

The Other Goal of Gifted Education: Promoting Emotional Development and Social Responsibility Through the Use of Co-Cognitive Skills

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The things that will destroy us are politics without principle; pleasure without conscience; wealth without work; knowledge without character; business without morality; science without humanity; and worship without sacrifice.

Mohandas Gandhi

Background

I have been asked numerous times about the purpose of gifted education and my answer has always been: *“To increase the world’s reservoir of creative and productive people that will help to make the world a better place.”* But making the world a better place means that our programs need to provide the opportunities, resources, and encouragement for young people to engage in activities that do-good things to help other people, their schools, communities, and even the world at large. For example, a group of students at a local school wrote a proposal, raised money, learned new skills about horticulture, and designed and planted a beautiful garden at their school to commemorate the memory of a classmate who died of cancer. And good works contributions can even affect larger audiences such as the work of Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish girl who addressed the United Nations about the dangers of climate change [<https://video.nepm.org/video/extended-preview-jklvrq/>].

Persons who have made contributions to all areas of human accomplishment have been recognized because of their abilities, creativity, and task commitment. But there are other characteristics that can be found in truly remarkable people, and especially people who have used their gifts and talents to promote various forms of social capital such as: civic engagement; ethical business and governmental practices; social justice; equity for underrepresented segments of our nation's children, aged, disabled, and poor constituencies; and a greater concern for the preservation of the Earth's precious resources. People such as Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rachael Carson, to mention only a few, have used these traits to bring about important changes in the quality of life for countless people around the world. What is significant about these traits is that they are found in individuals across a broad spectrum of age levels, socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and levels of educational opportunity. In other words, these traits *defy* the typical "normal curve" assessments that have been so popular when examining the potentials of young people for traditional lesson-learning giftedness that still dominates many programs.

It is for this reason that we have termed these traits *co-cognitive* characteristics. They are the kinds of characteristics that give rise to the development of cognitive abilities in challenging problematic situations where critical thinking, creative problem solving, and other forms of constructively intelligent behavior are called for. Most importantly, these traits serve as the triggers-for-action through which committed individuals and groups have *applied* their scientific,

artistic, and cultural knowledge to making improvements in the quality of life, the creation of community, and the pursuit of happiness. We view this goal of learning as a transformation from knowledge acquisition to the application of knowledge to wise choices, decision-making, and purposeful action. This is how we help young people develop wisdom, which we define as (1) the possession of knowledge of the best ends and best means (including discernment and judgment), and (2) the capacity to make good use of that knowledge, discernment, and judgment. In other words, wisdom requires not only a level and type of knowing or thinking but also the application of those abilities to a socially constructive purpose. Capabilities without *action* are simply potentials, rather than manifestations of potentials. None of us is affected by unrealized potential; we are all affected by positive *action*.

Our research (Renzulli, 2006) thus far has identified the following six factors depicted in Figure 1 that make up the co-cognitive characteristics that are important contributors to socially positive action.

Figure 1

Operation Houndstooth

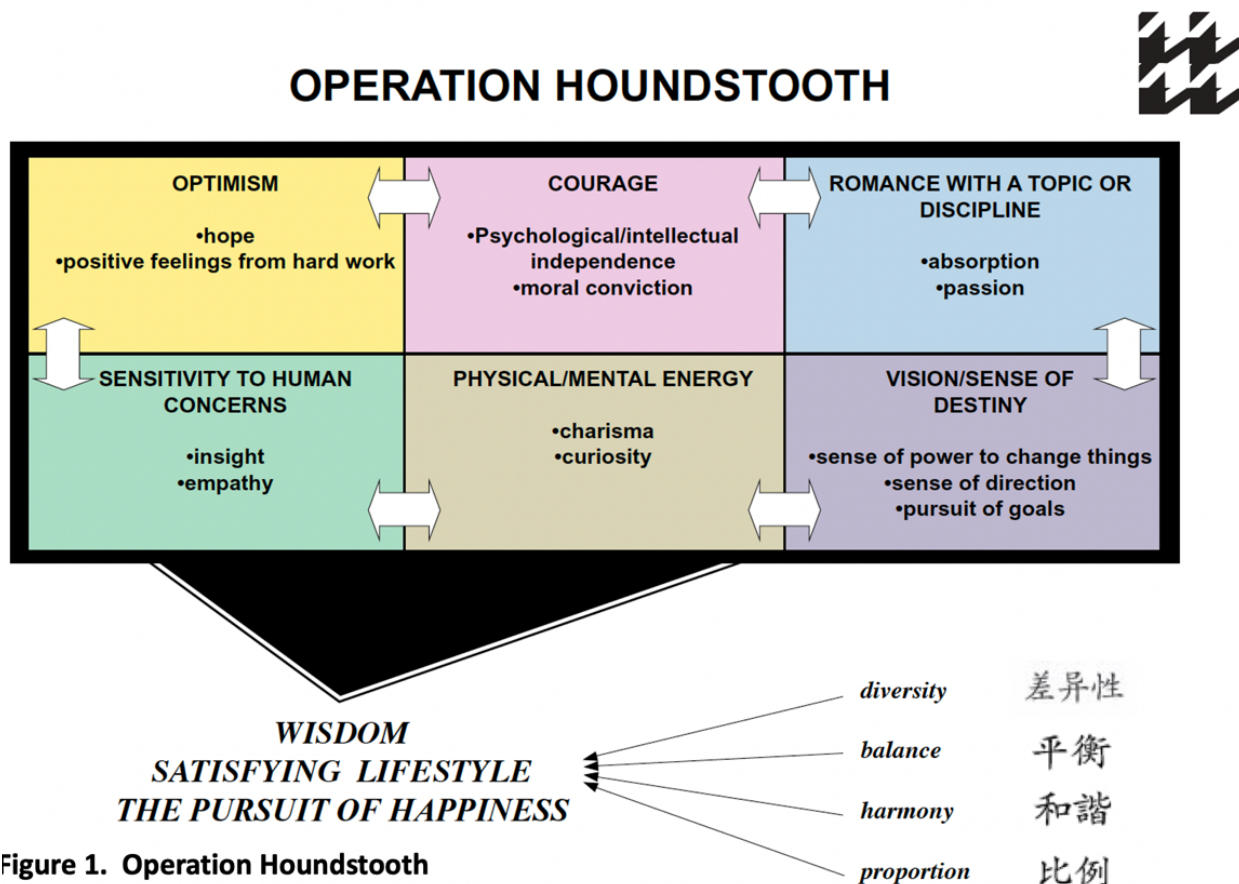


Figure 1. Operation Houndstooth

- *Optimism.* Optimism includes cognitive, emotional, and motivational components and reflects the belief that the future holds good outcomes. Optimism may be thought of as an attitude associated with expectations of a future that is socially desirable, to the

individual's advantage, or to the advantage of others. It is characterized by a sense of hope and a willingness to accept hard work.

- *Courage*. Courage is the ability to face difficulty or danger while overcoming physical, psychological, or moral fears. Integrity and strength of character are typical manifestations of courage, and they represent the most salient marks of those creative people who actually increase social capital.
- *Romance with a topic or discipline*. When an individual is passionate about a topic or discipline, a true romance, characterized by powerful emotions and desires, evolves. The passion of this romance often becomes an image of the future in young people and provides the motivation for a long-term commitment to a course of action.
- *Sensitivity to human concerns*. This trait encompasses the abilities to comprehend another's affective world and to accurately and sensitively communicate such understanding through action. Altruism and empathy, aspects of which are evident throughout human development, characterize this trait.
- *Physical/mental energy*. All people have this trait in varying degrees, but the amount of energy an individual is willing and able to invest in the achievement of a goal is a crucial issue in high levels of accomplishment. In the case of eminent individuals, this energy investment is a major contributor to task commitment. Charisma and curiosity are frequent correlates of high physical and mental energy.
- *Vision/sense of destiny*. Complex and difficult to define, vision or a sense of destiny may be described best by a variety of interrelated concepts, such as internal locus of control, motivation, volition, and self-efficacy. When an individual has a vision or sense of destiny about future activities, events, and involvements, that vision serves to stimulate planning and to direct behavior; it becomes an incentive for present behavior.

Of course, many interactions take place between and among these six components. We will refer to these components as *co-cognitive factors* because they interact with and enhance the cognitive traits that we ordinarily associate with success in school and with the overall development of human abilities. Admittedly, these characteristics are much more complex and difficult to study than typical cognitive ability and test score-based research, but they are, nevertheless, the things that have characterized influential people over the centuries who have made a difference in the improvement of the human condition.

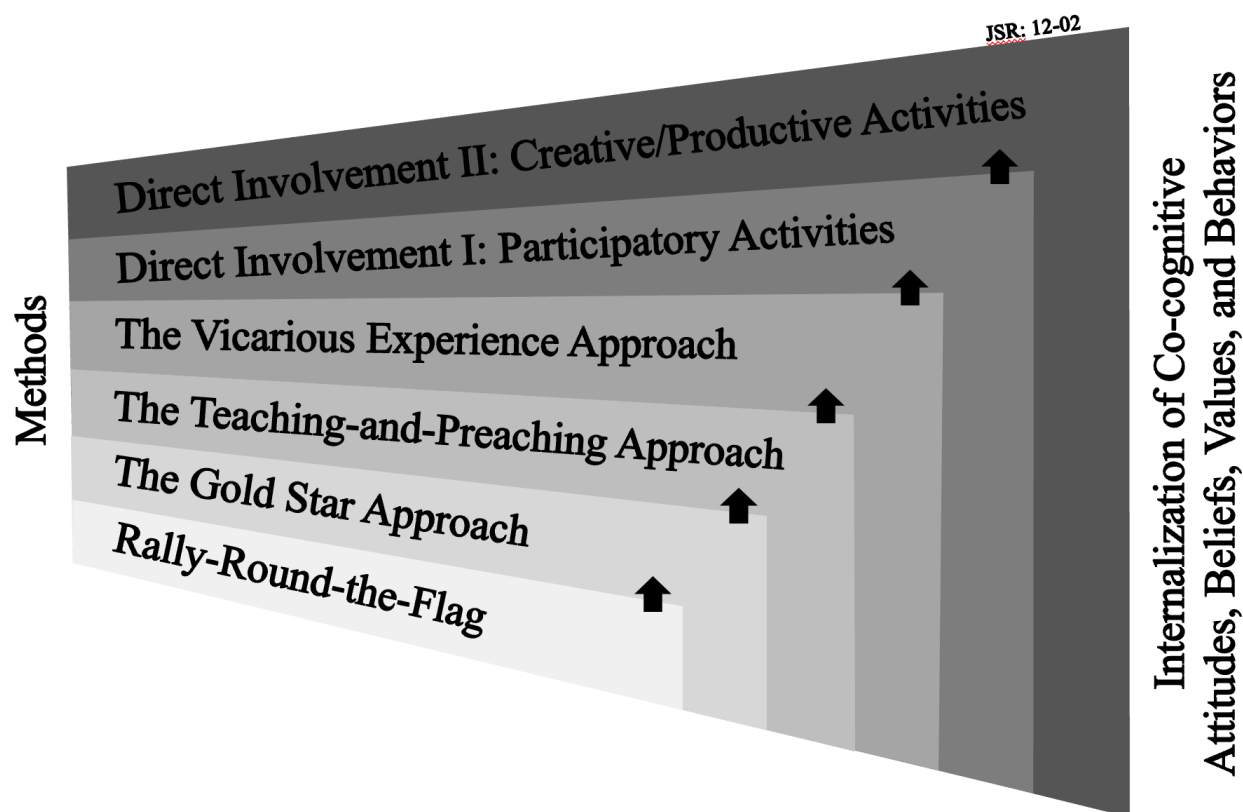
Teaching Strategies for Internalizing Co-cognitive Characteristics

The big challenge, of course, is developing teaching strategies for internalizing these characteristics. *Internalizing* simply means that traits will become a meaningful part of the young person's attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors rather than doing something they do to earn a good grade or material reward. Figure 2 depicts a range of intervention strategies ranging from low to high impact and are briefly described as follows:

The Rally-Round-the-Flag Approach sometimes referred to by others as "the cheerleading method," involves visual displays (posters, banners, bulletin boards) featuring certain values, slogans, or examples of virtuous behaviors.

Figure 2

Interventions Designed to Promote Co-cognitive Characteristics



The Gold Star Approach is not unlike the ways in which we traditionally have rewarded students for good academic work. The approach makes use of techniques such as providing positive reinforcement through merit badges, placement on citizen-of-the-week lists, extolling good behavior at award assemblies or other events.

The Teaching-and-Preaching Approach consists of the direct teaching of noncognitive material and is probably the most frequently used method to promote attitudes and behaviors related to character and value development. This approach resembles the kinds of training commonly used over the centuries in religious instruction and in situations in which the transformation of information, skills, and ideologies are the goal of persons responsible for the curriculum.

The Vicarious Experience Approach is often used as an extension of direct teaching and consists of vicarious experiences that places students in situations in which they are expected to encounter a particular personal or emotional reaction to situations in which a specified noncognitive goal is being pursued.

Direct Involvement I consists of ways in which students come into direct contact with situations and events where affective behaviors are taking place. Community service,

internships with provisions for helping others or remediating injurious events, and participation in events where social or political action is being formulated or taking place are examples of this type of direct involvement.

Direct Involvement II consists of situations in which young people take on *active leadership roles* to bring about positive social, educational, environmental, or political change, especially change that promotes justice, peace, or more harmonious relations between individuals and groups.

Adding It All Up

A more detailed explanation of these strategies can be found in Renzulli, J. S., Koehler, J., & Fogarty, E. (2006). The internalization of co-cognitive attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors cannot be achieved through any one of these interventions alone. Schools should adopt several approaches. If our goal is to move more students toward initiating action and promoting social capital, then our schools need to provide them with more opportunities to achieve higher levels of social engagement in areas where students have expressed a strong interest. School environments that intend to foster the production of social capital should offer students experiences at every stage of these approaches, but Direct Involvement I and II opportunities produce the best results for strong internalization. An excellent resource on ideas and strategies for promoting social capital can be found in Barbara Lewis' Book referenced below (1988).

References

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