Opportunities and Challenges of Talent Development for Students Placed At-Risk

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Abstract

Let us suppose that schools are, or might strive to become, places in which educators work collaboratively with parents and the wider community to recognize, nurture, and celebrate the strengths and talents in all people (cf., McCluskey, Treffinger, & Baker, 1995). Based on such a vision for education, this article describes a practical model of education for talent development and identifies several ways in which that model can contribute to effective educational experiences for students who have been placed at-risk.

***Keywords*:** Talent development model; students at-risk; effective programming; autonomy, productivity.

A Model for Talent Development Programming

Treffinger and Feldhusen (1996) argued that talent development might be viewed as the "successor" to gifted education, an emphasis on talent development that has more recently been echoed by Olszewski-Kubilius (2011) in her National Association for Gifted Children Presidential Address and by others. The Levels of Service (LoS) model for talent development in education (Treffinger, 1998; Treffinger, Young, Nassab, & Wittig, 2004; Treffinger, Young, Nassab, Selby, & Wittig, 2008) presents a practical framework for implementing contemporary, inclusive programming in a single school, throughout a school district or division, or even in broader policy and program contexts. Applying the LoS approach can point the way for educators to become *talent scouts* who seek out and nurture the talent potentials in all children and youth. Significantly, this includes many students who might never be considered for services under more traditional views of "gifted education" (McCluskey, Baker, O'Hagan, & Treffinger, 1995, 1998; McCluskey, Place, Treffinger, & McCluskey, 1998; McCluskey & Treffinger, 1998).

LoS programming is *flexible, inclusive, responsive, proactive,* and *unifying* (Center for Creative Learning, 2010). It is *flexible* and does not follow a fixed formula, curriculum, or set of services and activities for all students. Instead it involves many different kinds of activities, people and places, as appropriate for each student, based on his or her needs and interests. As an *inclusive, responsive, and proactive* model, it addresses many talent areas and responds to the positive, emerging, and expanding needs of students, providing guidance for instructional planning and delivery. LoS challenges teachers, schools, districts, parents, and the community to take deliberate, constructive action for talent development, thus offering a *unifying* structure for communication and collaboration among many constituents.

The LoS model's four levels are illustrated in Figure 1; they are: Level I (programming for *all* students), Level II (programming for *many* students), Level III (programming for *some* students), and Level IV (programming for a *few* students). Let us consider briefly the nature of each of these four levels; interested readers can find more extensive descriptions and case study examples of each of the four levels at www.creativelearning.com/talent-development/about-los.html, the website of the Center for Creative Learning.

Level I: Programming for *All* students

Level I of the LoS approach involves instructional activities aimed at all students. Level I activities are often short in duration (e.g., a single event, lesson, or unit). The objective is to build a foundation of experience, through which students discover and begin to pursue their personal interests and strengths. Level I activities might take place in any classroom, school, or other learning setting. They engage students in activities that provide broadening experiences or "exposure" to new ideas and places, opportunities to think creatively and critically and to apply higher-level thinking (beyond the knowledge and recall level), or to learn in ways that are adapted to their unique interests and styles. Level I activities can serve as a springboard for students or adults who work with them to recognize areas of particular interest and talent potential. Upon observing a learner's strengths, teachers, and parents encourage him or her to follow-up with more in-depth and demanding involvement in a particular area of interest. Level I activities also provide a foundation for students to acquire independent learning skills and to begin to assume responsibility for setting personal goals and for managing and directing their own learning.

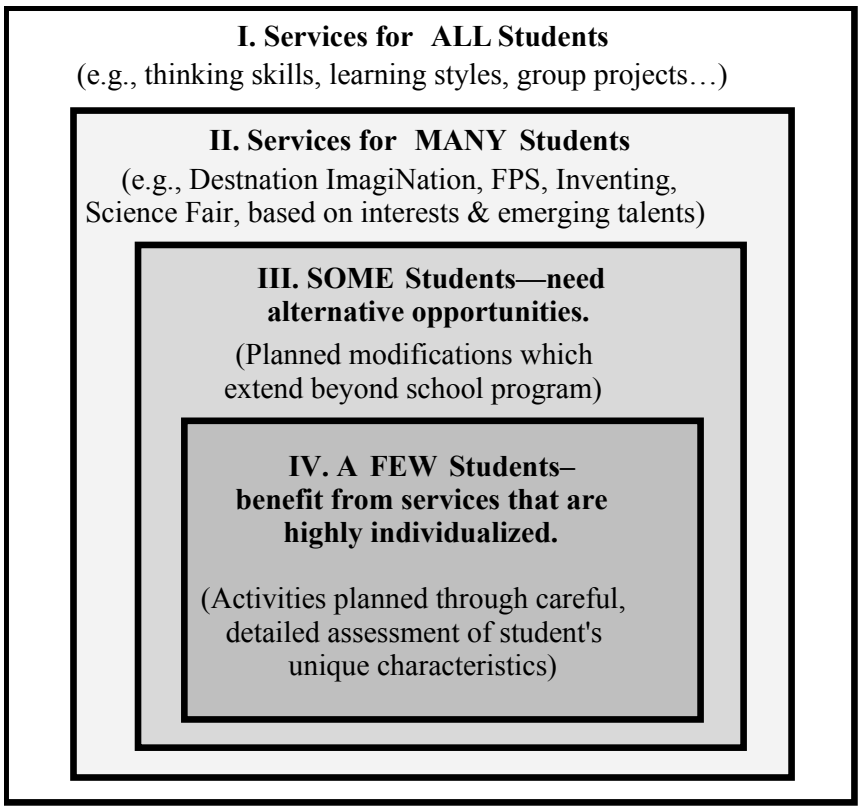

Figure 1: The Level of Services Model ©2004, Center for Creative Learning (Reproduced by permission).

Level 11: Programming for *many* students

Level II programming invites students to build on their initial curiosity about or interest in particular subjects or talent areas and to explore them in more depth. All students *might* participate in any Level II activity; however, not every student *will* become involved in all activities. While other people (e.g., teachers, youth workers, or parents) might recommend or encourage students to become involved, voluntary participation is a key element of Level II, building students' ownership responsibility for talent development.

Level II activities vary in scope and duration, but generally have fixed points at which students can decide whether to continue or move on to other interests. They often involve creating some product or taking part in a public performance or presentation. Level II programming may include elective classes, self-selected in-class enrichment projects, open-

performance groups (such as a glee club, newspaper, or theatre group), and other interest-based activities (such as a science club, computer group, or debate team) and programs that nurture teamwork, creativity, and problem-solving skills (e.g., the Future Problem Solving Program International; www.fpspi.org). School-based offerings are often supplemented by community activities with open membership (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, sports groups, and scouting). These activities not only allow students to test their level of interest and commitment to a particular field, but allow supportive adults to work with them, to observe and record their accomplishments, and to urge students with potential to move on to more demanding and in-depth work.

Level III: Programming for *some* students

Level III programming offers services for students who are enthusiastic about the particular field of study or talent area and who aspire (and are expected) to perform at a consistently high level of engagement and accomplishment. In Level III the focus shifts away from foundation-building or exploratory activities to differentiated responses to a student's maturing strengths and talents. Students sustain their participation in Level III activities (individually or in groups of talented peers) over an extended period of time, and devote a considerable amount of time on their own to study, practice, or prepare.

Level III opportunities might include auditioned musical, speech, and theatrical groups, extended science, social studies, or art projects (which may move to higher levels of competition or presentation), inventing or community service programs or competitions, creative writing for publication, individual study in any domain, or clubs. Examples of opportunities outside the school might include private lessons or advanced tutoring, or participation in auditioned community-based performing groups. Mentors, teachers, parents, and coaches continually challenge the students to stretch and move on to more demanding work, and a greater sense of accomplishment.

Level IV: Programming for *a few* students

Level IV programming in the LoS model recognizes and responds to the exceptional needs that may be demonstrated by a few students in any domain who have outstanding records of expertise, experience, dedication, passion, and ability to attain or approach a "professional" level of performance and accomplishment in that subject or talent area. Students engage the content of the domain creatively, acting as a professional in the field would, following a professional process of inquiry, and problem solving that deals with real-life issues. They will often share their accomplishments and products with others in their field and with the public. They may receive recognition and support for these products with advanced academic credit, publication, professional performance, selection for highly-competitive programs or groups, or having their work patented. Students might take part in regional, national, and in some cases, international, competitions or attend special seminars, concerts, or workshops designed to bring them together with other students who are highly accomplished in their field of interest.

Level IV services often also extend beyond the school setting, through connections with mentors who are successful in their field, internships, active involvement in professional organizations or societies, or advanced learning through web-based distance education courses or projects.

Students who are at-risk

Despite our idealistic vision of education as an exciting, engaging, dynamic set of experiences that captivates and nurtures every student, it has long been the reality that for many students, this view has been unrealistic. These students have found little stimulation, challenge, or success in school and have become disillusioned, disenchanted, or "demotivated," removing themselves emotionally, psychologically, and physically from school, from learning, and even from a productive role in society (cf., McCluskey, Baker, Bergsgaard, & McCluskey, 2001; McCluskey & Treffinger, 1998).

Work in this area has often focused on characteristics of individual at-risk students, commonly describing them as likely to display low academic self-concepts, unfocused personal and career objectives and expectations, external locus of control, reliance on extrinsic, rather than intrinsic motivation, inadequate study skills, and passive resistance to the efforts of parents or teachers (e.g., Ender & Wilke, 2000).

At-risk students often demonstrated a sustained record of failure and low academic achievement. While there might be at-risk students from any socio-economic level, many come from poverty or from homes in which there is little value or support for education. Tending to be older than classmates, at-risk students have been described as demonstrating emotional and behavioural problems, being alienated from school, and associating with other low-achieving and unmotivated peers.

They tend not to be active in school activities and to demonstrate disciplinary or truancy problems that lead them to fall behind farther and farther from successful completion or graduation. As they fall behind, their alienation from school and educators grows, and personal or family problems, substance abuse, or encounters with the justice system increase.

In an article on "at-risk," the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL, undated) cited an alternative perspective advanced by Hixson (1993) that "the central dilemma is that we have framed the problem incorrectly and, as a result, have been looking for solutions in the wrong places. This predicament derives from widespread, but nonetheless incorrect, assumptions" that must be reframed.

Hixson argued that it would be more productive to approach the challenge by considering that:

" • Students are not 'at-risk,' but are placed at-risk by adults.

• Building on student strengths (e.g., knowledge, experiences, skills, talents, interests, etc.), rather than focusing on remediating real or presumed deficiencies is the key.

• It is the quality of the entirety of the school experience, rather than the characteristics of the students, that will determine success or failure--both theirs and ours. The two can never be separated."

Thus, Hixson proposed,

"Students are placed 'at risk' when they experience a significant mismatch between their circumstances and needs, and the capacity or willingness of the school to accept, accommodate, and respond to them in a manner that supports and enables their maximum social, emotional, and intellectual growth and development. As the degree of mismatch increases, so does the likelihood that they will fail to either complete their elementary and secondary education, or more importantly, to benefit from it in a manner that ensures they have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be successful in the next stage of their lives, that is, to successfully pursue post-secondary education, training, or meaningful employment and to participate in, and to contribute to, the social, economic, and political lives of their community and society as a whole. The focus of our efforts, therefore, should be on enhancing our institutional and professional capacity and responsiveness, rather than categorizing and penalizing students for simply being who they are."

Effective directions

Given an emphasis of the interaction between student characteristics and the school experience, then, talent development, especially when viewed in a contemporary, inclusive way, is a relevant and potentially important component of an effective response to the needs of students at-risk. The LoS model for talent development programming, for example, is well-suited for addressing the opportunities and challenges in a constructive way. Table 1 identifies nine principles of effective programming for students at risk and the relevance of the LoS model for meeting them.

Our world is in great need of innovative and effective solutions to an ever-expanding array of problems and challenges. At the same time, however, life today is rich in opportunities for invention and creative accomplishments in the arts, humanities, science, and technology. We can hardly afford to waste the talents of any of our children or youth. Many young people who may now be experiencing frustration, failure, withdrawal, low productivity, and limited prospects for future career success or personal satisfaction, are capable of much more. Within the population that has now been

placed at-risk may be the talented leaders we will need for the future. The LoS Model of Talent Recognition and Development challenges us to locate and nurture those students and provides us with practical tools to do so.

Table 1: Relating LoS to principles of effective At-Risk programming.

Principles of Effective Programming for Students Who Are At-Risk	**Relevance of LoS Talent Development Programming Model**
Place more emphasis on students' potentials and strengths than on problems, what's wrong, and "faults".	Services involve recognizing and responding to a variety of student strengths, talents, and interests.
Avoid negative stereotypes and labelling of students.	Recognize that all students have the potential for talent development (rather than identifying a single "select" group based on test scores or past achievement).
Recognize that individuals have unique strengths and preferences as learners, and will perform better when enabled and supported in using those strengths.	Make a fundamental commitment to "bringing out the best in every student" and view nurturing students' strengths as more important than selecting pre-defined groups or categories of students.
Provide flexible programs in which curriculum and instruction are tailored to individual students' needs, and are structured and delivered in innovative ways.	Talent development learning plans involve a profile of each student's skills, experiences, interests, learning styles, and talents.
Create programming that is delivered in alternative settings and offers a broad range of options.	Consider a variety of programming services, offered in varied formats and settings, rather than a single, school-based program.
Place a strong emphasis on personal attention and relationships with qualified, caring staff.	Engage students in working with teachers, peers, community members, and mentors (in person or virtually) based on the student's unique strengths, interests, and talents.
Provide learning opportunities that are "process-rich," engage students in learning and applying methods and tools for generating ideas, focusing ideas and making effective decisions, and engaging in constructive, forward-looking problem solving.	Involve learning and application of specific tools and methods for Creative Problem Solving.
Guide students in constructive social behaviour and responsible decision-making and self-management	Recognize that autonomy and self-direction are not just traits that are "present or absent" in students, but skills that can be learned and applied successfully and gradually over time.
Engage students in real-life learning challenges, practical skills, and opportunities for application.	Emphasize engaging students in original individual and team or group projects that lead to real-world products and audiences.

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