

In Search of Excellence: An Interview With Linda Brody

Suzanna E. Henshon



Dr. Linda Brody directs the Study of Exceptional Talent (SET) and the Diagnostic and Counseling Center (DCC) at the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth (CTY). SET offers academic advising and counseling to exceptionally advanced students identified through talent

searches and studies their progress over time, while the DCC provides psycho-educational assessments and counseling to students who seek these services, with an emphasis on addressing the needs of twice-exceptional students. Linda's research focuses on evaluating strategies that facilitate talent development, especially acceleration, and on studying special populations of gifted students, including the highly gifted, gifted females, and twice exceptional students. She has edited several books and published numerous book chapters and articles in professional journals. Having earned her doctorate from Johns Hopkins, she taught graduate courses in gifted education there for many years. Linda presents regularly at conferences, is a reviewer for journals in the field, and serves on several advisory boards including the Maryland State Advisory Council on Gifted and Talented Education. She was awarded NAGC's Distinguished Service award in 2015 and was inducted into the Bridges 2e Hall of Fame for her work on behalf of twice-exceptional students in 2017.

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

Brody: I was a high school teacher enrolled in a graduate program at Johns Hopkins when I learned about a new offering in gifted education being established there by Lynn Fox. Lynn was then a newly-appointed faculty member who had been Julian Stanley's graduate student and a core member of the team that established the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY). I didn't know about SMPY at the time, but I was aware of how few opportunities for gifted students existed in schools, either in the

inner-city school where I taught or the highly rated suburban system where my young daughter attended school. I was intrigued and enrolled in the program.

This was the mid-1970s, and there seemed to be a new burst of interest in gifted education. Joe Renzulli, Jim Gallagher, Harry Passow, and Paul Torrance were just some of the pioneers making waves in the field, an Office of Gifted and Talented was being established in Washington, and the Maryland State Department of Education was offering summer programs for gifted students. It was a particularly exciting time to be at Hopkins, where SMPY's pioneering research was at a peak and students were traveling long distances to Baltimore to enroll in SMPY's programs. I was fortunate to be part of a small cohort of passionate graduate students that included Sandy Cohn, Mike Pyryt, and Camilla Benbow, and I was invigorated by the action research that I was exposed to through SMPY. A particularly inspiring experience my first semester was the Terman Memorial Symposium sponsored by SMPY on the Hopkins campus. A celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Terman study, the event brought leaders in the field to campus, as well as some of Terman's subjects who shared their memories.

I became hooked on the mission, never left Hopkins, and never looked back. I worked for Lynn Fox on several research projects, for Julian Stanley as Associate Director of SMPY, and since 1991 for CTY. I've been extremely fortunate to have always been in positions with a great deal of flexibility and intellectual stimulation; where I could interact with colleagues I respected; and where I felt like I was making a difference in the lives of students.

Henshon: *Can you describe a defining moment in your own professional journey?*

Brody: I developed a special interest in twice-exceptional (2e) students when I was in graduate school. The education faculty at Hopkins consisted of a small, cohesive, and interdisciplinary group that

socialized over pizza and shared ideas on a regular basis. There was little recognition of 2e students in the larger education community at that time, but the close proximity of experts in gifted education and learning disabilities at Hopkins sparked discussion about students with high abilities also having learning disabilities. Interest in probing the topic further led to a grant, a symposium that brought leaders from both the fields of learning disabilities and giftedness together, a pilot summer program for 2e students, and innovative research, as well as a book summarizing these activities that I coedited. I have been committed to finding ways to support 2e students ever since, including co-founding CTY's Diagnostic and Counseling Center where diagnosing and serving 2e students remains a priority. Most notably, my work with 2e students has given me insight into the complexity of the cognitive and non-cognitive traits all students possess, which has impacted all of my work with gifted students.

Henshon: *You currently serve as the Director of the Study of Exceptional Talent (SET) and the Diagnostic and Counseling Center (DCC) at the Center for Talented Youth. Can you tell us something about what it's like serving in these positions?*

Brody: I have administrative duties for both departments, but I also do a lot of direct counseling with families. In SET, we provide academic counseling to the exceptional middle and high school students who qualify for this program. An outgrowth of SMPY, SET was founded from concern that students with such advanced abilities are unlikely to have their needs met by a typical school program and may also be prone to social or emotional issues. We follow SET students over time, which helps us evaluate whether the steps we recommend are effective. The DCC's services include providing psychoeducational assessments to students with learning challenges, especially 2e students. I enjoy the direct contact that I have with families, and it keeps me informed about what is happening in the schools.

Henshon: *What are some of the most important lessons you've learned from a mentor?*

Brody: I must single out Julian Stanley, who was both a mentor and a role model for me. Julian knew from his research that students who share an aptitude for math can vary tremendously in their knowledge of math, their other abilities, their interests and motivation,

and the available offerings in their schools and communities—all of which have implications for the educational opportunities that might best meet their needs. It is an inaccurate assumption that Julian primarily advocated for radical acceleration; in fact, he recommended choosing from a “smorgasbord” of programs and strategies those that are most appropriate for individual students. Julian taught me the importance of understanding the unique characteristics of each student and of considering a wide variety of options to meet their needs.

Julian was also a role model in the way he lived his life. He was incredibly productive in his work, yet he took time to learn about and enjoy music, art, theater, literature, and travel. He encouraged students to take time to get a broad background in the liberal arts and not focus exclusively on one domain too early. He cared deeply about his friends and family, the students and colleagues he mentored, and the mathematically talented students he counseled. He was never too busy to meet with a student, take a family to lunch, or follow up later to see how the student was doing. Though he was famous for his efforts, the Julian I knew sought little credit for the work he did; his main goal was always to help someone else be successful.

Henshon: *How can we better serve gifted students with learning disabilities?*

Brody: A good assessment is essential for identifying a 2e student's strengths and weaknesses, and for understanding the underlying causes of any learning challenges. With this information, we can modify their educational program to meet their needs. It's important that high abilities be recognized and that students be placed in the most challenging environments possible, though accommodations may be necessary to ensure success in those environments. For example, students with high verbal abilities but difficulty writing may be successful in advanced language arts programs when provided with computers for writing or allowed to respond orally to test questions. Similarly, calculators can help mathematically talented students who struggle with computations be successful in advanced math classes. It's important to address any social and emotional issues, and, like all students, 2e students should be given access to extracurricular opportunities where they can pursue their interests with like-minded peers.

Henshon: *How can we better serve special populations of gifted students, including the highly gifted, women, and diverse populations?*

Brody: Educators and counselors should be aware of the research findings that describe the risks students from these groups may face. We know, for example, that highly gifted students may be at risk for not being adequately challenged in school, may struggle with issues related to asynchronous development, and/or may have difficulty fitting in socially with peers. Among gifted girls, barriers to success in male-dominated STEM fields have been shown to be problematic for many of them. And gifted students from minority or low-income populations may lack access to the opportunities that can be important for them to achieve their full potential. In general, we need to assure that students from these groups have access to strong academic programs, extracurricular and out-of-school opportunities, and peers who share their interests and abilities. In addition, at-risk students may be especially in need of role models and mentors who can inspire their goals for the future and spur them to achieve them.

Henshon: *What individuals both in and outside the field of gifted education have exerted the strongest impact on your thinking?*

Brody: My understanding that the Talent Search model is about so much more than identifying math talent began with my exposure to the pioneering research by Lynn Fox and Julian Stanley. But it is the staff of all the university-based centers who have added a wide variety of programs and services in response to changing times and helped the model evolve well beyond what SMPY's founders envisioned. Being a part of these efforts has contributed to my commitment to the model and to my personal growth as an educator eager to embrace new challenges. I am grateful to the colleagues with whom I have worked most closely on this journey. These include, but are not limited to: Camilla Benbow, Susan Assouline, and Ann Shoplik, who were postdocs with me under Julian and continue to be close confidantes; Carol Mills, who collaborated with me on projects at CTY for many years; Carol Blackburn and Michelle Muratori, whose contributions continue to enhance the effectiveness of the SET program; and Joyce VanTassel-Baska and Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, whose leadership as Talent Search directors and as scholars continues to inspire me.

I have also been influenced by the conceptions of giftedness that embrace non-intellective traits and psychosocial factors as essential components of giftedness. This includes the theories of Abe Tannenbaum, Joe Renzulli, and François Gagné, and the more recent definition of giftedness posed by Rena Subotnik, Paula

Olszewski-Kubilius, and Frank Worrell. In my work with gifted students, I am increasingly convinced that the achievement we have come to expect from gifted individuals can only be actualized when the necessary levels of self-confidence, motivation, passion for a domain, and social skills allow it to come to fruition. More generally, I am often reminded of Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* when working with students whose basic needs appear not to be met, and Piaget's focus on developmental stages is relevant to identifying students in need of accelerative intervention strategies.

Henshon: *What research are you currently working on?*

Brody: We've been focusing on tracking alumni of the SET program to learn more about the pathways that took them to where they are today. Since our counseling efforts focus a great deal on advocating for students to gain access to accelerative strategies, extracurricular activities, intellectual peers, and mentors, we are particularly interested in the reflections of individuals who have achieved high levels of career success as to whether they believe these were important contributors to their talent development. We are also exploring the barriers they may have encountered along the way and how they overcame them, as well as whether optimal pathways differ significantly depending on the field the individuals pursue.

Henshon: *If you are to give someone advice on things to do or not do in their research, what might your advice be?*

Brody: Investigate something you really care about finding the answer to. Also, don't procrastinate on doing research while you wait for the perfectly designed study. The ideal control group may never come along, for example, but your work may still have meaningful results. Finally, collaborate with others when possible. Doing research as part of a team can be much more fun, and the contributions of differing viewpoints and insights can do much to improve your efforts.

Notes on interviewer



Suzanna E. Henshon earned a PhD at The College of William & Mary in 2005. She writes full-time and has 370 publications. In 2019, she published *Teaching Empathy: Strategies for Building Emotional Intelligence in Today's Students* with Prufrock Press. Email: suzannahenshon@yahoo.com