Nurturing Hope in Gifted Children: Preparation for An Ever-Changing World

F. Richard Olenchak, Ph.D., P.C.
Professor, Psychologist, and Director
Urban Talent Research Institute
University of Houston
Houston, Texas 77204-5023
rolenchak@uh.edu
“In knowing who you are and being willing to share your honest self with the children in your life, you are participating in ‘CHILD CARE’…”

-- Fred Rogers,
In one or more areas of human pursuit, the individual could demonstrate:

- Orientation toward goals
- Positive expectations
- Confidence
- Resilience
- Self-discipline
- Pride in accomplishments
- Academic proficiency
- Courage
Differentiation Gone Awry

- Sample case studies of 78 students from elementary through high school from four different US locations
- Interviews with and observations of students, their families, and their teachers over three-year period
- Assessment of circumstances and interventions for improvement designed, implemented, and assessed
- Affluent Vietnamese-American family
- Lives with older brother and both parents
- Dad is banking executive and Mom is chemist
- 9 in 4th grade; identified for G/T in 1st grade; IQ=182
- Suburb in Northwest; moderately-sized, diverse school with superior, new facilities
- Many friends yet tends to be extremely quiet but is still included in activities of peers; has experienced recent academic decline accompanied by depression; often reads instead of completing assignments; when reading is interrupted, she talks back to teachers; family will allow school counseling but not intervention from a psychologist; differentiation is classroom-based but erratic; “Perhaps she is stressed out by her parents’ expectations” (teacher quote)
Hue - age 9

My school was good until they started to give me different work because I am in the gifted program. I wish I could get out of this! It’s just harder and harder, and it doesn’t really do anything for me but stress me out. Get me out of here before I go crazy! I used to love school – now I hate it.
Marquand

- Middle-class, African-American
- Lives with mother and older sister
- Mom dabbles in art; thanks to an inheritance does not need to work outside the home
- 10 in 4th grade; identified for G/T in 2nd grade; IQ=144
- Large city in Southeast
- Strong in math and athletics, especially competitive sports, but disinterested in everything else; increasingly withdrawn though he has friends with whom he plays sports; differentiation provided through ‘Early Years’ Program of International Baccalaureate; “He has all the ability in the world, but it seems he does not know how to balance his potential with ‘fitting in’ to cultural demands.” (principal’s quote)
Marquand - age 10

I feel like I don’t belong here - like when a puzzle piece isn’t the right size. I think my school thinks everybody is just the same and kids need the same thing at the same time. If you’re smart, you get the same as everybody that is smart, and if you’re in the middle, you get the same as everybody that’s in the middle.
Rachel

- Middle-class Caucasian
- Lives with mother, stepfather, and younger stepbrother
- Mother is research assistant in doctoral program
- 13 in 8th grade; identified for G/T in 2nd grade; IQ=137
- Suburban area in Midwest
- Large, diverse middle school with excellent academic programs
- Self-selected isolationist; one friend of similar abilities and interests; technology interests out of school yet avoids it in school; malaise in most subjects; increasing truancy; spends time alone at arcade or takes bus to downtown museums; G/T pull-out through 5th grade and classroom differentiation using tiered lessons since; “She is oh so bright but not willing to fit in with the rest of us peons.” (one teacher’s quote)
Rachel – age 12

You know, this differentiation gimmick is only a way for teachers to relieve their guilt. All it amounts to me is more work that has little meaning to my life. Schools make it easier to be stupid than gifted – maybe that’s where I should head and wait until the school game is over to use what God gave me.
Jorge

- Free lunch, Latino
- Oldest of 4 in traditional family
- Dad works three jobs, one of which is his own fledgling lawn/pool business
- 10 in 6th grade; referred for G/T in 1st; IQ=160
- Inner city of large Southwestern urban area; bused 45 minutes to well-regarded magnet school
- Skipped from 1st to 3rd grade but has since had academic problems in all subjects; has developed discipline problems (not following directions, lying to explain missing work, overt refusal to do work); constantly on defense; clear interests in architecture but school feels forced to address make-up work so no time for architecture; differentiation now focuses on remediation; threat of dismissal from magnet; “Jorge is a dear, but we have failed to get him to see that he has to do his work in order to have time for his own projects.” (magnet coordinator quote)
Jorge – age 10

I don’t know what they want from me. It is just like, you know, they want you to keep working on the same stuff over and over. It’s as if they hammer at your head with things that you can learn fast but that are so boring you can’t stand it. Away from here, lots of kids are after me to work with them because I know how to get things done.
By instilling hope, we teach our kids that they’re not merely passive recipients of everything that happens. Modern psychology and education have been too preoccupied with repairing damage when our focus should be on building strength and resilience, especially in children.

- Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman, psychologist and author of *Learned Optimism*. 1998
Nothing defines our age more than the furious and relentless rate of change. Taking charge of change requires hope.

Arthur M. Schlesinger

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

Oscar Wilde

Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart; and you'll never walk alone; you'll never walk alone.

Oscar Hammerstein, II

The human body experiences a powerful gravitational pull in the direction of hope. That is why the patient’s hopes are the physician’s secret weapon. They are the hidden ingredients in any prescription.

Norman Cousins

To eat bread without hope is still slowly to starve to death.

Pearl S. Buck
Recent Research

- Hopeful college students receive higher grades than unhopeful ones, regardless of IQ scores (Scheier & Carver, 1993).

- At the University of Kansas, more than 200 freshmen were tested for hopefulness. Over six years, it was learned that high-hope students had better grade point averages and were more likely to complete their degrees (Snyder, 1994).

- A research team measured hope in nearly 400 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-graders in Edmond, OK, then tracked their test scores in reading and math. The results: children with more hope performed better (Snyder, 2001).
Hope plays a central role in motivating human action by giving people an elevated sense of moral purpose, emotional energy, and imaginative capacity to shape the future in ways they would like (Ludema, Wilmot, & Srivastva, 1997).

Higher as compared to lower hope people have a greater number of goals, tackle more difficult goals, have success at achieving their goals, perceive their goals as positive challenges, have greater happiness and less distress, have superior coping skills, recover better from physical injury, and report less burnout at work (Elliot, 1999; Olenchak, 2001, 2005; Snyder et al., 2000; Snyder & McCullough, 2000).
Hope is the sum of one’s mental willpower plus one’s waypower for goals.

C.R. Snyder, Ph.D. (1945-2007)
Professor of Psychology
Director of Clinical Psychology
University of Kansas

*The Psychology of Hope*, 1994
Helping Children Enhance Waypower

- Be an analyzer:
  - **EXPLAIN** how causality works.
  - **LISTEN** to explanations for events.
  - **SHOW** ways to break goals down.
  - **TEACH** problem solving systems, including setting priorities.
Helping Children Enhance Waypower

- Be a mentor:
  - DEVELOP templates for handling similar situations.
  - ATTRIBUTE failure to ineffective strategies and not to self or others.
  - DISCUSS ideas and plans for reaching goals.
  - MODEL your own strategies for pursuing paths toward goals.
Helping Children Enhance Waypower

- Be a cheerleader:
  - PRAISE the child’s positive effort.
  - MODEL upbeat self-talk.
  - ENJOY victory; learn from defeat.
  - CELEBRATE each small gain – not just the outcome.
Helping Children Enhance Waypower

■ Be a realist:
  - EXPECT roadblocks as part of life.
  - SHARE your own life experiences.
  - FRAME roadblocks as challenges.
  - REMIND them of handling earlier barriers.
  - SHOW them and emphasize your own patience.
  - MODEL ways both for maintaining and for mentally recharging.
Helping Children Handle Goals

- Be a detective:
  - STOP your own activities.
  - LOOK at what the child is doing.
  - LISTEN to what the child is saying.
Helping Children Handle Goals

- Be a goal stretcher:
  - **CLARIFY** previous performance.
  - **BASE** new goals on the child’s own previous performance.
  - **MODEL** goal stretching yourself.
Helping Children Handle Goals

- **Be a mediator:**
  - **POINT OUT** conflicting goals.
  - **POINT OUT** goal conflicts that society promulgates.
  - **POINT OUT** talents and interests and match them with the child’s goals.
Steps for Developing Hope

- **Step 1: Formulate a goal**
  - Something you want to do
  - Doing something each day that gets you closer to what you want
  - Casting an “I wish” statement – a good beginning
  - Making time your friend
Step 2: Consider multiple paths

- Determining what paths and outcomes are available, selecting the most viable path, and trying/evaluating it
- If one pathway or outcome becomes blocked or frustrated, trying again
- Continuing the process of selecting, trying, and evaluating until you have reached your acceptable outcome
Step 3: Be willing to try

- Retaining an openness to doing your part, even if your “part” is to disengage from the goals after due consideration

- *Little Engine that Could* mentality
Step 4: Put forth the effort but open to adjustments

- Acting on your plan, even if you find that you need to readjust later; overplanning = paralysis
- Finding yourself paralyzed and unable to act, review the goal itself setting a goal too high defeats us before we begin
Step 5: Anticipate challenges

- Counting on the unexpected to appear at some point
- Keeping open to multiple, alternative routes and outcomes
Step 6: Think positively

- Giving yourself permission to succeed
- Keeping the goals simple at first until you strengthen your ability to persevere
Step 7: Engage or disengage the goal

- Remaining open and adaptable
- May not always be able to attain your most desired outcome
- Enhancing our probability of success through openness about the outcomes
Step 8: Persevere in the process

- Continuing the process until you have satisfied the goal
- Continuing the process automatically as long as you remain engaged
- If disengaging from the goal, then select another goal and repeat the process
Back to the Case Studies: Interventions Shown to Work

- Adult associated with the school agreed to assume a mentoring role
- Interests surveyed either formally or informally and were accorded specific attention and action by the school
- Specific school activities aimed at enhancing real-world thinking by teaching hope through waypower and goal-setting
- Specific school time allocated to affective needs and development of self
- Weaknesses received school attention but were purposefully de-accentuated relative to strengths
- Increased communication between school and home
- Recognition of extracurricular tasks, duties, and accomplishments by school
- Development of a personalized strength plan (akin to IEPs); strict adherence to it
- Group and individual school counseling component aimed at time and talent management
# How Hopeful and Unhopeful People See the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pessimistic explanation</th>
<th>Optimistic explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal vs. Impersonal</strong></td>
<td>I wasn’t picked because nobody likes me. I did bad on the test because I’m stupid.</td>
<td>I wasn’t picked because I’m not so good at soccer. I did bad on the test because I did not study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Permanent vs. Temporary</strong></td>
<td>I’ll never have any friends at Sunnyside School. My mom is the crabbliest mom in the whole world.</td>
<td>It takes time to make new friend in a new place. My mom is in a really bad mood today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pervasive vs. Specific</strong></td>
<td>Teachers are unfair. Struck out again; I’m just no good.</td>
<td>Mrs. Smith is unfair. My batting needs some help.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Teaching Hope

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Pessimistic (don’t say this)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Optimistic (say this instead)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Permanent vs. Temporary** | Tammy, what’s the matter with you – you are *always* such a pain.  
Jose, you aren’t following directions. Why don’t you ever do what you are told? | Tammy, you really are misbehaving *today*. You are making things difficult for all of us.  
Jose, you haven’t done what you were asked yet. Why not? |
| **Pervasive vs. Specific** | You are such a bad girl.  
She will never get up in front to make a report; she’s so shy. | You need to stop trying to use other people’s materials.  
*It’s very hard* for her to speak before the group. |
| **Personal vs. Impersonal** | This room is a pig sty; you are such a slob.  
You lost again. You guys just aren’t very good. | This room is a pig sty.  
*You must clean it up.*  
Another loss. You will have to work harder on the basic drills. |
Thank you for caring enough to spend your time with me!

Urban Talent Research Institute
University of Houston