REFLECTIONS
on Gifted Education

Critical Works by
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and Colleagues

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Hawker Brownlow
EDUCATION

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PART V
Contemporary Issues, Challenges, and Commentary

Examining the Challenges and Caveats of Change in Gifted Education

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Conflicts between incompatible, staunchly held, sincere beliefs make up what we may call the little wars of science, little wars which, except for size and consequences differ in pattern no whit from the big wars between nations.

—Edwin G. Boring, *History, Psychology, and Science*

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Introduction From Joe

Changing beliefs, practices, and policy in any field are always a challenge. You need only look at the biographical accounts of people in all fields of human endeavor who have tried to make changes to understand how professionally risky even mild recommendations for changing the *status quo* can be. The "little wars" that Boring mentions in the above quote are necessary for our field to grow, but the value of change must go beyond conflicting papers, competing theories, and passionate seminar debates. The real payoff of any new idea is how it affects the practices that take place in the classrooms and programs that

serve the young people who are the object of our work in gifted education. It is easy to criticize an idea or theory, but practical applications yield data that are subject to a wide range of evaluative criteria that go beyond unverified speculation. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and therefore we have tried to include in this book as much practical information as is possible.

Although my collective work is best known for the systems and models for change that my colleagues and I have developed over the years, an equal and perhaps even greater focus has been devoted to how practical materials, strategies, and professional development interact with research-based findings to bring about the change processes. This chapter describes "where I'm coming from" so far as the always-challenging process of change is concerned, how one goes about introducing new ideas in the field of gifted education, and dealing with the inevitable criticism that usually accompanies new ideas, particularly those that challenge the services that traditionally have been provided in gifted education programs. This chapter hopefully will set the stage for the chapters that follow.

My former advisor and I got together over a bottle of bourbon for late-night discussions at almost every conference following the completion of my doctoral degree at the University Virginia in 1966. Dr. Virgil S. Ward was the most respected and best-known theorist in the field at the time and as the years went by and my work started to gain some attention, he would always ask, "How do you account for the *popularity* of your work?" Implicit in his inquiry was that "popularity" was not necessarily a good thing if the work was not "theoretically based" and was fond of citing many other "trendy" educational programs that did not have what he called "a strong underlying theory."

Many others have asked the same question over the years. Although there is no easy answer to the question about popularity, an oversimplification might be that I believe practice should drive theory development rather than the other way around and that research should be a part of an ongoing process directed toward theory development. The Practice-Research-Theory Cycle depicted in Figure 1.1 is an approach that has worked for me because the ultimate consumer or end-user of my work has been the education practitioner and ultimately, students in school learning situations. When all is said and done, most of my approach to change is based on the belief that *teachers know* the most about what will work in classrooms. Like all academicians, however, there is a need to gain respect among the scholarly community and administrators who always raise the question, "Where is the research?" If my work has achieved "popularity" beyond the common sense that it makes to teachers, it is also because there are volumes of easily accessible research studies underlying the approaches I have recommended.
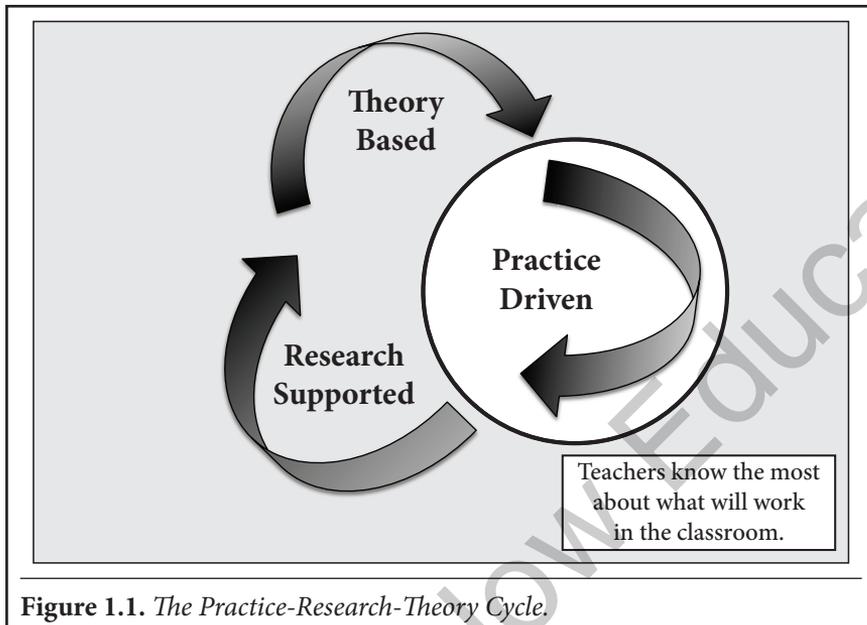
Figure 1.1. *The Practice-Research-Theory Cycle.*

However, the number of articles in refereed journals or presentations at prestigious research conferences, while important for academic respectability, are only important to me as part of the Practice-Research-Theory Cycle for making changes in schools and classrooms. Thus, for example, when I argue in the Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness theory that "task commitment" based on strong interests is an essential part of developing high-level talent, the pragmatism that is an equally important part of my way of thinking led to years of research development on a series of instruments called Interest-A-Lyzers.

Although I have contributed some major theories (or models) to the field, all of the theories had their origins in firsthand experiences from my years in the classroom and the countless brilliant teaching practices that I have observed over the years on the parts of persons with whom I have had the opportunity to work. These practices usually resulted in one or more research studies to provide the empirical support that is necessary in the evidence-base orientation so pervasive in fulfilling the criteria for academic credibility. The research enabled us to advocate or make suggestions for practice and additional research, ultimately leading to the formulation or reexamination of a theory (or model) that would both guide practice and generate further research.

If I were to come back in another life, I would like to spend a majority of my time studying the elusive process of change. How does any idea become popular, gain academic respectability and sustainability over an extended period of time, and produce verifiable results in planned learning situations?