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Practices for Identifying Gifted Students

No single test can capture a gifted student's dynamic abilities.

Susan K. Johnsen

Parents often go to principals to ask for help in supporting their gifted children. They may request acceleration for their child in mathematics, a specialized curriculum or course, extracurricular activities, a pullout program, or even a different teacher. Since misconceptions about identifying gifted students are prevalent, it's important that principals have information that will help parents make good decisions.

Who Are Gifted and Talented Children?

Children who are gifted and talented exhibit a wide range of characteristics. Some may excel in academic subjects, performing well above grade level in specific areas, such as math or reading. Others may be more interested in the arts, playing musical instruments, or using various media to demonstrate their talents. Still others may show leadership abilities by working with their peers to achieve specific goals. This variety is reflected in the federal definition of gifted and talented students, as stated in the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994:

The term "gifted and talented" when used in respect to students, children, or youth means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who require services or activities

not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop such capabilities.

Since the federal government does not mandate gifted education, states are free to develop their own definitions. Most choose to incorporate diversity, with 30 states recognizing intellectually gifted; 29 recognizing academically gifted; 19 recognizing creatively gifted; 13 recognizing leadership; and 20 recognizing giftedness in performing/visual arts (NAGC & CSDPG, 2005). Some states even specifically address special populations, such as English-language learners (Arizona and Florida), gifted students with disabilities (Arizona and Kentucky), culturally diverse students (California and Florida), rural students (Vermont), and highly gifted students (California).

Because of the diversity among students with gifts and talents, most professionals in gifted education have moved away from a psychometrically derived definition (e.g., a high score



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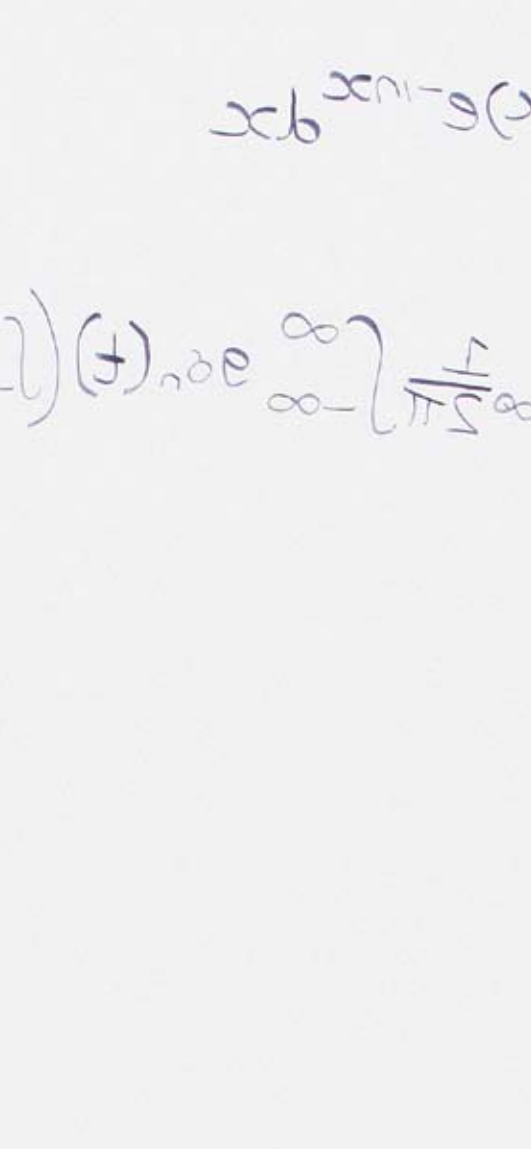
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on an intelligence test) and toward broader conceptual models. These models incorporate a multiplicity of factors that influence a gifted and talented child's development and ultimate display of high-quality performances and products. For example, Tannenbaum (2003) identified five influential factors:

- General ability (e.g., IQ);
- Special ability (e.g., aptitude in a specific area);
- Non-intellective facilitators (e.g., dedication to a chosen field, strong self-concept, willingness to sacrifice, mental health);
- Environmental influences (e.g., parents, classroom, peers, culture, social class); and
- Chance (e.g., accidental, general exploratory, sagacity, personalized action).

In his model, Gagné (1995, 1999) not



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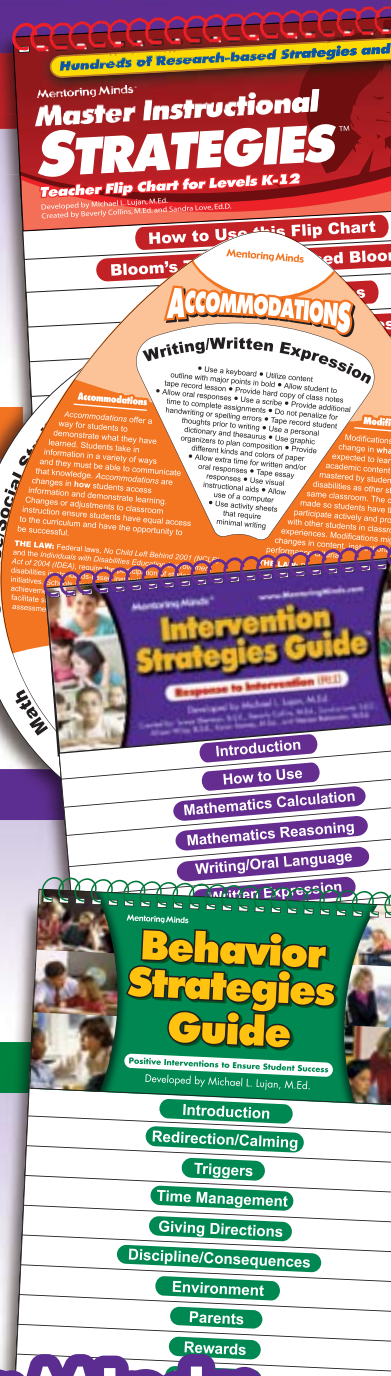
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only identified a variety of factors but also discriminated between *gifts* and *talents*. According to him, gifts are natural abilities that must be developed into talents, which emerge through the systematic learning, training, and practicing of those skills that are characteristic to a particular field. This development may be facilitated or hindered by two general categories of factors:

Intrapersonal catalysts are influenced by genetic background and include physical (e.g., health, physical appearance) and psychological (e.g., motivation, personality, volition) factors.

Environmental catalysts include surroundings (e.g., physical, social, cultural); persons (e.g., parents, teachers, mentors, siblings, peers); undertakings (e.g., programs for gifted and talented students, extracurricular activities); and events (e.g., death of a parent, major illness, winning an award).



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The Identification Process

In developing a method for identifying gifted and talented students, there are important issues to be considered (Johnsen, 2008):

Gifted students will exhibit their talents not only in a domain but also within a specific area of interest. For example, Zack, a fourth grader, performed similarly to his age peers on classroom science activities, but was well beyond grade level in his theoretical understanding of the shape of the universe and black holes, which emerged incidentally during an opportunity for independent study.

Giftedness is a dynamic concept. A single test score may not capture how a child's gifts might be developed into talents, particularly for children who have limited opportunities for out-of-school enrichment activities (Johnsen, Robins, Witte, & Feuerbacher, 2003). Any identification method should therefore consider ways of providing opportunities for students to exhibit their gifts and collect samples of the students' work over a period of time.

Gifts and talents are exhibited by children who have disabilities, or who come from different ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds. It is estimated that black, Hispanic, and Native American students are underrepresented by about 50 percent in gifted education programs (Ford, 1996). To improve identification of special populations of gifted students, professionals need to examine local and state definitions so that a wider range of characteristics are considered. Teachers also need to be trained to observe characteristics that may be manifested in different ways by different cultural groups and by children with disabilities (Fernández, Gay, Lucky, & Gavilán, 1998; Johnsen & Ryser, 1994; Whitmore, 1981).

Early identification is important to the development of gifts into talents. Identifying students' gifts early is particularly important for children who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. When provided with challenging learning activities that nurture their gifts, these children perform at a much

higher level than children who are provided a skill-based curriculum that focuses on their weaknesses (Borland, Schnur, & Wright, 2000; Johnsen & Ryser, 1994).

Best Practices

Given these four issues, best practices in identification methods incorporate:

Multiple assessments, because no one test can possibly sample all of the behaviors that a gifted student might demonstrate. Consequently, information needs to be gathered from qualitative assessments (e.g., portfolios, checklists); from quantitative assessments; from different sources (e.g., teacher, parent, student, peer); and in different contexts (e.g., school, home, extracurricular activities).

A *pre-referral process*, where teachers provide challenging and differentiated opportunities in their classrooms and observe their students' responses.

Parent involvement in developing knowledge about gifted students so that they understand the purpose of a gifted program and can become observers and developers of their own children's gifts.

Identification Phases

Most often, states and school districts organize their gifted identification procedures into three phases (Johnsen, 2004), with decisions made at each phase to determine if the students will progress to the next.

During the *nomination phase*, educators should consider all students to ensure equal access, particularly those with disabilities, from minority or lower income backgrounds, who are learning English, or are from rurally isolated areas. In this phase, schools should send fliers home in multiple languages, advertise the program options, and describe the identification process. Teachers may implement pre-referral or differentiated strategies to observe how students interact with challenging and diverse learning activities. Where available, teachers of gifted and talented students might work with

"Identifying students' gifts early is particularly important for children who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds."

small groups to uncover special gifts and interests. Specific assessments that are used during this phase include:

- Teacher and parent checklists;
- Portfolio products and performances;
- Peer and self-nominations;
- Student background information;
- Teacher observations; and
- Group intelligence and achievement tests.

During the *screening or identification phase*, individually administered or

small-group assessments designed to identify gifted and talented students in specific talent domains are used. For example, students who have aptitudes in mathematics might be administered the Test of Mathematical Abilities for Gifted Students (Ryser & Johnsen, 1998); for those with aptitudes in the performing arts, they might provide a portfolio of their best works or participate in an audition before a professional panel (Baum, Owen, & Oreck, 1996). Specific assessments that might be used during this phase include:

- Individually administered tests;
- Professional observations;
- Portfolio products and performances;
- Auditions; and
- Interviews.

During the *selection or placement phase*, a trained committee of professionals in gifted education examines all of the data to determine which students need services or activities that are not provided

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Myths and Facts About Gifted Students

To examine your school's background knowledge in gifted education, how might your parents and teachers label the following assumptions about gifted students, as myths or facts?

1. Gifted and talented are synonymous terms.
2. Gifted students display their talents in an interest area.
3. Gifted students are different from one another.
4. The best way to identify most gifted students is by using intelligence tests.
5. It is better to wait until third or fourth grade to identify gifted students.

Answers: 1. Myth 2. Fact 3. Fact 4. Myth 5. Myth

in the general education classroom. Professionals recommend the use of a format, such as a case study or a profile, which allows the committee to examine an individual student's strengths and weaknesses. Committee members need to be cautious in their deliberations so that:

- Assessments are equally weighted;
- Best performance is used as an indicator of potential;
- Quantitative scores are comparable;
- Errors in assessments are considered; and
- Performance over time is described (Johnsen, 2004, 2008).

Gifted students are as distinct from one another as they are from other children. They need to be identified and supported so that their gifts in specific domains will be developed into talents. Early identification is especially critical for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities. Effective identification practices incorporate multiple assessments within a dynamic process, provide training to parents and teachers, and make decisions based on a comprehensive system that provides equal access to all students. □

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WEB RESOURCES

The Association for the Gifted has published a diversity document that recommends best practices in identification. www.gifted.uconn.edu/siegle/TAG/TAGBook.pdf

The National Association for Gifted Children has published a position statement entitled "Using Tests to Identify Gifted Students" (www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=404) and has other publications related to assessment that may be accessed online at www.nagc.org.

The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented lists 26 monographs related to assessment, evaluation, and identification. The abstracts and conclusions may be accessed online at www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt/resource.html.

