

Off the Charts

Asynchrony and the Gifted Child

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Royal Fireworks Press

UNIONVILLE, NEW YORK



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Royal Fireworks Press
P.O. Box 399
41 First Avenue
Unionville, NY 10988-0399
(845) 726-4444
fax: (845) 726-3824
email: mail@rftp.com
website: rftp.com



ISBN: 978-0-89824-380-2

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kemnitz
Editor: Jennifer Ault

Book and Cover Designer: Kerri Ann Ruhl

Cover photo of a fragment of a statue of Alexander the Great
in the Louvre, Paris, France. Photo by Thomas Milton Kemnitz.

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York,
at the Royal Fireworks facility. Bau23

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Annemarie Roeper 1918-2012



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For Annemarie Roeper, who taught us that the emotions are central in identifying gifted children. The Annemarie Roeper Method of Qualitative Assessment suspends judgment to create a safe space, allowing the Self of the child and depth of giftedness to be revealed. Annemarie saw gifted children as whole, even in their asynchrony. We share her worthy goal of supporting children to become who they really are.

*~ Anne Beneventi
Director of the Annemarie Roeper
Method of Qualitative Assessment*

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CHAPTER 1

Hollingworth, Dabrowski, Gandhi, 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: The 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 Unpublished transcript of the meeting of the Columbus Group.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 implications and offering ways to address the problems it creates 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 on 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 Stetter 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 as speakers. The annual Hollingworth conference thereafter served as a focal point for the development of ideas and methods relating to the highly gifted, helped to increase attention for this part of the population in the gifted field, and offered a regular gathering place for like-minded colleagues.

In 1990 at a state gifted conference in New York, Kathi Kearney, the originator of the Hollingworth conferences, and I were on the program, as were Joe Renzulli and his wife, Sally Reis. I attended a session of Joe's in which he equated giftedness with achievement, said that he (or educators using his methods) "created" giftedness with what he called ORE—opportunity, resources, and encouragement—and that the word *gifted* meant giving gifts to society. He added that a child in a gifted class who did not get good grades should be dismissed from the class. I asked him whether that was true no matter how bright the child was and no matter whether there was any other place for that child except the regular classroom, and he said *yes*. Essentially, his view was that if a child wasn't showing giftedness by achievement, there was no reason to consider that child gifted.

After the session, I spoke to Joe in the hall, and we were shortly joined by Sally Reis. What developed was a rather heated argument in which Joe claimed that I was incorrect in attributing giftedness to what he called "the golden gene" (not a term I had used), and I claimed that he was "throwing gifted children out of the educational lifeboat" if they were not achieving according to his definition of achievement. His plan would leave them to the mercies of a school system that had little or nothing to teach them that they didn't already know. The argument was escalating when Sally figuratively stepped between us to defuse the situation by assuring us that "we're all using different words, but we really mean the same thing."

When I recounted the story to Kathi Kearney later, we both realized that Sally's pacifying statement was actually backwards. We were not using different words to mean the same thing; we were using the same word—*gifted*—to mean quite different things. Because we were part of the group whose focus was on

the upper end, we knew perfectly well that the differences from the norm that we and parents perceived were not “created” by schools. They were apparent well before children entered a formal classroom (many were observable in infancy) and actually affect them all of their lives.

There is overwhelming evidence from nearly a century of research that the developmental trajectory of highly to profoundly gifted infants, toddlers, and preschoolers is most often actually slowed or stopped when the children get to school, where most of what they are offered as “learning opportunities” are simplified versions of what they have been doing long before they got there. Further, the children are confused by the obvious differences between themselves and their classmates, differences that include the jokes and games they like, the vocabulary they use to express themselves, their passion for learning, and their infinite numbers of questions. They feel that they don’t fit in, and they don’t understand why.

Finally, it did not seem logical that the extraordinary differences at the upper end could be internal realities caused by developmental processes, while the differences of moderately gifted children closer to the norms are externally created by school programs and hard work. Wherever faster, broader, and deeper ways of learning and processing can be identified, they are surely the result of striking differences in development.

Kathi and I shared the experience we’d had at the conference with Hollingworth colleagues and suggested that we needed to get together and come up with a way to tease apart these different conceptions of giftedness. The following summer, a conference on the work of Kazimierz Dabrowski was held in Ohio, and some of the Hollingworth speakers attended. Because I lived in Columbus at the time, we decided to gather at my house afterwards to take on

this task, and we invited Martha J. Morelock, who was at the time working on her doctorate at Tufts University under the direction of David Henry Feldman, author of *Nature's Gambit*, to join us.

That gathering was made up of Dr. Christine Garrison (now Christine Neville), the originator and first director of PEG, the early entrance program for exceptionally gifted girls at Mary Baldwin College; Dr. Linda Silverman, founder and director of the Gifted Development Center in Denver, as well as the Institute for Advanced Development; Kathi Kearney, who was working on a doctorate under James Borland at Teacher's College, Columbia, and who had founded the Hollingworth Center for the Highly Gifted; Martha Morelock; and myself, co-author of *Guiding the Gifted Child*.

We gathered in my living room, started a tape recorder, and began what turned out to be an astonishingly challenging effort to put together our combined knowledge and experience of gifted children, particularly those at the upper end (the "far right tail of the curve"). All of us had studied and written about this population (three of us were also parents of such children), and there was among us extensive experience educating, testing, and counseling them, so we all had considerable firsthand, real-life knowledge. In addition, because all of us were known as consultants, we had interacted with many families of such children. Parents had shared the joys and frustrations of trying to keep up with them, handle their intensities and sensitivities, find true peers for them, encourage friendships, and find ways to get around the obstacles created by an educational system that all too often flatly refused to believe in their existence.

In trying to find a way to describe the developmental differences we wanted to highlight, we agreed that in almost every way these children were out of sync with expectations, norms, and

averages. Jean-Charles Terrassier, writing about the unexpected differences in cognitive capacities of the gifted, had used the term *dyssynchronous* (1985). We felt that the prefix *dys-* gave his term a negative spin, just as the translation of Dabrowski's *superstimulabilities* as *overexcitabilities* (OEs) suggests that people who have OEs have "too much" of something, when Dabrowski meant it to be seen as a normal aspect of central nervous system sensitivity in the population he was describing. We wanted to make clear that the developmental differences we were describing were also *normal* in the gifted.

We hit on the term *asynchronous* but couldn't find it in a dictionary (Google, of course, lay years in the future). So we called the Columbus Public Library's research division and found that the word was a computer-related term not yet in use outside of that field. We adopted it and settled on *asynchronous development* as a clear, direct, and inclusive term for what we were describing.

We then spent many hours hammering out the definition as it has been expressed ever since: "Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally" (Columbus Group, 1991).

We came to the conclusion that this definition worked across the range of giftedness because developmental differences are the primary factors that distinguish gifted children from others. The greater the distance from the norm, the more apparent are the asynchronies and the greater the impact on children's life experiences.

We understood that the definition's few words were only a foundation. In order to begin to clarify all the complexities of the internal experience of developmental differences, vastly more explanation was needed. There was the internal asynchrony of advanced cognitive capacity coupled with more age-appropriate emotional maturity in combination with the sensitivity and intensity Dabrowski wrote about. There were the "many ages" of the gifted child. The common idea that children less gifted will "catch up" needed to be refuted, since it is clear to all those who interact with this population that supporting their development means that the trajectory will not only remain divergent from the average, but the divergence will likely increase.

Martha Morelock's graduate school work was already focused on these issues, and she had read to us a paper of hers about a child whose story both illustrated and had helped us clarify the definition. When the question arose of who would write the first "official" article using our definition, she volunteered. Her writing was obviously more than up to handling the complexity of the issues involved, so it was agreed that Martha would launch the Columbus Group definition with an article that she would later title "Giftedness: The View from Within."

But how, we wondered, should she attribute the term and the definition? It had taken all of us working together over a day and a half of struggle to reach consensus, untangling ourselves from all the other conceptions of giftedness in the field. We felt sure that what we were saying would be immediately recognized by anyone who lived or worked with the sorts of kids we were talking about. It felt to all of us as if *asynchronous development* would spread like wildfire once it was made public.

But we were also aware that we were only five people—women, at that—and the tendency of combatants in the field of

ideas is to use *ad hominem* arguments to tear down ideas that do not match or readily integrate with their own.

My husband, who had been in a nearby room during most of our deliberations, came in as we were talking about this issue with a quotation that had been posted on a bulletin board in our kitchen. “This is what you need,” he said. The quotation was attributed to Gandhi: “There is no limit to the amount of good you can do in the world if you don’t care who gets the credit.”

That’s it, we all agreed. We would fly in the face of academic precedent and remain anonymous. We would name ourselves something that no one would recognize and cite only that name. But what should it be? We decided to use the term *Group*. But what group?

It was the summer of 1991, and Martha’s first publication of our ideas would come out in 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s voyage to “the new world.” And we were meeting in my house in Columbus. We decided to think of our work as moving “toward a new world of giftedness” (knowing, as we did, that like the world Columbus had set out to find, it was not new at all and was already fully inhabited) and to name ourselves the Columbus Group.

So that is what we did. When any of us wrote or spoke about asynchronous development, as we all did over the next several years and have continued to do until the present (along with members who have joined us since then), we simply cited the unpublished transcript of the Columbus Group’s 1991 meeting.

Exactly as we predicted, asynchronous development as a way of looking at the internal experience of the gifted began to appear in the literature almost immediately in the writings of many people who had no connection with us at all. Just 20 months after

Martha's article was published, Linda Silverman was asked to keynote the World Council's Conference in Hong Kong (1995), at which asynchronous development was to be the theme.

In only four years, this clear, direct, and readily recognizable explanation of the internal experience of gifted individuals had spread from a living room in Ohio across the world.

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CHAPTER 2

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 differ sufficiently from the norm to warrant or even require a different approach to teaching them. As a clinical psychologist, Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1886-1939) 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, more than two decades after the Columbus Group's definition first entered the public conversation as a way to re-establish a balance between the internal and the external views, a group of academics is 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 toward 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 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 hardships, 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? A 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 book *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 extra-curriculars, well-behaved. But I don't know who I am. (Peterson, 2009, p. 27)