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# TRANSFORMING GIFTEDNESS TO EMINENCE:

*Patterns of Influence on a  
Developmental Path From  
Publication to Policy Center*

by

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*As individuals become older, more educated and established in a career, ability appears to become less of a factor in distinguishing the gifted from their colleagues.*

—Joyce VanTassel-Baska (1989)

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars relish their simple pleasures. One of the most delightful is finding an article or book chapter that coalesces thoughts and gives direction to one's work. This chapter honors the impact of "Characteristics of the Developmental Path of Eminent and Gifted Adults," authored by Joyce VanTassel-Baska. It appeared in a book she coedited with Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, entitled, *Patterns of Influence on Gifted Learners* (1989). The chapter sheds light on a central conundrum of our field: Children we identify as gifted in childhood often do not demonstrate truly exceptional performance in adulthood, *and* exceptional adults often report that others did not view them as gifted children or educate them as such. VanTassel-Baska discusses many potential explanations for this puzzle including: (1) the trajectory of some domains starts later than childhood, (2) professionals may not be using the appropriate identification

schema, and (3) practitioners may not be offering the appropriate educational stimuli to promote talent development of gifted children.

We organize this chapter as follows. First, we provide a summary of the VanTassel-Baska chapter (while encouraging those of you who have not read it in a while to go back to the original). Next, we offer a logic chain for the research conducted by Subotnik and colleagues that led to the establishment of the American Psychological Association's (APA) Center for Gifted Education Policy. Third, we describe the work of the Center in light of this logic chain, including the description of three major projects that explore educational and social paths to eminence.

### DEVELOPMENTAL PATH OF GIFTED AND EMINENT ADULTS

A wealth of research has been conducted to inform what schools should do with gifted students. A much smaller proportion of the gifted literature is devoted to eminence later in life, including links between giftedness in youth and eminence in adulthood. Joyce VanTassel-Baska (1989) provided an outstanding synthesis of the eminence literature nearly 20 years ago. In the article, she defined childhood giftedness as “. . . advanced development in intellectual areas, or as exemplary performance in a specific area . . .” (p. 146). Concurrently, VanTassel-Baska identified adult giftedness as measured by national and international recognition through high-quality and important work in one's field. She argued that eminence cannot be predicted on childhood giftedness alone, and that eminence is culture-bound so that factors that lead to eminence in one time and place may not be relevant in another context. She also stated that eminence may be obtained after death (as in the case of Emily Dickinson) and that in some cases achieving eminence may have a negative effect on production of subsequent works (as with Ernest Hemingway).

VanTassel-Baska further developed a model for the transformation of giftedness into eminence over a person's lifetime in the course of four stages:

- ▶ early childhood (developing talent),
- ▶ middle childhood (nurturing talent),
- ▶ adolescence/adulthood (displaying extraordinary achievement), and
- ▶ adulthood/old age (producing “prodigious acts and life's work”). (p. 157)

She presented the first two stages as a “constellation of variables” (VanTassel-Baska, 1989, p. 157), where the development and nurturance of talent can depend on factors such as schooling, community, family support, and position within the family. As a child moves from early to middle childhood, skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, personal characteristics, and higher order thinking skills emerge as tangible results of the interplay between the aforementioned factors (VanTassel-Baska, 1989, p. 158).



As gifted children enter into adolescence, then adulthood and old age, they build a framework around them that shifts and supports this constellation of variables. A “recreated family” (VanTassel-Baska, 1989, p. 158) replaces their home family structure as gifted individuals seek out other bright peers and mentors associated with their talents. The workplace replaces schooling as the arena for demonstrating abilities. Factors such as timing, perceptions of events and experiences, and the role of significant others influence the framework.

Innate intelligence is important only as a starting point in the model: Other psycho-social factors such as family, home life, parental involvement, personal traits, and perceptions become just as important, if not more important, over time. VanTassel-Baska (1989) stated that coming from a middle-class background and having parents who are highly educated professionals, as well as gaining early access to role models and large home libraries, are good indicators for eminence. She also presented evidence that both a stable home life and an unstable home life can be predictors of eminence, but for different reasons. For example, VanTassel-Baska cited a Goertzel and Goertzel (1962) study showing that out of 400 childhood homes that produced eminent adults only 58 could be considered untroubled. The researchers argued that troubles early in childhood, if dealt with in a healthy way, give children the skills to deal with life’s hardships.

Notably, researchers have shown that traditional schooling in the primary and secondary grades can have little impact on gifted children’s abilities to become eminent adults. In fact, VanTassel-Baska (1989) noted that 60% of those in Goertzel and Goertzel’s 1962 study had serious schooling issues. This might be explained by the tendency of some gifted children to develop a particular passion that becomes so prominent that it can overshadow and inhibit other areas of learning (VanTassel-Baska, 1989).

The central factors of adult eminence reported by VanTassel-Baska (1989) are personal traits and perceptions. Gifted children may have talents but never properly develop them without the passion, determination, and confidence to pursue their goals. These personal traits become increasingly important as gifted children reach adulthood and rise in their respective fields. In elite fields, there are fewer differences between levels of talent among peers, so personal traits and perceptions about chances of success play a larger role in achieving more public success. VanTassel-Baska noted that perceptions about chances of success and perceptions about previous successes are greater predictors of future accomplishments than actual evidence of past achievement.

The development of eminence is a topic of particular interest for the APA Center for Gifted Education Policy (CGEP). Our work is committed to promoting the educational and social skills necessary for adolescents with demonstrated talent to become successful in their chosen fields. The more we know about what factors are important in fostering eminence, the more we can promote these factors through education and policy to help the next generation of gifted youth stay on track to reach their full potential.