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Inspiring the Future: An Interview with Kenneth Kiewra

Kenneth A. Kiewra and Suzanna E. Henshon



Kenneth A. Kiewra is John E. Weaver Professor in educational psychology at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Kiewra conducts research on note taking, talent development, and scholarly productivity. He also created and validated the SOAR (select, organize, associate, regulate) teaching and learning method. His scholarship has been shared through six books and numerous articles and chapters. He is listed among the top 2% of the most cited researchers worldwide throughout their careers, according to research on meta-science by Stanford University. Kiewra has given more than 500 invited presentations and interviews around the world. His teaching excellence has been recognized with the National Chess Educator of the Year Award, University of Nebraska's Outstanding Teaching and Instructional Creativity Award, and three college awards.

Henshon: *What led you to the field of talent development?*

Kiewra: Carol Dweck calls herself a me-searcher (Prinz et al., 2021) because she investigates areas of personal importance. My foray into talent investigations was purely me-search. My first born child, Keaton, displayed an array of early qualities that prompted me to introduce him to chess. He developed deep interests in revolving topics ranging from dinosaurs to the Pony Express, read early, had a lock trap memory, and had a penchant and proficiency for skill games like checkers and tic-tac-toe. His play was strategic, thoughtful, and nearly unbeatable. Chess seemed to me like the perfect arena for his proclivities and skills. Sure enough, Keaton took to chess like rooks to open files. I taught Keaton the little I knew about chess and then tutored him from what I learned from reading chess books, trying to stay a lesson ahead of him. Our meager training paid quick dividends as Keaton finished third in the Nebraska State Elementary Scholastic Tournament among 80 far-more seasoned participants.

Keaton's early success and my lackluster chess knowledge made it evident that I needed reinforcements

and resources for cultivating his chess talent. That was when I donned my educational psychology cap and used science to find out what a talent parent might do. I conducted qualitative interviews with parents of chess prodigies to find out what those parents were doing to help their chess children excel (Kiewra et al., 2006). That investigation was a defining moment leading to nearly two decades of talent research (e.g., Kiewra & Witte, 2018; Witte et al., 2015), wherein colleagues and I investigated the roles parents play in elite talent development in domains as far ranging as music, volleyball, spelling, baton twirling, speed skating, and many more. That work is also chronicled in my book *Nurturing Children's Talents: A Guide for Parents* (Kiewra, 2019). As for Keaton, he went on to capture six national scholastic titles, earn the International Master title, and carve out a successful chess coach career, thanks, in part, to some me-searching and talent parenting.

Henshon: *Based on your research, what do you advise parents who want to cultivate children's talents?*

Kiewra: First I would say that talent need not culminate in gold medals or academy awards to merit pursuit. Talent is not an end product but a process, a continuum along which all children can move, whether the outcome is chess master or chess club, Carnegie Hall or community band. The idea is to be better on Friday than on Monday, better in December than in June. In that vein, it is the pursuit of talent that parents and children find most gratifying. Children emerge from their talent paths with greater confidence, resiliency, and self-regulation skills. And children and parents enjoy the ride and develop a closer relationship along the way.

Second I would say that most anything is possible. Almost none of the parents I interviewed foresaw elite talent as the eventual outcome. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who aptly said, "Every artist was first an amateur." All the talented people you know and admire, and all those I studied, began with blank slates. Talent is made, not born.

Third I would say that no child takes the talent journey alone. Young talent travelers need adult support. Behind most successful children are parents guiding the way. Parents fulfill a host of roles that children are ill equipped to handle. Parents spark a constellation of environmental factors necessary for success, including: providing an enriched early environment, securing mentors, regulating practice, building a center of excellence, occasionally sustaining motivation, and managing all logistical aspects of the talent journey. This is no easy task and can require extraordinary parental actions and sacrifices. But for those who took the journey, their actions and sacrifices were justified in two ways. One, they recognized and met their child's talent pursuing need, which begged to be met in the same way a medical need must be met. Two, they loved their children and wanted them to be happy and fulfilled.

Last, talent parents are not pushers. Instead, it is their children often pushing for resources and support. Talent parents know that they cannot fuel or commandeer the talent train—that comes from the children—parents can only help steer.

Henshon: *Another talent area you investigate is productive scholars and what they can tell the rest of us about being more productive. Please comment on this line of research.*

Kiewra: This is a second me-searcher topic. I wanted to know how I might be more productive. I wondered how some scholars have been so productive and impactful. How on earth has Rich Mayer, for example, published more than 600 scientific articles over his career? Since 2000, colleagues and I have conducted a series of studies with or about highly productive scholars in educational psychology. This includes studies involving scholars nominated by their peers, scholars from a German cohort, female scholars from the United States and Europe, early career award winning scholars, award winning graduate student scholars, and recollections about scholar John Glover. This work, interviews from other sources, and personal experiences are chronicled in a forthcoming book titled, *Be a More Productive Scholar*, and published by Oxford University Press. The book contains more than 100 advice points for budding and established scholars alike, housed under general topics such as: You can do it, get solid training, find your path, forge an identifiable research program, use productive research approaches, leverage student mentoring, write like a star, handle the review process, manage time and life, seek and lend support, climb down from the tower, and take heed of the universe conspiring. In the end, readers see that productive scholars, like talented children, have a deep passion for their

domain, work smart and relentlessly at their craft, benefit from the support and guidance of others, and accumulate advantages that make them successful.

Henshon: *You have explored talent development in some other ways. Please tell readers about that.*

Kiewra: More me-searching. One of my children was a National Merit Scholar. This led a colleague and I to investigate National Merit Scholars (Kiewra & Rom, 2020). We interviewed six Scholars and their parents to learn what roles students, parents, and schools play in academic success. We found that Scholars were raised in two parent families, with multiple siblings, by well-educated parents. In the home the children showed precocious abilities early, were advanced and avid readers, and emerged from their early home environments with positive academic values, high motivation about academic success, and with an independent and industrious work ethic largely through parental guidance. Surprisingly, parents had limited involvement in their children's academic success when they were school aged. Schooling was important too, with scholars benefiting from home schooling or from an assortment of school-based special programs for the educationally gifted.

Here is yet another me-searching topic. As I approached retirement, I began to contemplate what I might do. This wondering led colleagues and I to investigate those who challenge time and conventional retirement plans and remain productive in their wisdom years (Kiewra et al., 2023). Among our interviewees were educational psychologist Rich Mayer who continues producing at an incredible rate into his 70's even though he could have retired years ago at full pay. Another is news anchor icon Judy Woodruff who was still anchoring the *PBS NewsHour* well into her 70's. There were also the Wander Women who quit their jobs, sold their possessions, and set out to hike America and enjoy nature. Their ongoing adventures have already taken them along thousands of trail miles, including "The Triple Crown" of hiking: Pacific Crest Trail (2,653 miles), Continental Divide Trail (3,028 miles), and Appalachian Trail (2,190 miles). Some of the conclusions drawn from the study include: (a) Don't retire, but if you do, retire to something, (b) follow your bliss, (c) work hard, (d) offset aging challenges, (e) be inspired by role models, (f) be a life-long learner, and (g) take heed of the universe conspiring.

Henshon: *You have a whole other area of research (outside of talent development) on academic success. Please tell readers about that and about your recently published book, SOAR to College Success and Beyond.*

Kiewra: It all began in graduate school at Florida State University. I was taking a statistics class and the instructor banned note taking, believing that it interfered with listening and learning. Because he also believed that students needed notes to study, he provided us with notes following each lecture. Most students loved this. Not me. I was a faithful and copious note taker. I retreated to the rear of the classroom and became a clandestine note taker, secretly recording notes on a small pad resting on my lap—likely making me the world’s first laptop note taker. This experience led me to investigate note taking, my first and longtime research domain and my initial me-searching expedition.

Research on note taking eventually morphed into my investigating a special brand of notes, graphic organizers like hierarchies and matrices that display information spatially. Collectively, this work revealed the benefits of note taking as a means for selecting important information and of graphic organizers for organizing it, such that associations among ideas are more readily apparent than when information is organized in linear-formatted texts or outlines. From this realization, I developed and investigated the teaching-learning method SOAR (e.g., Daher & Kiewra, 2016; Jairam & Kiewra, 2010).

SOAR is an acronym for the method’s four components: select, organize, associate, and regulate. Instructors can facilitate SOAR learning, for example, by supplying notes (select); graphic organizers (organize); relationships, examples, and mnemonics (associate); and practice test questions (regulate). Instructors should teach their lessons in SOAR-compatible ways while also teaching students how to SOAR on their own. Preparing teachers in this way is the subject of my book, *Teaching How to Learn* (Kiewra, 2009), and my college course, Teaching Learners to Learn.

I also teach students SOAR strategies directly through a college course I developed called Strategies for Academic Success, which enrolls more than 600 students annually across all disciplines. The book for that course is *SOAR to College Success and Beyond* (Kiewra, 2022a). It includes all SOAR topics plus chapters on motivation, mind-set, and life and time management.

Classes and books like these seem more imperative than ever. I have progressively witnessed a decrement in note taking, a drop in intrinsic motivation and study time, and a startling uptick in cyberslacking due to digital distractions in the college classroom.

Henshon: *What are some of the most important lessons you have learned from your scholarly work and career that you might pass along to readers?*

Kiewra: I was asked this same question for a special issue on self-regulated learning (Kiewra, 2022b). Here I recap some of my career guiding principles that might also be valuable to others:

- *Conduct pioneering research.* Careers are too short to follow the crowd and conduct the umpteenth study on concept maps or the minor design alteration when investigating the testing effect. Don’t become a footnote to others’ work. Follow your bliss and go where your interests lie. Be a researcher. I was recently recognized for pioneering work on note taking, SOAR, and talent development (Bembenutty, 2022).
- *Take your work to the people.* Don’t be content publishing for a select few. Disseminate your ideas through teaching and service. As mentioned, I developed and teach courses for teachers and students on applying SOAR strategies. I developed and teach three different talent-based courses, one for 1st-year Honors students, one for graduate students on talent development, and another for graduate students on being a more productive scholar. Over my career, I have made more than 500 invited presentations on these topics for teachers, students, scholars, and parents.
- *Write for your friends.* Former *Journal of Educational Psychology* editor Joel Levin told me that a manuscript must pass the Friend Test to merit publication, meaning that a friend unfamiliar with the area would understand and enjoy it. Effective writing is simple, clear, interesting, and jargon-free. I strive to make all my writing—from journal articles to books—friendly.
- *Find your rhythm.* There is a rhythm to my workday. I schedule my classes so they meet in the late afternoon just 1-day a week to free up large time blocks for scholarly work. I work from home most days focusing on scholarly work each morning when my mind is freshest, exercising midday to rejuvenate, and then returning to my scholarly work or attending to routine tasks in the afternoon.
- *Take a walk on the wild side.* Research confirms the health and creative benefits of walking, particularly in nature (Oppezzo et al., 2014). I have been on the move as a runner, hiker, or walker throughout my career. This routine has kept me healthy and happy and has provided opportunity to reflect and think. Some of my best ideas have evolved while on the trails.

Henshon: *Can you tell readers what upcoming projects are on the horizon for you?*

Kiewra: Because I'm up against the wisdom years calendar, my next big project might be painting the family room or reseeding the lawn. When I do retire, I hope to keep writing and presenting, keep reaching out to teachers, students, scholars, and parents. My next big writing project is likely to be another book for parents. This one will merge my teaching, learning, and talent interests to advise parents on how to help their children be successful, both in school and on a talent path. It might be called something like "Teach Your Children Well: Lessons from a Career in Educational Psychology."

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Notes on interviewer



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