

**Tripartite Model of Giftedness:
A New Way to Conceptualise Developing Talents among High Ability Students**

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As far back as Confucius in China and Plato in Greece, philosophers have written about “heavenly” or gifted children. We in the U.S. trace the early roots of attention to the gifted to research conducted by Lewis Terman at Stanford University. Professor Terman followed a cohort of very bright young students from California schools and collected volumes of data on these high ability students over the course of 50 years. The purpose of his project was to find what traits characterise children of high IQ and to see what kind of adults they might become. Terman concluded that children of high IQ (140 or higher) are healthier, better adjusted, and higher achievers than unselected children. This early and influential research laid the foundation – in America and worldwide – for how most gifted educators and the lay public still conceptualises giftedness.

A student at Florida State University and I recently conducted a nationwide study to explore how state policies and practices in the U.S. define giftedness, identify gifted students, and accommodate for gifted minority group students.¹ Among our findings we discovered that the great majority of the 50 states use a 3% - 5% cut-score for demarcating giftedness,² and that although most states endorse multiple criteria to define giftedness, they continue to place pronounced, if not almost total emphasis on the IQ score in identifying giftedness – a finding that Professor Terman would be pleased to see! A finding that I was not, however, delighted to discover, as this article will shortly explain.

Myths in the Gifted Field

There exist a few myths in the gifted field that continue to influence how we define and conceptualise giftedness. These myths date back to Terman’s early work and continue to impact, in not always helpful ways, how we go about educating our brightest and most talented students. I will briefly mention three of these prevailing myths – none of which are supported by scientific evidence. The first myth is that giftedness is something real. The

second myth is that giftedness is the same as high IQ. And the third myth is that once a youngster is gifted, they are always gifted. The interested reader can learn more about these and other myths in the gifted field by reading my new book.³

The myth that giftedness is something real is very popular among professionals and the lay public alike. However, the reality is that giftedness is not real; it is an invented, social construction. It is nothing more than a useful way to categorise a special group of children. The second myth, that giftedness is the same as high IQ, is another popular belief both in Western society and in many Eastern cultures. During my recent sabbatical in S.E. Asia, I found that many well-educated educators in Hong Kong and other technologically-advanced Asian societies still reify the IQ. This second myth is perpetuated, in part, by the misguided belief that the IQ is also something real, not a hypothetical construct. And that a student with a score of, say, 130 on an IQ test is in some real and meaningful way different and more superior than a student with an IQ score of 128 or 129. Nothing is further from the truth!

The third myth, once gifted, always gifted, is a “close relative” of the other two myths. It is the reason why many students identified by an IQ score in the early grades are not required to demonstrate subsequent evidence in the later grades that they are still gifted. Many professionals, the public, and even the popular media believe that aptitude and ability are predetermined, set at birth, and unchanging. The great preponderance of scientific evidence, however, indicates that intelligence is not a state of being, and it is not fixed or undeviating. It can change, even markedly, over the course of a person’s life. IQ accounts for a substantial, but not nearly a majority of the reliable variance in a student’s academic performance or real-world success. This leads to the main thesis of this article, an introduction to a new way of conceptualising giftedness.

Conceptualisations of Giftedness

There are many different ways to conceptualise giftedness. There are educational conceptualisations, political conceptualisations, philosophic conceptualisations, and psychometrically-driven conceptualisations. The popular high IQ model is a psychometric conceptualisation. The reader is probably familiar with Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences model and perhaps even Joseph Renzulli’s three-ring conception of

giftedness – along with the high IQ psychometric model, two popular ways of viewing giftedness. The various models differ in important ways. For example, they differ in whether they contend that giftedness should refer to evidence of *potential* for future extraordinary performance or accomplishment, or refer to evidence of *current* exceptional ability or achievement.

There is a growing consensus among authorities in the gifted field that giftedness is best viewed as specific, not general, that the expression of giftedness is best understood as domain specific. I agree with this viewpoint, at least when we consider high ability students until 9-10 years old. In preschool and the early grades, one can make a strong argument that giftedness – or rather the *prediction* of future academic giftedness! – is not yet specific to a particular domain or academic field but rather more indicative of general intellectual ability.

Tripartite Model of Giftedness

This leads to a conceptual model for academic giftedness that I have called the *tripartite model of giftedness*. A detailed explanation of this model appears in my new book. My model suggests that there are at least three different but complementary ways to view students with uncommon, advanced, or exceptionally high ability or potential. The model offers three different ways to identify gifted students, and three different ways to educate high ability students. Remember what I stated earlier, that giftedness is a social construction, not something real. The three different views or lenses through which one can view giftedness by applying my *tripartite model* are simply three different, alternative ways to consider viewing, identifying, grouping and educating students of uncommon or high ability. The three different views of my tripartite model are:

- Viewing Giftedness through the Lens of High Intelligence
- Viewing Giftedness through the Lens of Outstanding Accomplishments
- Viewing Giftedness through the Lens of Potential to Excel

The first perspective, the *high IQ viewpoint*, is by now familiar to all readers. From this perspective, an IQ test or its proxy is used to identify students who are functioning at a certain pre-established level considerably above average intellectually. There is no one

correct cut-score because giftedness is a social construction, not something real. In some situations, a liberal cut-score makes perfectly good sense so that many bright students are initially included at a young age in gifted programs. This strategy makes sense, for example, when identifying young students of high potential who are recent immigrants or who live in financially disadvantaged families and have not enjoyed the obvious benefits of being raised in a more affluent family. In other situations, a more conservative cut-score and more select admissions criteria are appropriate. For example, a more rigorous cut-score makes good sense among older students. Other tests can be used to complement or confirm the findings from the IQ test. This first perspective can follow a general ('g') or multi-dimensional view of intelligence (e.g., Cattell-Horn-Carroll model). It can even be based on a neuro anatomical model of giftedness. This first perspective is often, although not always, associated with the first myth I earlier mentioned, "once gifted, always gifted."

The rationale for gifted programs based on viewing giftedness through the lens of a high IQ is that students of superior intelligence need and/or are entitled to advanced, intellectually challenging, and more fast-paced academic material.

The second perspective, the *outstanding accomplishments viewpoint*, does not necessarily disagree with the importance of high IQ. This second viewpoint considers IQ one useful but not necessarily central measure when identifying academically gifted students. This second perspective recognises the importance of general ability. But it also recognises the significance of specific abilities and skills, attitudes, and personality characteristics. An *outstanding accomplishments view* emphasises actual real-world performance in the classroom, in the lab, and on academic tasks as the central, core and defining characteristic of academic giftedness. Evidence of academic excellence is the *sin qua non* to qualify as a gifted student, not IQ, based on this second perspective. Creativity is more often emphasised when viewing giftedness through this second lens. And the role of motivation, drive, persistence, and passion – clearly non-intellectual factors – is emphasised in this second viewpoint.

The rationale for gifted programs based on an *outstanding accomplishments perspective* is that students who excel academically have earned and deserve special academic programs because of their outstanding effort and superior classroom accomplishments. Gifted

education based on this perspective is slightly but not radically different from gifted education based on a high intelligence perspective. Programs would consist of highly enriched and academically challenging curricula.

The third lens through which the tripartite model conceptualises academic giftedness is what I call *potential to excel*. What I mean is that some students – for any number of reasons, have not been provided enough opportunity or intellectual stimulation to develop what remains *dormant*, undeveloped or underdeveloped intellectual or academic gifts. This third perspective is based on my experience working with many students (and youth athletes) of high potential but not yet actualised ability. This third perspective of the *tripartite model* acknowledges that not all students start out on an equal footing. Some children from poverty, recent immigrants from another land and culture, and/or families in which intellectual and educational activities are not encouraged in the home are all at distinct disadvantage to develop their gifts.

This third perspective emphasises the *potential to excel* and could just as easily be termed the “almost or potentially gifted student.” The idea underlying this third lens is that some students, when provided with special, enriched resources, tutors and intellectually stimulating interventions will blossom in extraordinary ways well beyond their peers – they will eventually actualise their yet unrealised high potential and ultimately distinguish themselves from their peers. When identifying student with a high likelihood for gifted status, the premise is that with enough nurturance, stimulation, and encouragement, and if begun early enough, these special students will demonstrate significant gains in their IQ and academic performance – considerably more than what one would expect from students with less potential.

Developmental Transformations

One additional component of my model bears mentioning, namely recognition of developmental transformations across the child’s lifespan. My thinking on developmental transformations is based on ideas first proposed by two gifted authorities, Francoys Gagné and Rena Subotnik. My thinking is also based on first-hand experience working closely on the sidelines with highly gifted youth soccer players; both with the U.S. Olympic

Development Program Soccer Program and the women's soccer program at Duke University. These experiences introduced me to how talent, at the highest levels, develops and is transformed over time. And to the importance, in addition to a ton of genetic advantages in terms of physical ability, of non-ability factors such as persistence, will, deliberate practice, grit and hard work, good coaching and mentoring, a love for the game, and opportunity to play at the most competitive level. My experience with elite soccer players taught me that giftedness is a dynamic construct; highly talented athletes (and students, as well as musicians, dancers, artists, actors, scientists, etc.) develop and become highly proficient, creative and expert in their respective field only over time and only after considerable hard work. I also learned that not all highly talented young athletes or extraordinarily bright students ultimately develop into elite, world-class performers, scientists, politicians, teachers, engineers, physicians, or attorneys. It takes much more than general ability.

Concluding Comments

The tripartite model provides three different lenses through which to view giftedness. The developmental perspective reminds us that ability is never enough; many factors, including non-intellectual factors, influence in very concrete and real ways, over time, the unfolding development of competence and even expertise in one of many culturally-valued fields. The tripartite model also reminds us that a few gifted youth continue on to attain the highest levels of talent development and reach what would be considered an elite and even eminent status in their respective field. A status marked by a passion for the game and creative performance on the playing field in soccer, and dedication, persistence, and even innovative accomplishments in the lab or academic arena. Not all young gifted students ultimately will reach this highest plateau, but the unique success trajectory for each academic field – in the sciences, math, social sciences, helping professions, humanities, etc. – can serve as useful guideposts and roadmaps in working with gifted students from any of the three gifted perspectives: high IQ, outstanding performance, or potential to excel.

Notes:

¹ McClain, M. C., & Pfeiffer, S. I. (2012). Identification of gifted students in the U.S. today: A look at state definitions, policies, and practices. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 28, 59-88.

² Some countries have adopted a more stringent cut-score for demarcating giftedness.

³ Pfeiffer, S. (2012). *Serving the Gifted: Evidence-Based Clinical and Psycho-educational Practice*. New York: Routledge.

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415997508/>

