



1

The Gifted Child



INTRODUCTION

Go get a piece of paper. Now, write down the name of someone whose gifts, talents, abilities, intellect, and contributions you admire. It can be a famous person, a dead person, a person who made a difference in your personal life. Now, here is the question for you: *How well did that person do in school?* Did she get 100% on spelling tests each week? Did he graduate at the top of the class? Did she get an A on that science fair project? Did he go to an Ivy League university? Perhaps you aren't sure. The person I most admire didn't even finish high school. He was viewed by his teachers as lacking in imagination. He came from a family where his father was very strict and oppressive. As an adult, he had a drinking problem and was a chain smoker. Many of the people who worked for him felt he was a very difficult boss who was brutal in his criticism of their work. On the upside, he was a great father and husband. He was generous, often taking no salary so that his employees could be paid. Have you guessed the person I most admire? It's Walt Disney. The point of this exercise is to remind us at the outset that *giftedness is not always about school performance*. School is such a small part of the lives of our gifted students; their minds often are elsewhere. Some gifted students might not be *good students* but they could be *excellent scholars*. Just keep this in mind as we examine, *Who are the gifted?*

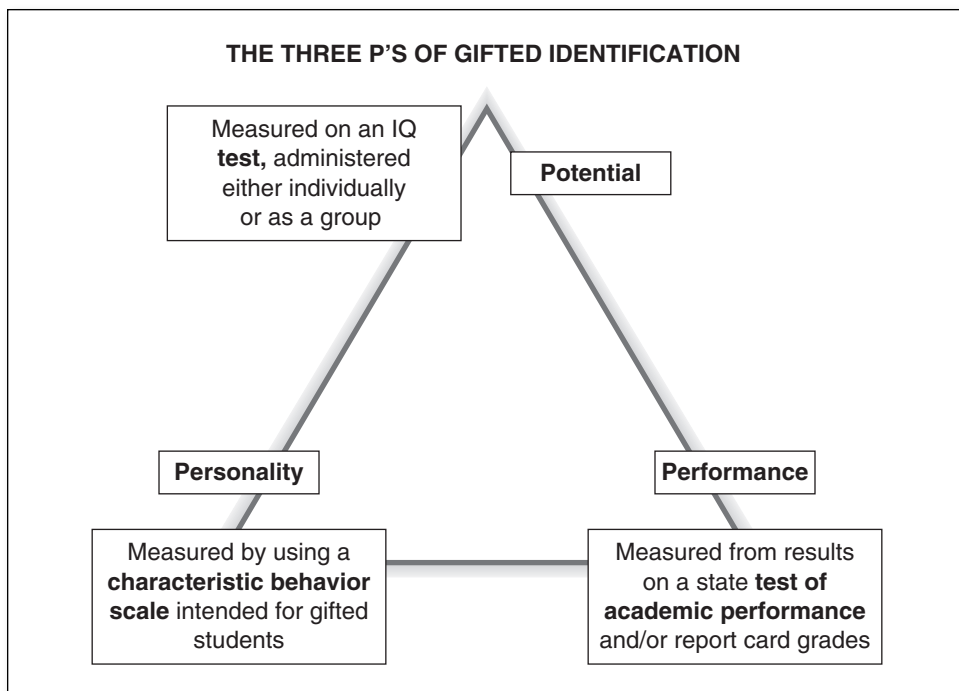
IDENTIFYING GIFTEDNESS

Many experts have a difficult time agreeing on a definition of giftedness. However, most would identify gifted kids as the *smart kids*. How smart are they? Well, giftedness generally means those students who score at the top 3–5% on a test of intellectual ability. However, the last two decades have

seen a shift in our understanding of how to identify gifted students. Many states offer special funds to provide programs for those students with very high abilities. In some states, these students are referred to as GATE (gifted and talented education), or TAG (talented and gifted), or by some other acronym. For the purposes of this book, I refer to these students as *gifted* or *GATE*. Three criteria often are used to qualify a student for a gifted program:

1. High performance on an intelligence test
2. High performance on a test of academic skills
3. Close alignment to a series of characteristic behaviors of the gifted

Put together, these three criteria represent a profile of a gifted student. This triangulation of identification components was given the name *The Three P's of GATE Identification* by a colleague and friend of mine, Kim LaPorte Johnson. The following chart shows how this looks:



Because students are identified for gifted programs according to criteria set by each state educational agency, or even by separate school districts within a state, a student identified as gifted in New York might not qualify in Nevada or Connecticut, or vice versa. In addition, a student qualifying in Anaheim, California, might not qualify in Santa Ana, a city right next door. Although differing identification criteria may be quite

confusing for parents who look upon giftedness as a *permanent label*, the logic of this identification process is quite valid once it is examined. According to practice, children are identified as gifted within the community in which they live because each region seeks to find the top 3–5% of its children for a gifted program.

IDENTIFYING FIVE AREAS OF GIFTEDNESS

There are five major areas in which a student might be identified as gifted. Most states require that *general intellectual ability* is one of the areas served. Most educational agencies also serve students in a *specific academic ability* category as well (usually language arts or math), because identification is based upon the state standardized achievement test. The other three areas (*creative thinking, leadership, and visual and performing arts*), are more difficult to define and, therefore, it's not as easy to identify and serve students appropriately in these areas.

FIVE AREAS OF GIFTED IDENTIFICATION

1. General Intellectual Ability

- This is determined by an IQ test (the major criterion in many states).
- The following areas of intellectual ability usually are assessed:
 - Verbal
 - Mathematical/Quantitative
 - Spatial
- Students are not expected to perform equally well in all three areas.

2. Creative Thinking

- This is determined by observation and a characteristic behavior scale.
- Some of the following characteristics usually are addressed:
 - An affinity for creative problem solving
 - A desire to be different
 - A strong and sophisticated sense of humor

3. Leadership

- This is determined by observation and a characteristic behavior scale.
- Some of the following characteristics often are assessed:
 - Popular; well-liked by peers
 - Self-confident
 - Organized
 - Fluent and concise self-expression

(Continued)

(Continued)

4. Specific Academic Ability

- Determined by test scores on district and state achievement tests
- Considered an excellent student in at least one academic area
- Considered a high performing student in school

5. Visual and Performing Arts

- Often determined by portfolio or audition
- Significantly accomplished in one or more of the designated areas: art, drama, music, and/or dance

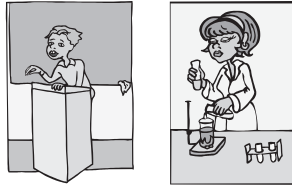
Adapted from the California State Department of Education

IDENTIFYING AREAS YOU CAN SERVE

Because GATE identification is a multifaceted process, students should be assessed in several areas. However, a major caution relates to how a student qualifies for a gifted program. I would advise an educational agency to refrain from identifying students in an area in which it is not prepared to provide an adequate program. Far too often, students qualifying for GATE in the visual and performing arts are placed in an advanced math class with students of strong academic ability, only to struggle and often fail. How successful are students likely to be if they possess advanced science abilities and are placed in a class designed for those with exceptional music talent? *Bottom line: For any of the areas in which a school district identifies gifted students, it should be prepared to provide an appropriate program for those students.* This service should be *over and above* what is provided for other students. At the very least, an educational agency should provide a strong program for those students who qualify for the gifted program because of their intellectual or academic abilities. As a next step, I encourage school districts to develop programs which address the other categories of giftedness.

Looking at visual and performing arts, for example, a student who is identified as *gifted* should expect more than regular classroom art or school chorus. Lessons with noted artists, inclusion in a community orchestra, or performing with a local theater group are examples of possible *above and beyond* opportunities in the visual and performing arts.

What does a school district offer specifically for students who are gifted in leadership ability—student council? Working with local community leaders, being mentored by a government official, and attending leadership conferences could qualify as *over and above* services. *Bottom line: If you can't provide services in an area, then don't identify for it!* Instead, why not develop a program?



POTENTIAL VERSUS PERFORMANCE

Another issue related to gifted identification often is expressed by teachers who might have a student in class who *couldn't rub two dendrites together if life depended upon it*, but who qualified for GATE some years past. What we do know about giftedness is quite interesting—both *potential and performance* are dynamic, changing over time. A student might qualify for GATE in second grade but, if tested again in a year or so, he might not qualify. This changing situation can become a nightmare for administering gifted programs, so most educational agencies follow the practice of *once gifted, always gifted*, even though that is not always true. However, the opposite situation can occur. A student assessed for placement in a gifted program in third grade might not qualify then, but when tested again in fourth grade, she qualifies. Why is this? Many factors come into play when a student is assessed: dynamics of the testing situation, a student's health or confidence on that day, maturity, and so forth. Who knows? So, most educational agencies operate on the premise that once students are identified, they remain in the gifted program. Such a position makes things easier both from an administrative standpoint and also for public relations.



DEFINING GIFTEDNESS

Before going any further in this book, let's take a moment to define what is meant by *giftedness*. We know it can be measured on an intelligence test by scoring at the top 3–5%. However, what does *giftedness* mean beyond a test score? Since this is my book I get to choose the definition that has worked for me over the past 40 years and the one I use with the teachers in my seminars. It's from Abe Tannenbaum, a respected researcher and advocate for gifted education since the 1960s:

Giftedness in children denotes their potential for becoming critically acclaimed performers or exemplary producers of ideas in spheres of activity that enhance the moral, physical, emotional, social, intellectual or aesthetic life of humanity.

STRESSING CONTRIBUTION

If you accept Tannenbaum's definition, then being gifted isn't about *receiving* a gift; it's more about *giving* a gift. As I explain to participants in my seminars, I believe there is an obligation attached to being gifted. This obligation is associated with the concept of *contribution*. People of high abilities have a responsibility to make this world a better place. This obligation translates itself into a variety of behaviors: tolerance, empathy, intellectualism, patience, and honesty, along with problem-solving ability and ethical behavior.

When parents say, "My child is gifted, what does she get?" I try to turn this attitude around by saying, "Your child will receive a high quality education from a GATE certified teacher who will bring out her gifts and talents. Our expectation is that your child will, in the future, contribute her gifts and talents to benefit others." I always have emphasized the concept of *paying it forward*. An exercise I used the first week of school when I taught special classes for intellectually gifted students is described here:

You have all been identified as gifted, which means you are among the top 3–5% of all students in mental ability. What are you going to do with this gift to make our classroom and this school a better place? Please sit down with a partner and list five things you can do to share your gift for the betterment of our school and community. These will become our goals for the year.



As a teacher, and later as a principal, my goal for students was to see their names listed on that scrap of paper when someone in the future asked, "Who do you admire?" As an educator, what I wish for all students is for them to be on *The List* of people whose gifts, talents, contributions, and abilities are so outstanding that they are remembered as being *exceptional*. Being rich and famous, to me, is not nearly as important as making a positive difference in the lives of others. Hopefully, you will agree with me and instill in your students this strong sense of *contribution and commitment*. It sort of makes getting an A+ on the weekly spelling test a bit mundane, doesn't it?



THE CAUSES OF GIFTEDNESS

As we further examine *who are the gifted*, the question comes up, “What actually causes giftedness?” Is it genetic, or is it environmental, or is it simply an aberration? Although much has been written about the research in this area, little has been discussed for fear of offending someone. There are two schools of thought: one is *genetic* and the other is *environmental*. Here is the simple *genetic* explanation: Smart people marry smart people and have smart children. Generally, this is true. Occasionally, however, two very smart people will have a very dull child. Likewise, two people of very average or low intelligence may have a brilliant child. In biology, this phenomenon is called a *mutation*.

Another cause of giftedness is *environmental*, the belief that you can *make* a child gifted by exposing him or her to a variety of enriching experiences, beginning at an early age. Studies have confirmed that this does work for younger children; however, their intelligence seems to *level off* when they reach about fourth grade, or age 9 to 10. This does not mean that parents shouldn’t play Mozart to their unborn child. It can’t hurt, but it probably won’t help too much in the long run. We do know that children whose parents engaged them in conversation at an early age and encouraged them to “use your words” generally are smarter than those who have not had these experiences. Paul Slocumb and Ruby Payne (2000) have discussed this topic at great length in their book, *Removing the Mask: Giftedness in Poverty*. This book is worth a first and a second read! However, we all know there are exceptions to almost everything and my cousin George is an example. Although exposed to an enriched language experience at an early age, he didn’t speak until he was almost seven. Now, he is a nuclear physicist. Go figure.

APPRECIATING UNIQUENESS

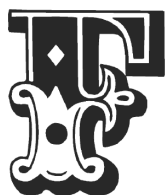
Whatever the cause of giftedness, some kids simply are smarter than others. However, teachers need to worry less about this issue and more about making all kids smarter. While all children have their own gifts and talents, this is not to be confused with the *clinical definition* of gifted and talented which applies to the top 3–5% of students. If we define giftedness as *very high ability and potential*, some students, unfortunately, are not gifted. Once we accept this fact, we then can proceed to meet the needs of our gifted children who have special needs of their own.

Some teachers and administrators tend to speak in platitudes hoping to make everyone feel good: “All students are gifted.” There is a sense that it isn’t *fair* that some students have it all: they are highly intelligent, excellent athletes, good looking, and simply nice kids. *Don’t you just hate*

'em? Of course we don't! However, we are fixated on the concept of *fairness*. We want life to be fair and it simply isn't.

ELIMINATING THE "F" WORD

As a teacher and administrator, I have heard students use the "F" word in school, which isn't allowed. I would like to suggest banning another "F" word: *fair*. If we are concerned that it isn't *fair* that some kids are smarter than others, then we fall victim to the ever-present *Pity Principle* which has governed our profession for over three decades. The *Pity Principle* implies



that we can't intervene or provide extra service to members of any group unless we *pity* them in some way: they are poor, they don't speak English, they are disabled, they are a minority, or they are cognitively delayed. While there are programs for these groups of children, we fall short when it comes to investing in programs for those who are capable.

Are gifted children expected to fend for themselves? Sometimes, it appears so. When I worked for the County Office of Education, I had the opportunity to conduct nearly a hundred *time-on-task analyses* in as many classrooms as part of *Effective Schools Research*. What always concerned me was that the most common off-task behavior of gifted and high-ability students was waiting. The vast majority of gifted students I observed in regular classrooms spent nearly 20% of their day waiting. Simple arithmetic helped me calculate this alarming statistic: By the time a gifted child graduates from high school, he has spent two years of his educational career waiting for others to finish. Waiting for the rest to *get it* is the single most nonproductive behavior experienced by our gifted students. As you read further, however, strategies will be provided to help remedy this situation.

THE GATE CLASSROOM AS THE BEST CLASSROOM

Since we are on the topic of placement for gifted students, we need to discuss another *elephant in the living room*. As a retired principal, I fully understand the problems associated with clustering gifted students together in the same classroom. Soon, the perception is that the GATE class is the *best class*. Parents of non-GATE students may begin to resent such a special class or try to get their own children into the class. How interesting it is that these parents don't resent the special education classes. In any event, principals have a difficult time when it comes to the placement of gifted youngsters because they want to please everyone. As a result, principals fall victim to the *Tootsie Roll Approach*, distributing gifted students equally in each class, much like Halloween candy, *one for you, one for you, and one for you*.



GROUPING PRACTICES FOR THE GIFTED

Let's examine what the research says about grouping gifted students together. Sally Reis, a renowned researcher in gifted education at the University of Connecticut, has conducted studies about placement of students. She has described various instructional practices and their impact on GATE students. I've combined Reis's findings and added my own descriptions of what I've observed in schools related to GATE grouping practices. This information is outlined in the chart that follows:

GROUPING PRACTICES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

- **Full-day placement** in a class comprised entirely of gifted students, taught by a teacher trained to provide instruction for gifted students
- **GATE cluster classes** where about 10 students, irrespective of total class size, are identified GATE and the remainder of the class is a heterogeneous group
- A **pull-out program** where gifted students leave the classroom daily for an hour, or perhaps for a half-day once a week, to do advanced studies with a teacher trained to work with gifted students
- **Distribution of gifted students** among all the teachers at a grade level (the Tootsie Roll approach), also called the *Do Nothing Option!*
- **Part-time grouping** of students during the day where gifted and talented students have a special class matched to their area of expertise (advanced math, English, or science; music or art)
- **After school and Saturday specialized activities** designed for gifted students (not particularly effective since it assumes gifted students need to be challenged only *after* school hours)

Reis's research indicated that a pull-out program with a highly trained teacher might work best for GATE students. However, my personal experience with the current standards-based curriculum is that gifted students in a pull-out program feel somewhat disassociated from classmates. Also, it is a common expectation that GATE students either make up the work they missed while out of the regular classroom (*Isn't that fun!!!!*) or, if they are excused from the work, they are expected to have mastered anything taught while they were away.

Another major drawback of pull-out programs is the cost. Not too many educational agencies can afford additional staff to provide GATE

pull-out classes. In short, while GATE pull-out programs have been successful in the past, they may not work as well with current budget constraints. Of all the options Reis outlines, clustering seems to be the most common approach to grouping gifted students that is being used currently.

Here are some thoughts about *clustering gifted students* that should be considered:

CLUSTERING GATE STUDENTS

- All cluster classes need to be taught by a GATE trained/certified teacher.
- A cluster is about 10 students. Here are some guidelines for placement:
 - At fourth grade, if there are only five GATE students in the school, then all of them should go into one classroom.
 - If there are 14 gifted students in fifth grade, then I would put them all in the same class.
 - With 20 gifted students at a grade level, you could form two GATE clusters, rather than putting all 20 students in one class.
- The remainder of the GATE cluster class can be composed of a *heterogeneous* group of students. While some schools fill out the GATE cluster classes with high performing students, as a former principal, I did not want to deplete the other classes of all the high performing students.
- Students with mild to moderate learning disabilities may be included within the heterogeneous group of students in the GATE cluster classes. Reis cautions, however, that special education students with the greatest academic difficulties might not be placed in the GATE cluster class. Just a reminder, 8–10% of our gifted students also have learning disabilities. They are often referred to as *double-labeled* or *twice-exceptional*.

It is essential that GATE cluster classes have a sufficient number of gifted students placed together to create what is considered a *critical mass* so that they can interact with each other. Also, while four or five gifted students can be overlooked easily in a classroom, it is more difficult to ignore a cluster of 10.



WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT INTELLIGENCE

Since the goal of education is to make all kids smarter, then an examination of what we know currently about intelligence might give us some insight into how we can help students reach their highest potential. Since we know we CAN make kids smarter, and that intelligence is not static but ever-changing,



the more we know about how smart kids differ from others, the more we are able to make more kids smarter!

Stephen Ceci, psychologist and professor of developmental psychology at Cornell University, is considered an expert in the development of intelligence and memory. His article, entitled *IQ Intelligence: The Surprising Truth* (2001), presents 12 supported facts about intelligence compiled from earlier works. Some of the highlights of his findings are displayed in the box that follows:

FACTS ABOUT INTELLIGENCE

1. **IQ correlates with some simple abilities**—The higher your intelligence, the faster you process information and the quicker you can solve problems.
2. **IQ is affected by school attendance**—The longer you remain in school, the smarter you become. Staying in school can prevent your IQ from slipping. IQ declines over summer vacation and with lack of performance. For each year of high school not completed, there is an average loss of 1.8 IQ points. Delaying schooling has adverse effects on IQ.
3. **IQ is not influenced by birth order**—There is no correlation between birth order and intelligence. However, as a group, smarter people tend to have fewer children than those of lower intelligence.
4. **IQ is related to breast-feeding**—By age 3, breast-fed babies have an IQ that is from three to eight points higher than bottle-fed babies. (This may be related to the amount of time a mother and child spend together while nursing. It also may be that the immune factors in mothers' milk prevent children from getting diseases that deplete energy and impair early learning.)
5. **IQ varies by birth date**—Students born late in the year, as a group, show lower IQ scores. For each year of schooling completed, there is an IQ gain of approximately 3.5 points.
6. **IQ evens out with age**—Siblings who are raised separately may have marked differences in IQ when they are younger. However, once they reach adulthood, their IQs are more similar. (This probably is due to genetic factors which take priority over environmental ones.)
7. **Intelligence is plural, not singular**—Three kinds of intelligence are generally recognized: spatial, verbal, and analytical/mathematical. A fourth type, practical/common sense, also has been noted by the author. Other recognized GATE authorities have embraced the theory of *multiple intelligences*.
8. **IQ is correlated to head size**—Based upon IQ tests, the larger a person's head, the smarter he is. Cranial volume seems to be correlated to IQ. (This correlation was discovered in the Armed Forces where every inductee is given an IQ test and also measured for a helmet.)

(Continued)

(Continued)

9. **Intelligence scores are predictive of real-world outcomes**—Over their lifetimes, people who have completed more school tend to earn more. College graduates earn over \$800,000 more than high school graduates. Those with professional degrees earn nearly \$1,600,000 more than college graduates. As a rule, the higher a person's intellectual ability, the higher her earnings.
10. **Intelligence is context-dependent**—A person can be really smart in one area and very average in other areas. Being able to reason complexly depends upon what each person is required to think about.
11. **IQ is on the rise**—Average IQ has risen 20 points with every generation. We are smarter than our parents, and our children very likely will be smarter than we are. The bar continues to rise.
12. **IQ may be influenced by the school cafeteria menu**—Diet influences brain functioning. *Eat your fish. It's brain food!* A 14% increase in IQ was noted after preservatives were removed from the cafeteria menu in New York City public schools. This improvement was greatest among remedial students.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

We need to recognize that some students are more intelligent than others. However, instructional strategies previously reserved for the brightest students can be used effectively with a wider range of student abilities. Many times, the entire class can participate successfully in an activity that is appropriate for students of high ability. All students can benefit from being asked to think critically, to examine content in depth, to connect content being learned to other content, and to move faster through the content.

As you read the information in succeeding chapters and use the strategies presented, don't think just about your *gifted youngsters*, think about *all your students*. Some youngsters will grasp the concepts very readily; others may labor a bit, while some students might struggle a lot. However, the more frequently you provide students with opportunities to stretch their thinking, the more adept they will become at it. Conversely, if students are never asked to extend their thinking, we teachers are doing them a disservice. Every student has a right to be exposed to the most rigorous content.

The next chapter is about how the brain works, with specific strategies to use in a brain-compatible classroom. By regularly using the strategies in the following chapters, teachers will increase opportunities for deeper thinking and more meaningful learning for all students.