How Italian, European and American Frameworks Contribute to Promoting Talent Development in Italian Schools

Lara Milan; Sally M. Reis; Maria Assunta Zanetti; Joseph S. Renzulli
University of Connecticut, USA

Abstract

This article describes current attempts and steps to expand both services and research about gifted education and talent development programs and educational opportunities for academically talented students in Italy. The laws, procedures, and policies that have been essential to this process are described, as is the outcome, which is the implementation and use of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model as one viable method for developing students' talents and gifts in Italian schools.

Keywords: Gifted education; talent development; identification; differentiation; enrichment; acceleration; SEM; Renzulli Learning System.

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, our society needs a wide range of skills to succeed in a rapidly changing environment. Societies and economies have experienced significant change; innovative digital technologies have had a significant impact, as many of today's jobs did not exist a decade ago and we do not know what kind of jobs our youths will do in the future. Society and economy rely on creative and competent people to design the solutions to tackle demanding problems that haunt our future while competency requirements are changing. In addition to strong basic skills (literacy, numeracy and basic digital skills), skills such as creativity, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, and executive function, and other problem solving play an increasing role in coping with complexity and change in today's world.

Learning competencies for the future

Some international organizations have identified lifelong learning competences needed for the new world knowledge society, or what the European Community refers to as "Key Competences." These are important and cross-curricular in nature within the curriculum (European Communities, 2007). In the United States, the term, 21st century skills, is often used to describe these competences. The 'key competencies for lifelong learning' refer to the framework approved by the Council and European Parliament in 2006 and the 21st century learning have become increasingly popular (e.g., Partnership for 21st century skills [P21] 2002) within the Education and Training 2010 work program. This framework identifies and defines various key competencies and capabilities that are necessary in our knowledge society and serves as a call to join efforts to ensure the development of a set of competences across all age groups in Europe (Commission for the European Communities, 2008; European Communities, 2007).

Despite some differences in the implementation and assessment approaches of these 21st century competencies (Voogt & Pareja Roblin, 2012), it is encouraging that both European and American approaches to education share a common goal of promoting personal fulfilment and development, employment, and positive citizenship for our youth. These different societies actually agree on a common list of competences, sometimes called the "soft skills," that may suggest a wider perspective on educational offerings in areas such as communication, digital competence, learning-how-to-learn, and social and civic competencies, creativity, and cultural awareness.

A comparison between the European competence framework and the American 21st Century Skills shows common features, as both competence frameworks refer to the need to deal with complexity of the fast-changing world and to respond to the new digital, virtual reality, and technological environments. They both emphasize the development of important affective skills, such as critical thinking, creativity and problem solving. Both frameworks support the development of competence-oriented teaching and learning and suggest how these competences need to be transferable to new contexts. Both frameworks also suggest that a plan is necessary to integrate these competences into school curricula to respond to the need for changes. They also point to the need for new teaching methods and assessment procedures, as well as the need to invest in the education and professional development of staff in order to promote fundamental changes to teaching practices.

Most policy makers believe in the central role of teachers in the implementation of 21st century skills as well as key competences and subsequent need for teacher professional development (Voogt & Pareja Roblin, 2012). The 21st century education movement in the USA relies on a long-lasting tradition of procedures and strategies to help all students reach their full potential, as many of the 21st Century Skills have been integrated into gifted education pedagogy since its inception.

Italy has had minimal expertise in the field of gifted and talented education compared to other European countries but that is beginning to change. The premise of this article is based on a doctoral thesis completed by the first author that challenges the current theoretical and practical point of view, despite any cultural and educational differences, can enable Italian Schools to adapt current American programs and models for talent development. To do that may help to ensure that Italian students can develop a broad set of skills early on in life to develop the country's human capital.

Addressing this challenge will ultimately boost employability, competitiveness and economic growth in our society. Critical thinking, entrepreneurship, problem-solving or digital competences are some of the competences needed to enable Italian students to fulfil their potential and become confident and productive citizens.

Italy's investment in promoting talent development in schools

During the past 40 years, Italy has invested human and economic resources in developing programs, tools and teacher training to meet the educational and emotional needs of students with learning disabilities, neglecting the educational needs of students of uncommon ability and high IQ and creative potential. Italian society's perception of high ability students is that they are already a privileged group who will do quite well without special services. Other research suggests a different scenario and it is clear that some academically gifted students both underachieve in school and drop out of high school (Reis & McCoach, 2000; Renzulli & Park, 2000).

Compared to other European countries, Italy has been slower to respond to the educational needs of high ability students who are under-challenged in schools due to a lack of awareness of their too long ignored educational needs. Italian educational policies over the past four decades have failed to include Gifted and Talented Education while directing available resources to bringing low-performing students up to proficiency.

Educators, school administrators, policy makers, school psychologists, and the popular press all agree that not all students start out on an equal footing, but all educational efforts were directed towards remedial services rather than providing students with uncommon ability to actualize their yet unrealized high potential. Consequently, in Italy a lack of best practices or research in gifted education exists as does an absence of educational tools and even training courses on gifted education and talent development. The moral principle of equity for all students that is a foundational principle of educational policies is all but nonexistent in Italian schools at the present time. Rather, currently, school provisions are more focused on meeting the educational needs of students with learning disabilities, neglecting the urge to address the educational needs of highly able students.

The Italian education system

To better understand the Italian Education System, it may be useful to refer to the text edited by the Italian Eurydice Unit – (Eurypedia, http://www.indire.it/eurydice/eurypedia/) which outlines the Organization, Structure, Administration and Governance at Central and Regional level of the Italian Education System in the Pre-primary, Primary, Lower and Upper Secondary Education. Eurypedia was created in 2011 to offer comprehensive descriptions of the education systems of the 38 countries that took part in the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme. In Italy, every child receives education and training for at least 12 years, between the ages of 6 and 16, as follows:

- pre-primary school (for children between 3 and 6 years of age);
- primary education (for children between 6 and 11 years of age);
- lower secondary school (for children between 11 and 14 years of age);
- upper secondary school (for students from 14 to 19 years of age); and,
- Higher education offered by universities and colleges.

The Italian education system is organized on the basis of the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy of schools. The Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) is responsible for general administration at national level and has exclusive legislative competence for determining the standards of education that must be guaranteed throughout the country. In fact, the Ministry of Education sets the general objectives and quality of the educational services, the subjects to be taught, the learning objectives, the so-called soft skills, and the annual number of teaching hours, the general criteria for student assessment. Schools at pre-primary, primary and secondary levels have teaching, organizational and research autonomy, granted since 2000. Conversely, the Regions have a joint legislative role along with the State on issues related to education. Regions are solely responsible for the planning, management and provision of vocational education and training through recognized institutions. As there are no National Guidelines in Gifted Education in Italy, teachers are not required to access proper training on how to meet the educational needs of gifted children. Therefore, at the local level, each school designs its own Educational Offer Plan (POF) which is approved by the Teachers' Council and represents the cultural and planning identity of the school. It must be consistent with the general and educational objectives set at national level and, at the same time, it must reflect cultural, social and economic requirements at local level. The POF must be approved by the District/School Council and provided to students and their parents on enrolment. Schools are administered by the school manager who is responsible of the direction and deployment of human resources, in order to arrange school activities, assuring the quality of the educational process. According to the National Guidelines for the Curriculum, the general aim of school is the harmonious and comprehensive development of the individual, in keeping with the principles of the Italian Constitution and European cultural tradition, to be achieved through the promotion of knowledge, respect for individual diversity and the active involvement of students and their families. The reference for these new guidelines is the Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning set up by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union through the Recommendation of 18 December 2006.

Teachers are able to select teaching methods as well as textbooks and teaching tools, which must be consistent with each school's educational offer plan (POF) and the general and educational objectives established at national level. Freedom in teaching is a principle set out in the Italian Constitution (Art. 33). In this respect, any innovation process is to be approved by the Teachers' Council which makes it difficult for any researcher to carry out educational research in schools. This is particularly true when addressing a new subject such as the educational and emotional needs of gifted children.

In schools, pupils are enrolled into class according to their age and students spend their schooling career with their peers. Occasionally, pupils from different classes can be grouped together for special school activities or objectives but there are no resource rooms nor gifted education specialists to provide personalized learning activities to gifted children. A class has a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 26–27 pupils. These limits are not strictly observed as some classes can include up

to 30/32 students. The number of pupils per class is usually lowered to 20, if the class includes students with learning disabilities. There are no pull-out programs for highly able students, nor is there a national definition or identification system for gifted and above average students. No resource rooms nor specialist in gifted education are available and teachers are not asked to plan and present activities that are differentiated to address student's individual interests or enhance their talents.

In Italy, different education models can and should be adopted to meet the diverse educational needs of children with high cognitive potential. Several national and European provisions exist to support these provisions, the most important of which dates back to the last century, as summarized below:

- In 1994 the Council of Europe publishes a "Recommendation 1248" on education for gifted children;
- In 2005 the "Gifted Education in 21 European Schools - Inventory and Perspective" report is published (Mönks & Pflüger, 2005);
- In 2013 The Journal of the European Union, in a discussion entitle "Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee" discusses "releasing the potential of children and young people with high intellectual abilities in the European Union" (own-initiative opinion) with explicit suggestions based on a plenary session (Garcia-Caro, 2013); and,
- In 2013 The EESC - European Economic and Social Committee states that the problem of children and young people with high intellectual ability is relatively well analyzed thanks to research carried out over several decades and to the existence of an abundant specialized scientific bibliography.

In particular, the Recommendation of 1248/1994 of the Council of Europe was inspired by the workshop "Education of the Gifted in Europe: Theoretical and Research Issues," held in Nijmegen, Holland, in 1991 and supported by the Council of Europe itself. The recommendation states that: gifted children should be able to benefit from adequate teaching conditions, capable of fully developing their potential, in their interest and in the interest of society. No country can afford to waste talents, since it would be a waste of human resources not to identify intellectual or other potentials in time, for which adequate instruments are needed.

In particular, the Assembly reaffirmed: education as a fundamental human right, stating that it should, as far as possible, be appropriate for each individual. Whereas for practical purposes education systems must provide adequate education for the majority of children, there will always be children with special needs and for whom special arrangements have to be made. One group of such children is that of the highly gifted.

The Assembly therefore recommended that the Committee of Ministers ask the competent authorities of the states signatory to the European Cultural Convention to take account of the following considerations in their educational policies.

Point 5 in the Recommendation is more specific on this:

5.1: legislation should recognize and respect individual differences. Highly gifted children, as with other categories, need adequate educational opportunities to develop their full potential;

5.2: basic research in the fields of "giftedness" and "talent" and applied research, for instance to improve identification procedures, should be developed in parallel. Research on the "mechanisms of success" could help to tackle school failure;

5.3: meanwhile, in-service teacher training programming to include strategies for identifying children of high ability or special talent. Information on gifted children should be made available to all those who deal with children (teachers, parents, doctors, social workers, ministries of education, etc.);

5.4: provision for specially gifted children in a given subject area should preferably be arranged within the ordinary school system, from pre-school education onwards. Flexible curricula, more chances of mobility, enriching supplementary material, audiovisual aids and project-oriented

teaching styles are ways and techniques to foster the development of all children, whether highly gifted or not, and enable the identification of special needs at the earliest possible time;

5.5: the ordinary school system should be made flexible enough to enable the needs of high performers or talented students to be met;

5.6: any special provision for highly gifted or talented students should be administered with discretion, to avoid the innate danger of labelling, with all its undesired consequences to society.

In Italy, national educational measures have not been implemented for gifted students, even though actual school regulations make clear reference to the need for promoting the development of students' potential and talents. In 2015, the law n. 107, called "The Good School," sets the grounds for a review of current educational teaching strategies, in particular to support talented students. But the law does not state the need to make all necessary investments in teacher training, as Italian teachers are not presently trained to differentiate the curriculum in order to promote each student's potential.

The Note of the Ministry of Education n. 2805 (December 11, 2015), known as "Educational Flexibility," makes reference to the use of flexible instruments. The goal is to underline and reinforce that the school curriculum and the achievement of the educational objectives cited in the law cannot be realized without a flexible organization such as the stretching of school time, even beyond the usual time frames, within the limits of the resources that the autonomy can guarantee. The adoption of programming methods that enable students to participate in cross-grades groups and level groups could be an effective tool for the implementation of individualized and personalized teaching strategies; one can refer to previous positive experiences adopted for remedial purposes and/or strengthening in curricular and/or extracurricular hours; or based on the peer-to-peer strategy (students groups with an "internal" tutor, chosen among students); to teaching strategies based on cooperative learning; to lab and hands-on activities; to problem solving methodologies; to the introduction of optional courses in the student's curriculum; and to the importance of flexibility in the implementation of an integrated plan in full compliance with the choices of the autonomy of educational institutions. All of these modifications call for profound reflection and a renewed commitment to designing more flexible programming options.

The provisions discussed above could be used to establish the conditions for the implementation of tailored instruction to accelerate and/or enrich the curriculum in order to engage the highly able students in differentiated activities that may suit their learning pace, respecting their learning styles, to prevent underachievement and dropout especially of highly gifted students. Unfortunately this has not occurred.

The purpose of gifted education and talent development programs

Renzulli and Reis believe that the first purpose of education, and in particular of gifted education, is to provide young people with maximum opportunities for self-fulfillment. The second purpose is to increase society's reservoir persons who will help to solve the problems of contemporary civilization by becoming producers of knowledge and art rather than consumers of existing information. If we agree with these two goals of gifted education, and if we believe that our programs should produce the next generation of leaders, scientists, inventors, problem solvers, entrepreneurs, and persons who will make important contributions to all areas of human productivity, then the third purpose is to show the sensibility in modeling special programs and services after the *modus operandi* of these personas rather than after those of good lesson learners. (Renzulli & Reis, 2014).

In Italy, the need to develop students' educational talents and gifts is mainly the concern of some parents of gifted children, and a few researchers and progressive universities. The Ministry of Education, with the Departmental Decree n. 1603 (2018), established a National Technical Committee with the primary purpose of designing national guidelines for gifted children. The LabTalento of the

University of Pavia is the only university talent lab in Italy. Its purpose is to help young people with high cognitive skills or a specific ability in an area of talent to fully develop their potential. LabTalento has the following goals:

- Supporting and disseminating research about the nature of giftedness, talents, creativity, and the education of gifted and talented children and their teachers;
- Establishing opportunities for the exchange of ideas, and experiences through teacher training;
- Supporting and enhancing programs, activities and best practices provided for gifted and talented children;
- Supporting and enhancing parent and family education regarding the development of the potential of all children; and,
- Creating an atmosphere of acceptance and recognition of gifted and talented children from any background.

In 2017 an International Agreement between the University of Pavia and the University of Connecticut was signed in order to promote academic research and encourage the intellectual development of Italian scholars in the field of gifted education. The long-lasting cooperation aims at bringing together researchers and professionals coming from different parts of the world through collaborative research projects, resource sharing, and the organization of international conferences.

Over the years, strong collaborations have developed between the LabTalento of the University of Pavia and internationally experienced researchers, in order to create synergies, share models such as The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; 2014; Reis & Renzulli, 2003.). The challenge at the LabTalento in recent years has been to adapt enrichment, acceleration and empowerment programs to the Italian school communities with an inclusive approach, in order to a support students' potential, as suggested by the Renzulli and Reis's SEM motto "A rising tide lifts all ships." Ultimately, the educational challenge of the new policies should be to support the development of potential and talent, in order to achieve equity for academically talented students in Italy.

In 2019, the Bill n. 1607 represents the latest law proposal to provide provisions to recognize the existence of gifted children in Italy, to promote the adoption of personalized teaching plans and to advocate for teachers training on this subject. And recently, the Ministry of Education emanated the note n. 562 (April 3, 2019) that officially includes gifted children in the spectrum of Special Needs. The note states that: gifted students are to be included in the Special Needs group, indicating the possibility of finding customized solutions. If, according to the team of teachers, there are evident manifestations of discomfort and criticality, it is the responsibility of teachers to evaluate the need of a personalized curriculum, to be formally outlined in a PDP (Personalized Educational Plan).

However, three problems emerge from this.

- there is not a national definition, an act or law that defines the characteristics of gifted children;
- a PDP is to be adopted as a remedial approach only to respond to an evident manifestation of discomfort; and,
- the team of teachers who should evaluate the opportunity of planning differentiated strategies are not trained in recognizing the signs of underachievement and have received no training in gifted and talented education.

It seems quite risky to improvise new solutions because there is no expertise nor professional training on this subject. Once again, professional training and the scientific research on the different approaches that have characterized the history of gifted education in other countries could be implemented to help to address the 40 years gap that the Italian school system faces, with the advantage of learning from other countries' experience, including failures and successes. The overview of the field of gifted education, the individuals who influenced the field, the streams of

research and educational practices in the field, including legislation, educational practices, gifted education publications, and advocacy efforts are the grounds of the academic training of a Specialist in Gifted Education, a professional degree that unfortunately does not yet exist in Italy.

Indeed, anyone wishing to understand the options for educating gifted and talented students should review the many models and strategies that exist and these vary widely in the ways they may be used to promote talent development and to meet the needs of gifted students (Renzulli et al., 2009). In general, most existing systems and models are based on a chosen definition of who is gifted and talented. Most of the models focus on meeting gifted students' academic needs, some focus on creativity, a few also include students' social-emotional aspects. Some approaches delve more into differentiation strategies and others into enrichment and/or acceleration strategies; some models are more content-based and others are more process-driven.

The history of gifted education in the United States and Europe teaches us that, throughout time, the most popular intervention programs have proved their effectiveness not only in the United States, but in different educational settings across the world. However, the subject of gifted education is still relatively unknown in Italy. In other countries of the European Community, as well as in the emerging countries, the concern for talent development is more widely acknowledged and is based on the more widely recognized concepts that some people demonstrate abilities or potentials beyond the norm compared to their peers, in various academic, artistic, and creative fields.

Definitions and identification of gifted and talented students in Italy

In Italy there is not an agreed upon definition of giftedness, but which particular conceptions of giftedness are being adopted has important implications for educational practice, as each conception of giftedness brings with it its own set of implications for education. The main criteria for selecting a definition should be which models are both theoretically sound and can also be practically implemented in the Italian school system. Identification is also an issue that comes up for discussions among Italian experts. The history of gifted education teaches us that there is no one right way to identify children as gifted, and modern giftedness researchers emphasize alternative assessments that do not rely solely on intelligence tests, suggesting a trend towards domain-specific conceptions as well as the assessment of co-cognitive traits such as motivation and creativity.

Despite this tendency, in Italy the use of high IQ score is becoming a primary criterion for labelling students as 'gifted.' The reality is that giftedness is a social construction (Borland, 2009). Moreover, there is a general understanding that 'being gifted' means that you have a high IQ. The myth 'once gifted, always gifted' persists among the Italian population, and giftedness is perceived as something permanent, although studies since the early 1970s consistently show that such development is the result of an interaction between the child's genetic endowment and a rich and appropriate environment.

The benchmark for assessing giftedness varies among Italian experts and typically refers to the top 5% of the population with IQs of 120 or higher whereas others refer to the top 2% with IQs of 130—~~o~~r higher. From an international perspective, this approach clings to the misunderstood conception of giftedness that dates back to the pre-1970s literature and before controversy took a new turn and thanks to the research conducted by eminent scholars such as Feldhusen (1988), Gagné (2000), Gardner (1983), Reis (Reis & Renzulli, 1982), Renzulli (1978, 1986), Sternberg (1982), and Tannenbaum (2003). Reis and Renzulli (2009) proposed that no single homogeneous group of gifted children and adults exist, and that giftedness is developmental, not fixed at birth. The work of these contemporary scholars is now widely accepted in the U. S., Europe, and Asia; and it is critical that Italian educators begin conceptualizing giftedness and the types of programming that they imply in order to capitalize on the human capital that these more flexible conceptions will allow us to identify.

To overcome the long-standing controversy between 'gifted' and 'non-gifted' students, some scholars have suggested replacing the term gifted education with "talent development" (Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Treffinger & Feldhusen, 1996). This perspective emphasizes the process of developing

the individual talents of all students, as well as the need of adopting a multi-criterion approach to identify talents, with the consequent promotion of flexible educational programs that respond to the different characteristics of the students.

The European trend toward talent development tends to advocate for an inclusive approach, and this approach helps to overcome some of the criticisms that gifted education has historically experienced such as elitism and the under representation of minority groups and students who learn differently from traditionally prescriptive and memory-oriented teaching practices. Contemporary models now provide a theoretical and practical guide for the development of enrichment and more open educational programs. In the selection process of an educational model for the development of talent it is essential to opt for a flexible system, adaptable to the Italian school settings and to the administration of the Italian school system which presently is not structured to provide differentiated instruction to meet the needs of students that are above grade level in aptitude or achievement.

Comparing gifted education models for use in Italy

Analysis of educational models shows that "the two mega-models," the acceleration initiative developed by Julian Stanley (1971; 1973) and the SEM developed by Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis (Reis & Renzulli, 1985, 2014; Renzulli, 1977) have defined the major organizational efforts of the gifted education field since the mid-1970s. Both also represent the consistent division in the field between accelerative and enrichment approaches (VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). Although curricular differentiation is considered more of a strategy than a model, it is also a very useful approach that can assure that some of advanced students' curricular needs are addressed in their regular classroom settings. Whether teachers differentiate content, process, products, or the learning environment, this successful approach to instruction can benefit a wide range of student achievement levels, from those with learning disabilities to those who are considered to be high achievers. These three main areas of programming in the field, Differentiation, Acceleration, and Enrichment, are briefly described below.

Differentiation

Differentiated instruction is a useful and practical tool that enables teachers to create opportunities for academic challenge and engagement for all students, avoiding the one-fits-all educational approach. The differentiated classroom creates opportunities for challenging and engaging learning opportunities for all students, that address their specific differentiated instructional needs (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Differentiation can offer students individual opportunities to perform at the appropriate level and be challenged in school. The goal of differentiated instructional strategies is to ensure that all students are engaged and challenged by providing tasks that match their learning needs.

Acceleration

In the Italian school system, apart from early entrance to school or college and grade skipping, no other acceleration options are allowed in Italy at the present time. *Acceleration* can be referred to as a "vertical curriculum;" it enables students to progress more quickly through academic subjects and content, allowing them either to skip grades and instructional content, to learn at a level that best matches their academic abilities and needs. Some examples of acceleration options are early entrance to school, grade acceleration, subject acceleration, Advanced Placement, dual-enrollment courses, curriculum compacting, distance learning, and opportunities to participate in International Baccalaureate programs.

Enrichment

Enrichment refers to providing richer and more varied educational experiences, and expanding the regular curriculum so that it is modified, extended and broadened to provide greater depth and breadth that is generally provided.

Discussions in gifted education between the approaches of acceleration and enrichment have continued, although it is often now recognized that comprehensive and high quality gifted and talented programs should provide both enrichment and acceleration opportunities. A review of the main schools of thought that characterize the history of gifted education in the United States in the past four decades suggests that these main approaches should be considered in Italy (Milan & Zanetti, 2018). Italian policy makers have taken steps towards the promotion of educational policies to support students with a potential to excel (Pfeiffer, 2012). The professional training and the understanding of the dynamics that generated these major provisions of enrichment, acceleration, and differentiation suggest that the choice for a model to be implemented in Italian schools had to include all these three validated approaches. An approach that combines all three and has begun to be implemented in Italy is The SEM (see Figure 1, Renzulli & Reis, 2014).

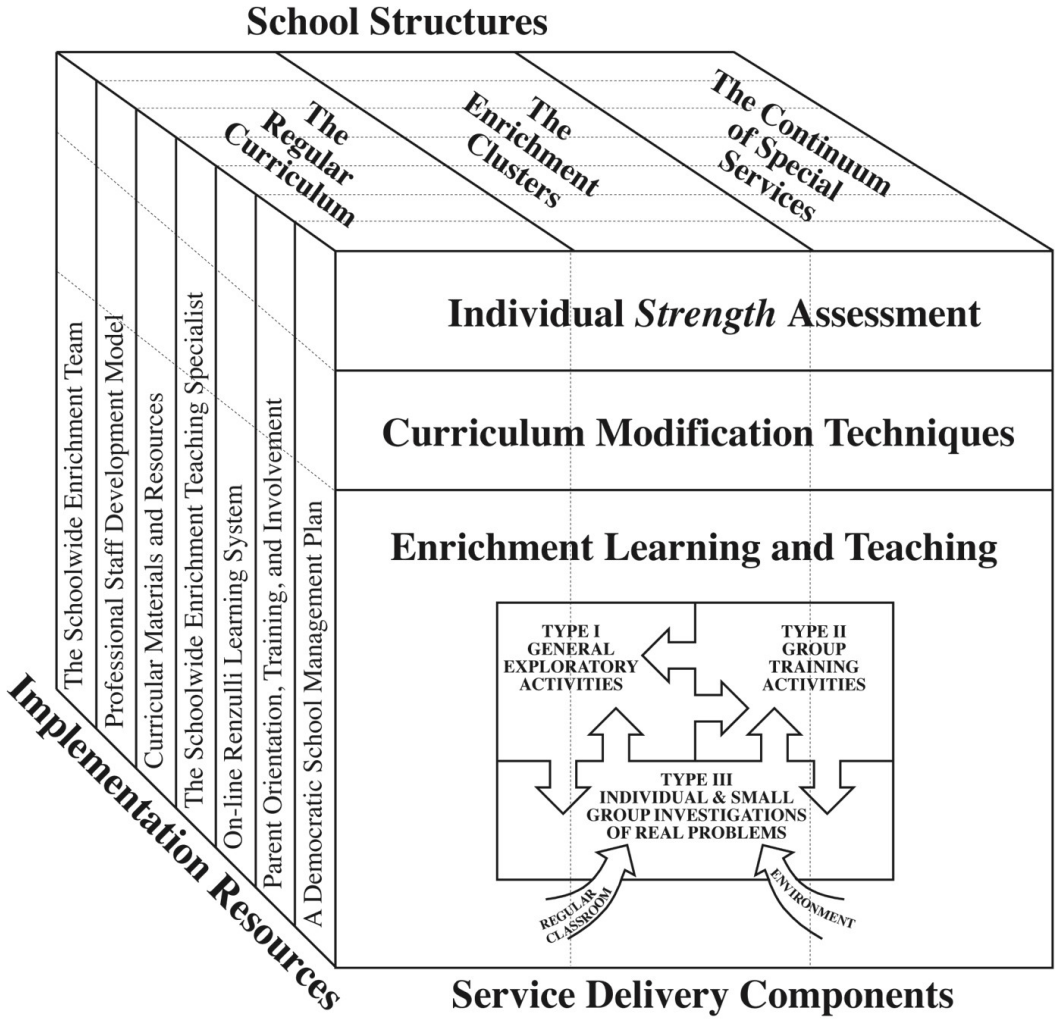

Figure 1: The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM): Combining the Three Main G&T Approaches.

The SEM (see Figure 1, Renzulli & Reis, 1985, 1997, 2014), combines the three primary gifted and talented approaches. It also applies the pedagogy of gifted education to talent development, providing every student with opportunities, resources, and encouragement necessary to achieve the students' individual potential, through the use of differentiation, enrichment and acceleration strategies. Unlike traditional gifted programs, for which identification is regulated by achievement test and IQ cut-offs, the SEM adopts a broadened conception of giftedness (Renzulli, 1986), the Three Rings Conception of Giftedness (Renzulli, 1978), that avoids labelling students as "gifted" and "non-gifted." The identification system in the SEM is based on a variety of measures including: The Renzulli Rating Scales (Renzulli et al., 2013), achievement tests, teacher/parent/self-nominations, as well as alternative pathways. Based on the belief that "a rising tide lifts all ships," the SEM usually

identifies 15–20% of above average ability/high potential students. Indeed, enrichment activities provide gifted children, as well as non-identified students, with opportunities to explore their potentials and uncover their gifts.

Various research studies show highly favorable results for underachieving gifted students when the SEM and the Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli, 1977) are used as a direct intervention for counteracting underachievement (Baum et al., 1995). The SEM model has been implemented in hundreds of school districts across the USA and around the world and has demonstrated effectiveness under widely differing socioeconomic levels and program organization patterns (Reis & Renzulli, 2003; Renzulli & Reis, 1997, 2014).

The scientific and ethical reasons that guided the suggestion about the use of the SEM for Italian schools includes the body of research that supports this model, either as a whole-school approach or for a program for talent development. The SEM is an inclusive approach and flexible approach and provides practical materials and tools for teachers. As noted, using the SEM can reverse the process of gifted underachievement and prevent students from dropping out of school. The model also supports twice exceptional students (2E; Baum et al., 2014).

Renzulli and Reis have worked to translate their research findings into practical suggestions about identification and programming that work in classrooms (Reis, 2015). In developing theoretical constructs, Renzulli and Reis devoted equal or even greater attention to creating instruments, procedures, staff development strategies, and instructional materials for implementing this model, pursuing a Practice-Research-Theory approach. To provide Italian teachers with resource materials for the implementation of the SEM, the original book 'The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A How-To Guide for Talent Development' (Renzulli & Reis, 2014) is being translated into Italian and will be shortly available in Italy (under the title: 'Il Modello di Arricchimento Scolastico: Una Guida Pratica per lo sviluppo del Talento' (Renzulli, Reis, Milan), as will the 'Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students' (SRBCSS-R), a teacher rating instrument appropriate for use as one measure in the identification process. The Renzulli Scales are among the most popular tool for identifying gifted children in the United States. This standardized instrument is completed by teachers and provides an effective method for identifying gifted children.

The SEM is also equipped with an interactive online program, the Renzulli Learning System, that aids in the implementation of the SEM by matching student interests, expression styles and learning styles with a vast array of enrichment educational activities and resources, designed to enrich gifted and high potential students' learning process. The Renzulli Enrichment Database includes thousands of carefully screened, grade-level appropriate, child-safe enrichment opportunities that are regularly monitored, updated, enhanced and expanded. Students can remain with chronological peers but have ability level enrichment resources delivered to electronically through this Internet based program. It is also helpful for classroom teachers, who can quickly and easily find and infuse/enrichment activities into any and all prescribed curricular topic.

Conclusion

All children benefit from participation in research-based programs for talent development to develop their gifts and talents. Simply stated, gifted and talented education works and G&T programs contribute to developing students' metacognitive knowledge and higher order thinking skills, as suggested by both the European framework and in the 21st Century movement. Due to the sheer number of models in gifted education, the choice of a model that enhances the strengths and abilities of the school population, (including high achieving learners and twice exceptional students), should be guided by some important factors such as:

- an agreed upon and research supported conception of giftedness;
- the availability of numerous research based resources for identification, implementation, and evaluation;
- professional development materials and services including videos and on-line training; and,
- visitation sites and networking vehicles for communicating with other SEM programs.

To ensure the success of any model, professional development must be provided to teachers to promote a mindset that is supportive of gifted education in general, as well as specific training focused an evidence-based gifted education practice of the selected model. Implementation fidelity is a potential moderator of intended benefits of any educational strategy (Brigandi, 2019).

An enrichment specialist in gifted education plays a key role in implementing this model with fidelity, adhering to recommended structures and processes. Therefore, providing professional training to teachers on the components of any model is key to its success. We recommend that, over time, at least one enrichment specialist is hired in every school in Italy that will implement the SEM. Although this is obviously a very ambitious goal, we will not develop the gifts and talents of our most potentially able young people unless there is a person(s) on the faculty of every school who has the specific leadership responsibility and specialized training that will guarantee that certain highly targeted services are provided.

The research currently being conducted in Italy will be similar to previously conducted American research studies on the SEM (Reis & Renzulli, 2003) to examine how the SEM implementation will work in Italian Public Schools. It will also investigate how an Italian SEM implementation can produce positive changes in student achievement and teacher attitudes toward education of the gifted. We will also produce research about classroom teachers and how they implement the SEM for both high achieving students and the general student population. We anticipate that the implementation of the SEM in Italy will result in favorable attitudes toward special programming for both students and parents. More comprehensive implementation of special programs using the SEM will also provide the opportunities for the types of research that has been conducted in the United States and in other European countries.

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About the Authors

Lara Milan, *Ph.D.*, Specialist in Gifted Education and Talent Development. She implemented for the first time in Italian Public Schools the Schoolwide Enrichment Model for her PhD research study. Founder of SEM Italy (www.semitaly.com), she cooperates with the LabTalento at the University of Pavia. She translated and co-authored the Italian edition of the SEM book.

Dr. Sally M. Reis is the former Vice Provost of Academic Affairs and a Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor at The University of Connecticut. She is past Department Head of Educational Psychology Department, where she also serves as a Principal Investigator for the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. She was a teacher for 15 years, 11 of which were spent working with gifted students on the elementary, junior high, and high school levels. She has authored or co-authored over 250 articles, books, book chapters, monographs and technical reports. Her most recent work is a computer-based assessment of student strengths integrated with an Internet based search engine that matches enrichment activities and resources with individual student profiles. Dr. Reis is the Co-Director of Confratute, the longest running summer institute in the development of gifts and talents. She is co-author of The Schoolwide Enrichment Model, The Secondary Triad Model, and Dilemmas in Talent Development in the Middle Years. Dr. Reis serves on several editorial boards, including the Gifted Child Quarterly, and is a past President of the National Association for Gifted Children. She recently was honored with the highest award in her field as the Distinguished Scholar of the National Association for Gifted Children and named a fellow of the American Psychological Association.

Maria Assunta Zanetti, *Ph.D.*, is Associate Professor at the University of Pavia, Department Brain and Behavioral Sciences. She is the director of Lab Talento, the Italian Laboratory of Research and Intervention for the Development of Talent, Potential, and Giftedness at the University of Pavia (www.labtalento) and she is a member of the committee of the Italian Ministry of Education for the development of gifted and talented national guidelines.

Dr. Joseph S. Renzulli is Director of UConn's National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented and Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor of Educational Psychology at the Neag School of Education. A leader and pioneer in Gifted Education, Dr. Joseph S. Renzulli was named among the 25 most influential psychologists in the world by the American Psychological Association. He received the Harold W. McGraw, Jr. Award for Innovation in Education, and was a consultant to the White House Task Force on Education of the Gifted and Talented. His work on the Enrichment Triad Model and curriculum compacting and differentiation were pioneering efforts in the 1970s, and he has contributed hundreds of books, book chapters, articles, and monographs to the professional literature. Dr. Renzulli established UConn's annual Confratute Program with fellow Educational Psychology Professor Sally Reis; the summer institute on enrichment-based differentiated teaching has served more than 25,000 teachers from around the world since 1978. He also established UConn Mentor Connection, a summer program that enables high-potential high school students to work side by side with leading scientists, historians, and artists, and is the co-founder of the Joseph S. Renzulli Gifted and Talented Academy in Hartford, which has become a model for local and national urban school reform.

Addresses

Prof. Dr. Joseph S. Renzulli;
Director, Renzulli Center for Creativity, Gifted Education, and Talent Development;
University of Connecticut, USA.

e-Mail: joseph.renzulli@uconn.edu

Dr. Lara Milan;
Founder & CEO SEM Italy.
e- Mail: lara.milan@semitaly.com