



Interview Article

An interview with Steven I. Pfeiffer: reflections on the last 25 years of gifted research

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Abstract

Over the last few decades we have seen an enormous amount of research and theorizing about the gifted and gifted education. In this interview Dr. Steven I Pfeiffer reviews and reflects on the “ state of the art “ of gifted research and where we also need to focus on in the future.

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Michael F. Shaughnessy: Dr Pfeiffer, most of our readers know about you- but just briefly could you tell us about yourself- and your most recent work.

Steven Pfeiffer: Hello, Michael. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this interview. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you and the journal readership tales of my clinical, research, and academic experiences in work with high ability students and their families! As you know, Mike, I am now recently retired from the University. For a significant portion of my career, I was an academic clinician, professor, and clinical researcher at leading Universities – including Fordham University, Duke University, and most recently, Florida State University.

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In my career, I also worked outside of pristine and hallowed academia for a number of years in the more ‘messy,’ real-world of clinical practice. I worked at Ochsner – a large, tertiary care pediatric medical center in New Orleans. I also worked at the Devereux Institute of Clinical Training & Research, headquartered in Villanova, PA. And I served as a Clinical Psychologist (and Officer) in the Navy Medical Service Corps.

I received my doctoral degree from the University of North Carolina -Chapel Hill, in what now seems like a hundred years ago! Following my internship in clinical psychology at the Astor home, I completed post-doctoral training in family therapy at the Philadelphia Child & Family Therapy Training Center, affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

I had the honor of participating in a number of collaborative research projects over the course of my career. The research covered a wide range of clinical topics, including the impact of low birth weight, Autism Spectrum Disorder and other neurodevelopmental disorders, the challenges of 2e diagnosis, and the role of the family in supporting the success and well-being of gifted students with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges.

I like to think that my greatest professional satisfaction has been in three related areas. First, as test author of the *Gifted Rating Scales*, including the very new *GRS™-Second Edition* (Pfeiffer & Jarosewich, 2024). The *GRS™-2* has quickly become a highly respected, widely used, and very popular teacher and parent rating scale. School districts are finding that the *GRS™-2* can play a huge role in the fair, equitable, and accurate screening and identification of high ability kids.

Second, I continue to obtain great fulfillment and personal joy in my clinical work with parents of gifted kids –as a consultant, therapist and most recently, parent coach. Since Covid, I have continued to work with parents virtually, both here in the USA and internationally (Pfeiffer, 2017). Finally, I am proud of the favorable reviews and encouraging impact that my first non-academic trade book has had! Published less than a year ago, *Parenting from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids* (Pfeiffer, 2024) has been my ‘Swan Song’ – my planned final professional activity before full retirement. The book has led to a number of readings, interviews, and book signings, and a whole bunch of eloquent and profound e-mail and text exchanges with parents and educators who have read the book.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Now- a general query- what have we learned about gifted/talented from the research of the past 20-25 years?

Steven Pfeiffer: The gifted field has published literally a ton of impressive, empirically supported research over the past 25 years on the gifted student. We now know a whole lot more about the learning styles, social-emotional and family needs, and unique behavioral, attitudinal, personal, and neuropsychological characteristics of gifted learners than when I began my career.

We know more about what works – and what is ineffective, in motivating bright kids. We have a growing literature about what puts certain gifted kids at heightened risk for depression, anxiety, eating disorders and other psychological problems. And what psychosocial and psychiatric treatments are effective in mitigating and in some instances, totally ameliorating, these difficult impediments to well-being.

We know a great deal about the benefits of early identification, and about asynchronous development, multipotentiality, misdiagnosis, and missed diagnosis of the twice exceptional learner. The field has collected considerable scientific information on when early school admission, grade skipping, and acceleration actually works.

We now know a lot about how to foster creativity and how to differentiate learning. We also know a lot about nonverbal intelligence and social intelligence/Emotional Intelligence, as distinct from academic or classroom intelligence. We know a lot about the role of the family and school in supporting the full expression of gifts. The field has embraced a more nuanced, comprehensive, dynamic and multidimensional view of the talent development process. As lead author of the *GRS-2*, I also would like to think that the gifted field now have better, more precise and informative screening and identification tools (Pfeiffer, 2015).

Michael F. Shaughnessy: I almost have to apologize for this question- but what does IQ testing tell us about gifted?

Steven Pfeiffer: One of the beliefs in the gifted field that I take issue with is the fiction that the terms gifted and high IQ are synonymous. This belief that people with high IQ's are gifted, that a high IQ defines giftedness, has pervaded the gifted field and Western culture for over 120 years. It is a belief that exists not only in the schools but also in the public domain and popular media. Both in the USA and globally.

This parable, in my opinion – and in the opinion of a growing body of other authorities in the gifted field, led to many rash special educational practices in the schools. One such imprudent practice is setting a rigid and inflexible IQ score, such as 120 or 125 or 130, for example, as the absolute, precise threshold above which a student must score on an IQ test to be considered gifted. The second equally imprudent educational practice is based on the myth, once a person is gifted, they are always gifted. The practice based on this second fiction is that once a student is identified in the schools as gifted – based on an IQ test score, even if they are only 4 or 5 years old, then they don't need to ever be re-evaluated. Because they are, of course, gifted...throughout their schooling career and, really, for life!

I believe that there is great merit and value in viewing gifted identification as an ongoing process. Not as a “once and done testing event” in the life of a high ability student. Recent research in developmental psychology and the neurocognitive sciences inform us that we should view the IQ test score as but one (very good) indicator of a student's intellectual ability. An IQ test score is a good, but clearly incomplete and not infallible predictor of a young child's future capability. An IQ test score obtained in childhood alone is an insufficient predictor of outstanding accomplishments or eminence in adult life.

IQ scores can change in the life of an individual, and, in fact, they often do. Research that my doctoral students and I conducted found that over the course of six years, a number of students' IQ scores shifted, and in some instances by as much as ten or more IQ points! Some students whose initial IQ scores put them within the IQ category, upon re-testing 4 or 5 years later obtained a second IQ score that fell below the gifted threshold! Equally revealing, some students whose initial IQ scores fell below the IQ cut score obtained, upon re-testing 4 or more years later, a second IQ score that now put them within the IQ group! Kids change as they develop, as we all know. And we shouldn't be surprised, really, that their relative cognitive abilities can change over time, just as their relative height, weight, interests, motivation and personality can change. Although IQ is fairly stable over time when we look at group data, many individual students do change, and some quite a lot. Some kids change for the better; and some, unfortunately, for the worse - for a myriad of reasons.

A young child can be gifted intellectually or academically (or in the arts, theatre, dance, music, or athletics) at one time in his or her life, but not necessarily at another time. In my books *Serving the Gifted* (2013) and *Essentials of Gifted Assessment* (2015) and in workshops that I lead, I recommend that if educators are interested in finding students of uncommon ability and high potential, then they need to search annually for gifted students. I also recommend that students selected for gifted programs be regularly re-evaluated, in my opinion at least every two years to determine if they are benefiting in concrete and measurable ways from their gifted programs. Gifted re-evaluations can help educators determine if students in gifted programs are making substantial growth and marked gains relative to some objective and scientifically verifiable criteria and prediction of success.

Clearly, many factors contribute to success at every stage of a student's development and any number of things can work to enhance or moderate the actualization of a high-ability student's potential.

Gifted re-evaluations serve to reinforce the idea that we need to examine the many factors that play a role in facilitating (or moderating) talent development. It forces us to look at (and figure out how to actually evaluate in a reliable and meaningful manner) constructs such as motivation, passion for the subject matter, joy in learning, persistence, frustration tolerance, academic self-efficacy – factors that we know play a role, in addition to IQ, in a bright student's ultimate success in school and life.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: You have your own model of “giftedness” How did it come about and why is it different from say Howard Gardner's “Frames of Mind” and Sternberg's approach?

Steven Pfeiffer: There are a great many different ways to conceptualize giftedness. There are educational conceptualizations, political conceptualizations, philosophical conceptualizations, and psychometrically driven conceptualizations. They are all different ways to view and describe students who are in some ways special or unique (Pfeiffer, 2015). Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Model and Robert Sternberg's Theory of Successful Intelligence are two well-known conceptualizations. Other popular models include Julian Stanley's Talent Search Model, Rena Subotnik's Developmental Transitions in Giftedness and Talent, and Joe Renzulli's Three Ring Conception of Giftedness. No one conceptualization is correct.

During my tenure at Duke University, I proposed a conceptual model for academic giftedness which I call the tripartite model of giftedness (Pfeiffer, 2013). My model provides three different ways to view students with uncommon, precocious, or conceptually high ability. The model also offers three different ways to screen and assess and array special educational programs and resources for these three different types of high ability students.

The tripartite model incorporates three distinct but complementary lenses through which one can view academic giftedness. The three views are simply three alternative ways to consider screening and grouping students of uncommon or high ability: 1) giftedness through the lens of evidence of high intellectual ability; 2) giftedness through the lens of outstanding accomplishments (but not necessarily high IQ test scores); and 3) giftedness through the lens of clear evidence of potential to excel.

I developed the tripartite model as a practical, multidimensional, and inclusive way for practitioners to conceptualize the different types and expression of high ability that we observe in the real world (Pfeiffer, 2015). Feedback from educators, parents and administrators has been uniformly very favorable. School-based practitioners like the flexibility and adaptability to a wide range of students of singular or special ability or uncommon potential. The new GRS -2 was intentionally developed with the tripartite model in mind.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Joe Renzulli has his own online "Renzulli Learning System" Have you seen it and what are your thoughts?

Steven Pfeiffer: I am a huge fan of Joe Renzulli and his important and substantial body of work in the gifted field. In my opinion, he is one of the more important innovators and influencers in gifted education. I am familiar with the Renzulli Learning online interactive system, although I have not actually tested it out.

My understanding is that the online system provides a personalized learning environment, which supports differentiated instruction – one of the hallmarks of Renzulli's pedagogical model. The online system purportedly encourages personalized learning, identifies student strengths, interests and learning styles, and matches the user with thousands of "personalized, engaging enrichment activities." If the Renzulli system delivers all that it promises, and if it is easy-to-use, flexible and adaptable to local needs, works with multiple computers and iPads, and not unduly expensive, then it sounds like a winning curriculum product that will gain wide use.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Screening for gifted- is now mandatory in some states- what work have you done in this realm?

Steven Pfeiffer: I am a huge advocate for early screening for giftedness in the schools, along with early screening for low incidence learning and neurodevelopmental disorders. My work in early screening dates back to 2004, when I was invited to consult with the New York City Department of Education on developing a city-wide gifted screening protocol for all Kindergarten and 1st grade students. Working at the time with Pearson Assessments – the publisher of the original GRS (Pfeiffer & Jarosewich, 2003), we designed a simple, inexpensive yet powerful screening protocol that invited teachers to complete GRSTM record forms on all referred students and the young kids to take the brief group form of the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test (OLSAT). We then generated a rank ordering of all nominated students for the schools, based on their combined GRSTM and OLSAT performance.

Most recently, publication of the new, second edition GRSTM-2 includes both a shortened parent and teacher rating form. We designed, with the encouragement and expert guidance of MHS psychometricians and test developers, a more accurate yet shortened set of teacher and parent diagnostic scales with enhanced functionality and accessibility, and

modular administration for group screening use in the schools (<https://storefront.mhs.com>). I like to think of the new *GRS™2* as a ‘second generation’ gifted assessment tool that can play a huge role in the screening and early identification of many typically unrecognized young “diamonds in the rough.”

Michael F. Shaughnessy: A kind of side question: what about the spiritual lives of gifted kids- their views on religion and "God?"

Steven Pfeiffer: What a very intriguing question, Michael! Quite frankly, I don't have a whole lot of knowledge about the spiritual lives of gifted kids, and whether or not they enjoy unique or even more intense or deeper views on religion, spirituality, and God. I suspect, but have no data to support the belief, that in general, individuals of higher intellectual ability with greater abstract reasoning ability and facility to understand complex ideas and symbols, would be in a better position to deal with thorny existential issues such as faith, God, spirituality, sacredness, the origin and meaning of life, and the creation of the Universe.

I have worked in my clinical practice with many gifted adolescents who were keen to talk about theology, the meaning of man's existence in the cosmos, and whether there is a God.

These have characteristically been far-reaching, deep, and often transcendent conversations. But I simply am not familiar with any hard empirical data on whether there are unique differences in the spiritual lives of gifted kids. Of course, in my work with gifted kids, I am often asked, “well, what do you believe, Dr. Pfeiffer?” I often answer by reaffirming that, in my opinion, there is no inherent irreconcilable conflict between the science of human behavior and faith. Some may view my response as a therapeutic copout!

Recently in my coaching practice, a number of gifted adolescents, and even a few younger kids, have brought up the topic of Karma. Many kids, including many gifted kids, believe that they receive karmic rewards for good deeds done. Whereas they also often believe that the Universe can be an exacting judge doling out bad karma as punishment for corrupt and unscrupulous deeds. I suspect that some cognitive psychologists and psychoanalysts might suggest that this tendency to see one as deserving good karma or good fortune, whereas others who suffer as justified bad karma, as a form of attribution bias. I remain undecided on this idea but find it fascinating.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What about “gifted adults”- and the challenges they face- what are their problems/concerns/issues?

Steven Pfeiffer: I am not a strong believer or adherent in the traditional view of what is meant by the “gifted adult.” Some authorities in the gifted field have suggested “once gifted, always gifted;” that if you are born with a high IQ, then you are a gifted individual – for life. Readers familiar with my writings know that I don't adhere to this “classical viewpoint.” I contend that a young child born with precocious cognitive abilities – okay, a high IQ, is bright. Sure. And that this young child with the tested and verified high IQ test scores has much greater potential to accomplish important, culturally valued things than most others using their God-given intellectual gifts.

In other words, a young child's potential to become a gifted achiever, producer, or creator later in life much more likely if they demonstrate precocious cognitive abilities early in life. Sure. I agree with this proposition. This is as true in theatre, the visual arts, dance, music, and creative writing, as in the traditional academic fields such as chemistry, mathematics, science, engineering, computer science, and the like. But I find it important to distinguish between potential for giftedness status from the actual attainment of a recognized elite or expert status in adolescence and adult life.

High IQ, along with a host of favorable psychosocial factors, and a nurturing environment, portend to a much brighter future for a young child who we might deem as “gifted” at an early age. But there is no guarantee that the young, precocious 3-year-old will grow up to become a gifted sculptor, scientist, lawyer, actor, musician, or mathematician. In my book, *Essentials of Gifted Assessment* (Pfeiffer, 2015), I explain in detail these very points in my chapter, “Conceptions of giftedness.”

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

Steven Pfeiffer: Mike, we covered a whole lot of ground in this interview. Some great questions! In many ways, the questions encouraged me to reflect on some early experiences and ideas in my work with high ability students going back over the past 25 years! Thank you for these far-reaching and interesting questions!

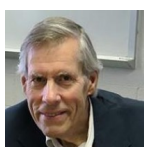
I probably should take this opportunity, at the close of the interview, to acknowledge and give thanks to the many clinical supervisors and classroom teachers who helped nurture my development, early in my career, as a clinical psychologist and helping professional. A special shout out to Ray Rainville, Louis Hsu, Jim Gallagher, Andy Burka, Jack Naglieri, Sir Michael Rutter, and Vicki Stocking and the Duke TIP staff. Also, my heartfelt gratitude to my former students and postdocs, who challenged and sharpened my thinking, and the many clients who trusted me and graciously gave of their valuable time in our work together. Finally, with great appreciation and abundant love to my wife, Jan, my three adult children, Leslie, Kevin, and Andrea, and my five grandchildren, Jayda, Kayden, Maya, Shiloh, and Thai. You all taught me so much about child development, individual differences, parenting, patience, forbearance, moderation and balance, and serenity.

Biodata of Steven Pfeiffer



Steven Pfeiffer is a popular speaker, scholar, and internationally recognized authority on the gifted. He is a licensed and board-certified clinical psychologist whose work focuses on gifted identification and the social-emotional needs and character development of high ability children and youth. Dr. Pfeiffer received his doctoral training at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Following his internship in clinical psychology, he completed post-doctoral training in family therapy at the Philadelphia Child and Family Therapy Training Center, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Dr. Pfeiffer is Professor Emeritus at Florida State University. Prior to his tenure at FSU, he was a Professor at Duke University, where he served as Director of Duke's gifted program, Duke TIP. Dr. Pfeiffer also served as a Clinical Psychologist in the U.S. Navy Medical Service Corps, and as a Psychologist in the Department of Pediatrics, at Ochsner Clinic and Medical Center, in New Orleans. He also served as Executive Director of Devereux's Institute of Clinical Training & Research, headquartered in Villanova, PA. Dr. Pfeiffer is a highly regarded speaker. He was invited to testify at the White House and before the Italian Parliament. He has authored more than 200 articles, book chapters, and books. He is lead author of the *Gifted Rating Scales* (GRSTM2), and author of *Essentials of Gifted Assessment*, published by Wiley in 2015 and considered the gold standard on gifted identification. His most recent book is titled *Parenting from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids*. The paperback book is published by Routledge and available from the publisher and online at www.Amazon.com.

Biodata of Author



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