

FOCUS ON OUR RESEARCHERS: RENA SUBOTNIK



Editor's Note: Many of us have known each other for years as researchers about the talented and gifted but do we really know each other? This occasional column will profile the researchers whose studies we read, reference, and discuss. Who are we? This year's profile is of Dr. Rena Subotnik, of the American Psychological Association, a board member of our SIG.

By Jane Piirto

Editor of *Update*

The first time I visited Rena Subotnik in her apartment on the Upper West Side of New York City, we were colleagues at Hunter College. It was 1986. She was the new specialist in gifted and talented education hired by the education department and I was the principal of the Hunter College Elementary School. We became fast friends. Framed on her wall hung a newspaper clipping of a dashing, young, curly-haired Rena in a beret, written about for advocating environmental causes.

The beret was more authentic than I knew. Rena's, mother tongue was French. Her parents immigrated to the U.S. in 1941, and their common language was French. Her father was educated in Belgium, an activist

in the movement to acquire land in Palestine for Jewish settlement and her mother, from Egypt, had attended a Lycée, They had lived in Belgium, France, and Casablanca while escaping from the Nazis. Because he was a community worker, her father obtained a visa through the efforts of American Jews, and since her mother was from a country with a low quota, they were permitted to enter the United States. "We spoke French at home, and I really didn't need to speak English until I went to school"

At PS 179 on the Upper West Side, the school served Jewish, Latino, and Caribbean children from many lands. Rena did not feel odd. She was a risk-taker and had been reading since preschool, and so even though she had little English, her teacher advised her parents to have her tested for a program for gifted children. In third grade she was accepted into the Hunter College Elementary School. This was "a dramatic change in terms of social class composition of the students and opportunities afforded."

Hebrew School presented another educational avenue. She attended two days a week and on Sundays. Hunter had a no-homework-until-fifth-grade policy, and so she

and her neighborhood friends spent time playing in each other's homes and running in Riverside Park. Subotnik said, "This experience has shown me that just because one is in a homogeneously grouped class or school, it doesn't mean that you can't enjoy and learn from interacting with children who hold other interests and have other abilities."

After sixth grade, students from Hunter entered high school. Many of the girls went to Hunter College High School, a high school for gifted girls, after taking what is still called The Hunter Test. Around half of the girls were not accepted. Rena was among them.

She attended her local junior high school, Booker T. Washington junior high, where she noticed bullet holes on the windows on her first day of school. She was in Special Progress classes, where students completed three years of study within two years. The students were streamed into classes labeled 7-1 to 7-25. "When we were lined up in gym class you could see that the students got darker and the gym uniforms and gym shoes got shabbier as you looked from 7-1 to 7-25. This was the ugly side of tracking." Rena showed her now well-known sociable side early, hanging out after school with friends from various classes, learning from "wonderful teachers with good senses of humor."

In ninth grade she applied and was accepted to Hunter, Bronx Science, and Music and Art. She rejected Hunter because she didn't want an all-girl school and because she was a year ahead of the girls she'd gone to elementary school with because of her Special Progress classes. Now she says she regrets that decision a little, since an all-girls school might have served her well. She didn't think her talents in Music and Art would sustain her, so she attended the Bronx High School of Science, commuting an hour and a half each way, doing her

homework on the subway, meeting her fellow commuter friends on the way to and from the Bronx.

At Bronx Science, the nature of the competition changed. Subotnik went from the top of the class to the upper middle of the class. However, she says, this didn't create envy in her, because she had been raised to appreciate intelligence, and she admired the academic stars. She hated science because her teachers were so bad, but she loved math. However, her special math abilities were never recognized. One of her favorite classes was mechanical drawing: "It helped me immeasurably in my visual spatial thinking."

She was a sociable, talkative teenager. Her teachers used to get annoyed. "In geometry class my teacher got so angry that he told me he was going to give me a 65 for the semester. But he had also said that if anyone in the class got a 100 on the Regents examination at the end of the year (state graduation requirement for college bound in New York), he or she would get a 98 on their report card. I got a 100 on the exam in spite of all my talking. My teacher, bless his heart, gave me a 93."

In a class of 850 students, 3 out of 5 were boys, around 30 were African American, and most were Jewish. They commuted from all over the city. "I spent my senior year taking math electives, art electives and cutting school to ride the Staten Island ferry." She graduated when she was sixteen. Because of quotas for New York Jews in the Ivy League schools, many of the graduates of Bronx Science attended City College, known as the Proletariat Harvard. Rena did also.

Subotnik lived in a world where she was comfortable. When asked whether she resented the quotas, she replied: "Not really. I didn't really want to leave NYC all that much and the quotas just seemed to be reality. I lived in a majority culture in NYC and had no feelings

of inadequacy, and I wasn't ambitious enough to want to go to the Ivy League, so this was not a big issue."

When asked how her Jewishness has shaped her world view, she replied: "It's shaped my behavior and values a lot. I revere learning and the learned. I appreciate the cultural traditions that emerged out of Jewish communities that led to outstanding achievement in science, literature, and the arts. I was part of a Zionist youth group when I was in high school and college that was based on the kibbutz movement in Israel. We were non-materialistic, highly idealistic, non-sexist in a time that pre-dated the hippie era. Although I am much more conventional now in terms of my life style, I remain an idealist, relatively non-materialistic, and still revere talented children and adults."

City College was more of the same, as many of her classmates from Bronx Science attended also. She viewed most of the classes as "excellent and demanding" with one exception. Pointing out the errors her calculus professor made during a class in her freshman year did not endear her to him, but this professor gave her a B in spite of perfect attendance and scores on all exams and quizzes, and when she asked him why, he said he would change her grade if she never came into the math department again. "Instead of being recruited to be a math major, I was shooed off."

She had a love for the social sciences, and so she did not protest. She spent her junior year in Israel, as a international student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. When she returned as a senior to City College, she took education credits and student teaching, and got certified. "I loved those courses." Following a path common to dwellers in New York City; she enrolled at Teachers College, Columbia University, for her master's degree. A serendipitous talk with Abraham Tannenbaum changed her path. "On the

way, I stopped into the special ed office to ask instructions on how to get to C and T and met Abe Tannenbaum. We chatted and I ended up being his student. I still keep my notebooks from that time. Every lecture was a gem."

One year into her master's degree, she visited her brother in San Francisco. "I had a wonderful experience the first week. Someone asked me, 'what are you?' I answered 'Jewish.' She said, 'No, what sign are you?' It was then I decided to move there as a change of scene and a new start." The 1970s were beginning. She hitchhiked around the city and met some people who lived in a commune. She moved in with them and lived in the Haight Ashbury culture for over a year, decided to go back and finish up her Master's degree at Teachers College, and then came back to San Francisco for another two years. "I was becoming less satisfied with the future of my life there, but enjoyed hiking and navel gazing."

A visit to Seattle impressed her so much she decided to move there in 1974. Seattle seemed to be the place where she had always belonged. "Carlos Casteneda talked about how a dog will walk around a few times before plopping down on his favorite spot. The Seattle area was it." At a volleyball game she met a woman who was the coordinator for gifted and talented programs for the Seattle School District and the woman persuaded

her to submit an application to teach the gifted and talented for the school district.

For the next few years she taught in three middle schools. She taught in a pull out program, and remembers emphasizing Future Problem Solving and creative thinking in the curriculum she taught. "I picked kids who were known to be very creative but didn't always do so well on standardized tests. Our program

capitalized on their creativity, and I also helped them to understand the conventional thinking that went into test construction so they could improve their test scores.” “I got so engrossed in the lives of my students that my sense of humor and intellectual life was affected.” However, the program was in constant flux, and she got tired of moving schools.

While in the Pacific Northwest, because she was an active hiker, she became very involved in the environmental movement, and was one of the first 16 members of the local chapter of Greenpeace, even conducting clandestine fact-finding missions to investigate abuses of the natural world, one to fish factories in Norway. ‘We also postered various sections of the railway between Bremerton, Washington, where the Trident nuclear submarines were stationed and the Idaho National Energy Lab, where the spent nuclear fuel from the Tridents was sent. We wanted communities to know that this highly radioactive stuff was traveling through the tracks in the middle of town without any signage or warning.’”

She decided to apply to the University of Washington and was accepted into the Curriculum and Instruction Department for her doctoral studies. “I liked talking with adults about education.” While there, she took all of the courses which emphasized giftedness. Most of these were in the educational psychology and psychology departments.

A trip back to New York City and a visit to Bronx Science provided the topic for her dissertation. “I went to visit Bronx Science to talk with the Principal about their new ethics in science course because my minor area in the doctoral program was the social management of technology. The principal bragged about how many Westinghouse Science Talent Search winners he had that year (1983), and suggested I use them for my

dissertation. It all came together in that conversation with him. I decided to study the creative problem finding behavior of Westinghouse Science Talent Search winners that lead to the work that I conducted with so much pleasure and effort for the next 15 years.”

While doing her research and writing it up, she felt the influence of several thinkers. These were Benjamin Bloom’s Talent Development Model, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and his problem finding research, David Feldman, with his prodigy and creativity research, and JP Guilford for his Structure of Intellect. “I used their work for my dissertation.”

After she graduated she took a job at West Virginia University. “It was a wonderful faculty and there existed a lot of enthusiasm for gifted education in the community. Classes were full and I had several doctoral students.” She was there for two years, but when she saw the job advertisement for the Hunter College job, she left, feeling a yearning for urban living, and for home. “My personality was not suited to living in a small college town. I wanted very much to return to urban living.”

After Rena arrived at Hunter, my office became the site for her next research project. Each mo ‘I would arrive and two seventh grade boys would be at my conference table, poring through battered tin boxes of file cards, writing down the names and addresses of former students at the Hunter College Elementary School. Donna Shalala, the then President of Hunter College, had given Subotnik seed money of \$5,000 to do a replication study of the Terman longitudinal studies with graduates of the Hunter College Elementary School, to see what they were doing now.

Subotnik explained the rationale and findings for the study: “I used the graduates from 1949 to 1959 because those groups were most likely to have been admitted

based on IQ. (The first class of HCES graduated in 1949 and the class of 1960 and beyond for a while were admitted using various experimental criteria). The graduates were in their late 30's to early 50's. I used Terman's mid life questionnaire as a model for my research instrument. I discovered that the graduates were not especially eminent or renowned, in spite of the high IQs and opportunities. There didn't seem to be the kind of drive exhibited by these wonderful people to be significant contributors beyond their own community.

'This research affected me in two ways. One was it made me realize viscerally that IQ was not a sufficient predictive variable in relation to eminence or great creative productivity. It also made me realize that I wanted to use whatever gifts I had to make a mark on the field.'

She did further work on eminence and women. Almost all her work has been in collaboration with others. I asked her about her philosophy of collaboration. She said that because she has a tendency to procrastinate, collaboration forces her to keep to a schedule and to get the work done. She also likes to intensely discuss a line of reasoning with her collaborators.

Collaboration with Karen Arnold is especially evident in Subotnik's work. They met at AERA one year, when they went to each other's sessions about longitudinal studies of adolescents. 'We cooked up the idea of Beyond Terman Contemporary Longitudinal Studies of Giftedness and Talent at AERA.' They began to visit each other or meet at vacation spots, working in the mornings, then taking long walks and eating good dinners 'We published a lot together to both of our benefits.'

Subotnik left Hunter College for the American Psychological Association in Washington, D.C., two years ago. She is the Director of the Esther Katz Rosen

Center for Gifted Education Policy. This center provides information and services to the profession and science of psychology regarding gifted and talented children and adolescents. Another mission of the Center is to develop prototype programs designed to serve high performing adolescents in the arts, sciences, sports and professions.

I asked Rena what she has learned through all her years of teaching, research, and publication. She replied: "(1) Giftedness is who you are applied to what you do. I no longer subscribe to the position that one's innate talents and gifts qualify an adult to call him or herself gifted. (2) Like you, I believe that personality plays a key role in the development of talent. I also believe that different personality variables play a key determining role at different points in the talent development process. For example, motivation and drive are key in the early process of acquiring techniques, skills, and knowledge. Social skills, knowing how to play the game, charisma, etc. play the key role in many arenas after the acquisition of extraordinary expertise. I agree wholeheartedly with the Piirto Pyramid, and would only emphasize differential weights for various components over time." When asked which of her studies is most close to her heart, Subotnik listed three: (1) The longitudinal study of 1983 Westinghouse Science Talent Search Winners; (2) The Hunter study, Genius Revisited; (3) and an ongoing study, of how music conservatories develop talent. She has studied Juilliard, and is continuing the research with Linda Jarvin, Erik Moga, and Robert Sternberg at Juilliard, Curtis and the New England Conservatory.

She has also been an editor - most notably of the International Handbook of Gifted Education, and of the Journal for Secondary Gifted Education. Her continued study and research brought her an honored award in 2002. She was given the National Association for

Gifted Children's Distinguished Scholar Award. A few years ago she also received the Early Scholar Award, which is often a prequel to the Distinguished Scholar Award.

Here a list of some her work so you can catch up with the publications of one of our fine scholars.

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Author's note: The research methodology for this interview was qualitative email interviewing, over a space of about two months. Two or three questions were posed at a time, with followup questions as the interview proceeded. The participant approved the final draft.