
Knowing Talent from an Early Age: Between Normative Awareness and Reflective Ignorance of Students

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Abstract

This research departs from a conceptual unease about the importance of recognizing talent early in the framework of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's thought. In this study, 'talent' refers to students' inherent aptitudes, abilities, or natural potentials that can be recognized and developed. In his view, a free human being is an individual who can understand their potential from a young age through a continuous process of growth into adulthood. However, the reality of education shows a gap between awareness of the importance of talent and the ability to recognize it concretely. Here, 'normative awareness' means students' understanding of the general or accepted importance of knowing their abilities, while 'reflective awareness' refers to their personal, conscious recognition of their own talents. This study uses a descriptive, quantitative approach and a survey method, involving 78 second-semester students from three mathematics classes. The research instrument consists of 12 questions that measure perception and self-awareness related to talent. The research results show that all respondents (100%) stated the importance of knowing their talents from an early age, but all (100%) also admitted they did not know their talents for sure. These findings indicate a disjunction between normative awareness and reflective awareness within the students. Theoretically, this condition indicates a weak guidance process within the education system that has not yet helped students fully recognize their potential. This research provides important implications for the development of a more reflective, dialogical, and individual potential-exploration-oriented, student-centered education model.

Keywords

Early talent; normative awareness; reflective awareness; self-awareness

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1. INTRODUCTION

Amid the increasingly complex currents of educational globalization, the issue of early talent recognition has emerged as an important discourse in the development of human quality (Pancarina, 2021; Parra-Martinez & Wai, 2023). International reports emphasize that 21st-century education should no longer focus solely on the transmission of knowledge but should holistically develop individual potential, including self-awareness as the foundation for lifelong learning (OECD, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020). In this context, individuals' failure to recognize their talents early on results in low psychological well-being, career direction confusion, and weak personal identity construction



(Batool & Ghayas, 2020, 2020; Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). Thus, recognizing talent is not merely a personal need but has become a global agenda in education, well-being, and sustainable human development.

In Islamic education and critical pedagogy, the recognition of talent runs deep. Education is not just cognitive; it also guides human nature toward perfection. Ki Hadjar Dewantara puts “among” at the core of education, guiding individuals to discover and nurture potential naturally and sustainably (Dewantara, 1977; Ferary, 2021; Taufikin, 2021a, 2021b). However, modern education often takes a uniform approach and emphasizes formal achievement, thereby restricting the exploration of talent. Studies in contemporary Islamic education primarily focus on curriculum, teaching methods, and the integration of values (Baiza, 2022; Bouzenita & Wood, 2018; Sahin, 2018). Self-awareness around talent has yet to be a main focus.

Several studies have examined the relationship between self-awareness, interests, and students' career direction. Marciniak et al., (2022) highlights the importance of self-awareness in adolescent career development. Howard et. al., (2021) examine the role of intrinsic motivation in the formation of academic identity. Zulfatmi (2023) and Kasim & Yusoff (2014), in the context of Islamic education, emphasize the importance of integrating spiritual values into potential development. Hertzog (2017), Soemantri (2010), Yusuf (2021) and Arjanto (2023) studied the influence of educational environment on talent exploration. However, these studies tend to view talent aspects partially and have not empirically integrated normative and reflective awareness. Most existing studies examine motivation, curriculum, and identity development, while paying limited attention to the gap between awareness of the importance of talent and its concrete recognition.

However, there are conceptual and empirical gaps that remain inadequately addressed. First, empirical studies about the gap between awareness of talent's importance and the ability to recognize talent concretely are very limited. Second, little research combines Ki Hadjar Dewantara's philosophical perspective with empirical student data from Islamic higher education. Third, most research remains normative and conceptual without strong quantitative support. Thus, little is known about how students perceive the importance of talent, while they lack clarity about their own potential. Previous research has not addressed this paradox in a measurable, context-specific way.

Given this background, this study examines the gap between normative and reflective awareness of talent in Mathematics Study Program students at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kudus. It specifically asks: (1) How much do students' value early talent identification? (2) How accurately can they identify their own talents? A descriptive quantitative survey targets second-semester student.

This study makes several key contributions. Theoretically, it provides a conceptual framework for the gap between normative and reflective awareness in talent recognition. Empirically, it draws on data from students in Islamic higher education, a group that has rarely been studied this way.

Methodologically, it combines survey methods with reflective analysis grounded in classical and modern educational theories. Socially, it implies practical steps toward a more humanistic, reflective, and individually-oriented education system.

2. METHOD

This study is grounded in the methodological understanding that talent is not merely an individual psychological phenomenon, but also a socio-pedagogical construct that can be empirically measured. Therefore, a quantitative, descriptive survey design was employed to identify general patterns in students' perceptions of the importance of talent and their ability to recognize it (Cohen et al., 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). A survey was chosen because it can systematically capture collective trends, while a descriptive approach was used to depict the phenomenon within the context of higher education, without testing causal relationships.

This study was conducted in the Mathematics Education Program at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kudus, which has a distinctive character as an Islamic higher education institution integrating Islamic studies and science, and places students at the intersection of academic demands and personal development. The study participants consisted of 78 second-semester students from three classes, selected using total sampling.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that measured two main aspects: normative awareness of the importance of talent and reflective awareness in recognizing personal talent. Data collection was conducted in a controlled classroom setting, with clear instructions to ensure consistency. Data analysis utilized descriptive statistics via SPSS, focusing on frequency distributions and percentages. To ensure data quality, content validity, and reliability, tests were conducted using Cronbach's Alpha, ensuring that the instrument possessed an acceptable level of reliability for social research (Dukes, 2006; Meixner & Hathcoat, 2019).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals findings that are consistent yet sharply contrasting. Among 78 second-semester students in Mathematics Education at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kudus, all recognized the importance of early talent identification. Yet, each admitted they did not know what talents they possessed. Before discussing the main results, it is important to confirm that the instruments used were valid and reliable.

Table 1. Research Instrument Blueprint

No.	Variable	Indicator	Number of Items
1.	Normative Awareness	Understanding the importance of talent	6
2.	Reflective Awareness	Ability to identify personal talent	6
	Total		12

Referring to Table 1, the research instrument consists of 12 items, evenly distributed to measure two main constructs. This structure ensures that the measurement is not biased toward any single dimension.

Table 2. Measurement Scale

Score	Response Category
1.	Strongly Disagree
2.	Disagree
3.	Neutral
4.	Agree
5.	Strongly Agree

As Table 2 shows, a Likert scale gave a graded measure of perceptions. However, the final data revealed a highly homogeneous response.

Table 3. Instrument Validity and Reliability

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Threshold	Interpretation
Normative Awareness	0.82	> 0.70	Reliable
Reflective Awareness	0.79	> 0.70	Reliable
Overall Instrument	0.81	Acceptable	Reliable

Referring to Table 3, the Cronbach's Alpha values for each variable, both normative awareness (0.82) and reflective awareness (0.79), exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating that the instrument possesses good internal consistency. The overall value of the instrument (0.81) further reinforces that all items work in harmony in measuring the intended construct. Thus, this research instrument can be considered reliable, meaning that the resulting data has an adequate level of stability and reliability for use in further analysis.

3.1. Perceptions of the Importance of Identifying Talents at an Early Age

Table 4. Students' Perception of the Importance of Talent

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Important	78	100%
Not Important	0	0%
Total	78	100%

Referring to Table 4, all respondents (100%) stated that recognizing talent at an early age is important, with no variation in responses. This finding indicates that students' normative awareness is at a very high level and is collective in nature. However, precisely because of its uniform and absolute

nature, this result carries critical implications. This awareness tends to be declarative, accepted as an established common truth, but is not necessarily rooted in personal reflective experience. In other words, students understand the importance of talent as a socially internalized value discourse, not as the result of a deep encounter with their own potential. This condition suggests a gap between students' conceptual understanding and existential awareness.

3.2. Ability to Identify Talent with Certainty

Table 5. Students' Certainty in Identifying Their Talent

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Certain about their talent	0	0%
Uncertain about their talent	78	100%
Total	78	100%

Referring to Table 5, all respondents (100%) stated that they were not certain about their talents. The fact that no respondent expressed certainty indicates that reflective awareness is at a very low level, perhaps even nonexistent. This finding reveals a fundamental disconnect between knowledge and personal experience. Students have understood the importance of talent as a concept, but have not yet been able to position themselves as subjects who possess and live out that talent. Thus, their awareness remains confined to the cognitive realm, not yet reaching the reflective dimension that enables the formation of a clear personal identity.

3.3. Cross-Class Consistency

Table 6. Cross-Class Consistency of Findings

Class	Number of Students	Important (%)	Uncertain Talent (%)
A	27	100%	100%
B	26	100%	100%
C	25	100%	100%

Referring to Table 6 above, there are no differences between classes. All groups exhibit identical patterns. This indicates that the phenomenon is structural rather than individual or situational. When the entire table is read holistically, three main structures of meaning emerge: first, Dominant Normative Awareness; students have internalized the value of talent. This demonstrates the educational system's success in transmitting values. Second, the Absence of Reflective Awareness: Students are unable to recognize their own talents. This indicates a weakness in the process of self-reflection within the educational experience. Third, the Absolute Gap between Knowing and Being: The data reveals a total disconnect between knowledge and experience. Not a single respondent bridges the two. That is:

- a. 100% of students state that talent is important
- b. 100% of students do not know their own talents
- c. The absence of data variation indicates a collective and structural phenomenon
- d. An absolute gap has been identified between normative and reflective awareness

Thus, the results of this study not only present figures but also reveal a pattern of skewed awareness. Valid and reliable data show that students live in a state of value awareness without a sense of self-ownership.

Discussion

The findings of this research present a quiet yet profound irony: students acknowledge the importance of recognizing talent early, yet simultaneously fail to identify their own. This pattern is not merely a simple dissonance but rather indicates an epistemic gap between normative awareness and reflective awareness. In other words, students know "what should be important," but do not have internal access to "who they really are." This condition aligns with the developmental psychology literature, which emphasizes that self-awareness does not automatically develop from normative knowledge (Batool & Ghayas, 2020; Harter, 2015; Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Rochat, 2015; Terrace & Metcalfe, 2012).

Theoretically, this phenomenon can be explained from a humanistic education perspective. Abraham Maslow places self-actualization at the pinnacle of human needs, achievable only when individuals fully understand their potential (Carducci, 2020b, 2020a; D'Souza & Gurin, 2017; Kaufman, 2023; Maslow, 1943). When students do not recognize their talents, self-actualization is hindered at an early stage. Carl Rogers also emphasized that education should facilitate "becoming a person," which is the process of authentically discovering oneself (Rogers, 1957; Woodward, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2022). In contemporary research, self-awareness has proven to be a major predictor in career decision-making and life satisfaction (Howard et al., 2021; Kay, 2018; Martin, 2018; Verbruggen, 2020).

In the context of Indonesia, Ki Hadjar Dewantara's ideas are highly relevant. The concept of "*among*" is not just a pedagogical method but an educational philosophy that emphasizes guidance in line with the child's nature (Dewantara, 1977; Istiq'faroh, 2020; Taufikin, 2021a). When students do not know their talents, it indicates that the among process is not functioning properly. Education may succeed in conveying the value of talent, but it fails to accompany the process of discovering that talent itself. In value-based education studies, this failure is often associated with the dominance of instructional approaches over reflective ones. (Biesta, 2015, 2020).

This finding can also be interpreted through Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Davis et al., 2011; B. Gardner et al., 2022; H. Gardner & Moran, 2006). Gardner rejects reducing intelligence to a single dimension and emphasizes the diversity of human potential. However, the education system often only values certain types of intelligence, especially logical-mathematical intelligence. Recent studies show that overly academic curricula tend to hinder the exploration of identity and talent. (OECD, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020).

Compared with previous research, these findings show both similarities and significant differences. Wilhelm & Hirschi (2019) shows that low self-awareness correlates with career confusion. Howard (2021) emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation in the formation of academic identity. Other research shows that students often experience “identity diffusion” when they lack clarity about their potential (Kröger et al., 2019). However, this research goes further by showing that even before career confusion arises, there is a fundamental gap in talent recognition.

Based on the synthesis of findings and theory, this research proposes a new conceptual construct, the “Normative–Reflective Talent Gap Model.” This model explains that there are two layers of awareness: normative awareness (external knowledge) and reflective awareness (internalized personal). When the two are not connected, individuals are in a state of “awareness without ownership.”

This model describes three stages: (1) internalization of values (normative awareness), (2) self-reflection (reflective awareness), and (3) identity integration (talent clarity). The findings of this research indicate that the process stops at the first stage. This concept expands the literature on talent development, which has so far focused more on the identification of abilities rather than the integration of awareness (Duckworth et al., 2019).

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the formulation of the gap between knowing and becoming. Empirically, this research presents concrete evidence in the context of Islamic higher education, a field that is still rarely explored. Methodologically, this research demonstrates that a simple descriptive approach can uncover profound structural phenomena.

The practical implications are clear: educational institutions need to design interventions based on self-reflection, mentoring, and experiential learning. Studies show that reflective approaches can significantly enhance the clarity of self-concept (Jones, 2020). The curriculum also needs to shift from mere cognitive evaluation to facilitating self-exploration.

However, this research has limitations. Descriptive design does not allow for causal analysis. Moreover, the limited context necessitates caution in generalization. Further research is recommended to use a mixed-method and longitudinal design to capture the dynamics of talent development more comprehensively. Thus, this research not only uncovers problems but also opens new directions in understanding education as a process of self-discovery, rather than merely meeting standards.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This research emphasizes a finding that is not merely descriptive but conceptual: a gap between normative and reflective awareness in the recognition of student talent. Students know that talent is important, but they are unable to identify themselves as subjects of that knowledge. This is where the

novelty of this research lies, not in the repetition of the old thesis about the importance of talent, but in the discovery of a lopsided structure of consciousness, which we have formulated as the Normative, Reflective Talent Gap. This finding shows that, in practice, education is more successful at instilling values than at guiding the inner experiences that allow those values to become one's own. Thus, the main issue is not a lack of information, but the disconnection between knowing and becoming.

The implications are broad and urgent. Education needs to shift from an instructional orientation to a reflective praxis that allows students to explore themselves authentically, through mentoring, dialogue, and meaningful learning experiences. Theoretically, this research enriches the realm of self-development studies by adding a dual awareness dimension (normative-reflective) that has not yet been explicitly mapped. However, this research has limitations in its descriptive design and limited context, so generalizations must be made with caution. Therefore, subsequent research needs to test this model using longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches, as well as to develop pedagogical interventions that can bridge that gap. With that step, education does not stop at knowledge about potential, but moves toward a real encounter between humans and their talents.

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