Reflections on an Evolving View of Giftedness and Talent: *An Interview With Rena Subotnik*

By Suzanna E. Henshon

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Dr. Rena F. Subotnik is director of the Center for Gifted Education Policy at the American Psychological Association (APA). The Center's mission is to generate public awareness, advocacy, clinical applications, and cutting-edge research ideas that will enhance the achievement and performance of children and adolescents with special gifts and talents in all domains (including the academic disciplines, the performing arts, sports, and the professions).

Before she came to APA, Dr. Subotnik was a professor of education at Hunter College and research/curriculum consultant to Hunter's laboratory schools for gifted children. She has been awarded research and training grants with the Institute for Education Sciences, McDonnell Foundation, Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, Camille and Henry Dreyfus Foundation, National Science Foundation, the Javits Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Education, and the Spencer Foundation. She currently serves on the editorial boards of *Roeper Review, Gifted Child Quarterly,* and the *Journal for Secondary Gifted Education.* She is author of *Genius Revisited: High IQ Children Grown Up* (1993), and co-editor (with Robert Sternberg) of *Optimizing Student Success with the Other Three R's* (in press), (with Herb Walberg) of *The Scientific Basis of Educational Productivity* (in press), (with Karen Arnold) of *Beyond Terman: Contemporary Longitudinal Studies of Giftedness and Talent* (1994), (with Karen Arnold and Kathleen Noble) *Remarkable Women: Perspectives on Female Talent Development* (1997), and (with Kurt Heller, Franz Mönks, and Robert Sternberg) the second edition of the *International Handbook of Research on Giftedness and Talent* (2000). Dr. Subotnik was named the 2002 Distinguished Scholar by the National Association for Gifted Children.

Henshon: What led you to the field of gifted education?

Subotnik: I knew I wanted to be a teacher and enrolled at Teachers College, Columbia University directly after graduating from college. On the first day of registration, I was looking for the Department of Curriculum and Instruction to find out what classes I needed. If you have ever been to TC you'll know that it is housed in a lovely set of old buildings with lots of twisting and turning hallways. In the course of getting lost, I stepped into the Special Education Department office. Abe Tannenbaum was there to greet students, and I was the only one around at the moment. He started asking me some questions and soon we were chatting about where I'd gone to school. When I told him I'd attended Hunter College Elementary School and the Bronx High School of Science, he said, "You should be in my program!" I was thrilled to be invited personally to join a graduate program, and that was how it all started.

At many crossroads in my life, pursuing gifted education was one of many options. I took the gifted education path in each case and never looked back. For example, when I finished my teacher education sequence, I wanted to teach in Seattle and was prepared to be a gifted education specialist or regular teacher. At a volleyball game I serendipitously met the head of gifted programs in Seattle, and she said, "I have a job as a teacher of the gifted at Madrona Middle School. Are you interested?"

Henshon: What were the most important lessons that you learned (from a mentor)?

Subotnik: I work for a wonderful Executive Director at the American Psychological Association, named Cynthia Belar. She has guided me through some difficult work situations. Her mantra for me is to wait at least 24 hours before responding to perceived provocation. It's great advice when I remember to keep it.

When I first came to APA, Marty Seligman, a member of the American Psychological Foundation Board of Directors, told me that much more support for giftedness and talent could be found among discipline-based groups than among education groups. He suggested that if I approached the American Chemical Society, for example, I'd get a more positive response than from the National Science Teachers Association. I've taken his advice and found many organizations outside of the K-12 education world receptive to the talent development of gifted learners.

Henshon: If you had to name individuals both in the field and outside the field who have had great effect on your thinking, who would they be?

Subotnik: Bob Sternberg (1999), Françoys Gagné (2005), Benjamin Bloom (1985), Abe Tannenbaum (1986), Jane Piirto (1998), Joe Renzulli (2005), and David Feldman (1986). Except for Bob

avoid "victimology" by helping girls get what they need to compete with boys on the power playing field. This strategy allows girls more choices in how to focus their lives in the workplace and at home.

Longitudinal research has been an important methodological concern for me (e.g., Subotnik & Arnold, 1994). It's a research method that is severely underused in our field. Viewing the development of science talent over time provided me with many of the insights that I'm developing today. For example, I discovered that Westinghouse (now Intel) Science Talent Search winners selected what post-secondary institution to attend based on name recognition rather than on the reputation of specific faculty in their area of interest or opportunities for undergraduate research at those institutions. After a look at how elite music talent addresses the undergraduate years I became especially aware of how science is not organized optimally for talent development.

Henshon: Can you say more about your experiences at Juilliard?

Subotnik: When I was living in New York, I had the good fortune to meet the (now former) director of admissions at Juilliard, Mary Gray. We compared admission to selective academic programs with the admission process at Juilliard. The comparison was eye opening. At Hunter and many other academic programs for the gifted, we used IQ tests to to the curriculum the students receive. At music conservatories, the criteria for admission include mastery of a publicly displayed, challenging repertoire appropriate for each age level and each instrument. If one aspired to attend Juilliard, you knew exactly what to prepare for your audition.

Another thing I learned at Juilliard that has been confirmed by the work Linda Jarvin and I

Henshon: Is your thinking about those areas of interest that you mentioned radically different now versus 15 years ago?

Subotnik: Generally, I have become less interested in studying why gifted people fail, and more interested in coming up with interventions or policies that will help gifted individuals make better choices in their talent development. Perhaps this reflects my move out of academia to Washington, DC. My perception is that academics tend to analyze problems and do not always get around to solving them.

Henshon: What research are you working on currently?

Subotnik: Along with Linda Jarvin, from the Yale University PACE Center, I am trying to learn from training for classical music performance what we might apply to elite talent development in academics. We believe this model can guide students and program organizers on what steps need to be taken to enhance the likelihood that abilities will be transformed into scholarly productivity or artistry.

Henshon: What are some important related questions that you'd like to see addressed?

Subotnik: Can secondary school programs ever provide support to talent development (without complementary out-of-school programs), even if they are outstanding? Is academic talent development ready to take on the psychological come how to play the game, etc.)

Henshon: Is there any area of research being conducted on any of those areas that you've just mentioned in the field of gifted education?

Subotnik: I don't think there is any kind of comparison or policy-based study that looks at out-of-school versus in-school programs. I have written up

some thoughts on this, but the evidence I drew from was only based on my own experience. Sidney Moon and Felicia Dixon are publishing a book on gifted adolescents, and Felicia is heading up an NAGC task force on the topic. Maybe this question will be addressed more comprehensively in those two venues.

As for the role of psychology in talent development, I hope that our work will inform the community well. Sidney Moon (2003), Françoys Gagné (2005), Tracy Cross and Larry Coleman (2005), and others are also conducting some very interesting work in this arena.

Henshon: If you had to give someone advice about what to avoid when conducting research, what might some of that advice be?

Subotnik: I love to generate research ideas and make things happen, but once the project has materialized, I want someone else to follow up, and such a person is not always available. There's a lot of excitement involved with designing a study, getting it funded and accepted by various stakeholders. Collecting data is also exciting. My advice would be "Don't drop things after initial excitement." You have to follow up vigorously lest study subjects and potential data disappear. For example, with my longitudinal research I would sometimes wait too long to collect the next round of interviews, and discovered that many subjects had moved and not left forwarding addresses. If I'd lost any more subjects, the longitudinal nature of my study would have been compromised.

Henshon: What's happened as far as research in the field of gifted education that you think should receive more attention than it has?

Subotnik: We know that most children we select for gifted programs do not turn out to be outstanding adult performers or thinkers. We also know that many gifted adults were not identified as gifted children in school. This discrepancy needs to be addressed more in our field. Of course, this research agenda presumes that the goal of gifted education is to develop eminence. Not everyone buys into that by any means. But I do.

Henshon: What are some areas within the field that you think may have been misinterpreted as far as the research goes?

Subotnik: Some conflate student behaviors that result from lack of gifted education services with behaviors associated with giftedness. Acting out as a result of boredom, for example, is considered a natural outgrowth of being gifted. This is bad for our field and bad for kids' mental health. It's bad for the field because it rationalizes bad behavior to educators and members of the community whose support we need for gifted programs. It's also bad for children to be told that it's OK for them to act out because they're bored. Another example is arrogance on the part of children who do not tolerate their classmates' slower pace of learning or lack of interest in esoteric things. Arrogance is bad behavior, and usually reflects a lack of ability to understand others more deeply. It's our job as adults not only to get gifted students into appropriate learning situations but also to help them learn to cope with difficult situations in productive ways.

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