Renzulli, J. (2021). The major goals of gifted education and talent development programs. *Academia Letters,* Article 2585.

The Major Goals of Gifted Education and Talent Development Programs

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It is better to have imprecise answers to the right questions than precise answers to the wrong questions.

Donald Campbell

In a recent Hechinger Report (April 19, 2021) entitled *"PROOF POINTS: Gifted Programs Provide Little to No Academic Boost, New Study Says,"* the author cites a recent research study (Redding & Grissom, 2021) based on the same old way most researchers gather data on any types of school performance. Indeed, most contemporary education research almost universally focuses only on things that can be measured down to an exact percentile or standard deviation from the mean. There are many characteristics that are important in all kinds of human performance, and above quote by a well-known American statistician calls our attention to this reality. And to make matters even worse, the popular press, news feeds, and publications such as the Hechinger Report come out with headlines such as *"Study: Gifted Programs Not Beneficial*," which appeared in a recently popular news feed. Is it any wonder that special programs for gifted education and talent development continue to be an endangered undertaking?

If the author of the Hechinger Report and the cited researchers believe that focusing on common core standards and increasing reading and math scores on standardized achievement tests are the major goals for gifted education, they simply do not understand the difference between lesson-learning giftedness and creative productive giftedness. The major goal of gifted education is not to standardize young learners. Rather, most people in the field believe such programs are intended to expand the reservoir of people who will contribute to creative innovations in the arts and sciences and to all areas of human endeavor designed to make the world a better place.

Providing an inductive, investigative, and inquiry-based pedagogy rather than traditional deductive, didactic, and prescriptive brand of learning is a major goal of today's gifted education programs. The focus is on *applying* knowledge-of and knowledge-how to real-world problems and situations in ways that model the *modus*

operandi of the practicing professional, even if at a more junior level than that of adult experts. This approach increases collaboration, cooperation, the development of thinking skills and creativity, construction of models, scientific and artistic contributions, and preparation of publications and other creative products.

When it is argued that the prime mission of gifted education and talent development programs is to raise scores on high-stakes tests, we should not ignore the fact that people who make high-level contributions in their respective fields are a function of their interests, task commitment, analytic and creative thinking skills, and a range of executive function skills necessary for getting a job done. These kinds of introspective and exploratory skills are the things we should be using to determine the effectiveness of special programs and services rather than just looking at increases in test scores. And although these skills cannot be measured as precisely as math and reading test scores, they are the things that count when it comes to developing creative and productive giftedness. We also believe that talent development opportunities should be available to all students; and it is for this reason that our Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1991, 2009) casts a wide net that extends talent potential assessment beyond simply setting an arbitrarily established cut off score on an IQ test. This issue is especially important because of the unrelenting attention being given to the underrepresentation of low income and minority groups in gifted education programs. Because of exogenous factors (e.g., family, community, and educational backgrounds and experiences), these young people typically do not do as well on standardized cognitive ability and achievement tests when compared with students from more affluent backgrounds.

The skills mentioned above cannot be developed through the sit-memorize-and-repeat teaching approach that improves the standardized test scores most researchers use as the major dependent variables in their studies. Rather, an inductive and investigative pedagogy teaches young people how to find and focus a problem in which they have developed an interest and to apply investigative methodologies and creative thinking skills to challenging and exploratory endeavors. Expert advice from adults, how-to books, and virtually unlimited Internet tools that can provide just-in-time information for the necessary resources about which students must gain guidance from their teachers. And like practicing professionals, students must explore various product formats and potential audiences for their final products, performances, presentations, and other modes of communication.

If we are going to evaluate and pass judgment on the importance and value of gifted education programs, we must first and foremost examine the main purpose of these programs, which, as mentioned above, is to increase the world's reservoir of creative and productive people. A good model for this brand of evaluation might be the ways in which we look at the quality of a doctoral program, medical school graduates, or conservatories that prepare our artists and performers. My neighbor, for example was recently diagnosed with a rare heart disorder. He and his doctor did a comprehensive search of all places and surgeons in the country who have experience with this surgery. They examined data about frequency and success rates and other things related to

factors that contribute to treatment and follow-up care. They did not inquire about surgeons' SAT scores, Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) scores, or rank in class upon graduation from medical school. As Paul Branden, the pioneer contributor to the study of gifted education in science often said, "By their deeds ye shall know them, by the things they do. That will tell us about their future capabilities and performance."

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