

### Gifted Education a Boon to General Classroom

In starting this paper, I initially thought I would offer a snapshot of the current views that experts hold about gifted education and perhaps compare this to perspectives held 20-30 years ago when I first began to teach. However, I discovered that while there has been great deal of research and theory developed about the nature and importance of giftedness, consensus in the gifted education field has been slow to form. Whether discussing the definition of a gifted student, the best manner to identify one or how to appropriately meet that child's educational needs, there remain distinctly differing approaches.

As a result, I decided to change the focus of this paper. After summarizing the complicated history of gifted education, I'll touch on the field's evolution and then delve deeper into the philosophy of one particular educational theorist and researcher: Joseph Renzulli. Although Renzulli is not considered the definitive word in the field, I have chosen him because his is an inclusive philosophy, he is an educator putting his theories to the test in classrooms, and those classrooms are right here in Connecticut.

The ongoing debate about the definition of what constitutes a *gifted* child or student is complex. Indeed, Sternberg & Davidson's text begins with an academic who rejects the very idea of the gifted child (Borland, 2010, p. 1). As a result, I have chosen definitions from a prominent researcher in the field, one who has collaborated with other experts and holds a view consistent with the current federal definition. Pfeiffer defines a gifted child as one who, "...demonstrates a greater likelihood, when compared to other students of the same age, experience and opportunity, to achieve extraordinary accomplishments in one or more culturally valued domains (Pfeiffer, 2013b)." Similarly, he defines the *academically* gifted student as one who, "...demonstrates outstanding performance or evidence of potential for outstanding academic performance, when compared with other students of the same age, experience and opportunity... (Pfeiffer, 2013b)."

In general, identification of gifted people has not been difficult. Smart, talented, extraordinarily able people have always stood out. However, establishing a methodology for identifying gifted students, particularly ones who don't necessarily "self-identify," has proven more difficult.

While the identification and education of gifted children is found in writings dating back to ancient Greek philosophers and Confucius, the origins of gifted education in America likely stem from Lewis Terman's research at Stanford University nearly a century ago. Terman modified French psychologists Binet and Simon's mental test to identify and track high-scoring youth in a lengthy longitudinal study. His version of the test would go on to become the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (Dai, 2010, p. 12-13). Students scoring at least 120 to 130 on the test were termed gifted.

Borland, mentioned earlier, goes on in his treatise to argue that mental testing and the creation of the term, "gifted child," were not by chance, but a reactionary backlash to growing diversity in early 20<sup>th</sup> century schools. Due to intense immigration and compulsory education laws, schools were filling with students of different cultures, languages and preparation. The establishment of testing and labeling allowed authorities to give the nation's youth the impression that they were under constant observation and, as a result, control. In the aftermath of this testing, a new jargon was created to categorize as authorities saw fit. Words such as "intelligence" and "normal" were used in new ways. Likewise, words like "supernormal" or "gifted" were used to describe successful test scorers while "subnormal," "idiot," or "moron" were used for those testing poorly (Sternberg & Davidson, 2010, p. 1-6).

Now, even though some students had been identified by testing or teacher recommendation, it wasn't clear what was to be done with them. According to Kirk, Gallagher & Coleman (2015), school systems eventually adopted various strategies to help move gifted students through school faster. These strategies included: admitting precocious children to Kindergarten as early as age two or three; "telescoping" or moving students through grades faster than their peers; and skipping grades entirely. When available, students were offered: Advanced Placement courses; dual enrollment in high school and college; and early college admission (as cited in Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994).

Unfortunately, not much changed within the classroom for gifted students. They were often doing the same work, "text consumption and test prep" according to Renzulli (Mitchell, 2010), as their peers; however, simply doing it much faster. Whether they were pulled out from their general classrooms or not, there was little to no personalization for their interests, no options, and

a decided lack of challenge other than the accelerated time frame. Likewise, they had little autonomy other than what they afforded themselves when they finished the assignment before everybody else.

Anecdotally, I can recall this model. I was assigned to a Gifted and Talented Education program my first year of high school. It was two hours of English and Humanities. We had a dynamic teacher who raced through a curriculum of Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, etc. While thrilling in the moment, many of my classmates and I opted to skip the Sophomore year version. We did an exponential amount of work for a grade that was valued the same as everyone else's. Plus, the Sophomore class was taught by a different, less charismatic, teacher. There was no apparent incentive to continue other than to feed one's ego.

There is evidence that some school districts used the Response-to-Intervention model to organize their efforts on behalf of gifted students. However, while some districts pulled gifted students out of general classes part-time for small group work (Tier II) or offered them exclusive programming (Tier III), little research indicated any significant impact of these interventions over what the students would have received in their general classes. This disconnect between the classroom and Terman's testing may have resulted from assumptions that Terman made in the course of his study. Terman's assumptions included the ideas that: giftedness depended upon high IQ, the gifted were a specific group, and their intelligence was unchanging (Pfeiffer, 2015, p. 4). These original assumptions are significant and have contributed to a particularly misleading mythology about giftedness.

The most pervasive myth seems to be that being "gifted" is an actual thing when, in reality, giftedness is a human construct. And, while this construct can be defined and measured when using IQ tests, it is entirely subjective when comparing it to other "inherent" traits like height or eye color. It is not a true human characteristic, but a category that a society uses to classify people. Pfeiffer points out that, "Historically, each society has used the concept of giftedness as a label to explain and recognize those individuals who perform exceptionally well in whatever domains that society values (Pfeiffer, 2015, p. 7)." As a result, a great instrumentalist or vocalist might be considered gifted in a society valuing music, but not recognized as such in a society

that emphasized hunting or agriculture. Their musical talent would be unchanged; the label or category would.

Borland, again, posits that he not only believes the “gifted child” to be a bogus concept, but that the scanty research available at the time (late 1990s) did nothing close to defending the need for gifted education. Likewise, the idea of separating some children, often of a higher socioeconomic class, via test and entitling them to an exclusive curriculum is a political powder keg. Instead, he suggests that differentiated curriculum be formed first, that labels for “gifted” and “normal” students be discarded, and that students be matched with the curriculum that best fits their educational needs rather than their chronological age. He argues that the “normal” majority of students would be better served by this approach as well as the “gifted.” He concludes his paper by calling for a “paradigm shift,” a profound change in the way gifted education is conceived and executed (Sternberg & Davidson, 2010, p. 13-16).

Ironically, perhaps, the changes that Borland sought had already taken root by the time of his publication. And, while not the powerful paradigm shift that he sought, there has been a gradual change in the way gifted students are taught. According to Pfeiffer, the “gifted child” model gave way slowly to the “talent development perspective...that downplays general intelligence, is more domain or specific talent centered, and less exclusive (cited by Dai, 2010).”

The mid- to late-1990s saw several innovative educational models and their corresponding theorists flourish, including the husband-wife team of Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis. Their Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) would not only establish itself as an effective educational program for gifted students but also for general classrooms as well. Their motivation for developing this program mirrored the sentiments of Borland and similar critics of using IQ tests to separate students. “Laypersons and professionals at all levels have begun to question the efficacy of programs that rely on I.Q. scores...as the primary methods for identifying which students can benefit from differentiated services (Renzulli, 1998, p. 107). Their hope was that SEM would meet the needs of all the students, not despite their differences, but because of them.

Renzulli reasons that traditional definitions of giftedness, and their related identification procedures, are severely limited by a lack of consideration for a student’s motivation, the tremendous differentiation within giftedness itself (intellectual ability, academic aptitude,

creativity, etc.), and the tendency to misinterpret the definition if not just defaulting to using an IQ score (Renzulli, 2011, p. 83). He follows with the claim that research consistently shows that, “while no single criterion should be used to identify giftedness, (creative/productive) persons who have achieved recognition because of their unique accomplishments and creative contributions possess a relatively well-defined set of three interlocking clusters of traits (p. 83).” As a result, the SEM is based on Renzulli’s “Three-Ring Conception” of giftedness, an alternative perspective to giftedness that is best represented by a Venn Diagram consisting of these three interlocking traits: Above-Average Ability, Task Commitment, and Creativity. The traits are equally valued and a preponderance of one trait would indicate less potential for success than a balance of the three.

The farthest reaching implication of Renzulli’s new conception of giftedness and his resulting SEM is that it, “... reflects a democratic ideal that accommodates the full range of individual differences in the entire student population, and it opens the door to programming models that develop the talent potentials of many at risk students... (Renzulli, 1998, p. 106).” Instead of separating and marginalizing gifted students while simultaneously stigmatizing the vast majority of students as “ungifted,” Renzulli’s approach unites teachers, administrators, parents, and possibly even politicians, in creating an effective universal learning environment.

Many profound teaching developments have been created, tested, and modified in models such as SEM. A few developments that started as enrichment for gifted students, but are now used in general classrooms around the nation, include: “(a) a focus on concept rather than skill learning, (b) the use of interdisciplinary curriculum and theme-based studies, (c) student portfolios, (d) performance assessment, (e) cross-grade grouping, (f) alternative scheduling patterns, and (g)...demanding roles that require hands-on learning, first-hand investigations, and the *application* of knowledge and thinking skills to complex problems (Renzulli, 2005, p. 81).” The crossover of these teaching developments from strictly gifted programs to the general classroom is a huge sea change for a couple of reasons. First, research shows these teaching techniques work! That has not been the case with much of what has been historically examined in either type of classroom. Second, every student in a general classroom has increased opportunity to develop higher order thinking skills with these interventions, not just the few who test well.

The SEM, as Renzulli suggests, is intended to infuse an existing school culture that is open to inclusion, not replace programming or add on to curriculum. The first step is to establish the mindset of seeing the school as a place for talent development. With this in mind, educators are encouraged to scout talent everywhere instead of using cutoff scores to classify students. With everyone's potential for talent, there is more likelihood that everyone will work together to help the students discover it on their own.

Once this foundation is in place, the SEM requires three components. The Total Talent Portfolio, a combination of traditional- and performance-based assessment, is used to help determine a student's abilities, interests, and preferred learning styles. Then, the curriculum is modified to suit the results of the portfolio assessment. This may result in curriculum compacting (eliminating redundancy that bores kids endlessly), textbook analysis (to reduce the emphasis on "text consumption" mentioned earlier), and expanding the depth of learning (introducing higher-order thinking skills to the existing curriculum). Finally, focus is turned toward enrichment learning and teaching by emphasizing four principles: 1) Each learner is unique so teach like that's the case; 2) Learning is more effective when students enjoy what they're doing; 3) Learning is more meaningful and enjoyable when studies have a real problem solve; 4) Use knowledge and skills that are learned (Renzulli, 1994-95).

In conclusion, I didn't expect to be as inspired by changes in gifted education as I have been. While there has been a great deal of disagreement about the merits of gifted education and the field's origins certainly have authoritarian overtones to them, the results of the last 20 years' experimentation and research in various gifted program "labs" are promising. Not only have solid pedagogical techniques resulted, these techniques are being used to improve education across the board in general classrooms.

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