

Commentary [12-5-20]

What *Else* Terman Told Us About 21st Century Implications for the Identification of Talent Potential in Underrepresented Groups

When you go to the well to draw some water, take a moment to say a prayer for the person who dug the well.

Chinese Proverb

Joseph S. Renzulli
University of Connecticut

An Extension and Enhancement to Universal Screening and the Use of Local Norms

The big buzz today when it comes to identifying low income and minority group students is the use of universal screening and local norms, concepts with which I totally support and which we introduced into Connecticut state identification guidelines many years ago. But the larger question is what kinds of instruments and procedures we should be using to make decisions about the opportunities, resources, and encouragement that need to be provided to low-income and minority group students who normally don't "make it" because of the cut-off-score approach that has dominated our identification process.

In most states and countries almost all students at the third-grade level and above are universally screened by taking state or education ministry required standardized achievement tests. And current research is currently being done on performance-based assessment that shows promise of using this type of assessment procedure for universal screening of primary grades children (Little et al., 2018; Kearney, et al., 2019). Most states and other countries also use some kind of teacher rating scales which are usually analyzed utilizing locally developed norms or norms provided by the distributors of the scales. When we use any kind of norms (national, state, local) we are using criteria that makes comparisons between and among students rather than the individual strengths and interests of any individual student. Although metric-based scores and national, state, and even local norms inform us about the distribution of traditionally measured academic abilities of groups, they do not zero in on individuals' co-cognitive strengths that are so important for decision making about the need and opportunity to provide supplementary services. These strengths don't make a person gifted or not gifted in the norm-based or entity interpretation of the word, but they are a starting point for decision making about who should be considered for advanced learning and creative/productive opportunities in particular academic domains and topical strength areas. When all is said and done, local norms tell us *how we interpret* any kind of metric-based information we collect; however, the more important issue is *what kind of information* we choose to gather.

We can achieve greater equity in gifted education programs for underrepresented populations by supplementing norm-based approaches to identification with additional

information that documents students' interests, talents, learning styles, expression style preferences, motivation, and executive function skills in singular areas where there is performance-based evidence of high potential emanating from students' actual participating in challenging activities. As Paul Branden has oft been quoted, "By their deeds ye shall know them."

What Terman Might Tell Us Today About Developing Gifted Behaviors in Young People

The monumental work of Lewis Terman on identifying high IQ young people is well known, but he is also known in the research and evaluation literature for conducting one of the world's most famous longitudinal studies. What did he learn after following up his subjects for almost 40 years? The following quote from the final volume his five-book series called *Genetic Studies of Genius* might give us a hint of often unrecognized conclusions of Terman's work.

A detailed analysis was made of the 150 most successful and 150 least successful men among the gifted students in an attempt to identify some of the *non-intellectual factors* that affect success. Since the less successful subjects do not differ to any extent in intelligence as measured by tests, it is clear that notable achievement calls for a lot more than a higher order of intelligence.

The results [of the follow up study] indicated that personality factors are extremely important determinators of achievement. The four traits on which the [most and least successful groups] differed most widely *were persistence in the accomplishment of ends, integration toward goals, self-confidence, and freedom from inferiority feelings*. In the total picture the greatest contrast between the two groups in *all-round emotional and social adjustment, and in drive to achieve*. (Terman, 1959, pg. 148; italics not in the original).¹

These traits are obviously more difficult to measure or create norms for than the assessment of achievement or cognitive abilities, however, if they are considered by Terman to be major determinants of high creative productivity, should we look both for the means to identify them in young people; and more importantly, the ways for developing them through the types of challenging learning experiences that we provide for *all* young people. This is exactly the reason why we recommend in The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 2014) two types of general enrichment for *all* students. The ways in which students respond to these general enrichment experiences can serve as an example of ongoing performance-based assessment. We have also encouraged regular classroom teachers to do the same thing by

¹ It partly because this research that resulted in having Task Commitment as one of the three major components in the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness (Renzulli, 1978).

infusing high-engagement enrichment activities into prescribed curricular topics (Renzulli & Waicunas, 2018).

Very few identification procedures make any use of information based on *student* completed instruments or information that teachers gather by observations they acquire from performance in regular curricular activities or special enrichment opportunities. We call the use of these student-completed instruments Assessment *For* Learning as opposed to metric-based assessments that provide information about assessment *of* learning—what a student already knows as opposed to what he or she might want to do if we look at the results of these student-completed instruments. We call the use of these student-completed instruments Assessment *For* Learning as opposed to metric-based assessments that provide information about assessment *of* learning—what a student already knows as opposed to what he or she might want to do if we look at the results of student-completed instruments. We have, therefore, also recommended a series of student completed questionnaires that focus on some co-cognitive developed tools for the assessment *for* learning. These instruments don't replace but rather supplement traditional assessment of learning tests. These instruments as well as a taxonomy of the types of executive function skills alluded to in the Terman quote above were described in an earlier Commentary [https://gifted.uconn.edu/schoolwide-enrichment-model/assessment_for_learning/]. The ways in which students respond to these student-completed assessments helps determine advanced level follow up opportunities, resources, and encouragement.



Thinking Like a Swiss Army Knife

All of the above is predicated on the belief that we are willing to rethink identification as a talent development process rather a labeling process—some students are “gifted” and receive all of the services and some are not, and therefore receive nothing but a prescribed one-size-fit-all curriculum. A talent development process means that we will do our “universal screening” by looking at the interests, strengths, motivation, and a broad range of other co-cognitive skills in our total school population and provide appropriate services when there is recognized potential in any areas of interest or strength. To do this and we must use a variety of assessment instruments and procedures that look at many different cognitive and non-cognitive potentials. Thanks to advances in technology, several of these instruments can be completed using online using our Renzulli Learning program.

A regular pocketknife has two blades, both used for cutting (no pun intended). But a Swiss Army Knife has approximately 29 tools that do many different jobs. Quick fixes based only on cut-off score, regardless of whatever norms one chooses to use, means that the potentials of many young people will never have the opportunity to benefit from the kinds of services that have made the field of gifted education an important contributor to the education landscape.

References

- Little, C. A., Adelson, J. L., Kearney, K. L., Cash, K., & O'Brien, R. (2018). Early opportunities to strengthen academic readiness: Effects of summer learning on mathematics achievement. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 62(1), 83–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0016986217738052>
- Kearney, K. L., Adelson, J. L., Roberts, A. M., Pittard, C. M., O'Brien, R. L., & Little, C. A. (2019, April 5–9). *Access and identification: Gifted program identification following early referral for high-potential behaviors* [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, Canada.
- Renzulli, J. S. (1978). What makes giftedness? Re-Examining a definition. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 60(3), 180–184, 261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171109200821>
- Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (2014). *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A how-to guide for talent development* (3rd ed.). Prufrock Press.
- Renzulli, J. S., & Waicunas, N. (2018). Using an infusion based approach to enrich prescribed and test-driven curricular practices. *International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity*, 6(1), 103–112. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1296876.pdf>
- Terman, L. M., & Oden, M. H. (1959). *Genetic studies of genius. Vol. 5. The gifted group at mid-life*. Stanford University Press.