

A Developmental View of Giftedness: *From Being to Doing*

Rena F. Subotnik



Rena Subotnik is director of the Esther Katz Rosen Center for Gifted Education Policy at the American Psychological Association. She is author of *Genius Revisited: High IQ Children Grown Up* (1993), and co-editor of *Beyond Terman: Contemporary Longitudinal Studies of Giftedness and Talent* (with Karen Arnold), *Remarkable Women: Perspectives on Female Talent Development* (with Karen Arnold and Kathleen Noble), and the second edition of the *International Handbook of Research on Giftedness and Talent* (with Kurt Heller, Franz Mönks, and Robert Sternberg). E-mail: rsubotnik@apa.org

When I began a professorship at Hunter College in 1986, the president, Donna Shalala, asked if I'd like a grant to conduct a study of alumni of the Hunter College Elementary School for Gifted Children (HCES). Perhaps she hoped that the alumni would turn out to be a rich source of future donations. Or, maybe she was just curious about what motivated so many New York City parents to pursue available slots at the school for their high IQ children.

In the basement of the school exist files that go back to the 1940s when HCES began to identify and serve high IQ children. My co-investigators and I were able to locate and interview over 250 of the 600 alumni who graduated between 1949 (the first class that came in under the IQ criteria) and 1960, when IQ was de-emphasized for a period of time. The youngest study participants were in their late 30s and the oldest in their early 50s. If Donna Shalala had been counting on a rich source of funding, she wouldn't have found it with this group, as the HCES alumni were singularly non-materialistic. They were also in good health, content, and exhibited a notable lack of exceptional achievement (Subotnik, Kassan, Summers & Wasser, 1993). This outcome affected me tremendously and has been festering for years on my mental backburner. Can gifted children grown up claim to be gifted adults without displaying markers of distinction associated with their abilities?

In response to this question, I will present a couple of scenarios that rationalize a developmental approach to giftedness. Following the presentations of the scenarios, I'd like to recognize people in our field whose work has informed my views on this topic. Finally, I will make some brief comments about implications for identification and programming.

Sonia is five years old and scores in the 99th plus percentile on an individualized IQ test. Her parents and teachers do everything they can to provide her with an enriched and challenging environment. When we see her in grade 6, she's likely to be doing exceptionally well compared to children her age without her extraordinary abilities and supportive community.

Ellen takes the school entrance readiness tests that indicate she is advanced. She is tested by a psychologist and is found to be in the 99th plus percentile on an individual IQ test. However, Ellen receives no special services at school and for whatever reasons, her parents are not forceful about getting any services for her. Although Ellen shares Sonia's high IQ, she may or may not be doing well scholastically in sixth grade.

Sonia is integrating available skills and knowledge keyed to her great intellectual abilities. Ellen is engaged with haphazard provision of skills and knowledge as related to her abilities. If Ellen were not doing well in 6th grade, some people would not call her gifted any more. I'm not one of them. That's because I believe that at this point, Ellen could receive some intensive instruction during summers or in a new school that could help her catch up academically, over time, with Sonia. I'd want her to have that opportunity.

We've looked at three variables so far:

- Academic potential (in the form of IQ)
- Age or stage of gifted development (early and middle school)
- Availability of appropriate challenge

Between 6th grade and 12th grade, another variable comes into play as parents and teachers have less control over young people's decision making and how they spend their time. I call this variable "hunger," but others have called it drive, motivation, or the rage to master (Winner, 1996). Individuals who are "hungry" love to learn or to be stimulated intellectually.

Let's go back to Sonia. Sonia attends a secondary school where she continues to be challenged, and to be offered skills and knowledge that she needs to develop intellectually. She finds herself attracted to certain subjects more than others. She informs herself about affordable summer and after school programs that allow her to network with other adolescents and adults with similar interests and concerns. As a senior, she gets a paper accepted to the *Concord Review* or by the *Intel Science Talent Search*. Because her work reflects thinking that is clearly exceptional, I would call her a gifted student.

What if Sonia didn't have the hunger? Throughout secondary school she studies just enough to pass her honors classes. She feels little passion for the material she's exposed to and prefers to focus on her inner life and relationship with friends. Some people would say that Sonja is still gifted. I would have a harder time rationalizing a place for her in a gifted program with others who *are* hungry and demonstrate actual high-level performance in the form of writing or research projects. At another point in life Sonia may find something that stimulates her hunger. When she does, she can apply for special programming again. Unfortunately, however, over time, opportunities become fewer in some fields of study.

If Ellen took advantage of catching-up opportunities at the beginning of high school, she was exhibiting hunger and could benefit from a gifted program in secondary school. If not, she would fall tragically far behind in the development of her potential.

I'm drawing readers' attention to the fact that labeling students as gifted has implications for policy and finance, because identification is a stand-in for admission to selective programs. Asking students to maintain optimal performance in these programs, particularly in secondary school and beyond, reinforces hunger on the part of students with the ability to do well in school. We would not ask any less from a gifted musical or athletic performer.

We have looked at five variables so far.

- Academic potential (in the form of IQ)
- Age or stage of talent development (early, middle, high school)
- Availability of appropriate challenge
- Hunger
- Discovery of domains of interest and ability

Let's visit with Sonia and Ellen as adults in their mid-30s. Sonia and Ellen seek out the skills and knowledge that they need in order to maximize their potential. They solicit advice from mentors or colleagues that guide their energies well. They remain hungry to make a difference in the world, and hone their social skills and unique personal qualities to make others take notice of their ideas, and to channel those ideas productively. Sonia and Ellen are becoming known in their respective fields, viewed with respect and probably some envy. They have become gifted *scholars, researchers, writers*, fill in the blank. We can call these women gifted, because they have exercised their abilities toward exceptional performance or productivity in a domain.

Two more variables have been added into the mix.

- Academic potential (in the form of IQ)
- Age or development (early, middle, high school and adulthood)
- Availability of appropriate challenge
- Domain of interest and ability
- Hunger
- Career advice or tacit knowledge (socialization)
- Excellent social skills or charisma

I ask you to consider viewing this list in two ways. One is to think about different combinations and permutations of Sonia and Ellen in regard to the seven variables. In childhood they start off with equally high IQs. By sixth grade their development will depend on whether or not they received appropriate challenge, and that may depend on how removed from the mainstream is their background. By the end of high school, what they're doing with their gifts will also depend on whether or not they have actively channeled their interests into a domain. By middle adulthood, they will have to either maintain the hunger or not, be in a position to receive and adapt tacit knowledge or not, and finally be able to engage the interest of others in their ideas, products or performances – or not.

According to this model, the influence of some of the earlier variables, namely IQ and availability of appropriate challenge remain important contributors, but in order to be gifted, that is, to be exceptional, as one matures, one needs to be increasingly active in one's own development. You have to develop your hunger, you have to be open to career advice, and you have to hone your social skills or your intriguing persona.

You may be thinking that other scholars in psychology and education have featured the variables from my list. I certainly acknowledge their contributions to my work (in alphabetical order):

- *David Feldman* (2000), for his insights into the developmental trajectories unique to each domain.
- *François Gagné* (2000), for featuring the differences between giftedness as potential and talent as fulfillment of potential.
- *Rena Ochs* (1990), for differentiating between the development of elite level talent and everyday performance.
- *Paula Olszewski-Kubilius* (2000), for elucidating the environmental conditions in the home that lead to high achievement or creativity.
- *Jane Piirto* (1998), for helping connect the literature on giftedness, creativity, and the domains.
- *Joseph Renzulli* (1999), for distinguishing between schoolhouse and real world giftedness, and for putting the concepts of persistence and motivation on the table.
- *Robert Sternberg* (2000), for featuring the role of tacit knowledge, capitalizing on strengths and weaknesses, and viewing intelligence as malleable.

- *Abraham Tannenbaum* (1986), for linking general and special ability, personality, opportunity, and chance with fulfillment of potential.

You may also think that I am holding the bar too high for labeling someone gifted in adulthood. I would argue that our expectations for intellectual giftedness are too low when compared to the performance fields. Musicians and athletes are expected to perform in their groups or programs. If they do not, they usually leave the group or play a marginalized role. People can call themselves, their children, students, clients or friends gifted, yet unless we are scrupulous with our resources, children who are motivated and able may not get services, and limited funding may not be well spent.

We have two main responsibilities in our field. One is to nurture potential in children to high levels. The other is to stoke the exceptional achievements of adolescents and adults. What are the implications of viewing giftedness as developing from being to doing?

- Give everyone an enriched early childhood education.
- In childhood, seek out those demonstrating exceptional potential is sufficient.
- Always reinforce hunger and commitment to excellence.
- Give those young children with exceptional potential highly challenging work and teachers with appropriate expertise.
- In late adolescence, guide individuals with great potential to explore preferred domains of performance.
- Give those who exhibit exceptional performance highly challenging work and teachers with appropriate expertise.
- Continue to reinforce hunger and commitment to excellence
- Reinforce development of unique styles and personal skills that enhance the likelihood that contributions can indeed help to make our lives better or more beautiful.
- In adulthood, giftedness requires recognition by members of one's field for excellence in performance, leadership, or creative ideas.

Let's get back to the Hunter College Elementary School graduates. They were not doing much more than one would expect from bright, upper middle class children. They are teachers, lawyers, accountants, and business people. You may ask why growing up to be a good person, parent, etcetera, is not sufficient for a high IQ child to call him or herself gifted as an adult. I would argue that everyone, save individuals immobilized by severe emotional or cognitive problems, should strive to be a good person or a good parent. Yet only a person with special gifts can be eminent and make transformational marks on a field.

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