



## AN EVOLVING FIELD

# Innovative Leadership: An Interview With Steven I. Pfeiffer

Steven I. Pfeiffer  and Suzanna E. Henson



Steven Pfeiffer is a popular speaker on how to raise successful and psychologically well-adjusted bright kids, both in the United States and internationally. He is Emeritus Professor at Florida State University, where he served as Director of Clinical

Training. He is a nationally board certified and licensed psychologist. Prior to his tenure at Florida State University, Dr. Pfeiffer was a Professor at Duke University, where he served as Executive Director of Duke's gifted program, Duke TIP. He also served as Director of Devereux's Institute of Clinical Training & Research, headquartered in Villanova, PA. Dr. Pfeiffer worked as a pediatric psychologist in the Child Development Center, Ochsner Clinic and Medical Center in New Orleans, and was an officer and clinical psychologist in the U.S. Navy Medical Service Corps. Trained as a clinician, Dr. Pfeiffer enjoys an active clinical and consulting practice. Author of over 200 articles and book chapters, he is lead author of the *Gifted Rating Scales (GRS and GRS<sup>SM</sup>2)*, first published in 2003 and revised and re-standardized in 2021 by MHS (<http://info.mhs.com/grsinfo>).

Among his most recent books, he authored, *Serving the Gifted* (2013) and *Essentials of Gifted Assessment* (2015). He is Editor-in-Chief of the *APA Handbook on Giftedness and Talent* (2017), the *Handbook of Giftedness in Children* (2018, 2nd ed.), and *The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know?*, co-edited with Tracy Cross and Maureen Neihart (2015). He recently served as guest editor for a special issue on the gifted that appeared in a 2020 issue of *Psychology in the Schools*. For many years an advocate for children's socioemotional needs, Dr. Pfeiffer testified at the White House and before the Italian Parliament. Eminent scholar Alan Kaufman of Yale University considers Steven Pfeiffer, "Among the small group of the world's leading experts in the (gifted) field ... ." His website is found at: <https://steven-pfeiffer-psychology.com>. Email: [spfeiffer@fsu.edu](mailto:spfeiffer@fsu.edu)

**Henson:** *What led you to the field of gifted education?*

**Pfeiffer:** My career has been anything but a good example of a direct path to working in the gifted field! As a youth, I had my heart set on becoming a pediatric cardiovascular surgeon. In college, that career goal shifted from medicine to clinical psychology. I envisioned myself like Bob Newhart in the 1970s sitcom "The Bob Newhart Show"—a psychologist in private practice, married to someone as spunky as Bob Newhart's wife on the show, Suzanne Pleshette, and treating delightfully neurotic patients!

Although my dissertation at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill was on creativity, with input from James Gallagher, head of the Frank Porter Graham Childhood Development Center and a leading figure in gifted education, I had no idea that I would end up working in the gifted field. After I left UNC, I completed a postdoc in clinical psychology in upstate New York and began a career as an academic clinician working with children and families. My early research and publications were in clinical and pediatric psychology, not in gifted education.

My career shift to the gifted field occurred rather fortuitously. I was recruited by Duke University for the position of Executive Director of Duke's gifted program, TIP. I had been in a similar administrative role at Devereux, headquartered in Villanova, PA, where I served as Executive Director of their Institute of Clinical Training and Research. Devereux's focus as an organization is on serving clients with a wide range of psychiatric and neurodevelopmental disorders. Devereux's focus is *not* on the gifted population. But I did have management and leadership experience! And I did have clinical, teaching, and research experience. I also had connections to the UNC and Duke academic community—including James Gallagher at UNC and Bill Bevan at Duke (former Duke Provost, colleague of Julian Stanley at Johns Hopkins, and founder of the Duke TIP program). These latent influences likely provided me with the unimagined opportunity to shift my career, at age 47, from the mental health field to the gifted world. As I now reflect back on my career—recently retired from the university and working only part time as a speaker and consultant, it was a wonderful if challenging career adaptation to the gifted field. I've loved my work in the gifted field. Truth be told, I never

abandoned my early identification as a psychologist and clinician (Pfeiffer, 2009). My passion has remained understanding how to optimize kids'—including gifted kids'—mental health, well-being, and success-in-life. My work on “strengths of the heart” reflects this early passion to understand and encourage the well-being and mental health of all kids.

**Henshon:** *Can you describe a defining moment in your own professional journey?*

**Pfeiffer:** The shift from a career working as a psychologist in a Department of Pediatrics in a large tertiary care medical center at Ochsner (Pfeiffer, 1986), and as a Director of Research and Clinical Training in a large psychiatric institute at Devereux, to my position at Duke TIP was a defining moment in my own professional journey. It felt like a huge professional transformation. It was! I quickly immersed myself in the world of gifted education. I read everything that I could get my hands on that had been published on giftedness, high ability, and talent development. I started attending NAGC and state gifted conferences, talking to and meeting acknowledged experts in the gifted field. And I started publishing on giftedness (for example, Pfeiffer, 2001, 2003). It took me a good 5 years to get fully “up-to-speed.”

I also spent a lot of time that first year socializing with the many hundreds of gifted students attending the Duke TIP campus-based summer program, affectionately called “TIPsters.” I attended their fast-paced academic courses, met with their teachers and residence hall advisors. And I met with many of their parents. In other words, during my first year as Executive Director of Duke TIP, I immersed myself in the intellectual, social, emotional, and even spiritual world of the gifted student! It was a defining period for me career-wise.

**Henshon:** *You recently served as guest editor for a special issue of the journal *Psychology in the Schools: Serving Gifted and Talented Students in the Schools*. Can you tell us about this project?*

**Pfeiffer:** Over the course of my career, I've had the good fortune of serving as guest editor for different journals. For example, in 2012, I edited a special issue for the *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment* on best practices in gifted assessment (Pfeiffer, 2012). Some background on the 2020 special issue (Pfeiffer, 2020): In 2011, two colleagues and I conducted a national survey sent out to over 2,000 members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Our survey findings were actually published in *Psychology in the Schools*. The main findings that we reported included a few noteworthy points that served as the impetus for the 2020 special issue:

Gifted students in the schools are among the most underserved special needs populations in American schools and are some of the most underperforming high ability students in the world.

Only ½ of NASP members who participated in the survey reported receiving any training in the assessment of the gifted, and less than half reported receiving training in the characteristics of the gifted.

Thirty-seven percent reported receiving *no* training in gifted assessment, characteristics of the gifted, curriculum and instructional methods for the gifted learner, unique socioemotional needs or characteristics, or the “twice exceptional” student.

More than ½ of the survey participants (66%) reported “never or rarely” conducting a gifted evaluation; only 17% reported consulting with teachers about gifted students; and the great majority of respondents rated their level of expertise in consulting with teachers about gifted students as “low.”

The Editor-in-Chief of *Psychology in the Schools* agreed that it was time for a special issue to help inform school psychologists about gifted education and hopefully increase the profession's involvement in serving gifted students in the schools. The special issue includes 10 articles authored by leading authorities in gifted education, written specifically for school psychology as a profession. Contributors include David Dai, Kris Wiley, Elizabeth Shaunessy-Dedrick, Carol Klose Smith and Susanna Wood, Linda Silverman and Barbara Gilman, Dante Dixson, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Rena Subotnik and Frank Worrell, Del Seigle, Lisa Rubenstein and Betsy McCoach, Megan Foley Nicpon and Susan Assouline, Denise Winsor and Chris Mueller, and Kristen Stephens. The issue covers a wide range of timely topics, including what giftedness should mean to school psychologists, the social and emotional world of gifted students, curriculum and instruction, career development and the school psychologist, best practices in identification and assessment, developing academic talent, underachievement, the 2e student, and policy and advocacy. It has turned out to be a fabulous special issue, well-received by school psychology, far exceeding my expectations!

**Henshon:** *You are a motivational speaker for a diverse group of people – students, parents, and teachers. What are some challenges you have encountered through this line of work?*

**Pfeiffer:** Perhaps one of the most gratifying and satisfying things that I continue to do in my career, in addition to my work as a therapist, has been leading workshops, giving talks to parents, teachers, and professionals. I have given perhaps 200 talks here in the United States and internationally. I love this work, especially

the opportunity to not only interact with people who share your passion about a topic, but also to learn from the audience. I've discovered over the years, in talks in Los Angeles, Mexico City, Florida, Hong Kong, Singapore, Canada, New York City, Israel, Texas, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Kentucky, England and many other places, that one needs to be humble, unpretentious, respectful, courteous, and a good listener to be successful and well-received. Even though you are invited as "the authority" to speak to and share your expertise with the group, you can't forget the fact that almost everyone in the audience has some experience and an opinion (some rather strong!) about the topic that you're speaking on. This has been one challenge and important lesson that I've learned over the years as I've become more experienced and skilled as a motivational speaker.

A second challenge is to only speak on topics that you have considerable experience, deep knowledge, and expertise on! It is seductive to be invited to speak on a wide variety of topics. I've found it important in my own career to limit my talks to only those topics that I feel fully competent (and authentic) to speak on.

**Henshon:** *What individuals both in and outside the field of gifted education have exerted the strongest impact on your thinking?*

**Pfeiffer:** Many people have influenced my development and have had a profound impact on my thinking and work. I would be hard-pressed to generate a list without inadvertently omitting many important and inspirational influences. While still in school, the writings of five people stand out as having influenced my thinking: Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Satre, Albert Camus, Freud, and Abraham Maslow. In a more personal and direct way, the following individuals immediately come to mind: Ray Rainville (personality theories and philosophy of science), Louis Hsu (statistics and measurement), Sir Michael Rutter (child psychiatry, prevention, resilience), Andy Burka (much of what I've learned that's important as a therapist), Daniel Goleman (my early exposure to Emotional Intelligence and my ideas on "strengths of the heart"), Irvin Yalom (existential psychotherapy and the self as therapist), the entire multidisciplinary team at the Child Development Center at Ochsner Hospital, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (flow and optimizing human experience), Robert Sternberg (on thinking "outside of the box"), James Gallagher (introducing me to gifted education), Jack Naglieri (test development), James Webb (role model for calm, unruffled composure as a leader), Anders Ericsson (brilliant colleague whose ideas on ability I disagreed with but who I greatly respected), Alan Kaufman (intelligence testing and champion of my

work), Maureen Neihart (supported my sabbatical to Singapore and a close and trusted colleague), Rena Subotnik (challenged the status quo and introduced me to talent development at a Duke TIP talk), and my entire staff at both the Institute of Clinical Training and Research at Devereux and at the Duke TIP program. Finally, I'd be remiss to not acknowledge the impact on my thinking and professional development as a psychologist of the many clients that I've had the great pleasure and privilege of working with over the years.

**Henshon:** *What research are you currently working on?*

**Pfeiffer:** I remain very interested in social-emotional learning—what I have called "strengths of the heart," and understanding how parents and educators can optimize the mental health and well-being of children and youth, including gifted kids. Much of my research, writing and talks, in fact, focus on enhancing strengths of the heart (Pfeiffer, 2017). I also am very interested in telepsychology, and the efficacy of smartphone-delivered psychoeducational interventions to promote well-being and resilience among kids at risk for psychological difficulties. One of my students and I are publishing a meta-analysis on the efficacy of smartphone-delivered mental health programs for youth. We plan to launch a series of studies into the efficacy and usability of popular smartphone mental health apps for gifted kids.

Finally, the upcoming publication of the newly revised and standardized *Gifted Rating Scales* (GRS™ 2), including a parent form with a scale that measures social-emotional skills (strengths of the heart), has afforded me the opportunity to investigate the validity, diagnostic accuracy, precision and utility of the new GRS™ 2. The members of the research team at MHS, test publisher of the new GRS™ 2, are brilliant, and I'm learning so much from them about my new, cutting-edge, "second generation" behavior rating scale.

**Henshon:** *If you are to give someone advice on things to do or not do in their research, what might your advice be?*

**Pfeiffer:** I was given two pieces of advice when I was a beginning doctoral student at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, which served me well over the course of my career. I've also shared them with my own students over the last 40 years. First, select an area of investigation that you are passionate about. This is so very important. When Anthony Fauci, MD, physician and eminent research immunologist who has served as the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984, talks about the challenges that we face in dealing with the novel coronavirus pandemic, he exudes an unbridled and deep enthusiasm for

his research on vaccines that epitomizes what I mean by passion.

The second piece of advice, which has also served my students and me well over the years, is to become excruciatingly familiar with everything that's been published on your topic of interest before venturing forth with a research idea of your own! You should always have a deep appreciation for everything written on the topic—including familiarity with *all* the prior research on the topic, before thinking about proposing your own research idea. I'm sure that there are many other excellent pieces of advice, but these two have particularly served me and my research lab students well.

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## Notes on interviewer



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