

*Off the Charts!*  
*Asynchrony and the Gifted Child*

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*Cover photo of a fragment of a statue of Alexander  
the Great in the Louvre, Paris, France.*

*Photo by Thomas Milton Kemnitz.*

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*Giftedness:  
Lessons from Leeuwenhoek*

*Stephanie S. Tolan and Michael M. Piechowski*

Gifted education was born out of the field of psychology's investigation of unusual intelligence. Psychologists had recognized giftedness as an innate mental capacity of a minority of individuals whose learning capacities differed sufficiently from the norm to warrant or even require a different approach to teaching them. As a clinical psychologist, Leta Stetter Hollingworth became passionately interested in gifted children when she administered an intelligence test to a child whose score was what might be described as "off the charts." Over time, Hollingworth's exploration of extreme intelligence led her to teach "the first college course devoted solely to issues concerning gifted children" (Borland, 1990) and to design a program of gifted education and a class for highly gifted children that served as a model for much that followed. But over time many educators of the gifted, embedded in the school system's focus on output and measurement, came to identify giftedness solely as success in competition, achievement, and product creation. What was being lost was the focus on individual personal development that was clearly evident in Hollingworth's philosophy and methodology. The Columbus Group definition of giftedness as asynchronous development grew directly out of the friction within the field of gifted education between the internal

view of giftedness as an inborn aspect of the individual—the *who*—and the external view of giftedness as behavior, achievement, and product creation—essentially the *what*.

Today, 20 years after the Columbus Group’s definition first entered the public conversation as a way to reestablish a balance between the internal and the external views, a group of academics are pushing for a “rethinking” that would not only shift the balance toward external achievement, but dispense with the internal view entirely. The concept of giftedness as unusual intelligence that affects an individual’s whole being would be supplanted by the concept of *talents* in specific domains, to be developed for the purpose of high achievement and product creation. It is a politically persuasive argument for gaining support for educational programming, with a country’s talented individuals seen as natural resources, but whether or not it is sufficient for the full development of unusually intelligent children is another question.

Talent development and personal growth are contrasting educational ideologies. The first is product-centered; the second is child-centered. Talent development stresses high achievement, accomplishing highly acclaimed works that win awards or change the world. The current push to define giftedness solely as talents to be developed with the goal of achieving eminence goes as far as to assert that “gifted children need to become eminent producers to be labeled gifted as adults” (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011, p. 23). In other words, one can be an extraordinarily intelligent adult, but for lack of outstanding works, one is not gifted. There is an implicit message that without notable achievement the individual is of little worth and that anyone having high ability and talent must keep demonstrating it. Feelings of lack of worth may sometimes be motivating to-

ward achievement, but more often than not, they are demoralizing and debilitating.

The Columbus Group's definition of giftedness (Columbus Group, 1991) includes "advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity" that together create "*inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm.*" Whether or not the individual is achieving in culturally recognized ways or creating products clearly capable of changing the world, his or her own inner realm of experience remains qualitatively different. There are social, psychological, and emotional ramifications of the gifted individual's internal differences throughout the lifespan.

As children move toward adulthood, stress on high achievement leaves out of consideration their emotional development, just as it is left out of the picture almost everywhere else—the *terra incognita* of subjective experience (except for counseling and psychotherapy). As Jean Peterson aptly said, "Age peers, educators, and other significant adults, and the public at large, do not have a window for viewing the inner world of gifted kids" (Peterson, personal communication, July 13, 2012).

Why should we take into account the inner life of gifted youth? Because the lives of young gifted people are not free of difficulties and turmoil. There may be an illness or death in the family, financial reverses, loss of friends, experiences of hostility, and bullying. In addition to these typical life challenges, there are others related to giftedness itself. Is high ability a blessing or a curse? One-sided focus on developing one's talents can lead to the loss of a proper sense of self, as illustrated in the following example, from Peterson's *Gifted at Risk*:

I have done everything my parents and coaches have asked me to do—expected me to do. Straight

A's, success in extracurriculars, well-behaved. But I don't know who I am. (Peterson, 2009, p. 27)

This student has described the consequences of following the path of compliantly meeting the expectations of high performance that bring the approval of adults. The missing part is consideration for emotional growth, as if it were either of little importance or an obstacle to the total concentration on high achievement. Yet adolescence presents vital developmental challenges: development of identity, choice of a career path, finding a partner, meeting or defying the expectations of others, and so on. The highly gifted often take a long time to decide on a career (Peterson, Duncan, & Canady, 2009).

## TALENT DEVELOPMENT

### or Product Perspective

- Emphasis on achievement and outer recognition
- Risks dissociation between the talent and the self
- Fosters competitiveness

## PERSONAL GROWTH

### or Child-Centered Perspective

- Talent development: an organic part of personal growth
- Child's self: endowed with will and capacity for self-determination
- Fosters interrelatedness

The emphasis on achievement and outer recognition risks dissociation between the talent and the young person's self (Grant & Piechowski, 1999). Furthermore, the climate of striving for high achievement leads to fierce competition



and even unethical behavior. A recent report on the tenfold increase in retractions of scientific papers—one-third due to honest errors but two-thirds to misconduct violating principles of science reporting—underscores the negative effects of fierce competition, the consequence of stress on achievement (Fang, Steen, and Casadevall, 2012). One notable example of unethical behavior: When Crick and Watson were racing to establish the structure of DNA and to win the Nobel Prize, they used, without her knowledge, the crystallographic data of Rosalind Franklin, essential to confirming the model. One wonders whether winning the Nobel Prize and the eminence it confers means that only Watson and Crick—not Franklin—deserve to be seen as gifted adults.

Caught in an educational culture that values only recognizable talents in specific domains, the unusually intelligent young person may lose track of other aspects of himself that are of critical importance to developing a sense of wholeness and a deeper understanding of his developing identity. The following was written by a young man who had attended Yunasa, a summer camp specifically designed to help highly gifted children and teens to develop more than their intellects:

The idea of Yunasa is simple. Get a bunch of gifted kids together and let them help each other grow. But it is so much more. I don't think any of us ever realized that we need to develop more than our intellect, that we need to develop five different parts of ourselves. Maybe some of us thought that we shouldn't be so smart in one way and so lacking in other ways, but no one realized that we needed to help our other aspects, like social, or emotional or spiritual, to grow. Yunasa showed us all that we needed to, and could bring ourselves into balance. That is literally what the word "yunasa" means in

Lakota: balance. Nowhere else is that stressed or even noticed. But balance is the heart of Yunasa.  
—D. J. Gallenberger, age 14

We thus face a dilemma about how to nurture talent: to sacrifice the self in order to reach the highest level of achievement, or to support personal growth as the bedrock on which high achievement can be built.

The advocates of the talent development viewpoint suggest that there are “psycho-social” aspects that need to be considered while developing talent, but nowhere do they acknowledge this need as existing for any purpose other than to assure success. It is difficult to find in their most recent response to others in the field who offered differing views on their original monograph any genuine awareness of or concern for the *personhood* of the children whose talents they would develop (Worrell, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Subotnik, 2012). They might well be speaking of the best way to program robots for future productivity.

It may be critical to note that among the high achievers in the past, some whose creative contributions changed the world were not recognized as *talented*. They were instead seen—as children and some of them well into adulthood—as bizarre, odd, difficult, or crazy. Only after their asynchrony had produced something recognizably useful were they granted the label “genius.” Maxine Kumin’s delightful poem (1984) about Anton Leeuwenhoek, a Dutch merchant, tells of his strange passion for grinding lenses and looking at tiny things. It ends with these lines:

*He says the water that we drink is full of bugs.*

*He's mad, we think!*

*They called him domkop, which means dope.*

*That's how we got the microscope.*

Considering Leeuwenhoek, it is not clear whether one could reasonably call what drove him to his lens-grinding and intense investigation of the small things of the world a *talent*. It was an internal drive to explore and discover, to investigate the world in a new way.

Those currently pushing the talent development model on American education suggest that there is no meaningful difference between various talents and their development (except perhaps in timing—does it develop early and lead to early achievement, or does it develop later and more slowly?). They imply that one can put all talents into the same box—whether a talent for musical composition, mathematical computation, writing poetry, playing chess, acting, singing, painting, or athletics. But unusual intelligence—as in that much-maligned *g* factor that continues to show itself even as theorists attempt to disperse it into individual intelligences and separate talent domains—is not the foundational support for *all* kinds of talent. Methods that can take a talented young painter to the highest level of artistic achievement, or a talented young gymnast to a place on the Olympic team, are not focused on nurturing unusual intelligence, and while an eminent painter or champion gymnast may well be unusually intelligent, that does not seem to be a requirement.

Where does the traditionally identified gifted child fit into this talent development model, when—like Leeuwenhoek—the child's intelligence may be more like a ravenous appetite to learn, explore, challenge, imagine, try, investigate, create, put together, take apart, and understand everything in his or her environment?

The authors of this book, themselves variously parents, educators, academics, counselors, psychologists, authors, and gifted adults, believe that it is vital to maintain an awareness of giftedness as more than particular talents that can be developed to provide gifts and services for the larger culture. It is a unique way of seeing and processing the world that brings both benefits and challenges to the gifted individual, from birth and early childhood throughout the lifespan. In her final years, Annemarie Roeper, one of the leaders in the field who most stressed child-centered education, frequently mentioned to friends and colleagues how different she continued to feel from the other inhabitants of the retirement center where she was living. Unusual intelligence, when understood, accepted, supported, allowed, and even celebrated, can lead, as it did for Annemarie, to a life experience of passion, accomplishment, service to the world, and deep personal meaning.

Anyone whose chosen field is meant to support the development of unusually intelligent humans needs to begin with an understanding of *who he or she is!*

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*Hollingworth, Dabrowski, Ghandi,  
Columbus, and Some Others:  
The History of the Columbus Group*

*Stephanie S. Tolan*

For two decades graduate students attempting to track down the source of the definition of giftedness as “asynchronous development” and credit its author[s] have run into a brick wall. The search inevitably leads back to a 1992 issue of *Understanding Our Gifted*, in which the term is first used and considered from several points of view, most specifically in an article by Martha J. Morelock entitled “Giftedness: A View from Within” (1992). In that article the definition is cited as “Columbus Group (1991, July). Unpublished transcript of the meeting of the Columbus Group. Columbus, Ohio.”

But attempts to find out what the Columbus Group was and who belonged to it were unsuccessful. Over time rumors and some names (most of them incorrect) circulated. Dr. Linda Silverman, who as editor of *Understanding Our Gifted* had adopted the definition for the publication, used it in her work, and included it as a core concept in *Counseling the Gifted and Talented* (1993), and I, because I was living in Columbus, eventually identified ourselves. So many people had begun using the Columbus Group definition and writing about asynchronous development, expanding its impli-

cations and offering ways to address the problems it created for children and families, that the particulars of its origin seemed to matter less and less over time.

The current pressure to focus on achievement and on talents in specific domains rather than the all-encompassing mode of processing and experience called *giftedness* is not new. There has been tension between the two strands of the movement to support gifted children since the earliest days of identifying them and recognizing their special needs. Indeed, it was precisely the push-pull between the external and internal perspectives, between an achievement focus and a developmental focus, that led to the creation of the Columbus Group in the first place.

For many years individuals in the gifted field with a particular interest in highly to profoundly gifted children—a population memorably called “statistically insignificant” by organizers of a gifted conference in 1978—had gathered informally at conferences for parents and educators to share that interest. The children who were the focus of their concern exhibited noticeable differences in the way they approached and experienced the world and seemed to have unusual levels of awareness, receptivity, memory, and intensity that could not be categorized solely as “talents” or “achievements.” Though a few people (Leta Hollingworth, Elizabeth Drews, Miraca Gross, and Julian Stanley, for example) had written about how to meet the needs of such students, most of the field of gifted education considered the population too rare to be addressed. With radical acceleration out of favor, seldom, if ever, were these children’s needs dealt with in the classroom.

In 1987 the first ever national conference with this population as its sole focus—the Hollingworth Conference for the Highly Gifted—was held in Maine, with many of the people whose interest had brought them together over the years