DEFINING GIFTEDNESS

For many years, psychologists and psychometricians, following in the footsteps of Lewis Terman in 1916, equated giftedness with high IQ. In the early 2000s, this legacy is beginning to dissipate, but in some states, giftedness is still defined as an IQ of 130 or above, and this type of score is required for identification of gifted students. Research, however, from 1975 to 2005 supports a broadened conception of giftedness (Sternberg & Davidson, 1986; 2005). Most of these researchers define giftedness as a combination of multiple qualities; in addition to intellectual factors, such features as motivation and creativity are considered key qualities in many of these broadened conceptions of giftedness.

Bloom and his associates at the University of Chicago engaged in a study of the development of talent in children, examining the processes by which young people under 35 who reached the highest levels of accomplishment in academics, the arts, and sports developed their capabilities. Bloom and his associates found that the following factors play a role in the development of talent: the home environment, which develops the work ethic and the importance of doing one's best at all times; the encouragement of parents in a highly approved talent field; the involvement of families and teachers; and the presence of achievement and progress, which are necessary to maintain a commitment to talent over a decade of increasingly difficult learning (Bloom, 1985, pp. 508–509).

The importance of development throughout the lifespan of the individual is reinforced by most developmental and educational psychologists who study giftedness, as is the domain-specific nature of giftedness. Gifted individuals are seen as those who can excel usually in one domain, providing that the environmental factors enable this excellence to develop.

Joseph Renzulli's (1978) three-ring definition of gifted behavior is a widely recognized example of a multi-faceted and expanded conceptualization of giftedness. Renzulli (1978; 1986; 2005) defines gifted behaviors as composed of three components as follows.

Gifted behavior consists of behaviors that reflect an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—above average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Individuals capable of developing gifted behavior are those possessing or capable of developing this composite
set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance. Persons who manifest or are capable of developing an interaction among the three clusters require a wide variety of educational opportunities and services that are not ordinarily provided through regular instructional programs (Renzulli & Reis, 1997, p. 8).

The U.S. government subscribed to a multifaceted approach to giftedness as early as 1972 when the Marland Report definition was passed (Public Law 91–230, section 806) (Marland, 1972). This U.S. Department of Education definition has dominated most states' definitions of giftedness and talents. As of 2007 the federal definition, cited in National Excellence, the national report on the status of gifted and talented education, is as follows:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (O'Connell-Ross, 1993, p. 26)

Though many school districts adopt this or other broad definitions as their district's operational definition, most focus solely on intellectual ability when both identifying and serving students, and few provide programs for students with talents and gifts in the areas of creativity, the arts, leadership, and specific academic fields. Common themes that emerge in any discussion of how to define giftedness include the need to identify the domain that serves as the basis of one's definition, whether individual or societal; the essential role that cognitive abilities and motivation play in giftedness; the importance of the developmental course of one's talents for whether or how they are expressed; and the inevitability of how one's abilities emerge and interact with educational, societal, and chance factors.

ASSESSMENT AND IDENTIFICATION OF GIFTEDNESS

Assessment and identification of gifted and talented students occurs using various methods and instruments that vary from state to state. Students are usually identified for gifted programs based on assessments of their abilities and achievement, and their creativity and motivation are often considered as well. In most school districts, an attempt is made to use multiple criteria for identification of students involving nationally normed standardized tests, as well as other measures of academic achievement, creativity, and motivation.

Classroom teachers usually nominate students for gifted programs, and children are usually referred on an ongoing basis. In addition to teacher nomination, many districts accept nominations from the student (self-referral), the parent, a peer, or from others, such as a psychologist, community members, principal, or a gifted students' coordinator. The following are usually used for assessment: group aptitude or achievement tests; various assessments of creativity or motivation; individually administered tests; auditions or performances; displays of work; and teacher of parent checklists or rating scales.

Identification of students for gifted and talented programs is usually completed using a comprehensive assessment of the child's abilities and potentials rather than simple IQ testing. The rationale for assessment typically centers on the need for developing an understanding of a child's relative strengths and how these relate to educational settings and matching children's strengths with appropriate educational programs.
There are usually three stages in the identification process. The first is nomination, which includes gathering student data from a variety of sources, including teacher, parent, and peer nominations; grades; portfolios; observations; review of student records; and outstanding products or performances. All students are involved in the pre-assessment pool to ensure equal access to screening and further assessment by all district children, including culturally or linguistically diverse children, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, children with disabilities, and children for whom English is a second language.

The second stage is usually screening when the data gathered from the pre-assessment stage is examined to
determine if additional assessment is necessary. In making decisions about additional assessment, existing test data for students is not the sole determining criterion. School personnel examine all available information about a student to determine if an evidence of possible giftedness exists for that student, and they conduct necessary additional assessment.

The third stage is final identification, when additional assessment has been completed, the data obtained throughout the stages of identification are evaluated, the identification decision is made, and student's educational needs are determined. The most important part of identification is to consider the purposes for identification and the match with the resulting program.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTEDNESS**

Multiple lists of characteristics of giftedness exist but the most common characteristics are summarized below using Renzulli’s definition of giftedness in Table 1.
Renzulli and Reis (1997) recommend the development of a continuum of services to challenge the diverse learning and affective needs of gifted and talented students. This continuum provides services that range from general enrichment across all grade levels, to curriculum differentiation opportunities for both enrichment and acceleration, to advanced classes and individualized research, as well as counseling and other services to meet affective needs. Two considerations exist when a district-wide continuum of services for academically and artistically gifted and talented students is developed.

The first consideration is organizational, relating to where and when students will be provided with services to meet their advanced learning needs and how and when different grade level students will be grouped together in or across different schools. For example, gifted and talented students can be grouped by instructional level in both elementary and middle schools. They can be cluster grouped in one or more content areas across classrooms and assigned to classes with teachers who have had professional development and use strategies to meet their learning needs. Separate classes can be provided for gifted students at any grade level. Interventions to attempt to reverse underachievement can be incorporated into counseling options either during or after school at the high school level. Students can have opportunities for advanced project work after school or during a time that their curriculum has been compacted. The second consideration in the development of a district-wide continuum of services relates to curriculum and learning opportunities, as decisions must be made about what will be taught and why and whether acceleration opportunities will be made available. Other questions to consider include whether the regular curriculum will be extended with enrichment or whether it will be compacted and replaced with teacher-selected advanced content and whether students will have the opportunity to pursue their personal interests using independent study.

Both of these considerations should be addressed as a continuum of services is developed. If organizational structures are the only component addressed in a district-wide continuum of services, little thought will have been extended to essential instructional and curricular decisions. For example, if students are grouped into a separate class for gifted students without any advanced or accelerated curriculum or instruction, little justifiable reason exists for that instructional grouping. If a large percentage of gifted students are underachieving and are not able to participate in advanced classes or are dropping out of school, an expansion of a district continuum of services should be considered to include more affective and counseling services.

Establishing opportunities for enrichment across the grade levels and differentiation in all classrooms are one way to begin the development of a continuum of services that range from some level of service in the regular classroom setting to a separate school or center for gifted learners. School-based gifted programs should offer a diverse set of learning opportunities. Resource room programs enable teachers to send out students from their regular classrooms to spend time with other high potential students to enable them to work on in-depth, advanced independent study projects and group projects in their interest areas. In some districts, students have the opportunity to travel to a center one day each week to work with other identified gifted and talented students on advanced curriculum or to pursue individual interests.

Curriculum compacting and differentiation is also suggested to accommodate the learning needs of advanced students. In a national study on compacting, the use of compacting to differentiate curriculum and eliminate previously mastered work was used with hundreds of gifted and high-ability students. Compacting is one component of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) (Renzulli, 1977; Renzulli & Reis, 1985, 1997) that is widely implemented as an enrichment program used with academically gifted
and talented students. This talent development approach provides enriched learning experiences and higher learning standards for all children through three goals: developing talents in all children, providing a broad range of advanced-level enrichment experiences for all students, and follow-up advanced learning for children based on interests. This SEM focuses on enrichment for all students through engagement, in enjoyable, challenging learning experiences and enhancement of students' interests.

Renzulli Learning, a 2006 innovation to challenge gifted and talented learners in classrooms and in separate gifted programs, is an online system designed to use strength-based assessment and differentiated learning experiences for gifted and talented students. The online assessment, which takes about 30 minutes, results in a printed profile that highlights individual student strengths and is accompanied by a differentiation search engine that selects hundreds of resources that relate specifically to each student's interests, learning styles, and product styles.

VARIATIONS IN GIFTEDNESS

Unfortunately, the majority of young people participating in gifted and talented programs across the country continue to represent the majority culture, most likely because identification and selection procedures may be ineffective and inappropriate for the identification of these young people (Frasier & Passow, 1994). Limited referrals and nominations of students who are minorities or from other unrepresented groups affect their eventual placement in programs. Test bias and inappropriateness have been mentioned as reasons for the continued reliance on traditional identification approaches.

In addition to students from economically disadvantaged populations, variations in gifted students include students from minority and cultural groups, as well as gifted students with various disabilities such as learning disabilities, visual and hearing impairments, and physical handicaps. Special programs, strategies, and identification procedures have been suggested for many of these groups; however, much progress still remains to be made to achieve equity for these underrepresented groups. Baum (1990) has identified four important approaches for handling gifted students with learning disabilities: encourage compensation strategies, encourage awareness of strengths and weaknesses, focus on developing the child’s gift, and provide an environment that values individual differences.

Underachieving gifted learners, especially young people with high ability, whose performance fall noticeably short of potential, present the most bewildering and perhaps the most frustrating of all challenges to teachers and parents. One cause of underachievement in gifted or high potential students is the inappropriate curriculum and content which some of them encounter on a daily basis. The hundreds of hours spent each month in classrooms in which students rarely encounter new or challenging curriculum, the boredom of being assigned routine tasks mastered much earlier, the low levels of discussion, and the mismatch of content to students' ability lead to frustration on the parts of many of the brightest students. Reis and McCoach (2000) identified specific characteristics of gifted underachievers and recommended numerous strategies that can be used to reverse underachievement of gifted and talented students. This research may provide helpful insights for educators regarding the performance of some of their underachieving gifted students.

See also: Intelligence: An Overview, Special Education

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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