

THE GIFTED LABEL: PERSON OR PROGRAM?

(Based on presentation at NAGC conference, Tampa, Florida, November, 2008)

Dona Matthews, Ph.D., and Joanne Foster, Ed.D.

University of Toronto

donamatthews@gmail.com jfoster@oise.utoronto.ca www.beingsmart.ca

An Interesting Approach: Starting at the End and Drawing Conclusions

1. Testing approaches should be as informative as possible, and thereby help teachers facilitate student learning in ways that are flexibly responsive, with programming that takes into account children's individual differences in knowledge and in learning rate.
2. Diagnostic testing should be followed by suitable instruction.
3. It is better to label programs rather than people.

Back to the Beginning: Why Identify Giftedness?

"The purpose of identifying gifted children is not to stamp them with a blue seal marked 'Premium Gifted Child'. Identification is not an end in itself. Rather, it is the means to the goal of getting each child into the educational program most suited to develop his capacities and his 'whole person.'" (Robert DeHaan & Robert Wilson, 1958)

Think about this quote. How far have we come in the past fifty years in determining who should receive gifted programming? Was the message valuable or heeded back then? Now? What have we learned in the interim?

Possible Benefits of the Gifted Label

Benefits of the gifted label include validation of ability, affirmation of differentness, educational changes that better match an individual's abilities and interests, and increased opportunities for interactions with intellectual peers.

But There Are Problems, Too

"Lack of consensus in terminology & definitions related to giftedness, lack of agreed upon IQ cut-off scores for identification..." (Bracken & Brown, 2006)

- ❖ **Gifted labeling compartmentalizes people.** That is, one is either gifted, or not gifted, and that can be problematic.
- ❖ **Too many children fall through the cracks.** For example, those implicitly labeled "not-gifted" (e.g., siblings; learners advanced in only certain subjects; students just missing cut-off criteria; poor test-takers; minorities); those identified as gifted but who don't find a match in gifted programs; and those who fear failure or avoid challenge.

- ❖ **Lots more drawbacks.** These can include intensified expectations from oneself, parents, and teachers; prejudices and misconceptions of others; envy or rejection from old friends; unhappiness with perceived elitism; confusion about the meaning of the label; worries about being an imposter; need to change schools for programming; and cultural, racial, linguistic, and SES underrepresentation.

The Labeling Experience

The labeling experience varies according to the child's age; psychosocial factors (e.g., resilience, social competence, personality, maturity); family factors (e.g., support and/or stressors); ability factors (e.g., domain[s] and degree of giftedness, other exceptionalities); educational opportunities following labeling; social and cultural context (is it okay to be smart?)

Current Research Findings

- Giftedness is context-specific, domain-specific, and highly variable in its development. There are continuities and discontinuities across the life span. Good programming matches vary across domains and change over time (Matthews, Subotnik, & Horowitz, 2009).
- Momentum is growing toward understanding giftedness within a developmental diversity framework, and away from a categorical (gifted/not gifted) model.
- There are enormous differences in the way children develop (e.g., timing, areas of interest, temperament, motivation, family and cultural environment).
- The old way of identifying, labeling, and segregating children on general intelligence or academic test scores at one point in time is very hard to defend (Horowitz, Subotnik, & Matthews, 2009).

Mindsets

“Telling children they’re smart, in the end, made them feel dumber and act dumber, but claim they were smarter. I don’t think this is what we’re aiming for when we put positive labels—‘gifted,’ ‘talented,’ ‘brilliant’—on people.” (Dweck, 2006)

Fixed mindset: Intelligence is innate and fixed (entity theory).

Growth mindset: Intelligence develops over time, with opportunities to learn (incremental theory).

Across backgrounds and situations, the growth mindset is associated with higher levels of academic and career achievement and satisfaction.

- ❖ **Giftedness from a growth mindset:** Giftedness is not a fixed and innate attribute of a person, but rather something that changes over time, and that can be influenced by many environmental factors. This is consistent with the direction of a paradigm shift in the field of gifted education, and consistent with a mastery model perspective (Matthews & Foster, 2005): Giftedness is exceptionally advanced subject-specific

ability at a particular point in time, such that a student's learning needs cannot be well met without significant adaptations to the curriculum (p. 26).

- ❖ **Mindsets and labels:** Gifted labeling reflects a *fixed mindset*. Those who have a *growth mindset* conceptualize intelligence as dynamic, developing over time with appropriately challenging and scaffolded learning. By avoiding labeling—and by modeling and nurturing a growth mindset—we can best support giftedness and talent development across diverse learners.

Recommended Changes to Gifted Labeling Practices

- Focus on giftedness as domain-specific advancement at a given point in time.
- Avoid the gifted label unless it's necessary for appropriate programming.
- Work toward a learning match for every learner in every subject.
- Provide a range of challenging learning options.
- Label programs, not people (Borland, 2006).
- Use assessment/identification information to help address individual needs, so the teacher becomes a “**mismatch diagnostician.**”

All of this means rethinking identification: The goal is to find those students whose domain-specific mastery so far exceeds grade-level programming that they do not learn much in the classroom unless appropriate adaptations are made.

What Kind of Assessment Works Best?

The best assessment is ongoing, by subject area, to determine who might need adaptations. It should be flexibly integrated into the teaching/learning process. And, it should be accompanied by teacher development on differentiation. (Lohman, 2005; Robinson, Shore, & Enersen, 2007; Worrell, 2009)

Multiple Measures: Which Ones?

Consider: History of academic achievement in a domain; high-ceiling standardized achievement and aptitude tests that focus on reasoning in that domain, motivation and interest in the domain; and a record of persistence in the typical learning environments of the domain (Lohman, 2005). **Subjective measures** include rating scales, checklists, student products, and portfolios. These can be useful for broad-based information, including motivation and attitude. **Objective measures** include intelligence tests; cognitive ability tests; aptitude tests; achievement tests; and school (university) entrance exams. Standardized tests provide additional information and objective confirmation of teacher judgment and other subjective assessment data.

Final Thoughts

By fostering a growth mindset, engaging in ongoing diagnostic, assessment providing a range of challenging and meaningful learning options, and labeling programs rather than people, educators and parents can support gifted-level outcomes in diverse learners.

These ideas are discussed in more depth in a recent article published in *Understanding Our Gifted* which you can find at www.beingsmart.ca or www.our-gifted.com (full reference below).

References

- Borland, J. H. (2005). Gifted education without gifted children: The case for no conception of giftedness. In R. J. Sternberg & J. E. Davidson (Eds.), *Conceptions of giftedness* (2nd ed., pp. 1-19). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Bracken, B. A. & Brown, E. F. (2006) Behavioral identification and assessment of gifted and talented students. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 24 (2), 112-122.
- DeHaan, R. F., & Wilson, R. C. (1958). Identification of the gifted. In N. B. Henry (Ed.), *Education for the gifted*, pp. 166-192. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.
- Horowitz, F. D., Subotnik, R. F., & Matthews, D. J. (Eds.) (2009). *The development of giftedness and talent across the life span*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Lohman, D. F. (2005). An aptitude perspective on talent: Implications for identification of academically gifted minority students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 28, 333-360.
- Matthews, D. J., & Foster, J. F. (2005). *Being smart about gifted children: A guidebook for parents and educators*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Matthews, D. J., & Foster, J. F. (Summer, 2008). Wrestling with misconceptions: Is the gifted label good or bad? *Understanding Our Gifted*, p. 3-7.
- Matthews, D. J., Subotnik, R. F., & Horowitz, F. D. (2009). A developmental perspective on giftedness and talent: Implications for research, policy, and practice. In F. D. Horowitz, R. F. Subotnik, & D. J. Matthews (Eds.) *The development of giftedness and talent across the lifespan*, (pp. 209-226). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Robinson, A., Shore, B. M., Enersen, D. L. (2007). *Best practices in gifted education: An evidence-based guide*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Worrell, F. C. (2009). What Does Gifted Mean? Personal and Social Identity Perspectives on Giftedness in Adolescence. In F. D. Horowitz, R. F. Subotnik, & D. J. Matthews, *The development of giftedness and talent across the life span* (pp. 131-152). Washington: APA Publications.