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Letter to the Editors

The National Policy for Students with High-Abilities/Giftedness in Brazil: is there an empirical basis for the hype?

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The National Policy for Students with High-Abilities/Giftedness in Brazil: is there an empirical basis for the hype?

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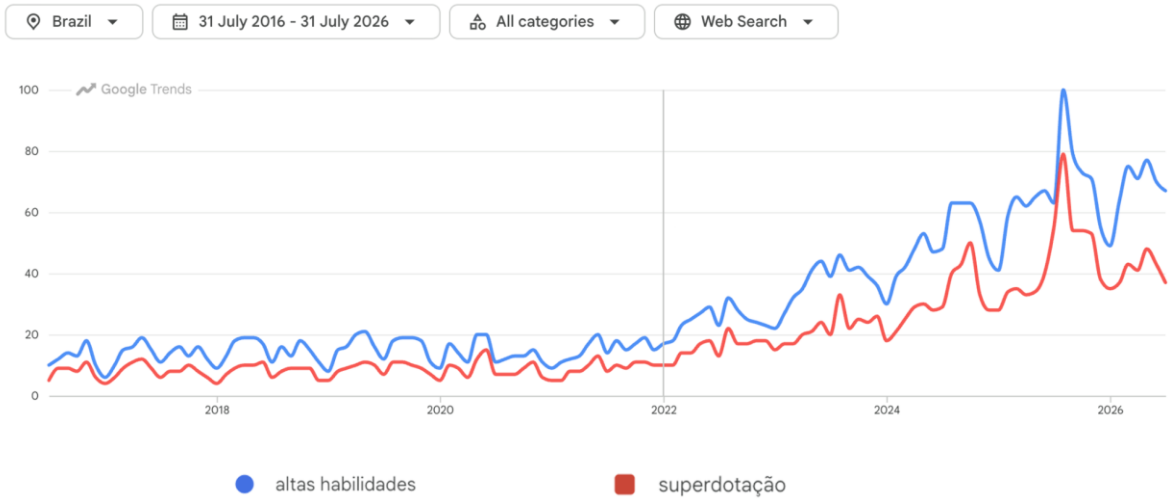
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Last June, Brazil enacted the National Policy for Students with High Abilities or Giftedness (Altas Habilidades ou Superdotação, AH/SD) under Law No. 15.436/2026.[1] The legislation defines AH/SD as a neurodevelopmental condition characterized, among other features, by elevated intellectual potential, intense curiosity, advanced learning capacity, and deep engagement in areas of interest, often accompanied by heightened sensitivity and emotional intensity. It aims to promote the early identification and full inclusion of gifted students across all educational stages (from basic school to postgraduate level), including those with twice-exceptionality in which high ability coexists with neurodevelopmental disorders or disabilities. The policy establishes the creation of a national registry, the provision of specialized educational services, and the implementation of flexible academic pathways.

This legislative milestone reflects and reinforces a surge of public interest in the subject of intellectual giftedness in Brazil. Headlines such as “How to know if your child is gifted?" illustrate how mainstream media commodifies this topic, including news spotlighting celebrities' accounts of their own experiences with the “diagnosis”.[2,3] Figure 1 presents Google Trends data regarding searches for high abilities (*"altas habilidades"*) and giftedness (*"superdotação”*) in Brazil, demonstrating an exponential increase in recent years.[4] A brief inspection of these results reveals a fast-growing market of self-proclaimed specialists and commercial institutions offering specialized training and certification courses.

Figure 1 Google Trends analytics: search interest over time for high abilities (“altas habilidades”) and giftedness ("superdotação”) in Brazil



Note: Data publicly available from Google Trends.[4] Results are shown on a relative scale from 0 to 100, where 100 represents the peak of popularity in that time period. Vertical lines indicate timepoints when the data collection system underwent improvements.

This momentum aligns with a broader (and uncontestedly necessary) recognition of mental health and neurodiversity in public debate. Giftedness has increasingly been folded into this larger movement; in the national school census, for instance, enrollment data for students with disabilities, global developmental disorders, and high abilities/giftedness are all grouped into a single statistical category.[5] More than that, the giftedness movement evolved further, acquiring its own hype and advocacy base, ultimately culminating in a dedicated national policy. This process demands closer scrutiny: does the scientific literature offer robust grounds to justify the distinct and increasingly prioritized status that giftedness has come to occupy in both public debate and legislation? And does this emphasis truly reflect a public health and educational priority proportionate to the surrounding hype?

This hardly seems to be the case. In fact, public enthusiasm appears to be outpacing scientific consensus. High abilities/giftedness is not a diagnostic category in formal classification systems, as it does not constitute a psychopathological condition defined by a characteristic pattern of symptoms and functional impairment. Furthermore, systematic reviews have consistently concluded that the non-cognitive characteristics of gifted children and adolescents fail to form a stable or distinct profile that reliably sets them apart from their peers.[6,7] What is more, it remains unclear what exactly we mean by "giftedness," as the field lacks an agreed-upon definition and exhibits considerable heterogeneity in identification criteria, including

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several studies relying on the notoriously narrow IQ as single classification instrument. In Brazil, the research landscape is particularly fragile and offers little groundwork for evidence-based practices. Instruments currently used in the country lack proper empirical evaluation of validity or accuracy with local samples.[8] Professional practices are highly divergent across the country, with specialists lacking standardized procedures for evaluation.[9]

More worrisome still, empirical findings often contradict the core claims that underpin both policymaking and public awareness campaigns. The widely held belief that gifted individuals are inherently vulnerable to socio-emotional difficulties is not consistently supported in literature.[6,10] In fact, current evidence points in the opposite direction: high intellectual ability may be a protective factor, as gifted adults tend to achieve greater occupational accomplishment and gifted youth often demonstrate superior emotional adjustment relative to their non-gifted counterparts.[11,12] This does not mean that gifted individuals do not experience psychological or educational difficulties, but rather that such difficulties cannot be assumed solely from the label itself.

In this context, what are the practical consequences of codifying a reified category of "high abilities/giftedness" into national law? While intended for inclusive planning, a national registry can lead to stigma and differential treatment, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of exceptionality that places undue pressure on identified children while implicitly devaluing the ungifted.[13] Giftedness occupies an unusual position in the expanding diagnostic marketplace: it offers the legitimacy of a clinical label without its usual stigma, providing instead a flattering and socially desirable identity.[13] At the same time, it risks the medicalization of a human trait, pathologizing the upper tail of a natural distribution. Together, this fosters iatrogenic differentiation and fuels a specialized market, with a growing proliferation of practitioners eager to supply this demand without the necessary scientific grounding.

In turn, most educational interventions recommended for gifted children are actually good universal pedagogical practices (clear exception noted for grade skipping).[13] Curricular enrichment, acceleration, and ability grouping can certainly benefit a wide range of students. The concern is not with the practices themselves, but with their categorical targeting. The policy directs resources toward a group that the literature suggests is not systematically at higher risk, potentially at the expense of other students facing more pressing and better-established educational needs.

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While the endeavor to tailor educational contexts to match individual needs and potential achievement is valuable, this must be evidence-informed rather than driven by digital hype and market creation. As it stands, current evidence favours reframing high abilities/giftedness not as a distinct syndrome requiring a separate policy, but as a part of the broader spectrum of human diversity best addressed by strengthening universal, high-quality, and flexible education for all. Educational policy should not be formulated around categorical labels, but guided by functional, developmental, and educational needs of students.

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