

A reflective conversation with Steven Pfeiffer: serving the gifted

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Abstract

The gifted remain an often misunderstood and underserved population. In this interview, Dr. Pfeiffer discusses these concerns and provides practitioners with timely information on who exactly the gifted are and the various ways in which they are unique. In this reflective conversation, Dr. Pfeiffer, a noted authority on gifted and talented students, explores practical, evidence-based techniques and guidelines for working with the gifted, their teachers, and their families. He responds to questions about how best to assist the gifted population in various realms, including home, school, and interpersonal relationships.



Keywords

Gifted, psychology and gifted

Steven Pfeiffer is a Professor at the College of Education at Florida State University. He is a licensed psychologist, and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association. Over the past 30 years, he has worked with gifted children and their families in his counseling practice. Dr. Pfeiffer is the lead author of the *Gifted Rating Scales*, published by Pearson Assessment. The scale is one of the most widely used and researched teacher

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rating scales in the gifted field. He has authored or co-authored over 150 articles and book chapters. His *Handbook of Giftedness*, published in 2008, is a widely used text in gifted courses. He recently completed a new book, *Serving the Gifted*, which was published by Routledge (2012).

- *Dr. Pfeiffer, your latest book is entitled Serving the Gifted. How did this book come about and what were you trying to accomplish?*

Mike, I have worked with high-ability students, in a variety of capacities, for more than 30 years. In the late 1970s, while still a graduate student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, my dissertation research looked at creativity and how important IQ was in creating creative writing. For many years, as a clinician, I have counseled gifted children and their families for a wide variety of problems. This has provided me with a unique perspective—working with very bright children when things go awry in their lives. I had the good fortune to serve as executive director of the Duke Talent Identification Program, and in this capacity I was able to look at high-ability children from a very different perspective—from the standpoint of what they need educationally and socially to thrive, and what unique before-career and career planning issues they face. Most recently, I served as co-director of a unique pilot program, the Florida Governor’s School for Science and Space Technology. Working with extremely bright and academically successful high school students across the state, I learned a tremendous amount about their unique needs. I think that the motivation for writing this book was to try to put down in one scholarly but easy-to-read volume all that I have learned over the years, as a psychologist, in working with gifted students. I wanted to provide other psychologists, educators, and parents with a timely and enjoyable read on what we know about gifted children.

In the first chapter I list a number of questions that have engendered debate, confusion, and even heated argument among educators, parents, and others regarding the gifted. I endeavored to answer each of these questions in the following chapters; I hope that I succeeded! Initial reviews indicate that readers—both authorities in the field and the lay public—are finding the book informative, insightful, in many ways provocative in challenging old myths and dogma, and a great read.

- *The book is subtitled Evidence-Based Clinical and Psycho-educational Practice. What exactly do you mean by “evidence-based clinical practice” and what do you mean when you discuss “psycho-educational practice”?*

Quite simply, I wanted to be clear that I would distinguish in this book between myth, anecdote, opinion—even the opinion and wisdom of knowledgeable authorities in the field—and what we know from research-based science. In my opinion, far too much practice in the gifted field, as well as in general education, and in the fields in which I was trained—clinical, counseling and school psychology—is based on folklore, myth, and reasonable opinion, and not on evidence grounded in hard-nose science. Actually, this is also true in clinical medicine! This is not an indictment on gifted education. For, as I say, even in medicine we see a lot of practice that is not guided by

evidence-based practice. I hope that my book helps to encourage a trend in the gifted field by which we are less quick to adopt practices, theories, and ideas without first raising questions about whether these ideas are supported by any research or scientific evidence. For example, I challenge the myths that giftedness is something real and that once gifted, always gifted, and point out how these myths continue to guide how we identify students of high ability.

- *Are most teachers nowadays familiar with these terms, and, if not, how would they get training?*

Evidence-based practice is a term that originated, I believe, in the medical field. It first appeared in the medical literature in Canada, but quickly took hold in American health care and went viral globally. Psychology quickly caught on and has been talking about evidence-based practice, evidence-based assessment, and evidence-based intervention for a number of years. There are a number of websites where organizations and groups provide resources and references for evidence-based treatment of different disorders, both in medicine and in psychiatry and psychology. Education has also joined the bandwagon. My colleagues in teacher education at Florida State University now talk about evidence-based pedagogy and curriculum. Obviously the concept has migrated from medicine to many other fields, including education. The recent interest in response-to-intervention is but one example of a purportedly evidence-based practice in education that supports students who are struggling academically. Another example of an evidence-based practice in education, one that is used for high-ability students and that passes muster as an evidence-based practice, in my opinion, is acceleration. The great preponderance of research, some quite methodologically rigorous, conclusively supports the benefits of acceleration for many high-ability children. Evidence-based practice is jargon that is part of the lexicon familiar to teachers.

- *What would you say are the best practices in terms of identifying gifted students?*

One entire chapter of my book, Chapter 4, focuses on this very question! I don't want to take the joy away from any reader who might like to read this chapter in its entirety by rehashing what I discuss in my book, although I do think that this is a very important question. I also hope that educators, psychologists, administrators, and policy-makers consider what I propose in my chapter on best practices in identifying gifted students.

I will very briefly summarize the key principles in gifted identification, in my opinion of course! First, it is important to be clear on how you or the school system defines giftedness. I talk about three different ways to define giftedness in my book, each equally valid but each leading to slightly different assessment procedures. Second, one should match identification criteria to the type of gifted program in the school district. Third, one should always use multiple measures. I have been advocating the use of multiple measures in clinical decision-making for over 20 years! Fourth, one should always consider the quality of the measures that are used in the identification process. Fifth, one should consider using local norms. This runs counter to what many psychologists have

been trained to do in graduate school. Many practitioners were told by their professors to *always* use nationally representative norms when evaluating a student. I explain in my book why this diagnostic practice is not necessarily logical or best practice when identifying high-ability students in a local school district. Sixth, there are a number of different decision-making models that one can use in determining whether a student qualifies for a gifted classification. In the book, I explain the different models and how they lead to different type I and type II errors and how they lead to different children getting into or being excluded from the gifted program! Finally, a key principle is viewing identification as an ongoing process. This is somewhat of a radical position in the gifted field, one that I first proposed over 15 years ago. This principle often gets me into difficulty when I give talks or when I am interviewed. I do not view giftedness as something real or permanent. I believe that the notion, “once gifted, always gifted” is fictional. In my view, a young person can be gifted at one time in his or her life but not necessarily at another time. I recommend that school districts interested in finding students of uncommon ability and potential search annually. I also recommend that students selected for gifted programs be regularly re-evaluated, in my opinion at least every two years to determine if they are benefiting from the gifted program. I see this as a new and exciting role for the school psychologist: to continue to search for newly emerging talent among the student body. Many factors contribute to success at every stage of development and any number of things can work to enhance or moderate the actualization of a high-ability student’s potential.

- *What about ethnically, racially, and culturally different students? Are there “best practices” in working with these students?*

Educators and school psychologists need to be knowledgeable about, and sensitive to, how cultural and ethnic factors, family belief systems, and attitudes toward learning, competition, motivation, and a host of other socio-cultural dynamics can impact intellectual development and academic performance. Best practices require that diagnosticians fully consider the socio-cultural and familial backgrounds of every student that they evaluate. Just a few months ago, I spent four months in South-East Asia while on sabbatical. I visited schools in a number of countries in South-East Asia and had the good fortune to lead workshops and speak with hundreds of parents and teachers of high-ability students in Singapore and Hong Kong. I came away from this cross-cultural experience with a deep appreciation and great sensitivity for the profound role that culture plays in terms of every aspect of a child’s life, including how they view testing, competition, authority figures, success and failure, and their own performance. So I am very much in sync with those who remind us to seek additional training, supervision, and workshops to become more familiar with the growing, diverse population of students that we work with in the USA.

- *Now, what would you say are the best practices in terms of identifying truly talented students in music, art, dance, theatre, drama, etc.?*

An excellent question! A lot of what I suggested earlier, Mike, in terms of best practices in identifying gifted students, holds true in terms of children with exceptional potential or ability in theatre, dance, the arts, or really any field. In fact, much of

my thinking about best practices in gifted assessment is based on my experience with the Olympic Development Program to identify and nurture the skills and on-field performance of young, elite soccer players. While a professor at Duke University and heading up the Duke Talent Identification Program, I volunteered to serve as the sports psychologist for the Duke Women's Soccer Program. This experience reinforced my thinking about best practices in gifted identification—early screening is important. Multiple measures are important. Ongoing evaluation, not one-time identification, is important. Changing the measures from predictors of success at an early age to more real or authentic measures of actual performance as the child ages makes a lot of sense. So, in answer to your question, Mike, yes, I see many parallels and in fact base a lot of my thinking about gifted identification and gifted education on experiences on the sidelines observing how elite athletic programs identify and nurture the talent of their high-ability players.

- *There has been much discussion of the special needs of gifted students with co-existing disabilities. Can you give us some examples and direct our readers to some books or articles in this realm?*

Gifted children with co-existing disorders or disabilities are often called “twice-exceptional” students. I dedicate an entire chapter in my new book to this group of students. I also include in the accompanying CD a PowerPoint presentation on the twice-exceptional student, around which the practitioner can develop a workshop or school presentation. The great majority of information on the twice-exceptional student is based on case studies and anecdotal clinical reports. There really are not a whole lot of empirical research studies that the reader can turn to. There are a few very good books on this unique group of students, although, as I mention, most of what is reported is not based on research but rather clinical experience. In my book, I provide a list of resources—articles, book chapters, and books that are helpful in better understanding the twice-exceptional student. I also introduce the reader to the history underlying the twice-exceptional concept—it comes from, not surprisingly, medicine. In medicine, medical scientists speak of co-morbidity. A number of factors can complicate the diagnostic and treatment challenges that practitioners may face when confronted with a gifted student with a co-existing disability. I discuss these very issues and factors in the book.

One thing that practitioners should know is that, at the present time, we don't have disease-specific guidelines to turn to when working with a high-ability young person who is struggling with depression, anxiety, an eating disorder, unremitting anger, a learning disability, or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or any number of other problems. One of the topics that is frequently talked about in the gifted field is the purported high frequency of misdiagnosis and missed diagnoses among gifted children. This is a real problem in the gifted field, although we don't have any solid epidemiological data to show exactly how prevalent a problem it really is. My own experience suggests that an appreciable number of bright children get incorrectly diagnosed because characteristics of their giftedness can either mask or confuse adults—teachers, parents, and pediatricians. Whether a child is gifted or has ADHD has been the primary focus of this misdiagnosis phenomenon.

- *What are some of the myths about gifted assessment?*

There are a number of myths in the gifted field, as there are in all fields. Many influence how we go about identifying students who we label as gifted. In 1982, a special issue of *Gifted Child Quarterly*, edited by Don Treffinger, was published, entitled “Demythologizing gifted education.” Just a few years ago, in 2009, *Gifted Child Quarterly* published a follow-up special issue on prevailing myths in the gifted field. Any reader interested in myths about gifted education should read this wonderful collection of brief articles. In my book, I focus on three myths in the gifted field: giftedness is something real, giftedness is the same as high IQ, and the myth of once gifted, always gifted. I hope that readers of my new book will see the logic of the case I make for why these are myths, not truths. I also hope that readers will agree that each of these three prevailing myths continue to influence how we go about identifying students of high ability. I mentioned earlier one myth in the gifted field that runs counter to best practices in gifted assessment, at least in my opinion. That is the belief among some that since giftedness is the same as high IQ—something that you are either born with or not born with—then there is no reason to retest students who earlier have been identified as gifted or, for that matter, have been tested but not found to qualify for a gifted classification because they missed a specific passing score. This practice makes little sense to me. It runs counter to everything we know about cognitive and intellectual development: the fact that children change, sometimes a great deal, over time for a variety of reasons—sometimes children become smarter, and sometimes, unfortunately, children become less intellectually or academically competent. There are many compelling stories of late-bloomers who were never identified as gifted, or as anything but average, when they were young but ended up turning the world on its head with their extraordinary accomplishments as adults. There are perhaps an equally impressive number of individuals who were identified at an early age as gifted based on an IQ score, but who never blossomed later in life into extraordinary performers or achievers. Are they considered gifted even though they’ve done nothing amazing or astonishing as an adult, nothing other than score highly on an IQ test at the age of 4, 5, or 6? In my opinion, I think not.

- *Who should be counseling the gifted, and what kind of training should they have?*

Psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health counselors, school social workers, and other healthcare professionals trained to provide counseling and psychotherapy should expect that students of high ability will encounter the full range of problems that any child or adolescent might face in today’s society. High-ability students can and do experience debilitating depression, anxiety, loneliness, suicidal thoughts, physical and sexual abuse, illegal drug and alcohol use, teasing and peer relation problems, conduct and anger management problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, thought disorders, impulse control issues, ADHD, sleep disorders, parent and family conflict, and learning disabilities. We don’t have any exact incidence or prevalence data, but it is reasonable to surmise that at least 10–15% of high-ability children have mental health problems that warrant professional attention. One of the unique features of my new book is the emphasis that I give to what psychologists and other psychotherapists need to be aware of when

working with gifted children. The position that I advocate, and which I emphasize in my book, is that a scientifically defensible approach to counseling the gifted follows a model of evidence-based practice. What I mean here is that evidence-based practice is based on the integration of three factors. First and foremost, the therapist considers the most recent and best-available research on how to treat the specific disorder or set of problems that the gifted client is presenting with. Second, the therapist has supervised experience and hopefully expertise in working with gifted children. This is very important when working with any group. Third, the therapist takes into consideration the specific young person's unique characteristics, background, culture, and preferences. When these three factors are integrated into a cohesive treatment plan, good things often occur in counseling. In my book, I describe, in some detail, my therapeutic work with a gifted adolescent with borderline personality disorder. I illustrate how I integrated good science, employing a modified dialectical behavior therapy approach, which is the treatment of choice for borderline personality disorder, with my experience as a clinician and my understanding and experience of working with gifted young persons.

- *You have a CD that comes with your latest book—what was the reasoning and rationale behind this?*

My book is part of a special series published by Routledge, their *School-based Practice in Action* series. Each of the books in this unique series includes a CD. The CD that I developed for my book contains useful tools for practitioners in the schools such as PowerPoint presentations and reproducible handouts and forms. For example, the CD includes a flyer for teachers and parents entitled "Bullying and the gifted" and a flyer specifically for parents entitled "I think my child is gifted and I have so many questions." Since many school psychologists are not trained in working with high-ability students, I included in the CD "Guidelines and recommendations for consulting in the schools on behalf of high ability students." Additionally, as I said, Mike, I also developed a number of PowerPoint presentations that can be used by the practitioner, including "Emotional Intelligence," "The Twice Exceptional Student," and "Underachievement and the Gifted Student."

- *The age-old question seems to be enrichment or acceleration—do you have a perspective or stance on this?*

My new book speaks directly to the different pedagogical and curricular models that have proven to be effective with high-ability children. There really is no reason not to incorporate enrichment *and* acceleration, as well as higher-order thinking skills and greater use of discovery learning, in classes consisting of high-ability students. The creative and highly skilled teacher knows how much enrichment to provide, how fast paced the curriculum should be, how much lab work and experimentation should be involved, and how much challenge and frustration the class can comfortably tolerate—unfortunately, there is no simple formula or algorithm that applies for all gifted learners across all subject matter! What makes the most sense pedagogically for children with very high IQs—say above 135—is not going to be the best pedagogical approach for students who are bright and high achieving but perhaps not geniuses. A third type of gifted student—the child who shows exceptional promise or potential but who has not yet either

demonstrated outstanding academic performance or scored in the top levels on an IQ test—will benefit from a slightly different approach to pedagogy and curricular activities. Of course, one size does not fit all children! In my book, I talk about three different types of gifted students and how each benefits and responds best to a unique type of gifted education.

- *What about mentoring—how important are mentors and where can gifted children and parents find them nowadays?*

Mentoring is important in talent development, probably in all fields. There is not an awful lot of research, but what there is rather conclusively indicates that mentoring can be very helpful in promoting the talent of children with exceptional ability and extraordinary potential to excel in one or more culturally valued fields or domains. Anecdotal reports and personal experience reinforce what research suggests; that mentoring is an important factor in the equation of achieving excellence or elite status in almost any field. In my new book, I provide a number of vignettes from the academic world, from competitive sports, and from the performing arts, which indicate the very helpful, facilitative role that a mentor can play in the life of a young person with high ability. Mentoring may play a crucial role, we suspect, in helping to promote the talents of select gifted children at risk of not reaching their full potential. For example, some authorities in the gifted field suggest that high-ability children of non-white ethnicities and high-ability females—two groups of gifted children at a heightened risk of not succeeding—benefit from a caring mentor who they can identify with based on their race, ethnicity, background, life experiences, and/or gender. This, of course, makes perfectly good sense. A pilot program that I co-directed at Florida State University, the Governor's School for Science and Space Technology, recruited a female PhD physicist with the specific goal of connecting with our female students; essentially, we hoped to create a special mentor relationship with our highly select, female students that would increase their interest in the program and even passion in science, mathematics and engineering.

- *What have I neglected to ask?*

Mike, I think you have, once again, done a terrific job of covering an awful lot of territory in your interview about my new book, *Serving the Gifted*. I do not think you have neglected anything other than perhaps asking me how readers might go about getting a copy. The book can be ordered online from the publisher: <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415997508/>. Readers can also order the book online from www.amazon.com.

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