



## INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR JOSEPH RENZULLI

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### Interviewer: TANIA VICENTE VIANA

Doctor JOSEPH RENZULLI is one of the greatest current leaders in the field of Giftedness. As a matter of fact, a pioneer since the 1970s in the application of educational strategies for teaching gifted students to all students at the school environment. The American Psychological Association named him among the 25 most influential psychologists in the world. He received the Harold W. McGraw Jr. Award for Innovation in Education. He was also a consultant to the US White House Task Force on Gifted and Talented Education. In Brazil, his ideas have been adopted, since 2005, throughout the national territory, in the nucleons of High Abilities or Giftedness Activities.

**Tania Viana:** “Interest” is a keyword for gifted people. Where did your interest in giftedness come from?



**Joseph Renzulli:** Like so many people in the Education Profession... my interest actually came when I was a classroom teacher. And I was a Mathematics and Science teacher, and I had students that probably knew more about Mathematics and Science than I did, and so I had to figure it out ways of being able to challenge them above and beyond the regular *curriculum*. So, that’s really where my interest began. Most of our lives interests begin from either reading something or experiencing something and that’s where my interest began.

**Tania Viana:** Did you intentionally design the Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness to include other expressions of gifted behavior besides traditional school performance?

**Joseph Renzulli:** Absolutely. I believe in every field – whether it's Art or Athletics or Business or Entrepreneurism – there are people who are above average in ability in their particular field. And so we use the word gifted a great deal in Athletics: he is a gifted football player, or he is a gifted swimmer, she is a gifted swimmer. So I believe that above average ability doesn't just mean academics. One of the things that I've been studying lately is executive function skills and what the research says is: that many people who have accomplished great things has been due to the fact that they are planning, good planner's organizers, collaborators, communicators and so there are many other skills that contribute to high levels of production.

**Tania Viana:** Whereas above average ability tends to remain constant, that does not happen to creativity and task commitment. How do you explain that?

**Joseph Renzulli:** I believe that those things are very experiential. That is, people might be in a given situation, and they see something or they might read something, and an idea will come to them and the same thing is true with task commitment. Someone might see something that, let's say, they see an animal being mistreated on the street and they say: "By God, we have to do something to correct that to make that better". So they're very situational and they feed upon one another. If I want to help those animals, then I've got to come up with some creative ideas, or if I have a creative idea to start a small business, then I have to develop the energy in the task commitment to develop that small business.

**Tania Viana:** About low and high spots in creative people, what these moments could teach for us? Specially the low spots?

**Joseph Renzulli:** I think that, if you study the lives of very creative people, people who have contributed great things to all areas of Science, the Arts and other areas... Oftentimes, they will talk about having spots when there's lots and lots of energy and other spots where there is not so much energy. And I believe that the low spots actually are good. I like them to being able to recharge our batteries. We can't operate at that high level all the time without experiencing some burnout and so it's almost with anything else we do. I like to bake bread. One of my activities is baking bread and there are times when I want to bake all the time and then I, for a while, I just don't feel like baking, you know. Or I'll find... I wait till I find a new recipe. So most people have high spots and low spots.

**Tania Viana:** Today, based on your experience, do you think there is a place for another ring in your model?

**Joseph Renzulli:** I've been asked that question lots of times and I think that the three rings that are there now are especially endearing to me. I think that the skills that I mentioned just a few minutes ago, the executive function skills, are part of task commitment. Although, if I were to add another ring, it probably would be the executive function skills, but the three

rings seem to cover most of what I feel have been the traits that have contributed to high levels of creative productivity in people that I have studied. I'm a great fan of reading biographies and autobiographies about very famous people in all areas and it seems that those three things always seem to be in there somewhere.

**Tania Viana:** Once you said the rings might be in other people, "a person who writes the lyrics and another person who writes the music". I'd like to ask you if this happened to you and your wife Sally Reis. She is the other ring in your life?

**Joseph Renzulli:** She's a very important ring in my life. And she is specially good at things that I'm not good at. She is an excellent planner and organizer and manager. And I might come up with an idea, but she's the one who is able to get that idea to work, to get it into schools to do research on the idea. And, of course, she has come up with many of her own creative ideas, specially related to reading for the gifted and related to twice exceptional students, specially those with autism. And so there are other people also that I believe collaborate... I've collaborated with because they have strength in areas that I do not have strength in.

**Tania Viana:** You advocate a better education for everyone, not only for gifted people. What was your motivation for that?

**Joseph Renzulli:** My motivation for that can be simply told in a story. When I started teaching, the Russians had fired Sputnik into the air and all the countries around the world said we've got to do more teaching science to our gifted children and the superintendent of schools sent me a list of the names of all the children in our Middle School who had IQs of 130 and above and he asked me to start a special program.

The program was on Saturdays, and certainly the children with IQs of 130 and above came, but I was a general science teacher and I had many many young people in my science class that were as good or sometimes better, in many cases much more interested in Science, than the high IQ students. And so, I started sneaking them into the program on Saturday and they did just as well and, in some cases, they did better than the students with high IQ. And it was for that reason that, when I developed the Enrichment Triad Model, I said that all children should receive general enrichment – Type 1 Enrichment and Type 2 Enrichment – and we should see how they respond to those general types of enrichment to determine which ones we want to take on to a more advanced level, what I call Type 3 Enrichment.

In Psychology, this is known as performance-based assessment and it happens in other areas: in Art, in Music and Athletics. We put all the kids out on the field and watch which ones can kick the ball better or throw the ball better through the basketball hoop. We don't just look at their height or their weight or how fast they can run, and so that's the reason I try to include more students to have access. I'm not saying they're gifted or not gifted, but they have access to enrichment that can develop their gifted Behaviors.

**Tania Viana:** You talk about a *continuum* between deductive and inductive education. Do you think an investigative and creative education is necessary for the challenges of the 21st century?

**Joseph Renzulli:** Absolutely, 100 percent. There are many challenges that we share every day in our daily living, in our family affairs, in our organizational affairs, in world affairs and the more people that we can get ready to become creative problem solvers in those areas, the better our world will be. I think that the future of humanity is dependent upon highly creative and productive individuals, who are using their talents to make the world a better place. And I've written some work on that, some articles on that, that you can find at my website.

**Tania Viana:** You have been working in this field for 40 Years. I assume you have come across many difficulties. What did you do to keep enjoyment, engagement and enthusiasm for working?

**Joseph Renzulli:** I love to see smiling faces on young people when I go to schools and classrooms and I believe the smiling faces are the result of, first of all, enjoying what you're doing. Too much prescribed *curriculum*, ministry driven *curriculum* has made school very dreary boring places for many children.

But when children are given up an opportunity that they chose because it was an interest area, that's why we developed the enrichment clusters component of our Schoolwide Enrichment Model, and they're with other children who chose that same cluster on studying dinosaurs or designing fashion, then we start to see happy looks, high engagement on their play on their faces. Enjoyment always leads to engagement and engagement leads to enthusiasm for learning. But it means that we have to get away from just having learning be didactic memorization preparation to take a test, which is what so much of ministry control *curriculum* around the world is all about.

**Tania Viana:** And what about you professor? You've been working in this field for 40 years. How did you do to keep enjoyment, engagement and enthusiasm for working?

**Joseph Renzulli:** One of the things that people often ask me: why I've been at this so long and at the University of Connecticut for more than 40 years. And I always say: they pay me to be curious and I believe that when I read something, when I see something happening in a classroom that I think other teachers might benefit from if they learned how to do it. I get very curious and I want to start to study it and I want to do some research on it and then I want to communicate it with larger and larger audiences and so the three "E"s are probably how I run my life when I enjoy something and I'm very excited about it, then that creates the task commitment to follow through on it and so that's a little bit about how the three "E"s have reflected my life.

**Tania Viana:** Evaluating your work since the beginning, what makes you happy about it?

**Joseph Renzulli:** Well, what makes me happy about it is when people start using it and I get material that teachers send me all the time, and I do visit lots of schools, and when I see good things going on at schools or somebody sends me a project that a young child did, then I get really excited about it. Because I realize that we're having some payoff in schools and in classrooms. Obviously, I'm interested in scholarly work and theories and research, but the real payoff for me is what is happening in schools and in classrooms and so, when I see those

kinds of things taking place, I have a great deal of gratitude and I have a great deal of satisfaction.

**Tania Viana:** Renzulli by Renzulli: how do you define yourself?

**Joseph Renzulli:** Again, I would say I'm a person that's always had a great deal of curiosity. I am a person that's always been interested in the lives of people who have done major kinds of work in their various fields whether it's the Arts, Science, Sports, Medicine, whatever it may be. I always wonder what caused them to come through with the kinds of ideas that they did in many cases, that they've changed their field because they've brought new ideas to it. So I guess ideas are at the center of what a lot of my life has been all about.

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