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Which Students Do We Consider Gifted and/or Talented?

Although a large number of the students in any school are thought to be very smart, only a few are formally identified as gifted and talented. The terms are used to designate people who are intellectually, creatively, academically, or otherwise superior to a comparison group of peers or older students. The term **gifted** is usually used to refer to people with superior intellectual or cognitive performance, whereas the term **talented** is usually used to refer to people who show outstanding performance in a specific area such as the performing arts or visual arts. The terminology typically used in the professional literature to describe students who are gifted and talented is presented in *Table 1.1*. Notice that the terms are generally more positive than those sometimes associated with categories of disability. Notice also that some terms—the positive as well as the negative—may reinforce tendencies to stereotype students who are gifted and talented.

FEDERAL LEGISLATION

“Gifted and talented” is not included in Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act) or the Individuals

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Table 1.1 Terms Used in the Literature to Describe Students Who Are Gifted or Talented

abstract thinker	less willing to cooperate or
advanced comprehender	compromise
bookish	motivated
cooperative	natural leader
creative	persistent
daydreamer	precocious
disruptive	prefers to think in
divergent thinker	generalities
erratic	problem solver
evaluative	responsible
flexible	self-critical
good memorizer	sensitive
happy-go-lucky	spontaneous
highly verbal	understands quickly
high tolerance for ambiguity	unmotivated
immature	willing to take mental
intelligent	and emotional risks
intuitive	

With Disabilities Education Act. Separate legislation, the Gifted and Talented Children's Education Act of 1978 (Public Law 95-561), gives states financial incentives to develop programs for students considered gifted and talented. The legislation includes the following definition:

The term "gifted and talented" means children, and whenever applicable, youth who are identified at the preschool, elementary, or secondary level as possessing demonstrated or potential abilities, that give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, specific academic, or leadership ability, or in the performing and visual arts and who by reason thereof require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school. (Section 902)

The 1978 Gifted and Talented Children's Act was repealed, but many states continue to use its federal definition of gifted

and talented. Note the focus on multiple dimensions (intellectual, specific aptitudes, leadership, and arts), inclusion of students who are potentially gifted, and the call for differentiated educational services.

In the past 25 years, many state and federal policies have supported widespread public interest in setting up special programs to serve students who are gifted and talented. Nevertheless, many of the programs that were prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s have been cut back as a result of budget problems (Larsen, Griffin, & Larsen, 1994). Today, a modest federal program, established by the Jakob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Act of 1988 (Public Law 100-297), supports demonstration projects, a national research center, and national leadership activities, with priority funding going to efforts to serve gifted and talented students who are economically disadvantaged, speak limited English, or have disabilities.

VARYING STATE DEFINITIONS

State Department of Education personnel write definitions and criteria for identification of students as gifted and talented (Gallagher & Coleman, 1992). In some states, the definition and criteria include both gifted and talented; in others, the two conditions are differentiated. For example, the Annotated Code of Maryland § 8-201-8-204 outlines provisions for gifted and talented education. Maryland defines gifted and talented students as:

an elementary or secondary student who is identified by a professionally qualified individual as having outstanding abilities in the area of: general intellectual capabilities; specific academic aptitudes; or the creative, visual, or performing arts. (Maryland Department of Education, 2001)

In Louisiana the conditions of gifted and talented are given separate definitions in accordance with R.S. 17:1941 et seq. and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, LR 26: 1599:

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Gifted—children or youth who demonstrate abilities that give evidence of high performance in academic and intellectual aptitude.

Talented—is possession of measurable abilities that give evidence of unique talent in visual and/or performing arts. (Louisiana Department of Education, 2000)

IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENTS WITH GIFTS AND TALENTS

Note one other distinction in the definitions. The Maryland definition specifically includes the notion of **educational need**, but the Louisiana definitions do not. The concept of educational need is prominent in other state definitions, criteria, and regulations and is central to definitions of many categories of exceptional students.

The *Minnesota Standards for Services to Gifted and Talented Students* (Minnesota State Advisory Council for the Gifted and Talented, 1988) includes an appendix with a list of characteristics of gifted and talented students and a description of the educational need related to each characteristic. The *Minnesota Standards* also include descriptions of individual students who are gifted and talented, to serve as examples of students who should be identified. Three of these descriptions follow so that you may have a better understanding of the types of students identified in definitions of gifted and talented.

1. Chu

Chu is a high school student. He is a Vietnamese immigrant who came to the United States at age 9. He learned to speak English. His fifth-grade teacher noticed his artistic and musical abilities, and he was encouraged to develop these talents. Chu loved designing intricate paper patterns and enjoyed learning. His teacher noticed a very mature sense of humor. Although new to the English language, his humor was dry and he understood the nuances of language missed by many of his

age-peers. He was particularly advanced in mathematics and was fascinated with computers.

Encouraged by a mentoring teacher in junior high, Chu succeeded in learning to program a computer and won three national contests sponsored by a national computer firm. There were outlets for his talent. His coursework included independent study and frequent communication with his teacher/mentor, who shared his interest in computers. Chu's interest in economics was sparked by a community volunteer who sought him out and provided additional support.

His exceptional ability in computer science was supported by individualized attention at his school. Chu was lucky. The high school in his attendance area has a technology focus. The mentoring teacher happened to share his interest and donated her time to work with him. The community volunteer heard about Chu and wanted to help. He needed support, the tools to learn, and an educational climate that recognized and valued his talent and provided outlets for his work. Chu's talent in computer science was appropriately matched with his school program. At the heart of this program was the mentoring teacher who devised an individualized plan to challenge him.

2. Annette

Annette is a highly creative and artistic fifth grader. Her family is very supportive, although they are somewhat bewildered by her disorganized, erratic approach to school work in contrast to her sister, who is well organized and a "teacher pleaser." Her greatest skills and most intense interests are in art and writing. Annette draws incessantly, often instead of doing assignments. She seldom takes the initiative to write a story, although when she receives a writing assignment, she begins with gusto and proceeds far beyond normal expectations. She does not cooperate with all school tasks. She complains about "old facts" (things she already knows), and she is excited by new information.

Annette's life is marked by passionate involvement with drawing, creative fantasy, and a wide interest in a variety of subjects. Her peers respect her drawing skills and sense of humor. Her passionate discourses command their attention, but

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she is not a sought-after playmate. She changes the rules of the game to use her creativity, and her peers regard this action as cheating. Annette lacks athletic skill. She has been identified for a gifted and talented program designed to challenge her abilities. Annette's classroom teacher also provides special challenges that involve her artistic and creative ability.

3. Elmer

When he entered kindergarten, **Elmer** was reading at a third-grade level. In mathematics he was able to read numbers in the trillions and he could add and subtract. He took pride in recalling populations and land sizes around the world. His kindergarten teacher provided him with more difficult work in reading and mathematics. Elmer still thought kindergarten was a waste of his time. His kindergarten year was also a year in which he formed his opinion on abortion, divorce, world peace, and war. Elmer became depressed and talked about wishing he were dead. Elmer was withdrawn from school, and his mother taught him for the first and second grades.

At the end of second grade, his family moved to a new school district which would provide an individualized plan and allow for some acceleration. At his new school Elmer was given a battery of achievement tests and scored consistently at the eighth- and ninth-grade levels. Currently a fourth grader, Elmer is enrolled in science and mathematics classes with eighth graders. His language arts instruction is provided with a tutor. He attends the remaining classes with other fourth graders. His mental health began to improve when he began to receive a more correct academic diet.

However, Elmer still notes many days of feeling bad about himself and the world. He is very introspective. He receives less encouragement and fewer pats on the back than other children. People assume that someone with his ability has it "all together." His parents continue to be concerned about his mental health. They have arranged for psychological counseling and have actively sought an intellectual peer for him. Elmer is an "at-risk" student, and his psychological and cognitive growth continues to be a serious concern.