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**Renzulli's Triad: School to Work for Gifted Students**

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## ABSTRACT

From the authors' perspective, Renzulli's definition, whether misinterpreted to require a composite of traits--more interesting than the interpretation Renzulli iterates--or used as Renzulli intended, to justify more inclusive programs, relies on a dubious rationale for gifted education: to select and nurture society's finest problem solvers. His emphasis on enrichment militates against systematic accelerated study in academics and the arts. Taken together, Renzulli's definition and intervention constitute a politically conservative, product-oriented approach to education that is more likely to reinforce social inequities of the current political economy than to equalize educational opportunity.

## INTRODUCTION

Renzulli's definition of giftedness and his enrichment triad model have been used extensively in the field of gifted education for the past 25 years or so. In the following remarks, we offer a perspective that questions whether these constructs, based on a conception of gifted children as our best future problem solvers and designed to provide qualitatively different programs, can contribute substantially to the education of gifted children.

## PROPHECYING GIFTEDNESS

Renzulli's Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness has, according to its author, been a subject of controversy since its publication 20 years ago partly because people have failed to understand it. In "What Is This Thing Called Giftedness, and How Do We Develop it?," Renzulli reminds readers that his definition does not require possession of all three traits (above-average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity) as a condition of giftedness--that the definition would be satisfied by the capability to develop such a confluence. We infer from his remarks that a child who scores high in only one of the three could be identified as gifted since that high score could be construed as potential for developing all three traits. If this inference is correct, then we are among the many who wrongly understood his definition to require a composite of three traits as necessary to giftedness, and we are a little surprised by his remark that "clearly" this was not what he intended.

It might be interesting to consider why so many educators construed this definition to be more restrictive than Renzulli apparently intended it to be. The version with which most people are familiar is probably the definition (Renzulli, 1978) published in the Phi Delta Kappan:

Giftedness consists of an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits--these clusters being above average general abilities, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Gifted and talented children are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance. (p. 261)

The first sentence of the definition asserts that giftedness consists of an interaction of certain traits. This was the novel element of the definition. In this sentence, Renzulli, in our opinion, was listing ingredients long associated with outstanding adult accomplishment rather than defining giftedness. We paid more attention to this statement and to the "composite set of traits" mentioned later in the definition than to the nebulous phrase "or capable of developing this composite set of traits" because the interaction concept was what Renzulli seemed to be proposing that was new.

Renzulli's (1999) effort to supplement his verbal description with a figural one to clear up misconceptions only reinforced the belief that the definition excluded underachievers. He adopted a Venn diagram with three overlapping circles "to convey figurally the dynamic properties of the concept (i.e., those properties pertaining to motion, interaction, continuous change, and energy rather than a fixed or stable state"; 1999, p. 10). Unfortunately, Venn diagrams cannot carry this burden. Venn diagrams represent disjunct or conjunct sets; they cannot portray fluidity or change. His diagram represents the intersection of all three traits as giftedness. It does not elucidate the concept "capable of developing" the requisite traits. If people interpreted his definition as meaning that possession of all three characteristics is necessary to qualify students as gifted, it is because both his language and his figural representation implied this to be the case.

Although Renzulli (1999) implies that one reason his definition sparked such controversy was its elimination of a high-

IQ score as a requirement for inclusion in gifted programs, this, in our opinion, was not the primary source of the controversy. By 1978, the IQ cutoff criterion had been embattled for a long time. One of its major critics, J. P. Guilford, whose structure of the intellect model--described in an article (Guilford, 1959) followed by his book on the nature of intelligence (Guilford, 1967)--was a dominant influence in gifted education during the 1960s and early 1970s. The first federal definition (Marland, 1972) listed five types of giftedness--one of them creativity--as alternatives to the long-established type: intellectual giftedness. It was not the recognition of different types of giftedness besides high-IQ that was controversial.

The main problem many teachers and administrators of our acquaintance had with the definition was its apparent requirement for students to meet three criteria instead of one. As Dirks and Quarfoth (1981) pointed out, multiple criteria may sacrifice extraordinarily high ability in one area for only above-average ability in several. A requirement for above-average creativity was especially regarded as a problem because creativity is notoriously difficult to assess; and task commitment is of questionable relevance in identifying gifted children, some of whom might not develop a high level of task commitment until they are in college and have explored several disciplines. Too, the incorporation of task commitment in Renzulli's definition seemed to contradict both technical and popular definitions of giftedness as a high level of ability.

If "capable of developing" this three-trait composite, however, includes demonstrated superiority (or potential superiority?) on at least one trait--above-average ability, for example--then his definition is not so novel but, in effect, simply lowers cutoff scores for gifted programs. In combination with other policies, lower cutoff scores can be an important entree to gifted programs for those gifted children who have had significantly different cultural experiences than the majority of the children on whom the tests were normed. However, to lower cutoff scores does not necessarily include such children. Without specific policies to target this group of students, "slots" for the gifted program tend to go to other students whose scores are no better than above-average despite their membership in mainstream culture. If there is research showing that Renzulli's definition consistently leads to identification of intellectually gifted children whose scholastic ability is underestimated by standardized tests, we would be pleased to know it because we value what Renzulli refers to as "schoolhouse" giftedness--precocious verbal comprehension and abstract reasoning.

The crux of the problem with Renzulli's definition is that it is too future oriented. It is based on the rationale for gifted programs as producing society's future "stars." Although this rationale is a popular one, it is not logically or ethically defensible. Predictions of adult success based on childhood performance are unreliable, and the extent to which predictions do succeed may mostly reflect the degree of social inequity that helps to guarantee the success of some children and the failure of others.

Renzulli's definition is not designed primarily to find children who are inadequately served by the school curriculum because of their current significant difference from the norm but, rather, to find those who are thought to have the potential to become significantly different by being the most highly productive adults in their chosen fields. Renzulli's three traits were selected on the basis of their being correlated with extraordinary adult achievement. Whether these traits could have been identified in even these same individuals when they were children is questionable.

Although inferences are made in any type of testing, the leap from IQ-, aptitude-, or achievement-test scores to performance in school is not as far as the leap from childhood performance to adult accomplishments. To infer that a 9-year-old child who can solve arithmetic problems that are challenging to adults is capable of successfully completing fourth-grade mathematics more rapidly than other fourth graders represents some risk of error; but the risk is not nearly as large as the possibility of error in inferring that a child selected for above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment is more likely than unselected children to grow up to perform extraordinary feats in a highly specialized field.

Speaking in regard to a study of young adults who had achieved world-class status in their disciplines, Bloom (1985) proposed that predictions of even the most extraordinary adult accomplishment are necessarily unreliable: We believe it [high-level potential talent] is so hard to predict because what the individuals have already learned by ages ten or eleven is very different from what and how they will learn at a later age. There is so much to learn and develop to reach the heights of talent development that no matter how much the individual has learned by these early years, it is only a small portion of what he or she must learn before reaching the extreme levels attained by the individuals included in this study. Being very good in one phase of the learning may not have a high relation to being very good at a later

phase, even though both phases of the learning are in the same talent field. The motivation to learn in an early phase is not necessarily related to the motivation to learn in the more complex and difficult later phases. (pp. 533-534)

From our perspective, Renzulli's definition is no improvement over the federal definition of giftedness, which, granting its many problems, nevertheless shows some alignment with school curricula through specification of the areas of intellectual giftedness, specific academic ability, and ability in the visual and performing arts.

In regard to gifted students, we think his encouragement of curriculum compacting may be his most important contribution. For several years, he has promoted the use of curriculum compacting as a means of minimizing time spent on repetition of material students have already learned (e.g., Renzulli & Reis, 1998). Based on mastery learning concepts of individual differences in learning rate and their implications for instruction, curriculum compacting could allow all students in any school to skip material they have already mastered and move on to more advanced material. Unfortunately, curriculum compacting in our experience is used primarily to make room for enrichment.

### **ON THE FUTURE OF ENRICHMENT AS A SCHOOL ACCOMMODATION FOR BRIGHT STUDENTS**

Renzulli was among the first researchers in gifted education to provide a serious critique of enrichment programs (Renzulli, 1977). We appreciate his critique but think he did not take it far enough. He opposed the unsystematic approach to curriculum within many enrichment programs and pointed out the fact that process-oriented activities were appropriate for all children, not just gifted children. Further, he suggested some enrichment activities represented mere trivial entertainment and were not particularly appropriate as educational activities for any children. His critique complemented but was not as radical as that of Julian Stanley (1976), who questioned the appropriateness of enrichment itself as a means of meeting the needs of gifted children.

We will direct our remarks in this section primarily to Renzulli's claims about enrichment. We know that teachers are, in the main, disgusted with gifted programs that provide undeserved fun and games to able kids and that they are looking for alternatives. Neither the Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness/Revolving Door Identification Model (Triad/RDIM) nor the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) promises much benefit to academically able kids in terms of their development in academic disciplines or the arts. And there are deeper, more useful approaches to developing the capacity of all kids to do good work in their own communities and in the world at large.

Examining four issues will help us approximate an answer to the question, "What is the future of enrichment, especially in the SEM, as a school accommodation for bright kids?" Lacking an appreciation of such points as these, teachers and administrators may find themselves nodding their heads in premature agreement with Renzulli. Too many already have. As we note, there are better choices for schoolwide-improvement efforts. And whatever the schoolwide improvements, bright kids need additional provisions.

First, the need to establish qualitative difference (Renzulli's main historical point) is bogus--gifted children are different in degree from other children, not in kind. Second, the supposed suitability of Type III enrichment as a vehicle for accommodating bright kids, and talent development generally, is hollow. Third, the view that A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) is a manifesto about serving poor kids' needs is idiosyncratic.

The idiosyncrasy of Renzulli's view of the major conservative educational manifesto reveals the fourth and most critical missing part of his theories: a failure to see connections between schoolwide enrichment and the Great Conservative Restoration in America. Despite the presence of democratic sentiment in the SEM, the implications of political economy are absent in Renzulli's models and theories. This is where the question of aims comes in. Who, we wonder, can benefit from Renzulli's restricted world view? We doubt it will be the folks being impoverished during the Great Conservative Restoration. In this context, after these brief complaints, we essay an answer to our question about the future.

### **ENRICHMENT AND THE HOLY GRAIL OF QUALITATIVE DIFFERENCE**

Renzulli's retrospective look at a life's work keeps silent on the assumptions and commitments that have thus far guided that work. His ideas about serving bright kids, one reads, have come from reading the research, conducting evaluations and research, and from general observations. These bland attributions actually obscure commitments that deserve statement. We learn nothing meaningful about Renzulli's basic assumptions.

The search for qualitative differentiation is a case in point. Why is it self-evident, as he says, that bright kids need qualitatively different instruction? The (unstated) reason seems to be that gifted kids are thought by some educators to be qualitatively different beings. Their giftedness supposedly makes them so, in this view. Despite the fact that Renzulli

might side with us in rejecting this view as undemocratic and even foolish, he nonetheless proceeds to affirm the need for (and proclaims his success in purveying) qualitatively different instructional regimens.

Logically, the search for a better (i.e., qualitatively different) way to serve gifted children leads to whole-school reform, to systemic visions, and to (saints preserve us) paradigm shifts. In fact, the SEM shares aspirations with a number of decent and quite varied school-reform schemes (e.g., Adler, 1982; Meier, 1995; Wigginton, 1985). Renzulli is simply coming at schoolwide reform from an inauspicious quarter (i.e., giving priority to serving the unusual needs of a difficult population).

Renzulli's Type III enrichment is described as most appropriate for, well--certainly not those dullards of quick-lesson-mastery, the schoolhouse-gifted--but for creatively productively gifted kids, who conveniently reveal themselves as such via their successfully negotiating Types I and II activities. Type III activities are, however, more like culminating activities or transforming educational miracles. We ought to hope--and Renzulli might well be hoping with us--that such experiences befall all kids, sometime, somehow. "Sometime, somehow," because these sorts of experiences can rarely be planned and certainly they cannot be routinely expected (and, claims to the contrary, ought to be regarded quite skeptically). Epiphanies of this sort are exactly what good teachers long to witness. And seldom do. These are "shining moments," indeed, when they unfold.

Planning them for the gifted, or even for James Conant's (1959) most academically apt top quartile, is neither appropriate nor does it, as this retrospective purports, constitute equity. It blunts charges of elitism, but it does not confront elitism directly.

Academically focused programs and acceleration that moves gifted kids faster than usual through 13 years of schooling do confront elitism. It is interesting in this light to note that, for Renzulli, even acceleration is enrichment. Virtually all acceleration takes place in age-grade placements in the Enrichment Triad model, and the claim that teachers "can eliminate up to 50% of regular curricular material" (after three hours of training) without harming the achievement of bright kids is spurious. Sure they can, but the enabling condition is a high level of academic ability, not the training. Unfortunately, in the muddy trenches where clever children wallow, such skipping of material is usually verboten; and, even when accomplished, it is shortly undone unless the years that kids are in school are actually shortened. Renzulli avoids the controversy by recasting acceleration as enrichment.

### **HALLUCINATING A NATION AT RISK**

In Renzulli's account, schooling seems to be a tabula rasa. Apparently, if one is not lazy or ignorant, one may, with a proper degree of flexibility, successfully launch just about any research-based practice in just about any school. The SEM is perfect for bad schools, we learn. Yes, it would be nice to see good things happen in bad schools; but thinking about such an issue needs to be more cogent than this.

A fair grasp of historical and political-economic context is needed to think cogently about educational aims and means. The notion that all children should benefit from schooling is nice, but usually society is so structured--for reasons other than laziness and ignorance--that only some children benefit. Others seem rather more afflicted than benefited by their schooling. Further, one must entertain the possibility that the way in which benefits accrue to some may actually contribute to the way harm accrues to others. There is plenty of evidence that schooling works this way (e.g., Friedkin & Necochea, 1988; Katz, 1968; Oakes, 1985).

Evidence of Renzulli's contextual blindness appears in his anomalous interpretation of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) as a document concerned chiefly with equity. Perhaps Renzulli has not noticed that the greatest period of conservative ascendancy--a veritable restoration, with all the hallmarks of reaction and unconcern for justice and equity--is well along in the United States. *A Nation at Risk*, as a document, certainly, but more surely as an event, ushered schooling into the thrall of this restoration by redirecting commonplace educational discourse in a few short years. See *Out of Our Minds* (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995) for further comments on the reactionary concept of "risk" and the place of schooling in promoting international greed as an American birthright. The point here is that *A Nation at Risk* spawned this line of action in schools, but Renzulli believes it provided an important opening for liberalism. This can only be true if liberalism is a kinder, gentler conservatism--which, of course, many believe it to be.

### **ENRICHMENT IN THE GRIP OF GREED**

A simplistic rendering of what education might offer performs triage on the options: content, process, and product. In many schemes, Renzulli's among them, one or more of the options takes priority. The others acquire importance insofar

as they advance the particular, favored option. "What Is This Thing ..." is an apt title, therefore, for a retrospective demonstrating Renzulli's commitment to "product." Giftedness in Renzulli's view culminates in product. As such, it makes sense for Renzulli to define and treat giftedness with an eye toward what best manufactures product.

One might argue that, from Dewey onward, educators have tended to favor product over content and process. The Deweyan conception, however, rarifies product into something fundamentally personal. For Dewey, process and product merge in the idea of "the project," which is both an instructional approach and the embodiment of the individual will. Humans pursue their projects. And education structured around the project promotes this awareness of the integrated and goal-directed application of the self.

Unlike Dewey, Renzulli and the recent proponents of school-to-work put less of a fine point on the way that products function to elaborate the self. For them, products are valuable in their own right, ultimately serving the interests, construed in neutral terms, of the political economy. That these primarily business interests cannot be neutral--cannot be glossed as the national interest--is a point that is usually ignored by school-to-workers.

There is, of course, a history of product and its manufacture in the United States that Renzulli might have consulted if he had been concerned with the ideological ramifications of his instructional models. The applicable history speaks about the exploitative features of production. Manufacture, and lately service and information, advance particular interests; and they subordinate other interests. Notably, the interests of workers have been overturned on behalf of profit and accumulation. Until recently, education has smoothed the way for these dynamics by glorifying the creative production of some students while exacting the compliance of most. This approach is embodied in Renzulli's original conception of enrichment, where gifted students (i.e., those capable of creative production) are given opportunities to learn inductively, while those destined for routine work are offered deductive lessons--drill and practice, drill and practice. Or, in the case of his SEM, inductive learning is compartmentalized into a once-a-week session rather than combined with deductive learning in all classes, as good pedagogy suggests.

Recent views about what benefits business take account of the contribution that all workers can make to the development of higher quality products. And business interests these days exhort workers to lend their creative powers to manufacturing (service or information-producing) enterprises. Now workers are asked to contribute not only their time, but also their ingenuity, to the production of profit. Responding to changes in the ideology of business, schools now also concern themselves with involving all students in the development of product. This approach can hardly be viewed as egalitarian, however, since it is based on a careful calculus of status distinctions.

The Enrichment Triad model is a perfect example. Students' products and enthusiasms are examined in an effort to determine which students are suited to which types of production. Whereas everyone is given the opportunity to produce, only the potential producers of the most interesting products are shepherded toward the vaunted Type III. This approach is, no doubt, more efficient than relying on IQ tests to differentiate the future workforce; but it is certainly no more egalitarian.

### **THE SAD, BRIGHT FUTURE OF ENRICHMENT**

Acting on behalf of the enlightened self-interest of any school (the "radiation of excellence"), the Schoolwide Enrichment Model--like other elitist practices that preceded it--contributes to the sorting function that schools have historically undertaken. In some ways, however, the stakes of whatever sorting process schools engage are higher now than in earlier decades of this century. Uncreative workers on assembly lines fared better than the marginalized, if more frequently consulted, temps who have come to replace them. The gap between rich and poor is widening despite pervasive rhetoric to the contrary. And the nature of work itself has been degraded: There are more prison guards and fewer farmers, more telemarketers and fewer mechanics.

Ironically, these circumstances make Renzulli's continued devotion to "product" seem quaint. Despite the fact that the term "service" has crept into his jargon, the currently ubiquitous "information" remains largely silent. Reading Renzulli, one imagines classrooms filled with junior bridge builders and designers of consumer products. This is a grim picture in comparison to rooms filled with children examining the historical and psychological complexities of racial hatred or contemplating the beauties and uncertainties of natural events. But then again, it is not such a bad picture in comparison to rooms filled with junior stock-brokers, surfing the Internet in search of hot tips.

### **ADDED MATERIAL**

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Edwina Pendarvis is Professor of Special Education at Marshall University. She and the Howleys have coauthored three books on the education of gifted students. She works with teachers and parents to try to change educational practices so they are more substantial and more challenging for gifted students. She is especially interested in the expressive language of gifted children, in economic influences in the education of gifted children, and in the study of underachievement.

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