

Wrestling with Misconceptions:

Is the Gifted Label Good or Bad?

Understanding Our Gifted, Volume 20, Issue 4, pp. 3-7. Reprinted with Permission, Open Space Communications LLC. 800-494-6178 / www.openspacecomm.com

Dona J. Matthews & Joanne F. Foster

Any kind of label bothers me. My daughter is not packaged goods like you find in a grocery store. Next thing you know, they'll put an expiration date on her, too. (Parent)

They made a mistake when they decided I was gifted. School's way too hard, and I don't always get A's. (Student)

I've been teaching a long time. Some of the kids in general education are a lot smarter than the ones placed in the gifted program. (Teacher)

One of the popular misconceptions about giftedness is that the gifted label is a benefit. Based on current evidence, however, it appears that it is a mixed blessing at best, and can bring unexpected problems to children, their families, and their teachers. In this article, we review current perspectives and recommendations on gifted identification and labeling, and consider some of the implications of labeling. In addition to research evidence, we include reflections from teachers, parents, and students, and conclude that the best use of the gifted label is when it attaches to programs rather than people. We discuss how parents and teachers can work together to make this happen to support gifted development.

Because each situation is unique, the gifted labeling experience varies considerably from one child to another (Matthews & Foster, 2005). How a given child experiences being labeled is affected by many factors, including

- the child's age;
- psychosocial factors such as resilience, personality, sensitivity, maturity, and social competence;
- family factors such as support and/or stressors;
- ability factors such as the domain(s) and degree of giftedness, and the presence of any other exceptionalities such as attention or learning problems;
- school-related factors such as the kinds of educational opportunities that follow being labeled;
- and the social context for delivering gifted education.

Children who are labeled gifted often have uncertain feelings about the label and the whole "gifted" experience, if not immediately, then over time. We have seen circumstances where

children do experience benefits from the gifted label—for example when they perceive it as a validation of their abilities or an affirmation of their sense of differentness; or when it results in educational changes that better match their particular abilities and interests, or provides increased opportunities for interactions with their intellectual peers. However, gifted labeling compartmentalizes people. That is, one is either gifted, or not gifted, and that can be problematic. Consider the following three true accounts of “outsider” attitudes, reactions of people who have not themselves been officially labeled as gifted.

In class we ask students who are training to become teachers to wear post-it notes with the word “gifted” written boldly upon them. They all seem fine with that – until it comes time to leave the classroom and enter the real world. It amazes us how quickly each one of them removes those post-it notes, crumples them up, and tosses them in the garbage. When we ask them *why* a little later on, they are quick to reason collectively that the label is often misconstrued and carries “baggage” they’d rather not have to confront. We have conducted this role-play again and again with teachers in different stages of their careers, and the end result is always the same. Before re-entering the “real world”, these teachers who want to work with gifted learners lose the gifted label as fast as they can.

In the second of our “outsider” stories, a trendy store in the US recently sold bright red t-shirts with the word “gifted” emblazoned on the front in gold letters. We discovered a *huge* stack of them on a clearance table, at 90% off list price. Perhaps being gifted is not something that people want to advertise about themselves, or even a “gift” they want to give to others.

Finally, Pia Natividad, a teacher candidate enrolled in a gifted education course, responded thoughtfully when asked about what the gifted label meant. She wrote, “In my experiences as a student, whenever I heard of students being called gifted, I always felt reverence in their presence. I thought these students were most definitely different from me. In my mind, they were the ones who received extra blessings from God, hence the word ‘gifted’.” (April, 2007)

In these brief stories one sees that outsiders’ responses to the gifted label can include reluctance to acknowledge it, negative general perceptions, and distancing misconceptions of what the word means. Depending on the circumstances, drawbacks of the label for those who are identified as gifted can include the following:

- confusion about its meaning;
- having to deal with the prejudices and misconceptions of others;
- intensified and perhaps unrealistic expectations from self, parents, and teachers;
- a sense of being an imposter;
- unhappiness with a perceived elitism and exclusivity;
- the need to change schools to get the necessary programming;
- inflated self-confidence; and

- envy or rejection from old friends.

More worrying even than these drawbacks, recent research suggests that we may actually be damaging children when we label them as gifted: “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, p. 75).

A Change in Progress: From Categorical to Flexible Understandings of Giftedness

He did really well on the IQ test in kindergarten, so he got into the gifted program back then. But he’s got a learning disability and is way behind on all his schoolwork. Is he still gifted? (Parent)

So, I’m supposedly “gifted”—whatever that means. Now what? (Student)

I’ve never received any training in gifted education. To be honest, if a student has a gifted label I’m not sure what to do with him day to day to day... (Teacher)

How people understand giftedness is rapidly changing, and some observers are describing it as a paradigm shift in progress (Borland, 2005; Matthews & Foster, 2006). The shift is toward a focus on developmental diversity and away from the categorical model where a few children are labeled as gifted, and all others are therefore relegated to the “not-gifted” category. Current research findings show enormous differences in the way that children develop, including in their timing and growth patterns, their areas of interest, their motivation, and their capacity to respond to different kinds of learning challenges. Educators are realizing that the old way of identifying, labeling, and segregating children by virtue of their general intelligence or academic ability test scores at one point in time, is harder and harder to defend.

This change has significant implications for those of us who are concerned about children who are academically advanced compared with their age peers. It means we have to put the emphasis more squarely on finding well-targeted learning matches for a given student at a given point in time. In a recent book considering what new findings in developmental psychology have to offer gifted education, and vice versa, the editors concluded that the most important next step is to move beyond a categorical (gifted/not-gifted) approach, and learn to see giftedness more flexibly:

From a developmental perspective, the pathways to exceptional adult achievement are complex, diverse, and domain-specific, varying across individuals, developmental periods, contexts, and cultures, with continuities and discontinuities that we still have much to learn about. For educators, this means providing appropriate curriculum and

programming matches for exceptionally advanced learners, creators, and performers, recognizing that this will vary across domains and change over time with development.

(Matthews, Subotnik, and Horowitz, in press)

In an interesting paradox, although this paradigm shift is emerging from a sharpened awareness of the complexity and variability of gifted development, it is resulting in a simpler and clearer understanding of what giftedness is and how it develops. Instead of the confusing, contentious, and mysterious definitions that accompanied the categorical approach, educators are increasingly defining giftedness as 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 (Borland, 2005; Matthews & Foster, 2006). They are recognizing that 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.

Giftedness as Something That Can Be Learned

What? Sharice failed the geography test??? That's impossible! She's gifted! (Parent)

I failed the geography test. I HATE geography! (Student) I failed the geography test. I really need to study harder next time. (Another student)

Sharice failed the geography test. I can't figure that out. She's so smart. (Teacher)

A child who has always done well at school has failed a test. What does that mean? The study of mindsets provides another valuable perspective on giftedness. For people who have a fixed mindset about intelligence, some students are seen as inherently smart, and some are not (Dweck, 2006). Children who hold a fixed mindset tend to feel judged in everything they produce. If they do not do well on a task, they conclude that they are not smart, at least in that subject area, and become less likely to attempt challenging problems, preferring work where they can demonstrate that they are in fact smart. There is a lot of compelling evidence showing that this categorical attitude is associated with lower achievement and self-esteem. Alarming, gifted labeling is an example of an institutionalized fixed mindset.

People who have a growth mindset, on the other hand, conceptualize intelligence as dynamic, as developing over time with appropriately scaffolded and challenging opportunities to learn (Dweck, 2006). Those with a growth mindset attribute their failures to a need for more work, and welcome the opportunities for learning that are provided by difficult challenges. The growth mindset leads to greater confidence, risk-taking, and academic and career success over time. By avoiding labeling, and instead modeling and nurturing a growth mindset, teachers and parents can have an enormous impact in supporting gifted-level development.

Sternberg (2005) also challenges traditional categorical conceptions of gifted education that see giftedness as fixed and innate. He emphasizes that creativity, intelligence, and wisdom are all fluid and modifiable, and can be learned. Further, he argues that in order to foster strong leadership skills as widely as possible at a time of urgent global need for good leaders, educators should be working to develop these attributes in all of their students. This means expanding our conceptions of what giftedness is, and moving beyond narrow labeling and categorization practices.

From Gifted Forever to Gifted Now

He was a slow starter when it came to reading, but look at him now. He's fascinated with everything scientific, and just seems to absorb it. His teacher says it's impossible to keep him challenged. (Parent)

I wonder if I will outgrow being gifted? (Student)

I worry about what will happen to Eli next year, and the year after that... (Teacher)

Another of the common misconceptions about the gifted label is that it is permanent, like a tattoo. But no. Current research evidence shows that it is a lot more like a washable marker than a tattoo: giftedness is less likely to stick than most people think. Over half of all children who score at gifted levels (above 130) on IQ tests at age 7 will score below 130 by age 12 (Gottfried, Gottfried, & Guerin, in press). And because IQ (like all norm-referenced standardized test scores), compares how one person did with others their own age, when one person's score comes down, another's has to go up, so there is as much upward mobility as downward mobility. If a child does not meet a certain gifted criterion on one test administration, he might just meet it on the next. The younger the child when assessed, the longer the time between test administrations, and/or the higher we set the identification criterion, the more volatile the scores, and so the poorer our capacity to predict gifted-level outcomes (or not-gifted outcomes) (Lohman, 2005). Giftedness is not something we should be thinking about as a once-and-forever quality of a person; instead, it makes better sense to think of some children as having gifted learning needs at a certain point in time – that is, now.

From All-Round Gifted to Gifted in Something

The only thing Victor is interested in is English literature. He doesn't even do his homework in the other subjects. (Parent)

They expect too much of me. Honestly, am I supposed to be 'gifted' 24-7? (Student)

She's supposed to be 'gifted', but she can't even do grade-level math. (Teacher)

Another widespread misconception about giftedness that affects labeling is whether intelligence is general across most or all cognitive domains, or specific to content domains. Many years ago, Gardner proposed a multiple intelligences theory (1985), positing that intelligences develop somewhat separately by domain. There has been a lot of research since then that has validated a domain-specific approach to understanding giftedness (Matthews, Subotnik, & Horowitz, in press). Some people are extremely advanced in mathematics; others are talented writers, or musicians, and so on. Some have several areas of giftedness, but virtually everyone has particular areas of strength and areas of relative weakness. Rather than describe someone as gifted, then, it makes better sense to describe their linguistic or spatial or other kind of specific gifted learning needs.

How Can We Tell Who Needs Gifted Programming?

The gifted label's meaning and value reside only in its practical consequence. It should be pursued or accepted only when it is the ticket required for entry to the educational programming a child needs in order to maximize his learning.

(Matthews & Foster, 2005, p. 102)

At first blush, people sometimes think that this approach—giftedness as something fluid that changes over time, and varies by subject area—means the end of gifted education. And yes, it does, if what you mean by ‘gifted education’ is the mysterious categorical model. On more careful consideration, however, the more flexible perspective we have been discussing here actually clarifies and intensifies the question of identification. Instead of asking, “Is this child gifted?” parents and teachers begin to ask, “How is this child gifted, and what should we be doing about it?” They recognize that some children have gifted-level learning needs at certain times and in certain subject areas, and that these needs must be met if those children are going to continue to learn.

To answer this second question we need to look more closely at what the child knows already in each subject area; that is, what he knows *now*. Gifted identification should be about diagnosing a student’s current need for differentiated educational programming. The best assessments are those that provide the closest understanding of the skills and content areas that are being taught, allowing as close an understanding as possible of a student’s actual learning needs. Teachers should think of themselves as “mismatch diagnosticians” and look for ways that students’ domain specific abilities are not being addressed by the curriculum usually provided.

The tests and assessments used to identify giftedness, then, should be *ongoing, flexible, and domain-specific*. The major goal of gifted assessment should be to find those students whose

domain-specific mastery so far exceeds grade-level programming that they are not learning much in the classroom unless appropriate adaptations are made. Intelligence tests can be helpful in understanding learning problems, providing supplemental information, or clarifying matters in ambiguous situations, such as where giftedness is combined with learning disabilities. However, IQ tests are not the best instrument for assessing gifted learning needs. As with learning problems, gifted identification is best accomplished when it (a) is integrated into the daily teaching/learning process, (b) represents an ongoing consideration by subject area of which children might need special educational adaptations, and (c) provides a viable means of informing the teacher about what programming approaches and strategies to adopt.

Best practice in psychology and education includes the use of multiple measures in making decisions such as gifted identification (Lohman, 2005; Robinson, Shore, and Enersen, 2007). This is important for all children, but is particularly important for those from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds. Sound implementation of multiple measures includes that programming matches the selection criteria; that additional measures are used to include learners who might otherwise have been missed, rather than to exclude learners from gifted programming; and that parents and teachers work together to consider children's diverse abilities and learning needs.

Specifically, the multiple measures for assessing need for gifted programming should include (a) the student's history of academic achievement in a domain; (b) the student's ability to reason in the symbol systems used to communicate new knowledge, as assessed by high-ceiling standardized achievement and aptitude tests that focus on reasoning in that domain; (c) the student's learning motivation and interest in the domain; and (d) the student's record of persistence in the typical learning environments of the domain (Lohman, 2005).

How Can Parents and Teachers Work Together in the Best Interest of Children?

I've started working with the principal and Sandeep's teacher. I'm coordinating a mentorship program at the school that includes a lot of parents and grandparents and other members of the community, as well as teachers. (Parent)

Shawn is a terrific mentor, and we're doing really interesting math stuff that I don't get to do in class. (Student)

I was surprised to learn that parents had as many questions as I do about what giftedness is and what gifted programming should look like. So we arranged for an expert to give a talk on gifted education at our last PTA meeting. It was a standing-room-only crowd, and we had a great discussion. Lots of controversy! (Teacher)

School change does not happen easily. The only way that educational practice actually changes is when parents and educators find ways to work together in the best interest of children. Even though there is powerful evidence of the need for a change from a categorical model where some children are labeled as gifted and others are labeled (implicitly) as not-gifted, people and systems and cultures tend to resist change. Change in this case means keeping the focus on giftedness as domain-specific advancement at a given point in time. It means avoiding the gifted label except where it is necessary for a student to obtain the appropriate programming. It means working toward a learning match for every learner in every subject area in every classroom. Instead of labeling children, why not label educational programming by level of challenge? We will only get there if parents and teachers can find ways to work together thinking about the nature of giftedness and gifted development, and how best to build collaboratively from there.

What Can Parents and Teachers Do?

1. Look for ways to model and support a growth mindset. Emphasize that learning happens slowly and incrementally, one step at a time. Learn to welcome mistakes and failures—yours and the child’s—as opportunities for learning.
2. Be ready, willing, and able to work with one another. Parents and educators who respect each other’s areas of expertise and time constraints engage in collaborative problem-solving and decision-making processes that ensure a good learning match for their children.
3. Discover how you and others might act resourcefully to meet children’s learning needs. Consider mentorships, multi-age or cross-grade groupings, guest lectures, technology-based networks, project supervision, field trips, and other possibilities for expanding learning opportunities in any given classroom and beyond.
4. Expand your thinking to include extracurricular possibilities. No one adult should be seen as the sole person responsible for a child’s learning. There is a wealth of local to global learning via clubs, contests, museums, libraries and other cultural institutions, and also via the Internet (with appropriate supervision).
5. Explain giftedness to the child (and think of it yourself) as a temporary designation of a learning need in a certain subject area, NOT a permanent condition or a sort of endowment reserved for some special children.
6. Think about the gifted label as an option of last resort, used only when a child cannot get the necessary programming without it.

Conclusion

The categorical approach to gifted education, where some students are labeled as gifted and are provided with segregated gifted programming, works very well for some students—that is, when there happens to be a strong teacher and a good fit for a given learner. In fact, gifted programming can sometimes turn an unhappy child into a keen and engaged learner again. In

practice, however, the categorical model lets a lot of children fall through the cracks, and labeling can end up creating more problems than it solves. Certainly there is collateral damage done to those who are left out and implicitly labeled as “not-gifted.” This underserved population might include siblings of identified-gifted students; learners who are advanced in only certain subjects; those who fail to meet the “cut-off” criteria for reasons that have nothing to do with their need for gifted programming (e.g., illness, temperament, creative approaches to test questions, and many others); or children whose needs go unrecognized because test items are culturally or socially insensitive. Moreover, we must also pay attention to learners who have been identified as gifted but do not find a good match in the gifted program, and those who acquire a fixed mindset with the label and so find their challenging learning opportunities daunting and their successes diminishing over time.

Parents and teachers with vested interests in the categorical model often worry that moving away from labeling means that exceptionally advanced learners will receive no accommodations for their learning needs. They argue that the more flexible developmental approach (that is, teaching individual children what they need to learn, in the best ways possible, based on where they’re at, and without a prerequisite label) relies on *all* educators having the training, support, and resources they need to provide appropriate differentiation for gifted learners, and that this will never happen, or at least not in their children’s academic lifetimes. We have been working with families and educators for many years now, and know that it can happen (Matthews, Foster, Gladstone, Schieck, & Miners, 2007). Giftedness is context-specific, domain-specific, and highly variable from one person to another. By working together toward developing a growth mindset in parents, teachers, and students, and by labeling programs rather than people, we greatly improve upon traditional categorical gifted labeling practices, and we do much more to support gifted-level outcomes.

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