Introduction to Identification of Students for Gifted and Talented Programs

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It is better to have imprecise answers to the right questions than precise answers to the wrong questions.

—Donald Campbell

How to identify students for participation in programs for the gifted and talented continues to be one of the most widely discussed and debated topics in the field. The fourteen seminal articles from *Gifted Child Quarterly* in this volume represent a cross-section of research and commentary about key ideas and concepts that attempt to lend both wisdom and clarity to important concerns about identification, and of course, these ideas also relate to the conceptions of giftedness discussed in volume one of the series. Both theoretical and practical relationships exist between the definitions and conceptions of giftedness and talent and issues related to identification. This relationship represents a good point of departure for two of the main issues that should guide all identification processes and which are discussed in varying contexts by the authors of articles about identification.

THEORY-BASED IDENTIFICATION

The first point is that how one defines or conceptualizes giftedness should be the theoretical rationale underlying an identification system, and this rationale, in turn, should guide the selection criteria for identification instruments and the ways in which instruments are used in identification practices. Conceptions of giftedness can be viewed as existing along a continuum ranging from a very conservative or restricted view of giftedness to a more flexible or multi-dimensional approach. The conservative view, which dominated thought and therefore identification practices throughout the early part of the past century, focused almost exclusively on IQ test scores or other measures of cognitive ability. It was not uncommon to observe IQ cut-off scores as being the sole criterion for entrance into gifted programs, and many of the guidelines and regulations developed by state agencies and school districts reflected this conservative tradition. Even in cases where multi-criteria were used as the first step (screening) in a two-phase identification process, the second step (selection) continued to be based on individual intelligence test scores. This approach has frequently fallen prey to what I have sometimes referred to as a "multi-criteria smoke screen" because it gives the impression of examining a broader range of indicators of potential, but in most cases high grades in regular schoolwork, teacher ratings, or other criteria only served the purpose of earning the student a "ticket" to take an individual intelligence test. This approach is mendacious because it gives the *appearance* of multi-criteria identification, when in reality it is one-dimensional, and therefore very restrictive when it comes to the potential value of a broader range of criteria. And the "gems of wisdom" that might be uncovered in the process of collecting a broader range of identification information are, in effect, thrown into the trash if the student does not reach a predetermined cut-off level on a cognitive ability test.

Jack Birch points out this dilemma in his article titled "Is *Any* Identification Procedure Necessary?" He suggests that " . . . we need to explore the broader context within which the child functions and which includes social, personal, and cultural factors which contribute much to the shaping of academic abilities, limitations, special interests and potentials" (Birch, 1984, p. 158). Other authors of these seminal articles echo this message (e.g., Callahan, 1982; Torrance, 1984; Borland & Wright, 1994), and a general theme of the section calls into question over-reliance on intelligence test scores. Persons contributing to this section are not arguing that intelligence test scores are *un*important! Most agree that intelligence tests and other cognitive ability tests provide us with one very important form of information about one dimension of a young person's potential, mainly in the areas of verbal and analytic skills. Nor are these authors arguing that cognitive ability tests should be dropped from the identification process. Rather, the argument is that (1) other indicators of potential should be used for identification, (2) these indicators should be given equal consideration when it comes to making final decisions about which students will be candidates for special services, and (3) in the final analysis, it is the thoughtful judgment of

knowledgeable professionals rather than instruments and cut-off scores that should guide selection decisions.

Another issue addressed by these authors is what has been variously referred to as the distinction between (1) convergent and divergent thinking (Guilford, 1967; Torrance, 1984), (2) entrenchment and non-entrenchment (Sternberg, 1982a, 1982b), and (3) schoolhouse giftedness vs. creative/productive giftedness (Renzulli, 1982; Renzulli & Delcourt, 1986). Conservatives have generally favored explaining giftedness in terms of performance that is more convergent or entrenched and of the schoolhouse variety.

Schoolhouse giftedness is the kind most easily measured by standardized ability tests and performance in traditional curricular pursuits, and therefore the type most conveniently used for selecting students for special programs. The competencies young people display on cognitive ability tests are exactly the kinds of abilities most valued in traditional school learning situations, especially those situations that focus on analytic skills rather than creative or practical skills. Research has shown a high correlation between schoolhouse giftedness and the likelihood of getting high grades in school. Research has also shown that superior lesson learning and test taking remain stable over time. These results should lead us to some very obvious conclusions about schoolhouse giftedness: it exists in varying degrees; it easily can be identified through standardized tests, teacher ratings, course grades, and informal assessment techniques; and we should therefore do everything in our power to make appropriate modifications for students who have the ability to cover regular curricular material at advanced rates and levels of understanding than their age peers. We should also remember, however, that the abilities people display in traditional lesson-learning situations bear a striking resemblance to the factors measured on typical cognitive ability tests; in today's atmosphere of high-stakes testing and the corresponding emphasis that is given to "test prep," this relationship grows stronger. Both research and our everyday experiences (i.e., common sense) verify the strong relationships between efficient lesson learning and high test scores. An examination of rapid progress through the regular curriculum (as determined by course grades and teacher judgment) should be a major consideration in identification and service delivery decisions regardless of standardized test scores.

Although schoolhouse giftedness should be valued and accommodated in any service delivery model, mainly through curriculum modification and replacement techniques, at lease equal attention should be devoted to creative productive giftedness. Creative productive giftedness describes those aspects of human activity and involvement where a premium is placed on the development of original ideas, where student interests are taken into consideration, where investigative methodology is a central focus of learning, and where products, artistic expressions, and areas of knowledge that are purposefully designed to have an impact on one or more target audiences is the rationale for organizing learning experiences. Learning situations that are designed to promote creative productive giftedness emphasize the use and *application* of

knowledge and thinking processes in an integrated, inductive, and real-problem oriented manner. The role of the student is transformed from that of a learner of prescribed lessons and consumer of information to one in which he or she approximates the *modus operandi* of the first-hand inquirer. These types of student involvement are consistent with the roles that gifted persons have played in society.

The importance of creative productive giftedness raises critical questions so far as identification is concerned. Whereas lesson learning giftedness, which is mainly accounted for in measures of cognitive ability, tends to remain stable over time, persons do not always display maximum creativity, task commitment, or other traits that lead to creative productive giftedness. Highly creative and productive people have peaks and valleys of high-level output. Some persons have commented that the valleys are as necessary as the peaks, because they allow for reflection, regeneration, and the accumulation of input for subsequent endeavors. Similarly, creative productive giftedness tends to be contextual or domain specific. While there certainly have been a small number of "Renaissance" men and women who have gained recognition for work in several fields, the overwhelming number of persons who have been recognized for their outstanding contributions have almost always achieved in a single field or domain. The history of human accomplishment, and especially research about the accomplishments of persons who have made important contributions to the arts, sciences, and all other areas of human progress (Renzulli, 1978, 1986) tells us that divergent thinking, non-entrenchment, and creative productive giftedness are types of giftedness that are most valued by society. Once again, these types of giftedness are not as easily identified as schoolhouse giftedness, but the authors of this section seem to agree that the convenience of easy and so-called objective measurements should not be the driving force behind an identification system. In a certain sense, making a decision to determine giftedness on the basis of a single, one hour cognitive ability test is about as subjective as one can get!

Implications about the temporal and contextual nature of creative productive giftedness are clear, but perhaps discomforting, at least to persons who have a need to state unequivocally on the first day of school that a student is gifted or not gifted. Although conceptions of giftedness have changed dramatically over the past quarter century, conservative ideologies still have appeal to persons who believe that giftedness is an absolute construct (you are either gifted or not gifted, and nothing will ever change your status). In some cases, conservatives give the guru-like illusion that they have within themselves a magical power to proclaim whether or not a child is gifted. If you ask a conservative what is the basis for his or her determination that a person "is truly gifted" in the absolute sense, his/her response almost always falls into one or a combination of two categories. The first response usually alludes to IQ scores. This response is frequently followed by a description of something the youngster did—wrote an outstanding story, developed an Internet web site, demonstrated leadership in a particular situation. These accomplishments of young people draw upon something they did or produced, and in recognizing

productivity as a manifestation of giftedness it is self-evident that characteristics in addition to cognitive ability come into play. In some cases non-cognitive characteristics such as motivation, creativity, passionate interests, physical and mental energy, and a sense of power to change things are more influential in carrying out complicated projects than cognitive abilities. No one, to my knowledge, has ever said, "you have to produce a product to be gifted," and as mentioned above, even conservatives allude to productivity in making a case for who is and is not gifted. But products created by young people serve as vehicles through which gifted behaviors are developed and enhanced, and thus their role is an important part of the rationale of the developmentalists for a broader set of identification criteria.

Developmentalists, persons at the opposite end of the continuum from conservatives, might best be described as those who believe that giftedness is not "fixed" in an individual, but rather is developed in certain people (not all people), at certain times (not all the time), and under certain circumstances (not in all circumstances). And contrary to accusations of the conservatives, developmentalists do not argue that "all children are gifted" or that we can create giftedness in all young people. They do, however, argue and support through research (Reis & Renzulli, 1982) that we can develop gifted behaviors in a larger proportion of the school population than the three to five percent usually selected by test scores.

What are the implications for identification between the conservative and developmental points of view? Conservatives clearly have the appearance of objectivity on their side; they also have appeal to regulation writers and those who like the administrative "tidiness" that makes test score cut-off approaches appealing. And those seductive story tellers who pander to parents on the speaker's circuit would lose a good part of their consulting fees if they couldn't assure audiences that they know with certainty who is "truly gifted."

The authors in this section are in universal agreement about broader conceptions of giftedness and a developmental perspective that provides more flexible identification procedures. But they also realize that "body count" funding formulas (x dollars per identified gifted child) and concerns about objectivity require creative approaches to identification. In recent years the research on broadened conceptions of giftedness has led several state departments of education to introduce more flexibility into their guidelines, and even in states with relatively rigid guidelines, there are greater efforts to provide waivers and interpret guidelines more flexibly.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROGRAM AND IDENTIFICATION

Feldhusen, Asher, and Hoover (1984) point out what might be called the golden rule of identification—"The careful determination of program goals will set the direction for the entire identification process" (1984, p. 149). At the secondary

level most programs are organized around specific domains or aptitudes, and this focus on content area goals has identification implications. Benbow and Minor's research shows that " . . . global indicators of intellectual functioning may exclude too many nonverbally gifted students, who appear to be less balanced than verbally gifted students in their cognitive development" (1990, p. 21). If a program is based, for example, on performance in accelerated mathematics courses, then it makes sense to use mathematics aptitude test scores and math grades as a central focus in the identification process. The same can be said for other special aptitudes (e.g., arts, creative writing, technology). But if creative productivity is part of intended goals and outcomes within specific content areas, then a blend of grades and aptitude scores can be combined with samples of student work, teacher ratings, and other criteria that reflect how students have applied their aptitudes to situations in which creative productivity was an intended outcome. It is difficult to imagine, for example, how an art program would not use portfolios or a drama program would not use auditions (as opposed to test scores) to determine the best possible candidates. In certain areas, performance criteria may be the single best form of identification information. Although teacher ratings have emerged as a widely used identification criterion, Clark's study of visually talented students raises questions about teacher ratings in this specific performance area: "One of the interesting findings of this research is a lack of correlation between age and performance on drawing tasks and teacher ratings" (1989, p. 102).

At the elementary level most programs do not have a specific aptitude focus; the typical pull-out program is usually a combination of various thinking skill activities and teacher-selected units that deal with topics not ordinarily covered in the regular curriculum. Regardless of what takes place in the program, the larger goals and outcomes of the program should influence identification decisions. Does the program merely strive to increase students' knowledge acquisition? Is creative productivity and the application of knowledge a major outcome? Are leadership skills and affective development important goals? Will a blend of students with various strengths enhance the interactions that take place in the program? If, as Rimm (1984) points out, a broad range of interests, independence, and imagination are important indicators of giftedness, then it is equally important to take these traits into consideration in the identification process.

AT-RISK POPULATIONS

A theme running throughout several of the articles in this section is that traditional identification procedures " . . . have failed to respond to our society's diversity by adequately identifying and serving gifted students who are economically disadvantaged, especially students from racial and ethnic minority groups" (Borland & Wright, 1994). Almost all authors have offered suggestions for broader identification criteria, and whether or not they have directly

addressed diverse groups, their recommendations certainly relate to this very crucial issue facing our field. McKenzie (1986) called attention to the racial and socioeconomic bias in standardized achievement and intelligence tests and warns that such tests may actually reinforce existing inequalities in the selection of children from diverse populations. His survey of several hundred school districts shows the relationship between gifted program participation and race, per pupil spending, socioeconomic status, and property value. Although we have long known about these factors influencing the inclusion of diverse populations in gifted programs, most writers on the subject are in agreement that there is need for more research that deals directly with the effectiveness of alternative identification procedures.

One study that deals directly with this challenge was conducted by Borland and Wright (1994). Using a population of severely disadvantaged inner city first and second grade students, the authors designed a multi-phase study that examined standardized assessment, non-traditional assessment, and teacher nomination. Parent input, classroom observation, and performance tasks were also used. Although the authors point out that the process they developed is time- and labor-intensive, they nevertheless have shown that a valid and research supported identification process based on site-appropriate methods such as observation, dynamic assessment, and examples of best performance can successfully identify economically disadvantaged participants for gifted programs.

OTHER ISSUES AND CONCERNS

A number of articles in this section deal with additional issues related to identification. Colangelo and Brower (1987) investigated the effects of labeling in family dynamics. They found a difference between immediate and long-term family effects of having a child labeled as "gifted"; while siblings came to terms with the designation of a family member, the identified students expressed uneasiness about the effects of the label on other members of the family. These authors point out the need for additional research on family factors associated with labeling. Callahan (1982) also addresses the labeling issue when she comments on how "winners" and "losers" are sometimes viewed as the outcome of formal identification processes; however, her concern is extended to perceptions within the peer group rather than the family. She also discusses important concerns about how teachers sometimes are affected by formal labeling and designated services. Classroom teachers may fail to make necessary accommodations in the regular curriculum because they assume that " . . . the 'giftedness' of the child is 'taken care of' in the resource room . . ." (p. 17). Birch (1984) also comments on the labeling issue (which he calls "typing") in yet another context. He argues that such "typing . . . can be a powerful deterrent and strong barrier to the recognition of individual characteristics of each child, the features and attributes that should guide educational interpretations and adaptations"

(p. 158). If we are to avoid one-size-fits-all gifted programs, Birch's suggestion for psychoeducational assessment that examines interests, learning styles, and other potentialities should be part of the equation that leads to more individualized programming directed at talent development.

CONCLUSIONS, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The articles on identification are restricted to publications in *Gifted Child Quarterly* over a period of twelve years, beginning in 1982 and extending through 1994. A great deal has obviously been written prior to and subsequent to this window through which we have been looking, and there are other important articles, books, and research reports that have appeared in other journals. Interested persons can gain a broader historical perspective on identification by examining the many citations in the present collection of articles, and conducting electronic literature searches that will reveal literally hundreds of books, articles, technical reports, and state and district guidelines for identification. The authors of this collection of *GCQ* articles have dealt with the majority of critical issues that surround the always controversial and frequently contentious age-old question of who is gifted and who is not! A few general conclusions emerge with a fair degree of consistency among this group of writers.

First, all agree that a single intelligence or other cognitive ability score is not the best way to identify gifted students. This is not to say that such information is unimportant in making selection decisions. Rather, a combination of background information should be used; this information should include both test and non-test criteria, and all criteria should be given comparable "weight" in the identification process (see comments above about the multiple-criteria smoke screen). It is important to remember that all criteria used in an identification process are only information, and it is people rather than information that make decisions. An identification process, therefore, should give as much attention to the ways in which information will be used, the relationship between identification and program services, and the training provided to persons taking part in the identification process. In our effort to be "objective" we have often succumbed to turning decision making over to instruments rather than recognizing the importance of human judgment in making selection decisions. And when it comes to information and its use, it is important to remember that there are two categories of information that need to be considered.

The first type, *status information,* consists of test scores, previous grades or accomplishments, teacher ratings, and anything else we can "put down on paper" beforehand that tells us something about a person's traits and potentials. Status information is undoubtedly the best way for identifying students with high levels of schoolhouse giftedness, and it can also be used to identify a talent pool of students who achieve at above-average levels in traditionally measured school achievement. But the temporal and contextual nature of high

levels of creative productivity requires that we look for these behaviors *within* situations where such behaviors are displayed and hopefully encouraged. Thus, a second type of information must have a place in the identification process. I call this type *action information,* and it can best be defined as the type of dynamic interactions that take place when a person becomes extremely interested in or excited about a particular topic, area of study, issue, idea, or event that takes place within the school or the non-school environment. In a certain sense, what I described as action information is not unlike the currently popular concepts called dynamic assessment or performance-based assessment, although action information is for proactive decision making rather than evaluation of student progress. These interactions occur when students come into contact with or are influenced by persons, concepts, or particular pieces of knowledge. The influence of the interaction may be relatively limited, or it may have a highly positive and extremely motivating effect on certain individuals. If the influence is strong enough and positive enough to promote further exploration and follow-up at high levels of creative or investigative activity on the part of an individual or group of students with a common interest, then we may say that a dynamic interaction has taken place. The level to which high level follow-up is pursued is dependent on youngsters' abilities, motivation, and creativity; at this juncture the teacher's role as a talent developer is crucial. It is this role, in fact, that should be a major part of teacher training in our field.

By definition, action information cannot be pre-documented; and therefore, a comprehensive and responsive identification process must have vehicles for systematically obtaining and using the dynamic interactions that may warrant one or more follow-up services. Teacher awareness of this component of an identification system and training in how to spot dynamic interactions that may lead to follow-up or referral opportunities is important for effectively using an action information component in the identification process. Equally important is the flexibility necessary for allowing students thus identified to revolve into services that will capitalize on the "turn on" that brought them to our attention. To translate the action information concept into practice, my colleagues Sally Reis and Linda Smith and I developed the Revolving Door Identification Model (RDIM, Renzulli, Reis, & Smith, 1981). The essence of this model is to provide a "talent pool" of above average–ability students with a broad variety of general enrichment experiences, and use the ways in which students *respond* to these experiences to determine who and in which areas of study students should "revolve" into more advanced enrichment opportunities. In addition to the general enrichment provided in special program situations, we also trained classroom teachers to use a form called the Action Information Message so that they could serve as referral agents whenever students reacted in highly positive ways to regular classroom experiences. Although this approach to identification departs significantly from traditional practices, it is consistent with the suggestions of many authors of these seminal articles, and its effectiveness has been documented by a series of research studies and field tests in schools with widely varying socioeconomic levels and program organizational patterns (Reis & Renzulli, 1982).

A second conclusion, and one that will no doubt be the object of much controversy for as long as our field exists is how we use the word "gifted." Is the word best used as a noun or an adjective? Is a person gifted in the absolute sense (what I have sometimes referred as the "golden chromosome theory"), or do we develop gifted behaviors in certain people, at certain times, under certain circumstances? Is it more appropriate to say that a fifth-grade boy or girl is "gifted," or are we better off saying that she or he is a gifted young writer or scientist or violinist? These questions have important implications for the important relationship that should exist between identification practices and the ways in which we serve targeted students. If students must be predetermined to be gifted *before* any special services are made available (the absolutist approach), we certainly have the administrative tidiness that is often required by state guidelines, especially in states that reimburse school districts on the basis of the number of formally identified gifted students. But if we are looking for students whose potentials might not show up through traditional tests or other forms of status information, or students whose high potentials may not be triggered until they are exposed to challenging opportunities, then we may be trading off administrative tidiness for a flexible identification system that embraces action information. A more flexible system also takes into account the crucial roles played by interests, creativity, task commitment, and affective traits that are best discovered contextually and through the types of dynamic interactions discussed above.

This second conclusion has policy implications for resource allocation and is, once again, related to policies in states that reimburse schools districts based on the number of pre-identified students, what I sometimes refer to as "the body count states." It also is related to the underrepresentation of minorities in special programs for the gifted, mainly because these students do not achieve at as high levels as majority students on traditional measures of cognitive aptitude. Typically, the more affluent school districts receive larger amounts of reimbursement because of higher test scores. Recommended variations in funding formulas in the body count states are often viewed with suspicion because of a fear of runaway costs, and even advocates of more flexible identification practices are cautious because they fear "losing" what has already gained in legislative allocations.

There is a way out of the funding formula dilemma without endangering a loss of present financial commitments, and this approach will also help to bring some degree of equity to districts that serve high proportions of at-risk students. By allocating funds based on total district enrollment each district will be eligible for a fixed amount of funding each year. The success of this approach, however, is not without its potential pitfalls! All districts applying for reimbursement must prepare proposals that show an identification system that clearly focuses on finding students who are most in need of special program opportunities and services, and a carefully articulated designation of services must be specified. Although funding levels are determined on the basis of total district enrollment, it is important that the monies be budgeted in a separate

account (rather than the general school budget), that the majority of funds be used for program-designated personnel, and that a comprehensive evaluation design be built into the guidelines for program proposals. Without these budgetary safeguards and targeted personnel requirements, funds might end up in an enrichment "slush fund" that pays for field trips, uniforms for the band, or other dubious uses of supplementary funds.

A great deal of progress has been made in the identification of gifted students over the past quarter century. These articles have addressed both the challenges faced and possible solutions to some of these challenges. New approaches that address the equity issue, policies and practices that respect new theories about human potential and conceptions of giftedness, and a continuous commitment to research-based identification practices are still needed. And although scientifically defensible identification practices should be a major focus of future investigations, it is important to keep in mind that some of the characteristics that have led to the recognition of history's most gifted contributors are not always as measurable as others. We need to continue our search for those elusive things that are left over after everything explainable has been explained, to realize that giftedness is culturally and contextually imbedded in all human activity, and most of all, we need to value the value of even those things that we cannot yet explain.

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