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[Report on Research]

## **Gifted and Talented Students, Redefined**

*A Revolutionary Thinker in Education at UConn*

Education pioneer Joseph Renzulli has revolutionized the thinking about the concept of giftedness. Before his breakthrough paper in 1978, “What Makes Giftedness: Reexamining a Definition,” scholars thought a child should be considered gifted if his or her IQ score was above the 130 mark. But Renzulli argued that giftedness is better defined by three factors: above average ability, task commitment, and creativity. He also postulated that giftedness may appear in many areas of endeavor, suggesting that he considers a student as a “gifted writer” or “gifted mathematician” rather than a gifted child.

“When you just look at IQ scores, you’re closing the door on a lot of really bright kids with a broad range of talents,” says Renzulli.

Initially scholars in the field scoffed at Renzulli’s theory, but today, supported by 25 years of corroborative research, his paper is the most widely cited in the field. He, together with his wife and colleague, Sally Reis, are national leaders in gifted education research.

UConn’s Neag Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development fulfills so many roles in teaching, research and service, it is difficult to say which is the most important or influential. Founded in 1990, the Center offers teacher education including Confratute, a summer teacher-training institute drawing participants from around the world, and conducts research with other leading universities. The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented is a collaborative program based at UConn as well and operates under a federal grant provided by the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act.

The Neag Center has myriad services for gifted students including the UConn Mentor Connection, a summer program which pairs high school students with UConn professors to work in labs and studios. A recent student in the program was a finalist in the prestigious Intel science talent search.

“Our mission here is to make schools more enjoyable for all kids by putting gifted education pedagogy into every classroom in the country,” says Reis, who heads the department of educational psychology and is the principal investigator for the Neag Center.

Renzulli’s latest passion is Operation Houndstooth, in which he applies theories about students with high potential who use their ability to help others.

The three-ring theory of giftedness (ability, task commitment, and creativity) is represented in a houndstooth pattern that helps to illustrate the interactions between personality

and environment. As our society becomes more self-centered and materialistic, it is important to give children the opportunity to help others and to let them know that their school values altruism.

An example of altruism in giftedness that the researchers cite is a fifth-grader named Melanie, who noticed a first-grader named Tony crying on the bus. She found out that he was being teased and tripped by some older boys because he is partially sighted. And, although he had large type schoolbooks, there were no such library books for him to read. Melanie used her talents to create books for Tony and devised a way for older kids to accompany him on the bus and at lunch to reduce the teasing.

Why would a student like Melanie use her talents to help improve the life of one little boy? What are the circumstances that create an altruistic person who could lead a life such as that of Mother Theresa or Nelson Mandela?

Operation Houndstooth is just beginning to study how six non-academic factors contribute to the development of giftedness: a sense of vision, a sense of destiny, physical/mental energy, romance with a topic or discipline, courage, and optimism. Reis' most recent study is a method of reading instruction that aims to raise reading levels by allowing children to choose their own books based on their interests, but above their reading level.

Before Reis and her research team arrived in a Hartford, Conn., elementary school, many third graders were reading only five minutes or less before becoming distracted. But just 10 weeks after Reis' pilot reading instruction program called the Schoolwide Enrichment Model Reading Framework, the children were reading for 35 to 40 minutes uninterrupted. The program encourages children to read books slightly above their reading level on topics that they are passionate about under teacher supervision. Eventually students work independently with reading activities on the Internet or in literature circles.

"These results are startling. This may be the most important work I've done in my career," says Reis, who also used the program with students in a suburban school.

Together, Renzulli and Reis are rewriting the definition of giftedness and providing the basis to improve education for all children.

"The studies we carry out have a potential to provide evidence-based data that if we make learning more enjoyable and enable young people to follow their interests, we can increase academic achievement," Reis says.

—*Alix Boyle*