Rader, R. (2016). Dr. Renzulli on gifted education. *The CABE Journal, 20*(3), 1, 8.

Dr. Renzulli on Gifted Education

Robert Rader
Executive Director, CABE

Bob: Tell us about Gifted Education, Dr. Renzulli.

Dr. Renzulli: Gifted Education is really a branch of special education where we try to accommodate particular traits or characteristics of students. The way I approach gifted education is a little different from the "you have to be labeled gifted before we can provide any services."

I recommend some general enrichment experiences for all kids. The ways in which kids respond to those experiences determines exactly the kinds of follow-up support services that we might provide. I think the best analogy or metaphor for it is what any good band director or any good athletic coach does. They don't say: "don't come out for the basketball team unless you're such and such a height."

Rather, they say "come out and let us see what you can do and then will see if there is a way that we can use and develop your talent." In psychometric terms, this is called performance-based assessment (as opposed to test-based assessment).

I have always argued that giftedness is in the response; it's not in the stimulus. It's what we do with kids when they respond in highly positive ways in a learning opportunity or situation. In my work, I look as much at the motivation and interests of kids as just simply what their achievement levels are.

Bob: How did you get involved with this area in the first place?

Dr. Renzulli: I got involved in this area when I started teaching and the Russians sent Sputnik into space. Everybody, including Superintendents, were beside themselves for getting something going to challenge our more able students. I was a math and science teacher and we developed a program in our school where a certain amount of time was set aside each week for our highest potential science students and basically, it was from there that my whole Enrichment Triad Theory developed. In this model, we provide general enrichment for larger groups of kids and the ways that kids respond to that determines the opportunities and resources for follow up—really a common sense approach.

We didn't have a planned curriculum, except for the general enrichment experiences. When young people got interested in a topic, like building a robot, then we, in a sense, built the curriculum around the student. We looked at what resources they

needed, who in our school or community might be able to help the student, and what kinds of support they needed to develop their project.

Bob: Do you think all children are gifted?

Dr. Renzulli: No I don't. But I believe that there are a lot more young people that can develop giftedness or, as I prefer to call it, "gifted behaviors" than just those who reach a certain predetermined cutoff score on an IQ test. I always use the word as an adjective and history has shown that many great people would never have made it if we only looked at their cognitive ability scores.

We are looking at a population that is above average, even well above average, in their traditional academic achievement. However, beyond that I'm looking at things like motivation, creativity, and executive function skills. Someone that wants to get the job done.

Our research has shown that these other non-cognitive skills are as important to task completion as traditionally measured academic skills. As I used to say to my own kids, their ability to "get their act together" and to use their time wisely is as important as academic skills.

These non-cognitive skills include planning, learning how to work collaboratively and cooperatively with others, self-regulation, time management skills, situational awareness, and organizational skills. These skills are all very important things in putting a good product on the table.

Anyone who has ever worked on a challenging project knows the importance of these skills; and therefore, we should provide project-based opportunities within our curriculum for this kind of skill development.

Bob: What do you think of mastery based or personalized learning?

Dr. Renzulli: Well, I think that you really raised two topics because mastery based learning can be a form of personalized learning. In fact most of what's out there these days parading under the banner of "personalized learning" is simply finding out areas where youngsters are deficient in certain skills and providing them with more drill and practice for improving those skills.

No one can argue against the importance or the value of such a diagnostic/ prescriptive approach. My approach to personalized learning looks at other characteristics in addition to academic achievement and over the years I have developed instruments to assess four sets of characteristics that are important to personalizing learning.

The first and most important area is interest. We can get more out of learners, from diapers to doctorate, if we give them an opportunity to select a topic within a curricular area in which they may have a particular interest.

The second is learning style. We know that kids learn in different ways and if we can accommodate learning style differences, then we can get more out of a young person than if we just teach them all in the same manner.

The third is preferred modes of expression. Imagine if we didn't give a young Steven Spielberg an opportunity to express himself through the medium of film rather than just speaking it or writing it, which are very typical ways school expect kids to express themselves.

The fourth area is the executive function skills mentioned above. I believe that we need to take all of those things into account if we want to provide young people with truly personalized learning experiences rather than a one-size-fits-all approach or only making decisions about personalization based on achievement test data.

What we have done in our work at UConn is to develop a technology based program that assesses all of these different areas that define the multi-dimensional input for personalization. It's all based on researched instruments that were formally developed in a paper-and-pencil format. Students respond to items at their keyboard and it produces an electronic profile for each individual student. A search engine then scans through about 50,000 very high engagement resources and it picks resources just for that student.

I think an equal or perhaps even more important use of this technology is that teachers can use the search engine to jazz up any standards-based curriculum topic.

If they are teaching a unit on a particular topic that has to do with, for example, mechanics in science they can find sites where a young person can design his or her own roller coaster or robot. If they are studying Ancient Egypt they can engage in an activity that lets them dissect and preserve their own mummy.

These activities promote very high student engagement and research has shown that engagement is more influential than achievement test scores in improving school performance.

Besides safety, every resource that we have built into the databases has to be more engaging than just worksheets online or text material that can be found in books or encyclopedias.

Bob: So what are the best ways for school boards and superintendents to support gifted education?

Dr. Renzulli: I think that one of the ways is to take a look at a more broadened conception of giftedness. I think if you have to be stamped with an IQ of 130 on your forehead before we will provide any enrichment opportunities we are going to overlook many students with high levels of motivation, creativity, and executive function skills.

What the research says about people who have done creative productive things—inventors, writers, designers, artists, entrepreneurs, scientists—is that they weren't necessarily the smartest kid in the class when judged by traditional measures.

In my work I have used a Venn (three-ring) diagram to show gifted behaviors as the intersection of above-average ability in a particular area, creativity, and task commitment.

The second thing is having a highly-trained gifted education specialists in a school so you have a go-to person, especially for finding, managing, and infusing high engagement resources into the curriculum and serving as a resource to classroom teachers.

All classroom teachers should have some background in enrichment teaching strategies and in recognizing some of the traits that I mentioned earlier (interests, learning styles, and preferred modes of expression).

Most importantly, teachers should have training on how to infuse enrichment teaching strategies and high engagement activities into the curriculum—the kinds of things that will motivate kids and get them very active in individual and small group projects.

My staff and I at UConn have been training teachers to do these things for years and now they are becoming popular with names like Genius Hour, and Project Based Learning, and Maker Spaces.

If we want to remain competitive as a nation, these kinds of experiences are necessary to produce more Thomas Edisons and Rachel Carsons, Steven Jobs, and Louis Armstrongs.

Kids with these potentials are in all of our schools today—we just have to work smarter to develop it.

Bob: I want to say thank you for the work you have done over the years. We have much to learn from you. If people want to get in touch with you, you're at UCONN. I encourage boards to think about what you said. So thank you very much.

Dr. Renzulli: My pleasure.

Dr. Joseph Renzulli is associated with UConn's Neag Center for Creativity, Gifted Education and Talent Development. He is a nationwide expert in this area.