

Reis, S. M., & Renzulli, J. S. (2009). Myth 1: The gifted and talented constitute one single homogeneous group and giftedness is a way of being that stays in the person over time and experiences. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 53 (4), 233–235.

Myth 1: The Gifted and Talented Constitute One Single Homogeneous Group AND Giftedness Is a Way of Being That Stays in the Person Over Time and Experiences

**Sally M. Reis
Joseph S. Renzulli**

*It is better to have imprecise answers to the right questions
than precise answers to the wrong questions.*
Donald Campbell

Can a field that prides itself on promoting creativity and innovation in young people handle these processes itself? Deep seated values, attitudes, and beliefs about the meaning of giftedness and how we should go about identifying students for participation in special programs have been slow to change because the evidence that might lead to such change has been in conflict with long standing attitudes that are the product of outdated research, personal beliefs, and an education system that places more emphasis on administrative expediency than on evidence that has resulted from recent research on the conceptions of human potential. Tidiness and efficiency are important to the operation of any complex enterprise, but they should never take the place of our responsibility to do the right thing in the best interests of the young people we serve through special programs and services. Einstein, the personification of scientific giftedness across ages and cultures, said, “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

After having spent over seven decades of our collective lives in the field of gifted education as teachers, school psychologist, coordinator, researchers, and university professors interested in the nurturance of gifts and talents, we believe there is no more potentially dangerous and false myth than the one above. Let us, therefore, begin this response with the following resounding statement: **THERE IS NO SINGLE HOMOGENEOUS GROUP OF GIFTED CHILDREN AND ADULTS AND GIFTEDNESS IS DEVELOPMENTAL, NOT FIXED AT BIRTH.** Our work (Reis, 2005; Reis & Renzulli, 1982, Renzulli, 1978, 2005), as well as many others, some of whom will be briefly mentioned, has contributed unequivocally to a robust research base that enables us to point convincingly to the heterogeneity of the group labeled gifted.

A brief summary of some research follows. Over a decade ago, a task force of psychologists and educators spent two years reviewing all of the extent research on the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted and talented children and young adults resulting in an edited volume (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002). While completing that summary, we read hundreds of articles about gifted and talented children and adolescents, and in our executive summary, we stated:

There is no more varied group of young people than the diverse group known as gifted children and adolescents. Not only do they come from every walk of life, every ethnic and socioeconomic group, and every nation, but also they exhibit an almost unlimited range of personal characteristics in temperament, risk-taking and conservatism, introversion and extraversion, reticence and flamboyance, and effort invested in reaching goals. No standard pattern of talent exists among gifted individuals (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002, p. 1).

Our current federal definition suggests that gifted and talented students are indeed the diverse group of individuals discussed above, students who have varying abilities and potentials in one or many domains. These are students whose talents and gifts are sufficiently advanced so as to require changes in the school curriculum and instruction and opportunities to develop their unique aptitudes, interests, learning styles, and preferred modes of expression. This widely accepted federal definition of giftedness (Ross, 1993) highlights students' intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, unusual capacity for leadership, or excellence in specific academic fields. The federal definition further points out that outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor (p. 26). In both this definition, as well as other well-researched conception of giftedness, the notion that giftedness is a developmental construct is widely supported by leading researchers in the field (Bloom, 1985; Gardner, 1983; Renzulli, 1978, 1986, 2005; Sternberg & Davidson, 1986, 2005).

Diverse Characteristics

In research about gifted students from a broad variety of backgrounds, Frasier and Passow (1994) referred to “general/common attributes of giftedness”—traits, aptitudes, and behaviors consistently identified by researchers as common to all gifted students. Although they identified some common elements of giftedness (motivation, advanced interests, communication skills, problem-solving ability, well-developed memory, inquiry, insight, reasoning, imagination/creativity, sense of humor, and advanced ability to deal with symbol system), they hastened to point out that every student does not display each trait. They also cautioned that these characteristics can be and are manifested differently by individual students. Over the last few decades, a large body of research has pointed to the ways in which gifts and talents vary, including but not limited to the following general categories of developmental characteristics.

Abilities and Aptitudes. These factors vary in both verbal and non-verbal areas across age, population, sex, disability level, and ethnic group. Simply put, high aptitude in any area manifests itself in vastly different ways depending upon what assessment has been used, the student's family and cultural background, and the rest of the youngster's areas of talent potential, including the absence or presence of motivation, creativity, and disabilities.

Achievement. Teachers and parents usually associate high potential with high achievement, but achievement can and does varies across high potential children and over time (Reis & McCoach, 2000). High ability children underachieve because of factors such as decreased motivation, social and emotional affect, effort, interest, and absence of challenge, engagement, and support. Children with high aptitudes who also have learning disabilities, for example, may increasingly demonstrate low motivation in school as they become older, and subsequently, have diminished achievement (Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1997).

Academic Background. Due to different preparation and exposure many young people and adults with strong potential for learning do not have appropriately challenging academic backgrounds. Continuous progression through schooling and beyond are a function of previous academic preparation, especially at early ages when brain development progresses at a rapid pace.

Culture and Identity. Children from diverse cultures, racial and socio-economic groups, and multi-lingual homes come to school with different and unique backgrounds, values toward education, and expectations that interact with achievement in rich and diverse ways (Ford, 2002).

Effort. No single non-cognitive trait is more influential on high levels of performance than effort or motivation, and in addition to factors mentioned above, young people and adults with high potential are the most hampered by under challenging learning or work experiences. High aptitude students often “coast” through school without having to expend much effort, and when they finally *do* encounter a challenge, some experience a loss of confidence in their abilities resulting in diminished achievement levels (Reis & McCoach, 2002).

Interests, Learning Styles, and Creative Opportunities. Maximum performance is intimately associated with these three factors. All persons that history has recognized as gifted contributors to their respective areas of the arts, sciences, humanities, and other areas of human performance have had strong interests bordering on a passion for their work, opportunities to pursue this work in a manner compatible with their preferred ways of learning, and they have worked in environments that provided opportunities for creative expression. Without these factors and environmental conditions, even persons with exceptional cognitive potential would not maximize their potential.

In addition to these important contributors to the development of high performance, a number of other factors that we sometimes refer to as “intelligences outside the normal curve” (Renzulli & Reis, 2005) have played a role in the high level accomplishments of both young people and adults. Factors such as courage, optimism, sense of power to change things, empathy, and physical and mental energy are the things that we respect in the work of people such as Rachel Carson, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, and Martin Luther King. Combined with other non-cognitive skills such as collaboration, leadership, organization, planning, and self-efficacy, what emerges is a picture of giftedness that goes far beyond the “golden chromosome” theory that would lead us to believe that some people are pre-ordained to be “gifted.”

If the diversity and heterogeneity of this population is so clear, why then does this myth continue to exist? Some educators and parents may hold outdated notions about the fixed conceptions of aptitude. For others, the myth may continue to exist because it is easier to identify “the gifted” by a score, despite protestations of multiple criteria. For others, the myth means that they do not have to take the time to consider the effects of poverty, hunger, poor schooling, or lack of stimulation on some children who had high potential but failed to develop it over time. And still others may hold on to this myth because they do not keep current with the research and information that has informed our field, as well as the recognized accomplishments of untold numbers of people who had high scores but never did anything with them! Giftedness is not a state of being, it is not fixed, it does not reside in some over a lifetime as a fixed entity. It is, rather, developmental in some children and adults with high potential, at certain times, under

certain circumstances, and with appropriate levels of support, time, effort, and personal investments and choices.

References

- Baum, S. M. (1988). An enrichment program for gifted learning disabled students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 32(1), 226–230.
- Bloom, B. S. (Ed.). (1985). *Developing talent in young people*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Ford, D. Y. (2002). Racial identify among gifted African American students. In M. Neihart, S. Reis, N. M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 155–164). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Frasier, M. M., & Passow, A. H. (1994). *Toward a new paradigm for identifying talent potential* (Research Monograph 94112). Storrs: University of Connecticut, The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. Needham Height, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Neihart, M., Reis, S. M., Robinson, N. M., & Moon, S. M. (Eds.). (2002). *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Reis, S. M., & McCoach, D. B. (2000). The underachievement of gifted students: What do we know and where do we go? *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 44(3), 152–170.
- Reis, S. M., Neu, T. W., & McGuire, J. M. (1997). Case studies of high ability students with learning disabilities who have achieved. *Exceptional Children*, 63(4), 463–479.
- Renzulli, J. S. (1978). What makes giftedness: Reexamining a definition. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 60(3), 180–184.
- Renzulli, J. S. (1986). The three-ring conception of giftedness: A developmental model for creative productivity. In R. J. Sternberg & J. E. Davidson (Eds.), *Conceptions of giftedness* (pp. 53–92). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (1997). *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A how-to guide for educational excellence* (2nd ed.). Storrs, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (2003). Conception of giftedness and its relation to the development of social capital. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (pp. 75–87). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Ross, P. O. (1993). *National excellence: A case for developing America's talent*. Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Education.
- Sternberg, R. J., & Davidson, J. (1986). (Eds.). *Conceptions of giftedness*. Boston: Cambridge University Press.
- Sternberg, R. J., & Davidson, J. (2005). (Eds.). *Conceptions of giftedness* (2nd ed.). Boston: Cambridge University Press.