

The Implementation of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model in Italian Schools

Lara Milan; Sally M. Reis
University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA

Abstract

In this article, we describe the results of a research study investigating the effects of a programming model specifically designed to apply the pedagogy of gifted education to the overall process of schoolwide enrichment, *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM)* (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). The specific factors examined during the implementation included student attitudes toward learning, teacher attitudes toward teaching, students' creative productivity, and the processes involved in the implementation of *SEM*. The study also investigates *SEM* adaptability to the Italian education system as the first pilot project implementing The Schoolwide Enrichment Model in Italian public schools. Positive changes were found in both student and teacher attitudes toward educational approaches to talent development, and more favorable attitudes toward special programming on the part of parents were also noted, suggesting new and more positive perspectives about gifted education and talent development in Italy.

Keywords: SEM; gifted; positive change; creative productivity; Italy; attitudes.

Introduction

The field of gifted education is based on the almost universally accepted reality that some learners demonstrate outstanding performance or potential for superior performance in academic, creative, leadership, or artistic domains when compared with their peers (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). This agreed-upon conception justifies an examination of differentiated models and strategies to develop students' talents and gifts in schools. A robust body of international research demonstrates that many other children also benefit from participation in research-based programs like the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) for talent development to develop their gifts and talents (Reis & Peters, 2020).

Among the many theories about the history of gifted and talented education, three broad schools of thought that apply to education defined the three major approaches to teaching and learning, and they include differentiation, acceleration, and enrichment. A review of research that characterized the history of gifted education in the United States during the past five decades suggests that these three main approaches should be considered when urging Italian policy makers to promote educational policies that support students in Italian schools who have 'a potential to excel' (Pfeiffer, 2013). The professional training available suggests that the choice of a whole-school approach should be implemented in Italian schools to promote talent development. This approach, also used in many other countries, is The SEM (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). The SEM offers a combined approach to talent development, adopting acceleration, enrichment and differentiation strategies, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The SEM is an infusion based approach that provides differentiated learning experiences that take into account each student's abilities, interests, learning styles, and preferred styles of expression. Applying acceleration, differentiation and enrichment for students, this model also addresses depth, rather than breadth of content. The major components of the SEM can be adapted to either provide general enrichment opportunities for all students (Enrichment Clusters) and simultaneously ensuring the opportunities for more advanced work for highly able and motivated students (The Triad Model) who can pursue their own interest in small groups or individually. Moreover, Curriculum Compacting is an instructional differentiation technique designed to make appropriate curricular adjustments for students in any curricular area and at any grade level. The Compactor enables high ability students to

progress across the curriculum at a faster pace compared to their peers, avoiding the repetition of already mastered content.

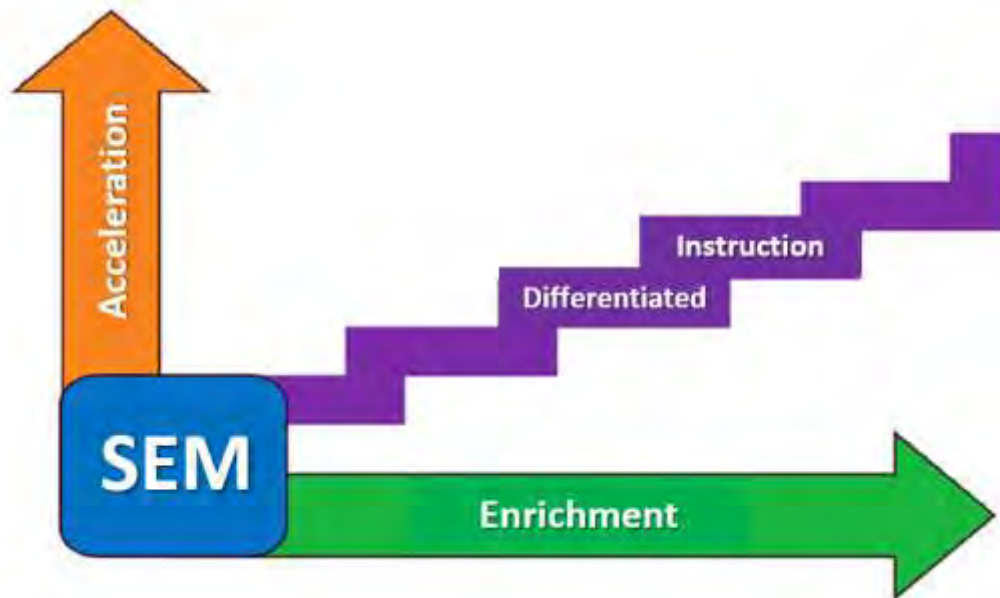


Figure 1: A Combined Approach to Talent Development (Milan, 2019).

The SEM is based on a broadened conception of giftedness, the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness (Renzulli, 1978), and extends the pedagogy of gifted programs to a wider pool of advanced students. Renzulli and Reis (2014) believe that gifted behaviors occur in certain people (not all people), at certain times, under certain circumstances, meaning that students are not gifted, in creative productive ways, all of the time, but rather when an interest develops and they are given the opportunity to pursue that interest, and also develop their creative ideas. This process also enables them to develop their above average abilities, creativity, and task commitment.

Using the SEM, teachers can create a safe and challenging teaching and learning environment for the creative process to emerge and be developed. This perspective emphasizes the process of developing students' individual talents, as well as the need to adopt a multi-criterion approach for identifying talent, with the resulting development of flexible educational programs that respond to the different characteristics of the students. The fundamental criterion that guided the researcher's choice of a model to be implemented in Italian schools responds also to the European favorable attitude towards inclusive approaches, which avoids creating elite school paths for gifted children. The SEM (Renzulli & Reis, 2014) applies the pedagogy of gifted education to the talent development of all students, offering enrichment activities to all students and, simultaneously, ensuring advanced activity opportunities to those highly motivated students with high performances (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). A collective body of research on the SEM suggests that the model is effective at serving high-ability students in a variety of educational settings and in schools that include diverse ethnic and socio-economic populations (Reis & Peters, 2020; Reis & Renzulli, 2003). These studies also suggest that the pedagogy of the SEM can be applied to various content areas, implemented in a wide variety of settings, and used with diverse populations of students including high-ability students with learning disabilities and those who underachieve. In particular, studies in the research literature show highly favorable results for underachieving gifted students (Baum et al., 1995) when the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness (Renzulli, 1978) and the Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli, 1977) are used as a direct intervention for counteracting underachievement.

The current research study

This study examines the effectiveness of a two-year study in which the SEM was implemented in two schools in Vicenza, in the northern part of Italy, using teachers who agreed to participate in the study and their students. The schools involved in the pilot project are located in an

urban area and serve both urban and suburban populations with similar socioeconomic levels, school attendance, staff educational levels, and regular education programs as most public Italian schools in the Vicenza area. Vicenza is one of the country's wealthier cities. The treatment and the control school involved in the research project are located in downtown Vicenza.

Treatment School A has a population of approximately 500 students, divided in 25 classes (6th, 7th, 8th grades), and each class accommodates more or less 20 students. Treatment School B has a population of approximately 600 students, divided in 27 classes (6th, 7th, 8th grades), and each class accommodates more or less 22 students. The control school is located in a separate building in the same urban area.

The Italian school system does not provide Gifted and Talented (G&T) programs and services and regular classroom teachers are not asked to provide any acceleration, enrichment, or differentiation strategies to meet the educational needs of advanced students. Moreover, teachers do not receive any training or professional development on G&T programs, due to a lack of regional or national regulations. Indeed, in Italy there are no national guidelines on gifted education, nor is there a national or local identification system. No mandatory professional training on G&T exists in the country, and there are no graduate courses in gifted and talented education. There are no specialists in gifted education in Italy. This situation suggests that gifted education is a nascent field in Italy. Personalized or differentiated instruction is only provided to children with learning disabilities and is usually delivered by trained teachers, in keeping with the myth that high ability students don't need help as they'll do fine on their own persists. The school in which the SEM was implemented for two consecutive years includes middle school students, as displayed in Table 1. During the first year, 68 6th and 7th grade students participated. During the second year, the SEM implementation continued in School B and two students joined this school and the SEM implementation, resulting in a total of 45 students: 22 7th graders and 23 8th graders. As noted, the school serves both urban and suburban populations with similar socioeconomic levels.

Table 1: Participants in the Research in the first year of SEM implementation.

	Middle School A		Middle School B	
Classes	6 th Grade		6 th Grade	7 th Grade
Participants	25		20	23
Male	12		14	10
Female	13		6	13
TOT Participants			.68	

All students involved in the project participated in enrichment clusters, as well as in Type I, II and III enrichment activities. Moreover, the SEM was particularly effective in accommodating the needs of special needs students, thus proving its inclusive approach in talent development. At the beginning of the study, no students at all were identified as gifted. Students with learning disabilities actively participated and participated in all enrichment activities. In Italy, there is no universal screening to identify gifted students, and national regulations mandate that special programs for students with special needs (ADHD, autism, dyslexia, for example) participate in regular learning experiences. Accordingly, all SEM activities were offered to all students participating in grade levels included in the study.

Assessment

The SEM offers alternate pathways to identify students' talents, as some creative students don't always test that well on standard testing achievement and aptitude scores. Profiles of the students involved in the research study were created, using adapted instruments to measure interests

and preferred modes of learning, as well as achievement test scores, Raven’s Progressive Matrices , the Renzulli Learning System, and the Renzulli Rating Scales (Renzulli et al, 2013) as suggested in the SEM. A cognitive evaluation test, the Raven Progressive Matrices (RPM , Raven, 2003, 2004) was also administrated to students collectively and simultaneously in class as a screening measure of aspects of general ability. Data analysis was carried out by psychologists from the University of Pavia who treated data on a collective and anonymous basis to provide a general overview of the students involved in the study, as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Participants in the Research in the second year of SEM implementation.

	Middle School B	
Classes	7 th Grade	8 th Grade
Participants	22	23
Male	16	10
Female	6	13
TOT Participants	45	

The data summarized in this table relates to tests administered in School B at the beginning of the pilot project, during the first year of SEM implementation. The 6th and 7th grade students, during the second year of the implementation, progressed respectively to 7th and 8th grades.

Table 3: Scores on Raven’s Progressive Matrices.

	HIGH ≥26	AVERAGE from 25 to 4	LOW ≤3	INVALID	ABSENT
Number of students in 6 th Grade	1	14	0	4	1
Number of students in 7 th Grade	2	18	1	1	1

The Renzulli Learning System

The senior researcher was given free access to the *Renzulli Learning System* for research purposes, which made the implementation of the SEM much easier. This research-based enhancement of the SEM (Field, 2009) is an innovative software product that creates a personalized profile of each student’s academic strengths, interests, learning styles, and preferred modes of expression. The profile acts like a compass for the second step, which is a differentiation search engine that examines thousands of resources that relate specifically to each student’s profile.

The heart of the SEM is the identification and nurturance of student interests, because talent flows from interest development. Therefore, students’ interests and talents were assessed at the beginning of the school year. The SEM (Renzulli & Reis, 2014) provides many ready-to-use forms to survey a student’s unique interests and talents. The Enrichment Specialist used *If I Ran the School*, *Parent’s Questionnaire*, and *The Profiler*. Students involved in the research project were given the opportunity to take the Renzulli Profiler, which consists of an online diagnostic assessment that takes about 30 minutes. All the data collected, computed into files, and tallied electronically together with the student’s academic results in the previous year, were assembled to create each student’s profile.

The interests surveyed resulted in the ability to identify students’ top three interest choices. Figure 2 shows students’ first top interests, as follows: media, reading, technology, and the performing arts. Knowing that these interest areas exist could be helpful to planning appropriate interest development and enrichment opportunities for students in the school. All students were able to participate in their first choice enrichment activity. It is interesting to note that when students’ top three interest areas were tallied, there are areas that were not included as highest interests, such as social action and the arts.

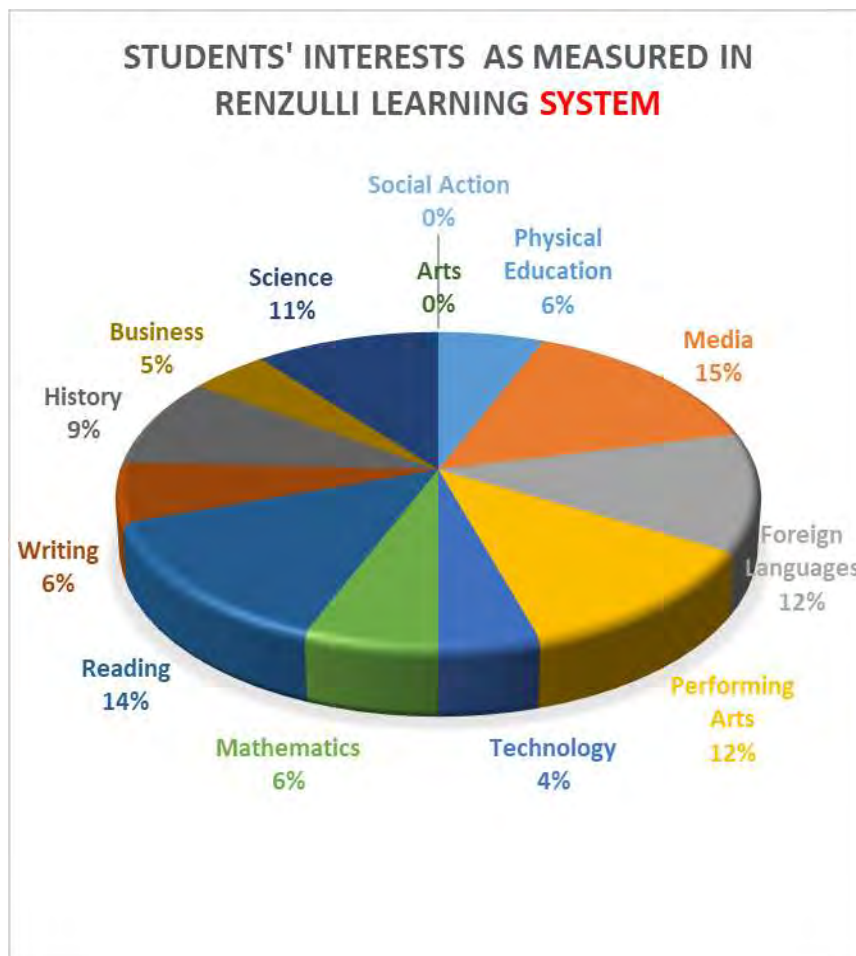


Figure 2: Students' Interests at the beginning of the second year of SEM implementation.

Enrichment opportunities

The goal of the SEM is to enrich the school experience with creative activities that enable students to explore their skills and talents. Enrichment clusters, one component of the SEM, focus on the acquisition and development of practical skills. They are usually scheduled once each week, offering students the opportunity to engage in real activities, with the goal of creating an original product to be presented to an authentic public. Enrichment clusters bring together groups of students who share a common interest; they meet weekly to pursue their interests in a dedicated space and in a specially designated school timetable. Group work is supported by an adult, usually the facilitator of the clusters or a mentor who shares a particular interest and has a certain degree of competence and experience in the subject. The only requirement to participate in these activities is personal interest, both for students and facilitators.

The Enrichment Specialist started a pilot Enrichment Cluster program during the second school year at Middle School B (N = 23) and organized six different enrichment clusters, that took place in two different sessions. All students were placed in the cluster of their first choice. Mentors were enlisted among parents, teachers and professionals in the local community, namely, an account manager, two professional authors, a professional dancer and choreographer, a drama teacher, a tech engineer. Enrichment clusters usually result in the creation of services or products. All the original products produced in the clusters contributed to the creation, planning and staging of a Musical which reproduced the TV format of a talent show. This creative and stimulating musical project involved students in the process of creative writing, musical composition, performance, recording, video production techniques of the SEM experience, as well as managerial and organizational tasks. The end of the year event was fully arranged by the students participating in the research study. All creative products made a decisive contribution to the success of the musical.

Individual Type III Enrichment activities are also offered in the SEM and were completed in this research project. The Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli, 1977) is the core curriculum for the SEM and the Triad model was used during SEM implementation to enable students to understand how one's interests can evolve into more advanced and self-selected follow-up studies (Type III). Various individual Type III creative projects spontaneously emerged during the implementation process.

The effectiveness of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model on school change

The SEM provides several instruments to assist with assessment and evaluation components of the enrichment activities. Questionnaires were also submitted to the students, parents and facilitators in the school using the SEM in order to collect data about the enrichment experience. Data analysis reveals positive changes in the attitudes of students, parents and teachers. Student creative products were numerous and exceeded the norm of typical student creative output in Italian schools, as there are no special services offering either enrichment, differentiated and accelerated opportunities to students with high abilities.

Most notable in the qualitative data analysis were the following general comments. Respondents noted increases in student centered enrichment activities and work on self-selected interests. They also noted greater cooperation between classroom teachers and parents, as well as their appreciation for the contributions of the gifted education specialist for the support of classroom teachers in schools. They also discussed the more favorable attitudes toward special programming on the part of both the teachers and the principal. The respondents also explained that parents displayed a new perspective on the possibility of having special enrichment programming in Italian public schools. They also noted a general new awareness and understanding of enrichment programs and gifted education goals, that is to provide more opportunities, resources, and encouragement for enrichment in the schools. The principal and teachers also identified remarkably favorable changes in attitudes toward education, as well as to the emotional and educational needs of the gifted on the part of classroom teachers.

The control school

The control group was in the same school district as the experimental school and served both urban and suburban populations, with similar socioeconomic levels, school attendance, staff educational levels, and regular education programs. Teachers and parents in the control school were asked to complete surveys about enrichment activities and opportunities. Teachers acknowledged that students' interests were not surveyed at the beginning of each school year. Moreover, teachers admitted that students had few opportunities to pursue their interests during the regular school time. Parents' responses also confirmed that their children's interests were not surveyed at the beginning of each school year, and that parents were not asked to disclose potential interests and talents their children display at home. Nonetheless, parents' beliefs that their children have the opportunity to pursue their interests during the regular school time was more positive than what teachers reported. The teachers and parents in the control school reported little if any enrichment or talent development opportunities offered in the school.

Analysis of student productivity

Creativity is one of the most important goals in education, career planning, and the traits sought by employers in all walks of life and is a major goal of the SEM. The measurement of creative potential or ability is, however, expensive and time consuming as most widely used assessment instruments are paper-based and scored manually. The major aim of this research was to examine students' creative products that emerged as a result of enrichment clusters (i.e., small group studies for the creation of an original product or service to be presented to an authentic audience) and Type III activities at the treatment schools. This research examined this issue by examining students' creative work in the Schoolwide Enrichment Model activities. Calculation of a simple mean from the tallies yielded the mean number of original products that emerged from number of tallies produced in the SEM school. Due to the absence of training in Schoolwide Enrichment opportunities and

processes, the control group students were not expected to produce creative products, so comparison to the control school was not conducted on this aspect of the study. This SEM implementation process resulted in a total of 11 enrichment clusters initiated that were implemented as students completed products and three individual Type III enrichment activities. In Table 4, the number of enrichment clusters offered and the creative products or services completed are summarized.

Table 4: Production of original products during the second year of SEM implementation at School B.

Treatment Site	N. of Clusters offered	N. of Products completed on Clusters	N. of Type III Activities	N. of Products completed on Type III Activities	Percent
Middle School B	6	6	3	3	100

Discussion

The specific factors examined in this research study were student attitudes toward learning, teacher and parent attitudes toward enrichment programs, the extent and quality of students' creative productivity, and the processes involved in the implementation of SEM. The three initial goals of this study about the SEM included the following:

- to determine if a school's participation in this type of program would result in specific and quantifiable indicators of schoolwide change;
- to examine whether students' participation in enrichment opportunities would result in more favorable attitudes toward the entire concept of gifted education; and,
- to determine the extent and quality of students' creative productivity.

The implementation of the SEM in this school, the first time in Italy that students in a public school were exposed to the SEM, was successful. Despite the initial reluctance of participating teachers, toward the end of the pilot project the benefits of the SEM in this school were evident, and the administrators decided to be at the forefront of a new trend in talent development in Italy. In order to be successful, they will need to gain all teachers' commitment to continue the SEM at the treatment school. Another positive outcome is that another school will be designated a SEM Elementary School in the same city as the treatment school. Another important result is that the SEM project is beginning to multiply across the country and more teachers and principals are becoming interested in the SEM, resulting in additional gifted and talented and SEM training sessions for groups of teachers across the nation.

Conclusion

This study implemented the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 2014), to promote talent development in Italian schools. The results of this study suggest that the students' attitudes toward learning were positively enhanced by participation in the SEM. The descriptive data found that students became increasingly positive about school and the variety of opportunities offered for learning. This was particularly evident in terms of students' beliefs that their interests were considered in determining the nature of the enrichment activities in which they would become involved. The results also indicated that, after initial reluctance about participating in training sessions, these negative attitudes were ameliorated after the stress related to implementation of new programming subsided, and as the SEM began to provide positive outcomes for students. Research on school change (Berman & McLaughlin, 1979; Hord et al., 1987; Loucks, 1982; Sarason, 1982) has found that teachers tend to be slow in altering attitudes toward large-scale aspects of education and using the SEM requires whole school buy-in. In the end, teachers participating in the treatment project developed a more positive impression of gifted education which resulted in their willingness to become the first Italian teachers of the first SEM class ever inaugurated in an Italian public school. The local press was very positive about this first attempt to adopt a talent development approach in an Italian school, even if regulations and funding do not exist for this initiative at this time. This positive press resulted in administrators gaining a more positive feeling of being at the forefront of educational change.

The results of the present investigation raise several important points about using enrichment programs for students and teachers. First, students' attitudes toward school learning processes were positively enhanced by SEM implementation and they started to view school as a place that more accurately addressed their personal needs by providing them with opportunities to pursue their interests that they might not have ever had in school. The logical consequence is that heightened levels of student attitudes toward learning would ultimately enhance both the quantity and quality of pupils' learning. Perhaps, even more important were the positive attitudinal changes that emerged in the qualitative data in this research. A general finding was that the pursuit of individual interests should be acceptable and encouraged in Italian schools. A second finding was that enrichment provides a means for obtaining opportunities for greater exploration, training, and creative production within topics based on one's interests. In addition, both parents and students came to believe that schools should enable students to become more attuned to their own personal needs and interests while acquiring the skills necessary for successful adulthood.

In light of the many critics of education and the many different approaches adopted in Europe, this study using the SEM appears to offer a solution that could contribute significantly to lower Italy's rate of student drop-out, which is one of the highest among European Countries. Engagement in enrichment opportunities may help to increase engagement in school (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). Second, the implementation of a system of Schoolwide Enrichment activities contributes to the revival of teachers' enthusiasm toward teaching. The SEM implementation in the treatment school demonstrated that as talent development began, students, parents, teachers, and administrators viewed their school in a different way. Students became more excited and engaged in what they are learning; parents found more opportunities to become involved in various aspects of their children's education; teachers began to find and use a variety of resources that, since the start of the project, seldom have been used in classrooms; and administrators started to make decisions that affect positive outcomes in learning opportunities conducive to implementing the SEM.

Implications and future research

It seems evident in 2021 that we should adopt different strategies to ensure that our most able students will solve the problems that threaten our societies. As educators, it is our responsibility to do everything possible to nurture and develop higher thinking skills in our students. Despite a 50 years gap and a lack of expertise in the G&T field, this research on SEM implementation in Italian Public Schools suggests that Italian schools can adopt programs and strategies to enhance students' gifts and talents. It also suggests that a talent development model originally created and implemented in American schools can be integrated in the Italian School System. Another positive aspect of this research study is that, in absence of national dispositions on how to identify high ability students, the SEM can assist teachers by providing them with useful tools. Expanded methods of identification, such as rating scales can be valid instruments for screening students for identification and subsequent participation in the gifted and talented programs which, however, do not yet exist in Italy.

The research study also suggests the need to invest in professional development in gifted education in Italy to help teachers learn how to implement teaching strategies to develop students' individual strengths and interests. This could help give voice to teacher concerns and needs, enabling them to learn and contribute to capacity building of differentiation and enrichment practices in Italy. These strategies, integrated into the SEM, may also enable teachers to respond to the special educational needs of gifted and twice exceptional students in Italian schools. These findings may also point to the need for teacher and student support that could be provided by a new professional figure in Italy, namely an Enrichment Specialist. These individuals can help to guarantee that future national provisions and best practices will be put in place in both public and private schools. Opportunities are offered to promote talent development and creativity in all young people, and especially in talented students. Recent controversies over the elimination of gifted education programs in urban areas such as New York City (Brody, 2019) must be viewed in the larger context of the role that schools need to play in changing world conditions, career development opportunities, the job market and the ways in which we can better prepare all of our young people for happy and productive futures (Renzulli & Reis, 2019).

Traditional gifted education activities are made available to a restricted number of students, and the unfortunate byproduct of this 'elitism' approach has been negative attitudes toward gifted education on the parts of many people in general education. Renzulli and Reis suggest that if educators want to rethink educational opportunities for talent development intelligently, the conversation should not be about eliminating gifted programs, but rather, about extending the opportunities, resources, and support that characterize gifted programs to more students. The hope is that Italy will be able to take advantage of the experiences and waves of trend that characterized the G&T field in the past fifty years in the United States, and learn how to broadly apply the pedagogical spirit of many gifted education programs to the school population.

Regardless of existing differences in terminology, definitions of giftedness, identification systems, the fundamental task of gifted education is how to cultivate human potential and help create productive and fulfilling life trajectories and pathways for those showing great promise, which are beneficial to society as well as individuals. (Dai, 2018). The talent development approach that emerged in the late twentieth century thanks to the pioneering work of Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis, has become a major force in gifted education, and the new understanding of the nature and nurture of high potential that they generated has helped to guide new pathways of gifted and talented programming (Dai, 2018).

As Robert Sternberg put it, "The field of gifted education has had many scholars to work in it, but there have been two giants in the field - Lewis Terman and Joseph Renzulli" (Reis, 2015, page xiv Preface). Renzulli's Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness (1978) with its emphasis on the importance of talent developments revolutionized the field of gifted education and ushered in an era marked by more inclusive approaches to gifted identification and services. This will hopefully also begin a new movement in Italy.

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About the Authors

Lara Milan, *Ph.D.* in Psychology, Neuroscience and Medical Statistics at the University of Pavia, implemented the Schoolwide Enrichment Model in the Italian public school for the first time in Italy. Specialist in Gifted Education and Talent Development, she earned the Graduate Certificate in Gifted Education and Talent Development at the University of Connecticut, USA. Founder of SEM Italy, promoting talent development in Italian schools. She is the co-author with Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis, of the Italian edition of the *Schoolwide Enrichment Model*, will publish the first Handbook on Gifted Education and Talent Development in Italy.

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.

Addresses

Sally M. Reis;

Renzulli Center for Creativity, Gifted Education, and Talent Development Neag School of Education; University of Connecticut; 2131 Hillside Road Unit 3007; Storrs, CT 06269-3007; USA.

e-Mail: sally.reis@uconn.edu

Lara Milan;

Contra' Orefice 9;
36100 Vicenza – Italy.

e-Mail: lara.milan@semitaly.com