In 1998, practitioners in the field of gifted and talented education received several important challenges. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) published standards for gifted programming to guide educators in their practice. The standards included a call to integrate gifted education programming into the general education program and to adapt, modify, or replace regular classroom instruction so that it meets the needs of gifted learners. At the same time McGrail (1998) noted, “public education is founded on the belief that all students (including high-ability students) have the right to instruction appropriate to their needs” (p. 36). Also, White and Breen (1998) pointed out that “it is clearly essential to do everything possible to realize the vast potential not only of all gifted children but also of all multiple gifted children” (p. 16). According to the NAGC standards, there should be assessments of gifted learners in all standard courses of study with the goal of providing “more challenging educational opportunities.”

In order to meet these challenges, NAGC recommended six guiding principles of program design, three of which are related to this article:

- Rather than any single gifted program, a continuum of programming services must exist for gifted learners.
- Gifted education programming services must be an integral part of the general education school day.
- Flexible groupings of students must be developed in order to facilitate differentiated instruction and curriculum.

The same publication established criteria for student identification, presenting a clear call for a broad system of assessment based on multiple sources and assessment methods that reflect the “gifted learner’s interests, learning style, and educational needs.”

This article will discuss how the Levels of Service (LoS) approach to talent development (Treffinger, 1998) responds in practical and powerful ways to these challenges. It will first explore a model of musical talent development that is representative of music programs commonly used in districts throughout the country. Next, it will discuss some parallels between that model and the LoS approach. The purpose for doing so is to establish that approaches to talent development similar to LoS are already available within many school systems. In order to reinforce this point, the article will also briefly explore similar talent development approaches in other domains. Then, it will identify some important key elements gleaned from recent research (Selby & Young, 2001; Treffinger, Young, Nassab, & Wittig, 2004; Young, 1998; Young & Selby, 2001b) regarding the process of talent development in any area of interest. Finally, the discussion will present some challenges and opportunities related to recognizing, nurturing, and celebrating the strengths, talents, and interests of students.

A systemwide LoS program addresses the challenges mentioned above and is consistent with instructional approaches used in the areas of music education, athletics, and vocational/technical education. In these cases, educators search for interested students, identify those with high potential based on performance, and develop individual expertise commensurate with the student’s passion. Instructors do not make assumptions about potential talent based solely on test scores. As a student’s skills develop to higher levels, instruction and opportunities for performance become more individualized and challenging.

Let us begin with a story drawn from the experiences of educators working in several districts over more than 30 years (Treffinger, Young, Nassab, & Wittig, 2004; Young, 1998) and a recently concluded study of youth orchestras around the country (Selby & Young, 2001; Young & Selby, 2001a).

### A Composite Music Program

Sunny Meadows is a composite of many K–12 public school districts. It might exist anywhere in the United States. It has six elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school serving approximately 5,000 students across all levels. Each school offers general, vocal, and instrumental music programs.
The Sunny Meadows music program exposes elementary students to music in a variety of ways. Classroom teachers, supported by specialists, survey the music of many cultures and introduce dance, movement, and singing. Music specialists offer instrumental experiences involving simple rhythm and melody instruments. Each year at an assembly, one of the local instrument suppliers demonstrates various band and orchestra instruments. Information packets that outline how the students can sign up for the instrumental program are sent home.

With the support of their parents, many students make an initial commitment to participate in the instrumental program. Not long after that, a shipment of new instruments arrives at the school. The school has “loaner” instruments available for use by those students not financially able to purchase or rent their own. A “pull-out” lesson schedule is established for small groups, and rehearsals for the full band or orchestra are held twice weekly. Other students might join the chorus. Some belong to two groups. Each student begins to progress at his or her own pace.

The Sunny Meadows Middle School’s schedule provides open membership opportunities for participation in band, chorus, and orchestra to any interested student. Parents of children who participated in the elementary music programs review their children’s musical development and interest and make a decision about maintaining membership in one or more of the performing groups and continuing with small-group lessons. Elementary teachers provide input into this decision based on the demonstrated skill and commitment level of the individual child. The staff encourages students with little or no prior experience who wish to join the middle school band or orchestra to take private lessons as a means of catching up. Teachers often pair beginners with more advanced and experienced players as student mentors. Beginning musicians move to a performing group when their skills reach an appropriate level. Membership in advanced groups is by invitation or audition.

The music staff encourages students who exhibit a high level of potential and skill to begin or continue private lessons. They inform students about more demanding opportunities such as regional orchestras and the community band. Highly motivated students are encouraged to pursue their interest at summer camps and to audition for a regional youth orchestra.

At the high school level, parents, students, and teachers again review individual progress and interest in music and decide whether or not the student will continue in the program. Some of them decide to move on to a different area of interest. New students may enter the program because Sunny Meadows High School supports groups suitable for beginning, experienced, and advanced musicians. The curriculum includes opportunities for orchestra, band, choir, and music theory as courses for credit. The most competent and committed students perform in groups of varying sizes within the school and the wider community.

Not all of those involved at the highest performance levels go on to study music at a conservatory or university. They may have other interests. Some excel in math and science. Some are serious writers. Others participate in sports, student government, the debate team, theater, and a wide variety of other activities. These other interests may also influence a student’s long-term goals. A few graduates with a passion for and strong commitment to music choose to study at the postsecondary level, frequently pursuing a career in music. They become teachers, performers, composers, or, in rare instances, directors of professional organizations.

The Levels of Service Approach

The music model used in Sunny Meadows illustrates five essential attributes of the LoS approach to talent development. As with the music program in Sunny Meadows, LoS programming is:

- Flexible: Programming includes many different people, places, and kinds of activities. It does not follow one formula, single curriculum, or set program of activities or services.
- Inclusive: Programming that is appropriate, challenging, and developmental can be available to anyone. Programming includes a broad range of talents and does not serve just one fixed group of students.
- Responsive: Programming responds to the positive needs of students. It guides planning and decision making and leads to modifications of instruction. The mission of programming is to design and deliver instruction through which we can bring out the best in every student.
- Proactive: Programming challenges the teacher, school, district, parents, and community to take constructive actions for talent development. Taking initiative for talent development becomes everyone’s business.
- Unifying: Programming provides a structure and terminology for communicating effectively about talent development within and among home, school, and community.

Instructors do not assume that students who have a great deal of potential in one area have a high level of potential in all areas. Sometimes, students with high potential for music also have high athletic ability and vice versa. High ability in one area does not equate with high ability in other areas. LoS provides a framework for planning, delivering, and managing a wide range of responses to the needs of students.
As shown in Figure 1, there are four levels of service. Level I opportunities include exploratory experiences that allow for strengths, talents, and interests to emerge and be recognized. Students also receive instruction in foundation-building skills and tools for productive thinking. Level I opportunities make up part of the regular instructional program and are available to all students. The Sunny Meadows music program exposed every student to music, both as a spectator and participant. Students had many opportunities to explore a developing musical interest or ability. These opportunities were provided across the system, even into high school, through assemblies and presentations by various student performers.

Level II services are open to many students. For these services, any student might be involved, but not every student will participate. Level II opportunities involve self-selection or voluntary enrollment based on individual interest and demonstrated competence for the specific activity. At Sunny Meadows, students self-select Level II activities, including various performing groups, elective classes, and concert attendance. All who wish to participate are welcome.

Level I and II opportunities are inclusive and usually designed for group participation. Explorations at these levels often help students find a spark that ignites a lifelong passion. At the same time, teachers and parents must be talent spotters, ready to recognize that spark and begin the process of nurturing the potentials it represents. Talent spotting is not always easy. Talents may emerge at varied times and settings depending on the child’s development and the domain in question. In most cases, however, a high level of motivation, intense interest, and the skills necessary to produce at a noticeably higher level than the child’s agemates indicates potential talent (Young, 1995).

Levels III and IV differ in two important ways from Levels I and II. First, the focus shifts from foundation-building opportunities to small group and individual opportunities that respond to the unmet needs of specific students. The second difference involves the students’ activities and participation. Any student might participate in Level I or II opportunities. However, invitations to students for participation in Level III and IV services are based on evidence and data documenting their demonstrated skill and sustained interests along with programming needs. Opportunities extend beyond the regular school program and often occur outside the class or music room in response to unique student needs.

At both the Sunny Meadows Middle and High Schools, some students experience more challenging opportunities at school and in the larger community. These opportunities require a higher level of skill and commitment. In LoS, these experiences would be considered Level III activities. Participation is by audition or invitation based on demonstrated ability to perform at an expected level. Level III instruction, while often focused on group performance, is tailored to the individual’s specific strengths, learning needs, interests, and potentials.
Level IV opportunities are appropriate for only a few students. These services are highly individualized and require an extraordinary level of skill development and commitment. Level IV programming often requires the involvement of highly skilled specialists and a significant financial involvement on the part of parents, the students themselves, or the community through scholarships and fellowships. Available services might include advanced placement in a college or university setting, an apprenticeship, or study with a highly regarded tutor.

In Sunny Meadows, Level IV music programming includes all-state band, chorus, and orchestra and state and county schools for the arts. Students might also participate in summer or full-time residential programs available at universities or conservatories around the country, private lessons with highly skilled professionals, top-level performing organizations such as a regional youth orchestra, and highly focused camps. In order to qualify for these opportunities, students need to demonstrate the skill, knowledge, and commitment necessary to succeed, usually through an intense audition process. Auditions may be followed by in-depth interviews and periods of trial or probation allowing students opportunities to demonstrate their abilities consistently, over time, and at the required level.

Figure 2 summarizes some of the programming parallels between LoS, the music model, and examples of other talent domains. The approach used by many school districts to develop the skills and talents of student athletes also mirrors LoS. Districts offer some physical education beginning in the early grades. Instruction includes games and sports activities designed for all students. Communities also support teams, such as T-ball and soccer, that are open to any interested child. These are similar to Level I and II activities. While engaged in these activities, children discover the extent of their own interest. Some are indifferent, while others enjoy being spectators. Some try out for the various teams at the middle and high school level. Middle and high school coaches design programs to build their teams and to develop individual athletes. Responding to students’ individual skills and developmental needs parallels the LoS approach at Level III. At Level IV, the most outstanding athletes might win scholarships to major universities, and a very few might begin training for the Olympics, coached by nationally known figures in their sport.

Feldhusen (1996) related a story about Ellen, a ninth-grade student, that parallels the LoS approach. By the age of 13, Ellen was a talented creative writer. She skipped first grade due to her advanced reading ability. Ellen’s mother took time to work with her on writing activities, and, in the second grade, Ellen started to show talent for writing. Her teacher provided opportunities for story writing and submitted one of Ellen’s works to a national children’s magazine. The work was accepted and published. Ellen’s parents hired a writing tutor and encouraged her to continue to write and submit her work. Through the years, her parents and teachers spoke often with Ellen about her talents and interests. Providing writing activities for all students (Level I) and then identifying Ellen’s interest and providing her with opportunities (Level II) enabled Ellen to begin the journey toward her full potential. Through her actual performance, Ellen demonstrated her readiness for even more advanced (Level III and IV) opportunities.

Feldhusen (1995) also cited research showing extensive efforts on the part of vocational educators to recognize potential talents among the students enrolled in their classes. These teachers identified specific characteristics that provided evidence of talents among some of their students. They designed special individualized educational opportunities to nurture those recognized talents. Efforts to individualize instruction so that outstanding talent is recognized results in the ability of vocational/technical schools to prepare students for successful careers. Programming in each career area is based on demonstrated skill instead of a single “high-stakes” test. As students demonstrate particular skills and understandings, they are offered instruction at the next highest level.

LoS and Talent Identification

Bloom (1985) concluded, based on studies of talented people’s lives, that many children in every society have a high degree of talent potential that can be nurtured by parents, family, community members, and teachers. He believed that early recognition, along with efforts to facilitate a child’s individual talents, is vital to the child’s ability to realize his or her full potential. LoS offers an approach to gifted education that allows for the identification of potential talent over a broad range of endeavors, while providing the depth of instruction and discipline needed for the development of talents at the highest level.

Many elements of talent identification at Sunny Meadows are similar to the LoS approach. Selection results from a process that involves the child, parents, school personnel, and professionals in the field. The process typically begins with exposure and is driven, at least in part, by the student’s level of motivation. An ongoing assessment of the student’s strengths is built into the delivery of programming. A student moves on to more demanding material and participation based on a demonstrated ability to benefit from instruction and participation at that next higher level. Seldom, if
ever, within the music model of talent identification and development is a student required to take a standardized test in order to achieve the next level of instruction or participation. In a similar fashion, differentiated programming in the LoS approach does not result from a high-stakes, one-size-fits-all test. As a result, identification has meaning beyond the act of “qualifying as gifted or not gifted.” It is an ongoing process of both identifying and developing the strengths and needs of students in order to provide an appropriate, challenging, and developmental program of instruction (Treffinger, Young, Nassab, & Wittig, 2002). Figure 3 summarizes the essential qualities of effective programming based on the concept of providing appropriate, challenging, and developmental services.

**Table 1:** Levels of Service and Programming Parallels Between LoS and the Music Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Service</th>
<th>The Music Model</th>
<th>Other Talent Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level I: Services for All</td>
<td><strong>Music Model Exposure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Other Exposure Examples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Instruction builds foundations and basic skills in the area of study</td>
<td>● All students are exposed to music in a variety of ways</td>
<td>● All students receive instruction in specific content areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Exploratory experiences are part of the regular instruction program, usually in group settings</td>
<td>● Students gain a basic familiarity with musical terms and notation</td>
<td>● Students take part in developmentally appropriate science experiments and creative writing lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Talents, strengths, interests allowed to emerge</td>
<td>● Students explore as audience members and music makers</td>
<td>● Students attend science and theater assemblies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level II: Services for Many</td>
<td><strong>Voluntary Participation Music Model</strong></td>
<td><strong>Voluntary Participation Other Examples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Activities and instruction are open to all but not all will participate</td>
<td>● All students are invited to join a vocal or instrumental group</td>
<td>● All students are invited to join the science, literary, or drama clubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Activities are inclusive usually involving group participation</td>
<td>● Music electives are provided in upper grades</td>
<td>● Specialized science, creative writing, and theater electives are offered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Activities allow for a closer exploration of the subject and of the student’s level of interest and motivation</td>
<td>● All students are provided opportunities to attend special performances</td>
<td>Science fairs, special trips, and theatrical presentations are open to all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level III: Services for Some</td>
<td><strong>Limited Participation Music Model</strong></td>
<td><strong>Limited Participation Other Examples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Activities and instructional programming are offered based on evaluation of the student’s specific learning needs and performance</td>
<td>● Performing group membership is based on audition</td>
<td>● Successful science projects are selected for presentation at larger venues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Services are provided individually as well as in small and large groups</td>
<td>● Memberships are available in community based groups and other selective performance venues</td>
<td>● Creative writing pieces are selected for publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Activities and mentoring are provided outside of the regular school program</td>
<td>● Student learning needs are continually assessed in private lessons</td>
<td>● Students are selected for roles in school or community theatrical productions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level IV: Services for a Few</td>
<td><strong>Targeted Programming Music Model</strong></td>
<td><strong>Targeted Programming Other Examples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Opportunities are developed in response to the unique skills and needs of each student</td>
<td>● All-state band, chorus, and orchestra supported</td>
<td>● Students belong to various clubs and organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Relationships are established with mentors who are highly successful in their field</td>
<td>● Governor’s or county school for the arts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2

Programming Parallels Between LoS and the Music Model
Appropriate
- Especially well-suited
- Consistent with needs and characteristics
- “Fits” well
- Makes sense
- Wisely and carefully-designed
- Compatible

Challenging
- Invitingly provocative
- Arousing competitive interest, thought, or action
- Energizing and stimulating; exciting and motivational
- Expanding, “stretching”
- Forward-looking
- Capacity-building
- Inspiring, stirs passion and intense involvement

Developmental
- Designed to assist or encourage growth
- Gradually becoming manifest or apparent
- Helping to bring about improvement
- Making active and available
- Enabling progress or advancement to new or higher levels

Figure 3
Essential Qualities of Effective Programming

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makes sense, and is wisely—and carefully—designed.

*Challenging* describes invitingly provocative experiences, those that arouse competitive interest, thought, or action. Challenging programming energizes, stimulates, or stretches the student. It involves inspirational, forward-looking, and capacity-building experiences. These experiences stir the learner’s passion and promote intense and sustained involvement.

*Developmental* programming is designed to make a student’s unique characteristics active and available. It involves making the student’s strengths and interests visible or manifest through a process of planned instruction and activities. Developmental programming expands opportunities for constructing an essential foundation upon which to build more effective use of a student’s strengths and sustained interests, thus enabling them to develop into unique talents.

In the LoS approach, identifying and nurturing students’ strengths, talents, interests, and potentials begins when a school offers a wide variety of exploratory activities to all students. Teachers create and maintain stimulating classrooms, rich in exploration and discovery. They become talent spotters working in partnership with students and parents to identify the personal characteristics of each student. With support from the district’s talent development specialists, schools design programs that expand students’ horizons. They provide some of these programs to all the students. Others, such as special projects, club activities, and field trips, while open to all, feature participation by those students with interests heightened by the nature of the activity.

During Level I and II activities, staff members guide students in discovering and understanding their strengths and interests. Students participate in various invitational activities designed to provide opportunities for them to engage in firsthand experiences. These experiences allow students to test their motivation, competence, and commitment. Students can keep a portfolio of their work and record their reflections about their experiences in a journal, and teachers can document individual success on self-selected projects.

While students begin to keep a record of their work, staff members work to collect data and build a profile for students whose needs go beyond the regular program. This group will be comprised of some, not all, of the students who have shown an interest in the field and may be based in part on demonstrations of the level of knowledge and skill that would allow the student to benefit from more rigorous experiences. Testing in the specific area of interest might be part of an overall assessment of the student’s learning needs, but it does not comprise the entire profile. The profile might include examples of the student’s work, an assessment of cognitive or learning styles, observations by staff and parents, and any activities within the larger community that might support Level III or IV opportunities.

**Key Elements for Talent Development**

Research (Selby & Young, 2001; Young & Selby, 2001b) on the youth orchestra movement and the LoS approach to talent development has identified five key elements with implications for schools, students, and parents. These keys apply to the process of talent development in any area of endeavor.
Help students to become aware of and explore talent areas. Talent development starts with an exposure to a talent area. Teachers, parents, or students can choose an area for exploration. Initial awareness of the area can happen at any age and take any form. Exploratory experiences in which children might discover or develop strengths can take place at home, in school, or in the community. It is important that children have the time and opportunity necessary to develop a sustained interest, but that interest should not be forced. Interests are stimulated by friends, relatives, school and community activities and resources, and a child's own questions and exploration.

Recognize the benefits of discipline. High-level accomplishment requires self-discipline. Children need to build an understanding of the word discipline, that goes beyond the negative connotations. They must learn the basics and fundamentals in an area to build a strong foundation for sustained involvement and acquisition or expertise in that area. Developing talent requires staying on course, setting short- and long-term goals, and periodically monitoring progress and making necessary adjustments. Students must learn how to analyze, evaluate, and make decisions about ideas and how to discover and approach problems. Independent thinkers are persistent and committed to their passion. They are intrinsically motivated and improvement-oriented. They are able, with help, to set realistic goals for the development of their talent, and to set priorities in relation to other life goals.

Be prepared to invest time, energy, and resources. High-level attainment requires ongoing support and encouragement and many years of investment in studying and learning the content of a field. This investment often includes support for formal training and lessons outside school. It requires collaboration among the home, school personnel, and community resources. Children need help in learning to balance their time between various areas of interest, in establishing the nature and depth of their commitment to the talent area, and in clarifying the role and responsibilities of each stakeholder.

Look for ways to provide appropriate and challenging learning experiences. Collaboration among parents, students, teachers, private instructors, and gifted specialists is crucial for ensuring appropriate and challenging learning experiences for young people. Instruction helps students to acquire skill, technique, and accuracy in their chosen area of interest. Support may be needed when interest seems to drift or skill development stalls. An appropriate challenge requires consistent practice, resulting in mastery or success and leading to the next level. As students progress, they benefit from participating with others interested in their area both in and outside of the school. Positive results from increased participation in an area help develop skill and knowledge, build a personal sense of accomplishment, and guide students in planning subsequent challenges to prepare them for the next level of accomplishment.

Be alert for transformational experiences. During their adolescent years, youth build competence and skill, confidence in their growth, and commitment to continue developing expertise in their chosen area. Students often attend a variety of high-level summer programs where their interest in the area becomes stronger through identification with peers and experts in the field. Such programs can be a transformational experience for them. Many meet and exchange experiences with a large number of their peers with similar interests and high levels of talent development. They come away from the event with a different view of themselves and their field. They express a strong commitment to strive for excellence. They face decisions about how the area fits into their long-term plans. Deciding to become a professional in an area involves identifying one’s primary strengths, interests, and passions.

These keys remind us that students need opportunities to learn at different rates and in different ways. Parents and teachers can provide a great deal of support, guidance, and encouragement throughout the talent development process. They must monitor students’ growth carefully and respond in appropriate and challenging ways to ensure ongoing talent development.

Roles, Responsibilities, Opportunities, and Challenges in LoS

In the LoS approach, the home, school, and community all play important roles in recognizing, nurturing, and celebrating talents. There are several important responsibilities and challenges for students, parents, and communities to consider in programming for talent development (Young, 2000).

The role of students in LoS involves task commitment and self-direction. Their responsibilities include demonstrating an eagerness to learn, a willingness to work hard at their interests, and a desire to create. They display curiosity, asking questions and seeking answers about their areas of interest. They seek awareness and understanding of their own strengths and style preferences. These roles and responsibilities lead to several challenges for students. For example, they must determine how to:

- gain access to resources;
- be confident and courageous in pursuing their goals and purposes, despite obstacles; and
- juggle or balance school commitments or requirements with their personal interests.

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The Levels of Service Approach

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LoS involves the commitment and support of the home and community, as well as the school. Parents can provide opportunities for exploration. They can advise and guide their children throughout their development and provide a safe environment for their growth. They might provide resources (e.g., materials, lessons, trips). They might help their children set career plans and goals. Parents also might help their children explore their own talents and interests as a path to success while exercising caution not to impose their own ideas about what the child considers important. Some of the challenges faced by parents include deciding how to

• locate and provide many opportunities and resources;
• explore possibilities together; and
• remain supportive and open to the child’s self-understanding and self-direction.

In LoS, talent development is a basic commitment of schools and teachers. Offering appropriate, challenging, and developmental learning opportunities requires schools to provide people, time, places, and many kinds of resources and activities. The school’s responsibilities include identifying student interests, using internal and community resources, and respecting varied strengths, talents, and learning styles. Educators can talk with and listen to their students in order to understand their unique characteristics and needs. They can form partnerships with parents and others in the community to respond to students’ varied talents. Some of the challenges faced by schools and teachers include determining how to

• act like “talent spotters” (actively looking for students’ strengths, talents, and interests; Young, 1995);
• act like “talent developers” (providing experiences that enable students’ talents to grow); and
• link classroom learning with out-of-school events, places, materials, and people.

Talents and multiple talents emerge from sustained involvement in an area of strong interest and may be developed in many worthwhile areas. The LoS approach to programming for talent development can enable gifted and talented specialists and classroom teachers to identify and nurture high-level talent across a broad spectrum as part of the regular school program. With the LoS approach, one size does not fit all. Educators can design programs to fit students, rather than identify students to fit a program. They might ask the question, “In what way is this student talented?” rather than “Is this student really talented?” They might follow that with the question, “What kind of programming does this student need?” rather than “Does this student need programming?” They can focus on creating opportunities for students to discover their strengths and interests. Through appropriate and challenging programming, gifted and talented specialists and classroom teachers can empower students to develop and use all the talents they possess.

References