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Challenging an Idea Whose Time has Gone

Response to Robert Sternberg's ACCEL: A New Model for Identifying the Gifted

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In this response to Sternberg's article, "ACCEL: A New Model for Identifying the Gifted," we agree that IQ testing may have outlasted its usefulness as an identification tool for gifted students. The field's commitment to an imperfect formula has neglected the evolution of offerings in schools and theoretical underpinnings that are moving us away from an outdated conception of giftedness. IQ testing should be reserved for finding specific forms of high ability and as a diagnostic tool, not as a gatekeeper that continues to perpetuate the underrepresentation of some groups.

Keywords: Intelligence testing, Standardized testing, Talent development, Gifted identification, Underrepresentation

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to Dr. Sternberg's article. In his article, Sternberg argues that, as with many influential theories in various disciplines, over time certain ideas and their related practices cease to be as important, helpful or even relevant as when they were originally created. There are numerous examples of invaluable scientific contributions that were disproven or replaced by something with more contemporary impact and/or value. It is not heresy to analyze the status quo or to recommend that our society would be better off if we make a change from an IQ or standardized testing approach to identifying gifted students to one that is dramatically different—different in assumptions, desired evidence, and potential outcomes.

Since Terman's time (early to mid 1900's), many have accepted and, in fact, based the entire field of gifted education on the equation: $T=S+E$. This is a positivistic approach that assumes there is a TTrue score (something that exists) that we can measure by creating a test (Score; in Terman's case the Stanford Binet), and then can more closely approximate the True score by calculating the Error associated with the instrument. Whether it is the Stanford Binet, Weschler Intelligence Scales or any other standardized instrument, the assumptions and approach stay the same. Our efforts to build better instruments as a means to reduce error have kept us on a circular path for nearly 100 years now, circling our philosophical wagons in the field out of an odd allegiance to maintaining the $T=S+E$ approach to gifted identification. As Sternberg points out, our allegiance to this approach has retarded our ability to keep up with the evolution of the field itself.

Today, gifted students participate in innumerable programs and opportunities. From art and music camps to leadership programs to dance to more traditional STEM programs, gifted education has expanded far beyond our gold standard gifted identification procedure. There are at least three important issues manifest here.

1) We want to believe that we have a handle on the static construct of giftedness. We love this illusion of technique (Barret, 1979). Of course, because it is rooted in a positivistic paradigm of research, it carries the limitations of the paradigm with it. For example, context, culture, geography, broadening conceptualizations of giftedness – these examples do not lend themselves to a singular snapshot that is measured by an IQ or other form of standardized ability measurement.

2) The second issue of concern is the historical inability resulting from our commitment to $T=S+E$ to find and identify gifted students of color and from lower socioeconomic homes. Those in power remain committed to an old, ill-fated approach ($T=S+E$) because it makes them feel good to think there is, and has always been, only one giftedness that matters: an IQ-based one. We have been willing to underrepresent children of color and those living in poverty, for as long as it takes to perfect an equation that is no longer viable. Meanwhile, K-12 schools across the US, as well as many colleges and universities, have moved on in practice to offer the types of programs that gifted students actually need. The disparity between the preference of academics who cling to IQ-based definitions exclusively and what society has already acknowledged through its offerings, has created a solid foundation for the next evolutionary step from a positivistic model to a more qualitative one.

3) The next issue is revealed in the work of people like Cross and Coleman (2005) and Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius and Worrell (2011), who provide reasonable conceptions of giftedness that are not reliant upon IQ-based definitions of giftedness. Some academics have gone further, suggesting reducing or eliminating efforts to identify gifted students (Borland, 2005; Coleman & Cross, 2005). A better route may be to take the resources expended to identify gifted children and put them into instruction, providing accommodations and opportunities as students need them to maximize potential.

Perhaps a good way to summarize these points is by using an analogy. When cars were first introduced in the US, they were impressive and exciting. When Ford created the Model T and the assembly line to build them, people became optimistic about owning one. The Model T was simple and easy to understand. It became synonymous with the term *car* and future and American prowess. After the Model T's creation, many other businesses were developed, expanding the market and advancing the automobile as the primary means of transportation. For its day, the Model T was very important to creating the automobile industry and our concept of car. By comparison to today's vehicles, it is almost laughable in performance, safety, reliability, and so forth. Regular pedestrians helped motivate the industry to create better cars, better roads, the interstate system, and so forth. Racing and performance desires created enormous growth in the industry as well. Now we have electric cars, hybrid cars, high performance cars, SUVs, trucks, and many other categories. The Model T was a critical innovation, but its day has passed and many more contemporary versions of cars and other modes of transportation that are far superior have replaced it. The needs of the people moved beyond what was once thought

to be a perfect vehicle for society. The future of the Model T was expansive and not limited to a superior version of itself; it was every mode of personal transportation that followed it.

By comparison to the auto industry, the testing industry is very small, relying on small numbers of academics to do the conceptualization and engineering of tests of ability. The work is profitable, proprietary, and secretive at times (Nairn & Nader, 1980). The language of psychometricians is inaccessible and consumers of their products are not trained to fully understand what they are being sold. The large testing companies now work with politicians to ensure their place in the fabric of 0-16 education (Strauss, 2015). Politicians almost never have any training in either education or psychometrics, but do have enormous influence on the spending of millions of dollars.

When comparing the examples of the Model T and standardized IQ testing, there are similarities and differences. The general openness to and understanding of car consumers ended up expanding and enhancing the market, leading to constant improvement and broadening of options for people--ones that represented their goals and ambitions. By comparison, the allegiance by some to standardized IQ and ability testing has tethered many academics and practitioners to Model T approaches to identifying gifted students. But, like the explosion of the car culture, the school-based gifted education culture is continuing to broaden the types of giftedness being served. How broad would the field of gifted education be today if our romantic notions of IQ and our willingness to leave out vast numbers of underrepresented financially impoverished students were no longer tolerated?

Sternberg deserves credit for building the case for the need to move past the standardized IQ and ability testing approach to identifying gifted students. He builds a case that our science now has the capacity to assess differing types of desirable abilities and attitudes, not possible at the time of Terman's work. Perhaps more importantly, the questions, values, worries, and hopes in the early 20th century were vastly different than they are today. For example, although Terman is highly regarded for his support of gifted children, there is a darker past. He was an important part of the eugenics movement, which "aim[ed] to improve the human 'breed' by perpetuating certain allegedly inherited traits and eliminating others. While championing the intelligent, he supported the forced sterilization of thousands of 'feebleminded' Americans" (Leslie, 2000, no pagination).

While Terman accomplished many good things on behalf of high-IQ students, he likely contributed to the ongoing impression of gifted education as inherently elitist. By comparison, the philosophy of inclusion has emerged as a significant and widespread cultural movement with many direct applications to schooling. Today, one of the most influential conceptions of giftedness is based on a talent development philosophy (Bloom, 1985; Cross & Coleman, 2005; Subotnik, et al., 2011), which reflects contemporary issues and values, including a recognition of influences from both genetics and environment (e.g., good teaching, practice, etc.).

Ninety years after thousands of its citizens were sterilized in an effort to create a "pure race," America has committed to providing appropriate educational opportunities for all students. Context and history matter. So does science. In the past 20 years or so, we have learned that cultural stereotypes can dramatically affect disenfranchised students' performance on tests (Steele & Aronson, 1995); that if we believe intelligence

is malleable, we can achieve greater performance (Dweck, 2006); that intentional practice brings about outstanding performance (Ericsson & Pool, 2016); and that good teaching matters to performance (Heck, 2009). In sum, the cultural underpinnings of IQ tests, which were flawed and prejudicial in favor of some and at the expense of others, would not hold up to the evolutions of culture, values, openness, fairness, equity and, perhaps most importantly, to the findings of science. America has moved on. It is time to limit the use of IQ to finding a specific form of high ability and as a diagnostic tool, not as a gatekeeper that continues to perpetuate the underrepresentation of some groups.

Sternberg claims that IQ testing alone is inadequate for the task of finding students with the kinds of exceptional abilities needed to solve the enormous, seemingly intractable problems facing modern society (i.e., global warming, the worldwide drift away from democracy, nuclear proliferation). He proposes replacing IQ or other standardized tests with less convergent assessments of students' creative, practical, and analytic abilities. The Kaleidoscope and Rainbow Projects have put such assessments into practice at the college level and Sternberg and his colleagues have tested some assessments in studies with younger children (Sternberg, Ferrari, Clinkenbeard, & Grigorenko, 1996; Sternberg, Grigorenko, Ferrari, & Clinkenbeard, 1999). This approach deserves further exploration, but is not yet ready to supplant all other approaches used in schools. Most identification of gifted students happens in the elementary years and essay writing is not a reasonable assessment for young children, even gifted ones. Among their many challenges, schools depend on valid, reliable instruments that are easy to administer and score, in part because the resources required for more subjective or time-consuming assessments are out of reach. Eliminating identification assessments and enhancing talent

development for all students is an evolutionary advancement that allows us to leave the Model T IQ-based identification practice behind.

The suggestion that we eliminate standardized testing as a gatekeeper may justifiably meet resistance in some quarters. Senator Patrick Moynihan was a believer in the ability of testing to offer opportunities to capable students from low socioeconomic status. In 1971, he remarked:

One of the achievements of democracy, although it seems not much regarded as such today, is the system of grading and sorting individuals so that young persons of talent born to modest or lowly circumstances can be recognized for their worth. (Similarly, it provides a means for young persons of social status to demonstrate that they have inherited brains as well as money, as it were.) I have not the least doubt that this system is crude, that it is often cruel, and that it measures only a limited number of things. Yet it measures valid things, by and large. To do away with such systems of accreditation may seem like an egalitarian act, but in fact it would be just the opposite. We would be back to a world in which social connections and privilege count for much more than any of us, I believe, would like. If what you know doesn't count, in the competitions of life, who you know will determine the outcomes. (p. 4)

His words speak to a system that relies on Model T IQ thinking. Testing *can* be an equalizer in a society based on competition. It is this competition that should be questioned, even more than the test. Gifted education built on a system of exclusivity rather than inclusivity has not led to the nurturance of leaders capable of solving modern

problems. If it has, the broader public has not been able to recognize these leaders and, so, has not supported them to be effective.

Sternberg proposes that the standardized IQ test is a thing of the past and we have argued the same. ACCEL is a model of education, an enhancement to our schools that will promote the thinking skills our society needs. This should not be reserved for a small percentage of students who can perform well on standardized tests. It should be shared widely, enriching all of society. All members of society must be able to work together, regardless of IQ, to achieve solutions to our most pressing problems. ACCEL can be an important part of a just and challenging curriculum to which all students have access.

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