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The Total Talent Portfolio: Looking at the Best in Every Student[1]

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Abstract

Every learner has strengths or potential strengths that can be used as a foundation for effective learning and creative productivity. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM; Reis & Renzulli, 1985) capitalizes on these strengths by offering students options to realize their own potential. Through service delivery components like Curriculum Compacting and Enrichment Clusters, students are insured of being exposed to high level and challenging learning experiences. A third component, the Total Talent Portfolio (TTP) serves as the framework by which all the other elements of the model can be organized. A model for total talent development requires that we give equal attention to interests and learning styles as well as to the cognitive abilities that have been used traditionally for educational decision making. The Total Talent Portfolio is a vehicle for gathering and recording information systematically about students' abilities, interests, and learning styles. The major dimensions of the portfolio and the specific items that guide data gathering within each dimension are presented in Figure 1. Students should achieve autonomy and ownership of the TTP by assuming major responsibility in the selection of items to be included, maintaining and regularly updating the portfolio, and setting personal goals by making decisions about items that they would like to include in the portfolio. Although the teacher should serve as a guide in the portfolio review process, the ultimate goal is to create autonomy in students by turning control for the management of the portfolio over to them. The major purposes of the Total Talent Portfolio are:

1. To **collect** several different types of information that portray a student's strength areas, and to regularly update this information.
2. To **classify** this information into the general categories of abilities, interests, and learning styles and related markers of successful learning such as organizational skills, content area preferences, personal and social skills, preferences for creative productivity, and learning-how-to-learn skills.

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3. To periodically **review and analyze** the information in order to make purposeful decisions about providing opportunities for enrichment experiences in the regular curriculum, the enrichment clusters, and the continuum of special services.
4. To **negotiate** various acceleration and enrichment learning options and opportunities between teacher and student through participation in a shared decision making process.
5. To **use the information** as a vehicle for educational, personal, and career counseling and for communicating with parents about the school's talent development opportunities and their child's involvement in them.

Abilities	***Interests***	***Style Preferences***	***Style Preferences***	***Style Preferences***	***Style Preferences***
Maximum Performance Indicators	***Interest Areas***	***Instructional Styles Preferences***	***Learning Environment Preferences***	***Thinking Styles Preferences***	***Expression Style Preferences***
Tests Standardized • Teacher-Made • Course Grades Teacher Ratings **Product Evaluation** • Written • Oral • Visual • Musical • Constructed (Note differences between assigned and self-selected products) Level of Participation in Learning Activities Degree of Interaction With Others Ref: General Tests and Measurements Literature	Fine Arts Crafts Literary Historical Mathematical/ Logical Physical Sciences Life Sciences Political/Judicial Athletic/Recreation Marketing/ Business Drama/Dance Musical Performance Musical Composition Managerial/ Business Photography Film/Video Computers Other (Specify) Ref: Renzulli, 1997	Recitation & Drill Peer Tutoring Lecture Lecture/ Discussion Discussion Guided Independent Study * Learning/Interest Center Simulation, Role Playing, Dramatization, Guided Fantasy Learning Games Replicative Reports or Projects* Investigative Reports or Projects* Unguided Independent Study* Internship* Apprenticeship* *With or without a mentor Ref: Renzulli & Smith, 1978	**Inter/Intra Personal** • Self-Oriented • Peer-Oriented • Adult-Oriented • Combined **Physical** • Sound • Heat • Light • Design • Mobility • Time of Day • Food Intake • Seating Ref: Amabile, 1983; Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1977; Gardner, 1983	Analytic (School Smart) Synthetic/Creative (Creative, Inventive) Practical/ Contextual (Street Smart) Legislative Executive Judicial Ref: Sternberg, 1984, 1988a, 1990	Written Oral Manipulative Discussion Display Dramatization Artistic Graphic Commercial Service Ref: Renzulli & Reis, 1985

Figure 1. Major Dimensions: Total Talent Portfolio

Status Information

The first set of information recorded in the TTP deals with student assets in the areas of abilities, interests, and learning styles commonly called status information. Status information is

anything we know or can record about a student prior to the instructional process that tells us something about learner characteristics. Examples of status information are test scores, course grades, teacher ratings of various learning behaviors, and formal and informal assessments of interests and learning styles.

Abilities

Abilities, or maximum performance indicators, as traditionally defined in the psychometric literature, deal with competencies that represent the highest level of performance a student has attained in a particular area of aptitude or scholastic achievement. Assessment on this dimension of school performance has traditionally been evaluated by tests or course grades. The first column of Figure 1 includes these conventional assessments, but it also includes a number of additional procedures by which maximum performance can be examined. These procedures may not be as reliable and objective as traditional tests, but they do have the advantage of letting us know how students perform on more complex tasks and on tasks that require the application of knowledge to assigned or self-selected learning activities. The merits of formal testing versus alternative forms of assessment have been debated extensively in the literature, and it is not our purpose here to reexamine this debate or to argue for one approach or the other. We believe that any and all sources of information are valuable if they will improve our understanding of potential for future performance and if they provide direction for enhancing future performance. We do argue, however, that alternative forms of assessment are equal in value to formal tests, and a Total Talent Portfolio that does not include alternate assessment information will seriously limit the purposes of this component of the SEM. Teacher-made assessments provide information about knowledge acquisition, the mastery of basic skills, and, in some cases, problem-solving strategies. This information is valuable for determining general levels of proficiency, but the most valuable kind of teacher-made assessments, so far as the purposes of the Total Talent Portfolio are concerned, are those that elicit open-ended or extended responses. Responses of this type enable teachers to gain insight into complex student abilities such as: constructing convincing arguments, using expressive written or oral language, generating relevant hypotheses, applying creative solutions to complex problems, and demonstrating deep levels of understanding. Open-ended responses also provide excellent opportunities for students to demonstrate artistic and scientific creativity, and to display advanced abilities such as analysis, generalization, and evaluation.

The grades students have received in previously completed courses can also provide information about particular strength areas. When grades reflect both performance on teacher-made assessments and other accomplishments in less structured situations, they provide a more comprehensive picture of student abilities than can be derived from test scores alone. The advantages and disadvantages of course grades are well documented in the literature on tests and measurements, and all teachers have had experiences related to the grading process and the usefulness of grades. The value of course grades in the Total Talent Portfolio is similar to standardized and teacher-made assessments in that they all provide a quick overview of general area strengths that may be capitalized upon when making decisions about possible modifications in the regular curriculum, enrichment cluster placement, or access to special opportunities that are available in the continuum of special services.

Recent developments in the field of educational evaluation have provided large amounts of the know-how necessary to assist teachers in evaluating student products. These developments have benefited from techniques originally developed for special types of evaluation situations such as writing contests, science fairs, artistic competitions, and the holistic scoring and primary-trait scoring of written material. In most cases, earlier techniques were associated with academic or artistic competitions, and they frequently depended on expert opinion from specialists within subject matter domains. The more recent developments in performance assessment have attempted to organize analytic procedures into checklists and rating scales that teachers can use to determine the presence or absence of key indicators of product quality.

Interests

If there is a "keystone" in the overall structure of the SEM, it is students' interests. Building educational experiences around student interests is probably one of the single most effective ways to guarantee that enrichment practices will be introduced into a school. In numerous evaluation studies of SEM programs, student comments about most favored practices almost always dealt with greater freedom for selecting at least a part of the work they pursued. A planned strategy for helping students examine their present and potential interests is based on a group of instruments called the *Interest-A-Lyzer* (Renzulli, 1977; 1996). The *Interest-A-Lyzer* family of instruments is available in three levels, Primary (K–3), Elementary (3–6), and Secondary (7–12), as well as in the area of art.

The main purpose of the *Interest-A-Lyzer* is to "open up" communication both within the student and between students and teachers. It also is designed to facilitate discussion between groups of students with similar interests who are attempting to identify areas in which they might like to pursue advanced level studies. The *Interest-A-Lyzer* is not the type of instrument which yields a numerical score, but rather, is designed in a way that allows for *pattern analysis*. The major patterns or factors that might emerge from the instrument are as follows:

1. Performing Arts
2. Creative Writing and Journalism
3. Mathematics
4. Business Management
5. Athletics
6. History
7. Social Action
8. Fine Arts and Crafts
9. Science
10. Technology

It is important to keep in mind that (1) the above factors represent *general* fields or families of interest and (2) numerous ways exist in which an individual may be interested in any particular field. Thus, identifying general patterns is only the first step in interest analysis. General interests must be refined and focused so that students eventually will identify specific problems within a general field or a combination of fields.

Instructional Styles Preferences

The third column of Figure 1 lists a broad range of instructional techniques that are familiar to most teachers. In some cases, these instructional techniques or styles can also be found in the literature under the title of "learning styles." Although several definitions of instructional styles can be found in the educational and psychological literature (Smith, 1976), the definition we recommend focuses on (1) the specific and identifiable techniques for organizing learning for individuals or for groups of varying size, and (2) the degree of structure inherent in any instructional technique. Our definition and related descriptions of instructional style alternatives have been adopted in an attempt to remove some of the mystery that surrounds the notion of learning styles. By focusing on instructional practices familiar to most teachers, we overcome the drawback of working with a "psychological middleman" that requires teachers to second-guess how certain psychological concepts (e.g., abstract-random learner) might be used in a learning situation. While alternative conceptions have value with respect to stimulating follow-up research that could eventually affect educational practice, our concern is for a theoretically sound, yet practical, approach that has direct and immediate implications for classroom practice.

One of the approaches we have used to gain information about student preferences for instructional techniques is an instrument entitled, *The Learning Styles Inventory* (Renzulli & Smith, 1978). This research-based instrument was developed to guide teachers in planning learning experiences that take into account the style preferences of students within their classrooms. *The Learning Styles Inventory* (LSI) is not a test in the traditional sense of the term, but an instrument that seeks to identify the ways in which individual young people would like to pursue various types of educational experiences. Every effort should be made to avoid "stamping" a child with a learning style in the manner that some children have been labeled according to intelligence level or disability.

Learning Environmental Preferences

Environmental preferences have not been investigated to the same extent as preferences for instructional style; however, a small body of research and a large measure of common sense suggest that the social and physical aspects of the environment affect various kinds of school performance. Amabile (1983) reviewed research dealing with social and environmental factors that influence creativity in school-age learners. The social contexts within which people operate reflect their preferences for closeness and interaction with others. When one is given freedom of choice, the extent to which she or he pursues group affiliation is almost always an indicator of social style preferences. Some students thrive in small or large peer group situations, others prefer to work with a single partner, and still others prefer to work alone or with an adult. Environmental preferences, like the instructional preferences discussed above, may vary as a function of the material being taught, the nature of the task to be accomplished, and the social relationships that exist within any given group of students. Most modern classrooms provide variations in the learning environment, but these variations are usually offered to students on a one-choice-at-a-time basis. In other words, a teacher may alternate among organizational arrangements such as individual seatwork, cooperative learning groups, and sustained silent reading; however, students are usually not given a choice outside the organizational arrangement selected by the teacher. Although a predominant organizational arrangement may be necessary

for purposes of efficiency and classroom control, we recommend that some attention be given to modification or "waivers" when it is clear that some students will benefit from a variation in the learning environment.

Thinking Styles Preferences

The fifth dimension of the Total Talent Portfolio provides information about the ways in which learners prefer to use their abilities and aptitudes. Thinking styles preferences might best be viewed as the bridge between abilities and personality; and as such, information about this dimension of the learner provides direction about the ways in which students like to address problems. Sternberg (1988) uses the three branches of the U.S. Government as a metaphor for the theory of mental self-government. The *legislative* function of mind is concerned with creating, formulating, and planning. Persons with a legislative style like to create their own rules and ways of doing things, and they prefer less structured problems and constructive, planning-based activities such as writing original works, building things, and designing new projects or enterprises. People with this style enter occupations such as creative writing, science, art, investment banking, policy making, and architecture. The *executive* function is concerned with carrying out or implementing plans or ideas initiated by others. Persons with an executive style prefer to follow rules, figure out ways to get things done, and they like pre-structured problems and working within existing structures. The executive style may be the preferred learning style among lawyers, builders, surgeons, policemen, managers, and administrators. The *judicial* function involves monitoring problems and passing judgment over ideas or products. Persons with a judicial style like to evaluate rules, procedures, and existing structures, they like to write critiques, give opinions, and judge people and their work. This style is found in occupations such as judge, critic, systems analyst, admissions officer, and quality control specialist (Sternberg, 1988).

Sternberg and Wagner (1991) have developed and carried out research studies on an instrument entitled, *Mental Self-Government Thinking Styles Inventory.* This 128-item, Likert scale questionnaire yields factor scores for each of the following 13 subscales: Legislative, Executive, Judicial, Global, Local, Progressive, Conservative, Hierarchical, Monarchical, Oligarchic, Anarchic, Internal, and External.

Expression Style Preferences

The final category in the Total Talent Portfolio deals with the ways in which people prefer to express themselves. Most classroom activities depend on written and oral expression; special subject areas such as art and physical education are based on expression styles inherent in their respective disciplines. A knowledge of expression style preferences can help teachers expand the range of learning options for individuals and small groups by "legitimizing" a broader variety of the ways in which students express themselves. Some styles of expression are more participative and leadership-oriented than product-oriented. Organizational, management, and service activities such as starting a club or business, serving as a project or team leader, or participating in community service activities should be explored as alternatives to the traditional written or oral formats that characterize most formal learning activities. These alternatives are especially valuable for students with limited English proficiency, or students who have had difficulty with standard writing or formal speaking skills. A knowledge of the ways in which

young people prefer to express themselves can be a valuable tool for organizing cooperative learning and project groups. By varying responsibilities along the lines of expression styles, a functional rather than random division of labor is established, and more students have an opportunity to contribute in unique strength areas.

A new instrument entitled *My Work: An Expression Styles Inventory* (Renzulli & Kettle, in press) has been developed to help teachers and students identify preferences for products. Research is being conducted on the secondary version of the instrument which is designed to yield the following 10 categories: Written, Oral, Artistic, Computer Technology, Audio/Visual Technology, Commercial, Service, Dramatization, Manipulative, and Musical.

Action Information

Action information consists of annotated recordings of events that take place within the instructional process. Action information, by definition, cannot be recorded beforehand because it is designed to document the ways in which students react to various learning experiences as well as other experiences that take place outside the formal learning environment.

A key issue regarding the use of the Total Talent Portfolio and relevant follow-up activities is the creation of learning experiences that will encourage the development of strong interests. The best way to capitalize on student performance, after all, is to (1) provide opportunities for participation in a broad range of activities within and across interest areas, (2) observe and document performance, satisfaction, and enthusiasm, and (3) make decisions about subsequent activities that will capitalize on *positive* reactions to previous experiences. The TTP, therefore can be used to document strength assessment activities, and regularly scheduled meetings with staff members, parents, and students are used to make decisions about appropriate follow-up, needed resources, and the development of future performance assessment situations.

Action information also consists of annotated work samples of completed assignments and other performance-based observations and assessments. These annotations can be both informal notes and more structured analyses of student work such as the type that results from our formative evaluation instrument entitled *The Student Product Assessment Form* (Reis, 1981). This research-based instrument provides students with feedback on specific dimensions of product quality. No matter what format the feedback takes, its function is to help the student evaluate her/his own work. Selection of items to be put into the portfolio is done by the student her/himself, therefore, analysis and evaluation are important process skills to be reinforced with students. Some teachers have even developed rating sheets to be completed by students and handed in with the project. The use of rubrics has become an integral part of some teachers grading criterion while allowing students the opportunity to learn how to learn and to understand exactly what standards are being set for them.

Using the Total Talent Portfolio

The main purpose of the portfolio is to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible about each student's strengths in the areas of abilities, interests, and styles. We suggest using check-off sheets based on the categories in Figure 1. as a basis for the portfolio. Research in schools using the TTP has shown that this system is best facilitated when teams of teachers make

the decision as to what information is most relevant for inclusion on the check off sheets. The check off sheets or portfolio folder can easily be customized for each school's use.

Student work, selected by teachers *and* students, should be placed in the portfolio, and examples of particular strengths within a work sample should be marked and annotated with attached notes or marginal comments by the teacher and student. It is recommended that portfolios be reviewed by teams of teachers periodically and that the portfolios also serve as focal points for meetings with parents. The cover sheet of the portfolio should include summary notations about particular accomplishments within each of the school structures upon which the SEM is targeted. The portfolio should "travel" with a student from year to year, and should serve as the basis for briefing subsequent year teachers about individual student strengths and accomplishments.

In order for the Total Talent Portfolio to achieve maximum effectiveness, it is necessary to avoid three pitfalls that have characterized other systems for gathering and recording information about student performance. These pitfalls are: (1) the escalation of needless paperwork, (2) the tendency to look at discrete items in student records, and (3) the focus on deficiencies that characterizes so much of school record keeping.

The Total Talent Portfolio is not a reiteration of the cumulative folder, it is the specific information about student strengths that lie hidden within test scores and course grades. It contains tangible pieces of information about a student that completes a 3-dimensional picture of that student. It forces the reader to focus on the positive, individual strengths of that student in order to gain a better understanding of how to help her/him learn. Above all, the Total Talent Portfolio is a place where teachers, students, and parents can share ideas to make the most of the educational experience.

Focus on Strengths

The unique feature of the Total Talent Portfolio is its focus on strengths and "high-end learning" behaviors. A tradition exists in education that has caused us to use student records mainly for spotting deficiencies. Our adherence to the medical (i.e., diagnostic-prescriptive) model has almost always been pointed in the negative direction: "Find out what's wrong with them and fix them up!" Total talent assessment emphasizes the identification of the most positive aspects of each student's learning behaviors. Documentation based on the categories in Figure 1 should be carried out by inserting in the portfolio any and all information that calls attention to strong interests, preferred styles of learning, and high levels of motivation, creativity, and leadership as well as the academic strengths that can be used as stepping stones to more advanced learning activities.

Portfolios of any type are only as valuable as the use to which they are put. Portfolios as exemplars of performance-based assessment are receiving a great deal of attention in the professional literature; they are being considered as supplements to or replacements for traditional evaluation procedures such as standardized tests. Although the information gathered in a Total Talent Portfolio can be used for program evaluation purposes, the primary use of the portfolio within the context of the SEM is to make educational programming decisions for individual students or for small groups of students who share common abilities, interests or

learning styles. Through a process that might best be described as "portfolio engineering," examples of positive performance are accumulated on a continuing basis, and regularly scheduled reviews are used to make decisions about subsequent talent development activities. These decisions may relate to guidance regarding the selection of enrichment clusters, within-class special projects, curriculum compacting, or individual learning opportunities that are a part of the continuum of special services. Portfolio engineering also involves conducting conferences among groups of teachers and specialists, meeting with parents, and conveying information about student strengths to subsequent-year teachers, college admission officers, and prospective employers. The "theme" of the Total Talent Portfolio might best be summarized in the form of two questions: What are the very *best* things we know and can record about a student? What are the very best things we can *do* to capitalize on this information?

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