

# TALENT ZONES

10 TOOLS TO HELP KIDS DEVELOP THEIR TALENTS



Lee HANCOCK, Ph.D.  
Foreword by TOM BYER

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# Praise for **TALENT ZONES**

“A call to the culture to rethink our methods around developing youth, asking administrators, educators, parents, and coaches to reflect on misguided adult exclusionary tactics around nurturing talent and, in the process, awaken to new, more effective and compassionate ways of developing kids. Lee has clearly ‘honed his talent’ for summarizing complex information and presenting it in a down-to-earth, relatable way, making this book pragmatic, interesting, and insightful.”

—Dr. John O’Brien, psychologist and former Ajax and US Men’s National Team player

“Lee Hancock starts with a meditation that flips the script: let’s line up ten kids and decide who among them is talented. Feel confident? What if the kid tapped as ‘without talent’ is your child? What then? What if we rewrote the playbook of selection and opportunity and teaching on behalf of the whole group of ten? This is a profound and important meditation on the thing we call ‘talent,’ which we assume we understand are able to see.”

—Doug Lemov, managing director of Uncommon School and author of *Teach like a Champion* and *The Coach’s Guide to Teaching*

“*Talent Zones* is a book that could not come at a better time. In our world of competitive overparenting, it is so helpful to have a resource and guide to really get to the root of the definition of talent—where it lies, and how it can be cultivated, nurtured, and built in healthy ways. Hancock encourages readers to focus on the journey and not the destination, to embrace and view failure as an opportunity, and to help kids develop grit. Hancock has deeply researched for readers on a topic we all want to know more about: talent. What it is? How is it identified and sometimes mislabeled? What is the history of its meaning? This is a fascinating read for parents, coaches, educators, or anyone who works with kids.”

—Cynthia C. Muchnick, author of six education-related books, co-author of *The Parent Compass: Navigating Your Teen’s Wellness and Academic Journey in Today’s Competitive World*, and parent of Division 1 college athletes

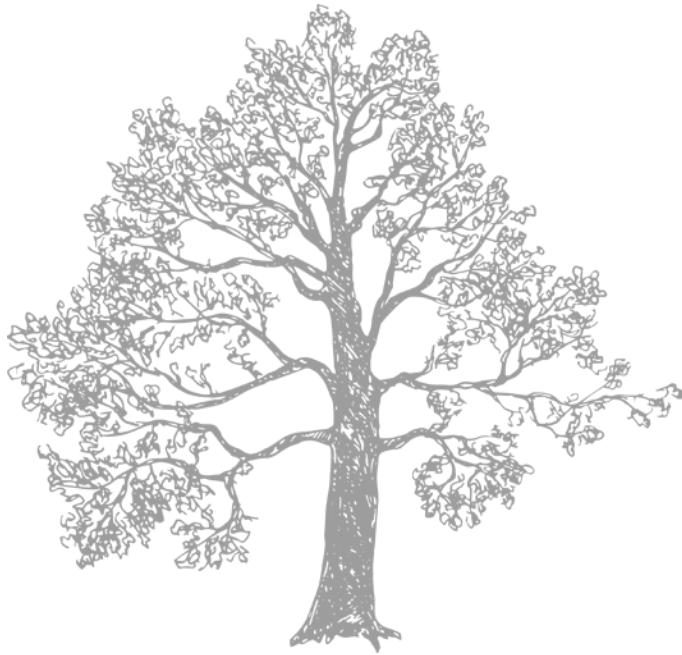
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## **Dedication**

To my sons, Jaden, Gavin, and Owen. You each have unique talents. It has been an amazing journey for your mom and me to watch you pursue your talents over the years. Hopefully you get a chance to read this book and feel we have created Talent Zones for you in your lives. We are so proud of you and can't wait to watch you continue to become amazing young men. Follow your passions and be the best versions of you that you can be. Love you!

## Acknowledgments

To my parents: Thank you for giving me the freedom and flexibility to explore my talents in my own time and in my own ways.

To my wife: Thank you for being an understanding and tolerant spouse throughout my career, and of course, during this long and often arduous book writing process. It is true: I do have a fun job, and you have been amazingly supportive of my passions for all the years we have been together.

To my sons: Thank you for being my proving ground for the development of talent. I know I talk a lot about life lessons, being a good person, doing your best, and so on and so forth, but it really is easy when I have such fantastic people to work with every day. Thanks for being awesome kids and making my job—as a parent and talent developer—always exciting and never dull!

To the amazing people at Free Spirit: Thanks! I am in awe of the work you did with my writing. You took a manuscript and made it a book. That manuscript took a long time to write, and I always felt that the ideas in it deserved a set of talented individuals who would make it look and feel like a finished product. I am proud of the work we have done, and I hope I represent your work as well as you have represented mine.

And finally, to John Lincoln: What can I say . . . you laid the groundwork for this book in so many ways. Personally, you challenged me, poked me, prodded me, barked at me, put your arm around me, taught me, and overall treated me as if I could, not as if I couldn't. You never allowed me to make an excuse or blame anyone or anything. You made me a better teacher, coach, parent, and person. You taught me that every single child can learn and should have the opportunity to learn—period. This gift of open eyes, and a passion to pursue education and talent development with that approach, is why this book exists today.

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# FOREWORD

by TOM BYER

In my three and a half decades as a technical skills developer for young soccer players, I have traveled the world presenting my work in more than thirty countries. One of the great benefits of presenting at conferences is that you get to be around a lot of really smart people. Although you are there so people can learn from you, you are also learning from everyone else. One of my favorite sayings is *If you are the smartest person in the room, you are in the wrong room.*

On one occasion I was invited to Geneva, Switzerland, to present to a group of top professional youth development coaches. It was there that I met Dr. Lee Hancock. We were both presenting at the conference, and a mutual friend had suggested we meet up on the sidelines.

Since meeting Lee in Geneva, I have had many opportunities to talk things over with him—in person, over the telephone, and by text. We are always discussing development, and because of my interest in psychology, I am constantly picking Lee's brain because he's always the smart guy in that particular room. Lee's expertise is multifaceted; he is a teacher, father, researcher, and coach all in one.

Lee traveled in 2019 to Tokyo, where I live, as the sports psychologist for the Canadian women's beach volleyball team. The team had just won the world championship and was playing in a pre-Olympic tournament to get accustomed to Japan. I remember Lee telling me he was writing a book. He said it was taking a huge amount of time because of all the research he was conducting. Well, that book has finally arrived!

*Talent Zones* puts us in the room with many smart people. Lee has done an outstanding job of seeking them out and dissecting their work, explaining it in detail, and weaving these ideas together into a development model that works—not only in sports, but also in academics and the arts. Many of the experts he quotes are people I look up to, who are all tops in their fields. This book, while small, is actually several books in one. It took me a long time to read because I wrote down so many notes for my own practical use.

After reading this book, I could not help recalling a fourth grader who was always fidgeting in class, clowning around, and distracting other kids. He was labeled as a low achiever. This little boy's teacher once dragged him out of the classroom into the hallway and told him, "You have the brain the size of a pea!" The teacher said he was not smart enough for fifth grade, and his mom agreed to hold him back to repeat a year. Having to repeat a grade is a traumatic experience for any young person. They become ashamed of staying behind while all their classmates advance to the next grade. This boy later tried out for his local Little League baseball team but was once again told he wasn't good enough and played for the Farm League team instead.

But his sister believed in her little brother. She always cheered him on. When he changed from baseball to soccer, she often played soccer with him and encouraged him. She saw his talent and nourished it. He became quite good at soccer and excelled in high school, until he hit another bump. He tried out for the regional all-star team but was told again that he just wasn't

good enough. The next high school season he scored the most goals on his high school team and was voted MVP of the league in New York State. This kid went on to play successful collegiate and professional soccer. After his retirement from playing, he helped transform Japan's youth soccer development program. The little boy who'd been told he wouldn't amount to much of anything in his life would also publish four books and five DVDs and win the Golden Boot Award from Adidas International for his contributions to grassroots soccer.

That person is me, Tom Byer. Like many of the people whose stories are told in *Talent Zones*, I was deemed "untalented"—not because I had no talent, but because I needed help finding my passion, growing it into talent, and persevering through rough patches. If it hadn't been for my sister, whose constant encouragement helped me believe in myself, my life would have turned out quite differently.

Through stories and research and his own experience, Dr. Hancock teaches the importance of recognizing the possibilities in all kids and building their self-belief so they can realize their own potential. He offers adults ten Talent Development Zones—practical, evidence-based, developmentally appropriate ways to help kids grow their talent. This is a book that all adults who work with kids—including parents, teachers, and coaches—can benefit from keeping on their nightstand, coffee table, desk, or mobile device, and referring to it as much as possible.

Thank you, Lee, for sharing your wisdom. I will be applying it in both my parenting and my professional work, and I think many other readers will find it just as helpful as I have.

Good luck to everyone involved with developing talent in kids!

TOM BYER

# INTRODUCTION

As an educator, sports psychology coach (someone who works with athletes on the mental aspect of their game), and parent, I have worked with talented individuals of all ages and in multiple arenas—from kindergarten classrooms to the Olympics, from high-level young athletes to students in “at-risk” programs. In addition, I have worked with youth talent identifiers and talent developers (teachers, coaches, and leaders) in music, sports, and academic programs. These talent developers have been employed in gifted and talented programs as well as general education classrooms and in elite arts and sports programs as well as grassroots clubs. And in each of these environments, talent—special skill or ability—has emerged.

At the outset, I should clarify that I am focusing on the idea of *talent* and talent development in education, fine arts, and sport as opposed to *giftedness*. The terms *gifted* and *talented* are words used to describe individuals with natural abilities, and in the context of education, these two terms have specific meanings. *Giftedness* in education often refers to natural ability, usually in one or more academic subjects (such as math, writing, or science), that places a child far ahead of their same-age peers. *Talent* in education also refers to natural ability, but usually in nonacademic subjects such as music, dance, or physical activity; talent is often considered innate but also malleable.

Professionals and groups dedicated to the education of gifted and talented children have their own definitions. The National Association for Gifted Children says, “Students with gifts and talents perform—or have the capability to perform—at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains” (2021 b). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 defined gifted and talented students as “Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.” The most recent reauthorization of ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, retains this definition (Woods 2016). Talent developers in sports would probably agree with each of these definitions, but would define this ability as *talent* and see it as something that is innate yet also built.

This idea—that talent is innate yet built—is what intrigues me about talent, and it’s where I focus my attention. My primary message in this book is that we—as educators, coaches, and other invested adults—have the opportunity and the responsibility to help more kids build, strengthen,

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“  
We—as educators, coaches, and other invested adults—have the opportunity and the responsibility to help more kids build, strengthen, and explore their innate talents.”

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and explore their innate talents. And the choice to label kids has profound consequences for them—both positive and negative—early on in school, sports, and the arts.

In sports, education, and fine arts, kids are either placed in or denied access to talent development programs every day based on tests, anecdotal evidence, or other talent markers (or ability to pay for the programs). Adults identify a small percentage of kids as “talented” at an early age and, by omission, unconsciously identify the others as “not talented”—with no proof that kids identified as talented when young will become talented adults, or conversely that kids identified as not talented will not become talented adults. We pour resources into talent development programs while often relegating the unselected to lesser learning environments, where they fend for themselves and either develop their potential or don’t.

## Why I Wrote This Book

We spend so much time focusing on a small percentage of “talented” kids based on our subjective markers while not providing other potentially talented kids a chance to develop their talents. This book explains why we can and should keep an open mind as it relates to talent in children and how we can give a much greater percentage of children that chance.

## Who This Book Is For

This book is for educators, sports coaches, music teachers, fine arts teachers, parents, and really anyone who works with kids in performance settings. As you read the book, I would like you to keep an open mind about talent in kids, including the labeling of talent, the development of talent, and the management—or mismanagement—of talent. For example, I understand that gifted and talented programs in schools, sports, and the fine arts have been around for years, and some are based on sound research. My goal is not to argue against having these programs. Rather, my goals are:

- to examine the idea of talent in relation to sports, education, and the arts, including how we create cutoffs without looking at enough criteria or the right criteria
- to explain how kids who are not labeled as talented can still be talented

## About This Book

In this book I describe what I believe talent really should mean when it comes to children. I explain how early talent is currently “found” and mined and how that isn’t always the best approach for developing long-term talent. I show how we have been defining talent all wrong, especially in kids. I discuss how being deemed untalented can be either a major opportunity or a catastrophe, depending on one’s mindset. I look for ways to redefine the *talent* label as a journey, not a destination. I discuss research-based, practical ideas to help teachers, coaches, and parents create Talent

Development Zones (TDZs) for kids as they journey. You'll notice in this book that I use soccer examples more than once. That's because I've played and coached soccer at a broad range of levels, so I have quite a bit of expertise and experience with this sport.

## Part 1: Talent in Kids—What It Is and What It Could Be

The first part of the book provides an in-depth overview of why I think it is critical that we look at talent differently in kids. It explains how the concept of talent has been used over time, the origins of the word *talent*, the research on talent development, and how we can approach talent in children differently—and more constructively.

### Chapter 1: Talented or Untalented?

This chapter discusses how children are labeled talented or not as they move through their talent development journey. I describe how kids may be placed on tracks at very young ages based on perceived talent, despite little proof that early talent identification yields consistent results.

### Chapter 2: The Concept of Talent as We Use It Today

Here we discuss how adults currently use and misuse the concept of talent with kids. It explains how pop culture, sports, and literature define talent and offers a typical scenario for how talent is developed using the Standard Model of Talent Development (SMTD). I describe the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy and ponder what happens to children who are unselected, or not identified. Finally, I present research showing why our current approach for identifying talent (or not) doesn't work.

### Chapter 3: Redefining Talent

Chapter 3 explores the history of the word *talent* backward through the centuries, eventually arriving at the original Greek definition of the word. Then it explains why it's in children's best interests to redefine the concept of talent in kids using this rediscovered definition.

### Chapter 4: Reapproaching Talent Development in Kids

This chapter discusses why and how we should reapproach talent development in kids. First I describe what educational psychologist François Gagné's talent development model says about why and how talent develops. Then I discuss the research that shows this model is partly wrong and partly right, because development is nonlinear. We run a high risk of misinvesting in the select few (at best) and completely missing investing in the unidentified many (at worst).

## Part 2: Talent Development Zones

Talent Development Zones (TDZs for short) are ten tangible, evidence-based, developmentally appropriate ways to help kids develop their talent. These TDZs transform the concepts and research explored in part 1 into practical strategies adults can use to create environments that help kids develop their own talents.



### TDZ1—Embrace Failure as an Opportunity

Here we discuss growth mindset and its parent theory, achievement goal theory. In this section I provide specific examples and practical ideas for how to help build growth mindset in kids using ideas gleaned from the research.

### TDZ2—Smash Ceilings

TDZ2 explores the concept of a glass ceiling and relevant research from the US government and classrooms that shows why placing limits on learning isn't a good thing. I explain how we can avoid limiting kids, using specific examples and practical ideas.

### TDZ3—Provide Opportunities for Deep, Deliberate Practice

This chapter discusses the importance of deep, deliberate practice and examines the popular idea that ten thousand hours of practice are needed to get good at something. I suggest there's more to the story, based on research by Anders Ericsson and Daniel Coyle. I also provide specific examples and practical ideas for helping kids engage in deep, deliberate practice.

### TDZ4—Build Realistic Optimism

I discuss the concept of realistic optimism in this chapter and explain why it is important in developing talent. I offer specific ways to help build realistic optimism in kids using ideas gleaned from the research.

### TDZ5—Foster in Kids a Love for Their Endeavors

In TDZ5 I describe self-determination theory and relevant research from Daniel Pink on why it's important to develop a love for what you do. I also discuss ways to help build intrinsic motivation in kids.

### TDZ6—Develop and Inspire Creativity

This chapter explains why creativity is important in developing talent. I discuss the creative problem-solving (CPS) theory and provide practical ideas for stimulating creativity in kids.

### TDZ7—Build “I Can” Kids

Here we explore self-efficacy and confidence. I describe systematic, practical ways to develop “I can” kids.

### TDZ8—Help Kids Manage Pressure

In this chapter, I discuss the different kinds of pressure, or stress. I offer suggestions for how to help kids manage stress emotionally and physically—and make the most of it.

### TDZ9—Develop Grit (and Know When to Change Course)

TDZ9 explains the importance of grit, or steadfast courage, determination, and perseverance. I describe the four key components of grit—interest, practice, purpose, and hope. I also discuss how grit may involve a change in direction. I offer specific ideas to help kids build grit and manage change.

### TDZ10—Create a Culture of Development

In the final TDZ chapter, I describe what a culture of development is, why it's important, and how it can be built using the power of stories, heuristics, and play. I explain why safety and vulnerability are critical components of this culture. I offer ways to create and develop culture of development with kids.

### Conclusion: Enjoy the Journey

The book concludes with a brief overview of what I've set forth throughout the book. It provides a few reminders and ideas to help you enjoy the journey alongside the kids you work with day in and day out.

## How to Use This Book

I hope you not only read and enjoy this book, but also learn from it and use it often, in many different ways. I hope you dog-ear a bunch of pages, write in the margins, and mark up the passages that are important to you. I also hope that when I discuss a concept, theory, or researcher who piques your interest, it inspires you to dig deeper. I hope that as you read you'll be eager to try the many actionable points, tips, and suggestions you'll find. And I hope my book generates discussion and spurs you to create even more ideas about talent and strategies to develop it. If you have any feedback or questions, you can interact with me on Twitter @DrLeeHancock or through my website: DrLeeHancock.com.

LEE HANCOCK

## PART 1

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# Talent in Kids— What It Is and What It Could Be

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This portion of the book describes the concept of talent, how it has been used over time, the research on talent and talent development, and how we can approach talent in children differently and more constructively.

## CHAPTER 1

# TALENTED OR UNTALENTED?



Let's do a little exercise. If I were to line up ten kids and put them through a series of activities designed to show off their abilities in a particular domain, would you be able to pick out the ones with talent?

Let me make it easier for you. Let's say that the domain is music, and in the group of ten kids, I put a young version of Aretha Franklin. Or maybe the domain is soccer, and I put a young Lionel Messi in front of you. Or perhaps it is mathematics, and the group of ten kids includes a young Stephen Hawking. Now could you pick out a child with talent? If so, what is the kid doing that demonstrates talent? We can assume from the definitions of the word *talent* in the sidebar that the child is showing some unique abilities, outperforming others, and overall doing things at a higher level compared to the other children in the group.

Based on the common definitions and popular notions of talent, I would not argue with you. Those kids—young Aretha, young Lionel, and young Stephen—have some real talent. They have a unique ability—innate or otherwise—that makes them stand out.

But what about the other nine kids? Do they have talent?

Let's look at the group of kids again. Perhaps you have a broader view of talent and you say three more kids in that group also demonstrate unique abilities or potential. So, you identify four kids in your group as having talent.

What about the remaining six kids? Do they have talent?

Let's line up that same group of ten kids, ranking them on a continuum from most talented to less talented to least talented. Could you do that? My guess is, if pressed, you could probably identify one kid you felt had very little talent based on the common definition.

### A FEW DEFINITIONS OF *Talent*

A natural ability to be good at something.  
(dictionary.cambridge.org)

A special natural ability or aptitude.  
(dictionary.com)

A special, often athletic, creative, or artistic, aptitude. (merriam-webster.com)

Okay, let's do one more exercise with the same group of ten kids. This time, one of the kids is your child. And this time I am the person deciding how talented each child is. I say, "I have determined that nine of these kids may have talent, but one doesn't have talent." That one is your child.

*Your child is untalented.*

What would you say about my assessment? How do you feel? What do you think?

You are probably frustrated, bummed out, and irritated. Perhaps you are even comparing your kid to the other nine children and thinking, "I can't believe they're more talented than my child."

You might even tell me I have no idea what I'm talking about. Your child can absolutely be as talented as anyone else in that domain. Your kid *does* have talent; it is just waiting to come out, or your kid needs coaching or teaching. You might tell me that if I had just seen this or that, I would have judged your child differently.

## Why Does It Matter?

Why does it matter which kids are identified as talented and which are not? If you are a parent, you probably already know. A child anointed as talented is shown through door number one—the get-attention door. A child thought to have little or no talent is shown through door number two—the sometimes-get-attention door.

Through door number one is a place where talent is developed in the few kids identified as talented. This place offers access to the best teachers, directors, leaders, and coaches. It is a place where lots of people pay attention to a child's development. It's where the best academic



A child anointed as talented is shown through door number one—the get-attention door. A child thought to have little or no talent is shown through door number two—the sometimes-get-attention door.

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programs (such as gifted and talented programs and honors classes), schools, and school systems are found. It's where kids find sports clubs and select teams. It is where children are invited to music conservatories or theater programs. Frequently, door number one leads to more and more "good" doors.

Through door number two is a place where adults sometimes see kids' abilities and try to help develop them. Or it's a place where children must get after it themselves. This place often has

lots of kids in it, and the teacher, leader, director, or coach is just trying to get stuff done. Children may or may not develop their talent here, but that isn't the primary focus. Neither the expectations nor the environment is designed with this goal in mind.

These doors exist in every performance domain where children participate. They lead to consequences, both for the "talented" and the "untalented." When we adults create, open, and shut these doors, labeling kids and showing them through one door or the other, we are setting them on track at an early age to receive all that is behind the chosen door.

Which door is better? Does being identified as talented mean a child will succeed? Does not being identified mean a kid won't succeed?

I think most parents would want their children to be selected as talented because of the reasons I've just described. What if I said that being labeled talented carries some potential problems and that being labeled untalented could begin a beautiful journey on a road less traveled—one that could actually lead to more talent?

In fact, many talented people have been labeled untalented at some point. From Michael Jordan (who famously wasn't selected for his high school basketball team) to Maya Angelou (who as a child was viewed as unintelligent because she didn't talk), the world is full of examples of very famous, very talented people who were shown through door number two as children and who went on to defy expectations. But these are just the famous ones—the ones whose stories got told *after* they found exceptional success. How many kids get told “Sorry, you didn't score quite high enough on the aptitude test to get into our gifted and talented program” or “I'm afraid you didn't quite make the cut for the orchestra” or the like? If they hear this at a young age, will they have the tools to develop their talents on their own? Or will an adult help them on their journey after they walk through door number two?

## Underserved Talented Kids

According to the US Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection from 2011–2012, there were approximately 3.2 million kids enrolled in gifted and talented programs, and the selection for these programs was often done at the state and local level. In a more recent report released by Purdue University's Gifted Education Research and Resource Institute (GER2I) in 2019, approximately 3.3 million children were labeled as gifted—but 3.6 million more gifted children weren't being identified (Dreilinger 2019). According to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), placement in gifted and talented programs is made through various means, including recommendations from parents and school officials, assessments, and placement exams. High-ability students from underserved populations, such as children of color and children from low-income families, are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs as well as advanced classes (2021a).

Identifying and serving underserved populations is an important undertaking. Who are the underserved? In education, this term usually means students whose needs aren't met consistently in schools: “students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, students who are English language learners (ELL), students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, and twice-exceptional (2e) students” (Ritchotte, Lee, and Graefe 2020).

In sports and the arts, underrepresentation is often a socioeconomic issue. For example, high-level youth sports in the United States typically use a pay-to-play model. Some sports, such as club volleyball, soccer, and lacrosse, can cost up to ten thousand dollars a year. Common high school sports, such as football, basketball, volleyball, and soccer, usually don't require hefty fees and thus seem more accessible to all kids, socioeconomically speaking. But closer examination

reveals that athletes participating in these sports often also attend year-round club programs—that is, those who can afford them and can get rides to attend these programs. This creates inequitable access to higher-level training. A similar scenario plays out in arts access for children.

It is imperative that we start to see underserved populations and serve them. Kids are often underrepresented because they are not in a school district that presents or promotes talent devel-



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opment programs, because they do not have adults fighting for their access to these programs, or because talent development programs are too expensive. Kids are also underrepresented because talent gatekeepers may not be watching for talent with an open mind.

I believe assessment strategies need changing—not only for underserved populations, but

for all kids. In fact, the very lens through which we see and identify academic gifts and talents needs an adjustment. And this is also the case in sports, music, fine arts, and every other performance setting where kids participate.

As you read this book, I ask you to consider a new approach to defining and developing talent in children. You will see that I use examples of talent in different domains throughout the book. Obviously, I am not an expert in all these areas. But I hope you'll find that through examples and research in different performance domains, I provide a compelling case for a different approach.