

Major Considerations for the Development of Gifted Program Identification Systems

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As scientific study advances our understanding of how human potential develops over the course of a lifetime, the systems created to enhance that potential (i.e. the education system) should also change to reflect contemporary theories. In the field of gifted education during the past several decades, research has supported a broadened, expanded conception of giftedness (Gardner, 1983; Renzulli, 1978; Sternberg, 1985). A thorough review of this research is beyond the scope of this article, (see Dai, 2010; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005), but to simplify a complex and active debate, very few researchers and theorists continue to accept an isolated IQ or achievement test score as a valid measure of a child's capacity for producing notable accomplishments over the course of the lifetime. This does not mean that IQ or achievement scores should not be included as *one of a number of criteria*, only that they should not form *the entire basis* for decision making in identification for gifted and enrichment programs. In this article, we discuss the critical issue of having a cohesive relationship between the identification process and education programming for high ability students. Additionally, we review the Renzulli Identification System for Gifted Programming Services (RIS/GPS)—a comprehensive, evidence-based, and effective program that achieves this congruency. When we change to a true multiple criteria identification system, such as RIS/GPS, more services can be given to develop excellence in a greater number of students in an equitable and theoretically justified manner.

Districts just starting to develop gifted and talented programs and those with programs already in place both benefit from considering how to analyze the appropriateness of identification systems designed to select their students. The following questions constitute a starting point for reflection on the practical, political, and psychometric complexities of the issue:

1. Will this identification system be applicable to diverse school populations and groups of students that have been traditionally underrepresented in programs for the gifted?
2. How will we "label" students identified for these programs?
3. Will the system be economical in terms of the personnel time, group and individual testing costs, and other resources necessary to identify our students?
4. How much individual testing by school psychology staff will be required?
5. Will the system be flexible enough to accommodate talent potentials across different domains such as music, art, drama, technology, and other non-verbal or mathematical talent areas?

6. Will it be flexible enough to make changes if student performance warrants a reexamination of selection or rejection decisions?
7. How will the system fit in with regulations of state departments of education (especially in those cases where some level of financial reimbursement is provided by state agencies for each identified gifted student)?
8. How will the system help us avoid parental dissatisfaction or legal challenges?

Additionally, in any plan to identify gifted and talented students, **six important considerations** should be kept in mind:

Consideration 1: There is No Such Thing as a Perfect Identification System! There is no perfect way to identify who is or is not gifted, just as there is no single best way to develop giftedness and/or talent potentials. Every identification system is a “trade off” between the instruments and criteria selected, the ways we make decisions about any and all types of information we collect, and how much weight we give each type of information in the decision making process. The first and most important decision that should be made regarding practical procedures for identification is the conception or definition of giftedness adopted by a particular school system. In some cases, state regulations mandate the definitions that must guide identification and the number or proportion of students that can be served. There are programs, however, where additional students with high potential may be served if supported by local funds; and in such cases, this group may be designated by a label that is different from the state certified group designated as “the gifted” (e.g., Talent Pool, Advanced Learners, High Potential). Local circumstances notwithstanding, the conception or definition issue should be consistent with the types of services for which students are being identified (see Consideration 6 below). Any number of excellent resources exist that decision makers can consult in order to reach agreement on a conception/definition decision. A recent collection of articles on identification (Hunsaker, 2012) is a good resource for up to date research and commentary on this topic.

Consideration 2: The Objective vs. Subjective Trade-Off. The most Frasier quaintly used type of identification information is tests of cognitive ability and/or academic achievement. These types of tests are considered objective because they rely on student performance rather than the judgment of others. Some people might question the objectivity of these tests because the decision to use them is, in and of itself, a subjective act or they have concerns about whether or not a one-hour “glimpse” into a young person’s overall potential can be considered an accurate appraisal of a student’s total capacity for high-level performance. Almost all other criteria (e.g., teacher, parent, peer, or self ratings, portfolio or writing sample assessments, or grades earned in school subjects) are considered to be subjective as their use implies personal judgments that may be open to personal bias, an idiosyncratic view of giftedness, or inconsistent grading standards. These types of criteria enable us to see other signs of potential, such as motivation, creativity, leadership and executive functions (initiation, execution, and completion of tasks), or intense interest in a topic not reflected in more objective cognitive ability tests. If we view some of these non-cognitive skills as important, then we need to examine the degree to which we are willing to make trade-offs between objective and subjective information.

Consideration 3: People—Not Instruments—Make Decisions. Regardless of the number or types of instruments used in a multi-criteria identification system, instruments only provide selected sources of information, instruments do not make decisions! These team members (e.g. teachers, program coordinators, school psychologists, district liaisons) may need different levels of orientation and training to become well-informed evaluators. Protocols for resolving differences of opinion that will invariably emerge can be structured in advance, reducing the need for ad hoc solutions to team member disagreements. How much “weight” will be given to the various instruments or decision-making criteria should also be determined before implementing the identification system. For example, if a decision is made to use three cognitive ability measures (e.g., aptitude test, achievement test, and course grades), and only one measure of creativity (e.g., a creativity test or a teacher rating), there will be triple weighting of cognitive ability and single weighting of the creativity criterion. The relative emphasis on different sources of information should be aligned with the overall intent of the program. This consideration is important in both the design of the identification system and the interpretation of the information provided to the committee who will review students’ records and subsequently make decisions.

Consideration 4: Avoid The Multiple Criteria Smokescreen. Most identification systems utilize a traditional nomination/screening/selection approach, and at least part of any multiple criteria screening process is usually based on non-test information (e.g., teacher nominations and/or ratings). A problem arises, however, if the nomination or screening process only determines which students will be eligible to take an individual IQ test or a more advanced cognitive ability test. In such cases, a teacher nomination or high ratings is only used as a “ticket” to take the individual or group ability test. The test remains the ultimate “gatekeeper” for which students enter or do not enter the program, as the score is still ultimately the deciding factor. Any highly positive attributes that might have been the basis for a teacher nomination, or favorable information discovered in the screening process, are totally ignored when it comes to the final selection decision. The danger here is, of course, that we may be systematically excluding high potential students from culturally diverse backgrounds or students who have shown signs of high potential in other than the high verbal, mathematical, or analytic skills measured by standardized tests. What appears to be a multiple criteria approach ends up being a smokescreen for a more traditional cut-off score approach.

Consideration 5: What Will We Call Selected Students? A fifth consideration emerges from some of the considerations discussed above and relates to the degree of specificity that we are attempting to achieve in the identification process. The tradition has been simply to label all selected students as “the gifted;” thereby relegating all others to a non-gifted category. In recent years, however, a large body of research has argued very forcefully against such a broad stroke labeling process (Frasier, García, & Passow, 1995; Gardner, 1983; Renzulli & Reis, 1997, 2014; Sternberg, 1985; Winner 1996) and in some cases recommendations have been made to do away with any labeling altogether (Borland, 2004). A more current trend is to document specific student strengths by preparing an electronic multiple criteria profile (Field, 2009; Renzulli & Reis, 1997, 2014). This strength-based profile can be used for making more

personalized decisions about the types of resources and activities recommended for talent development.

Of course, labeling of any kind is always a controversial issue. In recent years, an approach that has gained in popularity is *to label the service rather than the student* (Renzulli & Reis, 1997, 2014). For example, in a school utilizing the Schoolwide Enrichment Model, a special service offered to all students called an “enrichment cluster” enabled any interested students to participate in a class entitled Statistical Techniques for Young Researchers. This class was specifically designed for upper elementary students with strong aptitudes and interests in mathematics. Students—without needing to be labeled themselves—could benefit from material that was much more advanced than the math being covered in their sixth, seventh, and eighth grade math classes.

Another example of a labeled service is Curriculum Compacting (Reis & Purcell, 1993; Reis & Renzulli, 2005; Reis, Westberg, Kulikowich, & Purcell, 1998), which is a within-the-regular-classroom process that teachers use for students who have already mastered the concepts and skills to be taught in a given unit of instruction, and/or who are capable of covering the regular material at a faster pace and higher level of comprehension than their classmates. This process involves specific procedures for identifying particular strength areas, documenting these competencies in a systematic fashion, and providing advanced level enrichment and/or acceleration opportunities with the time gained from eliminating already mastered material.

Consideration 6: The Relationship between Identification and Programming. Our final consideration addresses the congruence between the criteria used in the identification process and the goals and types of services that constitute the daily activities of students in a special program. Congruence between identification and programming is so important that it might be viewed as “the golden rule” of gifted education! For example, identification for advanced courses in a content area such as math is best accomplished through *math* testing, examination of previous *math* grades, teacher recommendations or ratings on *mathematical* skills, and perhaps even estimates of a student’s motivation to work hard *in math*. A problem arises, however, when we expect an “all purpose” gifted program to develop strengths that are unique to each child. If a general gifted program has a curriculum, or if individual teachers in the program decide most of the activities (e.g., the teacher’s favorite Rain Forest Unit or play production), then little room exists for variations in students’ interests, learning styles, or preferred modes of expression. In other words, the materials covered in the general gifted program may be different from the regular curriculum, but the prescriptive nature of what is to be learned uses essentially the same approach to teaching used in regular classrooms. Therefore, a related decision in developing an identification system is the selection of a *pedagogical* programming model that will be used to guide direct and indirect services to students regardless of how they are grouped or organized for special program services. In this case, we are not discussing organizational models, but rather what the teaching/learning process looks like within any predetermined organizational arrangement.

Again, there are numerous programming models recommended for serving this population, and these programming models can be divided into two categories. Organizational or administrative models address how we group students and move them from one activity to another (e.g., full-time classes, pull out programs, centers where students go for a given period of time each week, regular class inclusion approaches, to mention only a few). Theoretical or pedagogical models focus on the kind and quality of learning experiences that are offered within any grouping or organizational arrangement. The Enrichment Triad Model (Reis & Renzulli, 2003; Renzulli, 1977), the Autonomous Learner Model (Betts, 2009), and a variety of acceleration, problem-based learning, and Socratic reasoning approaches are examples of theoretical or pedagogical models. An excellent resource for examining the range of programming options can be found in *Systems and Models for Developing Programs for the Gifted and Talented* (Renzulli, Gubbins, McMillen, Eckert, & Little, 2009)

By way of summary here, the six considerations discussed above point out the “landscape” surrounding the always complicated and frequently controversial topic of identifying gifted and talented students for services. This discussion of the issues will not provide ready-made answers to the many challenges of identification system design, but it does provide an understanding of some historically encountered problems that may be helpful in avoiding the pitfalls faced by so many persons who have set out on the journey of creating an efficient, effective, and equitable plan for identification.

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