

Developing Giftedness for a Better World

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Changing the World... One Step at a Time

As a third grader, Ryan was proud to read the local paper, sometimes sitting right alongside his father. One evening he saw an article reporting an extremely large increase in fines for littering, which led to his questions about why there needed to be fines for littering when it wasn't a big deal to simply put trash where it belongs. Ryan's father asked him if he had ever been too lazy to find a garbage can, or if he had seen his friends carelessly throw things down, and Ryan became a bit defensive. "Well, maybe once or twice, but no big deal," he answered. "Well," said his father, "what if everyone had the same attitude you do about trash? After all, one or two pieces of trash still add up. I'll bet the fine is being increased because it costs so much to hire people to clean up other people's mess."

The conversation continued into dinner. Ryan's parents speculated that young kids, with all their energy, might be able to contribute substantially to the welfare of their small town by actively becoming involved in this issue. Two days later, Ryan came home from school with the germ of an idea. What if he and his friends could pick up trash alongside the road to school on the coming Saturday? That first day, the four boys collected six bags of trash. One of the mothers sent a letter to the editor about their contribution, and soon others in school became involved. A local restaurant contributed free hamburgers for the kids who joined the next "trash day," and parents joined as "flaggers" for traffic safety.

For many years, our definition of giftedness has been based on the interaction among three characteristics: above average (but not necessarily superior) ability; creativity; and task commitment. In other words, high ability is not enough to explain giftedness. It also takes an intensity and focus on a certain area, along with the willingness to try new ideas or look at something with a different perspective. Gifted behaviors occur when these three components intersect, and this happens in some people (not all people) at certain times (not all times), and under certain circumstances. (not all circumstances). We only recently began to turn our attention to understanding more fully the sources of these gifted behaviors and, more importantly, the ways in which people use their gifts and talents in a constructive and positive way. Why did Ryan contribute time and energy to a socially responsible project that would make life better in his community? Can a better understanding of people who use their gifts for the greater good help us create conditions that expand the number of people who willingly contribute to the growth of both social and economic capital? How can parents provide opportunities so their children develop their abilities in responsible ways?

Social Capital and Gifted Education

Financial and intellectual capital are well-known forces that drive the economy and generate professional advancement, wealth production, and highly valued material assets—all important to a capitalistic economic system. Social capital, on the other hand, consists of intangible assets that address the collective needs and problems of individuals and communities. Continual investments in social capital benefit all of us, communities and individuals alike, because they help create the values, norms, and networks that constitute the bedrock of social trust.

What is perhaps most striking when examining the commentary of leading scholars about economic capital versus social capital is that investments in both types of national assets are necessary for greater prosperity, improved physical and mental health, as well as a society that honors freedom, happiness, justice, civic participation, and the dignity of a diverse population. Robert Putnam, for example, pointed out that historically the aggregation of social capital has contributed to economic development. He found that widespread social trust, participation in group activities, and cooperation created conditions for both good government and prosperity. Tracing the roots of investments in social capital to medieval times, Putnam concluded that communities did not become civil because they were rich, but rather became rich because they were civil.

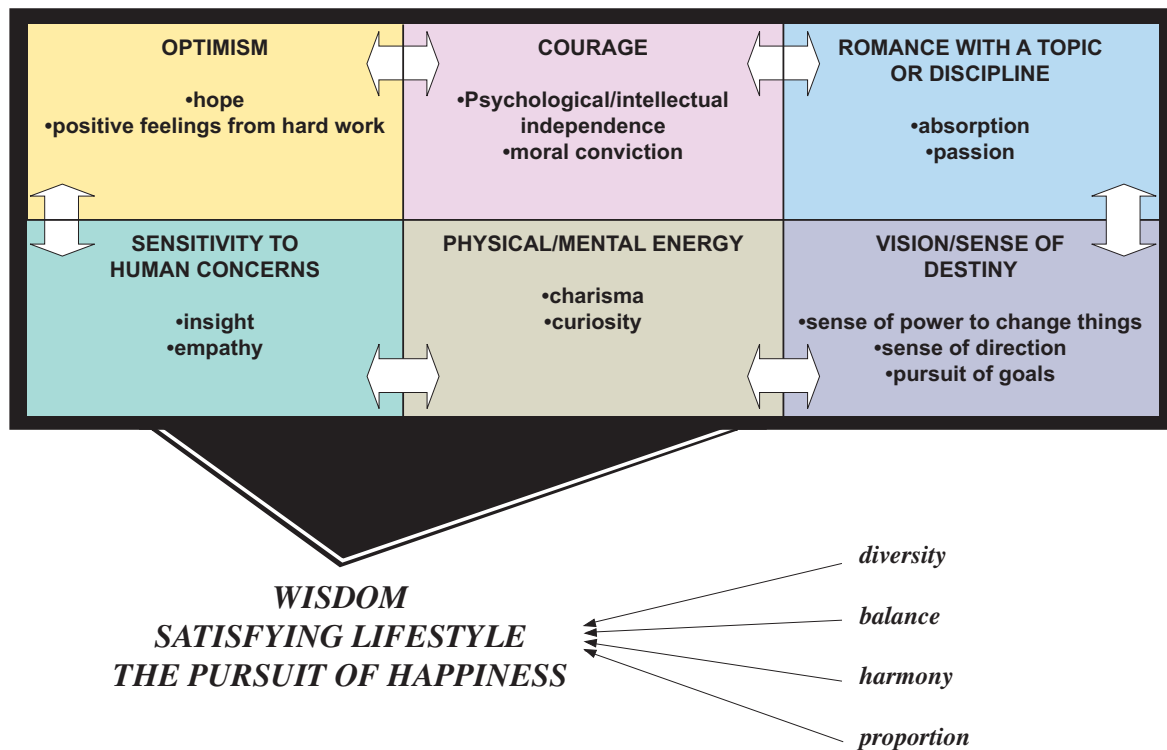
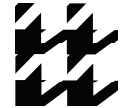
Over the latter half of the 20th century, however, striking evidence indicates a marked decline in social capital in western culture. Surveys show decreases over the last few decades in voter turnout and political participation, membership in service clubs, church-related groups, parent-teacher associations, unions, and fraternal groups.

Past research on gifted individuals has tried to address the difference between high-ability persons who use their intellectual, motivational, and creative assets in ways that lead to outstanding manifestations of creative productivity (such as Edison with the electric lightbulb or the Wright Brothers with the airplane) and those gifted individuals with similar or perhaps even more considerable assets who do not achieve high levels of accomplishment. Perhaps the more important question when thinking about the production of social capital is: “What causes some people to mobilize their interpersonal, political, ethical, and moral senses in such ways that they place human concerns and the common good above materialism, ego enhancement, and self-indulgence?”

Operation Houndstooth

In an effort to promote gifted leadership for a new century, we believe that the definition of giftedness should be expanded to include several traits that characterize persons who have had a profound impact on the improvement of society. In order to accomplish that goal, we developed a new research project, Operation Houndstooth, which has two major phases. The first phase of the project includes clarifying definitions while identifying, adapting, and constructing assessment procedures to extend our understanding of six important factors that emerged from a comprehensive review of the literature and a series of surveys given to high school-age students. The six components are described in the accompanying figure.

OPERATION HOUNDSTOOTH



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Our research has already shown that Houndstooth components can be found in diverse groups and across age levels. A major assumption underlying this project is that all the components defined in our background research can be modified under certain circumstances. Thus, the second phase consists of a series of experimental studies to determine how we might promote the types of behavior defined within those six components.

The word “Houndstooth” refers to the complex background pattern of interwoven factors that have an impact on gifted behaviors. Consider how the warp and woof of cloth provide strength and pattern. Like threads, gifted behaviors do not exist in isolation, but develop within particular situations. Operation Houndstooth was created to investigate which factors contribute to the positive use of personal assets.

It is important for parents to consider possible ingredients for giftedness and creative productivity if they are to help their children develop their potential. We can find many theories and anecdotal accounts of high achievers that call attention to different components and conditions for exceptional accomplishment; yet it is still unclear why certain persons have

devoted their lives and considerable talents to improving the human condition. What contributes to the creation of a Nelson Mandela, a Rachel Carson, a Mother Teresa?

The positive psychology movement, championed by Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, focuses on the enhancement of what is good in life, and the investigation of human strengths and virtues. The goal is for social science to become a positive force in the advancement of the highest qualities of civic and personal life.

Operation Houndstooth results from the coupling of this movement's tenets with a continuing search for key components that give rise to socially constructive giftedness, especially in young people. We know these components can have a positive impact on the development of high levels of motivation, interpersonal skills, and organizational and management skills. In addition, we believe Houndstooth components support the growth of cognitive attributes such as academic achievement, research skills, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

Before discussing how we can create learning environments that nurture Houndstooth characteristics, we should acknowledge a few cautions when considering how to instill those traits in young people. Simply telling children about these more complex capacities doesn't work—you can't teach or preach vision or sense of destiny. We should also emphasize voluntary student participation in programs and projects designed to promote the characteristics and behaviors identified in Operation Houndstooth. Student-initiated service is more powerful and engaging than required community service or forcing uncommitted young people to participate in projects based on someone else's values.

How then can we promote the capacities represented in Houndstooth? We suggest that the answer lies in providing young people with ways to: (1) examine their individual abilities, interests, and learning styles; (2) explore areas of potential involvement based on existing or developing interests; (3) find opportunities, resources, and encouragement for first-hand investigative or creative experiences within their chosen areas of interest; (4) become involved in ways they can see positive traits being modeled by adults. Parents can take a proactive role in making this happen.

1. Examining Abilities, Interests, and Learning Styles

The best examples of positive behaviors identified in the Houndstooth research have resulted from children who have a good picture of who they are as students, and how they learn best. Although academic strengths are usually obvious and well documented through regular school programs, information about interests, learning styles, thinking styles, and preference for various modes of expression comes from thoughtful conversations over time between parents, their children, and other involved adults. Guided discussions with your children about important topics can provide insights into how, where, why, at what times, and under what conditions each child is best able to learn. At the same time, the exploration of preferences can help establish a respect for individual differences. For example, it is likely you and your child will find that your learning profiles are not the same, yet you both have found ways to absorb information as well as "show what you know." We use a document called The Total Talent Portfolio (TTP) to collect this information. The TTP includes several kinds of information about a person, including:

- Academic strengths
- General and specific areas of interest
- Learning style preferences
- Learning environment preferences
- Thinking style preferences
- Preferred style of expression.

(You can learn more about the TTP and investigating your child’s abilities, interests, and learning styles in an earlier *Parenting for High Potential* article (Sept. 1999, pp. 6–7, 30) or in Karen Rogers’ book *Re-Forming Gifted Education*, listed in the resources at the end of this article.)

2. Exploring Areas of Potential Involvement

Houndstooth capacities develop when students become passionately involved in an area of personal choice. The best way to promote such involvement is to expose young people to dynamic experiences within their general area(s) of interest. Parents, who are familiar with what their child likes to do outside of school, can help stimulate their child’s curiosity about a variety of topics. A recent book, *Child’s Play: Enriching Your Child’s Interests*, by *Monica Cardoza*, explains how activities outside of school can be good starting points for developing interests. The author suggests that, if your child enjoys a particular activity, it will be wise to explore it in all its detail, looking into its offshoots or variations. For example, if your child studies ballet, you might encourage her or him to research other forms of dance, to read about the history of dance, or to study famous dancers, costumes, or music.

Another way to encourage in-depth involvement is by visiting places where creative activity is taking place. Business offices, film and television studios, research laboratories, publishing houses, artists’ studios, and backstage visits to theaters are just a few examples of places where you can take your child to see creative people at work. Once again, understanding your child’s interests and learning styles helps you become more effective in focusing and stimulating interests. In the vignette at the beginning of this article, Ryan’s father was aware that his son loved the challenge of finding many different solutions to a problem and then figuring out what would work best. The two of them spent most of dinnertime talking about “trash” (fines, recycling, waste facilities, machines, etc.).

Participation in lively discussions about controversial issues, events, books, and media presentations is another way to stimulate opportunities for intensive follow-up. Listening to a house guest talk about his passion for sustainable agriculture/aquaculture in Third World countries recently motivated two high school students to contact an organization that provides materials and training for rooftop gardens in Mexico City. As a result, one of them spent a summer working with families and then, upon returning home, the two friends began a club to train other students in their city in specialized gardening techniques.

Children who talk about work in which they are interested often have “stars in their eyes.” They frequently recount clever and creative ways in which they overcome obstacles. For example, one young musician who had organized groups of other musicians to play in rural elementary schools

talked about arriving at a school without a tuned piano and having to adjust the program to include awareness of sound quality and the joy of beautiful music, rather than focus the performance on pieces that included the unplayable piano. As a result, a young student at that school sought out a piano tuner, learned about his craft, and collected funds to have the school piano tuned on a regular schedule so the whole student body would benefit. The main message should always be, “Find an interest and get involved.” Being a gifted contributor is not a spectator sport!

Early characteristics of gifted children that may indicate interest in socially constructive work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation of “fairness” at school • A strong sense of right and wrong • Sensitivity to the feelings of others • Strong awareness of the needs of others

3. Providing Opportunities

Parents who see emerging interests in their children and then spend time learning about what excites their curiosity can offer opportunities for the development of those interests. For example, when a father first learned of his son’s concern for homeless children, he included his son in a Rotary lunch meeting about famine. Later the two of them watched a documentary on national poverty. As his son continued to ask questions, this father sought out more and more ways to help his son learn. He clipped relevant articles from newspapers and magazines, and even sent letters with clippings when his job took him away from home. He commented on conversations he heard at work, and openly encouraged his son’s burgeoning interest.

How Can Parents Help Encourage Houndstooth Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss, brainstorm, and explore little ways to help make a difference • Search out biographies of people who have made a difference (see https://achievement.org) • Bring up topics such as “What is fairness?” in conversations with your child • Help scaffold and build your child’s interest by searching out opportunities, finding resources, and helping them meet and work with appropriate people (adults and other students) • Read or watch the news together and discuss current events (not focusing on negatives or seemingly hopeless situations)

4. Becoming Involved Oneself

The best role models for good works are parents. The father described above, an accountant, signed up as a regular volunteer right alongside his son at a local soup kitchen. As a team, they

have now created a schedule and organized a committee to collect donations from restaurants around town that can then be used for soup kitchen lunches. In these cases, an underlying theme is “we can make things happen” and “we can instigate positive change.” Perhaps the most important outcome is the sheer enjoyment along with learning problem-solving skills that children can glean from addressing issues outside the realm of conventional classroom subjects.

5. Are the Goals of Operation Houndstooth Realistic?

If, as studies have shown, self-interest has replaced some of the values that created a more socially conscious early America, and if the negative trends of young people’s over-indulgences and disassociations are growing, then we must ask if there is a role that parents and schools can play in gently influencing future citizens, and especially future leaders, toward a value system that assumes greater responsibility for the production of social capital. In spite of our best efforts to identify students for special programs, it is still difficult to predict who will be our most gifted future contributors to our world. So far as the work on Operation Houndstooth is concerned, the possibility exists that by expanding our conception of giftedness beyond traditional high-scoring test takers and good lesson learners, we will find as rich a source of high potential young people in the broad and diverse populations of non-selected students as we find in students traditionally selected for gifted programs.

Understanding how positive human attributes develop is especially important because it will help us direct the educational and environmental experiences we provide for the potentially gifted and talented young people who will be in a position to shape both the values and the actions of this new century. While the whole notion of changing the big picture seems awesome and overwhelming, the words of Margaret Mead remind us that it can be done: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world... indeed, it is the only thing that ever does.”

Parents have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to interact with their children in positive and future-oriented ways. Perhaps one of the most important things we can do for our children is to empower them to shape their own futures. In so doing, we will instill in them the motivation to help create a better society, or even a better world.

Recommended Readings

- Purcell, J. H., Burns, D. E., & Schader, R. (1999, September). Parents, teachers, and the talent portfolio: Making curriculum modification and differentiation a reality. *Parenting for High Potential*, 6–7, 30.
- Cardozo, M. (2003). *Child’s play: Enhancing your child’s interests, from rocket science to rock climbing, stamp collecting to sculpture*. New York: Citadel Press.
- Purcell, J. H., & Renzulli, J. S. (1998). *Total talent portfolio: A systematic plan to identify and nurture gifts and talents*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Putnam, R. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Putnam, R. (1995). Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 65–78. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0002>

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