

# A Critique of Renzulli's Theory Into Practice Models for Gifted Learners

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*In this paper, I offer my views on the theory and practice models of Dr. Joseph Renzulli, a leading researcher and theorist within the field of gifted education. Renzulli's model is critiqued against a set of criteria proposed by the author for a "good" gifted program. There are many strengths to Renzulli's model; but a major weakness is the lack of school-based assessment procedures that can guide decisions about a broader range of accelerative, enrichment, and other types of program options for gifted students with different needs. The major ideas underlying Renzulli's theory were also critically examined, including the broadening of the talent pool, the emphasis on products, and the focus on the development of creative productivity as a basis for educational programs for gifted children.*

## Introduction

I was very pleased to be asked to respond to Dr. Renzulli's paper and the ideas that have shaped his contributions to the field of gifted education. As Dr. Renzulli states, one of the defining features of his work is the combination of both theory and practice. Renzulli has deliberately and systematically translated his ideas about giftedness and its development into models for identification and educational services. This made my task of critiquing his work both more interesting and challenging.

I have divided my comments into two sections. The first deals with the practice part of Renzulli's work, and I attempt to evaluate the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) and the application aspects of the Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness (Triad) and the Revolving Door Identification Model (RDIM) against what I consider to be important elements of a "good" program for gifted students. In the second part, I deal with some of the major ideas underlying Renzulli's conception of giftedness.

## Practice and Application

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*Criteria for a "Good" Gifted Program*

*A deliberate and concerted effort to identify every child's interests, talents, and potential for achievement, beginning with their earliest school experiences.* I believe that the spirit of the SEM and the Triad/RDIM is to be ever watchful for and discerning of signs of talent and potential in children within everyday school situations. Renzulli emphasizes the use of both status and action information to identify students who need some special educational programming. The identification of the talent pool as the top 15% to 20% of students is based on performance on typical standardized tests and other achievement indices. But, most standardized testing and achievement measurement (e.g., grades) do not occur until the early elementary grades. I would like to see Renzulli more explicitly deal with identifying talent in very young children. Deviations from expected age norms is often very apparent among young children and overlooked by schools in favor of goals that emphasize socialization over academic learning. There is a great need for curriculum compacting, acceleration, and augmentation of the preschool and kindergarten curriculum. Enrichment activities would take a different form, perhaps consisting of mainly Type I- or Type II-like activities since young children would not have the skills to work independently. Clearly a strength of Renzulli's models is a focus on discerning the interests of all children and providing encouragement for their development through enrichment activities.

*Testing and Identification protocols that yield information on children's domains of talent and level of developed talent within domains.* Renzulli advocates the use of standardized tests, which yield what he calls status information, primarily to identify candidates for the talent pool. He gives relatively little attention to further use of tests to determine levels of talent within domains and to provide information on which to match appropriate educational programs and services.

For example, it is clear from the research from the talent search programs that there is a wide range of abilities among students who score at the 95th percentile or above on standardized achievement tests. (This is the criterion that Renzulli says is typically used for gifted programs but, according to him, is too restrictive.) The talent searches have shown that accurate measurement of these differences can be accomplished via off-level testing and that they warrant very different kinds of educational interventions or programs. The interventions vary from mild to radical; programs differ along dimensions, such as the *degree* of acceleration and the *degree* of

alteration in the pacing of instruction.

Educators need assistance in using tests to obtain information that will help them plan and select appropriate educational experiences and to determine which students require different types and amounts of modifications in their school programs. What is important to stress and specify for practice is the ways in which tests and measurements can and should be selected and used in order to make decisions. For example, important criteria for the selection of assessment instruments include that the test has sufficient ceiling, will yield information about one or several domains of talent that the school is prepared to serve, and will be appropriate for the school population (e.g., using tests that are less reliant on English language proficiency for children who are nonnative speakers).

Tests should be used to gather information that will help educators decide on the pacing of instruction, the placement within the curriculum, and the degree to which supplementary services and programs are needed. All of this is possible within Renzulli's rubric but is not specified; and, in fact, one gets the impression that test information is not highly regarded. Assessment information, if gathered and used deliberately and systematically, can and should have these purposes beyond identifying the talent pool—to identify children who are not able to show their abilities in school achievement, to reveal the capacities of children who top out on achievement tests, and to provide information on which to recommend different degrees of intervention and alterations in the basic curriculum.

Renzulli, in providing the historical context out of which the Triad theory arose, makes the point that the use of IQ tests as the sole indicator of ability and the only criteria for entrance into most school gifted programs was inappropriate. He says that IQ tests do not speak to the individual's capacity to use information in productive creative ways, a hallmark of true giftedness. But, IQ tests, even used alone, can be helpful in identifying children in need of special services under particular circumstances (e.g., with children who are not able to show achievement, either because of poor early schooling or home environments or because of cultural expectations regarding behavior). No test is automatically appropriate or inappropriate. Usefulness is dependent upon the context and the population.

What is lacking in Renzulli's model is attention to differences among talent-pool students and the use of tests and measurements to discern them in order to make decisions about placement, pacing, and services. We have good tools with which to make these decisions. We need to train educators to use tests appropriately to better serve gifted children. It seems to me that a major problem

within education is that academically talented children are typically underassessed, for purpose of providing appropriate educational services, in comparison to children with physical or cognitive handicaps.

*The program should use a variety of service-delivery models in order to meet the needs of different gifted learners.* Within his models, Renzulli advocates several different types of services for gifted learners, including cluster grouping, special classes, and out-of-school experiences. I think that the intent of the model is to meet the educational needs of students in a variety of ways, even though the main emphasis is on product-oriented enrichment activities through independent study.

Curriculum compacting is the primary strategy used to accommodate children who already know a significant amount of the material in a particular lesson. Curriculum compacting buys time for students who can then do other kinds of activities or projects. Curriculum compacting is the main accelerative type of modification that is promoted within Renzulli's models. There are, however, many other accelerative strategies available to educators (Southern & Jones, 1991, list 15 such options), only a few of which are mentioned in passing. Even if Renzulli stated more explicitly the various accelerative strategies that could be used for gifted students, his models do not give educators the tools to make decisions about when and with whom to use them (see previous discussion). Although this is not the intent, one is left with the idea that the singular strategy to accommodate students who already know a significant part of the curriculum is by curriculum compacting. But curriculum compacting, particularly when implemented on a lesson-by-lesson basis, does not have the benefits of other kinds of administrative arrangements designed to streamline content to avoid repetition. Grouping into classes and placement of children for instruction in particular subjects into advanced grades may offer a more intellectually stimulating social environment, which is needed by many gifted children. Homogeneous grouping arrangements are more explicitly suggested in the Secondary Triad Model via special talent-pool classes. I applaud the focus in Renzulli's model on an array of services for gifted children rather than a single type of program, but a reliance on curriculum compacting as the main curricular modification concerns me. I do not doubt that 15% to 20% of school children could benefit from some compacting; but among a smaller subset of these children, other, more comprehensive ways of dealing with advanced levels of knowledge and a faster learning rate are more appropriate and effective.

Renzulli alludes to using outside-of-school courses and programs, such as summer programs, internships, and mentorships for students, particularly in the Secondary Triad Model (Reis & Renzulli, 1986). I think this would be, in principle, supportive of allowing students to cross school boundaries (e.g., elementary students attending high school classes and high school students attending college classes) in order to achieve continuous progress. I would like to see these options explicitly stated. Summer and outside-of-school programs have many important benefits for students. These programs—once thought of as superfluous add-ons to in-school programming—are now regarded as essential to the development of high levels of talent. These can be venues for the independent project work promoted in Type III activities and for contact with professionals who do real-world work. An integration of school and outside-of-school resources maximizes the possibility that interest and motivation will be sustained and talent development achieved.

*The content of the program addresses core curricular areas.* Renzulli advocates that Type I and Type II enrichment activities be used as a way to stimulate students' interests in subjects and independent investigations of the Type III variety. These could be very closely connected to the core curricular areas typically covered in school, or they could be only tangentially related. The degree of relatedness is not specifically addressed; and it is the intent of Renzulli's model to expose children to a broader range of concepts, ideas, and areas not traditionally covered in the school curriculum. Only a few general criteria for the selection of Type I or Type II enrichment activities or guidelines for the encouragement of particular Type III activities are given. Teachers use action information or indications of student interest displayed in the classroom as a means of identifying those who might be able to complete Type III enrichment projects. They or a resource teacher or gifted specialist work with the student to find an appropriate project. There are obviously a myriad of activities that could be chosen. To what extent do (and should) these activities relate to or extend the curriculum? In what ways do they build upon the concepts and skills being taught? Is there a master plan for which activities should be selected or promoted for different children? If the goal is to expose children to ideas and concepts not covered in the curriculum, which ones are appropriate and why? In what ways do these enrichment activities promote further development within the child's talent domain?

Research studies showed that the activities given by teachers to students after compacting the curriculum did not "reflect advanced content appropriate for high ability students" (Reis, Burns, &

Renzulli, 1992, as cited in Renzulli & Reis, 1994, p. 17). That this can be a problem is not surprising because both (a) more detailed criteria for selection of various enrichment activities are not given and (b) obtaining information on students' abilities that could be used to make these decisions is not emphasized in Renzulli's model. As a result, Types I, II, or III activities can end up being disjointed experiences for students or only laterally related activities that do not contribute to a cohesive plan for talent development.

It is also not clear to me for whom Type I and Type II activities are appropriate. In the SEM, these kinds of activities are suggested for all children. Within Triad/RDIM, these are reserved for talent-pool students, presumably those for whom we can buy time for such experiences via curriculum compacting. From the descriptions of Type I and Type II activities, they appear appropriate for most children; therefore, I question the value of the talent-pool concept in defining the population to be served with these activities.

*The program allows for continuous progress within the talent area(s) for students.* When I refer to continuous progress, I mean that students have access to content and courses that extend their knowledge and skills further, regardless of age or grade, including, for example, early access to high school-level content for elementary-aged students and college-level material for high school-aged students. Renzulli's various models do not impede continuous progress, but it is not explicit how the enrichment activities contribute substantially to the acquisition of increasingly complex levels of knowledge or skills within a domain. They potentially could; but I would feel more confident about that if Type III activities were designed to fit into some kind of hierarchy where each one prepared the student for the next independent project and, in some important way, built upon and extended the previous Type III activity.

### *Closing Thoughts on Practice*

When I have taught courses on program models in gifted education, I have been struck by the attractiveness of the Triad/RDIM model and the SEM to gifted-program coordinators. But, I have also been disturbed by some educators' reasons for liking the model. They articulate that with this model, they can serve all children through enrichment activities and do not have to deal with the difficult issues of identifying children for the "gifted program" (nor parent dissatisfaction with their procedures). Renzulli himself comments in his paper that he would be extremely disappointed if educators felt that the SEM

removed the need for special programs. I think this is a potential danger and occurs, in part, because of misinterpretation of the model(s). But, it also stems from the relative stress that Renzulli places on some ideas and concepts over others. Specifically, Renzulli emphasizes greater inclusion and enrichment activities (which are appropriate for most students), considerably less attention is given to developing school-based assessment procedures that can guide decisions about a broader range of accelerative, enrichment, and other types of program options for gifted students with different needs.

## The Big Ideas

### *Broadening the Talent Pool*

A key concept in Renzulli's models is that of broadening the talent pool. Given the main activities and interventions that Renzulli is recommending for students, his broadened definition is appropriate.

The identification and selection process can afford to be more flexible and can support a wide tolerance for error since the part-time enrollment of gifted children is not particularly crucial to their overall educational development and the accidental or even intentional inclusion of non-gifted children into the program would probably not produce any psychological trauma due to educational misplacement. (Ronvik, 1989, p. 232)

Because of the lack of information given to educators on how to identify students who need various degrees of acceleration and modifications in pacing of instruction, the impression one gets is that the model results in the identification of more students as gifted. However, the reality is that only a subset of the broadened pool will be appropriately placed in some special classes and will need services that others do not. The finding that the Type III enrichment products produced by the top 5% of students were not different from those produced by students below this level (Reis, 1981, as cited in Renzulli & Reis, 1994) only indicates that Type III activities can be given to a broader pool of students. The finding says nothing about performance within other types of curricular modifications or accelerative program options.

### *Emphasis on Products*

A major concept in Renzulli's models is the Type III enrichment activities with their emphasis on the development of products.

According to Renzulli, educational experiences that give students the opportunity to create knowledge and meaningful products will be conducive to the development of creative productive giftedness (or at least utilize the qualities necessary for this type of giftedness). I am sure that students find Type III activities very engaging because they emanate from their interests. As Renzulli asserts, they can encourage independent inquiry and make learning and the acquisition of knowledge more personal.

In Renzulli's discussion of the value of Type III activities, I am reminded of the thoughts and ideas of several other researchers. Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993) talked about the need for school learning activities to have both instrumental (future long-term payoffs, such as entry into medical school) and expressive (immediate feelings of enjoyment and engagement) rewards. Their research showed that typical high school classes in the arts offer expressive but not instrumental rewards to students, whereas science classes offer instrumental but not expressive rewards. Learning activities in all disciplines need to be structured to offer both in order to keep students engaged (Csikszentmihalyi et al.).

Lauren Sosniak (1998) talked about the role of "communities of practice" in the talent development process. These are situations where students enter adult worlds of real-life activities and are incorporated into them as novice-but-contributing members (e.g., being a part of a laboratory research team or newspaper production team). Her research showed that these were an essential component of the talent development of creative producers with benefits that include access to professional standards, social support, and apprenticeship types of learning experiences.

It seems that the most valuable aspects of Type III enrichment activities may be in motivating students to become engaged in the learning process, in independent inquiry, and in providing expressive rewards. Research showed that participation in Type III activities positively affected the classroom performance of underachieving gifted students (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, in preparation, as cited in Renzulli & Reis, 1994).

It is still not clear to me, however, in what ways these activities foster creative productive giftedness. Research questions that should be addressed including the following: Do students who participate in Type III activities go on to be creative producers in adulthood? Do they produce significant products as judged by professionals during high school or young adulthood? Does participation affect engagement in the talent field during high school and college? What do students report as the main contribution of Type

### III projects to their talent development?

Because of the motivational benefits of Type III activities and the lack of substantial evidence regarding their contribution to adult creative productive giftedness, they perhaps could or should be available to a wider spectrum of students, not just those who show a strong interest or can gain time to do an independent project via curriculum compacting. Research (Gubbins, 1982, as cited in Renzulli & Reis, 1994) showed that many talent-pool students did not do Type III projects because they were unable to independently generate ideas for them and needed assistance from the teacher to do so. Would there really be much less value in products that result from teacher-generated and teacher-directed ideas? With more teacher help, how many more students would be able to do and reap the motivational benefits of Type III activities?

### *The Focus on Creative Productive Giftedness*

Renzulli draws a distinction between lesson-learning giftedness and creative productive giftedness. The activities he promotes within the SEM and Triad/RDIM are designed to promote the development of creative productive giftedness—or some form of it that is a precursor to adult creative productive giftedness. Creative productive giftedness is an adult phenomena for the most part, with the exception of prodigies who produce adult-level work and only in a few, relatively circumscribed fields. Many researchers study what accounts for the transition from childhood giftedness to adult giftedness, primarily by examining the childhoods of adult creators. Inclusion of the characteristics of creativity and task persistence in Renzulli's model is based on his belief that these are necessary components of adult creative productive giftedness and that children who are capable of developing them are most likely to successfully engage in Type III activities.

Adult creative productive giftedness is very rare. I believe that despite its rarity, it can be the basis for a theory of giftedness. But I also believe, because of its rarity, it should not necessarily be the basis for educational programs and interventions for gifted students. Their purpose should be to provide challenge to all students and to move them from wherever they are to increasingly higher levels of knowledge, complexity, and understanding.

The transition from childhood talent to adult creative productive giftedness is very complex. It cannot be reduced to the inclusion of several additional characteristics in the identification protocol. In fact, the primary component is a high level of motivation to achieve,

often the result of very difficult and traumatic childhood circumstances. The research literature on adult creative producers shows that they were very task oriented, deeply immersed in the talent field at young ages, and almost constantly engaged in practice or some means of acquiring new knowledge and skills. I do not know if task persistence on a Type III project is indicative of that kind of commitment. I suspect, however, that long-term, pervasive commitment to a talent domain, as evidenced by engagement at many levels and in many activities inside and outside of school, is more predictive. Similarly, I doubt that children, no matter how bright, can be creative in the same way as gifted adults. They can produce products that have knowledge that is new to them and apply it in interesting ways; but this is very different from the kind of groundbreaking, field-altering creativity that eminent adults exhibit.

Are there childhood precursors of adult productive creativity? I do not think that we know. If we do not know the forms the constructs of creativity or task persistence take as they develop from childhood to adulthood nor their predictive validity, perhaps we should not promote school practices based on them. Perhaps it is enough to say that every school child should be challenged in school and should have opportunities to explore ideas beyond the curriculum in independent projects that emphasize application, usefulness, and personal meaning. Perhaps the endpoint should be much more immediate, providing academic challenge with curricular modifications, instructional delivery models, and utilization of community resources. I doubt that, despite Renzulli's effort to use school practices that would promote the development of creative productive giftedness, he would significantly increase the number of those types of individuals within the population. There are too many other variables that affect the equation, and they interact in very complex ways. We know, however, that without academic challenge, children lose motivation to achieve and may drop out of their talent domain. Fortunately, we have techniques (e.g., curriculum compacting, acceleration, summer programs, and so forth) to provide challenge and promote intellectual growth for talented students.

Renzulli overdraws dichotomies between lesson-learning giftedness and creative productive giftedness and between inductive and deductive teaching and learning. Clearly these overlap more than they are distinct and separate. Being able to take in information at a rapid pace and to integrate and evaluate it is an essential part of being able to forge new knowledge and to be creative. Adult creative producers typically read widely and voraciously as children. They took in vast amounts of information and were able to make connec-

tions between the rich schemata and cognitive structures acquired through considerable lesson learning. Renzulli does state that you can only be creative if you have a sufficient knowledge base with which to manipulate information. The dichotomies that Renzulli draws gives the impression that there are two different categories of giftedness—when, in reality, adult performance is more an emphasis on one relative to another and only after considerable lesson learning has taken place. New research demonstrates the importance of deliberate *practice* in the development of high-level talent, even academic talent (Ericsson, 1996).

### *Final Thoughts*

While I have criticized some of Dr. Renzulli's ideas, I admire his work because it has generated enormous interest in the field and resulted in the implementation of many programs for gifted learners. His ideas moved the field forward, and I have personally and professionally reaped the benefits of Dr. Renzulli's creative productive work. I want to thank him for his tremendous contributions to the field of gifted education; and I look forward to more of his ground-breaking, field-altering ideas.

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