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Laying the Base for the Future: One Cornerstone of the Javits Act

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Abstract

The passage of the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act in 1988 was truly a watershed moment in the field of gifted education. The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) represented one part of the overall agenda of research and services supported by the Javits Act. How the Javits Act came to be and the rationale and decisions that formed the underlying framework for Javits are the foci of the first part of this article. The second part of this article provides a brief overview of the NRC/GT organization and mission. Multiple research teams associated with the NRC/GT implemented quantitative and qualitative research studies, invited outstanding scholars in the field to contribute to our research series, and carried out leadership duties assigned to the Center, which have been complementary additions to many contributions made by the other Javits projects over the past several decades.

You know there are a lot of bright people out there who have the ability to achieve much, but for various reasons don't have the support and resources in their lives to know how to get from point A to point Z.

—Dr. Mary M. Frasier*

The passage of the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act by Congress in 1988 was a watershed moment in the field of gifted education. Although there had been federal monetary support in the 1970s for limited activities in gifted education by establishing an Office of Gifted Education and the National/State Leadership Training Program, the federal presence in the field had disappeared by the early 1980s. The Javits Act as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act re-established a federal presence with a total funding of US\$9,888,000 to be divided between a number of Javits Model Projects and support for a National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT). The long-term, continued funding of the Javits Act was unique in the history of the field. Many individuals and organizations throughout the

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country were tapped to contribute to the investigations and the program development work that were supported by the Javits Act. The NRC/GT represented one part of the overall research and services supported by the Javits funding. How the Javits Act came to be enacted and the rationale and decisions that formed the underlying framework for Javits are the foci of the first part of this article and provide an introduction to the many other reports included in this issue of the *Journal of Advanced Academics*.

In the second part of this article, we provide a brief overview of the organization and mission of the NRC/GT, and a subsequent article that follows highlights selected findings from areas of research that reflected the highest priorities from the needs assessment study conducted at the initiation of the Center's work. We recognize and acknowledge the significance of all of the other work contributed by Javits Act grantees as well as the many years of research and development that have continuously been provided by researchers in the field going all the way back to the work of such luminaries as Binet (1916), Gallagher (1958, 1991), Galton (1869), Hollingworth (1942), Passow (1981), Stanley (1989), Terman (1922, 1925), Torrance and Hall (1980), and others.

The Story of How the Javits Act Came Into Being

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) played a major role in the conception of and ultimate acceptance and funding of the Javits Act by Congress. The purpose of the Javits Act was determined, in part, by the legislation that had been drafted by Charles Radcliffe, a legislative consultant hired by NAGC in response to the deliberations of NAGC's Legislative Committee chaired by Dr. Sally Reis. The bill included a provision for a research center that would organize a coordinated program of scientifically based research support for demonstration projects to develop and test innovative identification strategies and program innovations, provide other supportive leadership activities that would build and enhance the capacity of elementary and secondary schools to meet the special educational needs of gifted and talented students.

From the beginning, it was clear to the group involved in advocating for the bill that a "champion" was needed in Congress. At that time, Senator Bill Bradley was serving in the U.S. Senate. Bradley, the democratic senator from New Jersey from 1979 to 1997, had been an academically talented student and a Rhodes Scholar. Prior to serving in the Senate, Bradley was an Olympic gold medalist and a professional basketball player with the New York Knicks. Fortuitously, his policy advisor, William H. 'Bill' Foster, had been a faculty member at Rutgers University and had a strong professional interest in gifted education and connections to many researchers and practitioners in the field. This connection provided just the tie needed to allow Radcliffe and Reis an opening to recruit Senator Bradley as champion for the bill. Reis and the legislative committee from NAGC worked closely with Foster and Bradley and the legislative advocates from the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC), Fred Weintraub and Bruce Ramirez, to develop the wording of the bill. Of course, the wisdom offered by Dr. James J. Gallagher from his years working in what was known as the Office of

Education in Washington provided further guidance in framing the legislation. Foster's understanding of the current issues in the field, Senator Bradley's commitment to children of poverty, the experience of the CEC staff in guiding legislation through the federal system, and the NAGC legislative committee's ability to forge connections across the issues resulted in the legislative emphasis on addressing issues of the identification of and services for gifted students historically underserved in gifted programs, including gifted children with disabilities. Bradley's strong admiration for Senator Jacob K. Javits, a senior senator from New York at that time and a mentor to Bradley, resulted in Bradley's decision to name the bill after Javits.

Foster assumed the leadership role in guiding the bill through the legislative process; he worked closely with Reis and the others on the NAGC Legislative Committee throughout 1988 to achieve passage of the bill. The backing of NAGC led by Dr. Mary Frasier as president and Dr. James Alvino as Council for Exceptional Children–The Association for the Gifted (CEC-TAG) president was critical to the success of the legislation. But like many legislative initiatives, it had its fortuitous moments. One of the most exciting sequences of events occurred in the summer before passage when one more vote was needed to gain approval from the House Appropriations Committee. Fortunately, one member of the NAGC legislative committee was from Kentucky, and we had a strong advocate in that state. Dr. Julia Link Roberts, Professor of Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University, was a member of the Board of Directors of NAGC. Roberts played a key role in securing the needed vote. Using her broad network of gifted advocates in Kentucky, Roberts was able to make a friendly contact with a neighbor of the congressman needed for the vote, and success of the vote was engineered through this relationship. For this work and other contributions in legislative advocacy, Julia Roberts received the first David W. Belin NAGC Award for Advocacy.

As outlined in the bill that Bradley championed, the Javits Act focused resources on identifying and serving students historically underrepresented in programs for learners who are gifted and talented “including economically disadvantaged individuals, individuals of limited English proficiency, and individuals with handicaps” (Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988, 20 USC §3065). The final bill listed the need to help reduce gaps in achievement and to encourage the establishment of equal educational opportunities for all students as its Number 1 Priority. These legislative priorities guided all the activities funded by the Act including the development of the first federally funded research center focusing on gifted and talented education. A glimpse into the dream, design, and destination for the NRC/GT (Renzulli, 1991) follows.

The Mission and Plan of Operation of the NRC/GT

In an effort to provide a platform for a national program of systematic research, the Universities of Connecticut, Georgia, Virginia, and Yale University, together with collaborators in state departments of education, parent groups, 180 collaborative school districts throughout the country, and a consultant bank of major researchers in gifted

and cognate areas, formed a consortium of stakeholders in our field. During the year between the enactment of the Javits Act and the call for proposals, we studied the organizational structure and practices of all existing national research centers. Furthermore, we visited selected centers to guide us in what we would do (and not do) to be more responsive to the research needs of the field.

A major conviction underlying the proposal we offered for the NRC/GT is that research in an applied field must reflect the areas of concern to the practitioners in the field, must be grounded in the realities of schools and classrooms, and must be accessible and meaningful to those people who work and study in them. A guiding principle for the Center, therefore, is that all research and dissemination activities should be designed to provide sound guidance for practitioners and/or result in some kind of direct impact upon educational practice, policy, and management. The Dissemination Model in Figure 1 is the plan designed to address this principle. At the same time, we recognized the essential need for research to be theory based and empirically sound, thus allowing for publication in highly respected research journals.

As directed by the legislation, the educational context of NRC/GT extends from preschool through post-secondary education and includes all types of interventions that influence identification and the full development of gifted and talented individuals.

One of the major assumptions underlying the Center's work is that the development, and hence the identification of and effective programming for gifted and talented children, is not a function of schools alone. Rather, a child who is gifted is part of a much larger system incorporating family, cultural milieu, classroom, school, community, and even the media. Furthermore, the investigation of issues surrounding identification and programming must include personal and social development considerations as well as cognitive development. The development of talents and abilities and full utilization of those talents and abilities do not take place separately from the development of the total individual. On a broader scale, the research designs developed by Center researchers had to reflect the research on economically different populations that clearly suggested the importance of the family, peer groups, the society at large, and the significance of role models in the development and achievement of the individuals in those groups.

A major challenge was recognition that a variety of research strategies are necessary to examine fully the questions of identification and talent development. At the time of the initial work of the Center and continuing across the span of 23 years, the researchers had to grapple with the realization that traditional research designs and standardized instruments have been adequate for addressing certain issues, but many important research and evaluation questions were inadequately addressed using traditional paradigms and instruments. It was not unreasonable to assume, for example, that the cultural bias underlying most intelligence and achievement measures may also underlie assessment of personality, interest, motivation, creativity, and so on. Thus, we designed our initial research studies to incorporate both traditional and non-traditional assessments and designs using qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

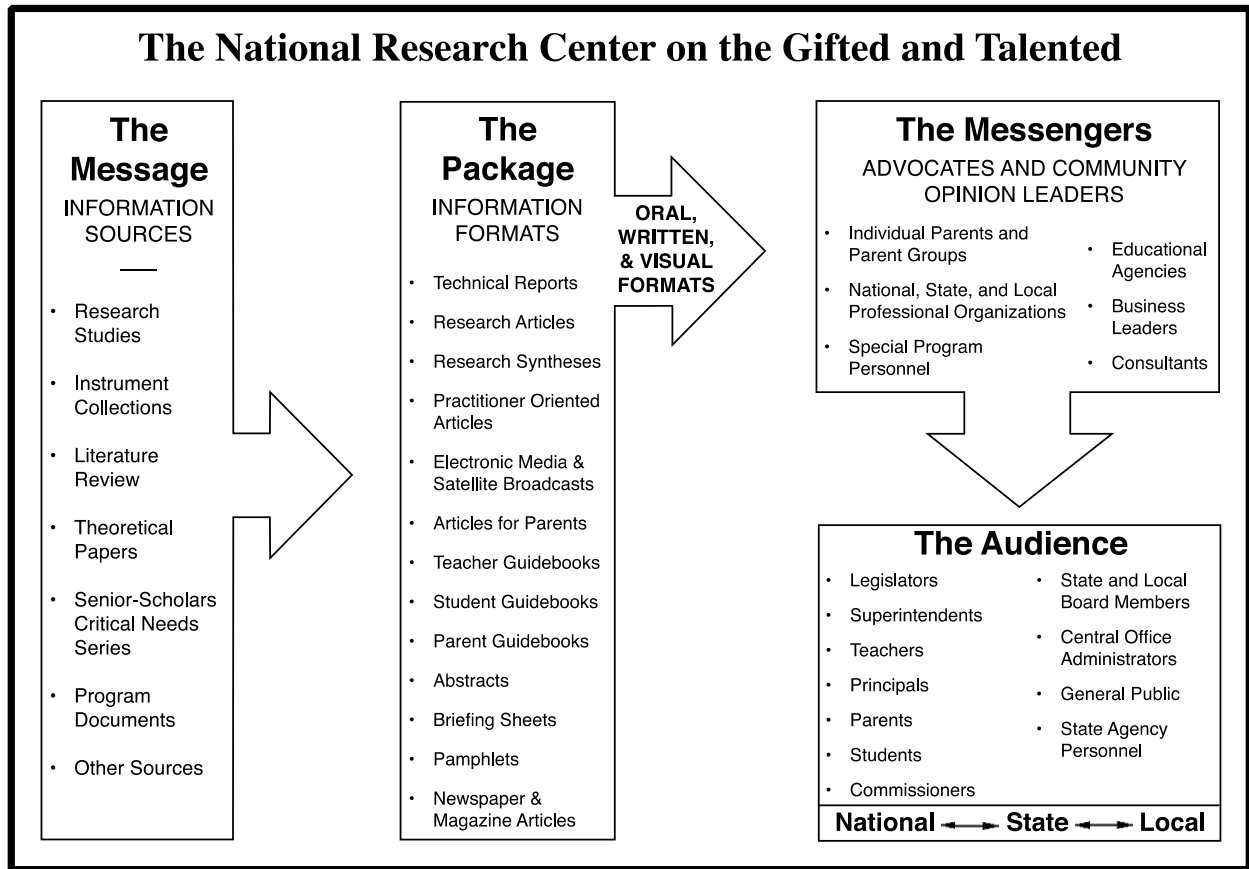


Figure 1. The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented dissemination model.

Another challenge came from recognition that a national research center must devote a portion of its resources to policy studies and that implications for public policy must also be considered when designing studies whose primary focus may be on educational practice or program management. Even the most compelling research findings about better ways of identifying high potential non-English-speaking students, for example, will have limited impact if policy makers do not see pragmatic, action-oriented recommendations for putting research into widespread practice.

Early Center Development

Early studies described in the initial proposal for funding focused on examining some “baseline” issues related to current practices in identification and differentiation for high potential students (e.g., Archambault et al., 1993; Callahan & Caldwell, 1993; Hunsaker & Callahan, 1993; Hunsaker, Finley, & Frank, 1997; Passow & Frasier, 1994; Reis & Purcell, 1993; Reis & Westberg, 1994; Sternberg & Clinkenbeard, 1995; Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Salvin, 1993). It was also important that subsequent studies be responsive to the needs of practitioners in the field. This resulted in the implementation of a national needs assessment study, which guided the research questions in subsequent years. This process involved building, refining, updating, and interpreting

the research agenda. The needs assessment consisted of preparing a systematic procedure for gathering problem-based research needs from prime interest groups and organizing this information into an action plan that would direct the specific research projects carried out by the participating universities, collaborative school districts, and members of our consultant bank. Information required for this process was gathered through interconnected state and national research advisory councils and a national survey. The final product of the needs assessment process guided the majority of the NRC/GT work over the subsequent years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Rankings of Categories of Items on NRC/GT National Needs Assessment Survey.

Rank	Item
1	Impact of gifted programs on student outcomes (longitudinal)
2	Regular curriculum modification
3	Teacher training/staff development necessary for curriculum modification or development
4	Grouping patterns and impact on learning outcomes
5	Individual vs. curriculum approaches to education
6	Motivation
7	Effectiveness of differentiated programs for economically disadvantaged, underachieving, and other special populations
8	Self-efficacy
9	Cultural/community reinforcement
10	Policy implications
11	Teachers as assessors
12	Grouping by special populations
13	Program options in relation to student characteristics
14	Process vs. content
15	Use of research
16	Impact/understanding of gifted/talented “differences”
17	Effects of grouping on all students when gifted are grouped
18	Assumptions/stereotypes of underachievement
19	Student characteristics associated with success
20	Cooperative learning
21	Relationship between community and program

Note. NRC/GT = The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.

Product Development and Dissemination

Center activities focused on both product development and product dissemination. Commitment to ensuring that professionals across many roles in the field had access to research produced in the Center guided identification of nine interrelated categories of products designed to reach multiple audiences:

- consumer-oriented guidebooks that can be used for the implementation of effective practices identified in the research carried out by Center researchers and other researchers,
- electronic products based on the above,
- technical reports,
- articles for research journals,
- articles for parent and practitioner-oriented journals and magazines,
- briefs and abstracts,
- best-practice summary monographs (Research-Based Decision-Making Series written by distinguished scholars in the field),
- a national database in which researchers can deposit and access data from studies on the gifted and talented, and
- a national repository of instruments for identification and evaluation.

Table 2 provides an overview of the NRC/GT deliverables that reflected these product categories and the dissemination activities enacted to ensure that researchers, practitioners, and the general public had access to current research findings and practices.

Table 2. NRC/GT Deliverables and Products Disseminated—1990–2013.

	Total
NRC/GT research studies conducted	77
Commissioned papers	43
Presentations	3,627
Journal articles/magazine articles, books/papers, and brochures	1,970
NRC/GT products disseminated	1,228,301

Note. NRC/GT = The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.

Lessons Learned and Thoughts About the Future

One of the most important lessons learned over the past two plus decades is that a comprehensive national research center must draw on the specializations and competencies of many persons who are not necessarily on the faculties of the primary universities funded by the Javits Act. This is especially important when a center is attempting to respond to concerns other than the issues that are foremost on the respective research agendas of those faculties. The use of the broad-based needs

assessment study mentioned above immediately identified the importance of recruiting highly competent specialists for our consultant bank who could be called on to advise on research strategies and to contribute to addressing the identified research and information needs through production of monographs such as the NRC/GT Research-Based Decision-Making, Collaborative Research, and Senior Scholar Series.

A second lesson learned relates to funding agencies' strong preference for specific research designs and standardized outcome measures that may put measurement on the outcomes most desirable for gifted programming in jeopardy. Growth on reading and math achievement test scores as dependent variables have become the gold standard of federally funded projects, which are important goals. However, it is difficult to achieve the same levels of reliability and validity on instruments that examine more complex behaviors such as creativity, student engagement, social and emotional characteristics, or factors such as the executive functions, which play an important part in academic and career success. These variables must be addressed through the use of "softer" instruments, observations, and qualitative rather than quantitative research designs.

Academic respectability of any research project is mainly determined by publication in well-respected professional journals, and we do not argue against the importance of this criterion for determining research quality. But most educators are familiar with the infamous research-to-practice gap, and one of the goals to which we made a commitment from the outset of our work was that all products would also be translated into genres that could be understood and used by practitioners (see Figure 1). One of the longest and strongest concerns in the social sciences, and especially within the field of education, is the role that research can play in guiding educational practices and in the formulation of educational policy. An equally long-standing history of poor communication between researchers and practitioners has centered around three problems—the relevancy of educational research, the lack of clear lay interpretations of the research, and the amount of time that it takes for research findings to have an impact on educational practice and policy. Even in those cases where well-respected and highly relevant research studies can be found, there is frequently a long delay between the establishment of research findings and the translation of these findings into practices that have an impact in classrooms. Some people have estimated the "theory-into-practice-gap" to be as large as 20 years!

The NRC/GT made a commitment to attack the relevancy issue and the theory-into-practice-gap head on! To do this, we analyzed problems contributing to these road-blocks and then developed a strategy that holds promise for overcoming these problems. We believe that the inroads made with the many independent and connected research studies, with the critical summaries by outstanding scholars in the field, and with the activities carried out as part of the leadership duties assigned to the Center have been complementary additions to the many contributions made by the other Javits projects over the past several decades.

As one cornerstone of the Javits Act, the development and implementation of a national research center made it possible to assemble a critical mass of researchers associated with the following universities during one or more funding cycles:

- University of Connecticut (1990–2013)
- University of Virginia (1990–2013)
- Yale University (1990–2006)
- University of Georgia (1990–1995)
- City College of New York (1995–2000)
- Stanford University (1995–2000)

The NRC/GT activities also provided an opportunity to develop the next generation of young scholars who served as research assistants. These novice researchers worked alongside principal investigators and offered critical insights into every phase of the research and development process. Just as we were finding ways to implement research studies focusing on identifying and serving the needs of students with obvious and potential talents, we were simultaneously guiding the talents of young scholars who would contribute to the future of the field of gifted and talented education. Senator Jacob K. Javits who was a strong advocate for providing programs and services for gifted and talented students would have been proud of all the accomplishments made possible by legislation named in his honor.

Authors' Note

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Note

* We dedicate this article to Dr. Mary M. Frasier who was with us as we began this journey and provided us with clarity and inspiration as we worked to be true to our mission of providing useful understanding and solutions in the realm of identifying and serving all gifted students including those who have historically been underserved. The quotation is from an interview by Darlene Martin (2003).

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Joseph S. Renzulli, EdD, a distinguished professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut and director of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT), has focused his work on applying the pedagogy of gifted education to the improvement of learning for all students. His most recent work is a computer-based assessment of student strengths integrated with an Internet-based search engine that matches highly challenging resources to individual student profiles.

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