

Au Contraire: Point/Counterpoint

Terri Bawden / James R. Delisle, Ph.D.

Au Contraire, James Delisle

by Terri Bawden

Over the past few years, James Delisle has become more and more bold in his attacks on Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) and Joseph Renzulli's Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM). He has made numerous presentations at state and national conferences and written articles claiming that Gardner and Renzulli have advocated that all children are gifted and that services to identify gifted children have been diluted or eliminated as a result.

If this is so, could Delisle please provide a reference or citation by Gardner or Renzulli saying that all children are gifted? Or perhaps he could provide evidence from research supporting his claim that, "As a fallout of Renzulli's and Gardner's work, it is now becoming increasingly popular for educators to scrap intact gifted programs and replace them with enrichment options for all children" (Delisle, 2001, p. 14).

In his article, "In Praise of Elitism," Delisle hurled some insulting accusations about "the biggest educational misnomer of modern times: the 'Theory' of Multiple Intelligences (MI), as proposed by Harvard researcher, Howard Gardner" (p. 14). In Delisle's opinion, "MI is a simplistic, wishful-thinking approach that seems like a good thing to people who are uncomfortable admitting that intellectual abilities are not equally distributed in American society" (Delisle, 2000, pp. 2-3). He goes on to say, "Gardner's sad and incorrect notion that giftedness is as common a behavior or trait as being able to bowl a game of 100 is based on an incomplete and inaccurate interpretation of the mountains of research that prove otherwise" (Delisle, 2001, p. 14). I think Gardner, a recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Prize Fellowship, would be quite surprised by this preposterous interpretation of his ground-

breaking work, *Frames of Mind* (1985), which gained worldwide acclaim by forging new understandings of human potential.

In the same article, Delisle referred to "Renzulli's interpretation of giftedness as a product" (p. 15), and claimed that, "the work of Renzulli, Gardner, and other self-titled 'talent development specialists' has tarnished the notion of giftedness more than they have shined it" (p. 15). I challenge Delisle to provide a single reference to substantiate his claim that Renzulli says one must produce a product to be gifted. Rather, Renzulli's programming model emphasizes product development and service-oriented activities as *vehicles* through which gifts and talents are manifested and nurtured. Delisle's strong accusations and misrepresentations are, unfortunately for our field, simplistic and naive. Perhaps some school districts have misinterpreted these theories and implemented them poorly, but these esteemed scholars should not be blamed for the trivialization of their ideas.

Are the needs of gifted students undervalued and overlooked in many school districts? Yes. But, the cause of this is not due to the theory of MI or the SEM. Rather, it has more to do with our society's priorities. We do not place a high value on intellectual-

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ism. It is much easier to convince politicians and voters to implode a 25-year-old football dome and build a new one than fund the repair or replacement of a 50-year-old school.

The popular notion that all students are gifted was an inevitable by-product of the egalitarian movement that had its roots in the 18th and 19th centuries in America. The publication, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent* (U.S. Department of Education, 1993), pointed to Alexis de Tocqueville’s writings in the 1830s that Americans value conformity over “intellectual distinctions” that would make a person stand out. In the 1980s, middle school philosophy often emphasized group goals rather than personal achievements. Controversies over grouping practices in the 1990s sometimes led to a cookie-cutter approach in education. Unfortunately, we have often confused *equity* with *equality* and tried to treat *all* students the same rather than providing them with a developmentally appropriate education. These are a few reasons why well-intentioned educators have adopted the belief that all children are gifted. After 18 years as a teacher of gifted children, I have come to believe that all children have gifts, but not all children are gifted. On a talent continuum, there is an important distinction between possessing a talent or skill and having an exceptional ability in that area. It is hard to understand how Delisle could interpret the works of Renzulli and Gardner to mean “everyone is gifted at something.”

In *Frames of Mind*, Gardner proposed a more broad perspective of

human intelligence than the narrow view that many gifted programs have used for identification, namely, high academic achievement scores, high IQ, or both. He validated the idea that human beings exhibit a range of abilities in a variety of areas. This theory was not intended to be an educational plan or a gifted program, but rather a means to better understand human potential. Since it is a theory and not a gifted education model, it is doubtful that gifted programs have been eliminated in favor of this approach. It is more likely that gifted programs have used the concept of MI to better serve identified students by nurturing their talents and supporting them in their area(s) of strength.

Renzulli’s SEM also provided a more broad view of intelligent behavior by proposing a continuum of support and services to children. The idea of gifted behavior as a combination of ability, task commitment, and creativity helped educators move away from the elitist image of the “smarty party” where students who were identified as gifted had an opportunity to go on field trips and participate in enrichment activities. Renzulli proposed that all students deserve an enriching environment, and the ways in which certain students respond to general enrichment should be a determining factor for providing them with advanced level opportunities, resources, and encouragement. If every student could, should, and would *want* to do an activity, then it should be happening in the regular classroom. He also recognized that some students require additional challenge beyond that which

is offered in regular classrooms. They need a demanding learning environment that requires them to emulate practicing professionals by investigating and solving real-life problems. Their productivity is a natural outcome of their learning, not an insignia of their giftedness. This model, which was developed to better serve gifted children, opened the door to many students who were previously overlooked in traditional gifted programs. It has layers of services and flexible options designed to meet a range of students’ needs.

SEM does not preclude serving highly gifted children in full-time settings. Recent efforts to train teachers to differentiate instruction in regular classrooms has also provided support to gifted students who do not have access to full-time programs, especially in rural districts. Differentiation for a full range of learners has validated the need to adjust the pace and complexity of lessons and to allow children to work in groups with other students of similar ability.

If we still have image problems in the field of gifted education, it’s often because we have not provided defensible services to identified students. We cannot survive if we cling to the notion that an IQ score anoints a child as gifted, and it is our job to bring gifted students together for nebulous self-esteem activities or contrived exercises in self-awareness. It is our obligation to teach these students how to channel their talents into meaningful and productive activities that will prepare them for the challenges of the future. Employers will not ask for their IQ score. They will ask

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what they can *do*. The affective needs of gifted students can best be met through interactions with intellectual peers and authentic, demanding work that helps them gain self-efficacy. Students feel a sense of accomplishment by responding to a difficult task and *doing something* with their talents and skills. Bringing them together to commiserate on their differences from the general population may be more appropriate for a group therapy session than a gifted program. Indeed, there are times when the social and emotional needs of gifted children should be addressed, but it must be in the context of a well-rounded program; it should not *be* the gifted program.

Gardner's theory of MI and Renzulli's SEM have given educators a more broad view of how to synthesize many sound educational practices in order to provide a continuum of services

for our gifted and talented children. Neither Renzulli nor Gardner ever claimed that all children are gifted, and to attribute the demise of gifted programs to their ideas is unfounded and unethical. Until Delisle can propose a new theory of the intellect or a well-researched gifted program model, it would be best not to make accusations that do not have validity or that misrepresent the work of others. The point he tried to make in his article that elitism may be necessary in order to ensure services for gifted children could have been made without vilifying two highly respected scholars. If he has research to support his claims, then let him share it in his articles and presentations. If not, then please focus on positive contributions to the field of gifted education, not negative aspersions. It is imperative that educators of gifted children work together to influence public aware-

ness about the need for an appropriately challenging education for *all* children rather than wasting energy on groundless criticism of researchers who have contributed greatly to our field. **GCT**

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Au Revoir, Common Sense

by James R. Delisle

The *good* news is that the presence of this Point/Counterpoint review of Multiple Intelligences (MI) and the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) within the pages of *GCT* means that a debate on what constitutes giftedness has begun anew.

It's about time.

The *bad* news is that Ms. Bawden presents a weak rebuttal to my views that is more defensive in tone than it is instructive, providing little depth and even less original analysis.

The main reason Bawden and I differ on our views of the benefits of MI and SEM is that we believe different things about gifted children. I understand that they exist as individuals apart from their willingness or ability to produce, produce, produce, and she attests (as do Joseph Renzulli and Howard Gardner) that giftedness exists only through the presence of accomplishments or

identifiable talents. Also, I focus on who gifted children *are* while Bawden focuses on what gifted children can *do*. Lastly, while Bawden finds it hard to remove giftedness from a school or academic context, I find it hard to place it there; my view of giftedness relies on psychology as its base, while her view relies upon curriculum.

Bawden chastises me because I criticize the work of Gardner and Renzulli, "researchers who have contributed greatly to our field" (p. 16). She points out Gardner's MacArthur Fellowship (ironically, termed by the media as a "genius grant," not a "multiply intelligent" grant) and Renzulli's decades' long advocacy of enrich-

“It is fine to champion your beliefs, Bawden, but to be blind sighted by the ideas that SEM practices or MI theory can compensate for the lack of a definable, separate gifted program is (to use your adjectives in describing my views) preposterous, naïve, simplistic, and groundless.”

ment for all students. Nowhere, though, does she leave open the possibility that another view of their work—my view, for one—may have some validity. Instead, she speaks with the steadfast authority of a zealot and, in doing so, weakens her own premises.

Let me explain. Bawden denigrates, in one fell swoop, all gifted programs that exist apart from SEM-like alternatives as “smarty part[ies]” where students who were identified as gifted [have] an opportunity to go on field trips and participate in enrichment activities” (p. 15). Can she not fathom the possibility that some field trips and enrichment activities, well planned and rich in complexity, *might* be most appropriate for students whose cognitive abilities surpass those of their classmates? Can she not envision that a field trip, as a culminating event for a study of physics or forensics, should be limited to students who have studied these topics in depth? And what about self-contained classes of gifted children—are these classes, too, year-long smarty parties, or might they have some purpose and do some good for the children enrolled in them? Bawden’s vision of what is possible for gifted children in our schools seems limited—indeed, myopic.

Further, in stating that “Bringing [students] together to commiserate on their differences from the general population may be more appropriate for a group therapy session than a gifted program” (p. 15), Bawden shows me that, although she may have 18 years of experience *teaching* gifted children, she is still a neophyte when it comes to *understanding* them. Her statement is crass and disrespectful of children, and I would not tolerate it from a gifted child education foe, let alone accept it from one of their purported advocates.

Bawden claims that the problems I raise regarding MI and SEM are due less to the initial work done by Gardner and Renzulli and due more to their misinterpretation by practitioners. And, at least in the case of Howard Gardner, this is partially true. But, my question to Bawden (and Gardner) is this: “Why haven’t you been more vocal in stating that the MI theory was never meant to be compiled as a series of workbooks on how to increase your linguistic or kinesthetic intelligence?” I have my own theory as to this silence (it involves economics), but the bottom line is that Gardner has allowed this bastardization of his work to go on for two decades. If he won’t speak up—loudly and often—who will?

Similarly, if Renzulli does, indeed, endorse “serving highly gifted children in full-time settings” (p. 15), where has he promoted this stance? All of the work I have read that he and his colleagues have produced points to the SEM as an *alternative to*, not a *complement of*, existing identifiable programs for cognitively gifted students. If Renzulli still sees a place for serving some gifted children in full-time settings, where is this mentioned in his work? To *not* state the need for such programming options implies, rightly or wrongly, that SEM serves *all* the needs of *every* gifted child. Case in point: Renzulli (1998) subtitled one of his articles about SEM, “A rising tide lifts all ships.” The truth is, though, that some ships have deeper hulls than others, and even at high tide, some will still strike bottom.

In closing, I wish to thank Bawden for opening a dialogue that I hope will continue on the benefits and drawbacks of MI and SEM in serving gifted children. Bawden’s on-target observation that our culture seems more disposed to

serving athletes over scholars is apt, and those of us who believe in serving gifted children (even if we differ on how this should be done) must remember the truth behind her words.

However, also remember this, Bawden: Varsity athletes are not served in the same way, or in the same setting, as those on junior varsity or intramural squads. In football and basketball, one size does not fit all. Never has, never will. So, if you accept this reality in sports, can you not see its benefits in serving gifted children differentially, depending on the extent and depth of their intellectual abilities? In my mind, and in the minds of many parents, educators, and children, MI and SEM are incomplete responses to those “varsity” gifted kids who have always been, and always will be, present in our schools and in our lives.

It is fine to champion your beliefs, Bawden, but to be blind sighted by the ideas that SEM practices or MI theory can compensate for the lack of a definable, separate gifted program is (to use your adjectives in describing my views) preposterous, naïve, simplistic, and groundless.

Open your eyes wider, Bawden, for there are many views of giftedness that you do not now see. And realize this: MI and SEM are partial solutions to the full-time issue of how to serve the intellectual and emotional needs of children whose abilities and insights far surpass the typical. That’s not theory. That’s common sense. **GGT**

References

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