

COMMENTARY
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Developing Gifts and Talents to Encourage Students to Make a Better World

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*True education is that which proves
useful in life and helps other people.*
Mahatma Gandhi

A short piece from a book by Henri J. M. Nouwen entitled *You Are the Beloved* (2019) caused me to think again about earlier works where I have discussed my beliefs about the major goal of gifted education (*to increase the world's reservoir of creative and productive individuals*). I have also offered my encouragement for including in gifted education experiences that increase the development of social capital—that is, providing students with encouragement to use their gifts and talents to good things for the benefit of others (Renzulli, 2008). If we pay attention to the kinds of gifts that Nouwen discussed in the quote that follows, perhaps our gifted and talent development programs will produce more Rachel Carsons, Nelson Mandelas, and Martin Luther Kings and fewer Adolf Hitlers, Joseph Stalins, and Idi Amins.

Nouwen's insightful quote:

Our Gifts Are Not the Same as Our Talents

More important than our talents are our gifts. We may have only a few talents, but we have many gifts. Our gifts are the many ways in which we express our humanity. They are part of who we are: friendship, kindness, patience, joy, peace, forgiveness, gentleness, love, hope, trust, and many others. These are the true gifts we have to offer to each other. I have rediscovered this simple truth. Few, if any, people have talents they can boast of. Few are able to make contributions to our society that allow them to earn money, compete on the open market, or win awards. But how splendid are these gifts of so many individuals! (p.12).

Many educators now advocate for the use of transformative curriculum that eases the tension between a rigid focus on standards and infuses (if not emphasizing) social and emotional development experiences into any-and-all required curriculum activities. The important question is, of course, how can teachers implement curricula to achieve this desired impact that will be more engaging than yet another series of prescribed lessons or motivational prep talks and “do good” posters?

As social and emotional development became a more pervasive topic in education, the commercial education industry quickly jumped into the market with books, posters, lesson plans and other resources to develop social and emotional skills. While I do not argue against the value of some of these materials, an extensive study of the impact and especially the *internalization* of

desired values and behaviors found that using role playing and simulations in programs such as mock trials, as well as direct involvement in action-oriented projects, were more effective than these “teaching and preaching” approaches (Renzulli, 1982; Renzulli, Koehler, & Fogarty, 2006).

The target populations of these action-oriented projects might range from one person, as in the case of a middle school girl who gave a reading interest inventory to a partially sighted classmate, and then recruited the best writers and illustrators in her school to produce a customized large-print library based on interests for the student who was unable to read regular library books. Or it might involve a larger audience as was the case of an elementary school boy who, with some peer volunteers, formed a button making “company” to raise money to buy gloves and mittens for low-income immigrant children who emigrated from tropical countries. Or the audience might be the entire world as in the case of Greta Thunberg, the Swedish high school girl whose advocacy for dealing with environmental climate change resulted world-wide advocacy efforts and an invitation to address the United Nations*.

In our complicated and competitive world, in which self-interest is the driving force that motivates many people to achieve, I believe that encouraging our most gifted, talented, and creative students to use their strengths to accomplish good things should be a part of any talent development or gifted program. A most interesting finding from the decades of research we have done on students who have engaged in the types of projects is the absolute satisfaction, enjoyment, and high level of task commitment they derived from helping others. Could there be any better “evaluation” for blending a social action goal into the purpose and mission of special programs? And shouldn’t we hope, and even pray, that these young people will transfer their experiences in doing good things into the work and leadership positions they will assume in the future?

A closing quote, again from Henri Nouwen:

A gift only becomes a gift when it is received; and nothing we have to give—wealth, talents, competence, or just beauty—will ever be recognized as true gifts until someone is open to accept them. This all suggests that if we want others to grow—that is, to discover their potential and capacities, to experience that they have something to live and work for—we should first of all be able to recognize their gifts and be willing to receive them. For we only become fully human when we are received and accepted.

*For more information on developing the strategies for the types of projects mentioned here see: <https://gifted.uconn.edu/schoolwide-enrichment-model>

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