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## **Equity, Excellence, and Economy in a System for Identifying Students in Gifted Education Programs: A Guidebook**

**By Dr. Joseph S. Renzulli**

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Can a field that prides itself on promoting creativity and innovation in young people handle these processes itself? Deep seated values, attitudes, and beliefs about the meaning of giftedness and how we should go about identifying students for participation in special programs have been slow to change because the evidence that might lead to such change has been in conflict with long standing attitudes that are the product of outdated research, personal beliefs, and an education system that places more emphasis on administrative expediency than on evidence that resulted from recent research on the conceptions of human potential.

Tidiness and efficiency are important to the operation of any complex enterprise, but they should never take the place of our responsibility to do the right thing in the best interests of the young people we serve through special programs and services. Einstein, the personification of scientific giftedness across ages and cultures, said, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." Controversy about which students should be selected for participation in programs for the gifted and talented has existed since the inception of special services for this segment of the school population. In most identification systems that follow the traditional screening-plus-selection approach, the "throw-aways" have invariably been those students who qualified for screening on the basis of non-test criteria. Teacher nominations are often used as a ticket to take an individual or group test, but in most cases the test score is the deciding factor. The strengths and evidence of potential that lead to the teacher nomination in the first place are totally ignored when it comes to the final selection decision. Thus the multiple criteria game ends up being a smoke screen for the same old test-based approach.

This monograph presents an identification system that attempts to address issues of excellence, equity, and economy. It is grounded in theory and supported by thorough research dealing with the underlying theories. It is designed to be economical in terms of the time and paperwork

required for identification, to provide access to special services for both traditionally high scoring students and those students whose potential may only be recognized through the use of a more flexible range of identification criteria. It is flexible enough to accommodate talent potentials in different domains, and it will respect regulations made by district policy makers and state departments of education, especially since these entities often provide much needed financial assistance.

Three very important considerations guide the discussion of this identification system: Firstly, it takes into consideration the fact that there is no perfect identification system. Because of the many conceptions of giftedness in existence in the literature, there is no one foolproof way of identifying giftedness. The first order of business for anyone wishing to identify and serve high potential youngsters is to decide on the conception or definition of giftedness adopted by a particular school or school system. This identification system is based on the Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness. Based on a thorough review of literature on the nature and measurement of intelligence, it posits that there are two kinds of giftedness: Academic giftedness, and creative-productive giftedness. Both of these types of giftedness are important and often interact. Both types of giftedness, as well as the numerous occasions on which they interact should be encouraged in special programs and opportunities created for their development.

Academic giftedness refers to efficiency and success in traditional school learning situations. These test-taking and lesson-learning abilities generally remain stable over time. They exist in varying degrees, can be identified through standardized assessment techniques, and have been the kinds of abilities most often used for selecting students for special programs. They emphasize deductive learning, structured training in the development of thinking processes, and the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information.

Creative-productive giftedness describes those activities where development of original material and products that are purposefully designed to have an impact on one or more target audiences are emphasized. Learning situations for these abilities emphasize the use and application of information (content) and thinking processes in an integrated, inductive, and real-problem-oriented manner. These learners then use the *modus operandi* of firsthand inquirers. It is putting one's abilities to work on problems and areas of study that have personal relevance to the student and can be escalated to appropriately challenging levels of investigative activity.

This identification system is secondly firmly based on the assumption that there should be congruence between the criteria used in the identification process and the goals and types of services that constitute the day-to-day activities that students will pursue. It therefore also attempts to activate a much broader range of services and teaching practices that are specifically designed to develop a variety of talents in young people. The programming model for which this identification system was designed is the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. One of its major components is the exposure to a broad array of topics, issues, areas of study, and even single authors, events, or methods of inquiry that might become the objects of interest on the parts of single individuals or small groups of students. These interests may arise from specially planned program activities (Types I and II Enrichment in the Enrichment Triad Model) or from material

covered in the regular curriculum. It is flexible enough for students to pursue in depth more focused topics of their own choosing (Type III) Enrichment in the Triad Model).

The third consideration in developing this identification system is that the services be labeled, rather than the students. Rather than labeling a student as “gifted” or “not gifted” this system provides for documenting specific strengths and using these strengths for making decisions about the types of activities and the levels of challenge that should be made available. This system provides for the identification of students who would benefit from services that recognize academic giftedness as well as creative-productive giftedness. It recognizes students with potential and provides opportunities to develop their talents through an integrated continuum of special services. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model is an organizational plan for delivering enrichment and acceleration through an integrated continuum of services. This includes general enrichment for both wide-ranging and targeted subgroups, highly individualized curriculum modification procedures for rapid learners, and first-hand investigative opportunities for highly motivated individuals and small groups. Grouping arrangements vary, based on commonalities in abilities, interests, learning styles, and preferences for various modes of expression.

The Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness is based on research that tells us that three interlocking clusters of ability characterize highly creative and productive people. These three clusters are well-above average, though not necessarily superior, ability, task commitment, and creativity. These clusters of ability are brought to bear on specific performance areas.

A key feature of this identification system is the formation of a Talent Pool that includes students who have been identified by both test and non-test criteria. The system respects and includes students who earn high scores on traditional measures, but leaves room for students who show their potentials in other ways. There are two ways in which we can gather information about human potential. Status information consists of test scores, previous grades or accomplishments, teacher ratings, and other pieces of information that we can put on paper before we evaluate a person’s abilities. Status information is the best way to identify students with high levels of academic giftedness and is used in this identification system to select students with above average ability in traditional academic performance. The other type of information is action information. This is the type of dynamic interactions that take place when a person becomes extremely interested in or excited about a specific topic, and they occur when students come into contact with or are influenced by people, concepts, ideas, creative opportunities, or segments of knowledge in or out of school. These are the kinds of information about creativity and task commitment, which are not stable and not always present or absent and often displayed within situations where such behaviors are encouraged.

These potentials are recognized through teacher nominations. Teachers are trained to use the Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (SRBCSS), the instrument recommended for teacher ratings in this system. Opportunities also exist for alternate pathways at the discretion of the school or school system, and two “safety valves”—special nominations, and Action Information nominations—spotting unusually favorable “turn-ons” in the regular curriculum. Training activities are provided to help teachers use the various nominations to best serve their students. The transmission of an Action Information Nomination does not guarantee

inclusion in the Talent pool, but it does provide an opportunity to carefully review the situation to see if special services can be provided to benefit this student.

Where this system has been implemented, students, parents, teachers, and administrators have expressed high degrees of satisfaction with this approach. By eliminating many of the headaches usually associated with identification of gifted students, we gain support from teachers and administrators, and by expanding services to students below the top few percentile levels usually admitted into special programs and those students who gain entrance by non-test criteria, we eliminate sometimes justifiable criticism of those persons who know that these students are in need of special opportunities, resources, and encouragement.

The Achilles Heel of change is not guidelines or a dislike of anything that smacks of “subjective” criteria. The Achilles Heel of change is apathy. If we truly believe that more flexibility is desirable, we must mobilize those who have a stake in serving high potential youth. This identification system is not as tidy as using cut off scores, but the tradeoff for tidiness and administrative expediency results in a more flexible approach to identifying and serving young people with great potential.