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GIFTED READING PROGRAMS: UNCOVERING THE HIDDEN POTENTIAL

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Within the last decade there has been a noticeable increase in the attention afforded the special segment of the school population termed "gifted" by reading educators. This interest has been engendered in part by the availability of Federal and State funds set aside for gifted instruction. Even with the rising concern for improved reading instruction of the gifted student, the questions arise as to whether the applied methods of identification used to affirm "giftedness" are indeed adequate and if reading instructional programs initiated for these students meet their highly specialized needs.

From its earliest inception the term "gifted" has undergone change. The traditional view of the gifted child was that he should be identified by his superior performance on intellectual measures. Included in this view was the notion that the gifted child should be able to develop his academic potential without any special help by the school. Because of this feeling, few programs for the gifted were available prior to 1969. However, since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education amendment of 1969, more efficient attempts at identifying the gifted and creative child have been initiated and new academic programs have been developed. As a result of this act, the definition of "giftedness" has broadened from its restricted equation with a superior IQ to encompass children who have the potential to develop creativity and acquire and master knowledge (Isaacs, 1971). However, most methods of identification based on this enlarged definition continued to rely heavily on standardized tests to determine giftedness. The result of the emphasis on standardized tests was the identification of a vastly disproportionate number of gifted who belonged to the dominant culture. If the objective of the identification procedure had remained simply to recognize those who achieved well in the educational/intellectual arena, then, the reliance on standardized test scores may have been sufficient evaluation. Yet, in the last several years the trend has been to enlarge the definition of "giftedness" even further.

Tongue and Sperling (1976) report that current projects provided by the U.S. Office of Education are moving away from measures of IQ and

the restricted academic notions of IQ to a more functional method for identifying the gifted child.

The new gifted may be individuals from the dominant cultural or sub-dominant cultural group, and may be present educational/social achievers or potential achievers. The “dominant culture” individual is defined as that person who possesses the qualities and characteristics held in esteem by the dominant or controlling cultural group. “Sub-dominant cultural” individuals, conversely, are those persons who do not possess the qualities which are considered important by the controlling cultural group and who must, therefore, operate outside the realm of this dominant group in accordance with their own varying set of cultural standards. As the definition of gifted has broadened, so, too, must the identification procedure be broadened to place less emphasis on standardized tests or academic accomplishments.

In the effort to develop an evaluation procedure that could serve all cultural groups and provide sub-dominant cultural students with an equal chance of being recognized as gifted, it would appear that a technique as free from acculturation as possible would be the primary goal. The problems associated with such an effort are not easily overcome, however. Not only are such “cultural-free” evaluators of “giftedness” at the very least, extremely difficult to develop, but also standardized testing has been a readily available means of evaluation that may not be easily given up by teachers in lieu of less familiar, more subjective and possibly more time-consuming methods of evaluation. The move away from the total reliance on objective methods of evaluation to determine giftedness must take place if reading educators are to identify and provide appropriate instruction for sub-dominant culturally gifted students.

The paradoxes of the present identification procedures for giftedness can be clearly demonstrated by a comparison of reading skills to giftedness. Research has shown that most gifted students identified by conventional means are verbally gifted individuals with well-developed vocabularies. Further, many gifted students read early and avidly and perform better on reading skill tests. The question becomes, therefore, whether these characteristics can be used to separate the gifted from the non-gifted or if, in fact, the criteria for giftedness generally employed have favored the more accomplished readers. Certainly, most standardized tests are exercises in silent reading, and these test/scores would be weighed in favor of those who already possess the necessary reading skills. Further, those of sub-dominant cultural groups who may lack the reading skills in Standard English but still have the underlying intellectual, emotional, social skills associated with giftedness have little chance of success on such tests and, consequently, have little chance of being considered gifted. When dealing with sub-dominant cultural students, therefore, it becomes necessary to expand the base for evaluation in the identification process to rely most heavily on effective subjective measures.

Presently, it appears that reading programs for the gifted tend to operate merely as rewards for children who have demonstrated above average reading skills rather than as programs to stimulate gifted students from all cultural groups who may or may not possess exceptional reading ability as demonstrated by standardized means. This has occurred primarily because of the complexity of already existing identification models which limit the identification of the gifted to children who have the ability to perform well on standardized test measures or demonstrate superior reading ability in the classroom.

The authors believe that the first step in the establishment of an effective reading program for the gifted is the adoption of a more adequate system of evaluation which fits all cultural groups and the development of the reading program upon this improved system.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to present a practical model for the Identification of Gifted Students that can be applied for dominant cultural or sub-dominant cultural individuals and a simplified observational checklist which will enable classroom teachers to evaluate personality factors which researchers have shown are characteristic of giftedness.

Models For Identifying the Gifted

A survey of the research literature describes various models which have been developed for the identification of gifted children.

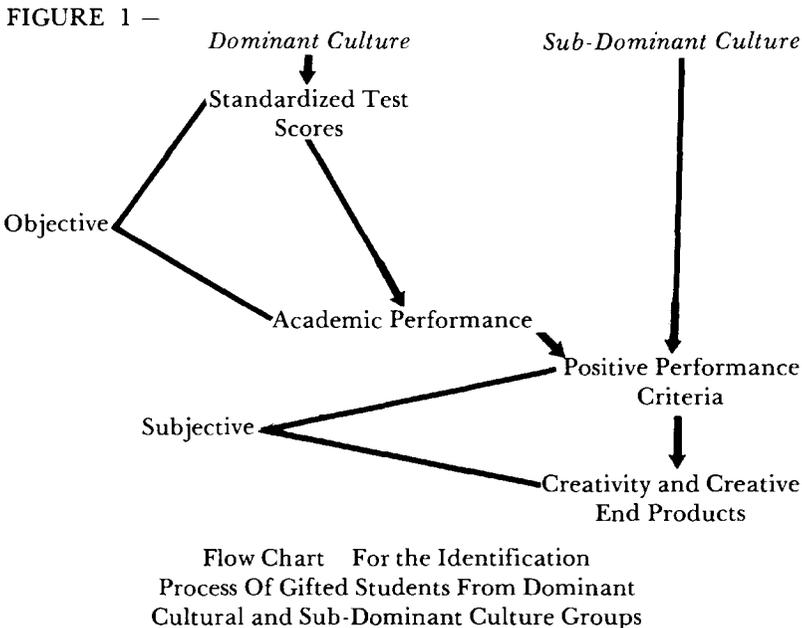
Even though there has been an attempt by researchers to reduce the importance of intelligence, in the identification of the gifted it has remained an important aspect of these models. New models, in addition to IQ, include emphasis on personality traits, the child's capacity for learning, as well as other behavioral characteristics. While tremendous progress has been made in expanding the narrow traditional definition of gifted, the authors believe that because intelligence tests are a relatively quick way of identifying children with superior ability, school programs will continue to weigh intelligence heavily in selecting the gifted child, unless a more workable model is made readily available.

While intelligence test scores may identify children from the mainstream of society's dominant culture, it is surely less than adequate for children from culturally different backgrounds. Witty (1951), in discussing the gifted child, explains that "giftedness appears in many different forms in every level of society."

Since it is not unusual for children who are outside of society's dominant culture to do poorly on standardized instruments, the authors strongly suggest that the traditional method of using intelligence testing to identify gifted children of sub-dominant cultural groups may not be appropriate. Since items on these intelligence tests measures are verbally loaded with items that require direct and enriching experiences related to the dominant culture, children from culturally different backgrounds often tend to do poorly. These children may, however, be truly gifted because of their ability to operate creatively within their

own cultural environment. Regardless of the culturally different child's ability to function creatively in his own environment, in our society the gifted is that child who possesses abilities that are valued by the mainstream culture (Boothby, 1977). The authors of this paper contend that a more practical model of identifying the gifted is needed.

Figure 1 shows the model presented by the authors of this paper. This model combines both objective and subjective type data for approaching the identification of the gifted child. The model also differentiates the kind of data that should be collected on children from dominant and the sub-dominant culture groups.



In the previous flow chart for the identification of sub-dominant cultural and dominant cultural gifted students, the horizontal dimension of cultural background is vertically compared to the objective and subjective components in the identification process. Culturally, individuals are assigned either designation of "Dominant Culture" or "sub-dominant culture."

On the vertical axis, components of the identification process for giftedness are divided into objective and subjective criteria. The objective components, which include the areas of Standardized Test Scores and Academic Performance, are those criteria of a more factual or empirical nature, which are related more directly to normative evaluation. Students culturally dissimilar from the normed population should be

evaluated in terms of more valid criteria. However, even for the dominant cultural group, the objective components should be considered only the first step in the identification of the gifted. Giftedness should not be determined solely on the basis of an objective test or grade related data for any cultural group. There must be consideration of more subjective components as well, if the identification process is to be a valid one.

As indicated by the identification chart, the value placed on the subjective components in the identification of giftedness is even more weighted for students in sub-dominant cultural groups. While the objective criteria in the identification process generally provide the evaluator with an analysis of the academic achievement, such criteria do not allow for systematic observation of the on-going intellectual processes associated with giftedness. Those aspects of the individual's personality that can be described as contributing to positive performances in intellectual endeavors are collectively referred to in the model for the identification of the gifted as "Positive Performance Criteria."

Positive Performance Criteria

1. Ability to communicate ideas and feelings by verbal and non-verbal means.

2. Ability to interpret ideas and feelings communicated through verbal and non-verbal means.

3. Adaptive behaviors characteristic of cultural group.

Creativity and Creative End Problems

- ___ Has command of a large vocabulary
- ___ Uses words fluently and creatively
- ___ Dramatizes through use of body language and facial expressions
- ___ Is quick to respond
- ___ Demonstrates a flair for dramatic or oral presentations
- ___ Is eager to relate experiences
- ___ Expresses ideas with clarity
- ___ Is sensitive to the thought and ideas of others.
- ___ Can interpret body language or facial expressions.
- ___ Displays sympathy or empathy towards others
- ___ Appears sensitive to the discrepancy of behavior in others
- ___ Appraises quickly and frankly new and unfamiliar people or situations
- ___ Displays a keen sense of humor

- Demonstrates “survival” skills by manipulating positive forces and overcoming negative forces in the environment
 - Is resourceful and can come up quickly with an alternative
 - Possesses a sense of adventure
 - Learns from experiences and seldom repeats mistakes
 - Shows a degree of flexibility when situations call for change
 - Accepts responsibility for actions
4. Heightened interest in the arts.
- Demonstrates an awareness of and appreciation for the environment
 - Is involved in a variety of hobbies or has a broad range of interests
 - Appreciates various music and art forms
 - Reads avidly in a wide area of subjects
 - Produces creative visual expressions
 - Uses color and form dramatically or uniquely in art
5. Physical capability and adaptability
- Has few physical and sensory defects or has compensated adequately for whatever defects are present
 - Is physically robust, stronger and healthier in appearance
 - Has well-developed psychomotor skills
 - Has received recognition for physical accomplishments
 - Displays a great deal of energy and vitality
6. Emotional/social leadership
- Manifests self-confidence
 - Has a position of leadership within cultural groups, Ex.: club or gang leader

7. Appropriate application of Convergent/Divergent processes

- ___ In uncontrolled situations, assumes authority naturally
- ___ Displays emotional maturity
- ___ Demonstrates social ingenuity
- ___ Is generally gregarious, outgoing, friendly
- ___ Has an individualistic personality that stands out from the group
- ___ Arrives at a logical conclusion based on given information
- ___ Sees the plausible yet unique alternatives of a given situation
- ___ Adept at selecting, organizing, and retrieving information
- ___ Able to expand information beyond what is given
- ___ Displays a keen sense of historical time and can sequentially organize information
- ___ Pays close attention to detail in the analysis process
- ___ Can transfer learning readily from one situation to the next
- ___ Is able to formulate the similarities/differences, the comparison/contrasts, and the causes/effects of objects, ideas, and situations

8. Persistence or commitment to task

- ___ Establishes goals that are realistic though challenging
- ___ Demonstrates determination in the fulfillment of goals; tenacity
- ___ Is self-disciplined, independent
- ___ Displays persistent curiosity
- ___ Has a long attention span

9. Energetic response to challenging experiences.

- ___ Produces works that have a freshness, vitality and uniqueness

- ___ Often initiates the search for information
 - ___ Desires to learn rapidly
 - ___ Creates new ideas, substances, processes and mechanical devices (inventor)
 - ___ Is willing to take a risk of failure in new or unfamiliar situations
10. Ability in process-oriented curriculum
- ___ May excel in science and math or other “process-related” curriculum
 - ___ May require less routine drill when learning new skills
 - ___ Seems aware of aspects in the environment that go unnoticed by others
 - ___ Displays some amount of skepticism with new ideas or situations
 - ___ Asks appropriate, thought-provoking questions
 - ___ Evaluates carefully based on accurate observation

These positive performance criteria consist of ten categories of behavior which the authors believe reflect giftedness. In an effective evaluation system, however, there must be visual proof of end-products of creative or positive behaviors that attest to or verify the existence of giftedness. Therefore, the authors have included factors which represent all aspects of the personality which they feel are manifestations of these positive performance behaviors identified as “creativity or creative end products.” These creative end products can function as an observational checklist which the teacher can use to determine the presence of these positive performance behaviors.

It is the authors' view that the truly gifted child must demonstrate that his entire personality shows an inclination toward giftedness by some proof that these positive performance criteria exist to some degree. It is unrealistic to assume that a gifted child will demonstrate his giftedness by performing all of the creative end products from each of the positive performance behaviors.

Also, it is necessary to be cognizant of the fact that the creative end products will differ for children from the dominant and sub-dominant cultural groups. For example, the creative end product for social leadership of a child from the dominant culture may be demonstrated by his becoming president of a club. However, the child from a sub-dominant cultural group may demonstrate social leadership by becom-

ing a leader of a gang. Both of these creative end products are characteristic of the child's own culture, and, consequently, any evaluation of the creative end products must be conducted according to the child's acculturation.

It should be noted that the positive performance criteria in the Alexander-Muia checklist present only positive behaviors even though the authors do acknowledge the existence of negative behaviors which may also be characteristic of giftedness.

Conclusion

While there does appear to be a positive movement in reading education toward improved instructional programs for the gifted, the first priority of such programs should be an adequate identification procedure. Though the definition of the giftedness has been broadened in recent years to encompass the sub-dominant cultural or culturally different gifted, most evaluative measures currently in use continue to favor those of the dominant culture. However, all students, whether of the dominant culture or sub-dominant culture, must be given an equal opportunity in an identification method that seeks to evaluate underlying intellectual potential rather than to reward academic success. As an alternative to present identification procedures the authors have proposed a model for the identification of dominant cultural and sub-dominant cultural gifted and have compiled an observational checklist that can be employed by the classroom teacher to affirm the presence of personality factors associate with giftedness. No matter how well staffed, equipped or financed a reading program for the gifted may be, its effectiveness must hinge on the process used to select those who will receive its benefits.

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