Suzanna E. Henshon, Ph.D.

Giftedness Across the Lifespan: An Interview With Rena Subotnik

Seven years ago, I read Rena Subotnik's *Genius Revisited: High IQ Children Grown Up* (Subotnik, Kassan, Summers, & Wasser, 1993) while working on a paper in a graduate seminar at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA. Dr. Subotnik's study of giftedness over the lifespan fascinated me. I quickly gravitated toward her work, and that spring she came to our campus to give an invited presentation.

In the years since, I have discovered Rena Subotnik's scholarship in a variety of formats, ranging from her service on *Roeper Review*, to the center she helped found at the American Psychological Association (APA), to her continuing flow of publications. The scope of her scholarship is amazing, and I am truly grateful that my professor, Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska, brought the work of Dr. Subotnik to my attention.

Dr. Subotnik brings a unique and wonderful perspective to the field of gifted education: as a gifted student, classroom teacher, writer, professor, consultant, and internationally known researcher. She has inspired thousands of people through her teaching and writing, and through her guidance in designing and directing the Center for Gifted Education Policy at the American Psychological Association.

Dr. Subotnik was professor of education at Hunter College and research/curriculum consultant to Hunter's laboratory schools for gifted children from 1986–2001. She has been awarded research and training grants from the National Science Foundation, the Camille and Henry Dreyfus Foundation, the Institute of Education Sciences, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, the McDonnell Foundation, the Javits Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Education, and the Spencer Foundation. She is coauthor (with Lee Kassan, Ellen Summers, and Alan Wasser) of *Genius Revisited: High IQ Children Grown Up* (1993), and coeditor (with Frances Horowitz and Dona Matthews) of *The Development of Giftedness and Talent Across the Life Span* (2009), coeditor (with Bruce Thompson) of *Research Methods for Gifted Education* (in press), coeditor (with Edward Crowe) of *Levers of Change* (2009), coeditor (with Robert Sternberg) of *Optimizing Student Success in School With the Other Three R's* (2006), coeditor (with Herb Walberg) of *The Scientific Basis of Educational Productivity* (2006), coeditor (with Karen Arnold) of *Beyond Terman: Contemporary Longitudinal Studies of Giftedness and Talent* (1994), coeditor (with Karen Arnold and Kathleen Noble) *Remarkable Women: Perspectives on Female Talent Development* (1996), and coeditor (with Kurt Heller, Franz Monks, and Robert Sternberg) of the second edition of the *International Handbook of Research on Giftedness and Talent* (2000). The National Association for Gifted Children awarded Dr. Subotnik the 2002 Distinguished Scholar Award.

Rena F. Subotnik was hired in 2001 to design and develop the Center for Gifted Education Policy (CGEP). Under her leadership, CGEP has focused on (a) providing services and information to psychologists and educators related to the needs of gifted children and youth, (b) conducting research on talent development in various domains, and (c) designing prototype programs for talented adolescents. In 2002, Dr. Subotnik was appointed by the American Psychological Association to serve as Director of the Center for Psychology in Schools and Education and CGEP was integrated into this important component of the APA Education Directorate. Dr. Subotnik continues to provide creative leadership for CGEP at APA and in public forums in collaboration with Ashley Edmiston, who helps coordinate the day-to-day management of CGEP.

What led you to the field of gifted education?

As a child, when I wasn't running around playing kickball or ring-o-leavio, my friends and I performed a lot of pretend play. One of our favorites was

"school," and the biggest challenge was to win the battle over who would be the teacher. I campaigned vigorously to be selected. At home this propensity was encouraged since my mother was a teacher (in Alexandria, Egypt) before she got married. And my father's father was a high school administrator (in Bialystok, Poland).

In my senior year of college I took 12 credits in education so I could apply for a license as a teacher in New York City. However, because I was just 21 and not ready to leave schooling myself, I applied to Teachers College (TC) for a master's degree. Abe Tannenbaum was doing some intake in the special education office and when he heard that I'd gone to Hunter College Elementary School and the Bronx High School of Science, he recruited me into the gifted education specialty at TC. It was a decision that provided me with additional direction in my life and one I will never regret.

My first job as a teacher of the gifted was in Seattle. Those 4 years were the most fun of any job I've ever had, and reinforced my desire to pursue more experience and expertise in the field of gifted education.

How has your perspective on the field of gifted education changed and evolved over time?

Over time I have become less interested in abilities, per se, and more about what people do with those abilities. For one thing, the flowering of abilities tends to be manifested in domains or disciplines and not generally. I am intrigued by how people overcome adversity to make a statement, whether in the form of a performance or an idea. I want to learn what I can about accomplished and focused individuals so that young people will have good information and role models to help guide them in their life's decisions. The information I glean from my studies also helps me meet my own personal goals, even when faced with inevitable setbacks.

Between 1986–2001, you served as a professor of education at Hunter College and the research and curriculum consultant to Hunter's laboratory school for gifted students. Can you tell us about this experience?

I would say that this was one of the most challenging times of my life, although one that helped me to forge my perspectives on gifted education as well as on the quality of general teacher education. Basically I was caught between two education missions that were clashing in the most inconvenient ways.

Until the 1960s, Hunter College was a selective public college for women. It was often referred to as the public ("working class") Seven Sister (along with Wellesley, Radcliffe, etc.). The Hunter College High School was all women as well and many of the women who graduated from the high school went on to Hunter College for their undergraduate education. After years of political jousting, the City University was formed to include the publicly funded colleges (Hunter, City College, Brooklyn College, etc.) that had previously operated independently of one another. They joined together in a mission to make college widely accessible to New York City youth. Criteria for admission were dramatically altered such that the City University, including Hunter College, became an open admission institution—at least in the beginning. By the mid-1980s, this idealistic mission became untenable as too many students came to the colleges unprepared for college-level work. The frustration was palpable and began to shake the political commitment to equity and access on the part of city government officials.

In contrast, the Hunter College Campus Schools (made up of Hunter College Elementary School and Hunter College High School) remained highly selective. The faculties of the college and of the campus schools had very little to do with one another, and it would be honest to say that there wasn't a lot of respect exhibited on either part. I was caught in the middle. The college faculty, particularly in the School of Education, were suspicious of my commitment to gifted education, and the faculty of the campus schools were suspicious of my commitment to high-quality teacher education for all. This was not fun.

What this provided me, however, was an opportunity to clarify my own thinking on questions of excellence and equity. I would say that I was very productive during this period, as I looked for ways to capitalize on the extreme tensions I was living with every day.

In 1993, you published your first book, Genius Revisited: High IQ Children Grown Up. *Can you tell us about this book?*

My first year at Hunter College was also the last year there for President Donna Shalala. Before she moved on, however, she gave me a small grant to conduct a follow-up study of graduates of Hunter College Elementary School. With the help of some colleagues, we were able to find 200 out of 300 possible graduates from the years 1948–1959. The mean IQ of the group was 157. They completed a 17-page questionnaire modeled on Terman's investigation of his "Termites" at midlife. Our study participants were very similar to Terman's in every way except that the women were far more accomplished—not surprising because women were liberated to be professionally active in post-1960s America. The Hunter

group was accomplished and generally happy with how they lived their lives. Very few, however, strived for or met goals of eminence. This outcome led me to revisit Tannenbaum's theories about fulfilling potential—that having a high IQ and a good education is not enough.

A year later, you coedited Beyond Terman: Contemporary Longitudinal Studies of Giftedness and Talent *with Karen Arnold. Can you tell us about this project, and how it developed from an idea into a publication?*

Karen Arnold and I met at annual meetings of AERA. We attended a lot of the same sessions because we were both interested in talent as it manifests over time. She had embarked on her wonderful Illinois Valedictorian project looking at more than 80 valedictorians from high schools across the state. I was pursuing my longitudinal study of 1983 Westinghouse Science Talent Search winners. We knew of several other long-term, repeated measures studies that others were conducting and thought that we should collect them and return this research method to its previously prominent stage in the gifted literature.

How did you decide to write your book, Remarkable Women: Perspectives on Female Talent Development *(1996)?*

Both Karen Arnold and I found that our longitudinal studies' most interesting outcomes were gender based. We conversed about this with Kate Noble and joined together to edit a book that addressed adult women and giftedness. Karen and I introduced Kate to the process we followed in the course of developing *Beyond Terman*. We met every couple of months for intensive writing and editing and rewarded our work with dining, touring, or walking. One of the most memorable aspects of that project was the debate we had about our views of feminism. My views were decidedly more of the "equal pay for equal work" variety rather than one that held that women had distinct ways of knowing and perceiving. I grew a lot through the process and really clarified my thinking on gender issues. Finishing this book allowed me to move on to other topics of interest.

I went back to my pursuit of the psychological components of elite talent in domains, and started a project at Juilliard. The purpose of the study was to compare the preparation of gifted performers with the preparation of academically gifted students. This has continued to be a major interest of mine up until today.

You served four terms on the Roeper Review *Editorial Advisory Board. Can you tell us about that?*

I am proud of the confidence my colleagues have had in my contributions to this important journal. *Roeper Review* Board meetings are held at the Roeper School in Bloomfield Hills, MI, tying the journal's identity to the school in a meaningful way. I have especially enjoyed suggesting ideas for special issue topics to the journal. In fact, I am coediting a special issue with Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Tracy Cross, and Christopher Kolar on specialized public high schools of mathematics, science, and technology, a growing interest that ties in domain specific talent development.

In 2001, you were hired to design and develop the Esther Katz Rosen Center of Gifted Educational Policy (CGEP). Can you describe some of your responsibilities in this position?

In 2001 the Board of Directors of the American Psychological Foundation approached me to consider heading up a new center to support initiatives that benefit gifted children. Until then, the money from the Esther Katz Rosen fund was used to underwrite some excellent book and conference projects and an annual lecture. I was asked to help develop a larger presence at APA to raise awareness of psychological issues associated with giftedness and talent for the general psychology community. To that effect we first piloted a new model of out-of-school talent development called the Pinnacle project; second, initiated and maintained the CGEP listserv, which now has more than 425 members from around the world; and third, conducted research, book projects, and presentations. For example, in early 2009, APA published a volume entitled *The Development of Giftedness and Talent Across the Life Span,* edited by Frances Horowitz, Dona Matthews, and myself. This volume challenged scholars in developmental psychology to explain giftedness and talent in light of developmental theory. Psychologists with background in gifted education also wrote chapters that complemented the work of the developmentalists. Bruce Thompson, renowned statistician and researcher, and I invited methodologists in psychology who have not worked with gifted populations to provide advice on how to tailor research designs to address recurring problems in gifted education research. Four gifted education researchers (Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Betsy McCoach, Tracy Cross, and Jennifer Cross) wrote chapters focused on ideas for how to use these methods. A volume that collects all these manuscripts will also be published by APA press, and should be out in late 2009.

Since 2003, the American Psychological Foundation has used the Esther Katz Rosen funds to support research grants to psychologists doing

innovative work in the area. Our center has built on the seed given to us by APF and acquired funding from other foundations including the Camille and Henry Dreyfus Foundation, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, and the National Science Foundation.

In 2002 you were appointed by the American Psychological Association to be the director of a larger entity, the Center for Psychology in Schools and Education that incorporated a gifted component. Can you describe some of the challenges of setting up the center and your day-to-day responsibilities?

My job as director of the Center for Psychology in Schools and Education is twofold. One is to make more evident to the psychology community how important psychological science is to the quality of K–12 teacher education. The second goal is to make more visible to national policy makers the role of psychology in teacher education. Whenever there are opportunities to talk about giftedness as a form of individual difference that needs to be attended to, I take those opportunities as well. So my job is a bit compartmentalized, but definitely the gifted and the general education components help me to keep focused on what is important in both domains. We have several initiatives underway in our office. One is to identify the core knowledge in psychology needed by teachers. Another is to promote the use of multiple methods in education research. Still another is to promote prevention and awareness of violence directed against teachers. Finally, we have developed modules that should be online by 2009 that help teachers use psychology to solve classroom problems.

What were some of the most important lessons you learned from a mentor?

I am very lucky to have had many mentors in my life. At this stage, most of the mentoring I seek is directed at how to be a more effective leader. I get advice from my executive director, Cynthia Belar, who is a role model to me. A second person who serves as a mentor is my sweetheart, Ed Crowe, who is able to organize people and projects with amazing skill. Both of these individuals have helped me to deal with disappointments and to channel my setbacks into successes, and my successes into personal growth and renewed insight.

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

When asked such questions, I'm always afraid I'll leave out someone really important and I will want to kick myself later. However, I'll take a stab at answering. The two "greats"whose work affected mine most directly are Abe Tannenbaum and Benjamin Bloom. They helped me to connect the dots between potential and fulfillment of talent. Other scholars who are working actively on this question also have my great admiration: Françoys Gagné, Ellen Winner, Joe Renzulli, Bob Sternberg, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Anders Ericsson, Sandra Kay, David Feldman, Jane Piirto, Kurt Heller, Joan Freeman, Joyce VanTassel-Baska, and others.

Outside of the field, I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with great minds in the arts and sciences, particularly those I have met through Juilliard and the Pinnacle project and all its manifestations. The person who was most dear to me from this elite group, however, was Nobel Laureate Joshua Lederberg, who left a big hole in my heart when he died this year. He was exceedingly kind, generous, and thoughtful. He loved discussing any topic and did so with gusto. Josh was a major booster of educating gifted students and never tired of talking about it in any context he could.

What would you say to a young teacher just entering the field of gifted education?

From my talent development perspective, I'd have to sort my responses by domain and level, and whether the teacher was working with students' strengths or not. I'd strongly encourage them to read *Developing Talent in Young People* by Benjamin Bloom (1985). For example, if a teacher is working with mathematics and young children, his or her job is to elicit excitement for the subject. From middle elementary school through late high school, gifted students need to be introduced to lots of content and skills associated with mathematical thinking, including creativity. By late high school, students gifted in mathematics need a teacher who is prepared to give really challenging mathematical problems and encourage individual creativity to the max. This advice is complicated by the fact that different school subjects have different trajectories of understanding. Children can understand basic mathematical concepts earlier than historical ones. To explain that, I'd suggest that a young teacher read *Nature's Gambit* by David Feldman and Lynn Goldsmith (1985). Finally, not all of the children in the class are going to be gifted in or responsive to instruction in all subjects. So you do your best and prepare as if they are all going to be the future Andrew Wiles, the mathematician who solved Fermat's Last Theorem.

What would you say to students?

Finding a good teacher or mentor is the most important action you can take in your talent development career. If

there is a particular area you would like to study, do some background work on finding an expert who is not only knowledgeable, but who is interested in sharing his or her accumulated wisdom with you. Once you have found a mentor who will work with you, watch him or her carefully and learn as much as you can on lots of levels, some more subtle than others—values, attitudes, lifestyle, personal, and social skills. It's not your job to be a clone of your mentor, but to gather as much wisdom and practice and insight until you are ready to move on to the next stage of your talent development.

What would you say to parents of gifted and talented students?

If your child doesn't have a special interest, that's fine. If he or she does, however, don't fear specialization. Your child will learn an enormous amount drilling deeply into a domain of arts or sciences that he or she will be able to apply elsewhere. Now that doesn't mean that I'm promoting the idea of leaving school or general studies. But why have three or four unrelated out-of-school activities when you could have one big one? I have found that students who are immersed in a domain enjoy a certain psychological comfort and direction that others don't enjoy. They just need to be assured that at any point this direction no longer fits, they can change their minds.

Also it's important to raise children with good social skills. Young people who are gracious, self-confident but humble, and thoughtful colleagues will elicit more from those who can help them than those who are unconscious of others' needs.

How did you learn to understand the nature and needs of gifted students?

I would say that the most effective way to learn about the nature and needs of gifted students is to work directly with them. I got more out of my 4 years of teaching in a gifted program than I did through anything else. A second best way is to watch gifted students working with extraordinary teachers, as I have at conservatories and in our summer programs. And the third best way is to interview gifted students on several occasions over time, such that they can talk about issues of concern to them and to you at a leisurely pace.

What kinds of writing and research are you currently working on?

I have two big projects I'm working on currently. One is a study of the impact of specialized science and mathematics high schools on the science pipeline. Robert Tai from the University of Virginia has been funded by the National Science Foundation to do this work. We have begun by developing an instrument to poll graduates of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. We will use what we learn with this pilot to study and apply it to another cohort of students at IMSA and at three other specialized schools. In the third year we hope to conduct the survey with an additional 30 schools. We are working with the Midwest Academic Talent Search to serve as a comparison group for the study.

The second set of work I am exploring is an extension of the investigations Linda Jarvin and I conducted at music conservatories. What I found most intriguing from those studies was the role that psychosocial skills play in successful expression of elite talent. Once a person masters a domain and has something to contribute, how well he or she masters the social universe will often determine how quickly and effectively that idea is received. I am seeking to explore further the role of psychosocial skills in talent development in various domains and implications for adolescents in and out of school. GCT

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