

## **An Interview with Steven Pfeiffer: Thinking about Giftedness and Talent Development- What are the Issues?**

Steven Pfeiffer  
*Florida State University*

(Interviewed on behalf of NAJP by)

Michael Shaughnessy  
*Eastern New Mexico University*

Steven Pfeiffer is a popular speaker on how to raise successful and psychologically well-adjusted gifted kids. Prior to his tenure at FSU, Dr. Pfeiffer was a Professor at Duke University, where he served as Executive Director of Duke's gifted program. He also served as Director of Devereux's Institute of Clinical Training & Research, headquartered in Villanova, PA. Dr. Pfeiffer has worked as a Pediatric Psychologist at the Ochsner Clinic and Medical Center in New Orleans, and as a Clinical Psychologist in the U.S. Navy Medical Service Corps. Author of over 200 articles and book chapters, he is lead author of the *Gifted Rating Scales* (2003; 2020). For many years an advocate for children's socio-emotional needs, Dr. Pfeiffer has 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..."

**NAJP:** Dr. Pfeiffer, you recently authored a chapter in a book- what was the name of the book and what did you write about?

**SP:** The name of the book is *The Oxford Handbook of Expertise* (2020). I was honored with the invitation to contribute one of the 50 chapters for the book. The chapter provides the reader with an overview on recent thinking about gifted and talented children and youth, including a history of gifted education and some big picture issues and future possibilities. Such as: Who are the gifted and what are the best ways to conceptualize this elusive group? How are gifted best identified? Is giftedness domain-specific or is giftedness domain-general? How malleable is giftedness? Does giftedness represent a qualitative or quantitative difference? And

---

*Author info:* Correspondence should be sent to: Dr. Michael Shaughnessy, Psychology Department, Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, NM 88130.

*North American Journal of Psychology*, 2020, Vol. 22, No. 3, 373-382.  
© NAJP

how does the concept of expertise-the focus of the Handbook - fit into gifted education? I attempted to bite off quite a bit in this one chapter!

**NAJP:** A global question about giftedness and talent- is it quantitative or qualitative- and what do you see as the differences?

**SP:** I love this question! It brings me back to my graduate student days, in the 1970's, when I had the good fortune of studying under James Gallagher at the University of North Carolina. Professor Gallagher had perhaps the best, nuanced answer to the quantitative versus qualitative issue. He liked to say, and I am paraphrasing him here! – giftedness is a lot like water. At a certain temperature, it freezes into solid ice. When warmed, the ice melts and turns into something very different, a liquid. And under further heating, the liquid actually transforms from a liquid into a gaseous state. Professor Gallagher would then ask us: are these different states of water: solid, liquid, and gas – qualitative distinctions? Or are they mere quantitative differences?

Professor Gallagher's position - or at least how I have come to interpret and understand his nuanced viewpoint, is that giftedness could best be considered both as marked by quantitative and qualitative distinctions. I agree with this view when thinking about giftedness and talent. Let me use a soccer analogy, which many readers of my work know I often rely upon when thinking about intellectual or academic giftedness and talent. The differences between most good H.S. varsity soccer players and weekend recreational soccer players, like myself, are primarily quantitative. However, the differences between Division I College soccer players and world class soccer stars, such as Messi or Ronaldo, are, in many regards qualitative distinctions.

They are performing, on the turf, in both quantitatively and in qualitatively different ways, compared to the rest of us who play soccer. Many things that they do on the field are more than just better or faster or more precise than what the rest of us can only hope to do. They play at an amazingly elite level that captures our imagination because it reflects more than simply quantitative differences! The same is true among our most elite and accomplished authors, poets, performing artists, scientists, politicians, engineers, mathematicians, physicians, teachers, and psychotherapists.

**NAJP:** What are some contextual and sociocultural factors to look at in terms of these issues?

**SP:** A number of writers in the gifted field have written about contextual and socio-cultural factors that play a part in talent development. Abraham

Tannenbaum was perhaps among the first authors within gifted education to suggest that we look beyond the 'gifted child' to understand the unfolding of talent among high ability children. Others in the gifted field have built upon Tannenbaum's brilliant ideas, including Gagne and Subotnik. Outside of gifted education, a number of authorities within the fields of developmental psychology, expertise, and the cognitive sciences have investigated contextual and sociocultural factors that impact human development, including development at its highest levels of performance. Many of these investigators label these important extra-person contextual and socio-cultural influences as either moderating or mediating factors.

However we label these important non-intellectual factors, it is apparent that they play a significant role in the development of talent at its highest levels of expression. For example, early intellectual stimulation within the home, certain parental values and attitudes toward learning and curiosity, and the availability of a challenging educational environment all contribute to the ultimate algorithm of how far any given high-ability child progresses toward expertise in a given field.

Other factors certainly include caring and knowledgeable teachers and the availability of attractive role models and mentors. Facilitative factors also include real-world opportunities to develop one's skills and 'push the talent envelope,' and a set of personal attributes, including drive, persistence, joy in learning, high frustration tolerance, and what I call 'coachability.' Interestingly enough, many of these non-intellectual attributes can be taught and nurtured but have a genetic-heritability component! What we also know is that there is not one generic template or algorithm that applies to all gifted kids. The combination of facilitative personal, socio-cultural, familial and environmental factors varies by individual child and by vocation or career. It's clearly not a simple 'one size fits all' for all gifted kids!

One important take-away from this discussion on non-intellectual factors is that ability is important. Very important, in fact, in what most theorists mean when talking about giftedness and talent. But ability is never enough. Ability will only get you so far when considering the "long view" of the development of talent towards expertise or even eminence in a given field. A great many factors beyond general ability influence talent development.

**NAJP:** The tripartite model of giftedness -- what is it and how does it differ from Sternberg's WISC?

**SP:** There are many different ways to conceptualize giftedness. Sternberg and Davidson suggested at least twenty different ways to view giftedness in their 2005 book. Most of the widely cited models, including

Sternberg's WISC, fit into one of four models. These four alternative models imply different ways to define, identify, and nurture gifts. The different models vary in their level of detail and in how easily they can be translated into assessment protocols and psycho-educational intervention programs. They also vary in their relative emphasis on the role of individual differences, developmental antecedents, genetics, family, and the environment.

The four models, at least as I view them, are traditional *psychometric views*, *talent development models*, *expert performance perspectives*, and *multiple intelligences*. Sternberg's *theory of successful intelligence*, his provocative WISC model -consisting of creativity, intelligence, and wisdom, fits into the multiple intelligences model.

My model, *the tripartite model of giftedness*, is not contradictory to any of the four models mentioned above. In fact, the *tripartite model* incorporates elements of all four models! The *tripartite model* is a practical model, developed based on my work with highly gifted youth during my tenure at Duke University. The *tripartite model* provides three different ways of viewing students with high ability or extraordinary potential. The *tripartite model* offers three different, but complementary ways to conceptualize, identify, and program for gifted learners. The three distinct lenses through which high ability students can be viewed within the *tripartite model* are these:

Giftedness through the lens of high intellectual ability;  
 Giftedness through the lens of outstanding accomplishments; and  
 Giftedness through the lens of potential to excel

The first perspective of the tripartite model, the *high intelligence view*, is familiar to most readers. Through this first lens, an IQ or cognitive ability test, or its proxy, can be used to identify students functioning at a certain level considerably above average intellectually. The criterion for high intellectual giftedness is based on compelling, and scientifically reliable, evidence that the youngster is advanced intellectually when compared to her or his same-age peers. The first perspective of the *tripartite model* can follow a general (*g*) or multidimensional view (for example, the popular C-H-C model of cognitive abilities). It could also be guided by a structure of intellect, multiple intelligences, or even a neuroanatomical model of intelligences.

The rationale for gifted programs based on viewing giftedness through the first lens of the *tripartite model* is that students with superior intelligence need advanced, intellectually challenging, and often more fast-paced academic material not typically found in the regular

classroom. Based on this first perspective, gifted education consists of highly accelerated and/or academically advanced and challenging curricula. The Johns Hopkins and Duke TIP summer programs are two examples.

The second perspective of the *tripartite model* is viewing giftedness through the lens of *outstanding accomplishments*. This second perspective does not scoff at or denigrate the importance of high ability. However, the second perspective emphasizes viewing giftedness through the lens of performance in the classroom and on real-world projects as the core defining characteristic for giftedness. As I conceptualize the *tripartite model* based on this second lens, evidence of real-world excellence compared to other same-age peers is the *sine qua non* to qualify as a gifted student and to warrant admittance into a gifted and talented program, not high IQ. I recommend that standardized and rigorous portfolio and rubric assessment of actual student products are the material that should be used to identify high-performing students as gifted through this second lens of the *tripartite model*.

Viewing giftedness through the *outstanding accomplishments* lens, gifted educators, school administrators, school psychologists, and parents are looking for direct and incontrovertible evidence of *authentic* academic excellence. Creativity is emphasized when viewing giftedness through this second lens, since we often expect ingenuity and creativity in judging outstanding real-world accomplishments. When we developed my *Gifted Rating Scales* (GRS), now revised and newly standardized with a teacher and parent form (GRS-2), we intentionally considered items such as *displays an active imagination* and generates many ideas to *what if* questions (Pfeiffer, & Jarosewich, 2003; 2020) to include the reliable assessment of evidence of high creativity.

The rationale for gifted programs based on an outstanding accomplishments perspective is that students who excel academically have earned and deserve special academic programs and services because of their consistently outstanding effort and superior accomplishments. Gifted education, based on this second lens of *outstanding accomplishments*, would look somewhat different from gifted education guided by a *high intelligence* perspective. For example, gifted programs would consist of highly enriched and academically challenging curricula, although not necessarily fast-paced or highly advanced.

I call the third lens or perspective *potential to excel*. What do I mean by this third way to view giftedness? In my clinical experience, and in consulting with tens of hundreds of educators over forty years, some children and youth - for any number of reasons, have not been provided nearly enough opportunity, the proper intellectual stimulation, and oftentimes the facilitative socio-emotional factors to develop what

remains as latent and as yet undeveloped or under-developed intellectual or academic gifts. This third perspective of the *tripartite model* is supported by a growing body of research (for example, Nisbett's work [2009]). I am sure that most readers can identify with this third perspective and can think of one or more students that they taught with high but unactualized potential.

Most educators and psychologists agree that not all children start out on equal footing. Some children from poverty, immigrant families, those from families in which intellectual and academic activities are neither encouraged nor nurtured in the home, or children growing up in poverty, overcrowded or dangerous communities with limited resources or educational opportunities, are all at a distinct disadvantage to develop their gifts. This was the rationale for the third perspective within the *tripartite model*.

The third perspective implies a prediction that students of *high potential* will very likely flourish and excel when provided with special resources and psycho-educational interventions. The assumption underlying this third perspective of the *tripartite model* is that with time, an encouraging and highly stimulating environment, and the proper social-emotional interventions, these students will actualize their yet unrealized high potential and distinguish themselves from among their same-age peers as gifted and talented.

Gifted programs that are guided by a potential-to-excel perspective consist of highly motivating and enriched curriculum that often includes compensatory interventions. This third category of gifted also carries with it a prediction. The prediction is that if the student is provided a well-conceived, comprehensive, high-dosage, evidence-based set of psycho-educational interventions, often requiring an integrated home component, then she or he will thrive and ultimately appear almost indistinguishable, or at least very similar to, any student who is already identified as falling within one of the other two gifted categories, high intelligence or academically gifted learner.

There isn't much empirical research relevant to the hypothesis that there exists this third type of gifted, the *diamonds in the rough*. These are children and youth who will flourish in astounding ways with well-designed and intensive psycho-educational interventions. It is apparent that the interventions would need to be high dosage to compensate for the early, missed familial and educational experiences and opportunities. And it is also apparent that the earlier that educators and school psychologists identify young, potential-to-excel gifted and talented students, the more likely they will respond favorably to the planned, evidence-based psycho-educational interventions. This is a very exciting and promising area of research opportunity, both in the USA and

globally. When we developed the *Gifted Rating Scales* (GRS), including the very new parent scale (GRS-2), we intentionally included non-intellectual rating scale items. We wanted to reliably assess motivation, drive, persistence, academic passion and socio-emotional maturity – things that we believe help identify this third group of gifted children and youth, the *diamonds in the rough*. These items on the new GRS-2 teacher and parent scales reflect important, non-intellectual factors that differentiate successful from less successful gifted students.

In summary, these three categories of the gifted constitute different types of bright children, with different levels and profiles of cognitive and social-emotional abilities. And, we are finding them, with different skills and personality characteristics. However, the three groups are *not* necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, there are many students with exceptionally high IQ scores who are academically gifted learners with a burning passion to learn. I developed the *tripartite model*, in part, to reduce much of the acrimony often found in the gifted literature and in the schools when one group of educators, administrators or parents advocate for adopting only one, typically narrowly defined high IQ view of giftedness. Interested readers may find *Essentials of gifted assessment* (Pfeiffer, 2015) informative. The book details for educators and school psychologists how to operationalize the *tripartite model*.

**NAJP:** Tough question, this issue of "evidence of potential." How do teachers, theorists and scholars address this vague construct?

**SP:** You are absolutely correct, Michael. The business of making predictions is always challenging and fraught with errors. It is one of those things that I strongly believe we should be thinking about in gifted education, namely that there are a group of, as yet, unidentified kids of high potential who we shouldn't lose sight of. As I explained earlier in the interview, for any number of reasons these kids are the under-actualized, potentially gifted students. My belief and the assumption underlying my third lens of the *tripartite model* is that with time, an encouraging and highly stimulating environment, and the proper, evidence-based psycho-educational interventions, these students will eventually actualize their yet unrealized high potential and distinguish themselves from their peers as special or gifted.

This idea goes back to my thinking that it is useful to think of academically gifted students in the schools as falling within one or more of these three categories based on the *tripartite model*. Individuals in the first category, the students with exceptionally high intelligence, typically have IQ scores in the top 2% or 5% when compared to other children of the same age. Some countries even set more stringent cut scores, such as

Singapore and Hong Kong, which define giftedness as intellectual functioning at the top 1%. There is not one correct cut-score or threshold for gifted. These are arbitrary decisions made by people, not pre-determined neuro-biological distinctions!

The second category of gifted in the *tripartite model*, *academically gifted learners*, are academically precocious, do exceptionally well in the classroom, love learning and academic challenges, and demonstrate high levels of persistence, motivation and grit when facing academic challenges. When tested, their IQ scores may fall in the 120 to 130 range, or sometimes higher. They are characteristically among the most capable and top-performing students in the class. Teachers love to have these students in the classroom.

The third category of gifted in the *tripartite model*, students with *high potential to excel*, are often recognized by their teachers and others as bright or quick learners, hardworking, and highly curious about their world. They may not test extraordinarily well on standardized aptitude or achievement tests. Their IQ test scores may fall in the 110-115 range, or even lower. Yet there is something about these students that conveys latent, partially hidden, and under-developed high ability. They are the “diamonds in the rough.” The unique challenge with this third category of gifted is that there is always a speculative classification. The classification should be based on observational and test data, classroom and contextual information that is integrated to *infer* that if life circumstances had been different, the student would likely appear as a student of high tested intelligence and/or academically gifted. The *inference* is that, if given a different home and different familial, cultural, and/or community resources and circumstances, the child would resemble a student with high intelligence and/or a student who is an academically gifted learner. As I already stated, this third category of gifted carries with it a prediction. And predictions, sadly, come with error! Statistically, we can think of Type I and Type II errors with all assessment, including this third category of the *tripartite model*. The hope is that we will identify some “diamonds in the rough” who otherwise, because of life circumstances, would never be provided the opportunity to demonstrate their unique potential to excel. In my experience, many experienced classroom teachers are quite perceptive and adept in identifying classroom behaviors and attitudes that indicate a student that may have unusually high potential, as yet unrealized or untapped. Successful coaches often see this same type of gifted youngster among young athletes, dancers, musicians, actors and artists. These are kids with little or no experience or savvy for the activity, but with a whole lot of untapped potential to excel if provided the right opportunity, coaching, and training experiences. The gifted field needs to direct more

resources to the screening and identification of this third group of gifted learners. We attempted to include items that teachers and parents could reliably rate that help identify this third group of gifted with our newly revised and standardized *Gifted Rating Scale* (GRS-2, 2020).

**NAJP:** Learning on the sidelines and "on the pitch" - what do these two things mean?

**SP:** I appreciate the notion of developmental transformations across the lifespan- ideas beautifully articulated by Professor Francoys Gagne and later by Rena Subotnik - because they so clearly help us understand how general and specific abilities transform into competencies, then expertise, and ultimately outstanding performance. Gagne and Subotnik's ideas personally resonated with my own early thinking and experiences and views on the gifted. My wife and I have three children. Our youngest daughter was identified at age five as having precocious athletic ability - akin to the early identification of intellectual ability. By age ten, our daughter had been identified by the Women's Soccer Olympic Development Program, known in the USA as the ODP. Her elite youth career began as a player on the ODP "under 13"-year old soccer team. A few years later, she was selected to one of the four ODP Regional teams, which is the feeder for the USA National soccer team. She was a young girl with a whole lot of athletic ability.

As a psychologist with already considerable experience working with high ability kids, it was an eye opener to be exposed to the world of talent development among elite youth athletics. I learned a great deal shepherding my daughter through the well-established world of competitive youth sports. My experience "on the sidelines" broadened and deepened my view and appreciation on talent development. My experience watching my daughter and other elite soccer players "on the pitch" expanded my understanding for what is required to develop expertise at the highest levels of performance - to play on the USA National soccer team in international competition.

My experience on the sidelines, watching my daughter training, playing with other elite athletes, and being coached, introduced me, first-hand to the importance of deliberate practice - an idea brilliantly researched by my colleague at Florida State University, Anders Ericsson. I watched from the sidelines and observed the powerful influence of coaching, mentoring, and how competition can both be facilitative and detrimental to high ability athletes' motivation and love of their sport.

Much of what I learned through my involvement with elite youth soccer on the sidelines as a parent in the late 1980's and early 1990's influenced my later views on what it takes to be successful and ultimately

leave your mark in any field. My observations on the sidelines informed my thinking that giftedness is a dynamic construct; that giftedness continues to develop and evolve over time; and that giftedness in the real world of soccer (or any field) is much more than simply having extraordinarily high athletic ability (or high IQ on the “academic classroom or lab pitch”). Observing from the sidelines as a parent also influenced my belief that the gifted education field could benefit from adopting a talent development model similar to the USA’s ODP model of soccer development. That’s my personal story! Interested readers can get the full story in my book, *Serving the Gifted* (2013).

**NAJP:** What have I neglected to ask?

**SP:** Michael, this was an enjoyable interview. Your far-reaching questions made me think hard and reflect back on ideas that I’ve been writing about and giving talks on for over twenty-five years. So, thank you! I’m sure that you could have asked other questions, but let’s leave those for another interview! At some future time, I’d love to talk about my work on strengths of the heart and social-emotional learning, which I think has relevance to gifted education.

#### REFERENCES

- Neihart, M., Pfeiffer, S. I., & Cross, T. (Eds.). (2015). *The social and emotional needs of the gifted: What do we know?* Waco, Texas: Prufrock Press.
- Nisbett, R. E. (2009). *Intelligence and how to get it*. New York: Norton.
- Pfeiffer, S. (2013). *Serving the gifted*. N.Y.: Routledge.
- Pfeiffer, S. (2015). *Essentials of Gifted Assessment*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley.
- Pfeiffer, S. (2018) (Ed.) *APA Handbook on giftedness and talent*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Pfeiffer, S. (2018) *Handbook of giftedness in children* (2nd ed.). New York: Springer.
- Pfeiffer, S. (2020) Giftedness and talent development in children and youth. In P. Ward, J. M. Schraagen, J. Gore, & E. M. Roth (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Expertise*. (pp. 103-127). England: Oxford University Press.
- Pfeiffer, S. I., & Jarosewich, T. (2003). *The gifted rating scales*. San Antonio, Texas: Pearson Assessment.
- Pfeiffer, S. I., & Jarosewich, T. (2020) *Gifted rating scales-2*. Toronto: MHS.
- Sternberg, R.J. & Davidson, J. E. (Eds.) (2005). *Conceptions of giftedness* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.