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OPINION

What We're Getting Wrong About Gifted Education

We're leaving out a large swath of students with a high potential
By Joseph S. Renzulli

Hardly a week goes by without another news item about a school district's attempt to deal with the problem of the underrepresentation of low-income students and children of color in gifted education programs. Suggestions for addressing the problem typically include the use of screening tests for all students, test norms that are scaled to local demographics, and non-verbal tests that use pictures or figures rather than words. While these recommendations may have value in providing a broader look at the development of gifted behaviors, they still rely on test-score comparisons among groups and thus fail to take into consideration the important distinction between high-achieving (or lesson-learning) giftedness and creative or productive giftedness.

How we use the word "gifted" itself points to an underlying problem in the field. Once it is deprived of the aura that surrounds its use, what does the term "gifted" convey practically? The word is often used either to refer to a fixed state of being ("She is gifted") or to high potential in a particular area of human performance, usually in comparison to a set criterion or group ("He is a gifted writer for his age"). These two different interpretations of the term "gifted" raise what might be the most important questions: Is one born gifted, or are gifted behaviors developmental? And, can we develop these behaviors in larger numbers of students than those who are the highest scorers on cognitive ability or academic achievement tests?

Treating giftedness as an in-born trait that can be identified by test scores has resulted in severe underrepresentation of high-potential children from low-income families and students of color in gifted education programs, because these groups have traditionally scored lower on standardized tests than the middle class and white populations.

This approach also leaves out any student who is not the best lesson-learner of traditional standards-driven curricula but may be highly creative, think differently and pursue tasks with fresh approaches, communicate in different expression styles, or have highly specialized talents, interests, imaginations, or motivations. These individual differences are seldom considered in traditional gifted program identification procedures even when using universal screening and scaling results to local norms.

This failure to fix gifted education's underrepresentation problem can be best understood by recognizing the difference between two competing types of assessment used to identify students for special programs and services.

The first type is assessment *of* learning—anything that tells us what students already know and how they have performed in school when compared with others. In this context it reflects the student's family background, neighborhood demographics, early life experiences, and the quality of his or her previous school experience.

The second type is assessment *for* learning, which takes into account the characteristics of the learner that provide the best direction for special opportunities, resources, and encouragement. These characteristics include curiosity, interests, learning styles, expression styles, enjoyment, and high-engagement learning in particular topics. Equally important are co-cognitive skills such as collaboration, empathy, creativity, planning, self-regulation, and other executive functions skills. These so-called "soft skills" are not as easily quantified as reading and math test scores, but they can be recognized by teacher observations, rating scales, and how students react in performance-based assessment situations.

In an urban district in Connecticut where I was working, for example, one student was low performing according to his state achievement test scores. However, he had a curious fascination with anything related to mechanics and electricity. After examining his strength-based profile, his teacher encouraged him to work on a project for the state Invention Convention competition.

The student won his division at the state competition by developing a dog bowl that sets off a flashing light when the water level drops below a given weight and went on to compete in the national Invention Convention competition. All of the background reading, experimentation, data gathering, and presentation skills that he used are the kinds of gifted behaviors that I refer to as creative and productive giftedness. This type of giftedness occurs when the young person thinks, feels, and does like the practicing professional, even if at a more junior level than adult scientists, writers, and filmmakers.

And these are exactly the kinds of skills that present-day employers are seeking in the rapidly changing job market where creativity, innovation, and task commitment are more valuable than just getting a high score on standardized tests. History is replete with men and women who were not superstars in school but who made notable contributions to their respective areas of interest and strengths when given opportunities and support.

Today's emphasis on big data, test scores, and comparisons among groups fails to drill down on what we need to know to make the best decisions for an individual child. Although metric-based scores and norms inform us about the distribution of traditionally measured academic abilities of groups, they do not zero in on individuals'

co-cognitive strengths that are so important for decision making about supplementary services.

These strengths should be a starting point for deciding who gets considered for advanced learning and creative opportunities in particular academic domains and topical strength areas. We can achieve greater equity in gifted education programs for underrepresented populations by replacing approaches to identification rooted in an understanding of "gifted" as a state of being and concentrating instead on developing gifted behaviors in individual students' interests, talents, motivations, and executive function skills in singular areas where there is performance-based evidence of high potential.

Educators must recognize that America's talent pool is changing. If scholars and educators are to remain true to the purpose of producing the next generation of leaders, scholars, artists, and creative innovators, then they must explore ways of going beyond traditional metrics and norms.

Joseph S. Renzulli is a distinguished professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut and co-founder, with Sally M. Reis, of the Renzulli Learning System.