

# *Talent Development From a Positive Psychology Perspective*

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*Two domains — talent development and positive psychology — that have heretofore rarely interacted in the literature have been brought together to explore how the positive psychology perspective could shed light on the process of talent development. With the description of the field of talent development and its current models that focus on psychosocial variables and the transforming process, the consideration of talent development from the impact of the three pillars of positive psychology is discussed, together with the need for research in this interdisciplinary area.*

*Key words: character strengths, positive psychology, talent development, Hong Kong*

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In today's Hong Kong pre-university school environment, our professional roles as teachers and educators have often been focused not only on teaching and learning but also on tackling student problems that arise from dissatisfaction with schools, underachievement, bullying, suicide, substance abuse, and academic dishonesty, among others. These and many other problems pose daunting challenges that often distract us from the positive orientation that emphasizes opportunity and possibility, such as promoting wellness, career development, interpersonal competence, a community of learning, and talent development. This positive orientation has a long tradition traceable to theories of human development and humanistic psychology that emphasize building human strengths and maximizing life success. The recent emerging field of positive psychology is also of similar scholarly lineage and focuses on fostering human potential over remediating problems (Seligman, 2003; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Martin Seligman who spearheaded this positive psychology movement has argued convincingly that there has been an overemphasis in psychology's traditional focus on human weaknesses, deficits, and pathologies, and that there is an urgent need to redress this imbalance through the study and applications of human strengths and positive emotions to promote positive human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

## **Two Stories Related to Developing Talent**

The application of concepts or tenets of positive psychology to education to foster student potential is completely in line with the notion of talent development. Indeed, Martin Seligman told his story on how positive psychology was conceived while working with his daughter in their family garden (see Subotnik, 2000). He was home-schooling Nikki, his five-year-old daughter, and doing things together was part of that process. However, he considered himself goal-oriented and time-urgent, and was not very good with kids. In attempting to weed, he yelled at Nikki who was having a wonderful time in throwing weeds in the air, and running around and dancing. In response, Nikki walked away, but unexpectedly came back with some wise remarks. She reminded her

Daddy that she used to whine all the time and she whined every day before her fifth birthday. More importantly, she revealed that she did not whine after she turned five because she made the decision not to do so: “I decided I wasn’t going to whine anymore. I haven’t whine since then, and it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done. If I can stop whining, then you can stop being so grumpy.”

Seligman got multiple insights from Nikki’s remarks. One was about child rearing and the raising of any gifted child. He thought that the conventional focus on correcting mistakes was misguided. Rather, the focus should be on the giftedness that children have, and identifying it is the first step. He felt that Nikki had displayed in the incident her strength to deal in a forceful way with an adult, and that strength should be recognized, amplified, and explored as to its use in different situations and as a buffer against the vicissitudes of life. He concluded that educators or caregivers could knowingly or unknowingly respond in ways that stifle or reinforce the expression of children’s giftedness or talent, and that a positive psychology perspective has an important role to play in talent development.

About a decade ago, from a perspective focusing on the nurturing of creativity in children, Howard Gardner also told an equally revealing story of his year-and-a-half-old son Benjamin when the family was staying at the Jinling Hotel in Nanjing (Gardner, 1989). At the time, he and his wife Ellen were working on a project, investigating early childhood education and creativity in China. Those were the days when the key to a hotel room was attached to a large plastic block with the room number engraved on it. Guests were encouraged on leaving the hotel to turn in the key at the reception counter or drop it through a narrow rectangular slot into a receptacle. Benjamin loved to carry the key around and enjoyed banging the key on the slot in trying to shove, very often in vain, the key into the narrow slot. Gardner considered Benjamin’s exploratory behavior as harmless, and as providing an opportunity to foster self-reliance that one could solve a problem effectively by oneself, and even discover new problems that required creative solutions. Somewhat to Gardner’s dismay, Benjamin’s exploratory behavior was often intervened by a well-intentioned attendant or passerby who would guide Benjamin to insert the key using

an orientation that aligned the key to fit into the slot. To Gardner, this key-slot anecdote provided insight into the Chinese view of possibly a proper and single way of doing things, which might be inimical to the experimental attitude of exploration and innovation that could lead to the ignition of the spark of creativity and the unfolding of talents in general.

In summary, we could learn multiple lessons from the two stories, and they may speak more powerfully to us with different tasks and at different times. However, one theme that clearly emerges is the importance of a positive psychology perspective in building strengths and resources in the process of talent development, an area that has not been specifically addressed or emphasized in gifted education.

## **Gifted Education and Talent Development**

Perhaps, we should first clarify what we mean by gifted education and talent development. Although gifted education and talent development are often used interchangeably, they have somewhat different implications for teachers and educators. Gifted education generally refers to the provision of services to students identified by standardized tests as highly able in intellectual and academic domains. It is believed that these tests are relatively stable measures, and that a student tested as gifted in school programs could be regarded as such throughout his or her schooling. In contrast, talent development generally refers to developing domain-specific abilities. A student will be served as long as he or she commits to the challenges and opportunities provided by educators, mentors, or coaches in the talent development context. Subotnik and Knotek (2009) suggested that the differences parallel Good and Dweck's (2005) description of entity and incremental views of intelligence whereby individuals either hold that intelligence is a fixed entity or that intelligence could be enhanced incrementally by effort and exposure to new challenges. Furthermore, Good and Dweck (2005) have also shown that entity views could be transformed into incremental views through intervention. Interestingly, there is also a parallel view that gifted education should be replaced by or transformed

into talent development by some leaders in gifted education (e.g., Treffinger & Feldhusen, 1996). Elsewhere, I have also argued that gifted education should encompass both the education for the gifted (the selected few of highly able students) and talent development for all students, so that there will be an equitable pursuit of excellence for all students (Chan, 2000). Nonetheless, whether one endorses the view that gifted education should address the needs of the highly able or the needs of the majority of students if not for all students, the process of how talents could be effectively developed is always the major concern.

Since the 1980s, talent development has been the topic of intensive research and theorizing. It has to be noted that the notion of talent development was somewhat novel at the time, when considered in the context of the century-old myth that talents would develop spontaneously and effortlessly. Subotnik and Calderon (2008) have reviewed the talent development literature and suggested that all talent development models portray a gifted individual's active pursuit of excellence in a domain. Accordingly, these models fall into three broad categories. One category has focused on identifying key variables or core components necessary for the fulfillment of potential in specific domains. For example, Tannenbaum's (1986) psychosocial model differentiates five essential variables that include general ability, special aptitudes, motivation and other internal qualities, environmental influences and support, and chance or being in the right place at the right time. Another example is Sternberg's (2005) WICS (Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity Synthesized) model that specifies the synthesis of intelligence, creativity, and wisdom as necessary for an individual to achieve his or her highest potential.

The second-category models refer to those that not only identify key components of talent development but also place them into a trajectory of development toward a desired outcome. An example of this category is Renzulli's (2005) Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness that defines giftedness as the interaction of above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity. The model suggests three types of enrichment activities that can assist children in pursuing the end-state of creative-productivity. Another example is Gagne's (2005) DMGT (Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent) model that proposes dynamic interactions among

gifts, talents, learning and practice processes, environmental catalysts, intrapersonal catalysts, and chance. The DMGT model is an explicit developmental theory of talent emergence in which outstanding natural abilities (gifts) are transformed into the specific skills (talents) of a particular domain through learning and training.

The third-category models build on the first and second categories with the additional specification of stages that parallel the developmental process. For example, Bloom (1985) identified three distinct stages: an early romance period, a middle technique period, and a mastery period. Specifically, in the romance period, the focus is on enrichment, on falling in love with an idea, a domain, or a topic. In the technique period, the focus is on learning the rules, knowledge, skills, and values of the domain of interest. In the mastery period, the focus is on socialization in the field or achieving professional success. According to Bloom, the roles and functions of parents change over time at different stages, as do the qualities and qualifications of the teachers in supporting and enhancing the unfolding of talents. In a similar vein, Subotnik and Jarvin (2005) documented the stages or process of talent development in broad terms for the domain of classical music based on data from three U.S. conservatories. Accordingly, the process of talent development is a process of transformation, from abilities to competencies, from competencies to expertise, and from expertise to artistry or scholarly productivity, and different psychological and environmental variables were involved in the process over time. They concluded that abilities or gifts are proclivities for initiating the talent development process, that the end product of the process is extraordinary performance or an original contribution, and that gifted children are less likely to transform their abilities into extraordinary performance without guided expert instruction and intensive effort. More importantly, the Subotnik-Jarvin model takes into account the changing nature of psychosocial variables in the talent development process, and suggests that these variables could be derived from external forces as well as internal variables that could be introduced to talented children as psychological strength training, as all children, whether interpersonally or intrapersonally more able, could benefit from coaching.

## **A Positive Psychology Perspective of Talent Development**

Positive psychology offers a useful perspective on the nurturing of psychosocial skills associated with talent development. Talent development can also be considered from the impact of the three pillars of positive psychology (see Subotnik & Knotek, 2009). The three pillars of positive psychology are experience (e.g., gratification), individual traits (e.g., strengths of character), and institutions (e.g., schools) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Specifically, talent development of students can be impacted by their experience and the institutions or schools that are entrusted with the promotion of their optimal development, and by the enhancement of their psychosocial skills through psychological training on their character strengths.

### **Enhancing Positive Experiences**

The first pillar is associated with positive experiences, and is concerned with an affirmative evaluation of one's activity in the real world. In the context of talent development, students could be presented with challenges that are attainable and effortful. When students are engaged in such properly balanced tasks, they will have a positive experience characterized by fulfillment and gratification. Specifically, it is said that successful engagement in a positive activity could be indicated by the degree to which the student experiences flow (Peterson, 2006). Flow, in turn, involves the full use of the student's strengths and talents. As the student experiences the pleasure in the state of flow, he or she will further expand and develop his or her skills. Thus, repeated flow experiences in activities will have long-term desirable consequences that include creative achievement and possibly health and well-being, and the building of psychological capital (Peterson, 2006).

### **Building Critical Character Strengths**

The effective use of positive psychology in talent development of a student will depend on a careful and thorough assessment of the

strengths of the student, which is the concern of the second pillar of character strengths. In this connection, Peterson and Seligman (2004) have developed a comprehensive classification scheme on human strengths (as opposed to diagnostic categories of disorders) across history and culture based on extensive literature search. Based on twelve explicit criteria, they classified strengths into 24 distinct character strengths that represent common human strengths across cultures (see Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). In turn, the 24 character strengths are subsumed under six universal virtues. They are: (1) wisdom and knowledge (cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge) that encompass creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective; (2) courage (emotional strengths that involve the exercise of the will to accomplish goals) that encompasses authenticity, bravery, persistence, and zest; (3) humanity (interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others) that encompasses kindness, love, and social intelligence; (4) justice (civic strengths that underlie healthy community life) that encompasses fairness, leadership, and teamwork; (5) temperance (strengths that protect against excess) that encompasses forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation; and (6) transcendence (strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning) that encompasses appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is believed that the use and building of critical character strengths could have an important bearing on the development of talents for students in the educational setting.

For example, through the lens of positive psychology, the virtue of wisdom and its strengths of creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, and love of learning are important to the psychosocial skills of receptivity to new knowledge and risk taking (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Subotnik & Knotek, 2009). According to Seligman and his colleagues, open-mindedness will optimize students' learning experiences as they think through challenges and examine different possibilities in their situation. In particular, love of learning, or passion for a domain, conceptualized to represent intrinsic motivation, is one of



the two variables playing an important and consistent role throughout the talent development process, the other variable being persistence. Without love of learning or passion, it is hard to imagine that one would devote so much time and effort to the pursuit. And passion also leads to persistence which is an emotional strength under courage. Persistence or resilience despite bad times and setbacks is especially important, since the process of talent development from ability to competence, to expertise, and to artistry or scholarly productivity takes many years. Nonetheless, it is believed that helping students build capacity for open-mindedness and love of learning may prepare them to benefit more from different educational opportunities and mentors who could also assist students in the important social skills of collegial behaviors and knowing how to “play the game” (Subotnik & Jarvin, 2005).

### **Fostering More Positive Institutions**

Regarding the third pillar of positive institutions, Seligman and his colleagues (2005) believed that psychologists have to work to foster positive climates that enhance students’ strengths. It makes good sense that a positive climate and an environment that is challenging, nurturing, and sustaining is necessary for the provision of interventions that could optimally develop talented students’ psychosocial skills. From an organizational point of view, climate may be operationally defined as having characteristics that include shared norms, beliefs, and behavioral expectations as well as individuals’ unique perceptions of the organization’s environment, including psychological safety, challenges, equity, stresses, and conflicts (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). Thus, whether a talented student is at ease to move out of his or her comfort zone and strives to give an outstanding performance or explore a new idea has a lot to do with the climate of the institution. The willingness to take risk and the willingness to defy the crowd are dependent not only on character strengths but also on the climates of the institution, school, or environment. Educators and psychologists from the positive psychology perspective must be prepared to impact a student’s experience across a range of contexts.

## **Needs for Future Research**

I have intended in this article to bring together two domains and lines of theorizing — talent development and positive psychology — that have up till now rarely interacted in the literature. Through describing the field of talent development and its current models that focus on psychosocial variables and the transforming process, I have discussed at length how the addition of a positive psychology perspective with its conceptualization of three pillars may enhance the ability of gifted students to thrive and progress.

Admittedly, this paper poses more questions to be addressed than providing answers to problems. For example, it is not known empirically and practically what sorts of school tasks are most conducive to the flow experience, what character strengths or institutional climates are most closely aligned with the expression or inhibition of talent development. It is likely that students who engage in activities that are traditionally expressed individually may need a different profile of character strengths than those whose talents lie in domains that are expressed in the team or group contexts. We certainly need research studies to answer these questions and yield findings that have implications for providing effective mentoring strategies and practices for the talent development of our students.

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