

Key Features of Successful Programs for the Gifted and Talented

SALLY M. REIS AND JOSEPH S. RENZULLI

Outstanding gifted programs reflect the special qualities of the people and schools involved, but have many characteristics in common.

For the past five years we have experimented with a new program for gifted and talented students that has been used successfully in several school locations and under a variety of conditions (Renzulli, 1982; Reis and Renzulli, 1982; Delisle and Renzulli, 1981; Delisle, Reis, and Gubbins, 1981). At present, we are monitoring the model in over 30 school districts in Connecticut.

The Triad/RDIM Program

The system combines the *Enrichment Triad Model* (Renzulli, 1977) with a relatively new plan for identification, the *Revolving Door Identification Model* (RDIM) (Renzulli, Reis, and Smith, 1981). Although several specific learning objectives are built into these combined models, this article focuses on the model's general program goals. Designed to integrate a program for gifted



Sally M. Reis is Coordinator, Programs for the Gifted and Talented, Torrington, Connecticut, Public Schools; and Joseph S. Renzulli is Associate Director, Bureau of Educational Research, and Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Connecticut, Storrs.

students with regular classroom instruction, the model provides enrichment activities to a broader spectrum of the school population than the usual 3 to 5 percent of students identified as gifted. By extending enrichment activities to more students, the approach minimizes concerns about elitism and negative attitudes toward gifted programs, resulting in a general "radiation of excellence" (Ward, 1981) throughout the school environment.

The Enrichment Triad Model, considered to be the nation's most widely used program for the gifted and talented (Mitchell, 1981), delineates three types of enrichment activities for students:

- General Exploratory Activities (Type I) consist of experiences and activities designed to put learners in touch with areas of personal interest. Students involved in Type I experiences are encouraged to further explore these areas of interest and can decide to do further research on the topic or problem they have selected.

- Group Training Activities (Type II) consist of materials, methods, and instructional techniques designed to develop high level thinking and feeling processes: critical thinking, problem solving, reflective thinking, inquiry training, divergent thinking, awareness development, and creative or productive thinking.

- Individual or Small Group Investigations (Type III) provide students with opportunities to investigate a real problem or topic by using appropriate inquiry methods. Successful completion de-

pends on the interest and task commitment of individual students. Type III activities ask students to think and feel like practicing professionals. Students in our programs completed many intensive, long-range Type III projects including creation of a walking robot, a year-long investigation of the effects of acid rain on northwestern Connecticut, and the production of a weekly children's television program.

The Revolving Door Identification Model identifies a pool of approximately 15 to 20 percent of the student population. These well-above-average students are exposed to Type I activities and receive Type II process training on a regular basis. Periodically, all students are offered Type I and II enrichment activities. Many students whose interests are generated through Type I or Type II training, or through the regular curriculum or the environment in general, will eventually "revolve into" the challenging, optional Type III investigations when they show an interest and a desire to pursue advanced work.

Successful Programs

A major goal in developing the model was to provide a system to purposefully take into consideration each district's local resources, strengths, budgetary constraints, problems, personalities, scheduling procedures, and other idiosyncracies. For example, a plan for inservice training may be highly effective in a district that has the benefit of strong administrative support, but a failure in another district where administra-

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tive support for gifted programming is absent. Every gifted program should be carefully planned with an individual district in mind.

Certain key features that tend to make some gifted programs more effective than others have emerged from our research and close interaction with the various field districts. Every feature relates to variables that can be changed through careful orientation, staff development, and the appropriate use of built-in monitoring and feedback; and *all* can be replicated in any school's gifted program through careful planning and specific program monitoring activities.

Key Feature 1: The Golden Rule

The golden rule simply states that the more thoroughly the instructional staff, students, parents, and administration understand the overall structure of the model, the easier it is to implement a particular identification procedure or learning activity. Orientation sessions, written materials, and visual displays help all participants to understand the general and particular functions of all aspects of the model and each person's unique role in carrying out these functions.

The “golden rule” presents a great opportunity for creativity on the part of teachers and students. In some districts, students have developed movies or slide/tape presentations explaining the program. In other districts, bulletin boards in prime locations display the model in simple, eye-catching graphics, which make it easily understood by even the youngest students.

A thorough understanding of the model provides everyone with a common language for effective communication. It enables us, for example, to inform a parent that his or her child revolved into a Type III activity on filmmaking as a result of a Type I presentation by a local cinematographer. Students must also understand the planned, purposeful connections between Type I, II, and III activities. They need to be aware that the purpose of a cinematography presentation is to stimulate new interests and ideas, and that the model provides advanced level follow-up (Type III) activities that will

emphasize creative and productive involvement.

Understanding the language of the model also aids in planning and organizing activities according to their categorical function, emphasizing the purpose of particular staff development sessions, and allocating time and money for each major type of enrichment. Evaluation reports are more easily prepared and understood when everyone involved has a common understanding of all program components and the interrelated role they play in the overall model.

Key Feature 2: Planning Prior to Program Implementation

A frequently cited reason for the success of Triad/RDIM programs is the careful planning that occurred *prior* to implementation. In each district a planning team was established to make decisions about how the model would be tailored to accommodate the unique characteristics and resources of each participating school. The planning team (which consisted of both volunteers and persons selected by administrators) included classroom teachers, school psychologists, media specialists (when available), parents, principals, and central office administrators. Quite often the team also included a faculty member who had been an outspoken critic of gifted programming. Appointing outspoken and negative faculty members to a planning team can divert negative energy into a more positive channel, thereby eliminating potential problems.

The principal functions of the planning team are to determine the grade levels to be included in the program, the size of the talent pool, and the criteria to be used for forming the talent pool. The team also selects methods for training classroom teachers in nomination procedures and for planning further inservice and orientation for teachers and parents. By carefully determining during the spring before implementation which grade levels are to be involved and how they are to be selected, student nominations may be completed by staff members who have had nearly a complete academic year to become acquainted with their students' strengths and interests.

In several of our research districts, parents of students who had been involved in traditional gifted programs were invited to a meeting designed to explain the differences between traditional programming and Triad/RDIM. By carefully addressing the concerns of parents (such as expanding the current gifted program to involve 15 to 20 percent of the student population), educators can resolve problems of misunderstanding *before* implementing the program.

Key Feature 3: Inservice and Administrative Support

For any new program to be successful, carefully organized inservice training must be provided for *all* persons who will be involved. In our experience, the most successful programs included school administrators in the inservice training. Principals need to know how to answer basic structural questions about the program. They should understand the major categories of service available to talent pool students without having to know the specific details. All administrative and instructional staff should be able to explain the main components of the program to parents and to answer basic questions. Many complaints about gifted programs stem from the frustrations experienced when teachers and administrators are unable to answer a question.

Three types of inservice should be used to familiarize faculty and administrators with Triad/RDIM. Formal inservice, which most teachers are familiar with, consists of short sessions focusing on specific topics and skills related to the program's implementation. At least three formal inservice sessions should be scheduled and each should address a specific topic. Sequential subjects to be covered include a detailed structural overview of the entire system; a definition of giftedness and resulting identification procedures; the specific roles and responsibilities of classroom and resource teachers; and, finally, an in-depth session on compacting or streamlining the regular curriculum to ensure that students have an adequate challenge in the regular classroom as well as the time to participate in the gifted program.

Informal inservice refers to the regular interactions that any teacher of the gifted will have with other staff members, parents, or community members. Informal inservice consists of the positive program reinforcement that teachers of the gifted communicate through conversations with other staff members. These conversations may occur in the hallway, the cafeteria, or the teachers' lounge. Positive but casual comments about individual student's work or planned enrichment experiences can sometimes do more to enhance the gifted program than a multitude of formal inservice sessions. Another type of informal inservice consists of arranging for program personnel (teachers of the gifted, principals) to be available for questions. This may be accomplished at faculty meetings through brief presentations or progress reports. Any opportunity to clarify the objectives of the program should be used. This visibility often helps to make the program more acceptable even in its earliest stages of development.

The third type of inservice is easily accomplished but has far-reaching effects on present and long-term program success. We advocate the distribution of *brief* but specific materials that have been referred to in previous formal and informal inservice sessions. Overly technical materials should not be used. Dis-

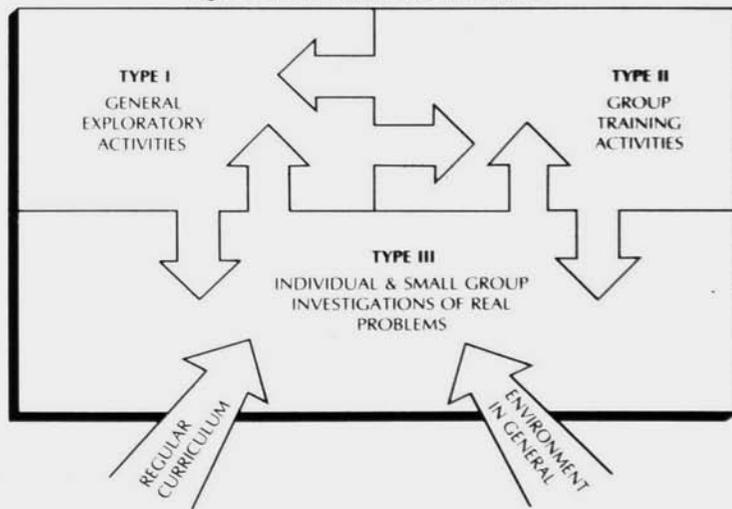
tributing written materials to teachers enables them to do something specific with their students (a suggested planned enrichment activity, the step-by-step procedures for curriculum compacting, and so on), and allows them to answer questions for themselves or for parents who have concerns about the program. Above all, backup materials should be brief, to the point, and practical. We have prepared "executive summaries" of the major books on *The Enrichment Triad Model* (Renzulli, 1977), *The Revolving Door Identification Model* (Renzulli, Reis, and Smith, 1981), and other full-length descriptions of major program components. The more comprehensive books are, of course, made available to persons who express an interest in detailed coverage of particular topics.

Faculty aid and support should be actively recruited at initial inservice sessions. By including teachers and other staff members and by seeking their help, the responsibility for students who will participate in the program is shared by both the classroom teacher and the resource teacher.

Key Feature 4: The Schoolwide Enrichment Team

One of the most innovative and rewarding key features to emerge from our field studies was the development of Enrich-

Figure 1. The Enrichment Triad Model



ment Teams. These teams generally consist of the principal, the resource teacher, three or four classroom teachers, some parents, and in some cases, a student. Every effort is made to encourage principals to be working, collegial members of the teams rather than persons who delegate responsibility to others.

In addition to participating in planning and implementation, Enrichment Teams help to put into practice an essential part of the philosophy underlying Triad/RDIM programs: the total educational experience of *all* students should include varying amounts and levels of enrichment. It is nothing short of ridiculous to maintain that only identified gifted students should have access to enrichment activities and that all other pupils should be denied the opportunity for challenging and rewarding school experiences. It is precisely this attitude that has caused the gifted child movement to be viewed as elitist and has resulted in the oftentimes irreconcilable schisms that exist between regular and special programs and personnel.

Enrichment team activities are many and varied. The team:

- Serves as a planning agent and clearinghouse for visiting speakers; field trips; artistic performances; and other grade level, schoolwide, and interest group activities that are designed to expand the scope of the overall school experience.

- Reviews a wide array of enrichment materials and determines where within the regular curriculum these materials might be most effectively integrated.

- Recruits faculty members and community resource persons who might present enrichment sessions or serve as mentors to individuals or small groups who are involved in advanced level research investigations or creative productions.

- Reviews television guides, summer programs, science fairs, literary competitions, publishers who accept childrens' work, and opportunities for participation in hobbies, theater, and local historical societies.

This information is shared with students, parents, and teachers, and follow-up is arranged with the help of parent team members. The team also

plans staff development activities related to the enrichment program and helps design evaluation and monitoring procedures. Most of all, it helps to achieve the "radiation of excellence" objective, which is a major schoolwide goal of Triad/RDIM programs. Enrichment Teams have had a profound effect on the overall curriculum of their schools, and yet, team members have never been required or even asked to engage in the burdensome task of "writing curriculum." In some cases, team members did in fact take pen in hand to develop curricular materials; but whenever this happened, it was the result of personal interest and program commitment.

Key Feature 5: Program Ownership

We define program ownership as strategies purposefully designed to make the entire school staff aware that *everybody* has a stake in the gifted program and an important part to play in the total range of services provided to program students as well as to the total school population (Reis, 1983). In addition to careful program planning, informative inservice, and the formation of Enrichment Teams, program ownership can be encouraged by specific strategies that attempt to utilize the talents of faculty members whenever possible.

Another way a resource teacher of the gifted can promote ownership in the gifted program is to share resources with classroom teachers. Many resource room activities, games, and materials (including creative and critical thinking skills, independent study skills, and others) are appropriate for all children. These materials should be circulated to classroom teachers for use with students who complete regular classroom work more quickly than their peers and for any other students who express an interest.

Enrichment experiences planned as a part of the gifted program should be shared with other teachers and students in the school whenever possible. When an enrichment activity is planned, the Enrichment Team and the resource teacher should determine whether the activity can serve a wider audience than the talent pool. This determination is generally made on the basis of several factors: level of difficulty, relationship of

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the activity to topics covered at certain grade levels, high levels of interest in the topic on the part of non-talent pool students, and practical considerations related to scheduling and the amount of time and space available for the activity.

By opening up certain enrichment sessions and inviting as many students as possible to listen to a lecture or to participate in a workshop on creative dramatics, all children benefit *at certain times* from the special program. Program ownership is thus extended to students outside the talent pool, and everyone has a better appreciation of and a more positive attitude toward its very existence. This approach also reduces the valid charge of "elitism," which so many gifted programs rightfully earn by limiting enrichment experiences that are appropriate for *all children* to those identified as gifted.

Examining the regular curriculum work of students in the talent pool is still another essential way to create program ownership. Resource and classroom teachers should work together to assess students' areas of academic strength so that they may agree on a "compacted" version of the regular curriculum. In most of the field districts, a "compactor" form was used individually or by groups to analyze the needs of identified students. This approach allowed students to cover curricular material at a pace that was appropriate for their ability levels, and helped to avoid the possibility of repetition. Resource and classroom teachers may then plan acceleration and/or enrichment options during the time made available by compacting.

Key Feature 6: Student Orientation

Talent pool students should be given an unusually detailed orientation about the services and opportunities available to them because of their inclusion in the program. In some of the Triad/RDIM field test districts, students had not "revolved into" an advanced level Type III investigation simply because they hadn't known they could. Students should thoroughly understand the program's definition of giftedness, the programming model, the ways in which they can become involved in the different enrichment types, and the methods by which they will be evaluated. They

should also understand the rigors and demands of a Type III investigation and the responsibilities they have to both their classroom teacher and the teacher of the gifted for completing work and fulfilling obligations.

In this way, responsibility for participation in the program, and possibly in an advanced level Type III investigation, becomes the domain of the resource teacher as well as the student. Talent pool students in the most successful field test districts were aware of their options for different levels of program involvement.

Key Feature 7: Communication with Prime Interest Groups

The communication devices that were used to keep various prime interest groups informed about any and all aspects of the program that might be relevant to a particular group were another characteristic of successful programs. The prime interest groups consisted of parents, classroom teachers, students, administrators, school board members, and the general public. Communication was achieved in several different ways including initial parent, teacher, and student orientation sessions about the gifted program, and frequent progress-report correspondence with involved parents. Newsletters to parents and teachers detailed enrichment experiences and included periodic invitations to visit the resource room, to see completed Type III products, or to attend a Type III Fair at the end of the school year.

Key Feature 8: Flexibility

Change is not only hard to effect; it is also difficult for some people to accept. The attitudes of those involved in a given building must be constantly considered when implementing a new program. Each school serviced by the program has its own "personality" and should reflect the individual differences of its administration, staff, and students. The flexibility of resource teachers to adapt and mold the model to fit each situation will greatly influence the subsequent success of any program.

Triad/RDIM is a general organizational approach to programming rather

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than a prescription for delivering services to gifted and talented students. Any model without this built-in flexibility is eventually doomed to failure because it will ignore the uniqueness of individual schools and the initiative and creativity of persons at the local level. There is no such thing as a “pure” Triad/RDIM program, because it emphasizes flexibility rather than prescription. Many exciting innovations in the model have been contributed by persons who have adapted it for use in their schools.¹

Key Feature 9: Evaluation and Program Monitoring

High-quality programs do not happen by accident. In addition to careful planning and schoolwide commitment, a system for evaluating and monitoring must be built into the overall programming model. The schools in our field studies agreed to participate in a wide

variety of information-gathering procedures. In addition to providing data necessary for research, these procedures enabled us to refine and further develop a software package, which is now being used for ongoing evaluation and program monitoring. The software package contains structured forms used to document major program activities, questionnaires for members of prime interest groups, and instruments designed to assess growth in cognitive and affective thinking processes. An instrument for evaluating 15 specific dimensions of students' Type III projects is also included.

Each evaluation instrument is related to one or more of the major goals of Triad/RDIM. Regular use of the evaluation and monitoring system in and of itself helps to contribute to high levels of program quality. In other words, the items included in the monitoring system serve as a set of “friendly enforcers” in the pursuit of desirable program outcomes. It is one thing to know and to pursue the objectives of a given program, but it is quite another to show evidence that the goals are being achieved. And of course, if we are falling short of one or more major program objectives, the monitoring system helps us pinpoint areas of deficiency and take appropriate action.

Summary

The effects of implementing the Triad/RDIM program in various school systems are as diverse and complex as are the program participants. In summary, outstanding gifted programs tend to exhibit many of the basic characteristics listed below. Generally, successful programs:

- Open doors to all interested students as enrichment experiences are planned
- Reflect the excellence of students' hard work and intense interests
- Display that excellence, thereby challenging other students both within the program and in regular classes to emulate it
- Create the opportunity for motivated nonidentified students to participate without the constraints of predetermined I.Q. or achievement cut-off scores

- Allow all teachers and students to share their interests and expertise with other interested students and teachers

- Relieve students of the burden of engaging each day in repetitious, boring tasks and assignments of previously mastered material by responding to the individual needs of students. □

¹Programs using this model have developed a national *Triad/RDIM Network Newsletter*, which is solely devoted to exchanging materials, resources, and innovative approaches to programming. Persons interested in the *Newsletter* may write the senior author for additional information.

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