

Major Considerations for Developing Guidelines to Identify Students for Gifted Education Programs

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A number of identification approaches exists in our field, some based on various theories and research about the development of human potential and others based on beliefs and school district traditions and policies about the types of educational services that develop high levels of performance. I have developed six important considerations that can guide decision making in developing an identification system. These points respond to the recurring and problematic questions that occur in any discussion of how we identify students for special programs and services, questions such as will the identification system apply to diverse school populations, how (or whether) to label students identified for programming, will the system be flexible enough to accommodate talent potentials across a variety of content areas besides language arts and mathematics, and will the system help avoid parental dissatisfaction or legal challenges. The following six considerations are the result of several years of experience in developing identification systems as well as the most recent developments in the research on issues related to student assessment.

Consideration 1: There Is No Such Thing as a Perfect Identification System. There is no perfect way to identify who is or is not gifted, just as there is no single best way to develop giftedness and/or talent potentials in special program candidates. Every identification system is a trade off between the instruments and criteria selected, the ways we make decisions about any and all types of information we collect, and how much weight we give each type of information in the decision-making process.

Because of the many conceptions of giftedness found in the theoretical and research literature, the first and most important step a school or school system must make toward developing an identification procedures is to adopt a practical definition of giftedness. In cases where state reimbursement is provided, state regulations mandate the definitions that guide identification and the number or proportion of students that can be served. There are programs, however, in which additional students with high potential may be served if supported by local funds; and in such cases, this group may be designated by a label that is different from the state certified group that is designated as “the gifted” (e.g., Talent Pool, Advanced Learners, High Potential). Local circumstances notwithstanding, the definition of giftedness used should be consistent with the types of services for which students are being identified (see Consideration 6).

Consideration 2: The Objective Data vs. Subjective Data Trade-Off. The most frequently used types of identification information are tests of cognitive ability and/or academic achievement. These types of tests are considered objective because they rely on student performance rather than a teacher’s or other person’s judgment. (Some people question the appropriateness of these tests because of they are concerned that a one-hour “glimpse” into a

young person's overall potential does not offer a fair appraisal of a student's total capacity for high-level performance.) Almost all other criteria (e.g., teacher, parent, peer, or self ratings, portfolio or writing sample assessments, and grades earned in school subjects) are considered to be subjective because they are open to personal bias, an idiosyncratic view of giftedness, or inconsistent grading standards. And yet, many will argue that these types of criteria enable us to see other signs of potential such as motivation, creativity, leadership and executive functions (initiation, execution, and completion of tasks), and intense interest in a topic that is not reflected in more objective cognitive ability tests. If we view some of these non-cognitive skills as important, then we need to examine the degree to which we are willing to make trade offs between objective and subjective information.

The goal of any good assessment is to make the subjective more objective. Well-constructed rating scales aim to make the teacher's subjective impressions more objective by anchoring them to specific behaviors. Judgments of the quality of a complex performance (e.g., dance, essay, debate) are rendered more objective by the quality of the scoring or rating rubric used and quality of the rater using it (i.e., the rater has been well trained to identify particular qualities). We need to enhance measures that capture the kinds of and aspects of performance that are only poorly sampled by traditional assessments by requiring greater professional judgment from persons experienced in particular talent areas and by training teachers to use instruments that examine traits such as creativity and motivation. Well-constructed rating scales used by trained raters will add to the credibility of what typically has been viewed as subjective instruments. The "trade off" is an issue that must be considered when examining the balance between subjective and objective information.

Consideration 3: People, Not Instruments, Make Decisions. Regardless of the number or types of instruments used in a multi-criteria identification system, instruments only provide data, they do not make decisions. Therefore, examining the criteria for selecting those persons involved in the decision-making process is crucial. You should think about how much orientation and training evaluators will need to become well informed and how to resolve differences of opinion. You should determine beforehand how much weight to give to various instruments or criteria upon which decisions will be made. If you are not careful, you may find that your identification procedure weights one type of data at the expense of another type. For example, your identification rubric may include two or three cognitive ability measures (e.g., aptitude test, achievement test, and course grades) and only one measure of creativity (e.g., a creativity test or a teacher rating). If you assign point values to scores or grades for each criterion, you may be triple-weighting cognitive ability and under-weighting the creativity criterion. And differential reliability and validity of various instruments can have an even greater effect on the interpretation of scores from different instruments. This consideration is important in both the design of the identification system and in the interpretation of the information provided to the committee who will review students' records and subsequently make decisions.

This consideration also has implications for the types of norms used in the identification process. Different kinds of norming (or comparison) groups are needed for different kinds of populations. Regional talent searches, for example, need at least regional (and probably national) norms. But decisions in district-wide programs, school-based programs, and programs that aim to address underserved populations are all best made by using *local norm groups*. Thus, for

example, if a goal is to provide special program opportunities for the highest potential students in a school that serves students who generally score lower on nationally normed tests, then the only way to include such students in a special program is to compare them with their peers. In other words, by using local norms, you can identify the top five or ten percent of the students in any school.

Consideration 4: Avoid the Multiple-criteria Screening Smokescreen. Most identification systems use a multiple criteria screening process that includes non-test information (e.g., teacher nominations and/or ratings). A problem arises, however, when the nomination or screening process only determines which students can take an individual IQ test or a more advanced cognitive ability test as part of the identification process. In such cases, the test remains the ultimate “gatekeeper”: students are selected or not selected for entry based on their performance on the test. Students who are not selected have almost always been those who were nominated for the identification process on the basis of one or more non-test criteria, but who did not make the cut after taking a cognitive ability tests. In other words, a teacher nomination or high ratings is used as a “ticket” to take an individual or a group ability test, but in most cases, the test score is the deciding factor. The highly positive attributes that might have been the basis for a teacher nomination, or other favorable information discovered in the screening process, are ignored when it comes to the final selection decision. In this example, the system looks like it incorporates multiple criteria, but it doesn’t. It relies on a test score to determine whether students are selected or not. And the danger with this system is, of course, it can exclude high potential students who, for a variety of reasons, do not score well on standardized tests, or students who have shown signs of high potential in areas other than verbal, mathematical, or analytic skills measured by standardized tests.

Another procedure commonly used, testing only those who are nominated, is equally problematic. It eliminates those children who do not conform to the teacher’s notion of giftedness. Again, what appears to be a multiple criteria approach ends up being a smokescreen for a more traditional cut-off score approach.

Additionally, a multiple criteria plan that is not carefully thought out can involve so much paperwork that it becomes inordinately time consuming, expensive, and unwieldy. In other cases, the smokescreen could be used to give the *appearance* of concerns for equity when such concerns don’t really exist.

Consideration 5: What Will We Call Selected Students? A fifth consideration relates what we call identified students (if we give them a label at all) and why we label them. The tradition has been simply to label all selected students as “the gifted,” thereby relegating all others to a non-gifted category. In recent years, however, a large body of research has argued very forcefully against such a broad stroke labeling process (Frasier, García, & Passow, 1995; Gardner, 1983; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Sternberg, 1985; Winner, 1996), and in some cases recommendations have been made to do away with any labeling altogether (Borland, 2005). In recent years an approach that has gained in popularity is to *label the service rather than the student* (Renzulli & Reis, 1994, 1997). For example, a labeled service is Curriculum Compacting (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992), which is a within-the-regular-classroom process that teachers use with students who have already mastered the concepts and skills to be taught in a given unit

of instruction and/or who are capable of covering the regular material at a faster pace and higher level of comprehension than their classmates.

Another trend is to document specific student strengths (Field, 2009; Renzulli & Reis, 2007). This strength-based profile can be a part of making more personalized decisions about the types of resources and activities recommended for talent development. Behavioral definitions (i.e., targeting specific strengths) are considered to be important because if we know and can document particular strengths, there is a greater likelihood that schools will attempt to cultivate these strengths in targeted students. This approach also introduces an element of accountability into programming, as it gives direction to efforts that schools should take in evaluating their programs.

Consideration 6: The Relationship Between Identification and Programming. This final consideration addresses the congruence between the criteria used in the identification process and the goals and types of services that constitute the day-to-day activities that students will pursue in a special program. Congruence between identification and programming is so important that it might be viewed as “the golden rule” of gifted education! For example, identification for advanced courses in some subject areas such as math is best accomplished through *math* testing, examination of previous *math* grades, teacher recommendations or ratings on *mathematical* skills, strong *quantitative* reasoning abilities, and perhaps even estimates of a student’s motivation to work hard *in math*.

A problem arises, however, when you look at what might be called an “all purpose” gifted program and how much flexibility and individualization is provided in such programs. If the program follows a prescribed curriculum or if individual teachers in the program prescribe most of the activities (e.g., the teacher’s favorite Rain Forest Unit or play production), then we must examine whether or not the program respects variations in interests, learning styles, or students’ preferred modes of expression that fall outside of these areas. In other words, the material covered in the special program may be different from the regular curriculum, but the prescriptive nature of the program does not allow for the identified students’ special needs or characteristics. It’s as if they are learning different material in a separate, but regular classroom environment. Therefore, a related decision in developing an identification system is the selection of a *pedagogical* programming model that will be used to guide direct and indirect services to students regardless how they are grouped or organized for special program services. In this case we are not discussing organizational models, but rather what the teaching/learning process looks like within any predetermined organizational arrangement.

By way of summary, the six considerations discussed above point out the landscape surrounding the always complicated and frequently controversial topic of identifying gifted and talented students for services in special programs. This discussion of the issues does not provide ready-made answers to the many challenges of identification system design, but hopefully provides an awareness of pitfalls encountered by so many persons who have set out on the journey of creating an efficient, effective, and equitable plan for identification. The ultimate test of any identification system is the degree to which it has successfully identified students who can and do profit from and succeed in the educational programs that are provided. This makes clear the intimate link between identification and programming. As one is changed, so must the other.

Thus, if identification is made more inclusive, then programming must accommodate the needs of the newly served students; likewise, if the program offerings are changed, then the identification procedures should also change to better identify the students who might profit from the new offerings.

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