The Amphitheater Model: An Approach to Talent Recognition and Development

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"Gentrification" is one reason that educators, as well as most other individuals in most other professions, must quickly learn to deal effectively with change. The term itself reflects the fact that luxuries of the past — items and privileges available to only the landed gentry — have recently become part of the world taken for granted by the majority of us. It wasn't all that long ago that only the "upper classes" had running water, automobiles, and other rich comforts. In the '40's, Gallup asked Americans if they knew what a television was: a decade or two later, society had been transformed. Certainly, most people of our acquaintance now have one (or two, or three, or more) TV's, plus refrigerators, stoves, and microwaves. As the automobile became more and more accessible, it also revolutionized American life (and teenage dating practices). During the past decade alone, look at the tremendous impact that VCR's, CDs, video games, computers, and other electronic gadgetry have had on our younger generation. And now virtual reality is upon us. To highlight the point, think back on life as it was when you were seven years of age. Then think what life is for the seven–year–old of today. There's a vast difference; children of the '90's are growing up in a very different world from that of their parents and grandparents.

Yet many parents and educators still insist that the only way to solve the ills of society is to go "back to basics." Looking back in nostalgia to the good old days, they feel what worked for them will automatically work for their children. However, the social context has changed. For good or ill, the age of the one–room schoolhouse is gone. Educators endeavoring to teach the new generation are finding that the old ways don't always work. It seems that fewer and fewer students of today, bombarded from birth with stimulating, entertaining, and time–saving technology, are able to sit all day and listen attentively to old–fashioned lectures. What good is teaching the basics if no one is listening? Undoubtedly, there is a need to take a different tack and to think about moving forward to new basics.

Of course, any quest for change or educational reform must not discard important ingredients by throwing the baby out with the bath water. Many basic instructional techniques have stood the test of time precisely because they are useful; we should continue to do what works. On the other hand, to be optimally effective in this dynamic era, educators must adapt and grow. We can no longer simply do or repackage what we

have always done. Further, since technology, materials, and strategies once considered the sole province of "enrichment" have gradually been incorporated into the total school program, gifted education itself must become part of the evolution. It can no longer be business as usual. In the shifting, vital world of education today, and in preparation for changes in the emerging future, new models for talent recognition and development must be designed, put in place, and evaluated.
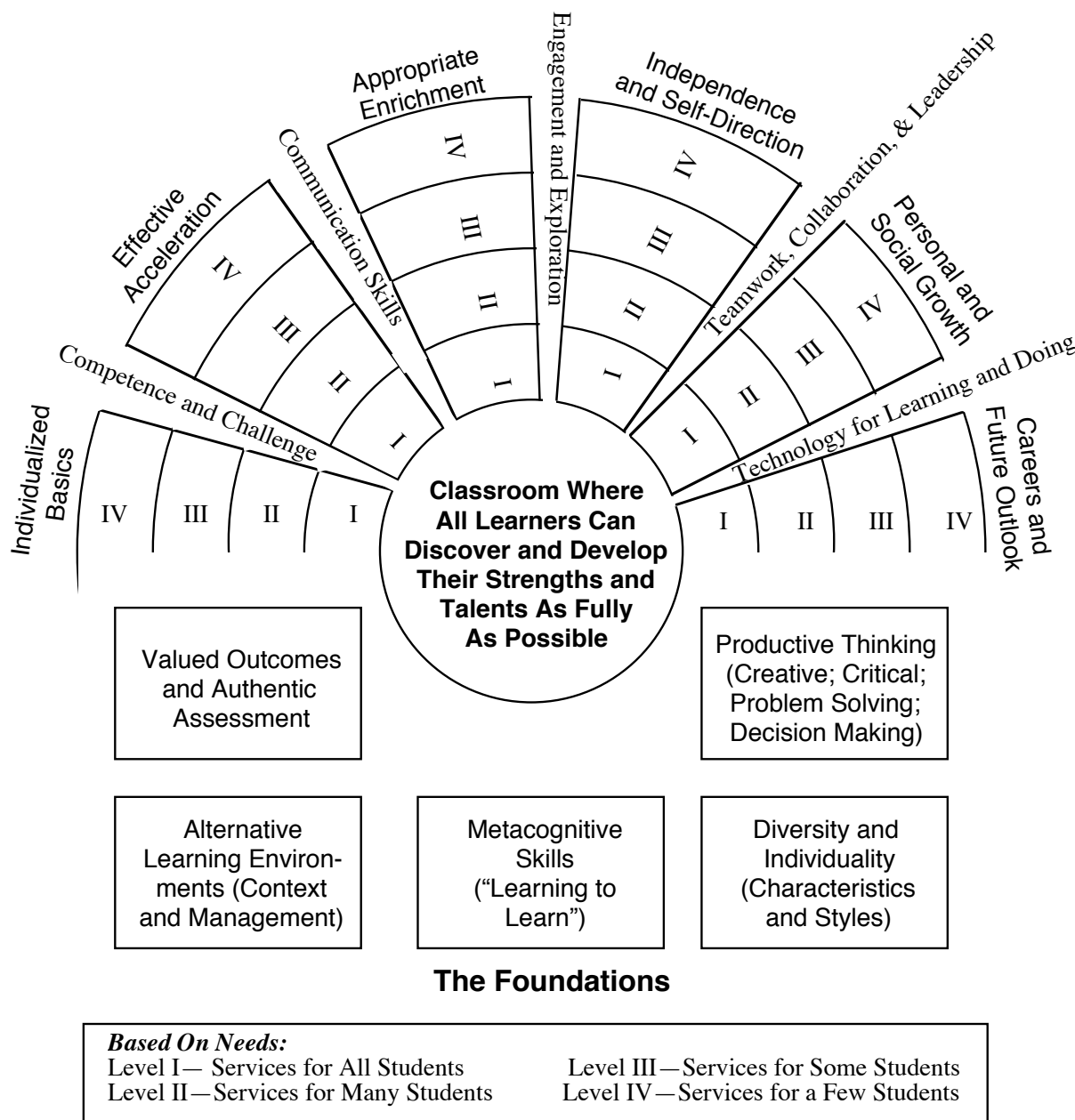
In an effort to contribute in a tangible way, we have constructed what we hope is a pragmatic, ecological model that takes into account the complexity, diversity, and strengths of our students, educators, communities, and schools. A talent development model, the multidimensional *Amphitheater Model* (McCluskey, Treffinger, & Baker, 1995; Treffinger, Sortore, & McCluskey, 1995), offered in Figure 1, is an attempt to consider and incorporate contemporary views of talent and its development, the interdependence among complex components, and the need for rich and varied programming options. Recognizing that, at present, there are surely more questions than answers in the field of gifted education, we are not so presumptuous as to view the framework as definitive in any sense. It is intended rather as a preliminary, organizational cognitive map to help us and others generate and explore testable hypotheses, identify new ways to respond effectively to current educational challenges, and reconsider programming alternatives for talent development.

The *Amphitheater Model* grew out of, and is in fact a synthesis of the three–pronged programming model offered by McCluskey and Walker (1986), Feldhusen's *TIDE (Talent Identification and Development in Education);* 1995) approach, and the *Levels of Service* and *Indicators of Excellence* components of an individualized approach to programming (Treffinger, 1986; Treffinger & Sortore, 1992). The circular epicenter of Figure 1 depicts what should be the major goal of educators everywhere: to create classrooms where all learners can discover and develop their strengths and talents as fully as possible.

To achieve this fundamental goal, it is essential to have a firm base upon which to build. The five building blocks or Foundations in Figure 1 highlight specific areas of primary importance in education today. These are:

1. **Valued Outcomes and Authentic Assessment**. In too many school districts in our high tech world, the basic educational objective has become to build the skills of as many students as possible to a certain "acceptable" level. This objective must change. Rather than trying to develop minimum competencies, should we not be striving to maximize talent development? Part of the challenge must be to identify worthwhile educational objectives for students, staff, and community and to assess outcomes in realistic fashion. Given today's social context, learning must be authentic, meaningful, and genuine. Instead of merely emphasizing facts, memorization, and rote learning,

educators must endeavor to provide students with the opportunity to apply their learning to fit the times. We must value not just the knowing, but the doing as well.

The Foundations

Based On Needs:
Level I— Services for All Students
Level II—Services for Many Students
Level III—Services for Some Students
Level IV—Services for a Few Students

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(Figure 1)

Taking this perspective has ramifications for the evaluation of learning outcomes. If the goal for students is to acquire, demonstrate, and apply knowledge, standardized testing in and of itself is an inadequate method for assessing growth, for tests do not necessarily measure skills, productivity, or potential (Feuerstein, 1979; Gardner, 1983;

Marzano & Costa, 1988). Assessment must become more authentic and real, and move from being test–based to performance–based. When students are engaged through creative, stimulating, real–life situations and activities, assessment must emphasize longitudinal observations, the development of portfolios, and product outcomes (Slavin, 1994).

2. **Alternative Learning Environments**. Not all learning takes place in school — we must be prepared, more and more, to seek and use varied contexts outside of the classroom (McCluskey & Walker, 1986). Restricting instruction to continuous, inflexible, whole–group routines is confining and frequently inhibiting to motivation and the development of talent. It is necessary to individualize: different children can be allowed to do different things at different times, at least for part of the day. Using learning centers, providing research opportunities, and encouraging some cooperative activities can turn the classroom into a "learning laboratory." And through the use of classroom displays, simulations, environmental projects, volunteers, mentors, and the like, human and material resources from the outside can, in effect, become part of the educational world taken for granted in every school. In fact, when designed appropriately, group and individual project work should extend and flourish outside the classroom and the school. It becomes a matter of managing instruction in flexible ways to meet the needs of all students.

3. **Metacognitive Skills**. In this age of information explosion, students cannot rely solely on information imparted by the teacher; they must move from memorizing and regurgitating facts toward analyzing their own strengths and weaknesses, consciously monitoring their own thinking and behavior, and making decisions about their own learning. Metacognition, or "thinking about thinking" (Armbruster & Brown, 1984), allows students to reflect upon their thinking before, during, and after problem solving (Barrell, 1991).

Flavell (1987) proposed that teachers should help learners acquire three types of metacognitive understanding: "metacognitive self–knowledge" (a feeling for how they learn best); "task–metacognitive knowledge" (an awareness of the need to organize and prepare differently for different types of tests, tasks, or challenges); and "knowledge of learning strategies" (an understanding of techniques to improve organizational, study, and problem solving skills). Many metacognitive strategies can be taught even to young students. "Advance organizers," for example, can be used to help "prep" learners beforehand. When the lesson comes, they're ready. Other techniques, including the well–known SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) approach and variations thereof, help students learn to study more effectively (Robinson, 1972). Certainly, it is essential that young people today acquire metacognitive, "learning to learn" skills: if students know their strengths, they can work toward them; if they know their

weaknesses, they can avoid or attempt to address them; and if they know their preferred learning style, they can structure situations and tasks to their advantage.

4. **Diversity and Individuality**. Gardner (1983), Sternberg (1988), and others argue that there are many types of "intelligences" or talents. Even to the lay person, it is intuitively obvious that characteristics and learning styles differ from individual to individual. Since different students learn best in different ways at different times in different settings, analyzing learning is not a simple matter by any means. A number of instruments have been constructed in an attempt to describe personal styles. Perhaps the best known of these are the *Learning Styles Inventory* (Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1978; Dunn, Dunn, & Treffinger, 1992), the *Kirton Adaption–Innovation Inventory* (Kirton, 1976), and the *Myers–Briggs Type Indicator* (Myers & McCaulley, 1985).

Since some children clearly learn differently than other children, diversity is a plus in the classroom. To put it another way, varying the class activities increases the chance that all children will have their needs met. When students become aware of their own idiosyncrasies, preferences, and styles, they can adjust, adapt, and learn more effectively. Several educators have, in fact, offered some intriguing and practical suggestions for using individual learning styles and visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities to reach more and more students (Barbe & Petreshene, 1981; Consilia, 1978; Dunn & Dunn, 1978, 1992, 1993). Others, picking up on Gardner's lead, have designed a variety of curriculum packages in a specific attempt to teach to individual (verbal–linguistic, mathematical, kinesthetic, visual–spatial, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal) and multiple "intelligences" (Campbell, Campbell, & Dickinson, 1996).

5. **Productive Thinking**. If students are truly to learn to think critically and creatively, solve problems, and make their own decisions, teachers must shift from merely presenting traditional lessons to emphasizing problem solving in everyday situations. At a broader level, it might be argued that schools themselves must be redesigned and improved so that they can do a better job of developing the talents of all students (Renzulli, 1994). Making a conscious effort to address the four general domains outlined in Feldhusen's (1995) *TIDE* Model (academic–intellectual, artistic, vocational–technical, and interpersonal–social) is a good place to start.

Creative Problem Solving (Treffinger, Isaksen, & Dorval, 1994; Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 1994) is one mechanism that can facilitate the process of challenging students, focusing on problem solving, and teaching for talent development. With the *Creative Learning Model*, teachers use direct instruction to help students learn and use basic thinking tools. In addition, by employing a facilitative, guided approach, students also learn and practice Creative Problem Solving methods in safe, structured situations. Teachers can also serve as facilitators for students' efforts to deal systematically and effectively with real problems and challenges.

From these building blocks, five strands, presented in Figure 1, emerge. These are:

1. **Competence and Challenge.** The essence of programming for enrichment is to challenge students by going beyond basic memory tasks. Although the term "higher order thinking skills" has perhaps been overused, it is an excellent way to describe how teachers can help students acquire a rich information base, set challenging expectations, apply the personal and group strategies required for competence, and assess outcomes and productivity. By aiming for the higher levels of Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, teachers can encourage and guide students to analyze, synthesize, and integrate material, and to seek original combinations by using information, drawing from it, and applying it to new situations (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). The "expert" literature considers the differences in style and approach between expert and novice problem solvers (Good & Brophy, 1990). This research indicates that experts are inclined to take a broader, more generic view in perceptual organization (as opposed to restricting themselves to specific, narrow elements or issues), to rely on chunking strategies, and to group information by virtue of general principles (rather than sorting by category). However, it has also been found that methods, strategies, and tools for expert problem solving are decidedly teachable. Educators, then, can learn how and when to use specific methods and tools with specific students to maximize learning and higher order thinking (Fogarty, Wang, & Creek, 1983; Leinhardt & Greeno, 1986; Peterson & Comeaux, 1987; Treffinger, Cross, Feldhusen, Isaksen, Remle, & Sortore, 1993).

2. **Communication Skills**. Another goal for teachers is to help students express themselves, their ideas, their questions, and their concerns in many forms and through various media. Effective communicators listen, speak, read, write, and use several tools for personal expression. By exploring creative and critical thinking, pre–writing, and reading strategies (including questioning, webbing, clustering, anticipating, and brainstorming), students can take more control of their own learning. And by integrating and connecting information among subject areas, teachers and students can foster intellectual growth in an enriching, challenging climate (Baker, McCluskey, Large, Gemmell, Sadowy, Wood, & Bevis, 1989; Brownlie, Close, & Wingren, 1988).

3. **Engagement and Exploration**. If we, as educators, are to take advantage of the natural curiosity of our students, we must allow them a voice. They must have input, and to some degree their work should be based on their own interests. Student interests can be assessed through interest inventories, brainstorming, or good old–fashioned conversation. By definition, if school work and assignments are tied to their interests, students have a personal investment in the goals, processes, and outcomes. Not surprisingly, effective learning is more likely to take place if students are driven by internal factors such as enjoyment or satisfaction (Dembo, 1991). Curiosity, risk–taking,

and exploration are sources of intrinsic motivation, but all three require the freedom to make mistakes. Therefore, teachers must be adaptable enough to create safe, supportive environments, where students can explore without fear and have opportunities for self–directed learning and discovery (McCluskey & Walker, 1986; Treffinger, 1975). Flexible teachers who encourage students to examine and evaluate issues with real–life outcomes and consequences can instill in them an intensity and lifelong love of learning.

4. **Teamwork, Collaboration, and Leadership**. While students must be able to work independently, there is also a need for teamwork. Learning and growth do not take place in isolation; in an enriched educational setting, students develop and share their personal strengths and learn to interact and collaborate effectively. The cooperative learning literature (e.g., Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1986) provides suggestions for helping students to learn to work in pairs, small teams, and large groups. In business, Deming (1986) stressed the importance of collaboration, breaking down communication barriers, and involving all staff in product and organizational development and improvement. Some of these ideas can be useful in our schools as well. Also, since it is now recognized that effective leadership is, in large part, situational (and can involve different people with different styles in different times and settings), all students should be encouraged to develop their leadership skills.

5. **Using Technology for Learning and Doing**. In this, the age of the computer, education is not complete unless students learn to understand and apply many kinds of technology. Using computers and interactive video as instructional tools is a valuable way of reaching and motivating students. However, the computer should also be employed as an expressive tool; we want students to be technologically literate (to become comfortable using modems, reading spread sheets, understanding data bases, and employing graphics, word processing, and desktop publishing programs to create polished finished products). In other words, aside from direct teaching, we also must strive to help students learn to apply technology in their own work and projects.

The next component of our *Amphitheater Model* describes four necessary *Levels of Service for Effective Programming* (Treffinger, 1986; Treffinger & Sortore, 1992). At Level I, the emphasis is on expanding learning opportunities for all students, in part by integrating all levels of Bloom's *Taxonomy* and creative and critical thinking strategies into the regular instructional package. At Level II, there is a shift toward extending experiences for students beyond basic exploration. Although not every student will be engaged here, virtually any student might become involved in Level II activities: participation is usually voluntary and interest–based. At this level, students have a chance to participate in programs such as *Odyssey of the Mind, Future Problem Solving, Junior Great Books*, or invention conventions. A fundamental requirement of Level I and

II activities is that they be broad–based and highly inclusive.

Once educators reach Levels III and IV, there is greater emphasis on the individual needs and characteristics of students. Participation at these levels is based less on voluntary self–selection and more on diagnostic planning. At Level III, the focus is on extending work to provide an appropriate challenge for students who exhibit interest, stick–to–itiveness, and ability. Level III programming might include follow–up seminars with guest speakers, or multi–session modules on specific themes. At Level IV, individually–designed services are put in place to meet the idiosyncratic needs of talented students. Activities here are carefully developed and laid out only after careful consideration of relevant data and planning meetings with the students and/or parents, staff, and mentors. Level IV services might include encouraging students to take higher level high school or college courses, dual enrollment in programs, within–grade advancement, or subject or grade acceleration.

The final dimension illustrated in Figure 1 involves six *Indicators of Excellence* in programming (Treffinger, 1986; Treffinger & Sortore, 1992). These are:

1. **Individualized Basics**. Instructional and curricular decisions are based on students' prior achievement and experience, personal characteristics, and learning styles.

2. **Effective Acceleration**. In any subject area, there should be opportunities for flexible grouping and continuous progress. That is, instead of being locked into a rigid pass–one–grade–get–to–go–to–another system, students should be able to move through curriculum at a pace commensurate with their ability and accomplishments. The popular let–children–be–children wisdom notwithstanding, longitudinal studies consistently show that allowing talented children into school early can be extremely beneficial for academic, intellectual, social, and emotional growth (cf. McCluskey, Baker, & Massey, 1996; McCluskey, Massey, & Baker, 1997).

3. **Appropriate Enrichment**. In an enriched setting, students are able, independently or in small groups, to pursue their own interests, to learn and apply problem–solving strategies, to develop metacognitive skills, and to identify and delve into real–life issues.

4. **Independence and Self–Direction.** Students require enriching experiences to become independent learners who can set challenging, yet realistic goals, identify resources, plan for action, complete tasks, evaluate ideas and products, and share information with others.

5. **Personal Growth and Social Development.** The learning environment and

curriculum should be structured to foster high levels of self–esteem and confidence among students. As well, young people must learn to recognize and respect the strengths and needs of others.

6. **Careers and a Futuristic Orientation.** Career exploration is a critically important, yet often neglected piece of the enrichment puzzle. In today's world, the job situation is shifting rapidly. Career opportunities are suddenly opening up in some areas and, just as quickly, shutting down in others. As a consequence, students must learn to adjust to the changing conditions and expectations, to explore various career options, to cope with the new realities, and to become malleable, lifelong learners. They must also acquire a vision, for as Socrates' noted, "If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable." Indeed, by giving students a sense of purpose and direction, it is possible to "reclaim" and refocus even at–risk individuals (McCluskey, Baker, O'Hagan, & Treffinger, 1995). One part of the process should be for educators to guide students in developing *Individual Growth Plans* outlining learning styles, past experience, school and outside interests, and personal goals and the practical steps necessary to achieve them (Feldhusen, 1995).

Time and Attitude

It would be naive to suggest that implementing all, or even portions of such a model will be easy. Given the state of education today, it will assuredly be terribly difficult. A major downside of today's educational climate is the often ill–conceived slash–and–cut approach. And when times get tough, enrichment programs are often the first to go. The cuts affect not only the people who are "downsized," but also the ones remaining who have to deal with an ever–increasing workload. Many teachers today find themselves caught in the rising–expectations, diminishing–resources dilemma.

To put it another way, many teachers simply do not have time enough to do the things they want and know how to do. Everyone needs time: it is tied to job satisfaction, efficiency, and even altruism. A social psychology experiment conducted at Princeton Theological Seminary underscores this point (Darley & Batson, 1973). As part of the study, a number of students were directed to walk from one building on campus to an adjacent recording studio to give an off–the–cuff, extemporaneous talk on the Good Samaritan parable (not a particularly onerous task for individuals taking religious studies). For those in the first treatment group, things went smoothly; the students knew they had plenty of time to make it to their presentation in a leisurely manner. En route, they encountered a man collapsed in a doorway coughing and groaning. Of these unhurried students, almost two–thirds stopped and offered to help the "victim." Students in the second condition, however, were told that they were late, so they had to rush to the studio. The result was that they dashed off, in harassed fashion, in an

attempt to reach their session on time. In this instance, very few people (only 10%) stopped to ask if they could help. Indeed, many of them walked around the victim; some even stepped over him! As others have noted (Myers, 1983), this is one of the most ironical moments ever captured in social psychological research. Imagine students of religion, mentally rehearsing their forthcoming speech on the Good Samaritan, ignoring a victim lying at their feet! Extrapolating, it is also easy to imagine overwhelmed, beleaguered teachers being less sensitive than usual when faced with increased demands, large class sizes, and insufficient time to do the job at hand.

Be that as it may, there is *still* a great need for educators, whatever the pressures, to take a positive attitude and feature programming for enrichment and talent development. Although acquiring the necessary pedagogical tools is critically important, effective enrichment depends in large part on the personality and attitude of the teacher. Educators must be positive, enthusiastic, and committed to challenging and bringing out the talents of all their students.

A classic educational–social psychological investigation, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, points to the importance of attitude (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). In this study, Rosenthal assessed a number of elementary school children and "identified" several so–called "late bloomers" who, although they had shown no special talents to that point, were supposedly about to blossom momentarily. In other words, teachers were informed that the testing had indicated that the hidden potential of a select number of these incipiently gifted students was about to burst forth and be fulfilled. But, as social psychologists are wont to do, Rosenthal had practiced a deception and misled the teachers. In reality, the students in question had shown nothing special during testing; they simply had been picked at random. Yet, when Rosenthal returned to the school at a later date, he found that the IQs of these randomly selected "late bloomers" had actually risen. Through self–fulfilling prophecy, the teachers had gotten what they expected.

Now it would not do to take the result purely at face value. Later research has suggested that the self–fulfilling prophecy effect may not be as powerful as Rosenthal first implied (Elashoff & Snow, 1971). To some extent, he may have been a victim of his own self–fulfilling expectations. Nonetheless, in virtually all fields of human endeavor, there is no denying that attitude matters very much. In the *Pygmalion* study, since teachers expected more of the "late bloomers," they unintentionally gave them more attention (extra looks of encouragement, extra reinforcement, extra challenge, and extra time to respond). The implications for enrichment programming are obvious; educators must strive to identify the strengths and talents in all their students, and focus on many areas now considered "extras." And we must continue to search for and respond to the talents of all students, even in difficult times.

Summation

For gifted education to remain static in this rapidly evolving era would be a prescription for self–destruction. In the past, the field has traditionally relied on narrow, categorical identification and selective "differentiation" that failed to address and nurture specific talents and needs. That approach is now insufficient. To survive in a meaningful way, gifted education must broaden its scope and begin to interface with the new social and technological context. If we begin to build a new paradigm which emphasizes recognizing and responding to many talents of many students, the "fit" with other aspects of education will become smooth and "seamless." As shown by the six programming areas and Levels I-IV in the *Amphitheater Model*, recognizing the talents of and providing appropriate instructional services for many students does not in any way mean that enrichment will be diluted or that the stars will be neglected. On the contrary, it summarizes how educators today can address the enrichment needs and development of talent in more and more of our students.

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