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# The Future of Gifted Education—A Movement Toward Talent Development and Future-Based Practices

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**Abstract**

What is the future trajectory of programs for academically and artistically talented students? In what ways will educators acknowledge, identify and serve these students? Gifted and talented learners display diverse characteristics and needs. As education changes over the next few decades, teachers will be asked to provide more diverse services. How will the unique and differential needs of this diverse group of talented students be addressed in the future? In this article, we suggest that the programs and strategies that can and will meet the unique needs of these diverse students will focus on innovation, flexibility, and, most importantly, a selection of research-based approaches and services that both contribute to excellence in general education as well as challenge and engage gifted and talented learners.

**Keywords:** talent development; enrichment; differentiation; research-based services; gifted and talented students

## 1. Introduction

In 2010, we published one of our most frequently cited articles, "Is There Still a Need for Gifted Education? An Examination of Current Research" (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). In it, we summarized key research on gifted and talented students and their learning experiences, reflecting on a decade marked by growing emphasis on remediation and test preparation. Nearly 20 years later, as we both continue our work, especially regarding strength-based pedagogy underlying our Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM), it seems fitting, at this point, to reflect back on what has been learned about gifted education over the last few decades, and to consider whether new and compelling evidence supports the continuation and expansion of special services and programs for gifted and talented students in the future.

As part of this discussion, we naturally find ourselves looking ahead: What will classrooms for academically talented students look like in the coming decades? Will schools ever undergo the fundamental changes needed to better serve talented students? Will high schools, for example, become flexible enough to allow students to graduate in less time while enjoying a more appropriate secondary education? Will teachers still be expected to differentiate instruction, or will artificial intelligence (AI) shape and alter that process—assessing what students need to learn based on a profile of what they have already mastered? If so, what will such profiles include? Will they account for students' interests, and will future educators recognize the importance of cultivating and assessing those interests?

Around the same time, Reis published an article identifying turning points that might shape the education of gifted and talented students in future decades (Reis, 2009). She suggested that educators interested in gifted and talented education should focus on: (1) expanding conceptions of the multidimensionality of giftedness and talent development;

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(2) increased and consistent academic challenge for high-potential and academically talented students; (3) greater attention to diverse and underserved populations; (4) a shift away from identifying gifted students toward talent development; and (5) applying "gifted" education pedagogy to talent development, with an emphasis on strengths rather than deficits. It is striking that, when asked in 2026 to reflect on the future of our field, these five priorities remain as urgent and relevant as ever—and they would top any list we would draft today.

## 2. The Future: Expanded Conceptions of Giftedness and Talents

Decades ago, we identified a persistent problem in the study of gifted and talented students: the tendency among some educators to treat giftedness as an absolute condition—something magically bestowed, much like blue eyes or red hair (Renzulli, 1980). That view is, of course, unsupported by an enormous body of current research. Nor is there any fixed list of traits that definitively marks a student as "gifted." As we have argued many times, some educators still speak as though certain individuals were born with a "golden chromosome" that makes them gifted persons by nature. This belief has fueled the mistaken assumption that identification is simply a matter of finding the right combination of traits. Labeling students as truly gifted, highly gifted, moderately gifted, or even borderline gifted only deepens the confusion.

The misunderstanding of the concept of giftedness has generated significant criticism and uncertainty around both identification and programming. Too many mixed messages have reached educators and the public, and both groups now harbor understandable skepticism about the credibility of the gifted education field—and about our ability to define giftedness clearly and offer services that are meaningfully distinct from general education. This is why our focus shifted to defining gifted behaviors rather than gifted persons years ago. The Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness, first published nearly 50 years ago, is summarized as follows (Renzulli, 1978, 2005):

> Gifted behavior consists of behaviors that reflect an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—above-average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Individuals capable of developing gifted behavior are those who possess, or can develop, this composite set of traits and apply them to any potentially valuable area of human performance. Persons who demonstrate or can develop an interaction among the three clusters require a wide variety of educational opportunities and services not ordinarily provided through regular instructional programs.

This three-ring conception of giftedness captures the core concepts drawn from decades of research (Renzulli, 1978, 2005), and the 1978 article is the most widely cited article in the field. As is true of any set of traits associated with gifted behavior, there is natural overlap among the general categories and specific characteristics. No single individual needs to exhibit all traits for gifted behaviors to emerge—which is precisely why the model emphasizes the interaction among the three clusters rather than any one of them in isolation. It is also why we believe gifted behaviors occur in certain people (not all people), at certain times (not all the time), under certain circumstances (not all circumstances), and within specific contexts or areas of study. In the future, we must continue to advocate for a fundamental shift in how giftedness is understood and identified. Rather than applying a single universal standard, the characteristics of advanced learners must be identified within specific population groups and educational contexts. This information should inform how we distinguish among students and determine what levels of service (see a continuum of services (Renzulli & Reis, 2014)) are needed for each student to realize their potential.

While this shift may seem subtle, we believe it has significant implications for how we conceptualize giftedness and how we structure both identification and programming. It also offers the flexibility needed to include more diverse students in gifted programs.

Defining gifted behaviors first—and then determining which services benefit all students and which are specifically necessary for talented students—will, in the future, help us develop services that are internally consistent and equitable. At a minimum, we must recognize that giftedness is expressed differently across different populations, and we must develop programs that reflect the full diversity of talent within any given culture. Young people identified as gifted and talented are as diverse and eclectic as the paths they take to develop their gifts and talents. They exhibit a broad range of ability, achievement, personality traits, and effort invested in reaching goals. Our years of research on the SEM have enabled us to identify some patterns or paths to talent development, as well as insights about the development of qualities that are the key components of creative productive giftedness. In the SEM, students' abilities, task commitment, and creativity are applied to areas of interest or passion over time. The development of their above-average abilities is accomplished when they begin the process of developing their academic abilities and interests both in and out of school. The development of their task commitment and creativity occurs when they find an area in which an interest is activated; they develop these skills to pursue an intense, or even initially a casual, interest. When children experience and enjoy creative and productive experiences based on their interests, and pursue independent or small-group investigative projects, they will be more likely to seek additional creative experiences later in life. These projects represent Type III experiences, or real-world problem solving in the Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli, 1977), and are an essential service in the SEM.

More traditional models of education that focus on compliance, memorization, and test preparation are now giving way to approaches that emphasize thinking skills and the application of knowledge that reflect what professionals do in their daily work. The theory of knowledge (Renzulli, 2016) underlying our SEM approach is designed to guide teachers to help students use received and analyzed knowledge in applied ways to produce Type III outcomes that approximate the work of persons who use an investigative and creative mindset to become producers rather than consumers of knowledge. The theory also makes distinctions between presented knowledge that typifies the traditional curriculum and the "just-in-time" knowledge needed by professionals to address a particular problem or project of current interest. We believe, in the near and distant future, most (if not all) conceptions of giftedness and talent will focus on the developmental nature of each of these concepts and that more attention will be placed on research-based practices to actually develop gifts and talents.

## 3. Low Academic Engagement and Challenge for High-Potential and Academically Talented Students

We have written at length over the years about what high-potential and advanced students need in school. They need work that engages and challenges them—they need time to think, reflect on, understand, and experience effort and study skills to enable them to achieve at increasingly higher levels than they previously believed possible. They do not need to repeat work that they have already mastered. They need educators who will assess what they already know and provide evidence that they have already mastered certain content so that they can be given more engaging opportunities. These should be made available to all students, not just those who are identified as gifted and talented, but curriculum compacting—one of the best forms of differentiation—must be implemented for high-potential and gifted learners as a minimum level of service to achieve academic

challenge in school. Indeed, we argue that good instruction for talented and high-potential learners can and should begin with the compacting process.

Curriculum compacting (Reis et al., 2016) incorporates an examination of the regular curriculum content and teachers' personal commitment to accommodating individual and small-group differences. This approach can benefit teachers of all grades in most content areas and addresses the demand for more challenging learning experiences designed to help all students achieve at high levels and realize their potential. Compacting enables instruction to be more appropriately paced in response to students' individual talents and abilities. Most academically talented students learn more quickly than others their age and require a faster pace of instruction than their peers. Sometimes these learners need a chance to think more deeply about one aspect of a lesson; at certain times and under certain circumstances, they may become passionately engaged with a topic or experience a burning desire to understand some aspect of their curriculum. Sometimes students' intense interests can actually delay or slow their progress through a compacted version of the regular curriculum, as their interests cause them to want to pursue a topic with a depth or breadth of understanding that extends beyond the regular curriculum—and this should be welcomed in the future!

Curriculum compacting also enables teachers to escalate the challenge for students who absolutely need to engage with challenge at a young age. This higher challenge is critical for this group of students and must be an essential service in the future. The greatest contributor to the underachievement of gifted and talented students is the lack of challenge they encounter in elementary and middle school (Reis & McCoach, 2000). The research we have conducted on high-potential students who underachieve has demonstrated that an unchallenging, too-easy curriculum is one of the major contributors to underachievement in high-potential and gifted students. In the future, high-potential and gifted learners should encounter and grapple with curriculum, instruction, and products that are more complex, challenging, and in-depth than would be appropriate for their chronological peers. Some students will need support and direction to tackle this more difficult work, while other academically talented students need less direction from their teachers, depending on the tasks. Learners who may be able to work more independently are often those with intense interests or the capacity to identify interests they wish to pursue, and this independence must also be encouraged in the future.

Our work on using curriculum compacting in the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 2014; Reis & Peters, 2021) has shown that teachers who encourage students to engage with more advanced content and subsequently "support their struggle" make a difference in the type of challenging work that some students pursue. Students' actual developmental level, as determined by their independent work, is markedly different from the level they achieve under adult guidance and support. The example we use most often to illustrate the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) from an enrichment standpoint is the Renzulli Type III independent or small-group experience. Without adult support and guidance, students' advanced projects would not be as rigorous and would most likely not even be attempted or completed. All high-potential students deserve the opportunity to participate in challenging schoolwork that requires adult assistance to achieve and excel. The role of the teacher is to serve as a guide or coach, helping students pursue challenging and engaging work and supporting them as they learn to struggle with tasks they could never accomplish independently.

When high-potential and gifted learners encounter true academic challenge for the first time, they often experience fear and anxiety and may begin to make false assumptions. Many who excel in school and earn top grades without real effort come to mistakenly believe that being smart means they should not have to work very hard. However, gifted

and high-potential learners who have never encountered challenge may feel a sense of panic when they do, inaccurately concluding that they are not as smart as they had previously believed. This will not happen if students encounter appropriate challenge from the time they enter school. Early and consistent challenge is essential to preventing the false belief that academic success should come effortlessly.

In the future, we believe that artificial intelligence will be able to assist educators in effectively measuring students' prior knowledge through pre-assessment, providing real-time data, and using adaptive assessments to understand how much students know and how far they can go. These AI tools can then help teachers differentiate and customize instruction, replacing previously mastered content with new, interest-based information to engage and challenge students—giving them choices that will make high-potential and talented students more willing to engage in school with enjoyment and enthusiasm. Unfortunately, artificial intelligence could also be used to pre-assess and then lockstep students into a boring, didactic future of work that has no engaging or enriching content, so we must be cautious about what we hope to achieve with this powerful tool and who develops and implements it!

We have found that enjoyment leads to engagement: a commitment to become intrinsically involved in and energetic about what one is learning or doing. Our research on the SEM also demonstrates that engagement leads to enthusiasm for learning. We recommend that high-end learning objectives be used to plan all enrichment activities, including the ability to formulate meaningful questions, apply knowledge and problem-solving strategies to real-world problems, work effectively with others, derive enjoyment from active engagement in learning, solve problems creatively, and produce new ideas.

These learner-centered skills grow young minds, promote genuine student engagement, and increase achievement. Although focusing on these outcomes may be counter-intuitive to the "more-practice-is-better" pedagogy, we need to be courageous enough to explore bold, innovative alternatives that will provide all students with a more highly enriched educational diet—the kind that characterizes learning in the nation's best public and private schools. This is not to say that we should abandon a strong, standards-based curriculum that ensures basic competencies, nor that we should neglect to demand data to evaluate returns on investment when we implement alternatives.

We also need to provide enriching experiences that promote student engagement, enjoyment, and enthusiasm for learning. Common sense and our own experience tell us that students are happier and work better when they are doing something in which they have an interest, such as extracurricular activities in which they show joy and engagement because they chose to join a particular club or activity group. These activities are often based on a pedagogy like what we advocate for Type III enrichment—the opposite of regular curricular activities that students may have already mastered. If we think about how students feel when they participate in the Math League, school newspaper, basketball team, chess club, debate team, or drama activities, we glimpse the pedagogy of the future that we desire. Engagement occurs when students have some choice in what they do and can interact with both students and teachers who are interested in developing expertise in a chosen area. They use the pedagogy of our SEM—authentic problem solving, interpersonal, and creative strategies to produce a product, service, or performance—and their work is brought to bear on one or more audiences beyond the teacher. The engagement that results from these kinds of experiences exemplifies the best way to approach learning in the future.

In summary, we believe that the future of education for all students, and especially those with advanced creativity, academic talents and gifts, will include the use of artificial intelligence. These types of tools, used well, will enable educators to fairly pre-assess all students' prior knowledge, providing accurate data for what regular curriculum content can

be eliminated with adaptive assessments to understand how much students know and free them to pursue more engaging and enriching content. That content, however, should be developed and guided by educators who understand gifted education pedagogy and the use of creative and research-based strategies that engage and challenge high potential students.

## 4. Underserved and Under-Identified Academically Talented Students: Embracing Diversity

Over two decades ago, Renzulli described the absence of academically talented students from gifted education programs as a ticking time bomb, and we stand by that statement today: "There is a time bomb that is slowly ticking away in our field. The serious underrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students, and young people who show their potentials in non-traditional ways, has caused reform gurus, policy makers, and equity advocates to question the very existence of special programs for the gifted and talented" (Renzulli, 2001, p. 33).

The problem continues as current research confirms the continuation of failure to identify and serve culturally and linguistically diverse students, as well as students with learning disabilities (Long et al., 2026; Peters et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2014). Siegle et al. (2024) recently asked eminent leaders and scholars in our field a series of questions about the key challenges facing gifted education, and these respondents overwhelmingly identified diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility as the most frequently cited concerns. They also discussed problems concerning identification and underserved students. Clearly, this is a problem that has persisted for decades, but we believe that a future solution lies in two areas: (1) more flexible identification, such as we advocate in the SEM, and (2) the future development of more full-time schools and classes for both identified and high-potential diverse students.

### *4.1. More Flexible Identification: A Talent Pool Approach*

Too often, even now, when educators use identification systems that follow a traditional screening-to-selection approach, many underserved high-potential students—including those with learning disabilities, highly creative students, or students from diverse backgrounds—are left behind; these are often students who qualified for screening using non-test criteria. The many "good and creative accomplishments" that led to nominations by teachers, parents, and creative assessments are often ignored in the final selection decision when a traditional multiple-criteria approach defaults to test scores. The implementation of a Talent Pool identification system that is a core of the SEM can help overcome this problem, as well as a wide array of other challenges traditionally associated with selecting students for enrichment and gifted programs. Generally, students, parents, teachers, and administrators expressed high levels of satisfaction with this approach (Renzulli & Reis, 2014), and the reason for this satisfaction is clear. By opening opportunities to high-potential students who may fall just below the top few percentile levels on tests, and by prioritizing program participation through multiple criteria, educators can eliminate justifiable criticisms of traditional identification. In the future, we need to ensure that educators and parents understand why high-potential and highly creative students need special opportunities, resources, and encouragement to develop their talents. The research underlying the three-ring conception of giftedness clearly supports such an approach; talent pools can include 15 to 30% of students in some high-achieving districts. By adopting this more flexible approach and eliminating the problems traditionally associated with identification, educators can gain unprecedented support from teachers and administrators, many of whom formerly resented the very existence of special programs.

### *4.2. Opportunities for Talent Development for All Students*

The Renzulli Academy, part of the Hartford Public School system in Connecticut, was founded in 2009. In the most recent school year, Hartford Public enrolled 16,434 students: 5.9% White, 57.4% Hispanic/Latino, 28.5% Black, 4.7% Asian, 0.5% American Indian, and 3% two or more races. Almost 80% of Hartford Public School students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals in the 2024–2025 school year, compared to the state average of 45%. A quarter of students in the district are English Language Learners, compared to the state average of 11%. The Academy implements gifted education pedagogy through the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) to create a dynamic and enjoyable learning environment. In Hartford—a city marked by high poverty rates, significant racial and ethnic diversity, and historically limited access to advanced academic opportunities—many gifted students experienced chronic underchallenge, disengagement, and underachievement. District leaders sought a model that could promote both equity and excellence without relying on test-preparation-driven instruction and selected the SEM. They chose it to provide enriched learning experiences and higher learning standards for all students who apply to attend the academy, focusing on the goals of talent development for all students, a broad range of advanced-level enrichment experiences, and advanced follow-up opportunities for young people based on their strengths and interests.

Recently, the Renzulli Academy was named a Category 1 School of Distinction in Connecticut for its high performance and growth (https://www.hartfordschools.org/o/renzulli/, accessed on 22 October 2026). It is the first Hartford school to achieve this award, which places it in the top 10% of all schools in Connecticut based on achievement scores, growth on achievement tests, absenteeism, and college/career readiness. It is important to note that this award was achieved without regular drill or practice for improving scores on state achievement tests. Instead, the Renzulli Academy focuses on gifted education pedagogy and enrichment practices based on the SEM, with a focus on engaging students in enjoyable learning experiences. This aligns with previous research suggesting that enrichment practices, without standard test-preparation strategies, can improve standardized test scores in a more engaging, enjoyable, and differentiated way (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008) and can serve as a future model for providing gifted education pedagogy as a school-choice option. We are hopeful that in the future, we will see many more enrichment opportunities for all students based on interests and engaging opportunities.

## 5. The Future: Applying "Gifted" Education Pedagogy to Talent Development, Emphasizing Strengths Rather than Deficits

We believe that the best way to develop the gifts and talents of young people is to apply "gifted" education pedagogy to talent development, with an emphasis on strengths rather than deficits. In the future, we hope that teachers will provide—and parents can more easily find—an appropriate educational climate and environment in which their children can develop their talents. Our Renzulli Academies, as discussed earlier, use an enrichment and talent development approach to teaching. In these schools, students complete a strength-based assessment of their interests, preferred learning styles, and favorite product styles each year to inform both faculty and students about their strengths and preferences. Teachers use this information to develop learning activities and organize curriculum units using this enrichment, strength-based approach. Teachers actively work to plan experiences that engage students' interests and provide enrichment across all content areas. The SEM Type III experiences (Renzulli & Reis, 2014) have also proven to be outstanding enrichment opportunities for academically talented students.

Children develop their potential talents because of specific environmental conditions as well as internal and external developmental experiences. During their school years, too

many high-potential and talented students encounter obstacles to, rather than support for, their talent development. We especially hope that in the future, more opportunities will be given to students to pursue interest-based learning, or what we call Type III enrichment, which produces greater enjoyment in school as well as improvements in executive function skills and affective benefits (Brigandi et al., 2016; Hébert, 1993; Terry, 2003; Westberg & Leppien, 2017). Type III studies also enable students to build relationships with mentors who help them successfully complete these interest-based projects (Brigandi et al., 2016; Hébert, 1993; Westberg & Leppien, 2017) and help students clarify and affirm their career goals (Brigandi et al., 2018).

Enrichment opportunities using the SEM or another type of strength-based pedagogy result in numerous benefits to academically talented and high-potential students, such as increased aspirations for college and careers and the ability to select interest-based and challenging postsecondary and career plans (Delcourt, 1993; Hébert, 1993). These opportunities helped participating students develop creativity and motivation that could be applied to subsequent education and work (Delcourt, 1993; Hébert, 1993, 2010). For example, Hébert (2010) and Delcourt (1993) found that using the SEM approach enabled students to be more productive in their areas of interest, had a positive effect on students' subsequent interests, and positively influenced their postsecondary career plans. Westberg (2010), who studied the longitudinal effects of the SEM on students, found that students maintained these interests and remained involved in both their interests and creative productive work after college and graduate school. In summary, enrichment experiences based on SEM pedagogy contributed to students' social and emotional growth, fostering a stronger belief in self.

In the future, we hope that teachers, parents, and other adults collaboratively and actively develop the talents of children and youth with desire and aptitude, using a strength-based pedagogy such as the SEM. Too few resources are devoted to this important goal today, and more should be focused on it in the future. We also need to fight against the discontinuity in the progression of talents and recognize the importance of societal interventions to develop and sustain potential talents. The path to talent development across any domain remains far too rare, and this process needs to become more common.

## 6. A Few Concluding Thoughts: Schools Should Be Places for Talent Development

In the future, educators must embrace the notion of broader conceptions of giftedness, accepting that giftedness is not a fixed trait only found in some children. Renzulli's Three-Ring Conception of giftedness is one example of a broader conception, and over our careers, we have found that gifted behaviors can be developed by focusing on developing the interaction of above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity as applied to students interests. These gifted behaviors appear in certain people, at certain times, in certain contexts. Future educators should consider which services benefit all students and which are specifically targeted toward academically talented students with various types of talents.

In the future, gifted education must move away from the practice of identifying "gifted students" toward models and practices focused on developing talents and gifts, using research-based practices that strengthen general education and challenge advanced learners. And as giftedness is reflected differently across diverse populations, identification practices must reflect diverse opportunities for students to develop their gifts and talents. Culturally and linguistically diverse students and students with learning disabilities remain under-identified today, and we hope that in the future, there is widespread use of our Talent Pool approach that draws on multiple criteria rather than defaulting to test scores. Talent pools of 15 to 50% of students in some high-achieving schools and districts could be used to engage and challenge diverse, high-potential students.

Consistent academic challenge must be the heart of future programming for advanced students. Lack of challenge and engagement in elementary and middle school is a major contributor to underachievement. Curriculum compacting, which replaces already-mastered content with deeper material, should be a minimum service. Teachers should be trained to help students engage in productive academic struggles with more demanding work. Students who experience steady challenge prevent their false belief that "being smart means never having to work or expend effort". In addition to challenge, the future should provide all students with choice and authentic, real-world problem solving (Type III enrichment), because enjoyment leads to engagement.

AI in the future could revolutionize regular curricular experiences by identifying ways that pre-assessment could test for prior knowledge, give teachers relevant data, and enable them to substitute more engaging, relevant work for previously mastered content that is interest-based and open-ended. One caution, however, is that this use of AI without enrichment teaching and learning being considered could also lock students into dull, didactic pathways. Teachers who understand strength-based learning and an enrichment approach to curricular development must be the ones who design this type of learning.

Talent development opportunities should exist for all students, focusing on their interests and strengths. The Renzulli Academy in Hartford, a high-poverty and highly diverse district, uses strength-based enrichment to create stronger aspirations and motivation for all students. Creativity is welcomed in this setting, and the goal of project-based learning for all enables all students to actively develop their talents through interest- and strength-based learning.

## 7. Conclusions: Schools Should Be Places for Talent Development

It is difficult for us to understand why so few psychologists, educational psychologists, and educators are interested in the study of giftedness or talent development. The need to engage more voices in the psychological and practitioner literature is clear, as much work remains. In the future, we need to further investigate the domains in which expertise can be developed; the continuing role that cognitive abilities and motivation play in giftedness; the importance of the developmental course of one's talents and how they are expressed; and the ways that talents and abilities are affected by societal forces, including gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, and educational and societal opportunities. This is an essential and fascinating area of research for the improvement of human life and the happiness and fulfillment of many, and we hope that this article will generate the interest of more scholars in various areas of talent development.

Enrichment and talent development programs are a natural place to develop talents, innovation, and creativity, and our goal is to produce the next generations of leaders and creators who can invent, lead, and make a positive difference in the world. Too few resources are currently being devoted to this important goal and more should be focused on this critically important mission in the future.

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