

Interview Article

An interview with Hanna David: reflections

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Abstract

In this compelling interview, Hanna David reflects on her personal journey and her deep involvement in gifted education. Born in Israel to Holocaust survivors, David describes her early education, academic challenges, and eventual shift from science to literature. Her passion for gifted children led her to work with Dr. Erika Landau, a pioneer in gifted education in Israel. David praises Landau's contributions, especially founding an institute that nurtured creativity in over 40,000 children. She discusses Landau's innovative approach, her refusal to computerize records, and the obstacles she overcame. David also shares her emotional experience of writing a book about Landau during a time of war, emphasizing the discipline and determination required. The book, now published by Springer, honors Landau's legacy and influence. David concludes by stressing the importance of nurturing individual potential and challenging societal norms, especially in education. Her story is one of resilience, mentorship, and lifelong advocacy for gifted youth.

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Michael F. Shaughnessy: First of all, please tell us about yourself and your education and experiences.

Hanna David: I was born in Israel in 1952 to a family of Holocaust survivors. I was the second of four children: my big brother was just 13 months older than me; we grew up like twins until I was 4. Until then, all 6 of us lived in my grandparents' 2-bedroom house. Though my first clear memory was from our apartment, to which we moved when I was almost 4, I know that I was very happy living with my grandparents in a house with a small garden, neighbors that were also our friends, and my nursery – where I went since I was one-year old.

The legend in our family says that when my brother started nursery school, I screamed aloud every morning for a month. Finally, my parents persuaded the teacher to accept me into her 9-boy group. But before that, I had to have shoes, so my mother took me to the big city, where I was allowed to choose the color – there was only one kind of children's show. I chose red, and I liked it so much that I said, "It's not pressing at all" [in Hebrew, it's just four words].

I was a "good girl", never made any trouble, but almost always got what I wanted. At the age of 4, when my brother started school – although the "normal" school age in Israel is 6 – I refused to attend kindergarten and stayed home for the whole year. Two years later, when I finally started school, I was so bored, having already been reading for two years. As a result, I was allowed to stay home until April due to health reasons. Later on, I chose an elite high school, even though my family could not afford the tuition; fortunately, I was exempt due to my high achievements.

However, I did have to work from the age of 13, both as a babysitter and a private tutor. Most of my peers came from wealthier or at least financially better-off homes, and I wanted to buy books and dress nicely, so I had to earn my own money. This necessity helped me through my life. I am a hard worker, not afraid to travel long distances in public transportation for jobs I want, and an expert in buying clothes and accessories for the lowest possible price.

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But the main thing I learned during these years was that each child had their own needs, that we must listen to our children rather than assume that we "know better", and that talent is a gift that needs nurturing. I discovered that even when a baby is just a few months old, they are curious, hungry for learning, and can be communicated with if you are sensitive enough to them.

I chose to study mathematics and physics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I was sure I would be the next Marie Curie, and the disappointment I felt from the first week was one of the greatest in my life. First, I realized that most of the other students had significantly better academic backgrounds. While I learnt in the best ultra-orthodox girls' high school in Israel, many of my peers belongs to the "Jerusalem royalty", namely they were children of "old" Israelis, families of judges, professors, well known doctors – rather than immigrant who came to the country with no education, no language, no connections and no money. In addition, my matriculation – which earned me a grant in my first year in Jerusalem – did not include high-level math, physics, chemistry, or biology, but rather languages – English and French – and many humanistic subjects. However, it took me two years to decide that I wanted to switch to a career in literature. In order not to waste these two years of math and physics, I started studying for a teaching license in math and physics so that, at least, I would have a profession.

During my third year at the Hebrew University, I met many American students who were on one-year programs; most of them came from Ivy League universities and belonged to conservative communities back home. Coming from an ultra-orthodox community where women were not counted in any of the religious practices made me very curious about conservative Judaism, falling in love with a young Harvard man – with whom I had various connections for decades. It was then that I decided that I had to continue my studies in the US.

However, I first had to complete my BSc in physics and math, my full-track in Hebrew literature, and my teaching license. But then the 1973 war started. The academic year had just opened in January 1974; it was too late to register for most of the high-profile institutes in the US, so I chose to continue my academic track at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the only institute at that time that "produced" conservative rabbis and cantors. This was an excellent choice: I felt at home from day 1 in New York. I actually did not want to go back home, as I got my MA degree and was accepted to a PhD. I hesitated until the very last moment. I had a round-trip ticket, which was to expire on October 2, 1975. I boarded the flight on October 2 and arrived on October 3, 1975.

Upon my arrival, I started studying for my PhD in the Department of Theory of Literature – where I also worked as a style editor of its literary journal. I switched to the Katz Institute for Literary Research, where I worked for almost 30 years. But during all these years, I never gave up my urge to learn more about giftedness, gifted education, and gifted children. I introduced myself to the Late Professors Avner Ziv and Roberta Milgram. Until now,

I have had two professional mothers (Robert and Erika) and one father, Avner. As Tel Aviv university did not have a cadre of people who either studies giftedness or developed practices for teachers, counselors, or psychologists of the gifted I stated my connections with people abroad – even before I got the opportunity to teach – for the first time in 1995 – a course about giftedness in a teachers' college.

I started publishing my studies in the field of giftedness in the early 90s, but I finally received my PhD in gifted education only in 2002. Since then, I have worked full-time as a counselor of gifted families, children, and adolescents.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What got you first interested in writing about Erika Landau?

Hanna David: I first met the late Dr. Landau about 40 years ago. She was unlike anyone I knew at that time in every possible way. First of all, she was a woman who founded and headed her institute, and though it was called at that time: "The Young Persons' Institute for the Promotion of Creativity and Excellence", everybody called it "Erika's Institute" and both parents and children referred to it as "I want my child to go to Erika" or "I participate at an interesting course at Erika's".

I knew that Erika had no children. I also knew, as it was public knowledge even then, that she had declared, "All the children at the institute are like my children." This claim was very unusual; even now the choice not to have children is very rare in Israel, people react to it with hostility, and women are judged – even in professional circumstances, by their ability to do both things: "be as good as a man" outside, and "a good wife and mother" – preferably of many children, at

home. Erika managed to publicly challenge these views, live the way she had chosen to, and at the same time make tens of thousands of Israeli families trust her with their children, even fight for the opportunity that they would be accepted to her institute.

Over the years that followed, Erika became my role model, my boss, and my inspiration. She was the person who encouraged me to pursue a PhD in educational psychology; when I had the opportunity to do so in Munich, I seized it with both hands – just as she had 40 years before. Overcoming the obstacles was my main difficulty: when I started my PhD studies, I was a single mother of three boys, but when I did, I was a new immigrant, married to a much older man whom I had left in Israel while living in Germany for years.

So, when Erika died, I felt that I owed her – both personally and professionally- to write this book. I knew I wouldn't be able to include everything I wanted, but I also knew that if I hadn't done it, nobody else would. I also knew that while in Europe, Erika was highly respected and quite well-known; however, she never received the respect and status she deserved in Israel. Thus, my decision to write this book in English was practical: I wanted the world to know more about this remarkable woman and her significant contributions not only to gifted Israeli children but also to the history of giftedness worldwide.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What do you personally see as her significant contributions?

Hanna David: Erika's major contribution was founding her institute, heading it for over 40 years, and introducing the concept of creativity not as an abstract entity but rather as a way of life for tens of thousands of children.

Founding her institute back in 1969 was a miracle then – and seems to be an even a more surprising one after almost half a century. Back then, Israel was a very young country: only 21 years old, between two major wars – the 1967 one, which made many Israelis proud, but turned them also to be drunk with power, relying on their military abilities rather than on their brain power. It did not seem to be the "right" time for developing giftedness, enhancing intellectual domains, or encouraging creativity in art, science, or literature.

Additionally, Erika Landau was not a native Israeli. Her Hebrew was far from perfect; she also had an accent, "European" manners, dressed solidly – unlike the "free-minded" Israelis, spoke politely (most of the time), and could not stand harsh voices. But on top of that was the fact that she had neither a financial nor a social background that should have supported her enormous project. Miraculously, she succeeded.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: How long did she actually work with gifted children?

Hanna David: Erika Landau instructed children for only a short time, but for 40 years, she was involved in various aspects of the lives of many children, adolescents, and families. Her main direct involvement with children was in the process of identification for giftedness, decision making whether to accept children to her institute at all, immediately, or recommend waiting a while – usually one semester, and in special cases recommending other tools, ways, tracks and suggesting various possibilities that did not include participating in her courses even though the child scored much higher than was requested in the entrance examinations.

Here are two examples of outstanding children whom Erika had chosen to interview rather than let her counselors do it. The first was a boy of 10 who took the entrance examinations to her institute in the 70s. The boy's record was perfect, but when she met him, she realized that his perfect Wechsler score did not demonstrate his full abilities, as his main strength was mathematics, and the Wechsler is not designed to identify mathematical giftedness. Thus, she advised the parents to find a math tutor for him, which they did. Later on, this boy became one of the first Israelis who got a PhD in artificial intelligence.

The other example is of a 6-year-old boy whom she met in the late '80s. He had an exceptional vocabulary, was very musical, and was very sensitive to others. However, his main area of giftedness was also mathematics. Erika told his parent that he should concentrate on sports that will help him grow to his full potential as soon as possible, namely basketball and athletics. Indeed, that boy graduated from high school at the age of 16 and earned his BSc at the age of 18.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: I suppose she kept extensive data and records. What do you know about her research?

Hanna David: Erika kept all the data records in paper files and refused to "computerize" her archive. In 2003, when I started working at her institute some of it was already destroyed. However, as I needed over 350 files for each decade I

studied, I would sit with one of the institute's secretaries, who would read everything in these files while hiding the child's name and picture. It was necessary to hide the children's pictures as I lived in Ramat Aviv, a suburb of Tel Aviv, where the institute was located, and raised three children there – so even if I did not know a child's name, I could have recognized their picture: they might have been one of my sons' peers, or children of my neighbors.

To the best of my knowledge, Erika did not leave any unpublished research. Furthermore, she objected to my "concentration on numbers and statistics", namely, that she did not support quantitative studies. It is a real pity because the institute could have contributed significantly more to the world of research in giftedness had it utilized its vast treasure of detailed data on tens of thousands of children over many decades for quantitative studies. Erika had a juicy story about the family of one of her children, she felt compelled to share it. Especially when she was in a good mood, she would tell "the girls in the office" some hair-raising stories. She was very excited when telling us stories about celebs – she had many famous people sending their children to her high-prestige institute. But she always made sure that everybody who heard such stories, such as gossip about one of the children whose famous father used physical violence against the child's mother, swore that nothing "will go out".

Michael F. Shaughnessy: I know that she was heavily involved in gifted education, but did she develop any specific theories or concerns?

Hanna David: Erika's main "thing" was creativity. She believed that giftedness per se was valueless; high potential was just "the beginning path towards being gifted." For her, asking questions, doubting "truths" that had been taught, being interested in how things operated, and exploring existential questions – that was the essence of education and the beginning of the track that should lead from high potential to its materialization.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Approximately how many children did she work with over her lifetime?

Hanna David: About 40,000 children and adolescents took at least one course at the institute during Erika's lifetime.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: How hard was it for you to finish this book? I know Israel has been at war now for quite a while.

Hanna David: Let me start with the second part of this question: While I was in the middle of question no. 4 on March 30 at 10:40 am, I had to stop working as a siren was heard, and I had to rush to the safe house. Fifteen minutes later, after the Yemenite missile was shot down, even before I knew that fragments of it were scattered in Tel Aviv, I was back at my desk. One can never get used to war, even after living in a war zone since age 4, when I had to rush to the basement shelter, holding my brother's hand, one stair after the other from floor 2, while my mother was holding my baby sister and my father was – as all other fathers – in the army. Immediately after October 7, 2023, I was unable to work.

Everybody I knew either had lost someone or was worried about losing someone. My 76-year-old husband was also drafted on October 8. So was my 50-year-old neighbor – the father of 6 – whose reserve time was 15 months. However, I taught myself to do what needed to be done, even when it was tough. I also employed some techniques – drawn from my experience as a Pilates instructor and yoga trainee – to focus on what I wanted to do.

And most important: right at the beginning of the war I "cut myself" from the news about the killed and the hostages from around the Gaza strip, as I worked in the Chof Ashkelon municipality both as an educational psychologist and the founder of the enrichment program about 20 years ago, and I felt I could not function if I knew everything about so many dozens of people I used to work with who were killed, wounded or captured. Self-discipline and persistence are two key characteristics of mine, and they serve me well, especially in times of crisis.

In addition to this difficulty, I had to overcome two other challenges: the first was to open myself more than I have done up to now, to reveal my life at a new level, to write about my relationship with Erika – until now I have exposed my inner self only in prose, most of it was published under my pseudonym. The second and more complex one was the justified requirement of my editor, who wanted me to add a critical chapter about Erika and her approach to nurturing gifted children. I had a full stomach – Erika was not the easiest person I had met. I felt it was blasphemy to speak evil about the dead. I finally did it, but it required a significant amount of my mental strength.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What is the most interesting thing that you learned from reviewing her life and relevant data?

Hanna David: Having known the late Dr. Landau for many years, both professionally and personally, I did not learn anything new when reviewing her life and work. However, there is one crucial thing that became much clearer, much more central, and highly more impressive than it had before: my understanding that the background, previous beliefs or concepts, other people's opinions and especially obstacle, difficulties and negative experiences are just temporary mental blocks, and if a person wants something badly enough, they are non-stoppable.

Dr. Landau had a vision, and she materialized it. The Israeli institutions rejected her – she was never offered a tenure-track position in academia, for example. However, nowadays, after almost all other "great" people of her generation have been forgotten, she is at the heart of hundreds of thousands of people – her former students and their families. I still remember when she decided not to fill out the forms the Israeli Ministry of Education asked her to in order to "consider" supporting her institute in the amount of 10,000 IS (approximately \$2,500).

She became very angry and said: "the time it is going to take does not worth it – after they get the form "clarifications" are to be needed; then I'll have to travel to Jerusalem and "explain" the need of my life project – and maybe then I'll get the money... A few years earlier, I was very happy when the Ministry of Education gave Dr. Rachel Zorman and me a modest grant to publish our book (Zorman & David, 2000). The money covered the cost of the faxes to Rachel, who lived in the US at the time, and although the book was ready for publication in 1998, it took more than two years for it to receive its final approval from various committees within the ministry of education.

Thus, I could identify with Dr. Landau then – I identify with her even more now, when understanding that if I wanted the book to be published and read by as many scholars, parents, and educators, it should be published in English rather than in Hebrew.

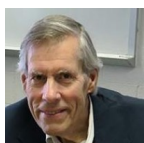
Michael F. Shaughnessy: What have I neglected to ask?

Hanna David: I think you have left out a question about Erika's institute today, specifically how it functions, whether there have been any changes, how COVID-19 has influenced it, and how the ongoing war affects it. Answers to some of these questions can be found in my 2024 article, "An Examination of the Effectiveness of Gifted Education Programs from the Perspective of a Comparison Between Two Programs."

Y Michael F. Shaughnessy: our book about her life and work- where will it be published and when?

Hanna David: Springer has already published the book. ISBN 978-3-031-91700-4

Biodata of Author



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