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Connectedness and Life Skills Development for all Children
Commentary on A. Ziegler & S.N. Phillipson 'Towards a Systemic Theory of Gifted Education'

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Connectedness and Life Skills Development for all Children

Commentary on A. Ziegler & S.N. Phillipson 'Towards a Systemic Theory of Gifted Education'

Ziegler and Phillipson (in this issue) draw upon the Actiotope Model of Giftedness (AMG) to give an overview of a systemic approach to gifted education. They argue the value of such a systemic approach for understanding the development of exceptionality. We certainly agree that the achievement of excellent performance is not only the result of individual abilities and efforts but also the collective support from interactive components within the system. In our field, the AMG has provided us with a conceptual framework that helps us interpret our data on connectedness and life skills development among children in Hong Kong.

In Western countries, efforts have been made to identify components of exceptionality (such as intelligence, creativity and personality) that may contribute to excellence. However, consideration of how these attributes interact with socio-cultural factors within the total system is often neglected. In the Asian context, the emphasis on 'the system' is consistent with beliefs and practices focusing on 'whole person' education, with each child having opportunities that will bring out his or her full potential (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000; Yuen, 2010). In this context, promoting connectedness and life skills through whole-school approaches goes beyond implementing specific programs. The key is in collaboration among teachers, parents, administrators and guidance

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personnel, with a focus on nurturing students' healthy social-emotional development (Yuen, Chan, Lau, Gysbers, & Shea, 2007; Yuen, 2011).

Ziegler and Phillipson also point out weaknesses in key models and strategies established so far in gifted education. They certainly challenge the fundamentals of the current mode of nurturing giftedness. They hold that the development of exceptional achievement requires attention to students' needs *at an individual level*, rather than group or class level. Given that gifted education should construct individualized learning pathways that focus on optimizing interactions between students and their environment, it seems to follow that the mode of educating gifted students should be reconceptualised. It may be that gifted students are not able to benefit fully from acceleration, enrichment and pull-out programs due to their often asynchronous development.

Under a systemic approach, the focus needs to be on providing individualized learning opportunities for *all* children, rather than selection and placement of a few high ability children. *All* children need to develop their action repertoire through positive interactions with variables in their socio-cultural environment. Indeed, the expansion of action repertoire involves a matrix of interactions among environments in different domains. This view is consistent with research findings in Hong Kong that show children's development of life skills in academic, personal-social and talent domains are positively associated with their connectedness to parents, teachers and peers (Yuen, Chan, Chan et

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al., 2010). In addition, data from high-ability adolescents in Hong Kong show that their involvement in talent development opportunities can enhance their life skills and foster better relationships with their peers, teachers and parents (Yuen, Chan, Gysbers et al., 2010).

Ziegler (in press) suggests that external resources (e.g. wealth; cultural values) and internal resources (e.g. bodily fitness; learning goals; personality traits) need to be considered in the process of talent development. Data from high- and average-ability children in Hong Kong reflect that internal learning resources—in this case adaptive perfectionist traits—strengthen connectedness to family and school, which in turn promotes competence in applying academic skills (Fong & Yuen, 2011). We agree with Ziegler and Phillipson that educators need to recognize themselves as part of a gifted individual's developing actiotope. Educators need to commit themselves fully to helping individuals use their internal and educational resources effectively on the path toward excellent performance. The paper leads us to reflect on how we might engineer students' learning environments more effectively to ensure development of exceptional achievement.

As suggested by Ziegler and Phillipson, one of the few strategies implemented at the moment that can cater to students' individual needs is *mentorship* (Grassinger, Porath & Ziegler, 2010). Indeed, Wood (2010) found that gifted students regard interaction with experienced people from their field of interest as the most valued and helpful means for

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their development. Similarly, our study of high ability adolescents in Hong Kong has shown that many students benefit from peer mentoring and counseling in school (Yuen, Lau, Lee et al., 2011). The model can serve as a base from which to individualize educational pathways; but more research is warranted on how to maximize educational benefits of mentorship.

The theory underpinning AMG reminds educators to attend to students' all-round social-emotional development, not merely the cognitive and academic. To optimize students' achievement, students need to perceive connectedness to a network of sub-systems that stimulate and support them toward exceptional performance and talent development. The systemic approach contends that exceptionality grows where persons and their sub-systems interact and adapt continuously until equilibrium is reached. The application of the theory is not limited to academic pursuits only, and it is essential to expand students' subjective action space continuously in many domains. The ideal is obviously to provide students with individualized learning opportunities and to give them continual feedback. But the problem is how this ideal can be achieved for gifted students within the typical school context.

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