

Note by Dr. Elizabeth A. Romey

Conceptual Foundations Chair
p. 2

Looking the “gifted” horse in the mouth: Benefits and drawbacks to the field’s lexicon

By Jennifer Foreman,
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Connecticut

p. 3

Response to “Rethinking Giftedness and Gifted Education”

By Rachel Sloan,
Undergraduate Student
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Virginia

p. 8

Oh @#\$%, I Think I Have Just Been Un-Gifted

By Erin Morris Miller, PhD
Bridgewater College, Virginia

p.14

Bold Steps: Best Taken on New Paths

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p. 10



To take a Bold Step or not to take a Bold Step? From the chair of NAGC to the members to the gifted children themselves... Major questions have been raised since November and the last NAGC conference at New Orleans. The focus for the Spring Conceptual Foundations Newsletter is the President’s Address by Paula Olszewski-Kubilius given at the NAGC conference in New Orleans and the article by Rena Subotnik, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, and Frank Worrell published by the Association for Psychological Science in Psychological Science in the Public Interest.

A step, whether it is a Bold Step or not, it is a step. In one of his finest poems, *Ithaca*, Constantine Cavafy, referred to as the father of

Greek modernist poetry, uses the Homeric story of the Odyssey as an allegory for the journey of life. Cavafy transforms main elements of the Odyssey into dynamic symbolisms.

*“When you set out for Ithaca / ask
that your way be long, / full of
adventure, full of instruction”*

Ithaca as an island, Odysseus’ destination. Ithaca as an individual’s thought, a personal destination. Ithaca itself perhaps is the most powerful symbol in Cavafy’s poem, it represents both a starting and an ending place. Everyone and everything comes from somewhere. We travel by physically and/or spiritually, and some of us go far indeed. Ironically, the farther people get from home, physically and/or mentally, the more they want to return. The great risk, however, is setting expectations based on the destination and ignoring that

“Ithaca” is nothing more than the trigger.

*“...Ithaca gave you the
marvelous journey. /
Without her you would not
have set out. / She has
nothing left to give you
now.”*

The point of life is the journey and the experiences along the way. It is the enlightenment found between the starting and the ending point that makes life worth living. The starting and ending point, though, is simply that: a starting and ending point. Let’s experience every step and once we do it, it will be bold!

Danae Deligeorges

Guest Editor

Bold Steps: Best Taken on New Paths

By Wenda Sheard

I write from across the Atlantic Ocean, where I now live, teach, and serve on the board of the United Kingdom's National Association for Gifted Children (UK's NAGC). Although distance and duty prevented me from hearing Paula Olszewski-Kubilius's Presidential Address in New Orleans, I felt waves of discontent created by the address.

In this article, I share my reflections on Paula Olszewski-Kubilius proposal "that we take a bold step and consider making talent development, rather than giftedness, the major unifying concept of our field and most importantly, the basis for our practice." I start with my first reaction -- one questioning whether Olszewski-Kubilius and I speak of the same "field." In the middle, I offer reflections on achievement, giftedness, elitism, and more. I argue that if NAGC takes a Bold Step towards non-marginalization, NAGC will no longer adequately represent our children in the margins. I end with my contention that bold steps are best taken on new paths.

What Field?

The field to which Olszewski-Kubilius refers in her Bold Step proposal is not my NAGC "field" on either side of the ocean. The people she cites as supporting her Bold Step (Don Treffinger, Joe



Renzulli, Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Carolyn Callahan, Carol Ann Tomlinson) are all academics. They are not the psychologists, counselors, therapists, parents, teachers, and administrators who together comprise the bulk of NAGC membership in the United States. Bold Step proponents think NAGC is *one* field, and that field is *their* field. NAGC is neither one field, nor their field.

The NAGC I know and appreciate has a long history of involvement by teachers, parents, psychologists, counselors, and school administrators directly involved in meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of gifted children. Consider for a moment our name—*National Association of Gifted Children*. In my opinion, our primary "field" should be gifted children, not their education, not their talent development, and not their future worth to society.

What Giftedness?

Bold Step proponents, including Olszewski-Kubilius, argue against giftedness as a trait and instead contend that "giftedness as a state

one grows into and acquires as a result of learning and achievement.” (November, 2011)

To mandate a talent development, achievement-based definition of “giftedness” to the exclusion of all other definitions will do little but reduce NAGC membership in the United States. In my years as an NAGC member, I have encountered scores of people who joined NAGC in order to help children exhibiting traits of giftedness. I have never encountered anyone who joined NAGC in order to figure out how to turn a non-gifted child into a gifted child.

What Achievement? What Elitism?

Bold Step proposers claim that a talent development focus will help eliminate charges of elitism. I am not so sure. If we value achievement in lieu of ability and potential, might we ignore groups of children who most need our help? I contend that if NAGC adopts an achievement/talent development focus, NAGC will not eliminate charges of elitism against it, but instead will find itself guilty of new forms of elitism.

Achievement-based definitions fail when examined under microscopes of equity. Just as

history is written by victors, so too is excellence defined by those at the top of the socio-economic and education heaps. By failing to provide opportunities and support to those who show promise but are not yet consistently achieving in line with their potential, we create and widen the achievement gap among our most capable students. Those who are achieving at levels commensurate with their

“I wish I had a pence or a penny for every time I have heard a teacher unfamiliar with gifted children say dismissively, “we meet their needs by differentiating”.”

ability need understanding, support, and opportunity. Those who have not yet discovered how to actualize their potential need even greater levels of support.

Another charge of elitism might be that NAGC ignores twice-exceptional children whose learning disabilities or differences prevent them from achieving to whatever “achievement standards” NAGC might adopt -- implicitly or explicitly -- in the future. Because twice-exceptional children -- almost by definition -- have one or more exceptionalities that interfere with their achievement, an achievement-based definition risks charges of elitism by

those who advocate for twice-exceptional children. I predict that if NAGC adopts the Bold Step proposal, NAGC will lose members who joined primarily to support twice-exceptional children.

A third charge of elitism might be that NAGC would be ignoring whole populations of gifted children -- for instance, children incarcerated in the juvenile justice system. Think for a moment -- do children with high learning potential in the criminal justice system typically have more *achievement* or more

potential? While it may be true that NAGC currently does little or nothing to help incarcerated children, not every NAGC in the world

ignores incarcerated children.

The UK’s NAGC: An Alternative Approach

In January 2012, the UK’s NAGC issued a report about youth in the criminal justice system. The report, aptly titled *Releasing Potential*, calls for changes in the UK criminal justice system to improve the education and lives of young people with high learning potential, and to reduce recidivism rates. Notice the terminology -- “high learning potential.”

The UK’s NAGC began using the term “high learning potential” three or four years ago in order to challenge common misconceptions surrounding giftedness. Since I joined the UK’s NAGC board in 2010, I have heard no controversy over the use of the term in

publications and conversations.

In *Releasing Potential*, we reaffirmed our belief that not all gifted children who need our support are high achievers. We wrote, “It is a fallacy that all gifted children are high achievers; that they have fewer problems than others; or that they will be identified or reveal their ‘gifts’ in school.” Our work leading up the January 2012

“The proposed Bold Step lacks implementation reality.”

report was undertaken because we believe we must explore high learning potential in all populations of

children, including populations as marginalized as youth in the criminal justice system.

Implementation Issues

I give Olszewski-Kubilius and other Bold Step proponents credit for their sincere desire to help as many children as possible. I understand that perfect implementation of their proposal would render moot many of the concerns I have written to this point.

The key phrase here is “perfect implementation.” No theory or policy program can ever achieve perfect implementation. I remember claims that some NAGC academics made when proposing differentiation as a panacea for both gifted and non-gifted children in classrooms coast to coast. I also remember follow-up studies finding dismal implementation rates -- rates so dismal that the erstwhile panacea morphed into political platitude. I wish I had a pence or a penny for every time I have heard a teacher unfamiliar with gifted children say dismissively, “we meet their needs by differentiating.”

The proposed Bold Step lacks implementation reality. How many of us -- especially those of us who spend many hours each day raising, teaching, and counseling gifted children -- have energy to devote to a cause so removed from the

one we thought NAGC to be? How many of us will realize that if NAGC takes the Bold Step towards non-marginalization, NAGC will no longer adequately represent our children in the margins?

How many of us are willing to represent a post-Bold Step NAGC in public? I can see it now -- non-gifted-land people of all colors and occupations and political persuasions asking us, “So, you’re the organization for gifted children, but you no longer believe in figuring out which children are gifted?” Or asking us, “Even though we remember your old definition of ‘giftedness’ with distaste, you expect us to swallow your new definition of ‘giftedness’ with pleasure?”

I am convinced that no matter how many new words or new definitions we dream up over the centuries to sugarcoat “giftedness,” ordinary people will always find the concept a hard pill to swallow. As John Stuart Mill wrote in *On Liberty* in 1859:

People think genius a fine thing if it enables a man to write an exciting poem, or paint a picture. But in its true sense, that of originality in thought and action, though no one says that it is not a thing to be admired, nearly all, at heart, think that they can do very well without it (p. 63).

I fear that the Bold Step, if taken inside NAGC, will compromise the central mission of NAGC -- to serve the diverse needs of gifted children. I fear that adoption of Bold Step rhetoric will turn NAGC into those who believe they can do very well without genius in its true sense -- that of originality in thought and action. The true originality that John Stuart Mill wrote about in 1859 is rarely the originality that society identifies or values as “achievement.”

Bold Steps: Best Taken on New Paths

Because I agree with much of what Paula Olszewski-Kubilius and others wrote in *Rethinking*

Giftedness and Gifted Education: A Proposed Direction Forward Based on Psychological Science, I hope they do proceed, provided they proceed in a venue other than NAGC, and provided they proceed without destroying what many have worked so hard to achieve within NAGC. I can see myself supporting their talent development efforts in another venue.

“For the Bold Step proponents’ talent development goals to be successful, I believe they need to start in another venue with an emotional appeal to the masses.”

Now, a bit of advice to Bold Step proponents from the field of political science, where I earned my Ph.D. focusing on education policy. In my opinion, if the Bold Step proponents want to make BIG change, they need to "punctuate the equilibrium." The biggest and quickest changes come when new issues are identified, have emotional appeal, and result in the creation of a new venue. I wrote about this for the Spring 2008 issue of NAGC's Conceptual Foundations Network. For a better explanation and more detail about the punctuated equilibrium theory, see paragraphs four through eight of that article, starting on page 12.

After nearly thirty years with gifted children, I firmly believe we need a punctuation of the equilibrium, otherwise those of us who care so deeply about gifted children will continue to go around in circles in policy arenas, never quite winning either the funding or the understanding we crave. I want a society-

wide punctuation of equilibrium; I do not want NAGC to puncture itself by taking a divisive Bold Step onto a bed of nails.

For the Bold Step proponents’ talent development goals to be successful, I believe they need to start in another venue with an emotional appeal to the masses. I am sure that many NAGC folks, me included, will support the Bold Step proponents in another venue, provided they don't hijack the term "gifted children" and don't deny the reality that some children are born with higher ranges of intelligence than other children.

In my opinion, the proposed Bold Step will be most successful if taken elsewhere than inside NAGC. If taken inside NAGC, the Bold Step will result in a fractured organization unable to meet its mission.

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