Renzulli, J. S. (1989, May). What makes giftedness: Translating theory into practice. *Thresholds in Education, 15*, 4–8.

What Makes Giftedness: Translating Theory Into Practice

by Joseph S. Renzulli

In the ten years since I originally published the three-ring conception of giftedness (Renzulli, 1978), a number of research studies and theoretical contributions to the literature have provided additional support to what might best be described as a broadened conception of human abilities. The work of persons such as Torrance (1979), Sternberg (1981; 1985), Gould (1983), Treffinger (1982), Amabile (1983), Gardner (1983), Bloom (1985), Tannenbaum (1986), Guilford (1986), as well as several other writers who contributed to Sternberg and Davidson's landmark book entitled *Conceptions of Giftedness* (1986), have pointed out that the development of giftedness in young people is a complex and many faceted process. If there is one overriding conclusion that can be drawn from these more recent contributions and from the research I reviewed in the earlier "What Makes Giftedness" article, it is that procedures used to select students for participation in special programs and services must take into consideration a broader variety of factors than the abilities measured on standardized tests of intelligence and aptitude. This research has caused me to shift emphasis from the traditional concept of 'being gifted' (or not being gifted) to a concern about the development of gifted behaviors in those youngsters who have the highest potential for benefiting from special educational services. This slight shift in terminology might appear to be an exercise in heuristic hair splitting, but I believe that it has significant implications for the entire way that we think about the concept of giftedness and the ways in which we should structure our identification and programming endeavors. We must re-examine identification procedures that results in a total pre-selection of certain students and the concomitant implication that these young people are, and always will be 'the gifted.' This absolute approach (i.e., you have it or you don't have it) coupled with the almost total reliance upon test scores is not only inconsistent with what the research tells us, but almost arrogant in the assumption that we can use a single one-hour segment of a young person's life to determine special program placement.

The strong support for a more flexible approach to identification requires that we now examine procedures for translating contemporary theory and research into functional and defensible identification practices. The purpose of this article, therefore, is not to summarize or repeat the work cited above or the material covered in my update of the original article on this topic (Renzulli, 1986), but rather to present an identification system that takes account of the several new advances about our understanding of developing giftedness that have taken place over the past several years.

The Renzulli Identification System

The ultimate value of any theory is its ability to translate research findings into defensible practice. In the sections that follow I will outline the specific steps of an identification system that is designed to translate the three-ring conception into a practical set of procedures for selecting students for special programs. The focal point of this system is a talent pool of students that serves as the major (but not the only) target group for participation in a wide variety of supplementary services. The goals of this identification system, as it relates to the three-ring conception of giftedness are threefold:

1. *To develop creativity and/or task commitment in talent pool students and other students who may come to our attention through alternate means of Identification.*
2. *To provide learning experiences and support systems that promote the interaction of creativity, task commitment, and above average ability (i.e., bring the 'rings' together).*
3. *To provide opportunities, resources, and encouragement for the development and application of gifted behaviors.*

Before listing the steps involved in this identification system, three important considerations will be discussed.

First, talent pools will vary in size in any given school depending on the general nature and ability levels of the total student body. In schools with unusually large numbers of high ability students, it is conceivable that talent pools will extend beyond the 15% level that is ordinarily recommended in schools that reflect the achievement profiles of the general population. Even in schools where achievement levels are below national norms, there still exists an upper level group of students who need services above and beyond those which are provided for the majority of the school population. Some of our most successful programs have been in inner-city schools that serve disadvantaged and bilingual youth; and even though these schools were below national norms, a talent pool of approximately 15% of higher ability students needing supplementary services was still identified. Talent pool size is also a function of the availability of resources (both human and material), and the extent to which the general faculty is willing (a) to make modifications in the regular curriculum for above average ability students, (b) to participate in various kinds of enrichment and mentoring activities, and (c) to work cooperatively with any and all personnel who may have special program assignments.

Since teacher nomination plays an important role in this identification system, a second consideration is the extent of orientation and training that teachers have had about both the program and procedures for nominating students. In this regard, we recommend the use of a training activity that is designed to orient teachers to the behavioral characteristics of superior students (Renzulli & Reis, 1985).

A third consideration is, of course, the type of program for which students are being identified. The identification system that follows is based on models that combine both enrichment and acceleration, and it can be used for programs that are carried out in self-contained or pull-out programs. Regardless of the type of organizational model used, it is also recommended that a strong component of curriculum compacting (Renzulli, Smith, & Reis, 1982) be a part of the services offered talent pool students.

For purposes of demonstration, the example that follows will be based on the formation of a 15% talent pool. Larger or smaller talent pools can be formed by simply adjusting the figures used in this example.

Step 1: Test Score Nominations

If we were using nothing but test scores to identify a 15% talent pool, the task would be ever so simple! Any child who scores at or above the 85th percentile (using local norms) would be a candidate. In this identification system, however, we have made a commitment to 'leave some room' in the talent pool for students whose potentials may not be reflected in standardized tests. Therefore, we will begin by dividing our talent pool in half (see Figure 1), and we will place all students who score at or above the 92nd percentile (again, using local norms) in the talent pool. This approach guarantees that all traditionally bright youngsters will automatically be selected, and they will account for approximately 50% of our talent pool. This process also guarantees admission to bright underachievers.

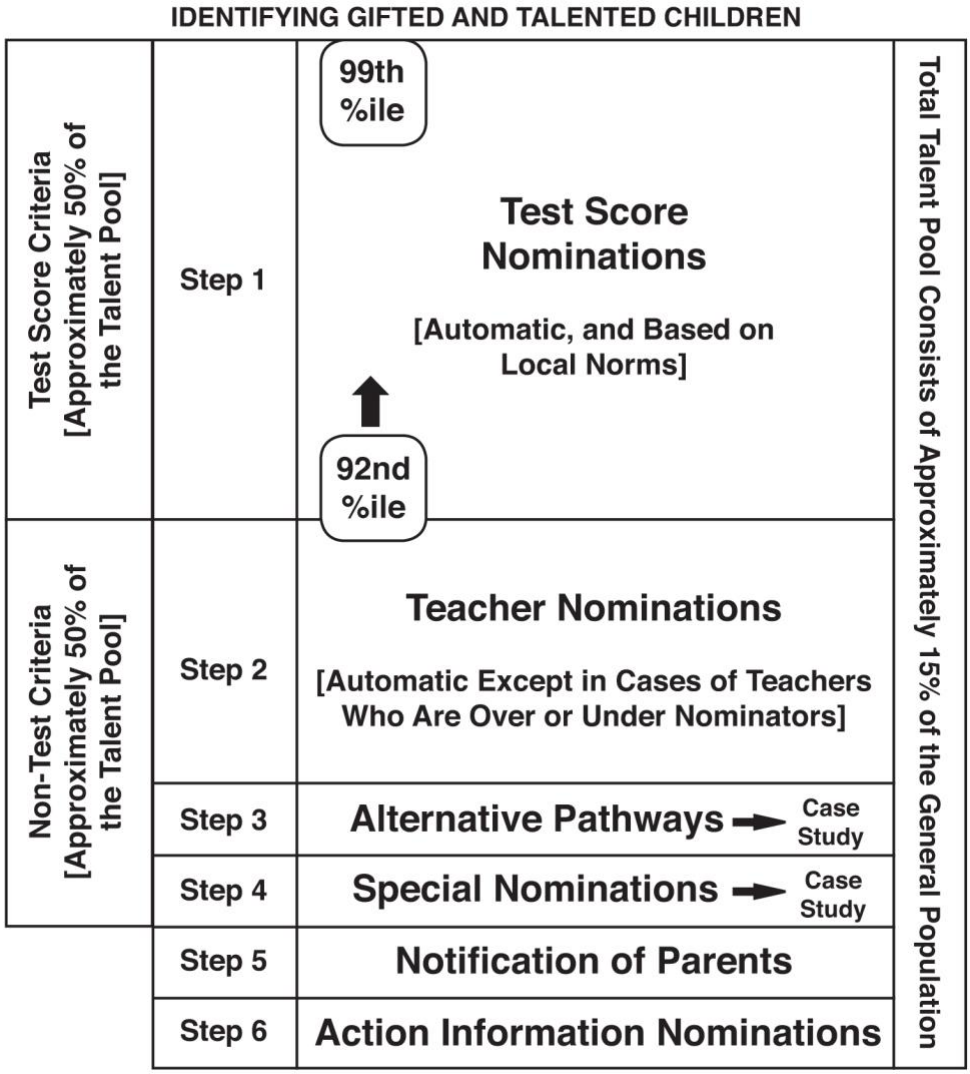
Any regularly administered standardized test (e.g., intelligence, achievement, aptitude) can be used for this purpose, however, we recommend that admission to the talent pool be granted on the basis of any single test or subtest score. This approach will enable students who are high in verbal or non-verbal ability (but not necessarily both) to gain admission, as well as students who may excel in one aptitude (e.g., spatial, mechanical). Programs that focus on special areas such as the arts, leadership, and athletics should use non-test criteria as major indicators of above average ability in a particular talent area. In a similar fashion, whenever test scores are not available, or we have some question as to their validity, the non-test criteria recommended in the following steps should be used. This approach (i.e., the elimination or minimization of Step 1) is especially important when considering primary age students, disadvantaged populations, or culturally different groups.

Step 2: Teacher Nominations

Teachers should be informed about all students who have gained entrance through test score nominations so that they will not have to engage in needless paperwork for students who have already been admitted. Step 2 allows teachers to nominate students who display characteristics that are not easily determined by standardized tests (e.g., high levels of creativity, task commitment, unusual interests, talents, or special areas of superior performance or potential). With the exception of teachers who are over nominators or under nominators, nominations from teachers who have received training in this process are accepted into the talent pool on an equal

value with test score nominations. That is, we do not refer to students nominated by test scores as the 'truly gifted,' and the students nominated by teachers as the moderately or potentially gifted. Nor do we make any distinctions between the two groups in the opportunities, resources, or services provided, other than the normal individualization that should be a part of any program that attempts to meet unique needs and potentials. Thus, for example, if a student gains entrance on the basis of teacher nomination because he or she has shown advanced potential for creative writing, we would not expect this student to compete on an equal basis in mathematics with a student who scored at or above the 92nd percentile on a math test. Nor should we arrange program experiences that would place the student with talents in creative writing in an advanced math cluster group. Special programs should first and foremost respect and reflect the individual characteristics that brought students to our attention in the first place.

Figure 1: The Renzulli Identification System



A teacher nomination form and rating scales (Renzulli et al., 1976) are used for this procedure. The rating scales are not used to eliminate students with lower ratings. Instead, the scales are used to provide a composite profile of the nominated students. In case of teachers who are over nominators, a request is made that they rank order their nominations for review by a school wide committee. Procedures for dealing with under or non-nominators will be described in Step 4.

Step 3: Alternate Pathways

Whereas all schools using this identification system make use of test score and teacher nominations, alternate pathways are considered to be local options, and are pursued in varying degrees by individual school districts. Decisions about which alternate pathways might be used should be made by a local planning committee, and some consideration should be given to variations in grade level. For example, Self-nomination is more appropriate for students who may be considering advanced classes at the secondary level.

Alternate pathways generally consist of parent nominations, peer nominations, test of creativity, self-nominations, product evaluations' and virtually any of the procedure that might lead to initial consideration by a screening committee. The major difference between alternate pathways on the one band, and test score and teacher nominations on the other, is that alternate pathways are not automatic. In other words, students nominated through one or more alternate pathways will be reviewed by a screening committee, after which a selection decision will be made. In most cases, the screening committee carries out a case study that includes examination of all previous school records, interviews with students, teachers, and parents, and the administration of individual assessments that may be recommended by the committee. In some cases, students that are recommended on the basis of one or more alternate pathways are placed in the program on a trial basis.

Step 4: Special Nominations (Safety Valve No. 1)

Special nominations represent the first of two 'safety valves' in this identification system. This procedure involves circulating a list of all students who have been nominated through one of the procedures in Steps 1 through 3 to all teachers within the school, and in previous schools if students have matriculated from another building. This procedure allows previous year teachers to nominate students who have not been recommended by their present teacher, and it also allows resource teachers to make recommendations based on their own previous experience with students who have already been in the talent pool, or students they may have encountered as part of enrichment experiences that might have been offered in regular classrooms. This step allows for a final review of the total school population and is designed to circumvent the opinions of present year teachers who may not have an appreciation for the abilities, styles, or even the personality of a particular student. One last 'sweep' through the population also helps to pick up students that may have 'turned-off' to school or developed patterns of underachievement as a result of personal or family problems. This step also helps to overcome the general biases of an under nominator or a non-

nominator. As with the case of alternate pathways, special nominations are not automatic. Rather, a case study is carried out and the final decision rests with the screening committee.

Step 5: Notification and Orientation of Students and Parents

A letter of notification and a comprehensive description of the program is forwarded to the parents of all talent pool students indicating that their youngster has been placed in the talent pool for the year. The letter does not indicate that a child has been certified as 'gifted,' but rather explains the nature of the program and extends an invitation to parents for an orientation meeting. At this meeting, a description of the three-ring conception of giftedness is provided, as well as a thorough explanation of all program policies, procedures, and activities. Parents are informed about how admission to the talent pool is determined, that it is carried out on an annual basis, and that changes in talent pool membership might take place during the year as a result of evaluations of student participation and progress. Parents are invited to make individual appointments whenever they feel that additional information about the program in general, or their own child is required. A similar orientation session is provided for students, with emphasis once again being placed on the services and activities being provided. Students are not told that they are the 'gifted,' but through a discussion of the three-ring conception and the procedures for developing general and specific potentials, they come to understand that the development of gifted behaviors is a program goal as well as part of their own responsibility.

Step 6: Action Information Nominations (Safety Valve No. 2)

In spite of our best efforts, this system will occasionally overlook students who, for one reason or another, are not selected for talent pool membership. To help overcome this problem, orientation related to spotting unusually favorable 'turn-ons' in the regular curriculum is provided for all teachers. In programs following the *Schoolwide Enrichment Model* (Renzulli & Reis, 1985), we also provide wide variety of in-class enrichment experiences that might result in recommendations for special services. This process is facilitated through the use of a teacher training activity and an instrument called an *Action Information Message* (Renzulli & Reis, 1985).

Action information can best be defined as the dynamic interactions that occur when a student becomes extremely interested in or excited about a particular topic, area of study, issue, idea, or event that takes place in school or the non-school environment. It is derived from the concept of performance based assessment, and it serves as the second safety valve in this identification system. The transmission of an action information message does not mean that a student will automatically revolve into advanced level services, however, it serves as the basis for a careful review of the situation to determine if such services are warranted. Action information messages are also used within talent pool settings (i.e., pull-out groups, advanced classes, cluster groups) to make determinations about the pursuit of individual or small group investigations (Type III Enrichment in the Triad Model).

Discussion

In most identification systems that follow the traditional screening—plus—selection approach, the 'throw aways' have invariably been those students who qualified for screening on the basis of non-test criteria. Thus, for example, a teacher nomination is only used as a ticket to take an individual or group ability test, but in most cases the test score is always the deciding factor. The many and various 'good things' that led to nominations by teachers are totally ignored when it comes to the final (selection) decision, and the multiple criteria game ends up being a smoke screen for the same old test based approach.

The implementation of the identification system described above has helped to overcome this problem as well as a wide array of other problems traditionally associated with selecting students for special programs. Generally, students, parents, teachers, and administrators have expressed high degrees of satisfaction with this approach (Renzulli, 1988), and the reason for this satisfaction is plainly evident. By 'picking up' that layer of students below the top few percentile levels usually selected for special programs, and by leaving some room in the program for students to gain entrance on the basis of non-test criteria, we have eliminated the justifiable criticisms of those persons who know that these students are in need of special opportunities, resources, and encouragement.

The research underlying the three-ring conception of giftedness clearly tells us that such an approach is justified in terms of what we know about human potential. And by eliminating the endless number of 'headaches' traditionally associated with identification, we have gained an unprecedented amount of support from teachers and administrators, many of whom, formerly resented the very existence of special programs.

References

Amabile, T. M. (1983). *The social psychology of creativity.* New York: Springer-Verlag.

Bloom, B. S. (Ed.). (1985). *Developing talent in young people.* New York: Ballantine.

Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

Gould, S. J. (1983). *The mismeasure of man.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Guilford, J. P. (1986). *Creative talents: Their nature, uses and development.* Buffalo, NY: Barely Limited.

Renzulli, J. S. (1978). What makes giftedness? Re-examining a definition. *Phi Delta Kappan, 60*(3), 180–184, 261. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20299281

Renzulli, J. S. (1986). The three-ring conception of giftedness: A developmental model for creative productivity. In R. J. Sternberg & J. E. Davidson (Eds.), *Conceptions of giftedness* (pp. 53–92). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Renzulli, J. S. (1988). (Ed.). *Technical report of research studies related to the enrichment triad/revolving door model* (3rd ed.). University of Connecticut: Teaching the Talented Program.

Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (1985). *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A comprehensive plan for educational excellence.* Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.

Renzulli, J. S., Smith, L. H., & Reis, S. M. (1982). Curriculum compacting: An essential strategy for working with gifted students. *The Elementary School Journal, 82*(3), 185–194. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1001569

Renzulli, J. S., Smith, L. H., White, A. J., Callahan, C. M., & Hartman, R. K. (1976). *Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students.* Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.

Sternberg, R. J. (1985). A componential theory of intellectual giftedness. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 25*(2), 86–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/001698628102500208

Sternberg, R. J., & Davidson, J. (1986). (Eds.). *Conceptions of giftedness.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tannenbaum, A. J. (1986). Giftedness: A psychosocial approach. In R. J. Sternberg & J. E. Davidson (Eds.), *Conceptions of giftedness* (pp. 21–52). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Torrance, E. P. (1979). *The search for satori and creativity.* Buffalo, NY: Bearly Limited.

Treffinger, D. J. (1982). Demythologizing gifted education: An editorial essay. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 26*(1), 3–8. https://doi.org/10.1177/001698628202600101