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Frank Worrell: An interview with a multitalented psychologist

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Interview

Frank Worrell: An Interview with a Multitalented Psychologist

Frank Worrell, Ph.D. 

Interviewed by Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D. 

Dr. Tracy Cross interviews Dr. Frank Worrell about his career, his take on several important topics of the day and ideas for making gifted education as beneficial it can be. A former president of the American Psychological Association, Dr. Worrell speaks about the role that talent development can play to more fully reach the goal of maximizing the potential of students, and how the APA thinks about talent development and its application to schools.



Dr. Frank Worrell

Cross • Please tell the *SENG* readership about yourself. How did you become interested in gifted students?

Worrell • I was born in the capital of Trinidad and Tobago into a low-SES family, although we moved into the middle class when I was about eight years old. My father was a policeman, and my mother was an

elementary school teacher. I am the third of four children—I have two older sisters and a younger brother—and was the first in the family to go to college. I was named after Sir Frank Worrell, knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for his contributions to cricket—but spent a lot of time avoiding sport, as expectations for my performance were too high to my mind.

I did quite well in elementary school, although I did not attend one of the selective schools. In Trinidad, we write a secondary school entrance examination in Year 7, and my parents had me move to a different elementary school in Year 6 where there was a teacher who gave after-school lessons in arithmetic, as I was not doing well in that subject. When I did write the secondary school entrance examination, I got into my first choice, which was one of the Tier 1 secondary schools. Trinidad and Tobago does not have gifted education, but I realized when I became more knowledgeable about the field that my secondary school could be considered a gifted program. Interestingly, the school used grade acceleration with some students from the second year to the fourth year, an acceleration that I did not qualify for.

In secondary school, I spent a lot of time involved in the choir and the drama club and read copiously, but was not the most diligent when it came to studying.

In a system where your performance on the final examination for the year was your grade for the year, I was not very successful academically, especially in the upper grades. I repeated O-Level examinations so that I could stay at the same school (because of the choir) and then completed Levels. I passed all of my A-Level subjects, but my grades were not great. I completed my Bachelor's (Psychology major, English minor) and Master's (Educational Psychology) degrees in at the University of Western Ontario and was a teacher and counselor, and then a principal of the equivalent of a continuation high school before pursuing my Ph.D. in School Psychology at UC Berkeley.

My interest in gifted education was sparked in my doctoral program at Berkeley, where I started to teach in the Academic Talent Development Program, which began as the UC Berkeley Gifted Program in the early 1980s using the Talent Search model. In early 1989, the program's name was changed to the Academic Talent Development Program (ATDP), and I began working for the program in the summer of 1989. I was intrigued by the differences and similarities in motivation and expectations of students who were at risk for dropping out and students who were academically talented. I worked for that program as an instructor and graduate research assistant throughout my time at Berkeley. My dissertation work included a subsample from ATDP as a comparison group of students who were not-at-risk for dropping out, and my first academic appointment was at Penn State. My connection with ATDP continues to the present day and I now serve as the faculty director of ATDP.

Cross • Recently you served as President of the American Psychological Association (APA). What does APA understand about gifted students that is not common among educators who work directly with them and what explains the difference?

Worrell • American Psychological Association has over 140,000 members and about 500 staff, so it is hard to speak for APA generally. Of course, there are members of APA whose research or clinical practice involves individuals who are classified as gifted. Division 47 of APA is the Society for Sport, Exercise, and Performance

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Psychology, which focuses on improving individual performance, although most specifically in the area of athletics.

APA's focus on gifted students was galvanized when Dr. Rena Subotnik was hired in the early 2000s to join the Education Director as the Director of the Center for Psychology in the Schools and Education (CPSE). Dr. Subotnik's long term commitment to research on gifted students continued during her tenure at APA. In addition to starting an APA listserv for psychologists interested in gifted education, Dr. Subotnik included gifted education in the programs of the Education Directorate and co-chaired with me for several years the APA Coalition for High Performance Psychology. This coalition included psychologists from Divisions 3 (Experimental), 7 (Developmental), 10 (Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts), 14 (Industrial/Organizational), 15 (Educational), 16 (School), 17 (Counseling), 19 (Military), and 47 (Sport, Exercise, and Performance), and several members of this coalition contributed to the 2020 book published by APA entitled *The Psychology of High Performance: Translating Human Potential into Domain-Specific Talent*.

Speaking generally, APA's conceptualization of gifted students aligns with the talent development framework. APA policy supports the use of multiple indicators for identification of talented individuals and the consideration of cultural and contextual factors, and also supports providing opportunities and effective teaching and coaching for individuals on the talent development pathway. APA has policies on psychology from high school to post-doctoral programs and also has recommendations for tenure and promotion of faculty.

Cross • *I know you to be a multitalented person. For example, in addition to your academic successes, you are also a talented singer. Has having multiple talents informed your thinking about gifted education?*

Worrell • I am not sure that I would describe myself as a talented singer, but I do think that familiarity with music as a domain has informed my thinking. For example, in gifted education, schools often focus on identification with IQ, which is not domain-specific, and follow-up with generic programming for the students identified. However, in a domain like music, even the process of identification needs to be specific: Is the individual's potential in voice or violin or trombone? And once identified, programming also has to be specific to the individual's talent subdomain, be that conducting or composing, or playing an instrument.

Additionally, once an individual has been identified in a domain like music, they begin the journey of not only developing the talent, but also sharing that talent. Often from the first year of taking music lessons, students are expected to perform in showcases at the end of the year

for their parents and families, and the expectations for public performances increase as the individual continues down the talent development path. As the individual becomes more skilled, they perform before juries or in competitions. In sum, the development of musical talent is specific and public from the beginning of the talent development journey in a way that it often is not in gifted education programs.

This public display of knowledge is an integral part of all classes in ATDP's Elementary Division, with an open house at the end of the summer. It is also a part of many of the classes in the Secondary Division (e.g., Public Speaking, Robotics). And the notion of development moving from potential to achievement enroute to expertise is also highlighted in the talent development megamodel that I co-authored with Rena Subotnik and Paula Olszewski-Kubilius.

Being involved in multiple domains forced me to think about the trajectories of domains and the nature of the domain-specific requirements which students need to make progress in a domain.

Cross • *What do you see as a couple of the biggest issues of our day pertaining to gifted education?*

Worrell • There are several issues facing gifted education, and some of them are intertwined. The first is the notion of the "gifted child." There is such a tremendous focus on identification of children for the label, gifted, that we often neglect the reason for identifying students in the first place, which is to provide talent development opportunities to help them progress. The second issue, due in part to the lack of a federal mandate and federal funding for gifted education, is that we offer talent development opportunities to too few individuals. Moreover, as gifted education slots are limited, parents with more social capital and resources actively lobby for their children to be enrolled in gifted programs.

Related to the two aforementioned issues is the fact that identification for gifted education placement is frequently based on students having well-developed academic skills, which necessarily favors youth from families with more resources. Given what we know about the association of socioeconomic status with achievement outcomes across domains, including sport, it is not surprising that the students in gifted programs tend to be from more affluent families, contributing to the idea that gifted education is only for individuals from elite programs.

My belief is that the concept of a free and appropriate education (i.e., the standard applied to students with special education needs) should apply to all students including those who are doing well, and we can address the aforementioned concerns by using a talent development approach. Ideally, all schools should have both schoolwide and targeted enrichment opportunities,

beginning in kindergarten. In this way, gifted education will serve a broader range of students, including children with high potential who have not yet had opportunities for their potential to be developed.

Cross • *As a school psychologist who has considerable training in using instruments to learn about individuals, I have heard you speak about some of the claims about underrepresentation that you have indicated may be somewhat off base. What is your take on the issue of the underrepresentation of differing groups of children receiving gifted services?*

Worrell • The United States has an achievement gap problem that is real. Children from some ethnic-racial groups (e.g., Black, Latine, Native American, and some Asian groups) and low-income backgrounds perform less well on average on academic achievement outcomes than their peers from other ethnic-racial groups (Whites, some Asian groups) and higher-income backgrounds. Although the causes of the disparities in performance are still being debated vigorously, the disparities in achievement outcomes are omni-present and long-standing. As identification for gifted education programs is frequently based on tests of cognitive abilities and tests of achievement, both of which manifest the achievement gap, underrepresentation is inevitable.

The response by many scholars has been to blame the tests, arguing that the tests are biased. The fact is that these tests have been examined for bias more than any other instruments that we use, and they are not psychometrically biased—the differences in scores reflect the very real achievement gap that exists. This fact is reflected in data indicating that the average differences in scores among demographic groups occur not only in tests of cognitive abilities or intelligence, but also in tests of achievement (reading, mathematics, science, history, civics) and in grade point average.

Moreover, it is on the basis of these test scores that we know that students from different groups are not doing as well as their peers, which has implications for preparation, as the disparities in scores increase from kindergarten to Grade 12. Again, it is on the basis of these test scores that we know that COVID-19 had a disproportionately negative impact on some demographic groups, resulting in greater learning loss for some groups of students. Thus, the scores on both standardized cognitive and achievement tests provide an ongoing reminder of the fact that the education system is not serving all groups of students equally well and a benchmark that we can use to gauge progress.

Cross • *In a recent paper with Jonathan Wai, you discussed the future of intelligence research and gifted education. Can you share the most important ideas that you and Jonathan conveyed in that piece?*

Worrell • Intelligence is a highly controversial topic in the United States, in large part because of the differences

in the distributions of these scores across ethnic-racial and socioeconomic groups as mentioned above. Given the frequent use of intelligence test scores to identify individuals for gifted programming, intelligence is often “blamed” for the underrepresentation in gifted education. However, defined as the capacity to learn quickly, there are few who can deny that intelligence is an important individual-difference variable that plays a role in every situation and domain that involves learning and reasoning.

In the paper that Jonathan and I wrote, we attempted to look at the perspectives of individuals in the fields of intelligence and gifted education. We argued that although giftedness is far broader than intelligence, researchers interested in gifted education should have some understanding of how intelligence—the capacity to learn quickly—affects gifted performance. We also noted that research on behavioral genetics and artificial intelligence both have implications for gifted education, and recent advances in ChatGPT and other AI technologies have made such considerations even more important. Finally, we argued that intelligence researchers would benefit from paying more attention to applications and the impact of situational, contextual, and chance factors, as at least one of the goals of the field should be translating intelligence or raw ability into gifted performance.

Cross • *What single change do you think schools might make to help students with gifts and talents?*

Worrell • I already mentioned that all schools should have gifted education programs, including whole school enrichment opportunities. As many formal gifted education programs do not begin until the middle elementary school years, I would suggest that the whole school enrichment activities begin in kindergarten and continue through K–12, and that these activities not be limited to academics, but also include extracurricular activities, which for some students serve as the touchstone which connects them to school and education.

Cross • *Whose work has been an influence on your career and research interests?*

Worrell • Three of my major areas of research include talent development, cultural identities, and time perspective. With regard to talent development, my perspective has been informed by several scholars, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Jean Piaget, Lewis Terman, and Lev Vygotsky. Terman’s work showed that intelligence is not sufficient in explaining outstanding performance, and the life story and writings of Du Bois, who was a contemporary of Terman, highlighted the importance of equitable opportunities being provided in the context of the United States. Piaget’s writings on the increasing complexity of thought and Vygotsky’s zone

of proximal development also played a major role in my understanding of students' academic development. I still think that gifted education in particular and education more generally do not do a good job of challenging individuals with high potential.

My work on cultural identities has been strongly influenced by William E. Cross, Jr., Erik Erikson, John Ogbu, Claude Steele, and Vygotsky. All of these theorists stressed the importance of the social and cultural contexts in their theoretical frameworks, helping to set the stage for much of my work. Erikson's psychosocial theory also included the importance of time constructs such as anticipation of achievement and hope, variables which I have used in my dissertation study and beyond. Phil Zimbardo's contention that we should pay attention to individuals' thoughts and feelings about the past and the present, in addition to the future, also influenced my work in this area.

Finally, my career and work have been influenced by many advisors, professors, collaborators, colleagues, and former students, including Harry Murray, Nadine Lambert, Mark Wilson, Rhona Weinstein, Nina Gabelko, Pedro Noguera, Marley Watkins, Tracey Hall, Paul McDermott, Beverly Vandiver, Peony Fhagen, Barbara Schaefer, Zena Mello, Monika Buhl, Rena Subotnik, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, Sandra Graham, Malcolm Woodland, Michael McKay,

James Andretta, Michael McKay, Christine Rubie-Davies, Penelope Watson, Melinda Webber, Mohamed Alansari, Jonathan Wai, Mercedes Zapata, and many others.

Cross • *What message or point would you like to leave with the readership?*

Worrell • The most important message for the field, from my perspective, is for individuals in the field of gifted education to be honest brokers, recognizing that we are all working toward the same goal. It is fine to disagree with each other—indeed, the knowledge base will stagnate if everyone agrees on every topic. However, disagreement is not the same as dismissal or contempt. Attacking individuals personally because they hold a different point of view is neither professional nor scientific, nor does it help us to advance the field. Being an honest broker means: (a) using the established quantitative qualitative, and mixed methods that we have for advancing knowledge, (b) being skeptical about what we think we know, (c) actively looking for disconfirming evidence for the hypotheses that we advance, (d) being honest in our interpretation of our findings, (e) acknowledging the limitations of our research, and (f) being open to the possibility that the views we hold are incorrect or incomplete.

Frank Worrell, Ph.D. is a Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Berkeley. His areas of expertise include at-risk youth, cultural identities, scale development, talent development, time perspective, and the translation of psychological research findings into practice. Author of over 300 scholarly works, Dr. Worrell is a Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science, the American Educational Research Association, and five divisions of the American Psychological Association (APA), and an elected member of the Society for the Study of School Psychology and the National Academy of Education. A former editor of *Review of Educational Research*, Dr. Worrell is a recipient of the Distinguished Scholar Award from the National Association for Gifted Children, the Distinguished Contributions to Research Award from Division 45 of APA, the Outstanding International Psychologist Award from Division 52 of APA, an Outstanding School Psychologist Award from the California Association of School Psychologists, and an Honorary Doctorate from Heidelberg University. He was the 2022 President of the American Psychological Association.