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New Directions for the Schoolwide Enrichment Model

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Abstract

This article not only proposes new directions for the Schoolwide Enrichment Model, it also analyses the processes of real and effective curriculum change. The very act of learning is perceived to be at the center of the change process. Developing modifications of existing curricula should also provide appropriate content and skills development which allows *all* students to develop their full potential. The article is based on Dr. Renzulli's recent book, *Schools for Talent Development: A Practical Plan for Total School Improvement*, published in 1994 by Creative Learning Press.

Although my responsibilities at the National Research Center have kept me busier than I ever anticipated so far as administrative activities are concerned, I have devoted whatever writing time I can find to reformulating the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) into a comprehensive plan for total school improvement. Gifted programs are under severe attack in the United States, and the "quiet crisis" that we wrote about in 1991 (Renzulli & Reis, 1991) has evolved into perilous jeopardy for our most potentially able students! To give you some idea about the extremes to which ideologies are being carried, one state department of education has recently announced that it will withhold state funding (not just G/T funds) from districts that do not do away with all forms of ability grouping (*Education Week*, January 13, 1993). Many other states and districts are examining national trends towards total heterogeneous grouping and standardized curriculum models. These developments have resulted in several program eliminations, reductions and modifications. Accompanying these ideologies has been a good deal of negative press about special programs and the people who support them. Advocates for services for gifted and talented students, even the liberals among us who favor more flexible approaches to talent development, are being accused of taking a stand "against our democratic ideals." Somewhere in all the rhetoric about improving our schools, we seem to have lost sight of an ideal upon which our education system and the very foundations of our democracy are based. Simply stated this ideal asserts that the uniqueness and individuality of every person should be honored and respected. Translated into educational terms, the ideal requires that all learning experiences for all students should be arranged so that whatever paths students travel, and whatever distances they travel on these paths must be appropriate to their unique abilities, interests and learning styles. If we do not develop specific techniques for achieving this ideal, our educational system will degenerate into a homogeneous, one-size-fits-all curriculum that continues to drive down the overall performance of North American students. We are already at

the bottom of most international comparisons, and recent studies comparing 1980 with 1990 data indicate that we are falling even further behind.

Our purpose in reconfiguring the model is not to counteract or circumvent national trends, but rather to offer some solutions for achieving equity and excellence that are based on the know-how that has emerged over the years on enrichment learning and teaching. It is difficult in a limited amount of space to describe these details of these new developments, but I hope to have a paper prepared soon that describes our new work on the reconfigured model. The basic purpose of these new developments is twofold. First, we are attempting to provide schools with a systematic plan to implement or maintain commitments to the development of high levels of talent in young people, regardless of the direction that a school might take so far as its reform agenda is concerned. Second, we want to do everything possible to insure that there is a viable and exciting role within the school for persons who have strong backgrounds in enrichment learning and teaching. We will be recommending some changes in the role that G/T teachers have traditionally played, but a major part of their role will remain focused on direct services to targeted students. Our approach to targeting will be expanded, and accordingly, we are developing procedures for examining the multiple talent potentials of a broader segment of the entire school population. To achieve this goal, we are recommending the use of existing SEM components with all students. The components include the Interest-A-Lyzer, performance based assessment, learning styles assessment, and the preparation of a *Total Talent Portfolio* that will consist of an updated version of the Strength-A-Lyzer. This expanded approach to identifying talent potentials is essential if we are to make genuine efforts to include more minorities and other traditionally overlooked students in a plan for *total* talent development.

This approach is consistent with the more flexible conception of *developing* gifts and talents that has always been a part of my orientation. It draws upon some of the new work that has emerged, such as Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, and, as has always been the case with SEM, the reconfigured model will be practical, systematic and inexpensive to implement. We are also recommending and developing procedures for the use of more thinking skills activities and general enrichment in the regular classroom. In the reconfigured model, the role of the G/T teacher, which we prefer to call the Schoolwide Enrichment Teaching Specialist, will consist of both direct services to any students engaged in "high end" learning (e.g., Type III enrichment, mentorships, advanced Type II mini-courses, out-of-school experiences, etc.) and leadership activities that will infuse the know-how of enrichment learning and teaching techniques into the overall school program. A part of our work in facilitating this process is the preparation of categorical data bases that list a broad array of thinking skills activities and enrichment materials, as well as other data bases on academic competitions, publishing opportunities for young people, methodological (How-to) resource books and materials, summer programs, and staff development materials that have been successfully implemented in schools with widely varying demographics. We have always argued that a large amount of gifted program activities should be made available for all students, and that SEM should serve as a vehicle for sharing the know-how of enrichment learning and teaching with the entire school. The reconfigured model will push this concept even further by enlarging the role of the Schoolwide Enrichment Team and developing genuine partnerships between SEM specialists and teachers and administrators. We still believe, however, that direct services in the form of high level follow-up and appropriate referrals to advanced resources and services are a "lifeline"

for underchallenged students with high potentials. For this reason, we will continue to advocate enrichment specialist positions as well as greater use of talent developing techniques by the general faculty.

The essence of our new work is the application of SEM know-how to the overall process of school improvement, and the development of some additional know-how that addresses factors related to increasing the challenge level for all students. For example, Curriculum Compacting is a "damage control" process that has been effectively used for high achieving students who are underchallenged by the regular curriculum. But a large amount of research has shown that "dumbed down" textbooks and a focus on minimum outcome based competencies have lowered the achievement levels for large numbers of the school population. Experience has shown that the billions of dollars spent on compensatory drill and practice approaches to remediation have produced negligible results for disadvantaged students. We need to apply some of our proven techniques for compacting and enrichment to the entire curriculum, and we must replace excessive drill and practice with accelerated content and thinking skills activities for all students. Accordingly, we are working on some procedures for a more proactive approach to curricular modification which will provide guidelines for enrichment teams that want to surgically remove excess practice material for unchallenging textbooks. It is hoped that experienced G/T teachers who have familiarity with compacting and staff development will provide the technical know-how and leadership to implement this process.

Where Are We Going With SEM

Three considerations are guiding our work as we go about the task of reconfiguring the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. These considerations are the central role that the act of learning should play in the process of overall school improvement, the importance of making better use of time, and the need for a systematic approach to school change procedures.

Focus on the Act of Learning

School improvement must begin by placing the *act of learning* at the center of the change process. Organizational and administrative structures such as site based management, school choice, upgraded classes, parent involvement and extended school days are important considerations, but they do not address directly the crucial question of how we can improve the act of learning. An act of learning takes place when three major components interact with one another in such a way as to produce the intellectual or artistic equivalent of spontaneous combustion. These three components are a learner, a teacher, and the material to be learned (i.e., curriculum). Each of these three components, in turn, has its own important subcomponents. Thus, for example, when considering the learner, we must take into consideration: 1) the abilities and present level of the learner in a particular area of study, 2) the learner's interest in the topic and the ways in which we can enhance present interests or develop new interest, and 3) the preferred styles of learning that will improve the learner's motivation to pursue the material that is being studied. Motivation or effort is the secret ingredient for successful learning, and some researchers (Stevenson, 1992) have argued persuasively that it is precisely this ingredient that accounts for the high levels of achievement among Asian students. As part of our expanded work, I will be preparing a (hopefully) teacher-friendly guidebook that will spell out specific

procedures for infusing enrichment learning and teaching techniques into general curricular activities. This work will draw upon much of the material already included in *The Enrichment Triad Model* and related writing.

The Importance of Time

Although it would be interesting to speculate why schools have changed so little over the centuries, at least part of the reason has been our unwillingness to examine critically the issue of time. At some point in history, between the time that Socrates met with young people in the marketplace in Athens and the advent of formal schools, the complexities of educating large groups of students gave rise to a formal organizational pattern that has come to be known as "the schedule." The arrival of textbooks with their ramifications for "coverage," and eventually, state regulations requiring prescribed amounts of time for various subjects further locked the school day and week into a formula of orderliness that has remained virtually unchanged since at least the turn of the century. If the ways in which we currently use school time were producing remarkable positive or even adequate results, there might be an argument for maintaining the traditional schedule. But such is not the case.

Although it is acknowledged that schools without schedules would probably be chaotic, the almost universal pattern of school organization that has emerged over the years has contributed to our inability to make even the smallest changes in the overall process of learning. This universal pattern is well known to educators and lay persons alike. The "major" subject matter areas (Reading, Mathematics, Language Arts, and Social Studies) are taught on a regular basis, five days per week. Other subjects (sometimes called "the specials") such as Science, Music, Art, and Physical Education are taught once or twice a week. So accustomed have we become to the rigidity of this schedule that even the slightest hint about possible variations is met with a storm of protest from administrators and teachers. "We don't have time *now* to cover the regular curriculum." "How will we fit in the specials?" "They keep adding new things (Drug Education, Sex Education, etc.) for us to cover." Our uncontested acceptance of the elementary and secondary school schedule causes us to lose sight of the fact that at the college level, where material is ordinarily more advanced and demanding, we routinely drop from a five meeting per week schedule to three day (and sometimes even two day) per week schedule of class meetings. And our adherence to the more-time-is-better argument fails to take into account research that shows quite the opposite. For example, international comparison studies report that 8 of the 11 nations that surpass US achievement levels in mathematics spend less time on math instruction than do American schools.

Some of the current reform proposals have indeed recommended changes in the schedule, but most of these proposals suggest *extending* the school day and year. These recommendations ignore the fact that extending school time without primary attention to the *quality* of learning will only increase the number of students who are bored to the point of refusing to learn what is already perceived to be irrelevant material taught by pedantic methods. These methods place primary emphasis on the needless repetition of vast amounts of material that has already been covered. Numerous commentaries on textbooks have summarized large numbers of research studies about the repetitiveness of a widely acknowledged, "dumbed down" curriculum in our schools. It is this research that has given rise to procedures in the Schoolwide Enrichment Model

about specific ways for making modest alterations in the school schedule. The purpose of these alternative options for scheduling is to guarantee that at least some time will be available in each school week during which enrichment learning and teaching will take place. It is further argued that participation in these types of learning situations will provide teachers with experiences that are more valuable to their overall professional development than the thousands of hours they typically spend in traditional educational workshops. Our experience has shown that a small amount of time devoted to analyzing the circumstances and impact of these situations, has a spill-over effect on all teaching contingencies.

Gentle and Evolutionary (But Realistic) Approaches to School Change

The approach to school improvement being recommended in this model is realistic in the sense that it focuses on those aspects of learning and development over which the schools have the most influence, and therefore the probability of achieving success. US schools are being bombarded with proposals for change. These proposals range from total "systemic reform" to tinkering with bits and pieces of specific subjects and teaching methods. Oftentimes the proposals are little more than lists of intended goals or outcomes, but limited direction is provided about how these outcomes can be achieved; and even less information is provided about the effectiveness of recommended practices in a broad range of field test sites. Even worse are the mixed messages that policy makers and regulators are beaming at schools at an unprecedented rate, messages that are often incompatible with one another. One state, for example, mandated a core curriculum for students, but then evaluated teachers on the basis of generic teaching skills that had nothing to do with the curriculum. Schools are encouraged to raise their standards, and advocates of site-based management encourage teachers to become more active in curriculum development. But these same schools are rated on the basis of test scores tied to lists of state specified, outcome based competencies. A recent study also reported that teachers and administrators felt the test forced them to compromise their ideals about good teaching.

The multiple layers of government that fund, regulate, and admonish schools to change have launched so many new initiatives that fragmentation has been exacerbated, educators have become frustrated, and the inevitable result is that little if any real improvement can be found in the schools. When researchers asked educators how they would evaluate educational reforms, they said, "There's nothing but chaos. Our best strategy is to ignore them and close our doors and go about our business." (*Education Week*, 9-9-1992, p. 30)

It would be easy to jump on the restructuring bandwagon with yet another grand design or string of rhetoric for radical and revolutionary school reform: "Throw out all the textbooks!" "Replace or retrain all the teachers." "Let the parents select the building principal." "Set world class standards and develop curriculum frameworks." "Replace the existing curriculum with interdisciplinary, multicultural, theme-based units." "Bring technology into the schools and form school/business partnerships." All these things make for exhilarating speeches, but the realities of school life, coupled with an already overburdened system of regulations, inadequate funding, vested interest groups and recent commitments to new initiatives would inevitably lead to more of the fragmentation and chaos discussed above. It is easy to "talk a good game" about school improvement, and on rare occasions we throw uncommonly large amounts of money at staff

development, curricular revision or on projects that promise to start yet another showcase school. We have been doing these things for years, *but in the overwhelming majority of America's classrooms nothing changes*. One need only look at a recent review of research from the national Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS, Fall, 1992) to verify this conclusion.

In spite of this gloomy scenario, we believe that school improvement can be initiated and built upon through gentle and evolutionary strategies for change. These strategies must first and foremost concentrate on the act of learning as represented by the interactions that take place between and among learners, teachers and the curriculum. In the early stages of the change process, these strategies should make minimal but specific suggestions for change in existing schedules, textbook usage and curricular conventions. And these strategies should be based on practices that have already demonstrated results in places where they have been used for reasonable periods of time. We also believe that the individual school building is the unit-of-change for addressing school improvement, and that effective and lasting change can only occur when it is initiated, nurtured, and monitored from within the school itself. Outside-of-school regulations and remedies have seldom changed the daily behaviors of students and teachers or dealt effectively with solutions to inside-of-school problems (Barth, 1990, pp. 11–15). A simple but sincere waiver of top-down regulations, a plan that involves consensus and shared decision making on the parts of administrators, parents, and teachers, and incentives for specific contributions to the change process are the starting points and the only "big decision" policy makers need to make in order to initiate a gentle and evolutionary school improvement process.

The change process recommended in this model begins with an examination of the major factors affecting the quality of learning in a school. These factors exist along a continuum of internal (to the school) to external, and each factor is interdependent with the others. Thus, for example, an internal factor such as the building principal may be externally influenced if the principal is assigned by central administration; and the curriculum may be externally influenced by state regulations or district-wide textbook adoption policies. All of these factors have salient characteristics. First, they are always present, and regardless of micro or macro change initiatives, they always will be present! Second, each factor exists along a continuum of negative to positive influence on the quality of learning. Third, each factor is almost always going through a process of change, for better or worse. Our goal in the Schoolwide Enrichment Model is not to replace these essential factors, but rather to apply the strategies and services that define the model to the improvement of the respective factors. We view its process as a "cross-cut" approach to school improvement, and the main targets of the change process are those factors that have a direct bearing on the process of learning.

In my mind's eye, I view the automobile as a metaphor for our reconfigured SEM model. The school is the automobile (hopefully a Porsche), and the principal is the driver, hopefully bold and daring like Mario Andretti or Amelia Earhart. The faculty is the engine, loaded with power and constantly being tuned-up to make it more efficient and effective. The Schoolwide Enrichment Team is the spark plugs, igniting the energy with above-and-beyond-the-call-of-duty activities. And the SEM specialist is the ignition and the distributor, initiating new developments and sending the energy to the appropriate places. We have learned a great deal about enrichment learning and teaching over the several years that we have trained personnel and experimented

with various components of the model. The atmosphere is ripe for a broader application of the strategies and techniques that have served us well in special programs, and I invite you to join us in this new effort to make all schools laboratories for talent development. I also hope that you will share these thoughts with your school and district leaders so that they will consider supporting your efforts to promote superlative learning in all students.

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