The Psychology of High Abilities

Also by Michael J. A. Howe

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The Psychology of High Abilities

Michael J. A. Howe

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Preface

High abilities are a vital human resource, and the aim of *The Psychology of High Abilities* is to explain how, when and why people acquire them, and illuminate ways of making it possible for larger numbers of young people to extend their capabilities. It was originally intended that *The Psychology of High Abilities* would be a shorter and more up-to-date version of an earlier book, *The Origins of Exceptional Abilities*, which was first published in 1990. However, it soon became apparent that the changes would need to be far more substantial than I had anticipated, and less than half of *The Psychology of High Abilities* is directly based on the earlier book.

Because high abilities are so valuable, there is much to be gained from striving to understand their causes. It is not always easy to know for certain why one individual rather than another has gained impressive capabilities. Explaining that can be so difficult, and there is always a temptation to assume that the origins of exceptional abilities are a complete mystery. There is also a tendency for people to assume that special genes or special innate gifts must be at the root of unusual capabilities, without even stopping to establish whether or not there is a scientific justification for that assumption. Simply because they cannot think of alternative explanations, some people leap to the conclusion that innate talents must be the cause. In reality, as soon as one seriously looks for them, a substantial number of other influences that contribute to individual variability in human abilities become evident.

We cannot manufacture geniuses, but we can take steps that substantially increase the likelihood of young people acquiring high degrees of competence in various fields of expertise, and enjoying lives that are productive and successful as well as fulfilling. And although our knowledge of the causes of the most exceptional abilities is certainly incomplete, we do know

sufficient to make it possible to design and implement educational policies that could lead to substantial increase in the proportion of young people who master the difficult skills that society rightly values.

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