


# Psychological Science, Talent Development, and Educational Advocacy: Lost in Translation?

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## Abstract

The talent development approach to the conceptualization of giftedness has historical precedent in the field. Examples of large-scale and longitudinal research studies from previous decades guided by the talent development approach are provided as illustrations. The implications of focusing on domain-specific talents in academics, the arts and sport, their individual patterns of development, and the use of eminence as a goal for programs and services in gifted education are discussed. The importance of linking theoretical debates and research with the realities of policies, resource allocation, and advocacy is emphasized.

## Keywords

philosophical/theoretical, definition and/or conception of giftedness/talent, advocacy

The purpose of the study is to find out why some students learn and others do not; why some students do poorly in high school and then seem to come into their own in college, while others who do well in high school fail to adjust to college. Here, on an unprecedented scale, is an attempt to find out more about the students' interests, their career plans, and whether the courses they take are consistent with the life objectives they have set for themselves. And, above all, it is an attempt to determine why so much of the nation's human potential is lost and what schools, counselors and parents can do to reduce this loss.

—Lawrence W. Derthink, U.S. Commissioner  
of Education, April 15, 1959

The preceding quote might have been plucked from the headlines, from a policy brief, or from an academic publication today. In fact, the words were penned in the late 1950s by a U.S. Commissioner of Education about Project TALENT, a large-scale study of talent development in the United States (<http://www.projecttalent.org/about>). Project TALENT was the vision of psychologist John Flanagan and initiated in 1960 with a sample of 400,000 high school students. As recently as 2010, Project TALENT researchers contacted study participants to learn about their current circumstances and the trajectory of their lives over the past five decades (Winkler & Jolly, 2011).

## Precursors From Psychology and Education

As the Project TALENT example demonstrates, the domain-specific approach to talent identification and talent development

advocated by Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011) has ample precedent in the field in terms of definition and research. In addition, the field provides examples of the talent development approach in the worlds of policy and practice as well as in the vineyards of previous research and theory. For the most part, the authors' proposals are comfortably cushioned by history.

Although textbooks commonly draw attention to the Terman studies as the preeminent early longitudinal study of giftedness, Terman's operational definition of giftedness does not focus on domain specificity, but rather on general intelligence. Despite his investigation of reading habits of the young study participants and despite Catharine Cox Miles's retrospective biographical investigation of eminent individuals from specific talent domains presented in Volume 2 of the series, the Terman studies were guided by a general conception of giftedness. In contrast, the longitudinal study, Project TALENT, is situated philosophically and empirically to understand domain-specific talents and the role that psychosocial variables like interests play in the development of those talents across the lifespan (Flanagan, 1962; Shaycoft, 1977). In this regard, Project TALENT is a grandparent of the Subotnik et al. proposals sans the focus on eminence as a goal of services for advanced children and adolescents.

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In fact, a family of research studies from the talent development perspective precedes Flanagan's large-scale study. A few years prior to the beginning of data collection for Project TALENT in 1960, the Talented Youth Project (TYP) was initiated in 1954 by Harry Passow (see Passow, 1956). The definition developed for the Talented Youth Project was, "Talent is the capacity for superior achievement in certain areas of endeavors which have consistently advanced civilization" (Goldberg & Passow, 1962, p. 223). Readers may associate a similar definition with Paul Witty (1958); the similarities are not surprising. Witty, Passow, Goldberg, and Tannenbaum all worked on various projects at approximately the same time (Kirschenbaum, 1998). Talent development was in the air and in the crafted text of the study proposals and publications around them. Whatever its etiology, the talent development approach to defining giftedness was alive, well, and thriving in the 1950s and 1960s. Specifically, the TYP study initiated in 1954 was prescient; it had been underway three years when the launch of Sputnik and the perceived threats to national security mobilized talent development investment at the federal level. Through such initiatives as the National Merit Scholarship Program and National Defense Act Student Loan Program, research, policy, and direct student aid were focused on developing talents among America's young people with a premium placed on STEM talents. The ensuing decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and the 1990s saw the establishment of the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth by Julian Stanley (1996), the rise of the talent search delivery models that grew out of domain-specific approaches to advanced learners (Matthews, 2008), and calls for a move to domain-specific talent development as the overarching metaphor for the field (Feldhusen, 1992).

## Translations to Advocacy

The philosophical popularity and longevity of the talent development perspective generates important questions. What are the implications for advocacy on behalf of advanced learners? Given the strong 20th-century voices in the history of the field that promulgated and endorsed the talent development perspective, why haven't we been at the table more frequently as the authors suggest we might be if the field will embrace this perspective? And what promises and pitfalls does the current call for the talent development approach offer us with respect to standing up, speaking up, and securing resources for children and youth?

## Advocacy as a Cornerstone

Ours is a field substantially built on advocacy. We have associations built around advocacy at the national, state, and local levels. We have models of advocacy (Dettmer, 1995; Gallagher, 1983). We have conducted research on advocacy (Robinson & Moon, 2003). We have gained practical knowledge and know-how from advocacy efforts. One of the key

lessons learned from a national study of local and state advocates is that in most cases, the final advocacy goal is a focus on services. The advocates may establish new services, expand or improve existing services, or recognize intermediate goals such as policy making or public relations along the way. Simply put, the purpose of advocacy is to argue for a cause. In the real world, advocacy also implies that resources will be directed to that cause. That advanced learners require vigilant advocacy at all times is a truism. One need only survey political events and policy choices to uncover recent examples of unintended deleterious outcomes for advanced learners (inattention to them under the initial conceptualization of No Child Left Behind) or the intended redirection of resources away from them (defunding the only federal program supporting research and demonstration projects for gifted children, the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Program).

**Pros.** How can a reaffirmation of the talent development perspective assist our field now? First, building on sound theory and replicable empirics whenever possible is an undeniable strength. In making the case by marshalling the research from a variety of disciplines, including sport as well as the academic and arts domains, Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (this issue) have protected the flank of their argument. Second, the explanation of the different developmental trajectories in different domains provides advocates with more than one opportunity across the lifespan of children, adolescents, and adults to argue for intervention. Savvy advocates can see that the brass ring of resources will come around more than once in a long-term, coordinated plan to develop talents.

Third, domain-specificity in talent development encourages connections among advocates across professional fields who want talented employees and want them now. Engineers, scientists, artists, and activists are not frightened of the concept of talent development. They want access to talented human capital for their own purposes. So much the better for our field if we can share research from the psychological sciences to explain the development of talents to other professional fields whose leaders are moved by data, rationality, and the bottom line.

**Cons.** What might be the cons of adopting a talent development perspective at the present time? In the development of theory or the execution of a research program, little danger is likely. Theory-building scholarship and coordinated research programs are slow tillage activities. They take time, and the relatively grim, current economic outlook is likely to change before the recommendations for theory and research put forth by the authors have the opportunity to bear fruit. In other words, widespread adoption of a talent development perspective for theory and research presents little risk to advocacy efforts.

In contrast, the risks to local and state policy and direct services are much higher. Many local and state policies are built around an identifiable client, the gifted child or adolescent. Resources may be tied to numbers of identified individuals,

school programs designed to serve them, or personnel preparation criteria, for example. For those states that have mandates to identify and serve gifted children and youth, the heady theoretical discussions and debates over terminology may have unintended outcomes. In times of economic distress and a weakening infrastructure for state and local services for high-ability learners, opening debates on existing laws, policies, and procedures in the hope of revising statutory language for philosophical acceptability or to reflect current psychological theory and research can result in the loss of protective state statutes and local policies. Any time that an existing law or policy is proactively opened for amendment advocates can lose ground as well as gain it. Timing is everything. Ask for changes when dealing from a position of strength. One possible outcome of this conversation is that talent development theory and research from the psychological sciences are lost in translation to local and state policy makers who are pressed to make pragmatic decisions about scarce resources every day. If the existing state and local documents do not have talent development language in them currently (and few do), then the field could find itself faced with more rollbacks regarding mandates and funding.

The arguments in the Subotnik et al. article are nuanced. It takes longer than an elevator ride to explain to someone outside the field that eminence should be the goal of gifted (or talent development) programs and services. Despite my personal research interests in eminence and innovation (Robinson, 2011, 2012), the practical world of schools and school boards make this goal a tough sell and one that is open to both charges of irrelevance (what primary school principal is focused on adult eminence?) or elitism (will policy makers assume that talent development programs are the same as the university-based talent searches that use high test score and performance criteria?). Will the proposed approach add fuel to the elitism fires we actually wish to douse?

I hope not. Linking psychological science and the talent development perspective has been well argued by the authors and has significant theoretical and empirical appeal. The suggestions by Dai (2011) that our field would be best served by a flat structure that emphasizes the importance of feedback loops among theoreticians, researchers, and practitioners provides important lessons to us. Our current challenge is to take precautions that the linguistic links between the worlds of theory and research and the practical concerns of the parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers are not lost in translation.

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**Bio**

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