

## **Recognizing and Serving Gifted Students**

Ann Smith

*The creative and gifted students reach out beyond the amassing and recall of facts. They are at home with the overarching concepts involving the great unitive themes. They strive for a coherent view of themselves, the world, and of human destiny. Indeed it is by this quality, more than by standardized tests, that we can identify them, for they are ever seeking the interrelations that lead to a higher synthesis.*

Elizabeth Monroe Drews

Identify: (v) i-den-ti-fy

- 1) To recognize or establish as being a particular person or thing; verify the identity of
- 2) To serve as a means of identification for
- 3) To determine to what group (a given specimen) belongs
- 4) To associate (one or oneself) with another person or a group of persons by identification

Why is it important to identify gifted children?

Simply stated, so that appropriate educational experiences are provided that lead children to their next level of development. In order to do this, we must be aware of what the child has already accomplished academically, intellectually, socially, emotionally and physically.

This is not a new concept. In fact, when public education began in the United States, students typically moved through their educational program as their ability allowed. Fewer students meant studying in smaller, multi-graded classrooms, which allowed children to work at their own levels of ability and interest. This not only made it possible for some students to complete their eight grades of schoolwork in a shorter amount of time, it encouraged them to do so.

How do we identify and what are we identifying for?

What services and programs are being offered in your school or district for gifted individuals? What areas of giftedness are supported by the program or services in place? Are the resources adequate to provide for all five areas of ability identified in the federal definition of giftedness – intelligence, general academic achievement, specific academic achievement, creativity, leadership, and/or ability in the visual and performing arts? Typically, schools focus on general and specific academic

achievement, leaving little in the way of progressing gifts and talents in the other domains. Schools/districts must have as a basic part of their plans for a gifted program, a concept of how they wish to serve their gifted students. Ideally, this concept will provide the basis for the identification procedures that are to be used.

A strong identification process will include components of searching, screening and identifying.

In the search component all students must have an equal opportunity to be considered. Students must be sought out in order to identify them as possibly needing a different type of educational experience. In order to do this, information must be gathered from a wide range of sources so as to capture students that testing data might miss. Nominations from teachers, principals, psychologists, parents and peers who regularly observe students and are aware of gifted behaviors are important inclusions in this part of the process. Additionally, students' self-ratings and students who self-select into programs that are offered must be included in the process. Considering students' work in school as well as extracurricular activities often leads to evidence of advanced thinking and creative ability. Searching for gifted students should begin as early as possible in the child's school career as the dynamic nature of brain development requires the continuous nurturing of abilities. However, in order for nominations to be effective, there must be education about the traits and behaviors of gifted individuals.

Once an effective search has taken place, students identified as possibly needing a different kind of educational experience are screened. An effective screening process includes the following in combination for of the identification process.

- Nomination forms (parents, teachers, counselors, the principal, peers; anyone who works with the student)
- Teacher reports of student functioning
- Family history and student background
- Peer identification
- Self-reports by students
- Students' work and achievements
- Traditional and nontraditional multidimensional testing

None of the above data should be used alone when screening for giftedness. Parent reports are too often overlooked, yet research supports that parents provide useful information; they are very aware of the behavior of their children. When asked relevant questions, they can help assess the level and in what areas potential giftedness may exist.

While intelligence tests are useful for the screening procedure, many gifted children are missed when cut-off numbers are rigidly established. And IQ alone should never be used as sole admissions criteria for gifted programming. We must recognize the limitations of using the score of a single test or the summed matrix score as the basis of identification and include a more comprehensive selection of evaluation data. That said, IQ tests are excellent measures of verbal and logical reasoning abilities in the most traditional sense, and tend to be good predictors of success within the school environment.

We must also be cognizant of alternative identification protocol and instructional strategies to aid culturally different gifted students. A number of alternative methods and procedures have been suggested that should be examined in order to serve students from minority populations more effectively than traditional IQ or achievement tests.

The major purpose of the identification process is to obtain information that will help inform the program that is best suited for the development of a gifted student's potential. We must remember that a district or school identifies children who can be served by the particular gifted program that it is planning to provide. For example, an individual who is verbally gifted but struggles with math may be frustrated if their school or district's gifted program is more heavily focused on advanced mathematics.

Continuous screening and identification should take place throughout a student's career, and the student should be allowed to self-select in and out of particular programs and services. Students will show different ranges of abilities at different times and in different circumstances, and a responsive program needs to accommodate this aspect of human development.

While we provide services and programs to help students develop talents, we must be careful to not discount the experience and process, the internal state, of giftedness. When we focus on output and achievement and products we are not honoring the whole child. A hallmark of giftedness involves complex internal states that cannot be scored by objective measures such as IQ or achievement tests. These internal states are equally as important and need to be given full consideration in the growth process if gifted children are to reach their full developmental potentials.

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