

## Schoolwide Enrichment: Improving the Education of Students at Risk at Promise

By Genevieve Marie Johnson

The term *at-risk students* encompasses many categories of children and youth: “those who become pregnant, those who commit crimes, those who commit suicide, those who drop out” (Martin, 1991, p. 69). Educational concern with at-risk students is not simply that they are failing to learn, but also that they will enter adulthood “illiterate, dependent upon drugs and alcohol, unemployed or underemployed, as a teenage parent, dependent on welfare, or adjudicated by the criminal justice system” (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 3). The ultimate risk that students face is that they become “disconnected from the functions of society, from economic

Genevieve Marie  
Johnson is a lecturer in  
the Department of  
Educational Psychology  
of the Faculty of  
Education at the  
University of Alberta,  
Edmonton, Alberta,  
Canada.

productivity, and as citizens in a democracy” (Johnson, 1997a, p. 35). Collectively referred to as *risk outcomes*, the negative life experiences that threaten at-risk students include high school drop-out, suicidal behavior, adult dependency, substance abuse, incarceration, and unwanted sexual experiences such as pregnancy and disease (Johnson, 1998a). Given this broad range of adverse outcomes, it has been suggested that approximately one-third of children could be considered at risk (Hamburg, 1992; Takanishi, 1993).

### **Risk Factors:**

#### ***Increasing the Probability of Risk Outcomes***

*Risk factors* refer to those characteristics and circumstances that predispose students to experience risk outcomes (Barr & Parrett, 1995). Risk factors are typically identified with epidemiological research designs (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989). For example, when students from two-parent families are compared with students from single-parent families, the incidence of negative outcomes is higher for the latter group, although negative outcomes are not normative for either group. To take a specific case, high school graduation is the norm regardless of familial structure; approximately 80 percent of students from two-parent families graduate, while approximately 70 percent of students from single-parent families graduate. But because high school dropout is more characteristic of students from single-parent families than of students from two-parent families, single-parent familial status is conceptualized as a risk factor for high school dropout (Johnson, 1997b).

Epidemiological approaches have identified a wide range of risk factors including: speaking English as a second language, ethnic minority status, poverty, inadequate familial environments, residing in disadvantaged communities, and cognitive and behavioral difficulties (Barr & Parrett, 1995). For example, because students of ethnic minority status are less able to succeed in school due to rigid social expectations and other forms of discrimination, cultural and linguistic differences are considered risk factors (Barr & Parrett, 1995; Johnson, 1997b; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Correspondingly, poor children are at risk, at least in part, because their background experiences do not always prepare them to achieve in the world of the middle-class (Sisk, 1994). Poverty is also associated with inadequate nutrition and health care, limited opportunities for cognitive stimulation, and environments of hopelessness and despair (Children's Defense Fund, 1998; Golden, 1992). Inadequate familial and community environments are characterized by inadequate housing, by situations that are not safe and nurturing for children, and by negative role models (Clasen & Clasen, 1995; Manning & Baruth, 1995). Additionally, cognitive and behavioral difficulties predispose students to risk outcomes (Aksamit, 1990; Johnson, 1998a). Violent and aggressive behavioral predispositions, for example, are frequently identified as risk factors (Johnson, 1995). Programs and strategies directed toward decreasing or circumventing the negative impact of risk factors are referred to as risk intervention and prevention.

### **Risk Intervention and Prevention:**

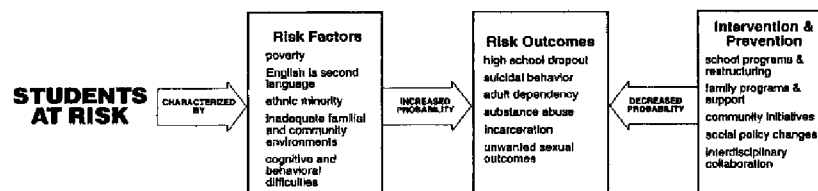
#### ***Decreasing the Probability of Risk Outcomes***

School, home, community, and societal intervention and prevention programs are implemented in hopes of reducing the deleterious consequences of risk factors

(Johnson, 1994). School-based interventions for at-risk students include remedial and special education, sex education, substance abuse, and crime prevention programs, initiatives that encourage parental school involvement, and early intervention programs (Johnson, 1995; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). School restructuring is promoted as necessary to improved educational outcomes for at-risk students (Henson, 1995; Wang & Reynolds, 1995). Home-based interventions include subsidized housing, nutrition programs, parent education, and efforts to enhance parental functioning (Johnson, 1997a; Lontos, 1992). Improved recreation facilities, increased access to health services, and community approaches to schooling and policing are examples of community-based intervention (Dryfoos, 1991; Johnson, 1998a). Societal interventions are concerned with modifying administrative structures, government policies, public spending priorities, and service delivery models (Manning & Baruth, 1995). Educators, social workers, corrections officials, public health workers, community activists, and social policy-makers generally promote an interdisciplinary approach to minimizing the impact of risk factors and, thereby, reducing the incidence and magnitude of risk outcomes (Barr & Parrett, 1995; Johnson, 1997b).

Figure 1 presents a visual-graphic summary of current conceptualization of at-risk students in terms of risk factors, risk outcomes, and intervention and prevention programs. At-risk students are characterized by risk factors which increase the probability that they will experience risk outcomes. Intervention and prevention efforts (e.g., school programs and restructuring, family programs and support, community initiatives, social policy changes, and interdisciplinary collaboration) focus on decreasing the probability that at-risk students will experience risk outcomes.

**Figure 1**  
Current Conceptualization of Students At Risk  
(Adapted from Johnson, 1998a)



### **Current Educational Practice with Students At Risk**

For educators, risk is synonymous with disadvantage (Scales, 1992). Indeed, the education of at-risk students is characterized by singular focus on individual disadvantage and deficiency (Johnson, 1998b; Renzulli & Reis, 1991). Albeit well intentioned, assumptions of disadvantage and deficiency have resulted in dilution of the curriculum and lowering of educational standards for at-risk students (Taylor & Reeves, 1993). Lower academic standards, unfortunately, set the stage for reduced student achievement (Schunk, 1996). Despite billions of dollars spent on compensatory education programs designed to improve the achievement of at-risk students, standardized test scores have shown negligible gains (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1989). "The parents of poor children have given up hope that education will enable their sons and daughters to break the bonds of poverty" (Renzulli, 1994, pp. 2-3).

The instruction of at-risk students is dominated by a category of teaching approaches referred to as direct instruction (Knapp, Turnbull, & Shields, 1990). Direct instruction involves teacher control, extensive opportunities for student practice, frequent teacher corrective feedback, careful structuring of academic tasks so that content is introduced in small manageable steps, and whole group or homogeneous group formats (Choate, 1993). While there is some evidence that direct instruction enhances the acquisition of certain types of basic skills (Enright & Choate, 1993), such an instructional approach has been criticized in its dominant use with at-risk students (Means & Knapp, 1991). In the classroom, direct instruction manifests itself in drill on phonics, vocabulary, spelling, and basic mathematics facts. Such teacher directed drill has been found to limit at-risk students' experiences with higher-order thinking skills (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Knapp & Shields, 1990). At-risk students' failure to demonstrate advanced academic competencies may be the consequence of teacher failure to move beyond instruction of discrete basic skills (Cole & Griffin, 1987).

Like other students, at-risk students require challenging school activities and assignments (Clifford, 1990; Johnson, 1998b; Renzulli, Reis, Hébert, & Diaz, 1995). Rampant boredom, the consequence of under-challenging curricula, may be the greatest academic risk faced by students. Many proposed solutions to inadequate school achievement are based on increasing the structure and rigidity of learning—ironically, the very practices that may cause inadequate achievement (Renzulli, 1994). Schools dominated by excessive structure and rigidity are mechanistic, dreary places that have lost sight of innumerable opportunities to make classroom learning inviting, exciting, and challenging. Traditional remedial models and common assumptions of deficiency and disadvantage result in gross underestimation of the potential of at-risk students (Taylor & Reeves, 1994). An alternative approach to the education of at-risk students is required (Wang & Reynolds, 1995).

## Schoolwide Enrichment:

### *Focusing on Students' Strengths and Interests*

*Schoolwide enrichment* describes a positive orientation to students, teaching, curriculum, and schooling (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). According to Renzulli (1988), the originator of schoolwide enrichment, all schools, including elementary, middle, and secondary schools, must be places where individual talent and potential are identified and developed. Schoolwide enrichment is the antithesis of remedial education and direct instruction because it focuses on students' strengths and interests. Schools are viewed as sites that provide broad and enriching experiences to all students (Renzulli & Reis, 1994). This vision is based on the belief that "everyone has an important role to play in societal improvement, and that everyone's role can be enhanced if we provide all students with opportunities, resources, and encouragement to aspire to the highest level of talent development humanly possible" (Renzulli, 1994, p. xviii).

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) includes organizational, structural, and instructional components (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). Organizational components include a schoolwide enrichment team, conceptualized as prerequisite to the promotion of a full range of enrichment activities for all students. Schoolwide enrichment teams are composed of teachers and parents who have specific responsibility for organizing and coordinating the overall enrichment effort of the entire school. A critical component of the team is a schoolwide enrichment specialist whose primary responsibilities include direct service to students and leadership in program and staff development. The SEM assumes that ongoing professional staff development is prerequisite to successful school enrichment. Inservice training which focuses exclusively on "one-shot, skill-oriented workshops is inadequate for bringing about real and lasting improvements in schools" (Renzulli, 1994, p. 264). Professional development must be a continuous process in which teachers are provided with learning opportunities relative to substantive examination of pedagogical and curricular knowledge, skill-oriented training that focuses on implementation of specific methods and materials, and situations in which new skills and knowledge can be applied and practices in unrestricted and non-threatening experimental settings.

School structures in the SEM include the regular curriculum, enrichment clusters, and a continuum of special services (Renzulli et al., 1995). The regular curriculum consists of predetermined goals, schedules, learning outcomes, and instructional delivery systems of the school. The dominant feature of traditional curriculum is that policy-makers have determined that certain outcomes are the essence of student learning. While the current emphasis on defining curriculum in terms of student outcomes is a positive development, "it could easily end up being another ill-fated regression to a minimum competency, basic skills approach to

learning” (Renzulli, 1994, p. 61). For schools to capitalize on the application of outcome-based education and the movement toward specified standards, it is essential that regular curriculum include procedures for adjusting levels of required learning so that all students are challenged by in-depth and enriching learning experiences. Enrichment clusters refer to interest-based groupings that are non-graded. Enrichment clusters are groups of students who share common interests and who come together periodically during specially designated time blocks to pursue these shared interests. Finally, the continuum of special services refers to a broad range of supplementary services relative to enrichment and acceleration such as student counseling and community connections.

In the SEM, school administrators target organizational and structural components as their essential focus, while classroom teachers focus primarily, but not exclusively, on delivering enriched instruction (Renzulli, 1994). While teachers should have a general awareness of organizational and structural aspects of the SEM, direct and specific training in enrichment instructional techniques is most essential. In pre-service programs of teacher education, courses in remedial reading and remedial mathematics should be balanced with courses in schoolwide enrichment. Correspondingly, SEM applications should be part of teacher training in specific courses in curriculum and instruction in content areas. The educational service delivery component of the SEM includes: (1) the total talent portfolio, (2) curriculum modification techniques, and (3) enrichment learning and teaching.

#### ***The Total Talent Portfolio***

“Every learner has strengths or potential strengths that can be used as a foundation for effective learning and creative productivity” (Renzulli, 1994, p. 99). *Total talent portfolios* refer to individual file folders containing information regarding the strengths and interests of each student in the school. Student abilities and interests are determined through formal and informal assessment conducted by classroom teachers. An effective method of determining individual interest and ability is to provide students with opportunities to participate in a wide variety of activities within and across personal interest areas. In such enriched learning situations, student performance, satisfaction, and enthusiasm can be observed and documented in relation to such opportunities (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). Thus, each talent portfolio contains summaries of student achievement and ability (e.g., standardized and teacher-made test results, course grades, teacher ratings), results of interest inventories, and documentation of student reaction to various learning opportunities (Renzulli et al., 1995). Individual interests and abilities are used to make decisions regarding student participation in regular curriculum and enrichment opportunities. Thus, in preservice or inservice teacher training, diagnostic assessment of individual student deficiencies in learning must be balanced with specific strategies for determining student strengths and interests. Teachers require training to interpret individual student strengths and interests and to develop

interesting and challenging learning experiences that correspond to those identified strengths and interests.

While traditional diagnostic-prescriptive learning models focus on identifying and remediating student deficits and weaknesses, the total talent portfolio summarizes positive student reaction to learning experiences. The two approaches, however, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. If necessary, positive student reactions can be used as vehicles for attacking deficiencies in basic skills (Renzulli, 1994). For example, a student experiencing difficulty mastering basic literacy skills is likely to sustain personal effort when learning activities are of genuine interest (Johnson, 1998b). All learning is enhanced by personal interest in the subject and in the act of learning (Schunk, 1996). Thus, in guiding and arranging learning activities, the SEM promotes performance-based assessment of individual student interest and ability (Renzulli et al., 1995). Documentation of student interests and strengths expands curricular options and provides indices of personal motivation—both of which are necessary for effective learning (Angle, 1996). Preservice and inservice teacher training must facilitate a view of remediation as best situated in a context of high interest student learning activities.

In addition to interests and strengths, the total talent portfolio also includes assessment of student preferences in instructional style, learning environment, thinking style, and expression style. Instructional style preferences include recitation and drill, peer tutoring, lecture, discussion, guided independent study, learning/interest centers, simulation, role playing, dramatization, learning games, reports, projects, internship, and apprenticeship (Renzulli, 1994). Learning environment preferences involve individual variations in social orientation (e.g., self-oriented, peer-oriented, adult-oriented) and physical considerations such as lighting, seating, time, and mobility (Dunn & Dunn, 1993). Thinking style preferences include analytic, synthetic, creative, practical, contextual, executive, and judicial (Sternberg, 1994). Expression style preferences involve written, oral, manipulative, discussion, display, dramatization, artistic, graphic, commercial, and service (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). Talent portfolios contain checklist indications of student preferences in instructional style, learning environment, thinking style, and expression style as assessed or observed by current and previous teachers (Renzulli et al., 1995).

#### ***Curriculum Modification Techniques***

For a number of reasons, schoolwide enrichment necessitates curriculum modification (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). First, some students may have previously mastered content presented in class and in textbooks. Second, the learning needs of many students are not met within the confines of prescribed curriculum. Additionally, curriculum modification creates blocks of time that can be used for interesting and challenging student learning experiences (Renzulli, 1994). Schoolwide enrichment assumes that teachers determine curriculum in relation to student needs and interests. In considering curricular choices for students, the teacher focuses on

specific knowledge, methodology, and application (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). Instructional objectives and strategies are determined and aligned with a range of student interests. Curriculum development includes teacher consideration of content (e.g., appropriate, relevant, interesting, mandatory), processes (e.g., thinking skills, research skills, literacy), product (e.g., report, model, presentation), and affect (e.g., attitudes, appreciation, awareness) (Renzulli et al., 1995). Teachers require training and retraining to facilitate a conceptual shift from curriculum as absolutely appropriate and effective to curriculum as appropriate and effective only in relation to student needs and interests. Instruction can never be understood as independent of individual learner characteristics, including and most specifically, learner interest.

Curriculum compacting and integrated instructional themes are two curriculum modification techniques recommended in the SEM. Curriculum compacting refers to the elimination of content that a student has previously mastered or to streamlining content so that it is commensurate with a student's level of motivation and ability (Lemley, 1994; Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992). For example, while many students require considerable practice to master certain skills, some students acquire such skills quickly. For students who require minimal practice, appropriate educational service involves provision of accelerated and enriching learning activities. Not all students require the same number of practice mathematics problems to achieve concept or skill mastery. To require a student to complete a practice worksheet when mastery already exists is more than a waste of instructional time; it is cruel. Such educational practices result in alienation between student, teacher, and learning content. Teachers must be trained to question their pedagogy when every student in the class is required to do the same ten worksheets. Individual variation is the norm. Assigned school activities must reflect that variation. For practice and review, some students may require five problems; others may require 100 problems.

Effective curriculum emphasizes both content and process, develops inquiry, and establishes the interconnectedness of knowledge and skills (Goertz, Phemister, & Bernal, 1995). A second curriculum modification technique recommended by the SEM is the development of integrated instructional units (Renzulli, 1988). For example, total talent portfolios may reveal that a student or group of students is particularly interested in the concept of flight. Flight provides a theme that unifies mathematics (e.g., angles for a smooth landing), language arts (e.g., biographies of the Wright Brothers and Amelia Earhardt), art (e.g., mobiles, Da Vinci's designs), social studies (e.g., history of aviation), and science (e.g., bird flight patterns) (Renzulli, 1994). Specific teacher training and practice in developing integrated instructional units is required. The current practice of teacher education courses and sessions that deal with a specific school subject (e.g., language arts, science, mathematics) is not conducive to curricular integration in schools. Institutes of teacher education and approaches to in-service teacher training are well-advised to move beyond compartmentalized treatment of school subjects. At the very least, subject-based courses and programs in teacher



education should include a substantial section on cross-subject thematic integration of curriculum.

Schoolwide enrichment curriculum modification includes strategic use of textbooks. Ideal classrooms are where "teachers encourage and accept student autonomy, where raw data and primary sources (rather than textbooks) are used in investigations, where students' thinking drives the lessons, and where dialogue, inquiry, and puzzlement are valued" (Fosnot, 1993, p. viii). "Textbooks have evolved over the past several decades into 'products' often assembled by committees in response to external pressures rather than a coherent approach to education" (Altbach, Kelly, Petrie, & Weis, 1991, p. 2). The schoolwide enrichment view of curriculum is largely incompatible with systematically covering textbook content. Thus, textbook material is omitted and enriched by the classroom teacher who is empowered to interpret curriculum in relation to individual total talent portfolios (Renzulli, 1994). Textbook-driven curriculum and textbooks themselves are viewed as potential contributors to student boredom and ineffective use of instructional time (Renzulli & Reis, 1985).

### ***Enrichment Learning and Teaching***

Four basic assumptions about the nature of human learning are expressed in the SEM (Renzulli et al., 1995). First, it is assumed that each learner is unique and that all learning experiences reflect the abilities, interests, and learning style of the individual. Second, learning is most effective when students enjoy school activities. Thus, learning experiences must be constructed with primary consideration for student enjoyment. Third, learning is meaningful and enjoyable when content and processes are learned within the context of a real problem. Finally, formal instruction is best used to enhance student construction of meaningfulness. The goal of these principles is to replace dependent and passive learners with independent and engaged learners (Renzulli, 1994). Thus, enrichment learning and teaching are driven by students' interests and needs and not directed by teachers, textbooks, or prescribed curriculum (Renzulli & Reis, 1985).

Teacher prescribed worksheets, memorizing information merely to perform well on examinations, and repetitious workbook exercises are incompatible with enrichment learning and teaching. A real product is the consequence of enrichment learning activities (Renzulli et al., 1995). The teacher facilitates student identification of products or services provided by individuals with similar interests. The teacher guides student selection of resources and materials necessary to produce these products and services. The teacher supports delineation of procedures necessary to impact on the intended audience or recipients of the product or service. Specific instruction occurs only within the context of product development (Renzulli, 1994). A traditional teacher may require students to memorize the definitions of a variety of poetic forms and, after considerable review of numerous examples, write poems in each of these various forms. An enrichment teacher provides students with

information on locating a book entitled *Directory of Poetry Publishers* and, as students struggle to evaluate and improve their poems, provides examples of award-winning and classic poetry for contrast, comparison, technique, and inspiration. In programs of teacher education, pedagogical focus must shift from defining student learning in terms of discrete task performance to conceptualizing student learning in relation to meaningful products and real productions. Imagine a system of education in which nothing real, genuine, meaningful, enduring, and valued outside of school was produced. This is not too difficult to image; it is the current system.

In the SEM, general exploratory activities expose students to a wide variety of disciplines, topics, ideas, concepts, issues, and events (Renzulli & Reis, 1994). Methods of delivering these general exploratory experiences include audio tapes, computer programs, debates, demonstrations, displays, field trips, films, guest speakers, learning centers, magazine or newspaper articles, mini-courses, museum programs, performances, photographs, slides, and television programs (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). Such general exploratory activities are based on regular curriculum topics or may be innovative interpretation of prescribed content (Zorman, 1991). Any and all general exploratory experiences, however, "must be purposefully designed to stimulate new or present interests that may lead to more intense follow-up on the parts of individual students or small groups of students" (Renzulli, 1994, p. 212). General exploratory experiences are invitations for students to participate in various types and levels of follow-up activities. Following each exploratory activity, systematic debriefing determines those students who are interested in further examination of the topic and how that interest might best be expressed. Given the extent to which exploratory activities constitute a wide range of general experiences offered to students, development and delivery across many grades and by many teachers may prove most efficacious. Pre-service and in-service teacher learning experiences that cultivate collaborative interaction are critical to many aspects of the SEM.

In addition to general exploratory experiences, enrichment learning and teaching also involves group training of skills (Renzulli et al., 1995). Group training activities are intended to enhance students' development in analytic skills, organizational skills, critical thinking, creativity, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, listening, observing, summarizing, research skills, notetaking, interviewing, surveying, library and database skills, utilizing technology, accessing community resources, leadership, and written, oral, and visual communication (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). Such skills are necessary for successful student learning and for quality product creation. Group training activities can be implemented in two ways. The teacher might plan and organize skill enhancing activities for any unit of instruction within the general curriculum. Additionally, the teacher may provide group training activities within the context of product development (Renzulli, 1994). For example, a group of students investigating environmental issues may find it necessary to access the websites of state or provincial agencies. Within this learning context, group training in navigating the internet would be a necessary and meaningful student skill.

General exploratory experiences and group training activities are ultimately directed toward individual and small group investigations of real problems (Renzulli et al., 1995). Renzulli (1994) defined real problems as having personal or social relevance, having no definitive or universally accepted solution, attempting to bring about a change in action, attitudes or beliefs, and as intended for a real audience. Such real investigative activities result in the development of creative products in which students assume roles as scientists, writers, artists, or other types of practicing professionals. Although students are performing at a less sophisticated level, the purpose of investigating real problems is to create situations in which learners are thinking, feeling, and doing what practicing professional do in the delivery of products and services (Renzulli & Reis, 1994).

Individual and small group investigations of real problems are vehicles for the application of student interest, knowledge, creativity, and specific skills (Goertz et al., 1995). Such investigations result in advanced understanding of the knowledge and methodology associated with a particular discipline, development of authentic products and services, skill development in planning, organization, resource utilization, time management, cooperation, decision making, and self-evaluation, and an increase in commitment and self-confidence. Individual and small group investigations of real problems are viewed as synthesis and application of the total school experience (Zorman, 1991). Renzulli (1994) offered ten steps to teachers when guiding students through real life investigations: (1) assess, find, or create student interest, (2) conduct an interview to determine the nature of the interest, (3) facilitate the formation of a research question, (4) develop a written plan, (5) help locate multiple resources, (6) provide methodological assistance, (7) provide managerial assistance, (8) help identify the final product and outlet, (9) provide feedback and escalate the process, and (10) evaluate, with the student, the process and product.

Research supports the effectiveness of schoolwide enrichment in enhancing student motivation, interest, and achievement (Delcourt, 1993; Hébert, 1993; Renzulli, 1994; Renzulli & Reis, 1994). Indeed, schoolwide enrichment is promoted as a viable strategy for general school reform and as an effective educational alternative for at-risk students (Ford & Harris, 1994; Renzulli & Reis, 1991; Renzulli et al., 1995; Sisk, 1994).

### **Schoolwide Enrichment and Students At Risk**

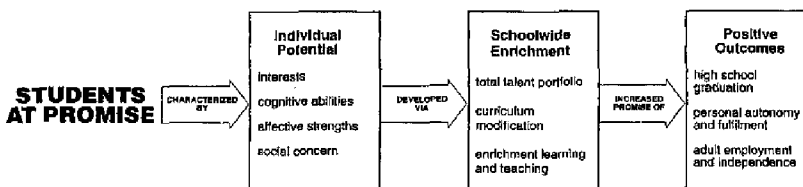
The Department of Education recently recommended a shift from "remedial help for individual children to an emphasis on schoolwide improvement" (Miller, 1993, p. 3). Remedial education and deficit-driven models of teaching have not produced satisfactory levels of student achievement (Knapp et al., 1990). Correspondingly, conventional teacher-controlled, textbook-dependent instruction is ineffective for many students, including at-risk students (Renzulli, 1994). At-risk students require learning experiences that are relevant and meaningful, frequent

opportunities for active school involvement, an integrated approach to curriculum, and instruction that generates interest and enthusiasm (Johnson, 1998b; Renzulli & Reis, 1991). Schoolwide enrichment offers a systematic approach to re-focusing the instruction of students at risk from teacher prescription and remediation to individual student strength and interest.

It is difficult for educators to maintain high expectations of at-risk students and to believe that disadvantaged students truly have strengths and interests that can effectively be utilized in learning situations (Frasier, 1993; Taylor & Reeves, 1993). McCall, Evahn, and Kratzer (1992) reported that teachers often do not legitimize indications of high ability in at-risk students, maintaining that unexpected achievement and performance are the consequence of luck or dishonesty. The first step toward improving instruction for at-risk students is recognition of the inherent potential in all individuals (Renzulli et al., 1995). Schoolwide enrichment provides a mechanism for conceptual re-orientation—that is, a shift from educational focus on disadvantage to educational focus on potential (Culross, 1997).

Indeed, conceptualizing students as *at risk* reveals the extent to which the nature of discourse and the focus of school programs emphasize disadvantage. Swadener and Lubeck (1995) offered a metaphor of *promise* as opposed to risk. A view of students as *at promise* “should invite collaboration and power-sharing rather than patronizing assistance, respect rather than pity, and belief in potential rather than failure” (p. x). Implementation of schoolwide enrichment for at-risk students may be difficult without a conceptual re-orientation of assumptions. Figure 2 provides a visual-graphic summary of a proposed conceptual shift from student risk to student potential. Students at promise are characterized by individual potential which is developed via schoolwide enrichment which, in turn, increases the probability that students will experience academic, personal, and social success. Such a conceptual re-orientation constitutes a subtle but consequential rotation in educational thought and corresponding praxis. Should we focus on problems, deficiencies, and weaknesses and then attempt to rectify? Or should we focus on ability and interest and then attempt to enhance, develop, and maximize?

**Figure 2**  
Re-conceptualization of Students At Risk as Students At Promise



### **Practical Application of Schoolwide Enrichment**

Although the SEM is ideally a schoolwide effort, the model can be implemented in varying degrees. Contingent upon school, community, parent, administration, and teacher commitment, the SEM can be implemented gradually or initially in select classrooms. As momentum builds and professional development sessions are provided, more teachers and classrooms may join the effort to create positive and stimulating learning experiences for all students.

For purposes of illustrative application, assume some teachers at a middle school are prepared to implement aspects of the SEM. Such teachers may have been exposed to the SEM in their pre-service training or may have been in-serviced in essential aspects of schoolwide enrichment. Assume, also, that the middle school is located in a disadvantaged community and that most students who attend are described as being at educational risk. In such a context, how would schoolwide enrichment be implemented?

Regular classroom teachers committed to enrichment would have a file folder for each student in their class, perhaps decorated by students early in the school year. The folders contain information gathered in September, from previous school years, from ongoing assessment, and from student reaction to general exploratory activities. File folder information is focused on student interests, for example, expressed and observed interest in specific types of music, sport, literature, careers, science topics, art, and famous people. The student interest file folders (i.e., total talent portfolios) also contain information relevant to individual student strengths and weaknesses, for example, reading and writing skills and deficits, level of computer literacy, extent of parental support, and identified disabilities.

In lesson and unit planning, teachers make primary reference to the student talent portfolios. Teachers consider available resources, instructional support, and scheduling as they determine; (1) the specific student interests that will be developed, (2) the products that students will create, (3) the specific student skills that are prerequisite to those creations and productions, and (4) how students will be grouped. To a large extent, students are involved in the process of instructional planning, particularly in terms of determination of creations and productions, that is, the expressed outcomes of learning. Parents are invited to facilitate student learning outcomes. Utilization of student strengths is maximized, group work is common, and opportunities to enhance skill deficits within the context of high student interest and real productions are developed.

To continue this hypothetical application of the SEM, a group of students may express and demonstrate, during general exploratory activities, particular interest in developing a school newspaper. During initial teacher direction and facilitation of student learning, the group determines that review of existing newspapers is necessary in order to establish standard content and format. Concepts and terms

such as editorial, advertisement, and entertainment contribute to increased student vocabulary in reading and spelling. Students may interview the editor and writers of a community newspaper. Interview questions are determined and rehearsed prior to actual interviews. Peers provide feedback on the quality and appropriateness of the interview questions. Written skills, social skills, and oral language skills are developed within the context of meaningful and interesting activities. The teacher asks, "What sorts of things would our school community find interesting and useful in our newspaper? How will we know when are newspaper is a success?" Such discussion may lead to student development of a consumer survey and to internet and library research.

In the context of producing a school newspaper, students are required to write, proof read, and word process, all of which are curriculum-based skills. Large blocks of time are scheduled to facilitate student involvement and completion of the school newspaper. Small blocks of time are scheduled with groups of students who require specific instruction in skills prerequisite to aspects of their creations and productions. Instruction does not follow textbooks nor flow from prescribed curriculum. Instruction unfolds in response to student interests.

The newspaper group may decide to solicit articles of interest from the larger school community. This provides a meaningful, product-based opportunity for many students to practice and improve written competency skills. In the context of real productions, teacher response to the common student query, "Why do I have to do this?" is concise and meaningful, "Your newspaper article will be read by many people; it needs to be very well done." As opposed to identification of basic skill deficits and application of discrete task practice exercises, individual interest and generation of authentic products is far more likely to result in significant student learning gains.

As other teachers and classrooms begin to implement aspects of the SEM, team teaching occurs and facilitates implementation of schoolwide enrichment. Students from different classrooms are grouped according to shared interests and common instructional requirements. Teachers share expertise to provide students with stimulating activities. General exploratory activities are offered most efficiently with cross-grade groupings. Parent and community experts contribute to student learning and projects more efficiently in multi-classroom contexts. Enriched teaching and learning builds momentum. A schoolwide enrichment team is development. A schoolwide enrichment specialist is designated.

### **Schoolwide Enrichment:**

#### ***Improving the Experience of Teaching***

Thus, the public education enterprise become more interesting and humanizing, not only for students and parents, but also for teachers. A deficit-driven approach may be as counterproductive to teacher wellness as it is to student

achievement. It is difficult to maintain enthusiasm in the context of identification and remediation of specific student skill deficits. Continually covering the same textbook, handing out worksheets, and marking practice problems contributes to negative personal interpretations of the experience of teaching. It may be impossible for teachers to remain optimistic when surrounded with educational disadvantage and when focused on students at risk.

Teaching is most satisfying when teachers cultivate and maximize student interest and ability. Teaching is most rewarding when teachers have the capability and power to respond to student interest by creative interpretation of curriculum. Ideally, teaching is concerned with student potential, not student liability. Students are always *works in progress*. Thus, all students essentially reflect potential and possibility. How students are conceptualized translates into how they are taught—at risk or at promise? How students are taught is critically related, not only to their level of achievement but, also, to teacher evaluation of the experience of teaching. Do we teach problems or possibilities?

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