

# Au Contraire

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## A Devolving Field: An Interview With Myself

All educators I respect share one ultimate goal: to enhance the lives of students in their care. Few make impacts that get lauded worldwide; instead, most of us are content to know that, at day's end, one child is more knowledgeable, more secure, or more fired up to learn thanks to our presence in their lives.

But, wouldn't it be good to have a little fame, just once? To get a call from Katie Couric or Charles Gibson asking you to appear on morning TV to share your wisdom and insights with millions of viewers? Since that's not likely to happen for me, I thought I'd preempt those media mavens and simply interview myself for "Au Contraire." Hey, I might learn something . . .

**Q:** What led you to the field of gifted education?

I was teaching children with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders in northern New Hampshire when I met Matt, a student whose lack of progress in and anger toward school was attributed to academics being too easy for him, not too hard (as it was for my other students). I switched Matt's curriculum to accommodate his needs and I talked to him about what he'd like to learn in school (no one had ever asked him that). Then—BAM!—success! When I left that school 3 years later to study for my Ph.D. in gifted child education, it was due to Matt's presence in my life.

**Q:** What was your earliest experience in the field?

My initial exposure to gifted children was in a pull-

out enrichment program in Stafford Springs, CT. I served fourth- and fifth-grade gifted students in a "classroom" that also served as the school library, band room, and speech therapist's office. So . . . I learned early on that a gifted child educator must be flexible!

**Q:** Who were your major professors? What are a few of the important lessons you learned from them?

The first major professor with any long-term impact on my thinking was Grace Ellen Stiles, an education professor, several of whose classes I took while earning my bachelor's degree in elementary education and mental retardation. It was she who introduced me to Bloom's taxonomy, years before I ever entered the gifted field. My major professor at the doctoral level was Joseph Renzulli. From him, I learned much about gifted education, but very little about gifted children. It was only after spending more and more time with gifted kids that I was able to put Joe's lessons into perspective. Ironically, it was a perspective that found me disagreeing with many of Joe's views of giftedness. This professional disagreement that began as a rift is now a chasm.

**Q:** Do tell . . .

“Au Contraire” is not the place to air dirty laundry. Let’s just say that I believe that gifted children exist apart from their academic performance or on-task behaviors. In other words, a gifted child has an innate capacity to learn, to absorb, and to assimilate information in ways not typical of his or her age peers. Annemarie Roeper, my personal hero, put it beautifully in her conception of giftedness when she stated that “giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences” (Silverman, 2001, p. 188).

As I interpret Renzulli’s view of giftedness—a combination of above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment brought to bear on some life endeavor—there is no place in this definition for many children I would consider to be gifted, including gifted underachievers. Our bottom line difference is this: Renzulli talks about gifted behaviors, while I talk about gifted children. And, in my world, many of the most gifted children would never be identified if they had to “prove” their giftedness in manners that would satisfy Joe’s views of gifted behaviors.

**Q:** What topics in the field have held your interest over the years? How has your thinking on them evolved?

I’d say that 90% of my career has focused on understanding the social and emotional needs of gifted children and the short- and long-term consequences of either addressing or ignoring these needs. In one sense, my thinking has “devolved” more than it has evolved, as I believe the most relevant information on how to address the “emotional education” of gifted children comes from the woman who first used that term, Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Her work in the 1930s and ’40s continues to be the paragon of

excellence toward which we should aspire.

**Q:** Have you taken any wrong turns in your research? Did they inform your beliefs or practice in any way?

Any professional who would state that he or she hasn’t taken any wrong turns is shortsighted, dishonest, arrogant, or all three! In my case, the biggest mistake I made professionally was in embracing the “inclusion” movement for gifted child education in the early 1990s. Silly me . . . I thought if school districts went from having one gifted child education teacher for a pull-out or self-contained classroom to an inclusive model of gifted programming, they would hire more staff to accommodate the added pressures spread throughout many classrooms. This didn’t happen. So, what I see now all-too-frequently is a limited number of G/T staff being run ragged attempting to do an impossible job. In such situations, no one wins, and gifted kids lose out the most.

**Q:** What do you see as the most important question researchers in the field should be pursuing? Is there promising research on these topics?

To me, “educational research” is an oxymoron. Nearly every study done on acceleration, enrichment, self-concept of gifted learners, or the special needs of gifted boys or girls has an inherent bias to find results that mirror the views and beliefs of the “researcher.” For instance, the majority of research from the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) is either influenced by the investigator’s own beliefs or ends up with findings that are so obvious that it makes me say “Well, *duh*.”

My personal preference would be to eliminate money now targeted to

NRC/GT and distribute these few million dollars to states where gifted programming budgets have been cut most severely in recent years. Rather than spend our limited resources on funding research of specious quality and limited impact, let’s use it to help gifted children learn and their teachers to teach them.

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

It puzzles me that even when the emperor has no clothes, people still choose to remain quiet about saying so. But, just like in the emperor’s tale, it may take a child’s level of innocence to point out the obvious—that the emperor is naked. Things as obvious as these, in the gifted field:

From an administrator: “Hey! Inclusion isn’t working! The gifted kids are cluster-grouped throughout four school buildings and my one G/T teacher is going crazy!”

From a gifted child educator: “Differentiation within the regular classroom is great in theory, but let some of those theorists come in and try to make the Parallel Curriculum Model work in a class of 28 where 3 students do not yet speak English!”

From a gifted child: “When do I get the chance to be with my gifted peers and simply talk about the ups and downs of being smart? Is education all about head and nothing about heart?”

There are some people on the speakers’ circuit who are literally making a living by misrepresenting the field of gifted child education by opening the field up to any student or teacher who can spell *differentiation*. “The sad part about such misinterpretations is that it . . . undermines the hard work of teachers struggling to maintain programs for the gifted, and it provides ammunition to

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antigifted policymakers who are always looking for ways of minimizing or eliminating services to students with special needs” (Renzulli, 2004, p. 67).

“Research” can lead us anywhere, and one’s interpretation of specific findings seems as legitimate as another person’s view. It’s time to recognize this and

return to the basics: educating gifted children in ways that would make Leta Stetter Hollingworth applaud in praise, rather than shake her head in disappointment.

**Q:** Any last thoughts?

Just one: When you find the emperor is naked, say so. [GCT](#)

## Multicultural

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*Amazing Grace; White Socks Only; Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear; Another Way to Dance*).

- Share personal experiences with your child about how you overcame social injustices. Your objective is to instill hope in your child.
- Talk to your child about the true meaning of friendship. Many students are so eager to have companionship that they affiliate with classmates without regard to their character, integrity, and goals.
- Be forthright in acknowledging that diverse students may exert negative

peer pressures on your child (e.g. accuse your child of “acting White”). This is another form of discrimination that cannot be ignored.

- Talk with your child about being assertive at initiating discussions with classmates.
- Above all else, don’t lose hope or faith. Be conscious, deliberate, consistent, and systematic in advocating for your child.

Not much has been written about “parenting culturally diverse gifted students.” However, some scholars have written books on parenting diverse chil-

dren that might be a helpful resource. Books on helping children cope with peer pressures may also offer insights and suggestions. Several of the above suggestions were borrowed from strategies my mother adopted as she faced the forced choice of placing me in schools where I did not have to sacrifice achievement or social relationships.

All of us—parents, educators, and others—must take a vested interest in and be proactive in nurturing culturally diverse gifted students. We must work together as if our collective future depends on it—because it does. [GCT](#)

## Advocacy

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democratic classroom environment is one where all students are provided with the right to learn. Such a classroom must consider the unique and differential needs, interests, and abilities of all students, and this includes the needs, interests, and abilities of gifted students.

They are talking about “accountability.” We can use their term to advocate on behalf of gifted students. While the major emphasis of the discussion related to accountability focuses on the outcomes of teaching and learning, we need to redefine the term so it includes moral accountability or the need to make educators and policymakers

accountable for their decisions and the outcomes commensurate to these decisions. Provocative questions that ask why and how decisions are made concerning the education of the gifted is a form of moral accountability that we, as advocates for the gifted, must bring to the attention of others.

They are talking about “academic rigor.” We can use their term to advocate on behalf of gifted students. Historically, the drive to identify the dimensions of academic rigor and implement academically rigorous curricula have been associated with educators of the gifted and gifted education. We need to provide the background and the direction for acade-

mic rigor as the topic is addressed among educators and policymakers. Others need to understand how gifted education can and does contribute to general education.

There always has been discussion about the negatives and positives of educationese, the language coined by educators to describe and promote intentions and directions in education. Advocates of gifted education need to use the current educational jargon to draft their advocacy efforts. Redefining the common language for the common good of gifted students is the challenge and demand of today’s educational political climate. [GCT](#)

## References

- Renzulli, J. (2004). Expanding the umbrella: An interview with Joseph Renzulli. *Roeper Review*, 26, 65–67.
- Silverman, L. S. (2001). This issue honors Annemarie Roeper—a gifted teacher and teacher of the gifted. *Roeper Review*, 23, 188.