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# Myth 1: The Gifted and Talented Constitute One Single Homogeneous Group and Giftedness Is a Way of Being That Stays in the Person Over Time and Experiences

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It is better to have imprecise answers to the right questions than precise answers to the wrong questions.

—Donald Campbell

Can a field that prides itself on promoting creativity and innovation in young people handle these processes itself? Deep-seated values, attitudes, and beliefs about the meaning of giftedness and how we should identify students for gifted programs have been slow to change because the evidence leading to this change conflicts with long-standing attitudes from outdated research, personal beliefs, and an education system that places more emphasis on administrative expediency than recent evidence about human potential. Tidiness and efficiency are important to the operation of any enterprise but should never take the place of responsibility to do the right thing for the young people we serve. Einstein, the personification of scientific giftedness across ages and cultures, said, “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

After having spent more than seven decades of our collective lives in the field of gifted education as teachers, school psychologist, coordinator, researchers, and university professors interested in the nurturance of gifts and talents, we believe there is no more potentially dangerous and false myth than the one above. Let us, therefore, begin this response with the following resounding statement: *There is no single homogeneous group of gifted children and adults, and giftedness is developmental, not fixed at birth.* Our work (Reis, 2005; Renzulli, 1978, 2005), as well as the collective work of others, some of whom we

briefly mention, has contributed unequivocally to a robust research base that enables us to point convincingly to the heterogeneity of the group labeled “gifted” and the certainty we hold about giftedness as a developmental concept.

More than a decade ago, a task force of psychologists and educators spent 2 years reviewing all the extant research on the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children and young adults resulting in an edited volume (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002). While completing that summary, we read hundreds of articles about gifted and talented children and adolescents, and in our executive summary, we stated,

There is no more varied group of young people than the diverse group known as gifted children and adolescents. Not only do they come from every walk of life, every ethnic and socioeconomic group, and every nation, but also they exhibit an almost unlimited range of personal characteristics in temperament, risk-taking and conservatism, introversion and extraversion, reticence and flamboyance, and effort invested in reaching goals. No standard pattern of talent exists among gifted individuals. (Neihart et al., 2002, p. 1)

Our current federal definition suggests that gifted and talented students are indeed a diverse group of individuals as discussed above, students with varying

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abilities and potentials in one or many domains. This widely accepted federal definition of giftedness (Ross, 1993) highlights students' intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas; unusual capacity for leadership; or excellence in specific academic fields. This definition discusses outstanding talents present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, in all areas of human endeavor. In this definition, as well as other well-researched conception of giftedness including our own, the notion that giftedness is a developmental construct is widely supported (Bloom, 1985; Gardner, 1983; Renzulli, 1978, 1986, 2005; Sternberg & Davidson, 1986, 2005).

## Diverse Characteristics

In research about gifted students from diverse backgrounds, Frasier and Passow (1994) referred to "general/common attributes of giftedness"—traits, aptitudes, and behaviors consistently identified by researchers as common to all gifted students. Although they identified common elements of giftedness (motivation, advanced interests, communication skills, problem-solving ability, well-developed memory, inquiry, insight, reasoning, imagination/creativity, sense of humor, and advanced ability to deal with symbol system), they also explained that students do not display each trait, cautioning that characteristics are manifested differently in different students.

Research in the past few decades has pointed to the ways in which gifts and talents vary, including in the following general categories of developmental characteristics:

- *Abilities and aptitudes* vary in both verbal and nonverbal areas across age, population, sex, disability level, and ethnic group. Simply put, high aptitude manifests itself in vastly different ways depending on what assessment has been used, students' family and cultural background, and other areas of talent potential, including the absence or presence of motivation, creativity, and disabilities.
- *Achievement* is usually associated with high achievement, but achievement can and does vary across high-potential children and over time (Reis & McCoach, 2000). High-ability children underachieve because of decreased motivation, social and emotional affect, effort, interest, and absence of challenge, engagement, and support. Children with high aptitudes but

with learning disabilities, for example, may increasingly demonstrate low motivation in school as they become older, and subsequently, they have lowered achievement.

- *Academic background*, because of different experiences, results in poor preparation for many young people and adults with high aptitudes. Continuous academic progress depends on strong academic preparation, especially at early ages when brain development progresses at a rapid pace.
- *Culture and identity* are important because children from diverse backgrounds and racial and socioeconomic groups interact with achievement in rich and diverse ways, and we sometimes fail to take their unique identities into account (Ford & Harris, 1999).
- *Effort and motivation* matter! No single non-cognitive trait is more influential on high levels of performance than effort or motivation, and in addition to factors mentioned above, young people and adults with high potential are most hampered by underchallenging learning or work experiences. High-aptitude students often "coast" through school without having to expend effort, and when they finally *do* encounter a challenge, some experience a loss of confidence in their abilities resulting in diminished achievement levels (Reis & McCoach, 2000).
- *Interests, learning styles, and creative opportunities* are intimately associated with high performance. All persons recognized in history as gifted contributors in the arts, sciences, humanities, and other areas of human performance have had interest bordering on passion for their work, opportunities to pursue this work in a manner compatible with their preferred ways of learning, and environments that provided opportunities for creative expression. Without these factors and environmental conditions, even persons with exceptional cognitive potential do not maximize their potential.

In addition to these important contributors to the development of high performance, a number of other factors that we sometimes refer to as "intelligences outside the normal curve" (Renzulli & Reis, 2003) play a role in the high-level accomplishments. Courage, optimism, sense of power to change things, empathy, and physical and mental energy are factors we respect in the work of people such as Rachel Carson, Nelson

Mandela, Mother Theresa, and Martin Luther King. Combined with other noncognitive skills such as collaboration, leadership, organization, and self-efficacy, a picture of giftedness that extends far beyond the “golden chromosome” theory has led too many in our field to believe that some people are preordained to be “gifted.”

If the diversity and heterogeneity of this population is so clear, why then does this myth continue to exist? Some educators and parents may hold outdated notions about the fixed conceptions of aptitude. For others, the myth may continue to exist because it is easier to identify “the gifted” by a score, despite protestations of multiple criteria. For others, the myth means that they have not taken the time to consider the effects of poverty, hunger, poor schooling, or lack of stimulation on some children who had high potential but failed to develop it over time. And still others hold on to this myth because they have not kept abreast with the current research and information that has informed our field as well as the recognized accomplishments of untold numbers of people who had high scores but never did anything with them! Giftedness is not a state of being, it is not fixed, and it does not reside in a chosen few over their lifetimes as a fixed entity. It is, rather, developmental—in some children and adults with high potential, at certain times, under certain circumstances, and with appropriate levels of support, time, effort, and personal investments and choices.

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