

Recollections of a Life of Service to Our Field: Dr. John J. Feldhusen

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John F. Feldhusen is retired from Purdue University but remains an active scholar. For over 30 years Dr. Feldhusen has influenced gifted education and giftedness studies as a researcher and as a mentor to outstanding graduate students, many of whom are now his colleagues as leaders in the field.

Dr. Feldhusen was the founder of the Purdue Gifted Education Resource Institute in 1975 and its director until 1995. He received the International Award for Excellence in Research from the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children in 1997, the Mensa Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002, and the Ann F. Isaacs Award in 2003 by the National Association for Gifted Children in recognition of his career-long contributions and inspirational leadership to NAGC and the field of gifted education.

Subotnik: What led you to the field of gifted education? Start off with some of your first experiences in the field and what drew you to gifted education from general educational psychology.

Feldhusen: My two major professors at the University of Wisconsin, Herbert Klausmeier and Julian Stanley, led me to gifted education around 1957. Although neither of them was working in what you would call gifted education, they were immensely interested in precocious and highly able youngsters. Stanley was essentially a measurement person in educational psychology. Klausmeier, at the time I got there, had just received a large grant from the U.S. Office of Education, and I got hired onto the project.

The design of the project was to study learning and retention in a group of 40 children with IQs of 90-110, and another 40 with IQs of 70-90. One of the major people from the Office of Education who came out to negotiate about the grant was a man who later became my good partner at Purdue, William Asher. He recommended that the project

would be more defensible if we also included a group of youngsters with IQs of 120-140 or 120 upward. The Office of Education seemed willing to give the extra money needed, and Klausmeier did not object, and so that led us into a study of these three levels, all of which we got to study in great depth. We tested the children's learning and retention of math and verbal material, and so I got a good look at very, very bright youngsters in contrast with children of average and low ability.

A major aspect of that study was to test and teach individually all the 40 youngsters in each group. We kept track of how much time it took to learn a new mathematical task or a new verbal task. The rapidity with which the high ability group learned the new task truly amazed me. When we came back several months later and tested for retention, again the retention of the high ability group just astounded me.

After I graduated I stayed on for a year of postdoctoral work and then went (in 1959) to the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire as a professor of psychology. At Eau Claire a fellow professor (John Thurston) had just received a very large grant to study children who persistently misbehave in school or who are very aggressive and distractive. For the next 10 years I pursued that line of research and juvenile delinquency. In that research, as in the Klausmeier project, we had a group of children who were very, very able (high IQs), so again I had a way to look at gifted children. We wrote three more large grant applications and all were funded. In 1962 I moved to Purdue University as a professor of psychology and education but continued to work with what had become the Eau Claire County Youth Study. In all the studies, the people with whom I worked were exceedingly productive in writing and in publishing, and so I was off to a good start in the process of getting our research and results into the literature.

I got back into the gifted field more and more after I got to Purdue. The professor who had been teaching a course in gifted education retired and so, seeing my background, I was asked to teach it. That actually inspired my interest a great deal.

In the mid-70s I went to a conference in Indianapolis, and to my benefit, as it turned out, one of our vice presidents at Purdue was also at that conference. The speaker, a very, very compelling young lady in a brilliant yellow dress, was Joyce VanTassel, then a local coordinator of gifted programs somewhere in Ohio. She inspired all of us to a

great new level of interest and enthusiasm. A couple of days later that vice president called me and said, "John, I wish we could move in this new field." I said, "Well, I'd be happy to work in it." He said, "You go home and prepare a proposal of what you would like to do and how much it would cost." I went to my office and a few days later delivered a proposal to him. He read it and said, "I was really thinking of something larger, John. Try again." So I wrote another proposal, and the Gifted Education Resource Institute at Purdue was born.

For many years his support was guaranteed. Almost simultaneously, the Indiana State Department of Education appointed its first consultant in gifted education. I got acquainted with him quickly and he agreed that there was great potential at Purdue and would be happy to support it. Many of our gifted student projects were immediately financially successful - notably our Saturday and our summer programs for the gifted. We actually ended up never taking a dollar from the vice president who had really backed us at a very comfortable financial level. We were off and running.

Subotnik: You mentioned a course that already existed at Purdue when you arrived there. How did that course come about?

Feldhusen: The course was taught by a professor of psychology who was quite famous at the time and is now totally unknown. Her name was Harriet O'Shea (1960; Weiner & O'Shea, 1963), and you will find her in the literature if you look for an early pioneer in the field of gifted and talented. She had developed the course, but as I arrived she was just departing. I found a huge part of the basement in one of our buildings had been sectioned off for this woman. How she ever managed to move out I do not understand! She had tons and tons of books and papers in this dark basement office. I had a nice chat with her, and she helped me in the transition with the course. She was immensely interested in the gifted, but we really never had any more contact after she left.

The course grew by leaps and bounds in another way. People wanted it all over the state of Indiana through our off-campus program. I also began to get excellent graduate students of the caliber of Sidney Moon, and they started offering the course off-campus. That goes on till this day, although other institutions have come into the act, so we don't offer it as widely any more.

I continued to teach the gifted course, but also got involved in another diversion, if you will, which took quite a bit of my time. Another dean at Purdue thought I was a good teacher and knew quite a bit about college teaching, because I taught a course in the psychology department from time to time called the "Psychology of College Teaching." This dean was much impressed with that and asked me to organize a system to offer that course regularly and to develop a number of other kinds of activities to work with faculty, improving their teaching skills.

For the next 7 or 8 years I continued to work in gifted education but also in the college teaching project where I had about eight or nine graduate students whom the dean supported, and they helped in projects working with professors. Many graduate students from throughout the University enrolled in this college teaching course, but a very large percentage of the enrollees were Purdue professors, sometimes even full professors. A large number of them, particularly from engineering and from the business school, simply wanted to become better teachers. We think we helped hundreds of Purdue professors and graduate students to become better teachers.

Subotnik: You mentioned your major professors. What are some of the important lessons you learned from them?

Feldhusen: I learned about the route to expertise. As Ericsson (2003a, 2003b) proclaims, it is predominantly work, work, work, strive, strive, strive, have goals, and try to achieve them. Those two men, Klausmeier and Stanley, were incredible paragons of work: 18-hour days. Julian told us about riding the bus to work and working all the way in and back. He was astounded that there were people who sat on the bus and merely looked out the window. I wonder if he remembers that story. I would say that both of them were committed to empirical research, good grantsmen, and very much inclined to report their research in good journals. Those were important lessons for me. At times they pressed me very hard.

After 50 years, I still have contact with both Klausmeier and Stanley. Although Klausmeier has long since retired, he still works and has an office; he's probably in his late 80s. Julian, I think, is in the 90s now, too. In the later years I became much closer to Julian as he moved into gifted, or precocity, or whatever one may wish to call it. And Klausmeier fell away from gifted and devoted his life to individually guided education.

Subotnik: What persons, other than your two major professors and Joyce VanTassel-Baska, whom you have mentioned so far, have had the greatest effect on your thinking?

Feldhusen: My wife has had a big impact on my professional development. I watched Hazel's teaching carefully and the effective way she worked to individualize instruction for very, very bright kids. Two of her students, Michael and Yi-ching, with whom I got especially well acquainted, are now graduating from Harvard. I really learned an immense amount about them and their families. Hazel and I both followed Michael and Yi-ching over the years, starting in second grade. We just had a letter from each of them within this past year. Both chose to enter the field of biochemistry. Both are working on very high-powered projects. They're both going to stay on for Ph.D.'s at Harvard.

We have an article coming out soon on one of Hazel's classroom techniques (Feldhusen & Feld-

husen, 2004). Through her I've had a good chance to look closely at how you can work with gifted children in a mixed classroom and be successful with all of the children.

Subotnik: That must be very grounding.

Feldhusen: Yes.

Subotnik: What topics in the field have held your interest over the years, and how has your thinking on them evolved?

Feldhusen: Early on I had a strong interest in identification; I wrote and thought about it a lot. And then I looked for best approaches to providing programs and services for gifted children. Both were my earliest interests, pretty much simultaneously. I also had an awfully good chance to work at both of them through our own Saturday and summer programs and a huge amount of consulting with schools. Purdue was very kind, letting me go a day a week to work with schools. And so I learned an awful lot about both topics.

Then in 1985 (I was editor of *Gifted Child Quarterly* at the time), along came an article that really intrigued me. One of my graduate students at the time proofed it and also felt that this was just a tremendous breakthrough. We'd been using the term "gifted and talented" for years but never made anything much of the talent side. The graduate student was Miraca Gross, and the manuscript was from François Gagné (1985). I picked up on it and, as you know, I worked on that a great deal, in a sense as a follower of François. We both did similar research trying to identify what are the major talents. That continues to be a major interest of mine.

The other major interest that grew during the last 7 or 8 years, came in part from Ericsson (2003a, 2003b) and from a number of other researchers like Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) in the area of expertise – that is high level creative achievement. It struck me that little or nothing was being done in the field of gifted education, early on, to get kids aiming for high level achievement. We just worry about good education from day to day, but what about long range goals? Several projects, including Csikszentmihalyi's (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen, 1993) good work, suggested that those who go on to high level achievement, (Terman also found this) had lofty goals or were thinking about it when they were very young. So that became a compelling interest of mine. For the last 4 or 5 years I have been pursuing that trail.

Another person who inspired me was Sandra Kay (1999). She was in Australia with us on a visit to Miraca Gross, and we had a long chance to talk about her system of getting kids to think about their achievements and about setting goals. We had also been working on a system for getting kids to think about short- and long-term goals. Now we have a new project just starting at Pine View School for the Gifted in Sarasota. An assistant professor back at Purdue is going to work with me on

this, and we are going to get a clearer view of how kids link their perceptions of their talents with their long-term goals. Pine View is quite remarkable in that, while its kids are identified on the basis of IQ and high achievement, the diversity of talents is very broad. Many of the students are particularly strong in the arts. So that project is a major preoccupation: I've put the two together...talents and high level, long-range creative achievement. And that's where my interest is at present.

Subotnik: What about when you were a kid yourself? Did you have goals; did you have any notion of where you would end up?

Feldhusen: I was inspired a lot by encyclopedia reading. I read encyclopedias starting in the fourth grade because I was in a room with three grade levels. The teacher would teach me and my group in the fourth grade, then the fifth grade, and so forth, and then give us seatwork, which I could usually finish very quickly. My seat was right next to the room library, and I could reach out with my long arm and pull out an encyclopedia. I developed a lifelong habit of reading during lectures, speeches, and sermons. Even in lectures, I still like to have a book in my lap or be writing.

I read almost daily in the encyclopedias, and then one fine day in the spring, I came back from lunch and there were all those encyclopedias in a heap on the floor. And I said, "Mr. Klatt, what is happening here?" He said, "Well, we're getting rid of them. We're going to get a new set of encyclopedias." I said "Oh, my gosh, can I have them?" He said "Of course!" So I went home, got my coaster wagon, picked them all up. What I didn't know was that those encyclopedias were infested with silverfish. I brought them home to my mother, who suffered the insects for many years. So, reading encyclopedias was one inspiration for me.

The next great inspiration came near the end of high school when I got an appointment to West Point. I heard things about how graduates of West Point went on to great fame and achievement. You have to take one exam for the appointment and I passed that, but then it was more than a year before I would take the West Point entrance exam. In the meantime, I was in the Army and one day got a message from my sergeant. He said, "Hey, Feldhusen, I saw something here. Do you know that you can go to some college or university when you've got an appointment to West Point?" And I said "Yeah, where?" And he said, "Well, here's one – Cornell University." "Oh," I said, "I've heard about that – that's great. I'd like to go there." So I went to Cornell for a semester. I was not a good student. I learned that out East they have a marvelous drink called ale, and I drank too much ale. I still had a whole semester to wait and meantime I was offered a chance to go to officer candidate school. Those experiences led me into contact with people who were very high achievers and thinking about lofty occupations. Finally, I took the exam and went to West Point, and after a short

time got very sick there, developed a bad case of asthma, and was discharged. So I came home and went to college, and I'd say those were the most significant events of my childhood.

Subotnik: What did you major in in college?

Feldhusen: In my first college experience, psychology and mathematics. I liked math very much, and I did quite well. And then I finally decided to get a teaching degree, and I taught math and English for several years. That was very inspiring because I had so many very bright students. Hazel undoubtedly met some of them because she was teaching nearby. Our principal wanted his male teachers to be happy and contented and stay on, so he went into town (Lake Geneva, Wisconsin was the town nearby) and recruited women teachers to come out and meet with us, hoping to build relationships. And look what he did!

In 1954 I went to the University of Wisconsin and pursued master's and doctorate degrees in educational psychology and got a Ph.D. in 1958.

Subotnik: Have you taken any wrong turns in your research, and if so, did they inform your beliefs or practice in any way?

Feldhusen: The delinquency project turned out to be a poor venture, even though grants-wise we did well, and in publications we did well. But we were ignored. There were some professors at Harvard who, like Gardner, had the field sewed up, and we didn't really accomplish anything even though we published like mad. My partner John Thurston and I both sensed that we just didn't make a breakthrough into that field. I think that was a poor turn, although from the standpoint of my vita, Purdue was so impressed that I marched right up to full professor in just a few years. Incidentally, I am very proud of my graduate Sidney Moon who was hired at Purdue upon receiving her Ph.D. and went up to full professor in 5 years.

Subotnik: Did you get any insight on how you might have published differently? Or was it just bad luck?

Feldhusen: Yes, I think I did. You've got to make contact with the operational field itself. With gifted, I worked with the Indiana State Department and I worked with schools. However, with delinquency we never really got into the operational aspects. We didn't make contact with penal organizations. I had worked as a guard in a penal institution for a short time while I was an undergraduate, but I found that job so distasteful, I guess maybe that would have kept me from getting into the actual field of crime or penology.

Subotnik: What do you see as the most important questions researchers in the field should be pursuing, and is there promising research on these topics?

Feldhusen: I think that the big question is: "What is it that propels youth toward high-level expertise and creative achievements?" Surely Gardner's *Creating Minds*

(1993) looks to that question. I think that is a high-powered question that needs to be addressed, and then we should try to bring the insights into the schools where gifted kids are enrolled.

Now the other thing I'd like to see more of is long-range, longitudinal work like Miraca Gross (2000) is doing. The Terman work is at an end. Now I think more large-scale, longitudinal research would be very desirable. But what Miraca is doing is very promising in itself.

Subotnik: Whose research in the field do you think should receive more attention than it has?

Feldhusen: Bob Sternberg (1990) is doing work that I think is extremely promising on the thinking processes of gifted and talented youth, and how to develop those thinking skills.

Subotnik: Are there questions in the field that should be approached differently?

Feldhusen: I think that we probably need more qualitative research looking closely at the day-by-day behaviors and psychology of gifted children. Donna Enersen (1993) at Purdue has done some good work in this area, but she is caught up tremendously in teaching. She is an awfully good qualitative researcher. I wish she had the inclination, the money, the grants, and what have you to do more research. Dorothy Kennedy (1989; Feldhusen & Kennedy, 1989) did a very nice doctoral study, a classroom observation study. It produced some very good insights about some very highly gifted youth. In general I think more qualitative research watching gifted children in their different environments and how they react, how their daily lives unfold, what the psychology is of that... I think those are promising areas.

Subotnik: Are there areas of research that you think are misinterpreted?

Feldhusen: I think Gardner's work is, particularly his incredible focus on intelligences. The tradition of intelligence is so much focused on the genetic, inherited characteristics of the youngster. And this is really why I fight against calling them intelligences and urge that they simply be called talents. I think the work of Gagné and myself both illustrate clearly that teachers understand talents, parents understand them, and the kids themselves understand them. Intelligence gives them, in my view, the wrong sense of abilities, because that term harkens from so far back on what is a genetic, built-in condition. Yes, surely, I can't deny that there is a genetic component, particularly in youth, and then in old age, apparently. Plomin (1994, 1999), Scarr (1996) and Bouchard (Bouchard & Lykken, 1999) have long since convinced me of that. But I think perpetuating the terms "intelligence" and genetic is giving the wrong impression to the world, and I must add, that my impression and my wife's impression of the "powerful" (supposedly) exemplar of Gardner's work, the Key School in Indi-

anapolis, after a visit several years ago, did not impress us at all. There is a study of six high schools in Indianapolis including the Key School, but the report has not been published. I wish it had, because its results are quite negative regarding the Key School.

Subotnik: If you could go into graduate programs in gifted education now and sweep a magic wand across them, what would you add that you think is missing from the preparation of scholars in our field?

Feldhusen: Number one, a very good psychological grounding. I think that is fundamental, and so I would love to see many graduate students in gifted education majoring in educational psychology. There are strong basics that they need to learn. Graduate students, teachers, everybody in the field of gifted education should come back to the extremely important need to help gifted children develop a powerful knowledge base. There is a feeling in the field that any teaching of information is rote memory. That's wrong, wrong, wrong. We need to look again at Sternberg, Gardner, and especially Ericsson, who clearly recognize that a sound base of declarative and procedural knowledge is fundamental. It is essential to good thinking. You don't think in a vacuum. You have to think about something, and that's the knowledge base. Now a good knowledge base is not a bunch of rote memorized pieces of information. A good knowledge base is an integrated, correlated, system of conceptual understandings and cognitive skills. To be meaningful, knowledge has to be understood. So I think that the field must come back to see that there is a critical need to develop youngsters' knowledge bases.

Subotnik: Would you like to add anything else?

Feldhusen: I think we have made remarkable progress in the last 20 years. There are awfully good people out there working in it. We have developed in these past 20 years a marvelous array of educational programs and services, these powerful, powerful schools for the gifted as we have in Indiana at Muncie – the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities – powerful institutions, and there are many of them. One of my graduate students and I did a study of those institutions and found marvelously good education going on there. The graduate student who worked with me on that, incidentally, now heads a school for the gifted in Amman, Jordan. His name is Fathic Jarwan, and we've got a nice piece in the literature (see Jarwan & Feldhusen, 1994) telling all about how those schools have developed, how they operate. I think that's almost a crowning achievement of our field. And of course then, schools like Pine View School for the Gifted in Sarasota and Sycamore School for the Gifted in Indianapolis are marvelous institutions and models for further development.

In closing, we need to understand that gifted and talented kids need exposure to people who have achieved at high levels. They need mentors. They need models. They need all kinds of opportunities

to work with other very bright children. There is good literature, some good pieces of work, on how to develop programs for mentoring experiences for gifted and talented youth. I see this also as crucial.

I also want to point to a wonderful thing that has happened in the field of gifted education and that is the growth of all the fine journals. *Roeper Review* surely was a pioneer journal in this area. At first it was not quite so focused on gifted, and then it became very much a journal in the gifted field. But *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *Gifted Child Today*, a whole series of journals now have been developed and they've been marvelous sources of communication bringing ideas to schools, to people, researchers working in the field and I think that's been a major contribution.

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