefs and attitudes, it is hardly surprising that many of our gifted girls are constrained by expectations that are more aligned to their gender than their potential.