Terry, A. W., Bohnenberger, J. E., Renzulli, J. S., Cramond, B., & Sisk, D. (2008). Vision with action: Developing sensitivity to societal concerns in gifted youth. *Roeper Review, 30*(1), 61–67.

Vision With Action: Developing Sensitivity to Societal Concerns in Gifted Youth

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At the 2006 National Association of Gifted Children Conference, a panel presentation addressed the importance of providing gifted children with opportunities to take positive social action through service-learning; this article is a result of that discussion. The Future Problem Solving Program (among others) has a community problem-solving component to help instill the habits of responding to community needs in socially constructive ways. A service-learning project conducted by secondary gifted students is discussed. The highest level of service-learning is an effective curriculum for gifted students that exposes them to community problems and encourages them to solve those problems creatively. Through service-learning, gifted youth have opportunities to expand their global awareness, practice skills of positive action, and make real their vision of a better future.

"Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes time. Vision with action can change the world" (J. Barker as cited in Christensen, 1993). In November 2006, at a forum at the National Association for Gifted Children Conference entitled "Vision with Action: Developing Sensitivity to Societal Concerns in Gifted Youth," the authors addressed the importance of sensitizing gifted youth to world problems and enabling them to use their talents in socially constructive ways. The following is an overview of the essential ideas presented in that forum by each contributor.

Giftedness and Creativity for the Common Good (Joseph Renzulli)

What causes some people to use their intellectual, motivational, and creative assets in ways that make a positive difference in the world, while others with similar traits become involved in more self-serving enterprises? Perhaps an even more important question is, What causes some people to mobilize their interpersonal, political, ethical, and moral lives in ways that place human concerns and the common good above materialism, ego enhancement, and self-indulgence? What makes a Nelson Mandela, a Rachel Carson, a Mother Teresa?

Although a plethora of folk wisdom, research literature, and biographical and anecdotal accounts exist about creativity and giftedness, we are still unable to answer these fundamental questions about persons who have devoted their lives to improving the human condition. There

has been endless speculation about the necessary ingredients for giftedness and creative productivity; but even though these theories have called attention to important components and conditions for high-level accomplishment, they have failed to explain how the confluence of desirable traits results in the commitment to making the lives of all people more personally rewarding, environmentally safe, peaceful, and politically free. Understanding how these positive human attributes develop is especially important because it will help us direct the educational and environmental experiences we provide for the potentially gifted and talented young people who will shape both the values and the actions of the future (Renzulli, 2002).

What people think and decide to do drives some of society's best ideas and achievements. If we want positive leaders, then giftedness will have to be redefined in ways that take the co-cognitive components of giftedness, such as those identified by Operation Houndstooth—optimism, courage, romance with a topic, sensitivity to human concerns, physical/mental energy, and vision/sense of destiny—into account (see Figure 1). The strategies that are used to develop giftedness in young people should give as much attention to the co-cognitive conditions of development as we currently give to cognitive development. By including the co-cognitive components, the definition of giftedness is expanded. Such an expanded definition will help us understand the unique contributions of those who have used their talents to make the world a better place (Renzulli, 2002).

It is important to provide young people with a systematic approach for (a) examining their individual abilities, interests, and learning styles and (b) exploring areas of potential involvement based on their existing or developing interests. In addition, they need opportunities, resources, and encouragement for firsthand, investigative or creative experiences within their chosen areas of interest. The learning and personal growth resulting from these authentic experiences connects directly to the type of work the students carry out, especially when the primary purpose of that work has an impact on one or more intended audiences (Renzulli, 2002). Service-learning initiatives such as the community problem-solving component of the Future Problem Solving Program International (FPSPI; 2007) help to encourage the growth of many of the co-cognitive factors while instilling the habit of responding to community needs in socially constructive ways.

Future Problem-Solving (Bonnie Cramond)

Reflecting on past endeavors to predict the future, we should be able to see that people have been largely unsuccessful at doing so. In 1981, R. Buckminster Fuller recalled that during his childhood at the turn of the century, people could not begin to conceive of automobiles, electrons, travel to the moon, or even air wars as reality (Huddle, 1984). How could they possibly prepare their children for the possibilities and problems such innovations brought? How can we prepare our children for their future? FPSPI is one way to help students think about the future and learn methods for solving problems for which there are no existing solutions.

Gifted children can be very sensitive, and some of them worry about events they feel are beyond their control (Lovecky, 1997; Mendaglio, 2003; Silverman, 1994). By equipping them with a means to address those concerns, we help them learn to choose their battles and work on the important problems systematically (FPSPI, 2007).

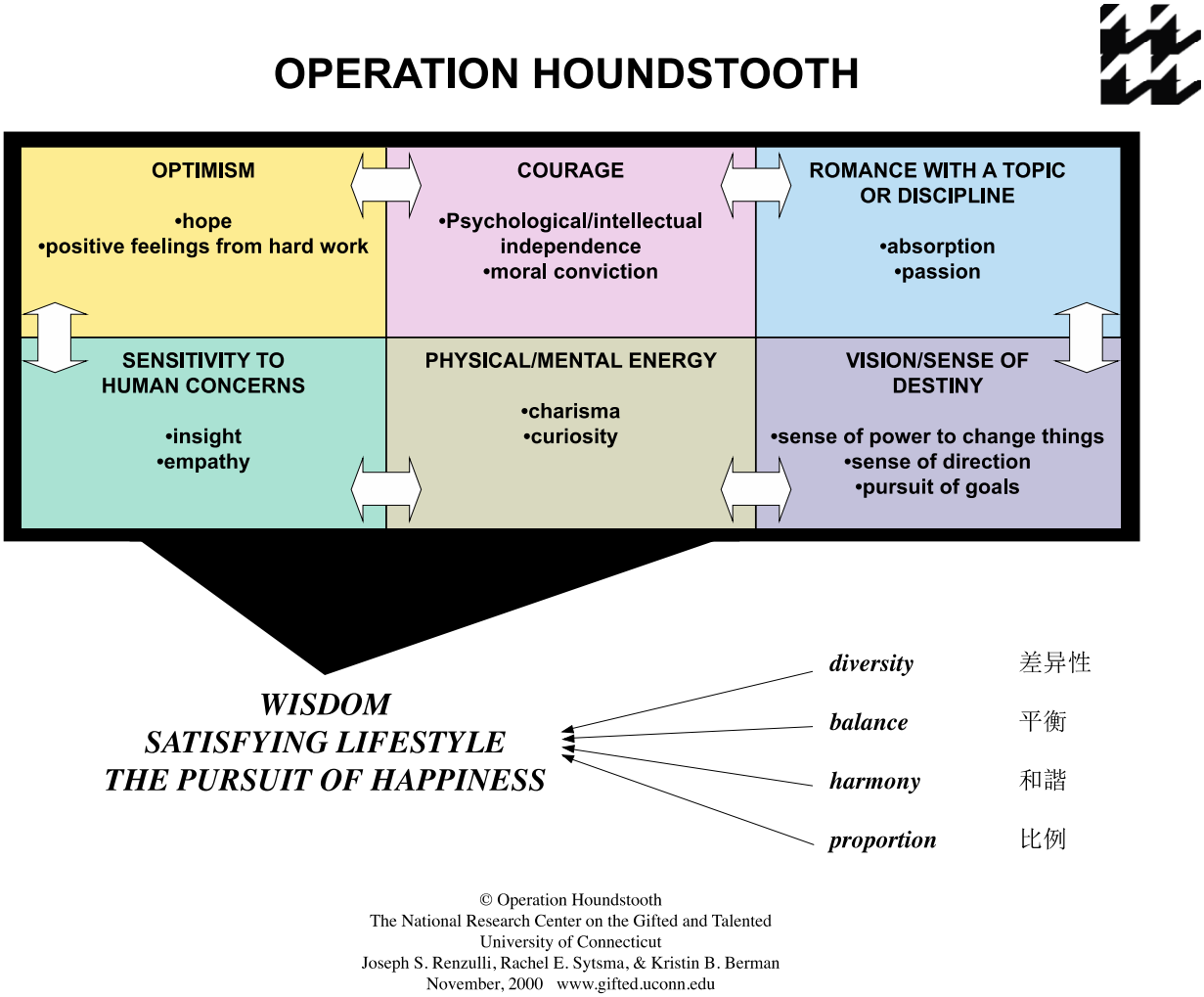

Figure 1. Graphic representation of Operation Houndstooth

Because of concern about students' abilities to deal with challenges in the future and, more basically, about their lack of interest in the future, Paul Torrance and his wife Pansy created FPSP (Torrance, 1974, 1978; Torrance & Torrance, 1978). They adapted the structure of the Osborn-Parnes Creative Problem Solving Model (Osborn, 1953; Parnes, 1967) by adding research and emphasis on problems of the future. Thus, they intended to prepare future leaders with a means for creative, productive thinking, and societal awareness. Torrance's desire was to teach students the creative problem-solving process in order to give them the skills and abilities necessary to establish themselves as positive decision makers and future leaders (Torrance, 1974, 1978).

Community problem-solving (FPSPI, 2007), the service-learning component of FPSP, challenges students to apply their problem-solving skills to actual problems in their community and empowers them to take hands-on action that makes a positive difference for those involved. An important difference between this component and the other components of FPSP is that the students identify problems in their own communities and actually implement the action plan. Because the action plans must be much more detailed, and the students must carry them out,

there is typically a longer work period for the problem, extending for 1 year or more (Bohenberger & Terry, 2002; Terry & Bohnenberger, 1995). Teaching students to use their creativity to deal with societal problems prepares them to be good citizens for the world of today and tomorrow.

Spiritual Intelligence (Dorothy Sisk)

After considerable reflection and research, which in science is represented by the new physics, neurobiology and neuroscience, geology, sacred geometry, and cymatics, and in psychology is represented in ancient wisdom and Eastern mysticism, and the living stories or "path-finding" accounts of individuals making phenomenal change in the lives and minds of other people, Sisk and Torrance (2001) reported that there is an important human capacity that has remained unaddressed—namely, spiritual intelligence.

Spiritual intelligence (SQ) can be described as a deep self-awareness in which one becomes more aware of the dimensions of self, not simply as a body, but as a mind-body and spirit (Sisk & Torrance, 2001). People who use their SQ want to feel connected, feel a sense of community, be free of restrictions, experience inner freedom, and live a life of meaning. Core values of SQ include: connectedness, compassion, responsibility, balance, unity, and service. Students with SQ have a sensitivity to societal concerns and social problems, which can be strengthened by service-learning.

One service-learning project conducted by 100 secondary gifted students focused on environmental improvement. The students were participants in a 3-week residential leadership program, and they wanted to make a positive difference in their community. After considerable discussion, they decided to improve the grounds of their local schools. They formed teams to carry out the project—one team canvassed and secured trees from local gardens and supply stores, and another team obtained permission and *blessing* by the school district for their undertaking.

The students planted 150 trees in 11 schools. The mayor and the local school superintendent attended the first tree planting. The students expressed that they experienced connectedness to their community and affirmation of their ability to make a difference as a result of their tree-planting project.

One of the students shared a newspaper article about a local retirement home in which a retiree remarked that he felt old and wished he could spend time with young people. The students decided to spend a Sunday afternoon on a second service-learning project in which they shared their class musical production with the retirees. The highlight of this project was the one-on-one interaction in which the students *just talked* with the retirees. On the bus ride back to the university, one student shared how much he had learned from the retirees and remarked that they had led such full lives. He added that many of them have been able to make a difference.

The students engaged in several process discussions to reflect on their service-learning projects, and they journaled their reactions. Reading from his journal, one student shared the following:

> According to Martin Luther King, Jr., "Visions are necessary to give us goals and objectives." Our goal was to make the school grounds look more beautiful, and we outlined where the trees would go, and with the "old folks" our goal was to entertain, and see them smile and have fun. Martin Luther King, Jr., also said, "But goals and objectives without commitment and action seldom bring results." And we had both.

These examples of service-learning projects demonstrate the importance of planting the seeds of *vision with action* in the minds of gifted students and provide ways to develop their societal awareness and desire to make a difference with commitment and results.

Service-Learning (Alice W. Terry and Jann Bohnenberger)

Service-learning is an innovative teaching method, which integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, to teach civic responsibility, and to strengthen communities (Fiske, 2002). It can provide teachers of the gifted with the vehicle to engage their students in meaningful learning that appeals to their idealism and their need to make the world a better place. Judith A. Ramaley, assistant director of the National Science Foundation's Directorate for Education and Human Resources, expressed the importance of engaging students in real-world, service-learning experiences this way:

> If we want our students to lead creative, productive lives, we must give them opportunities to learn in ways that have consequences for others, as well as for themselves. I know of no better way to invoke the many facets of cognitive development, moral reasoning, and social responsibility than to engage students in service-learning opportunities. At its best, a service-learning experience can be transformative (Fiske, p. 58).

Schools need not only design and implement learning opportunities for gifted student within the classroom but also need to identify learning resources and opportunities in the community that are integrated with those of the classroom. Service-learning can offer such opportunities for gifted students. There are three levels of service-learning: community service, community exploration, and community action (see Figure 2). The highest level of service-learning, community action, can be an effective curriculum for gifted students, which exposes them to community problems and encourages them to solve those problems in a creative, socially constructive manner. This type of high-quality service-learning not only requires that students become aware of a need in the community and provide a service, but also that they become so involved and committed to the need area that they go beyond just supplying a service. Students analyze the situation, generate new ideas, and work as a team to implement a difference-making plan of action. In the process, the students develop complex problem-solving skills and advanced communication skills; they also develop the ability to connect knowledge across disciplines and the perseverance to overcome obstacles (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2004). Community action service-learning provides strong affective and process components that complement cognitive components and are effective in sensitizing gifted students to community needs as well as incorporating interdisciplinary study (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2007).

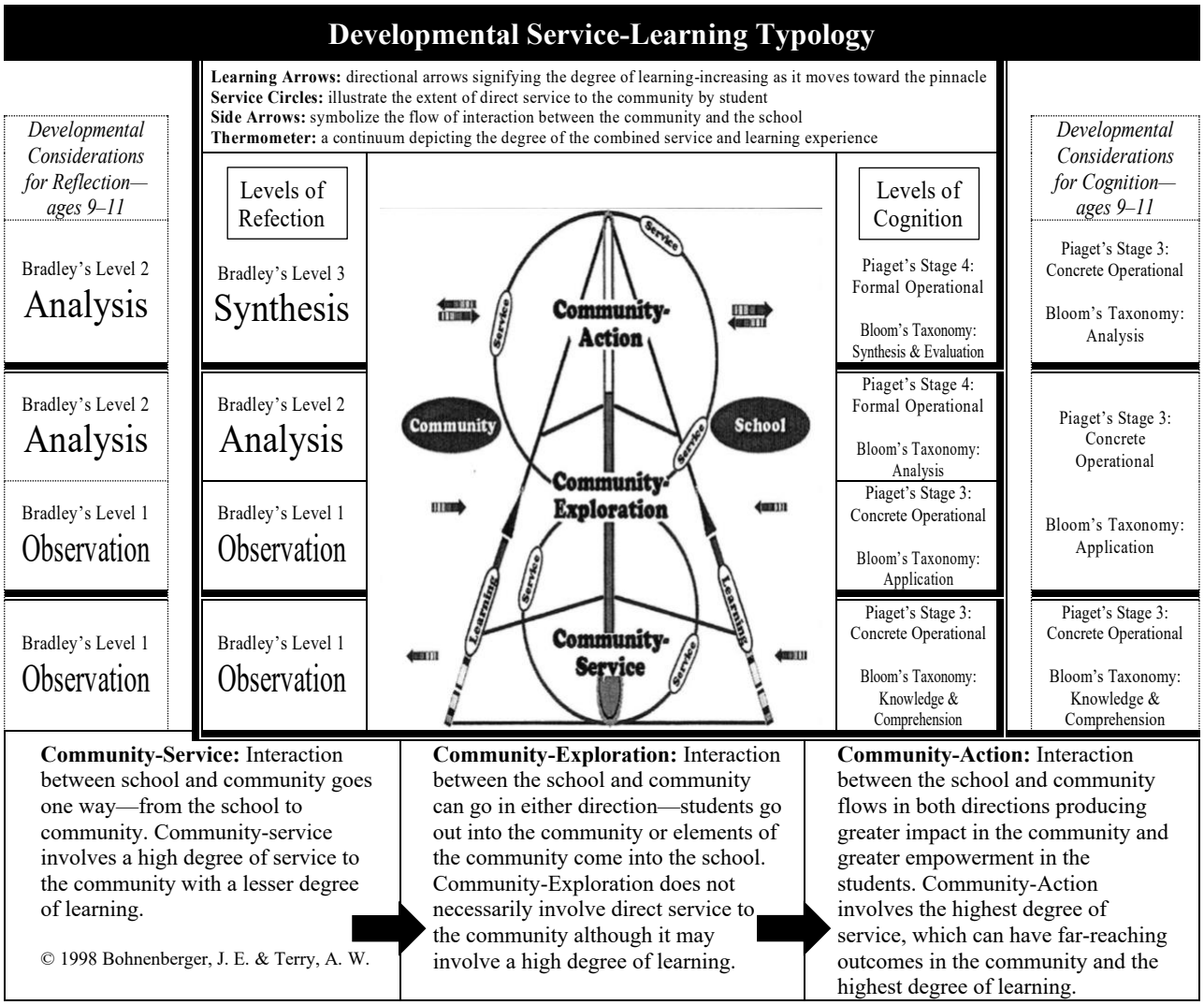

Figure 2. Developmental service-learning typology.

By sensitizing youth to be concerned about problems in their communities, Passow (1989) hoped they would devote themselves to developing their specialized talents to making contributions toward solving the serious problems facing their communities and the world. Service-learning puts problem solving to work in the real world for gifted youth, and students themselves are often surprised by how effective they can be and how much help their community needs. After becoming involved in a service-learning project that researched local, historical monuments, Aaron, a seventh-grade gifted student noted,

> I thought a community would be fine by itself and then after getting into this, it's like, I didn't realize how much it really needs.…Our history is there. If our monuments aren't being preserved, they're just going to eventually rot away, and this is a part of our history. (Terry, 2001, p. 153)

Teachers of the gifted can facilitate high-quality service-learning experiences for their students by employing the Best-Practice Model for Community Action (see Figure 3), which

incorporates the cognitive apprenticeship model, the creative problem-solving process, well-organized and cooperative learning groups, reflection, and celebration (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003). The cognitive apprenticeship model (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) includes four elements that lead to learning: scaffolding, modeling, coaching, and fading. This model leads students from dependence to independence in learning. The Osborn-Parnes model of creative problem solving (Osborn, 1963; Parnes, 1967) provides service-learning participants with logical steps to follow from their initial investigation of community needs to the implementation of their action plan. Cooperative-learning strategies are key to successful student-run service learning. Through cooperative learning, learning takes place between students through interaction with one another. In service-learning, reflection is viewed as the framework around which the students process and synthesize the information and ideas they have gleaned during their service-learning activities (Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, 1993). Celebration in service-learning is the use of multiple methods to acknowledge, celebrate, and further validate students' service work (Toole, 1998). A heightened level of celebration with more positive outcomes occurs when students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their accomplishments to interested others, such as presenting their project to evaluators and student participants from around the world at the annual Community Problem Solving Fair (Bohnenberger & Terry, 2002).

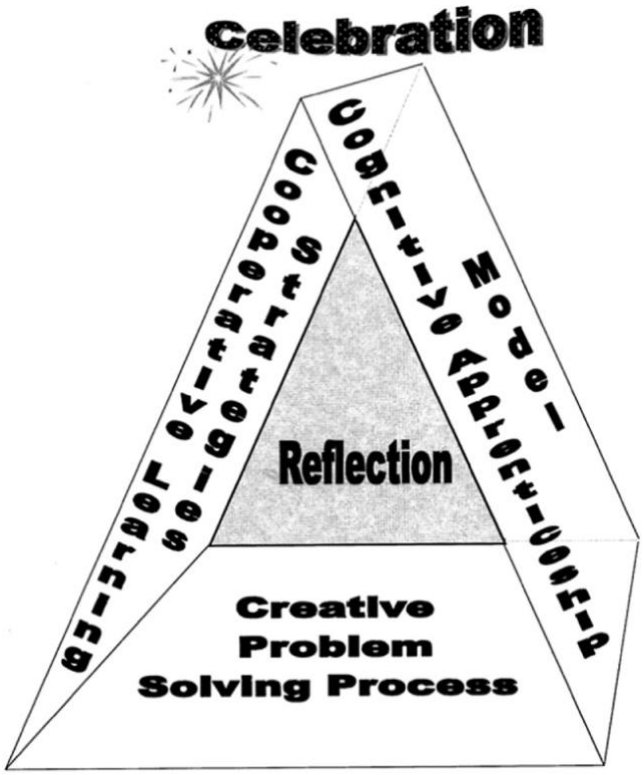

Figure 3. Community-action service-learning best-practice model.

The components of this best-practice model (see Figure 3) are interwoven and flow together synchronously. Creative problem-solving, an important element of this model, is essential in developing cognition in gifted students as they use the process to address the type of messy, ill-defined problems that occur in the real world but are not usually found in their textbooks. The community action model provides a blueprint for advanced levels of service-

learning that encourage creative productivity, promote the development of a reciprocal relationship between the students and the community, and enhance the students' sense of responsibility to self and community. Through community action service-learning, gifted youth have the opportunity to expand their societal awareness, practice the skills of positive action, and make their vision of a better future a reality (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003).

Conclusion

Should we teach gifted youth to use their intellectual, motivational, and creative assets in ways that make a positive difference in the world? Our answer to that question is a resounding, "Yes!" We acknowledge service-learning as an avenue toward helping gifted children achieve that goal, and we strongly endorse the FPSPI's community problem-solving component. This service-learning program provides guidance and support that helps students learn how to take positive action in their community. As more gifted youth are given opportunities to show how vision with action can change the world, perhaps the old African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" will be supplanted by a new proverb, "It takes a child to raise up a village" (Terry, 2003).

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