EXPLORATIONS IN GIFTEDNESS

This book is a scholarly overview of modern concepts, definitions, and theories of intellectual giftedness, and of past and current developments in the field of gifted education. The authors consider, in some detail, the roles of intelligence, creativity, and wisdom in giftedness and the interaction between culture and giftedness, as well as how giftedness can be understood in terms of a construct of developing expertise. The authors also review and discuss a set of key studies that address the issues of identification and education of children with intellectual gifts. This volume may be used as a summary overview of the field for educators, psychologists, social workers, and other professionals who serve intellectually gifted children and their families.

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This book is dedicated to our dear friend and colleague Joseph Renzulli of the University of Connecticut, who, perhaps more than anyone else, has changed both the way we conceive of giftedness and the nature of gifted education itself.
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William James and William James Sidis represent almost opposite ends of a continuum. William James was a gifted youngster who was to become one of the leading philosophers and psychologists of his generation. Some consider him to be the greatest American psychologist of all time. William James Sidis was a gifted youngster who flamed out early in life and, after an extraordinary start, became bitter, let his health go, and died at an early age. James is remembered as a gifted adult who started off as a gifted youngster. Sidis never reached the glory of his namesake and is remembered as a classic example of a bright flame that was extinguished early.

What is it that leads some gifted youngsters to become gifted adults and others not to make the transition from being a gifted youngster to being a gifted adult? What leads individuals to make transitions in the kinds of developing expertise that lead society to label these individuals as gifted, not only from childhood to adulthood but from one stage of childhood to another stage of childhood or from one stage of adulthood to another stage of adulthood? More specifically, what leads individuals from some ethnic groups to be identified as gifted more frequently than individuals from other ethnic groups?

Is it possible that some of the children not being identified as gifted have the gifts and talents to be major contributors to their fields, and that some of the children being identified have lesser talents? In particular, is it possible that underserved minority students have the abilities to excel in their careers, but never get the chance to display these talents because the educational system does not recognize their gifts? Consider three key problems of giftedness dealt with in this book.

First, consider the issue of identification. One of the goals of gifted education is to identify those who are most likely to make important contributions, of whatever kind, to society. From this point of view, we need to understand
Preface

what giftedness is and what transitions in giftedness are over the life span in order to understand which children truly have the most potential to develop the kinds of expertise needed to make important contributions, and which are more likely to flame out and thus be less likely to develop the needed expertise and to make such contributions. Without such understanding, we may be identifying as gifted individuals those who have a lesser potential contribution to make. They may, for example, be good in taking tests, but contribute little to the world. We may be failing especially to identify underserved minority children who could excel in careers, but whose excellence is not shown in the conventional assessments used for identification.

Second, consider the issue of instruction. To the extent that giftedness is in part a matter of developing expertise, educators may be able to help young children develop the kinds of expertise that will lead to long-term contributions if they can determine just what types of expertise these are. Educators cannot adequately decide on how and what to teach if they are not clear as to what kinds of expertise they are trying to develop through their instruction. A further important issue is that underserved minority children often may best learn in ways that do not correspond well to the ways in which traditional instruction is delivered, so that these children do not have the opportunity to fulfill their potential to excel. Instruction needs to match identification to ensure that students identified as gifted are taught in a way that helps them capitalize on strengths and compensate for or correct weaknesses.

Third, consider the issue of evaluation. Samples of children's performance – homework assignments, examinations, essays, projects, and the like – should be evaluated in terms of the kinds of expertise that are important to develop. Such evaluation thus requires identifying what kinds of expertise are important. Otherwise, we may end up evaluating children on the wrong criteria and rewarding the wrong children (as well as adults). Essentially, these are criteria that are viewed as mattering in school but not later in careers, or even earlier in school but not later in a school career. The evaluation must match the identification and instruction. Underserved minority children may make it through the identification and instruction processes, but unless the evaluations of achievement match what they have learned, they will not get credit for their achievements.

Thus, the objective of the research we have done has been to discover the bases for identification, instruction, and evaluation that warrant successful transitions in giftedness across developmental levels and that, in particular, do justice to members of underrepresented minorities. The problem is how to capitalize on the talent of the nation's youngsters, our most precious
resource as a nation. Currently, traditional memory and analytical abilities are stressed in the identification of children for gifted education programs. However, our research has suggested that creative and practical skills are as important as, if not more important than, analytical skills to success in life. We have found that even individuals who are analytically and creatively gifted will not necessarily possess the abilities to excel as adults. For example, they may be able to produce creative artwork but not know how to get it exhibited, or write creative stories but not know how to get them published, or have creative entrepreneurial ideas but not know how to get them funded, or compose creative musical arrangements but not know how to get them performed. They may fail in later transitions of giftedness because they are ineffective at promoting their ideas.

This book aims to bring together some of the enduring themes and most significant work on gifted and talented identification and education of Robert J. Sternberg and his collaborators at the Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise (PACE), a center originally at Yale University and then at Tufts University. This book represents an overview of roughly a dozen years of research in the United States and abroad. We are grateful to all the collaborators we have had over the years, and in addition to the PACE team members listed below, we wish to acknowledge the contributions of Li-fang Zhang, an occasional visiting Fellow at the PACE Center, who collaborated in our work on the “pentagonal theory of giftedness” described in Chapter 1. Rena Subotnik contributed to the work on music and giftedness. Lee Coffin and Tzur Karelitz played important roles in our work at Tufts. Joseph Renzulli, director of the National Research Center for Giftedness/Talent, has been an invaluable colleague and friend over the many years we were involved in the National Center, the senior author as associate director.

We are very grateful to all the PACE members who were involved in this effort, and wish to thank (in alphabetical order)


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RJS, LJ, ELG
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