

January 2009 *Giftedness Unwrapped*

Understanding Our Gifted

Issue focus: Early Learners

Giftedness Unwrapped

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In our writing we respond to parents' and teachers' questions about gifted development and gifted education. We illustrate our perspectives with stories from our case files of children, families, classrooms, and schools, stories that shed light on what giftedness is (and isn't) and how it develops. Here we address one of the questions we are most often asked by parents, how to tell if a child is gifted.

Mismatch Diagnostics: A Sensible Approach to Gifted Identification

When parents ask us, "How can we tell if our child is gifted?" we begin by suggesting that they reframe the question to something like this: "How can we find out if our child has gifted learning needs?" That question invites answers that are more compatible with the fluid nature of gifted development, the fact that gifted learning needs vary across different areas of focus, including times in a child's life, and types of learning contexts.

The reframing of this question may sound subtle and academic, but it makes an important distinction and can make all the difference between a child being assessed for the gifted category (with all kinds of potentially damaging repercussions), and her being given the right opportunities to learn.

Why Identify Giftedness?

It's better when schools offer advanced-level academic programming in which children can enroll as they are ready, labeling these programs as challenging, rather than selecting certain

children as inherently needing to be challenged (or “gifted”). Sometimes, however, more information is needed and it becomes important to determine if a given child has exceptional learning needs, and in what domains.

Looked at in this way, the reason for gifted identification is not to decide whether or not a child fits the category (and thus *is* gifted or not-gifted), but rather what the child’s learning strengths are, and if her development is so far advanced that some kind of differentiation is needed. Areas of particular interest are the academic subjects that are taught and valued at the child’s school, typically math, science, and the language arts. Certainly a strong argument can be made for identifying giftedness more broadly (e.g., spatial, musical, and other exceptional abilities), but that’s a topic for another day. A good starting point for thinking about gifted identification is the school subjects that are most emphasized.

Intelligence Quotients and Gifted Identification

Individually-administered intelligence tests are great as part of a battery of assessment tools when a clinician is trying to figure out a child’s cognitive strengths and challenges where there is a learning problem or concern about school choice. However, they are not usually useful for identifying gifted learning needs. There are many problems when IQ is the major criterion (or worse, the *only* criterion) used for a decision about whether or not a child qualifies for gifted programming.

A high IQ score doesn’t help parents or teachers understand what kind of learning opportunities a child might need. The IQ combines ability across areas of functioning in a global score, and means that a child has scored well in a series of subtests measuring linguistic, spatial, and quantitative reasoning. A child who is amazingly good at the subtests relating to mathematical development, and who has gifted learning needs in math, may or may not do well

enough on the test as a whole to qualify for gifted identification. If he does happen to make the cut and is identified as gifted, his IQ scores don't provide his school with anything specific or useful by way of programming recommendations. He will almost certainly be working considerably beyond his identified-gifted age peers mathematically, and he may find that he's struggling to keep pace in other subject areas.

An example from our case files immediately comes to mind. Alberto's mother, Sylvana, recalls that he's always been fascinated by numbers, measurement, and spatial relationships. He was building complex Lego structures before he was four. Now at age nine, his conceptual understandings of most dimensions of mathematics are closer to those of a fifteen year old. Last year, he was tested for the gifted program in his school district. His IQ was high enough, so he got in. The psychologist told Sylvana that Alberto had extraordinarily high scores on the subtests measuring quantitative and spatial concepts and reasoning, but was closer to average in his short term memory and tests of language reasoning.

So now Alberto's in a gifted program. He's having a difficult time keeping up with his classmates in most subject areas, and has come to think of himself as not very smart. But the saddest thing of all may be that if you ask him what his best and worst subjects are at school, he quickly says he DETESTS math. It's way too easy, and he's not learning anything. We think it is a dreadful educational failure, with long term repercussions not just for a child like Alberto, but for society as a whole, when a child who is mathematically gifted DETESTS math at school and is not continuing to develop his mathematical interests and abilities.

Another criticism of intelligence tests is that they are culturally biased. There are longstanding differences in test scores across race (Asian and Caucasian children do better than others), socioeconomic status (children from higher SES families fare better), and geography

(scores of suburban dwellers tend to be higher than urban and rural dwellers', at least in the US). Among other factors, including differences in opportunities to learn the kinds of things that IQ tests actually test, it appears that there are differences in the extent to which children are willing to exert themselves for standardized tests of abstract reasoning like IQ tests. There are many reasons children may not *want* to perform well on IQ tests, including that they don't see the point of the exercise, that they are otherwise preoccupied, and that they do not want to risk having to change programs, schools, or neighborhoods as a result of a high score.

That being said, there is sometimes a role for IQ testing in identifying giftedness. In combination with other sources of information, they can provide important information about what's going well in a child's intellectual development, and what needs more work. In fact, this is how IQ tests were originally intended to be used. Over a century ago, Alfred Binet designed the first intelligence test in Paris in order to help disadvantaged children do better at school. Although the tests have changed considerably since then, from a diagnostic perspective they still offer useful clues for planning sound educational matches. For example, when learning patterns are unusual, as happens when children have multiple exceptionalities (e.g., giftedness and attention problems, or giftedness and learning disabilities), an intelligence test can give a clinician a complex understanding of the child's learning pattern, and this can lead to good programming recommendations.

Variability in Development and in Assessment

Giftedness is a lot more variable than most people realize. There are many pathways to giftedness, and (contrary to a popular misconception), giftedness is not a "once and forever" kind of thing. Just because a child has gifted learning needs in one area or another at a particular time does not mean that she will always have gifted learning needs.

The best way to assess giftedness is to diagnose students' needs for differentiated educational programming in specific subject areas, at specific points in time. The most useful identification measures are those that provide thorough and current information about children's developmental levels across abilities.

Educators should consider many different sources of information, including (a) prior achievement in certain subject areas, as indicated by school grades and other reports; (b) scores, by subject area, on high-ceiling tests of abstract reasoning, such as the Cognitive Abilities Test, or CogAT (Lohman & Hagen, 2001); (c) demonstrated interest in the subject area; and (d) persistence in the tasks and learning environments required to achieve expertise in each subject area (Lohman, 2005). The strength of this kind of multiple-measures approach, when it is used regularly and frequently, is that it allows for timely identification of subject-specific gifted learning needs, and enables teachers to target their curriculum decisions most effectively to meet individual students' gifted learning needs. In the early years, when so much of what a child needs to learn concerns social and emotional development, special gifted programming is rarely a priority. We receive a lot of questions from parents about this, so in our next column, we will address parents' roles in supporting the kind of affective development that is most likely to foster giftedness.

Recommendation: Diagnose Mismatches as They Happen

All children benefit when teachers have the training and support they need in order to be mismatch diagnosticians, always on the lookout for ways their students' abilities *are* and *are not* being addressed by the curriculum. The mismatch diagnosis approach to gifted identification ensures that all children, including those like Alberto with profound subject-specific strengths, those who don't "test gifted" on IQ tests, those from culturally diverse backgrounds, and those

with learning needs that come to light as a result of a multiple-measures approach, get the education they require so they can thrive.

References

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