



Are Preschoolers Too Young for Gifted Programs?

Is it appropriate to write an individualized education program (IEP) for preschool students who are identified as gifted? This question has tormented me for the past 15 years. I taught and coordinated a gifted and talented program for 10 years in Indiana, teaching a K-5 pullout program from 1981 to 1991 and coordinating the K-12 program from 1987 to 1991. By 1994, I had become an elementary principal and found myself at a very affluent school in Nashville, Tennessee. Suddenly, I encountered kindergarten children who arrived with an IEP stating giftedness as the primary handicapping condition—a designation I found very curious—making them eligible for resource pullout in addition to a weekly pullout for enrichment.

Every state has its own definition for gifted education, and school systems create identification grids and curricula for their gifted programs that meet their state's qualifications. In Tennessee, giftedness is included as a category of special education and identified students can qualify for an IEP if it can be demon-

strated that the student's giftedness "adversely impacts the child's educational performance in his/her learning environment." Once identified, students may enter the pullout gifted and talented program known as Encore, whether or not a later re-evaluation continues to demonstrate a need for an IEP. In many cases, students who came in as gifted kindergartners were categorized as typical students by the time they entered third grade.

I don't condone the elimination of programs for truly gifted children. I have met numerous students over the years that were significantly different and required individualized programming. But I have also noted significant improvements to the breadth and depth of our general education curriculum and enhanced teaching practices, both of which have their roots in the gifted education movement of the 1980s. My concern has to do with identifying 3-year-old children as intellectually gifted. Is the motivation for this identification attracting and retaining affluent families to an urban school district? Or is it truly to find preschoolers who will face hardships in the regular school setting because of their intellectual ability?

A Program for 3-Year-Olds

Metro Nashville Public Schools offers a preschool program at Robertson Academy for students as young as 3 years old who are identified as gifted. Transportation is not provided, and it is worth noting that the school is located in one of Nashville's most affluent neighborhoods.

Although there is an effort to identify a diverse group of gifted preschool students throughout the city (especially in the underserved demographic categories), and to provide pre-kindergarten classes that are designed to enhance potential giftedness, it is far more common for children of affluent families to be tested for special education at this young age. Students who qualify for the preschool special education program go on to participate in Encore, a regular K-6 education program that features a weekly pullout instruction for small groups at limited sites throughout the city.

Nashville certainly has much to gain by keeping affluent families invested in its public school program, but a large group of students from this demographic leave public school after fourth grade and enter private schools. Perhaps it is time to publish longitudinal data about the preschool gifted programs, including socioeconomic data, to determine the long-term implications of this type of gifted programming.

Truly gifted students need to be identified and provided with programming suitable to their needs. The question remains, at what age is it possible to make that determination?

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