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Considerations for Increasing Access to Talent Development Programs for Students From Low-Income and Minority Groups

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One of the major issues in the field of gifted education is the underrepresentation of students from minority groups and low-income families in gifted programs. Researchers have reported that this is due both to identification practices that disproportionately exclude these students, including a lack of parent awareness of identification procedures, and a lack of gifted education programming in schools that serve many of these students (Lu & Weinberg, 2016; Mun et al, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014). In urban districts in the United States that serve a high proportion of students from Black, Hispanic, and Native backgrounds and/or from low-income families, gifted programs may be populated primarily by White and Asian students from higher-income families. This disproportionality is what we mean by “the underrepresentation issue” in this chapter, and has been documented in many large cities, including Chicago (One Chance Illinois, 2016) and New York City (Lu & Weinberg, 2016), among others (e.g., Card & Giuliano, 2015; Galvez, 2015; Isensee, 2015; Thompson, 2015).

Considering the “G Word” as Part of Creating Special Programming

In our article (Renzulli & Brandon, 2017) addressing underrepresentation in gifted programs, we presented the following list of questions that we feel the stakeholders for any school system should consider prior to setting any policy related to special programs for supporting children’s gifts and talents and the associated identification procedures that lead to access and participation.

1. How does this district define and identify giftedness?
2. Must this district officially designate a student as “gifted” before providing any supplementary services?
3. Is the goal of the program to label students as “gifted” or “non-gifted” or is it to develop the strengths and talents of any young person who shows the potential for benefiting from supplementary services that are beyond the regular curriculum?
4. Can teachers use certain general enrichment activities (e.g., Thinking Skills, Creativity Training, and Problem-Based Learning) with all students and use their levels of response to determine for whom and in what way advanced level follow-up is warranted?

5. Does the program allow for gifted education services to be provided to certain students, at certain times, and within certain contexts or domains of their demonstrated potentials, regardless of whether or not they have the official label?
6. Would the program serve, for example, a young Steven Spielberg, who was doing exceptional things with a movie camera at a young age but was not a traditionally high-achieving student?

Prior to considering even the first question on the preceding list, it is prudent to take a step further back and consider the goal in using the word “gifted” at all. A practical understanding of what the term “gifted” means raises the question of what heuristic purpose the term serves. A heuristic is simply an approach to problem solving, learning, or discovery that employs a practical, systematic method. A heuristic should be selected for its appropriateness to pursue an immediate goal; in this case, to plan special programs and to establish processes to determine which young people are eligible to participate in those programs.

We encourage readers to consider the word “gifted” as an adjective, as it is used to refer to high potential in a particular area of human performance, rather than as a noun (i.e., for an entity or fixed state). In this case, it usually references a comparison group (e.g., “He is a gifted artist, for a first grader.”). Using “gifted” or a synonym as an adjective also helpfully highlights the areas of talent that could suggest a need for different educational opportunities for children (e.g., superior reading comprehension; exceptional musician). Indeed, the word is even used as an adjective when the field is referred to as “Gifted Education.” Using the term in this way reminds us that the student receives a gift when the school provides opportunities, resources, and encouragement to transform his or her potential into gifted behaviors.

As a heuristic, “gifted education” conveys a process that *may* lead to the enhancement of abilities and skills. As a less than perfect heuristic, “gifted assessment” for identification *may* identify students who can benefit from enhanced programming, but it may also lead to students being selected who for one reason or another are not successful in the program, and it miss many who would benefit. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that this last possibility is a regular occurrence in the United States, especially for children from racial and ethnic backgrounds other than White or Asian and for children from families of lower socioeconomic status (Erwin & Worrell, 2012; Ford, 2014; Ford & Whiting, 2016; Lakin, 2016; Yoon & Gentry, 2009). These underrepresented students are also less likely than White, Asian, and higher-SES students to attend a school that provides any special services for gifted and talented students at all (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights 2016). This places two barriers in the way of access for children from historically underrepresented groups: in the absence of available programming, teachers may have less incentive to put time and effort into identifying students; and conversely, without a population of students identified as having a need for special services, the school may have less incentive to expend resources on developing and staffing a gifted program.

The traditional entity usage of the word “gifted,” along with a primary reliance on teacher nominations and ability-test scores to qualify students for special programming, have resulted in remarkable under-representation of high potential students from historically under-represented groups in gifted education programs in the United States (Erwin & Worrell, 2012; Ford, 2014; Ford & Whiting, 2016; Lakin, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016; see also National Research Council, 2002). The test-based approach to identification also leaves out students of all backgrounds who have high, but not the highest, test scores, even when they are highly creative, think and pursue tasks with a different approach to learning, or have highly specialized talents, interests, creativity, or motivation.

General Recommendations for Change

Four methods are generally recommended for improving access to gifted programming for children from historically underrepresented groups: the use of nonverbal tests, universal screening, making decisions based on local norms, and performance-based assessment. Each of these has the potential to solve some of the identification-related problems that have led to the current disparities in gifted program populations (Renzulli & Brandon, 2017). Providing additional supports to targeted students prior to and during their participation in special programming is a related practice that may support access and retention (Horn, 2015; Kearney et al., 2017).

The use of nonverbal tests, universal screening, and making decisions with these types of data based on local norms may address inequities in access to programs (Lakin, 2016; Lohman, 2005; McBee, 2006; Renzulli, 2005; Pfeiffer, 2015). However, some research has suggested that while nonverbal tests may improve representation, they do not totally mitigate the inequities or improve identification equally across groups (Giessman, Gambrell, & Stebbins, 2013; Lohman, Korb, & Lakin, 2008). Universal screening and interpreting data using local norms are both strategies that show promise for improving access to special programs that are designed to build on the skills that the universal screening tool measures. For example, a standardized reading assessment that all students complete at the end of 3rd grade can easily be used to identify the highest-achieving 3rd-grade reading students at the school, who could then be given opportunities, resources, and support to build on that strength—and this can be done regardless of their absolute achievement. Put another way, using universal screening with local norms for identification is useful because any school can always find a group of students whose educational needs are sufficiently different from their grade-level peers that they would benefit from special programming tailored to their needs, even if they would be considered average in a school with generally higher achievement or if no students in that group would traditionally qualify for gifted services (i.e., IQ above 130). The nature of the special programming would ideally reflect the observed strengths (VanTassel-Baska, 2015).

Performance-based assessment that leads to programming which builds on the strengths observed in the performance is at the heart of many creative and applied programs. For example, athletic programs and sports teams usually select players based on tryouts or observations of lower-level competitions. Likewise, graphic artists

submit a portfolio of work to be evaluated for admission to prestigious training programs and employment. For special programs in schools that are intended to develop students' creative productivity, performance-based assessment would entail observations of students as they respond to an opportunity for creative productivity. After viewing a presentation on inventions, for example, teachers would take note of students who independently express a desire to continue learning about inventions or inventors or who spend time beginning to create their own inventions. Those students could then be offered an opportunity and support to pursue this interest in inventing, ideally with a dedicated educator to coach them in order to increase the authenticity and intellectual rigor of their pursuit.

A potential problem with performance-based assessment is evaluator bias. Grissom and Redding (2016) found that Black students were three times as likely to be assigned to a gifted program if they were taught by a Black teacher. They suggested that this may be because certain behaviors may be viewed positively by a Black teacher, but negatively by teachers of other races. For example, a Black child's unwillingness to change their strategy or goal in the face of repeated failure might be described as "stubborn" by a White teacher but "persistent" by a Black teacher. Teacher training in various manifestations of creativity and questioning behaviors, and the use of tools such as the Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (Renzulli et al., 2010) or the Gifted Behaviors Rating Scale (Shaklee, 1993) can improve teachers' ability to identify talent potential in underrepresented students (Kearney et al., 2017; Horn, 2015).

Identifying Under-represented Groups Using Performance-Based Assessment in the SEM

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM; Renzulli & Reis, 2014) uses an identification system that integrates several of the above recommendations, and so it may be useful for addressing the under-representation issue (Figure 1). All of the identification procedures for this model were built to support the selection of students for a programming model that provides general enrichment for all students and opportunities for advanced level follow up for students who show high motivation and creativity in response to general enrichment experiences, the regular curriculum, or non-school interests and activities.

In the SEM, ability and/or achievement scores are often used for universal screening, with local norms used to select about half of the students in the "talent pool" who will regularly participate in special services for talent development. The second half of the talent pool is formed by including *additional* students whose observed creativity, enthusiasm for learning, leadership, or other non-tested attributes suggest they would potentially show gifted behaviors (i.e., creative productivity) if given the opportunity, resources, and support to do so. Rating scales such as those listed above can assist teachers to more fairly consider these "softer" traits in their own current and former students. *Also*, in this system, performance-based assessment is used continually to consider whether additional students may benefit from these special services. The model has been used for more than three decades in a wide variety of school settings.

Students who are selected for special services in the SEM include those who are not the highest-scoring students in their schools, but whose non-test score information and the responses to various types of performance-based assessment clearly reveal that they are candidates for selected supplementary services (e.g., Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995; Baum, Schader, & Hébert, 2014; Oreck, Baum, & McCartney, 2000; Reis, Gentry, & Park, 1995).

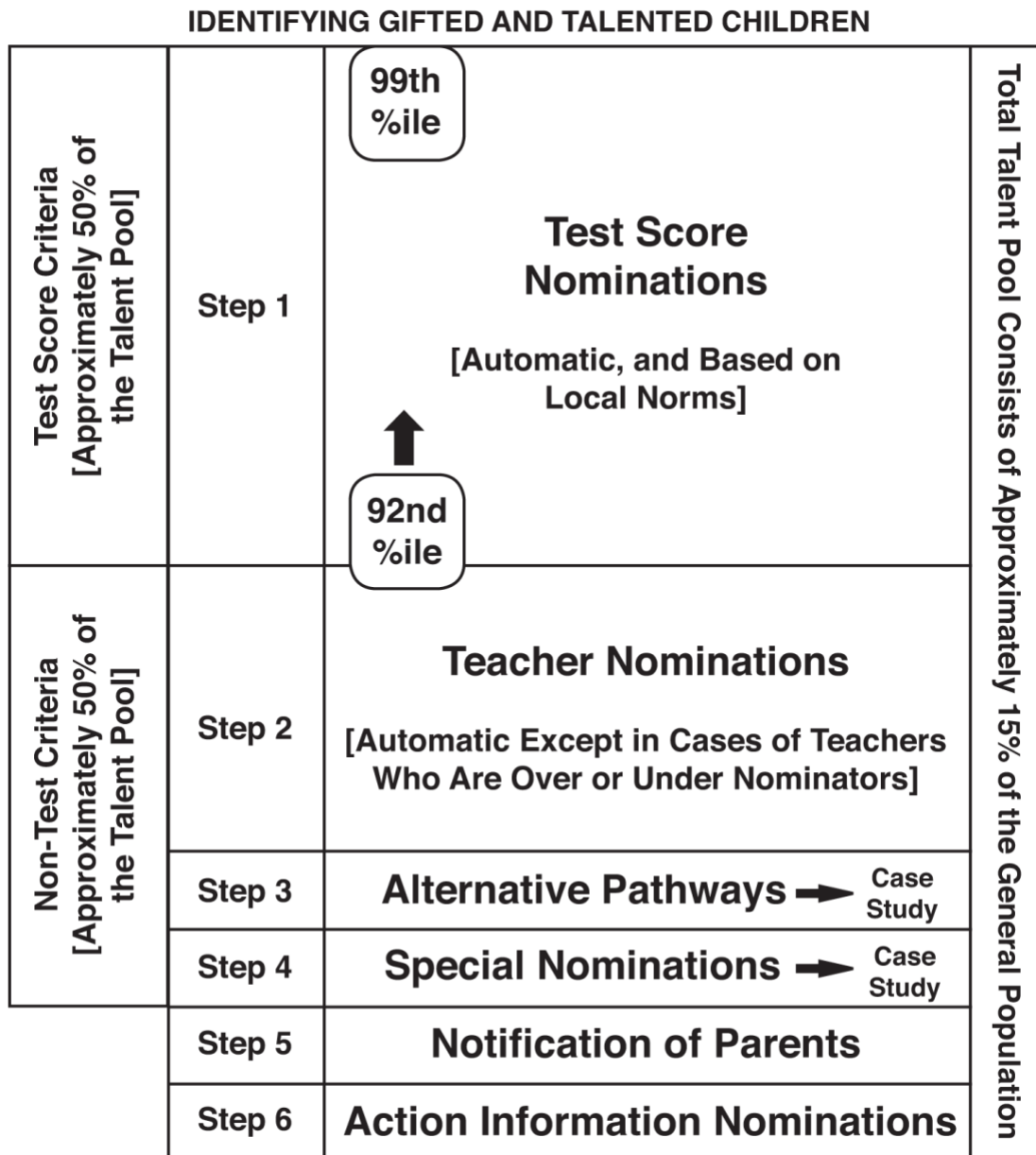


Figure 1. The Renzulli Talent Pool Identification System (Renzulli & Reis, 2014)

The system is flexible enough to accommodate talent potentials in different domains and populations. It takes into consideration the fact that there is no perfect identification system and it assumes that there should be congruence between the criteria used in the identification process and the goals and types of services that constitute the day-to-day activities that students will pursue. The accompanying service model also attempts to activate a much broader range of services and teaching practices, many of which are meant to develop creative and innovative talents in young people. In the following section, we describe how one district used the SEM identification system and programming model to bring high-potential students together for an enriched education that has shown promise in supporting their talent development across domains.

The Renzulli Academy: An Urban District's Talent Development Solution

One strategy to promote talent development in high-potential youth from underrepresented groups is to provide opportunities, resources, and support to students who show readiness for a more advanced curriculum than that normally provided by their school. This can be accomplished within a single school, or students from many schools can be brought together for this purpose. In this section we describe how a 4th-8th grade public school in Hartford, CT, based on the SEM (Renzulli & Reis, 2014) provides the *opportunity* to participate in gifted programming to students who would likely have not been identified as gifted in nearby suburban school districts as well as *resources* and *support* to help these students rise to the challenge of a more advanced curriculum including supplementary enrichment experiences. Finally, we discuss the outcomes observed in the first several years of the program and implications for replication efforts across the country.

The Renzulli Academy in Hartford uses the entire city as the “catchment area” for its enrollees and operates on the same budget basis as all other schools in the city (i.e., per-student budget allocation). Students are selected for the Academy following a two-part admission process based on the Talent Pool Identification System used in the SEM (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). The Talent Pool Identification System “casts a wide net” to identify as many students who may benefit from the school’s modified curriculum as possible. First, all students scoring in the top 15% of the district on third-grade state mastery tests in reading, math, and language usage receive an invitation to apply to the academy. If there is space, students entering grades 5–8 are also invited. Not all of these are students who scored at the highest level, called “Exceeding” (Connecticut State Department of Education [SDE], n.d.). For example, in 2019, statewide, 30.9% of 3rd-grade students exceeded the standard in reading and 26.1% exceeded the standard in math. In Hartford, just 22.2% of 3rd-grade students Met or Exceeded the standard in reading, with only 8.4% of students overall scoring at the highest level; and just 23.3% of 3rd-grade students Met or Exceeded the standard in math, with only 6.7% of students overall scoring at the highest level. In contrast, in nearby suburban districts, over 40% of 3rd-graders exceeded the standards in reading, and about 35% exceeded the standard in math (SDE, 2020). In short, the top 15% of students in Hartford includes many students who would be average students in other schools but who are top students *in Hartford*.

The second part of the admission process is an application. Students who are interested in attending the academy answer a few short-answer questions about their interests and motivation to attend the school, parents write a letter of interest, and the child's teacher completes rating scales on the students' creativity, task commitment, and general ability. School grades and behavior are also considered in the application, though a history of difficult behavior does not necessarily exclude an applicant (F. DeJesus, personal communication, March 20, 2017). Unlike some gifted programs, where students from minority groups and low-income families are represented in a much smaller proportion than the general population of the school district (Lu & Weinberg, 2016; One Chance Illinois, 2016), the students of the Renzulli Academy reflect the population of Hartford Public Schools (HPS). In HPS, 86% of students are Black, Hispanic, Native (Hawaiian, Alaskan, or American Indian), or of two or more races, (84% Black or Hispanic) and 88% of Academy students are in these groups (83% Black or Hispanic). Similarly, 78% of students in HPS qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 81% of Academy students do (SDE, 2019a;2019c). For this reason, we feel this model of identification is an effective solution to the underrepresentation issue for urban districts with predominately minority and low-income populations.

The accepted students are immersed in curricula developed for gifted learners: M³ enriched mathematics units (Gavin et al., 2007), Schoolwide Enrichment Model-Reading (Reis, 2009), investigation-based science (e.g., Heilbronner & Renzulli, 2016) and project-based social studies (e.g., National History Day; see Sloan & Rockman, 2010). This curriculum is complemented by general enrichment: foreign language instruction, fine arts, enrichment clusters (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2014; see also Allen, Robbins, Payne, & Brown, 2016), and school-based participation in academic and creative competitions. Many of the teachers at the Renzulli Academy have a master's degree with an emphasis in giftedness, creativity, and talent development, and teachers are supported with ongoing professional development in differentiation, gifted pedagogy, and the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. Students who need academic intervention are supported in the classroom through differentiated instruction and Response to Intervention plans. Parents participate in a parent council, are offered classes on the characteristics of gifted learners, and are expected to invest time supporting the school (Hartford Public Schools, 2016).

A common measure of the success of a school is its students' performance and/or growth on standardized assessments (VanTassel-Baska & Feng, 2004). In Connecticut, schools are rated with School Performance Index scores (SPIs) from 0–100, which are a combination of student performance on standardized tests, attendance, and equity measures, with each subpart having its own target and score. Since 2014, when the Smarter Balanced assessments were adopted to measure academic achievement, the target SPI for each academic area has been 75. In 2019, the Renzulli Academy's English Language Arts (ELA) SPI was 72.9, its math SPI was 65.9, and its science SPI was 66.5 (SDE, 2019a). These scores are higher than the state's overall performance indicators (2019 ELA: 67.7; 2019 math: 63.1; 2019 science: 63.8; SDE, 2020) and nearly as high as the scores in neighboring West Hartford, a school district where only 26% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals and 28% of students are Black or Hispanic (2019 ELA: 75.4; 2019 math: 70.6; science:

73.4; SDE, 2019b). Some might say that this school would produce these higher test scores simply because the students were drawn from a pool of the highest-scorers in the district, undoubtedly including students who were already scoring above goal on standardized tests. Perhaps these impressive scores are merely an artifact of selection. They might rightly ask for additional evidence with which to judge the effectiveness of the school's *educational model*, which brings together creative, task-committed students with above-average (but not necessarily superior) ability and then teaches them using an enriched curriculum designed for gifted learners.

Another way to assess a school is to consider how its students perform on performance tasks, including whether students place in academic and creative competitions and the quality of the products, performances, and services its students develop (VanTassel-Baska & Feng, 2004). VanTassel-Baska and Feng recommend portfolio assessment for evaluating the effectiveness of gifted programs, because gifted programs often emphasize outcomes on processes that are difficult to measure with standardized tests, such as higher-level thinking and creativity. Since the school's opening in 2009, Renzulli Academy students have excelled in creative and knowledge-based competitions across the disciplines:

- Students have competed at the National level in Invention Convention.
- Students have placed in the Columbus State University's math contests and earned achievement awards at the State MathCounts competition.
- Student artwork has won competitions, such as the Award of Excellence from the Wadsworth Atheneum at the 2019 Hartford Youth Art Renaissance Festival.
- Students have won the district Geography and Spelling Bees.
- Many students have advanced from regional finals to the National History Day State Competition, and some of these have advanced to the National competition.
- Students have placed in the City of Hartford Creative Youth Essay Contest.
- Students have placed and won in several categories at the Citywide Science Fair.
- Since the school began its band program in 2014, students have been selected annually for the University of Hartford's Hartt School of Music ensemble, the Litchfield Jazz Camp, and the Northern Regional Music Festival.
- In 2017, an Academy student received a full scholarship to the prestigious Loomis-Chaffee college preparatory boarding school. (F. DeJesus, personal communication, March 20, 2017; Hartford Public Schools, 2020).

Although this section did not describe a systematic program evaluation or include direct comparisons of the outcomes of similar students in other Hartford schools, the combination of high test scores, excellence in academic competitions, and award-winning participation in creative competitions, suggest that this program effectively serves the students who are selected to participate. Families have publicly provided positive feedback, as well. For example, one parent commented on the public school review website <https://www.greatschools.org>, "A rose might grow from a crack in the concrete, but planted in a garden with nourishment is where it will thrive." Although the

students served by the Renzulli Academy may not be eligible for gifted services in higher-performing districts, the opportunities, resources, and support provided by the Academy has enabled students to show that they can perform at high levels.

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