
AN EVOLVING FIELD

Talent Sleuth Extraordinaire: An Interview With Camilla P. Benbow

Suzanna E. Henshon



Camilla P. Benbow is the Patricia and Rodes Hart Dean of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, a position she has held since 1998. Benbow began her academic career at Johns Hopkins University and subsequently taught at Iowa State University, where

she was named distinguished professor and served as a department chair and interim dean of education. Dean Benbow's scholarship focuses on talent identification and development. As codirector of the longitudinal Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY), she is particularly interested in identifying the educational experiences and interventions most conducive to developing intellectual talent and excellence in careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. She is a member of the Executive Committee of the National Science Board and was formerly vice chair of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel. She cofounded and cochairs the Learning and Education Academic Research Network (LEARN) Coalition of the AAU College of Education Deans. In recognition of her contributions, Dean Benbow has received the David G. Imig Award for Distinguished Achievement in Teacher Education from the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (2010), the Presidential Award from the National Association for Gifted Children (2009), the Distinguished Alumna Award from Johns Hopkins University (2008), and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the MENSA Education and Research Foundation (2004). Benbow received her EdD, with distinction, from Johns Hopkins University (1981), from which she also received her BA (1977) and MA (1978) in psychology and her MS in education (1980).

Henshon: *What led you to the field of gifted education?*

Benbow: It was Julian Stanley. As a senior in college at Hopkins and intending to enter graduate school in clinical

psychology, I took a class taught by Julian—Psychological Testing. In that class, he spoke so much of the mathematically precocious youth he was working with that I became intrigued. Toward the end of the term, I went and spoke to Julian about possibly doing graduate work with him instead. He gave me a huge pile of books and articles and told me to read them. If I was still interested after digging through this literature, we would talk. Well, I read every single book and article and, as soon as second semester started, I was back in Julian's office even more committed. I was hooked and the rest is history, as they say.

Henshon: *What is the best way to support a mathematically gifted student?*

Benbow: I do not think there is any one best way of supporting a mathematically gifted student. Through careful diagnosis, one needs to determine what their educational needs are, their interests and passions, and how they best learn. Then, you should try to create a match between that student and the curriculum, usually using some form of acceleration. Typically what a mathematically gifted student needs is access to advanced and preferably enriched mathematics curriculum. Acceleration is a practice that is not only evidence-based but also the most strongly supported by the research literature. Regardless, the point is that we should adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of the child, not ask the child to adjust to a fixed curriculum.

Henshon: *As a prolific scholar you have generated a variety of books and articles. Please select one of your favorites and describe how that project emerged and evolved.*

Benbow: This is tough to answer as I have been so fortunate to be involved in so many exciting projects and each one has been so exciting to me at the time. However, among those that stand out is what I refer to as my top 1% paper (see Benbow, 1992). In that paper, the achievement of the top quarter of the top 1% was contrasted with the bottom

quarter of the top 1%. So, all students were in the top 1% but some just made it while others were at the top. People don't think about this but the top 1% contains one-third of the ability range; and through above-level assessments (administering college entrance exams to young adolescents) the able and the exceptionally able within this special population are distinguished. Would there be detectable achievement differences between those two groups in the top 1%? Most people would venture that there would be none, that there would be a threshold on achievement and that all students meeting the cutting score for the top 1% certainly would be above any threshold. I wondered if this was really true. So, I dug into the data and was astounded to learn that the differences between the top and the bottom quartiles of the top 1% were not only significant but quite substantial. There certainly was no threshold effect on subsequent achievement. Ability did matter even among the top 1%. Subsequent work has extended those findings from the educational world to the world of work and even creativity. These studies, unlike others before them on this topic, employed ability and criterion assessments with sufficient ceilings and the sample sizes needed to uncover findings involving truly exceptional (rare) outcomes. It was fun to do this study as the results were so counterintuitive to most people.

Henshon: *Please describe some of your responsibilities as the Patricia and Rodes Hart Dean of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College.*

Benbow: Basically I am in charge of, or CEO of, Peabody College at Vanderbilt University. It is my job to manage it and to lead it into the future. I also see my role as attracting the best talent to Peabody College, with regard to students and faculty alike, and then to ensure that the talent is developed. I see my role as creating the conditions for excellence to emerge among our faculty and students and for talent to blossom and bloom. If successful in these efforts, Peabody will be producing the leaders for tomorrow as well as the knowledge that can transform schools and communities and enable individuals to learn and function at levels not before thought possible. In essence, being dean is a form of professional practice for me.

Henshon: *You also codirect (with David Lubinski) the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY), a longitudinal study of 5,000 individuals over their lifespans. Can you outline some of your findings?*

Benbow: That is a hard task as the Study has been running for 40 years. So much has been learned. A nice summary can be found in Lubinski and Benbow (2006). One of the more important findings is that the level and pattern of ability test scores at age 12 can predict occupational achievement and creativity in the mid 40s or 30 years later. However, interests and passions are critical to assess as well and they have predictive power beyond ability. We also have accumulated a vast amount of data on the efficacy of acceleration in meeting

the needs of the gifted. Acceleration does seem to enhance achievement, even many years later. It is a shame that our schools are so hesitant in use this option.

Henshon: *What is the most important lesson that you learned from a mentor?*

Benbow: The value of following your passions. If you can spend your career doing work you love, you are so fortunate. As Mark Twain said, the difference between work and play is that one you want to do and the other you have to do. If your career is something you want to do, then you get to play all of your life. And, that is a lot of fun. I am thankful to Julian Stanley for getting me on that path.

Henshon: *Please name some individuals who have had the greatest effect on your thinking.*

Benbow: Julian Stanley, without a doubt. He was my mentor and professional father. Luckily, my husband and collaborator, David Lubinski, keeps challenging my thinking and continues to further my intellectual growth. Of course, my mother and father gave me the confidence and courage that enabled me to go down my chosen professional path. My father always held high expectations of me (and all his children) and my mother provided and continues to provide the needed emotional support.

Henshon: *What other topics have held your interest over the years and how have they evolved?*

Benbow: My lifelong passion always has been talent development since that first class with Julian Stanley. Luckily, there are so many aspects to talent development to be studied that one never gets tired of it and one never runs out of new ideas to pursue.

Henshon: *Could you talk about your own research process?*

Benbow: Gosh, I don't know what to say here except that I love data and I love figuring out what story the data are telling us about talent development. I feel like a detective trying to make sense of the clues that the data provide. Of course, one has to make sure that the data are reliable and valid as well as analyzed in the most appropriate way. Otherwise, the story line gets lost or muddled.

Henshon: *What is some of the research that you're working on currently?*

Benbow: We are looking at the career paths of talented women. All career development and talent development models are primarily based on the male population if you are focusing on those destined for high-level careers. In the past, women were closed out of high-level careers. Now, the doors have opened for talented women. They can become doctors, not only nurses, they can become the CEO of a company,

not the executive secretary. They can become professors and lawyers. Do the talent development models or the eminence literature developed from the study of high-achieving, talented males apply to talented women? How do talented women construct successful careers and satisfying lives?

Henshon: *What advice would you give young scholars about things they should or should not do in their research?*

Benbow: Follow your passions, work hard, and pick yourself up and try again after failure. Everyone experiences failure or, as I would call it, a setback. What separates highly talented individuals who achieve highly or even become eminent and those who do not achieve as highly is not the number of failures experienced. It is how you respond to failure and what you learn from failure. It is also the amount of time you invest in work. Highly achieving individuals work extremely hard and for long hours.

Henshon: *Are there aspects of creativity or giftedness that you think have been misinterpreted or ignored in the research?*

Benbow: People have not given sufficient attention to individuals who are spatially gifted. These are individuals who are good at visualizing things and like working with “their hands.” They tinker, they build, and develop projects outside of school. Such individuals could become great engineers, for example, but often get turned off by the heavily verbal nature of schooling. Actually, a systematic review of this topic recently appeared in Wai, Lubinski, and Benbow (2009).

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AUTHOR BIO



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