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More Changes Needed to Expand Gifted Identification and Support

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Kappan Classic Introduction

Find this Kappan Classic, “What Makes Giftedness? Reexamining a Definition,” on page 81 of the digital edition — online at <https://kappanmagazine.org> [<https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171109200821>].

Major changes have taken place in gifted education over the past three decades, and my 1978 article on what is now popularly referred to as the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness has frequently been cited as the starting point for a broadened conception of giftedness. Subsequent work by leading scholars such as Paul Torrance, Robert Sternberg, Howard Gardner, David Lohman, and Benjamin Bloom have reinforced the argument for 1) using an expanded set of criteria to examine high levels of potential in young people, and 2) viewing giftedness as something we can develop in far more students than previously identified by using an IQ cutoff score approach. This article wasn't very popular with the conservative gifted education establishment when it was published, but it's had a remarkable impact on identification and programming practices and is now the most widely cited publication in the field.

Although most scholars and researchers have embraced a more flexible approach to identifying students for special program services, regulations and guidelines for identification in several states continue to place major emphasis on IQ or other cognitive ability tests. The reasons for the gap between current theory and regulatory practices are threefold. First, there is an “administrative tidiness” with a test cutoff system that avoids using what many consider subjective information. Second, parents of traditionally served and mainly middle-class students generally oppose opening the door to young people from different cultural backgrounds or those who show their potentials in nonconventional ways. Third, state departments of education that reimburse districts based on a “head count” of identified students want to control the amount of funds allocated to gifted programs.

If I were rewriting this article today, my experience over the years would lead me to emphasize three recommendations. First, I would recommend using local (school level) rather than national or state norms when looking at decisions based on cognitive ability or achievement test scores. Low income and minority students continue to be underrepresented in gifted programs. The only way to include the highest potential students from schools serving low-income and minority group students is to avoid

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making comparisons with amalgamated norm groups. Second, I'd recommend that state reimbursement formulas be based on total district enrollments. This approach would allow schools with lower achievement levels to compete for funds that traditionally have gone to higher socioeconomic status districts. At the same time, it would guarantee that funding agencies can set an upper limit on total funds available for gifted programs in any given state's budgets. Finally, I'd recommend that weighting systems be developed to help achieve equity for all three sets of characteristics in the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness. Currently, there still tends to be disproportional emphasis on test scores at the expense of criteria that reflect creativity and task commitment. Developing high levels of creative talent and high motivation among all of our young people is essential for the continued economic and cultural advancement of our country.