

Sally Reis & Joe Renzulli

Personalized learning pioneers say student interest and engagement reveal hidden potentials that are key to achievement.

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Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis are recognized as the leading experts in differentiated instruction.

The term “talent development” has historically been associated only with gifted education in the K12 education world. But for the past 30 years, husband and wife team Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis have been steadily increasing the pool of educators trained to apply talent development practices to mainstream instruction through the Renzulli Learning Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM).

The Renzulli SEM is a subscription-based software solution designed to enhance the core curriculum in K12 schools by offering tailored learning opportunities to augment students' regular schedules on a daily, weekly or as-needed basis. At the core of the SEM is a computer-generated profile that identifies individual student interests, learning styles and expression styles and then automatically matches them with specific activities and assessments from a database of more than 25,000 secure and vetted Web-based and offline resources. It is this deep level of differentiation, which goes beyond simple skill-level differentiation, that makes the Renzulli model unique within the current personalized learning movement, and different from competitors in the education reform world.

“While technology has gone a long way toward helping us combat the one-size-fits-all approach to learning,” says Renzulli, “the personalized learning movement today still falls far short of examining the multiple categories of learner characteristics needed for true personalization.”

Renzulli and Reis are affiliated with the University of Connecticut, where Reis is a professor in the educational psychology department in the Neag School of Education and Renzulli is the Neag Professor of Gifted Education and Talented Development. Reis is also principal investigator of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, and Renzulli, a recent winner of the Harold W. McGraw Jr. Award for Innovation in Education, is director of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.

Acquired in 2010 by educational software company CompassLearning, Renzulli Learning was originally conceived by Joseph Renzulli in the 1970s as an enrichment program for gifted students, but in the 1980s, he and Reis expanded it to target students of all skill levels across a range of settings, including culturally diverse and low socio-economic populations.

High Engagement Equals Achievement

At the basis of the Renzulli SEM approach is the deeply held belief that student engagement is the single strongest and most important link to achievement. Increasingly advanced activities that dovetail with individual interests help students develop these interests into talents toward the goal of becoming what Renzulli terms a “junior professional.”

Students begin with exploratory activities, such as online simulations and games, that expose them to occupations and topics normally outside the curriculum. For instance, students might employ physics concepts to design and build their own virtual roller coaster, take the role of a surgeon in a virtual knee-replacement surgery game, or use software from the University of Chicago's Institute on Egyptology to perform a virtual mummy dissection. As with true professionals, students perform authentic research on topics of interest by locating and reading how-to manuals, studies, reports and other materials. Finally, they evolve into firsthand inquirers by taking the lead in creating knowledge through actions such as conducting surveys and interviewing experts.



Inherent to performing as a junior professional is the requirement that students create and present a final project to an audience beyond the teacher, whether it be parents and community members, Web-based social media users, or peers in remote classrooms.

Knowledge is authentic and project-based, rather than being storage- and retrieval-based, says Renzulli. “It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to see that the same pedagogy we use with gifted youngsters can make learning better for all kids.”

Reis and Renzulli say that in addition to high engagement and use of top-quality materials, their SEM approach to reform is unique in that it reverses an entrenched perspective in education: the notion that schools are places to make up deficiencies rather than develop talent. “K12 education has systematically withheld higher-order thinking opportunities from general education and struggling kids in favor of drilling them with worksheets,” says Renzulli. “We find out what kids hate to do, refuse to do and aren’t good at doing, and we spend the whole year beating them over the head with it.”

Broadening Student Exposure

At the New Venture School in New York City’s South Bronx, where poverty, crime and homelessness are high and general test scores low, instituting the Renzulli SEM in 2008 brought out an unusual degree of positive student energy, says Principal Dominic Cippolone.

In the fall of that year, New Venture students spent an hour a week researching and crafting projects on topics such as horses, music, 3-D modeling, dancing and sports. In late October, these student projects culminated in presentations at a school-based Renzulli Fair, to which parents and community members were invited. Projects spanned the gamut of live musical performances, videos, PowerPoint presentations, poems and other written works, and more. Cippolone says the experience was “uplifting” for his students, who often feel inferior and lack self-confidence.

“The Renzulli SEM program highlights what they’re interested in and what they do best instead of where they need remediation,” Cippolone says.

With Renzulli as a springboard, New Venture implemented other enrichment writing, dance and community service programs through groups such as the New York-based Teachers & Writers Collaborative, the international Dream Yard Project, and the New York City-based El Museo del Barrio that let kids delve deeply into their own interests. One such program was a journalism unit for 6th through 8th graders that culminated in a student trip to Manhattan, where the students met some editorial staff members of The New York Times and toured the offices. Another was a performing arts unit, which ended with students attending Broadway performances of Mary Poppins and The Addams Family, a first visit to Manhattan for many students who’d never been farther than their school’s block in the Bronx. “One student who conducted an interview with me as part of the journalism unit,” says Cippolone, “said he’d never felt so respected in his life.”

What the Critics Said

Renzulli says that early critics of his reform model in the 1970s and '80s comprised “the conservative element” of the gifted field, whose approach to enrichment consisted of “covering more material faster” and who opposed offering gifted curriculum opportunities to all kids. “The attitude was that we were giving away some kind of secret,” says Renzulli. “A second camp of critics were the general education folks who didn’t want us to ‘poke our gifted nose’ into their general education business, even though their intervention strategies were failing.”

The Renzulli SEM has clearly made significant strides in overcoming objections from these groups over the years. According to CompassLearning, more than 2,000 schools are using Renzulli’s model, with more than 500,000 students and 50,000 teachers registered. A survey of those registered shows that 58 percent of users are regular classroom students, 20 percent are gifted, 14 percent are in intervention programs, and an additional 8 percent are making up an unidentified “other” category.

Gifted and Talented Veterans Weigh In

Today, some of the Renzulli model’s most dedicated evangelists are seasoned professionals from the field of gifted and talented education. The Bayside Enrichment and Long Distance Learning (BELL) Academy, a public middle school in Queens, N.Y., for instance, was co-founded in 2007 by Principal Cheryl Quatrano, a 24-year education veteran and former director of gifted and talented education programs for New York City

schools. In designing the school, Quatrano recalls that her team combined “the best of the best” practices from the 40 programs she had created and supervised in the past, with SEM as the central element.

Differentiating learning and offering students as many choices and opportunities as it takes to succeed is the driving force of BELL, says Quatrano. “We like to say, ‘Educate children one at a time.’”



Integral to the BELL curriculum are Renzulli SEM-based, semester-long cluster programs in which both students and teachers choose courses that reflect their interests and strengths. Among the choices for these applied classes are yoga, cooking, quilting, newspaper, drums, Latin dance, woodworking and community service. At the end of each semester, students present final projects. For example, students involved in community service clusters raise money to help the homeless with clothing and food drives, collect toys for the Toys for Tots Foundation, and raise funds for Haiti relief and children with cancer at the Ronald McDonald Children’s Hospital. They also perform for and assist seniors at a local senior center.

Within its first four years, BELL Academy became the number-one-performing school of all schools in the Borough of Queens, and it now ranks in the 98th percentile on the New York City Progress Report, which grades schools according to environment, and

student performance and progress. Last year, says Quatrano, BELL received more than 700 applications for just 100 seats.

Sally Kriel, Hall County (Ga.) School District director of innovative and advanced programs, is another veteran gifted and talented educator dedicated to the power of the Renzulli SEM. In 2007, after 10 years as director of gifted and talented education for the Georgia Department of Education, Kriel assumed her current position. One of her first requests to Hall County's superintendent, Will Schofield, was that the district implement the Renzulli SEM.

"Like many states and districts, we were involved in school reform and faced with the problem of how to effectively differentiate learning," says Kriel, who noted that, at the time, more than half of the district's 33 schools were not making adequate yearly progress (AYP). "Schofield was channeling the notion of gifted education for overall school improvement, which included 26,000 kids," say Kriel. "We decided that instead of pushing away from the bottom, we'd focus on pulling from the top." With an economically and ethnically diverse student population, including many Hispanic English language learners, Hall County began to expand its concept of talent development to provide a range of options for students with different interests and needs.

With the Renzulli model of personalization at its center, including the belief that student enjoyment and engagement equal achievement, Kriel and Schofield expanded choices for learners in Hall County by instituting 12 K8 charter schools and special programs.

Among the charter schools are the elementary-level English-Spanish Bilingual World Language Academy, the Martin Technology Academy of Art and Science, and the Wauka Mountain Multiple Intelligences Academy for students interested in experimenting with multiple ways of thinking and demonstrating what they know. Elective special programs operating within other schools include the Creative School of Inquiry at Chestnut Mountain Elementary for students who enjoy discovery and creativity; the Da Vinci Academy at South Hall Middle School, which focuses on the arts, sciences and technology; and the Advanced Scholars Academy at Riverbend Elementary, which emphasizes rigorous personalized learning and community service projects.

Kriel says that the computer-generated profile the Renzulli SEM provides of each student at the beginning of the year allowed teachers to instantly "know" the kids without having to wait until the middle of the second semester. Also, she says it was wonderful to immediately challenge the top learners and to see the satisfaction, pride and competitiveness among students in the different special programs. Last year there were 200 applicants for 80 seats in the sixth-grade class at the Da Vinci Academy, and since 2010, all Hall County schools, including charters, are making AYP.

Teacher Creative Productivity

Operating under the belief that when adults enjoy learning and creative productivity, they understand better how children feel about the same process, Renzulli Learning trains teachers during the annual Confratute (a combination of letters from “conference” and “institute” with some “fraternity” in between), a weeklong summer event at the University of Connecticut. Now in its 35th year, and having trained more than 30,000 teachers, Confratute offers teachers an array of enrichment experiences, including instruction in 21st-century evaluation techniques, student social and emotional development, designing scientific investigations, and a range of practical skills such as drumming, silk-screening, knitting and dancing.

Kirsten Gerhardt, lead teacher for the K5 Alta Heights Magnet School in the Napa Valley (Calif.) Unified School District (NVUSD), attended her first Confratute last summer and says that the numerous strands and topics, as well as the quality of the presenters and seasoned teachers, offered “something for everyone.” She was “rejuvenated” after attending the schoolwide model strand that included practical ideas for technology integration, science enrichment, student interaction and Web 2.0. She says that teachers at her school are so busy implementing dozens of new projects and initiatives, however, that it’s difficult to squeeze in time for the comprehensive training. Gerhardt’s colleague in the district, Ginette Ilesley, who provides districtwide Renzulli support at several elementary schools by training teachers and working with gifted and “twice exceptional” (gifted with learning disabilities) students, recommends introducing busy teachers to the program through the Project Wizard, an online tool that walks students through projects of their choice, from hypothesis to resources and final projects. She also trains parents and enlists their support in helping guide their children through projects.

Renzulli Learning also offers face-to-face professional development training days for schools and districts, as well as an online training option.

What’s Next for Renzulli?

CompassLearning bought Renzulli Learning to complement CompassLearning Odyssey’s model of instructional skills personalization, according to Arthur VanderVeen, the company’s vice president of business strategy and development. VanderVeen says that the Renzulli SEM will receive improvements in the short term, including a larger IT team for more comprehensive technical and customer support and a more robust infrastructure, by this summer. Over the longer term, upgrades will include better tracking of student outcomes, including data on grades and project completion. Ultimately, CompassLearning plans to launch a product that integrates the Renzulli SEM into the company’s Odyssey program.

“Joseph and Sally Renzulli will remain very much integral to the Renzulli process, acting as consultants on all improvements, new designs and so forth,” says VanderVeen. “We are committed to the research-based pedagogy and will remain true to that mission.”



One Tool in the Toolbox

Joseph Renzulli believes that developing each student's individual strengths and talents remains the key to true reform for struggling students as well as gifted students. He says that the United States has spent \$3 trillion on failed reform efforts since the Johnson administration's initial Head Start and Title I programs, and that "the programs have gone by many names but have all been the same thing."

Calling Renzulli Learning "No Child Left Bored," Renzulli says his model is one tool in a teacher's toolkit that can work against an education system that is narrowing and deadening learning for kids through worksheets and continual test prep, and "lobotomizing the profession" by telling teachers not to think but to simply follow scripted instructional practices.

"Our approach comes at it from a different angle," he says. "We offer low-cost access to experiences and materials that turn on lightbulbs." DA