A Case for A Broadened Conception Of Giftedness

by Sally M. Reis and Joseph S. Renzulli

Programs for the gifted that rely on traditional identification procedures are excluding large numbers of qualified students, say the authors. They present new research that supports their view.

Who should be served by special programs for the gifted and talented? Despite a seemingly endless stream of articles, speeches, and bureaucratic guidelines devoted to this question, its answer continues to stir controversy and debate. Scholars and practitioners — even a few born-again snake-oil peddlers — have unabashedly put forth one panacea after another, each guaranteed to identify infallibly those youngsters who are gifted.

Nonetheless, three unfortunate realities continue to characterize the process of identifying gifted youngsters for special services. First, contrary to a large body of research evidence, rigid cut-off scores on I.Q. or achievement tests are still the primary — if not the *only* — criterion used to select participants for most gifted and talented programs.[1] Second, educators and laypeople alike are often dissatisfied with decisions that spring from the selection process. Third, research neither supports nor refutes the various methods that have been suggested for identifying gifted youngsters and the program models these selection methods generate. As a result, uncertainty and confusion prevail among administrators, teachers, program developers, and policy makers. Lack of solid research on these issues has also prompted some scathing — and largely unrefuted — attacks on existing practices by parents of gifted students[2] and by writers for education journals and the popular press.[3]

The development of new approaches for serving gifted students should be encouraged, but research must also validate

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them. Without such validation the support that educational programs for the gifted have gained during the past decade could easily fade away, as it has so often in the past.

The revolving-door model for identifying and teaching the gifted — an approach we first proposed in 1981[4] — has recently been validated through research. The revolving-door model challenges the traditional method of selecting for participation in gifted programs only those students whose scores on standardized tests of I.Q. or achievement fall into the top 3% to 5%. The research project we are about to describe was designed to assess the efficacy of using more flexible criteria to select students for participation in special programs for the gifted.

The population for the study consisted of 1,162 students in grades 1 through 6; they came from 11 Connecticut school districts — some rural, some suburban, some urban — and represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Through special arrangements with the Connecticut State Department of Education, the 11 participating school districts were allowed to use the flexible procedures of the revolving-door model to select students for their gifted programs. These procedures allowed the districts to identify for each grade level a "talent pool" comprising 15% to 25% of the general student population.[5]

Students in the talent pools engaged in regularly scheduled enrichment activities that were designed to capitalize on their existing interests, to promote new and diversified interests (type I enrichment), and to develop a wide variety of thinking processes and research skills (type II enrichment).[6] A procedure called "curriculum compacting" helped them to cover regular curricular materials at speeds commensurate with their varying ability levels. Individualizing the regular curriculum in this fashion allowed fast learners to "buy" time for accelerated learning activities or enrichment experiences.

Curriculum compacting involved class-

room teachers in the delivery of services to gifted youngsters — a task that might otherwise have been left solely to teachers in special resource rooms. The involvement of classroom teachers increased both the extent and the diversity of services afforded youngsters in the talent pools.

But the essence of the revolving-door model is the concomitant use of "action information" to determine which students should be placed in type III enrichment activities. Action information can be thought of as those dynamic interactions that take place when a student becomes inspired by a particular topic, area of study, issue, event, or form of creative expression. For this research project, action information came from teachers of youngsters in the talent pools and occasionally from parents or from the students themselves.

When members of talent pools showed interest in a particular topic or area of study and when their classroom teachers were reasonably certain that they had above-average ability in their areas of interest, then these youngsters were allowed to pursue their interests under the direction of a resource teacher for a given period of time. The students continued to go to a resource room until they had completed their projects, at which time they stepped aside to make room for other children. When one of these students displayed creative ideas or task commitment in relation to a second area of interest or wished to conduct advanced research on his or her original topic, however, he or she might continue to have access to the resource room. Thus the revolving-door model involved periodic and irregular schedule changes among the students who worked in resource rooms (or who received other supplementary services) during any given interval.

The revolving-door model provides exit criteria for type III enrichment activities through the completion of a Management Plan.[7] This form is essentially a planning and documentation device. It can be used to help students formulate their objectives, bring into focus a particular problem, locate and organize appropriate re-

sources, and identify outlets and audiences for their creative work. The Management Plan is somewhat like a contract; once its specifications have been fulfilled, there is a rationale for removing a child from the resource room program. The products that students completed during type III enrichment became one of the major sources of data for evaluating the effectiveness of the revolving-door model.

Students in the talent pools, their parents, and their regular classroom teachers also assessed the effectiveness of the program by completing questionnaires. Building administrators filled out forms detailing their involvement in the program, and resource teachers submitted monthly reports that listed ongoing type III enrichment activities and described their teaching experiences while working within the guidelines of the revolving-door model.

The talent pools in each district and at each grade level were divided into two groups for purposes of data analysis. The first group (Group A) consisted of students who scored in the top 5% on standardized tests of intelligence or achievement. These students would have been identified for placement in a gifted program by traditional guidelines; in fact, most members of this group had already been enrolled in such programs in previous years.

The second group (Group B) consisted of students whose abilities were well above average but who scored below the top 5% on standardized tests and therefore would not have been eligible under traditional guidelines for special services. Students in this group entered gifted programs in their respective schools under the expanded entry criteria of the revolving-door model.

Both groups participated equally in all program activities. There were no distinctions whatsoever between groups in terms of their opportunities for involvement.

The study addressed one major question: Did differences exist between the two groups in terms of the quality of students' products from the type III enrichment activities? We used the Student Product Assessment Form (SPAF),[8] an evaluation scale, to gauge the quality of students' products. This instrument provides individual ratings for eight specific qualitative characteristics of products and for seven factors related to overall product quality. We established the validity

and reliability of the SPAF through a yearlong series of studies, using a technique developed by Robert Ebel.[9] Levels of agreement among raters on individual items of the scale ranged from 86.4% to 100%. By having a group of raters assess the same set of products twice, with a period of time between ratings, we established a reliability coefficient of .96 for the instrument.

Using a two-way analysis of variance, we found no significant differences between Group A and Group B with respect to the quality of students' products. We also analyzed the responses from questionnaires and interviews and prepared separate reports for each participating school district.

A detailed discussion of our findings from these qualitative data is beyond the scope of this article. But the data indicated that feelings about the revolving-door program — gathered from classroom teachers, administrators, students in the talent pools, and their parents — were generally positive. Many classroom teachers reported that their high level of involvement in the program had favorably influenced their teaching practices. Parents whose children had been placed previously in traditional programs for the gifted did not differ in their opinions about the revolving-door program from parents whose children had been identified as gifted under the expanded revolving-door criteria. And resource teachers — many of whom had been involved previously in traditional programs for the gifted — overwhelmingly preferred the revolving-door identification procedure to the traditional reliance on test scores alone. In fact, several resource teachers said that they would resign or request transfers into regular classrooms if their school systems did not continue to use the revolving-door model.

Our study generated several other conclusions. First, although the revolving-door model provides special services to larger numbers of students than do traditional programs for the gifted, the greater involvement of classroom teachers and the rotation of students in and out of type III enrichment activities actually increase, rather than decrease, services to gifted children. Second, special programs that have traditionally been restricted to students who score in the top 5% on standardized tests can effectively serve other high-ability students, if we take such fac-

tors as action information into account when we identify participants and establish program activities. By doing so, we also minimize concerns about elitism and help to do away with the you-have-it or you-don't-have-it approach to giftedness.

Third, programs for the gifted that rely on traditional identification procedures may not be serving the wrong students, but they are certainly excluding large numbers of above-average pupils who, given the opportunity, are capable of producing equally good products. High levels of productivity can only occur when above-average ability interacts with such other factors as task commitment and creativity. It is these other factors that enabled the students in Group B to create products equal in quality to those produced by students in Group A.

Finally, the flexibility that characterizes the revolving-door model can help to insure more appropriate identification of gifted students and more appropriate programs to meet their individual needs. The revolving-door model is designed to overcome the capricious and arbitrary decisions that result from using a tidy cut-off score on a standardized test as the sole criterion of giftedness.

1. James Alvino, "National Survey of Identification Practices in Gifted and Talented Education," *Exceptional Children*, October 1981, pp. 124-32.
2. Dorothy Weiler, "The Alpha Children: California's Brave New World for the Gifted," *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 1978, pp. 185-87.
3. See, for example, David G. Myers and Jack Ridl, "Aren't All Children Gifted?," *Today's Education*, February/March 1981, pp. 30-33; and Anne Remley, "The Best for the Brightest," *Ann Arbor Observer*, October 1980, pp. 19-25.
4. Joseph S. Renzulli, Sally M. Reis, and Linda H. Smith, "The Revolving-Door Model: A New Way of Identifying the Gifted," *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1981, pp. 648, 649.
5. Screening procedures for admission to the talent pools relied on "status information," i.e., any objective or subjective knowledge about children that could be gathered and recorded for purposes of making such decisions. Variations in talent pool size were a function of local achievement levels, local policy decisions, and local resources available for special services.
6. Joseph S. Renzulli, *The Enrichment Triad Model: A Guide for Developing Defensible Programs for the Gifted and Talented* (Mansfield Center, Conn.: Creative Learning Press, 1977).
7. Joseph S. Renzulli and Linda H. Smith, *The Management Plan for Individual and Small-Group Investigations of Real Problems* (Mansfield Center, Conn.: Creative Learning Press, 1977).
8. Joseph S. Renzulli and Sally M. Reis, *Student Product Assessment Form* (Mansfield Center, Conn.: Creative Learning Press, 1981).
9. Robert L. Ebel, "Estimation of the Reliability of Ratings," *Psychometrika*, December 1951, pp. 407-24.   ∐