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Planting Seeds and Reaping Harvests

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**All of us have two educations; one
which we receive from others;
another, and the most valuable,
which we give to ourselves.**

John Randolph

Sitting on the “Detention Bench” outside the principal’s office was not an uncommon event in my early school career! A great deal of energy combined with a flair for the mischievous earned me the reputation of a “wise guy” and trouble maker through most of my elementary school career. When I returned to school for seventh grade following summer vacation the first new teacher in what seemed like forever had joined the faculty of my school. Tall, slim, and very pretty, Elise Kent was fresh out of college and a breath of fresh air to what was a very traditional recitation-and-drill regimen at our little country grammar school. All the seventh and eighth grade boys fell immediately in love with her and did anything and everything to please her and to attract her attention. I, of course, reverted to my usual pranks and wise cracks, which I am certain challenged everything she had studied about pre-adolescence and students with poor “deportment.”

One day she sat down next to me when I was once again on the detention bench for yet another exchange of blows on the playground. She started talking about a story I had written for one of her English class assignments. She asked me if I might be interested in starting a school newspaper where writers could share their work with others. In no time at all, my energy and behavior became focused into a positive way to impress Mrs. Kent, to have a “real audience” for the stories I liked to write, and to work with other students who shared an interest in writing. Perhaps this was the first experience that planted the seed for what later became Type III Enrichment in The Enrichment Triad Model!

A second teacher who influenced me was my seventh and eighth grade Social Studies teacher, Roberta Mamula, who planted in me the seeds of optimism and determination. The guidance counselor had come from the high school to help us select our high school program and, because she knew I came from a very poor family, the counselor recommended that I go to trade school or take the general track in high school. She had made the same recommendation two years earlier to my older brother who was much smarter than I, but he listened to her advice, and in subsequent years had to make many changes in his education before matriculating at a

four-year college, eventually earning his Ph.D. in history, and becoming an eminent scholar in his area of specialization.

Mrs. Mamula asked me to meet with her after school following the guidance counselor's visit. She said, "Don't listen to that old busy body—you're a clever fellow and you will somehow find a way to get support for going to college. Listen to me—take the college prep-course!" Mrs. Mamula lived in our neighborhood and knew me since I was a young child. My father died when I was eight and my mother was a very intelligent but relatively uneducated immigrant who did domestic work so that we could get by. My brothers and I learned from her, our first teacher and a person with a strong social consciousness, the importance of hard work, looking out for one another, and always helping a friend or neighbor in need. Perhaps it was her example that planted the seeds of what was later to become the concepts of task commitment and integrating social capital into the conception of giftedness that I developed in later years. Because we had very limited means for anything but the necessities of life, I learned at an early age that if I wanted something, a pair of sneakers, money to go to the movies, or bus fare to go somewhere, I had to figure out a way of getting it. Endless odd jobs, gathering and returning soda bottles to collect two cent deposits, a door-to-doors vegetable business on produce from our garden (and some items that mysteriously found their way onto my vegetable cart late at night from neighbors' gardens) taught me a self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship that was to become a *modus operandi* throughout my later career. Although my present work is more focused on selling ideas and theories, writing research proposals, or starting new programs, it is nevertheless not unlike having a successful vegetable business, newspaper route, or being the first person in line at the caddy shack on Saturday and Sunday mornings so that I would be guaranteed to make a day's pay.

One of the saddest nights of my young life was attending College Night during my last year of high school. I went from room to room listening to intriguing descriptions of wondrous colleges, but when it came to questions about financial aid the answers were always the same—there were athletic scholarships but nothing for high academic records. I was only a mediocre football player on my high school team and hardly scholarship material. I held back my tears until the bus ride home and resigned myself to the fate of finding a job after high school and waiting for the inevitable draft notice from the military and deployment to the Korean War, which was to be the fate of so many of my non-college bound contemporaries.

Then chance took a hand in things. My uncle, Ferrer Renzulli had graduated from Glassboro State Teachers College in New Jersey, and was a classmate of the person who was currently the director of admissions at GSTC. Uncle Fatty, as we all fondly called him, was the nearest thing I had to a father, and he did his best to look after our struggling family. He arranged for an interview with his former classmate, and lo and behold, I received a scholarship, a work-study job, and a part-time job stocking shelves at a local super market on the grave yard shift. Financial support is also a seed, and we should not forget this seed when we consider the many low-income students who will not flourish unless we advocate for this kind of support.

Although I never had a great "calling" to be a teacher, junior year practicum was all it took to convince me that I had found my life's work. I began teaching and pursuing a master's degree in school psychology part time at Rutgers University. One of my instructors asked me to review a manuscript for her that she was asked to examine for a book publisher. It turned out to

be the subsequently influential book by Getzels and Jackson entitled *Creativity and Intelligence: Explorations With Gifted Students*. I was fascinated and completely hooked on this line research, so much so that I decided to pursue doctoral work in educational psychology [there were no doctoral programs in gifted education at the time].

At around the same time the Russians launched Sputnik and my superintendent of schools, like so many other educators in America, scrambled to respond to our nation's clamor to improve science education. He asked me if I would be willing to start a science program for our most gifted students. When I asked him where I could find "the curriculum," he said there wasn't any! This was probably the best thing that could have happened, because I approached the teaching in a completely different way from traditional models of teaching and learning. I experimented with interest assessment, building experiences around the learner rather than using prescribed curriculum, and taking student learning and expression styles into account. This little "laboratory" laid the groundwork for what was to become the theories, instruments, and practical models that have come to define my present day research and work with schools.

These are only a few of the seeds planted in my early years that influenced my later work. Fast forward to more recent times. How did these early experiences translate into what today has made my work popular enough to be asked to contribute to this publication?

The focus of my work has been on bringing about change in the ways we identify talent potentials [emphasis on the plural] and the ways that we develop high levels of what I call creative/productive giftedness. Obstacles related to bringing about educational change can occur on multiple levels. In the late 1960s, when I first began work on the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness and the Enrichment Triad Model, I never dreamed: (a) that my work would become popular enough to form the basis for a new look at what makes giftedness and the means for serving high potential students, and (b) that it would become the basis for a good deal of controversy in the field. This work was greeted by a less than enthusiastic reception from the gifted establishment of the time including rejections of my writing by all the main journals in the field of gifted education, admonitions about my work by state directors of gifted programs to school districts seeking consultation, and rejections of papers from state and national conference organizers. My convictions about a broadened view of human potential caused me to seek an audience outside the gifted education community, and in 1978 the *Kappan*, a leading general education journal, published my article entitled, *What Makes Giftedness: Reexamining a Definition*. I credit Dr. E. Paul Torrance for the seed he planted regarding this end-run strategy—a strategy that he said he had to use to get the gate keepers in education and psychology to accept his work on creativity. In the ensuing years scholars, practitioners, and policy makers began to encounter my work, and this awareness led to an appreciation of more flexible attitudes toward the meaning of this complex phenomenon called giftedness. The 1978 *Kappan* article is now the most widely cited publication in the field. I mention this fortunate turn of events mainly to call attention to the always-expectant hope that people can change their minds about a long cherished belief. Similarly, after agreeing to publish the Triad Model as a three part series, a gifted education journal editor inexplicably decided not to publish the second or third installments. Once again, I sought audiences outside the gifted education establishment and by offering independent workshops around the country, and starting the summer Confratute Program at the University of Connecticut, now in its 30th year. If there is a strategic lesson to be learned from this scenario, it is simply that an end-run strategy is sometimes an effective way to go around

organizational power brokers (i.e., “The Establishment”) to bring your message directly to the consumer. A basic principle of economics is that supply creates its own demand. When practitioners began to see value in the approaches I advocated, this bottom-up strategy resulted in gaining the sometimes-reluctant attention of the persons who select articles for publication, invite speakers to conferences, and recommend practices to schools.

A bottom-up strategy is not without its roadblocks and pitfalls. In the years since I originally published the Enrichment Triad Model, and the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness (Renzulli, 1978) a wide variety of reactions have appeared in the literature and on the professional conference circuit. These reactions have ranged from a highly positive article entitled *Renzulli Is Right*, to a scathing criticism that branded my work as “a national disease in gifted education.” And this work seems to have generated enough controversy to cause some authors and speakers, regardless of the topic they are addressing, to weave into their work what Don Treffinger referred to as “cheap shots” about the ideas I have set forth.

To be certain, I was fully aware that the Triad Model and the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness challenged the traditional orthodoxy that dominated the field, but I never thought that state directors of gifted programs would prohibit me from speaking or consulting with school districts in their states, or that the editors of professional journals in the field would reject my articles because, as one editor put it, “I disagree philosophically with your ideas.” To understand the discrepancy regarding the popularity of these theories in more recent years versus the early resistance to it, it is necessary to turn back the calendar and revisit the climate in the gifted education field in the late sixties and early seventies. This was a time period prior to the landmark theories of Robert Sternberg and Howard Gardner, and before the publication of influential research on talent development by Benjamin Bloom, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Robert Alber, Dean Simonton, and others. Although some people were beginning to question the predominance of the single criterion, IQ score cut-off approach to the identification of students for special programs, state guidelines and regulations that were in existence or being enacted at that time still harkened back to the belief that a high level of traditionally measured intelligence was synonymous with giftedness.

Fast forward one last time to today’s work. A new seed was planted a couple of years ago by my partner and colleague, Dr. Sally Reis. She asked: Could we maintain integrity to the Triad Theory and, *at the same time*, harness the vast resources of computer technology and the Internet to assess student strengths and match resources to student abilities, interests, learning styles, and preferred modes of expression. With support from the University of Connecticut Research and Development Center, an important financial seed, a new program that can be found at <https://renzullilearning.com> was born. Following extensive development and field-testing, this program is now being used by thousands of teachers and students in the U. S. and a number of international schools. Differentiation is now within easy reach of every teacher because of a seed that Sally planted.

These are just some of the seeds that have influenced my career. I have benefited from the many persons who have planted, nurtured, and encouraged both those seeds that have grown and some that did not bear fruit. If there is a lesson to be learned from this brief glimpse into the seeds that have been planted by others on my behalf, it is that we never know when something we do to support a young person will be the acorn from whence a mighty oak springs forth.

Therefore we must use our talents and resources to plant many seeds in many individuals. People who work in the field of talent development should view themselves as gardeners; sowing, watering, fertilizing, mulching, pruning, and always being the sunshine that provides energy to our future contributors to all areas of human knowledge and productivity. This is how talents, both manifest and emerging, are developed.

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