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Effective Teaching in
Today's *Classroom*



Differentiating the Curriculum for Gifted Learners

2nd Edition



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Table of Contents

Foreword

Dedication

Introduction

Chapter 1: Understanding Gifted Learners

Chapter 2: Preparing a Differentiated Classroom for Gifted Learners

Chapter 3: Curriculum Compacting

Chapter 4: Differentiating the Content for Gifted Learners

Chapter 5: Differentiating the Process for Gifted Learners

Chapter 6: Differentiating the Product for Gifted Learners

Chapter 7: Encouraging Creativity in Your Gifted Learners

Final Thoughts

Appendix: References Cited

Chapter 1

Understanding Gifted Learners

Meet Raegan.

This gifted student spends her time creating new inventions and imagining the possibilities. Learning is not a chore; rather it is a way of life for her. Most days, she can spend her time daydreaming, but not in algebra ... she has to pay attention there if she is going to make the grades!



Now, meet Ty.

Ty, a gifted student, has been reading since he was two years old. Instead of listening to the teacher, Ty secretly reads books perched in his lap. Ask him any question, and most of the time he knows the answer!



Next up is Michael.

Michael is the gifted learner who is eager to take charge in groups, even when others don't want him to. He is the perfect student ... ready with his work, ready to answer

questions, and ready to help others. The teachers love him!



And finally, here's Jordan.

Even though this gifted student does not make the highest grades, she is a whiz at technology. If given the choice on projects, Jordan always wows with her presentations entrenched in technology. Instead of calling the IT desk, the teacher can rely on Jordan to solve any technological problems in the classroom!



You might know someone similar to these students. Gifted students come in all “packages.” And with the many packages and joys they bring to our classrooms, there can be a number of challenges, too. For example, Raegan is an extremely disorganized student and often has a hard time turning in assignments, even though she has completed them. Always the perfectionist, Michael is highly stressed about making sure he has the highest grade in the class. Anything under a 100 is not acceptable in his mind. Ty resents being used as a tutor for the struggling students in class, favoring his own independent learning instead. And, Jordan has trouble working with others on group projects, so she prefers to work alone. So, what defines the gifted learner and how does a teacher successfully embrace and work with these students in a mainstream classroom?

Defining Giftedness

Who would have thought that defining the word *gifted* could be so difficult? Depending with whom you talk, you might garner differing definitions. The topic of deciding which children are gifted and how to best educate these students can sometimes cause controversy between those who provide funds, those who provide state and district guidelines for the education of gifted students, administrators, teachers, parents, and even the students themselves. For these reasons, it is essential that educators have a research-based understanding of the term *gifted* before they begin to make decisions about how to educate their gifted students. [Figure 1.1](#) outlines definitions of giftedness by various researchers.

Figure 1.1 Researchers' Ideas About Giftedness

Lewis Terman	Giftedness includes both intelligence and personality.
Marland Report	Giftedness includes general ability, academics, creative thinking, leadership, the arts, and psychomotor.
Joseph Renzulli	Giftedness includes above-average ability, a high level of task commitment, and creativity.
James Delisle	Giftedness is based on who a person is and not on whether he or she produces anything.
Howard Gardner	There are many ways of being intelligent.
Ellen Winner	Giftedness is when a person is precocious in one area, has a drive to master that area, and thinks in unusual ways in that area.
Barbara Clark	Giftedness is the brain's ability to integrate functions in an accelerated manner and is expressed through cognition, creativity, academics, leadership, visual arts, or performing arts.

The definition of giftedness has changed throughout the last two hundred years. Lewis Terman is credited as the first person to use the term “gifted child.” He is thought of as the “father” of the movement for gifted education because he developed the first test to measure intelligence in 1916, although efforts to educate gifted students date back as far as 1868 (NAGC 2005a). He called it the Intelligence Quotient test, or IQ test. His IQ test focused heavily upon analytical skills and memory. At first, Terman believed that the intelligence of a person alone defined their giftedness. It is an idea that still circulates today. Nowadays, if you search “IQ test” online, you will find a wide variety of tests that “will notify you” of your intelligence quotient, often for a fee. However, after many years of research, Terman concluded that personality had as much to do with giftedness as IQ. He believed that a gifted person needed emotional and social confidence as well as a drive to be successful (NAGC 2005a).

It wasn't until October 4, 1957, that gifted students commanded nationwide attention. On that day, Americans were shocked to find that the Russians had launched a spacecraft

that successfully orbited Earth. Political leaders saw this as a threat—a contest of intelligence—and scrambled to support the education of students in both math and science and to provide attention to specifically gifted students.

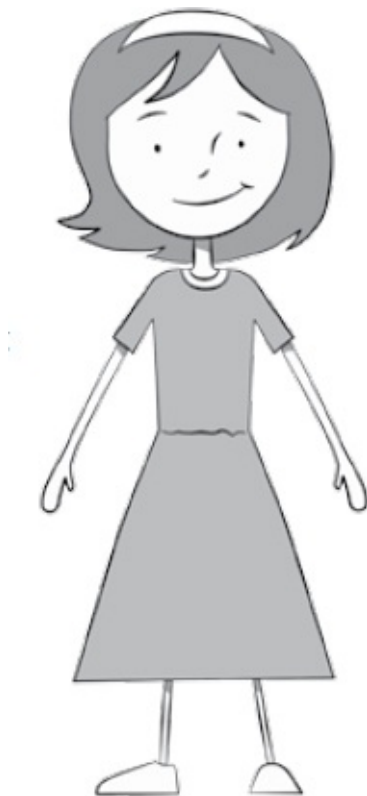
In 1971, the Marland Report to Congress outlined six areas of giftedness, which included general ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability. These six areas are commonly utilized and discussed throughout research and educational papers about teaching gifted students, although psychomotor ability has since been excluded from the official federal definition (NAGC 2005a).

Various researchers since Terman have put forth their contributions to the ever-changing perceptions of the meaning of the term *gifted*. Joseph Renzulli defines a gifted person by the following traits: above average, though not necessarily superior, general ability; a high level of task commitment; and creativity. All of these traits stress external behaviors. He prefers the phrase “gifted behaviors” instead of “gifted children” and believes schools should enrich education for all students (Renzulli 1994; Renzulli and Reis 1996). According to Renzulli’s research, it is their drive that differentiates gifted students from other students. It is not too difficult to spot students like Ty, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Ty exhibits exceptional ability in reading and comprehending difficult texts because he has been reading since such a young age. His drive and desire for reading set him apart from his peers and seem to fit Renzulli’s definition of giftedness.



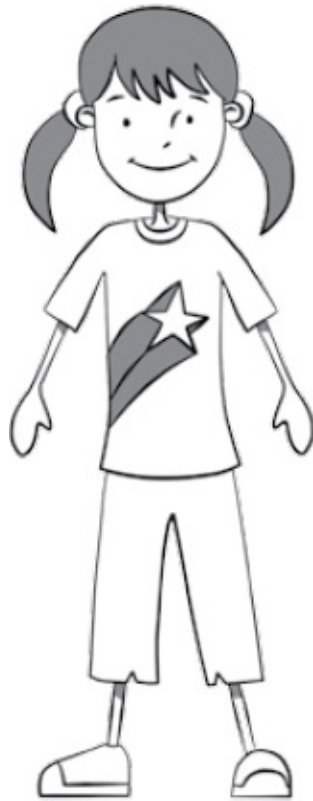
James Delisle (2000) does not believe that giftedness is based solely on what a person does. He claims that giftedness is based on who a person is and not on whether he or she produces anything. Delisle prefers to rely on the cognitive and psychological aspects of defining giftedness. He has taken up arms against definitions of giftedness that support talent development rather than defining gifted children as individuals who simply have different “personal, innate traits” (2012). Delisle believes that the job of gifted educators is

“to recognize the unique cognitive and affective facets of a gifted child’s life and then finesse school experiences to enhance these traits” (2012). Raegan, of all the students mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, would best fit Delisle’s definition of giftedness. She does well enough in her classes, but her way of thinking about the world around her is different from her peers.



The idea of intelligence has been greatly altered by Howard Gardner. He is opposed to one type of “general” intelligence. In his book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), he proposes that there are many ways of being intelligent. The original book cites seven intelligences: linguistic, mathematical, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and spatial. Since then, Gardner has added an eighth intelligence, the naturalist intelligence, and believes that other intelligences called the existential intelligence and pedagogical intelligence might follow in the near future (2011). Instead of asking, *How intelligent are you?* Gardner’s findings have prompted educators to ask, *How are you intelligent?*

Gardner’s wife, Ellen Winner, who is a researcher at Boston College, believes that some people can be profoundly gifted in just one area. When this is the case, it might not be identified on an intelligence test. She believes that giftedness is demonstrated when a person is especially precocious in one area, has a drive to master that area, and thinks in unusual ways. Winner advocates that programs for gifted children include art and music in their definitions (1996). Jordan, the student who excels at technology mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, would be a good fit within this definition of giftedness. She excels in one unique area, which sets her apart from her peers.



Another well-known researcher, Barbara Clark, explains that giftedness comes from the brain's ability to integrate functions in an accelerated manner. These gifted abilities are expressed through cognition, creativity, academics, leadership, visual arts, or performing arts (2012). Michael, the gifted leader mentioned earlier, would fit Clark's definition. He knows how to take charge and take care of his work. He is responsible beyond his years.



In 2010, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) released a position statement called *Redefining Giftedness for a New Century: A Paradigm Shift*. In it, they offer a new definition of giftedness.

“Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).”

The fact that there are so many different definitions of giftedness can be overwhelming. All these examples are included to explain how even researchers do not agree on how to define giftedness. Experts who are respected in their particular fields have distinct opinions that go against one another. Some definitions are polar opposites of one another and others are a combination of several ideas. The goal here is not to persuade you in any specific direction but to make you aware of the many ways people choose to define giftedness. No doubt your state definition, district definition, and the unique students that you serve will shape the definition you ultimately decide on.

Identification of Gifted Students

A definition drives identification, which drives the program that your school will offer gifted students. Your district’s definition is shaped by your state’s definition, which can change and evolve over time. School districts use their definitions to identify their specific populations of gifted students. Each definition affects which assessments are chosen and which programs are created for servicing these students. The programs are often funded with categorical money, and educators are held accountable for the use of the funds. [Figure 1.2](#) illustrates the connections among aspects of a gifted program.

Figure 1.2 Why Definitions Matter



Making sure that gifted students within a school are identified correctly can be a tough job. A district’s definition lays the groundwork to decide which students will be identified. Some students will exceed the criteria set by established definitions, other students will just meet the bottom line, and still there are a few students who will not be identified because of the boundaries set by these definitions. Districts have to consider that some families have not had the means to provide enrichment opportunities outside of school. To make things more complicated, some gifted students also have learning disabilities, which could be overshadowing or complicating their giftedness. These dually exceptional children are sometimes very hard to identify. In addition, some gifted students are English language learners, and a lower language acquisition level could make it difficult for them to score well on assessments offered only in English. These students tend to be underrepresented in gifted programs because of narrow definitions of intelligence, overreliance on standardized tests, and inadequate procedures for identification (Coleman 2003).

For these reasons, many districts today are using multi-criteria identification processes. These facts have influenced many districts to utilize a variety of instruments when

identifying gifted children in their districts. These instruments can include aptitude tests, grades, achievement test scores, parent nominations, teacher recommendations, self-nominations, and peer nominations.

Take the time to investigate the official definition used by your state or district to identify gifted children. Examine what terms are used, which identification assessments are recommended, and what services or programs are available for students who are identified as gifted. Find out what steps a teacher can take when he or she believes that a student in class may be gifted.

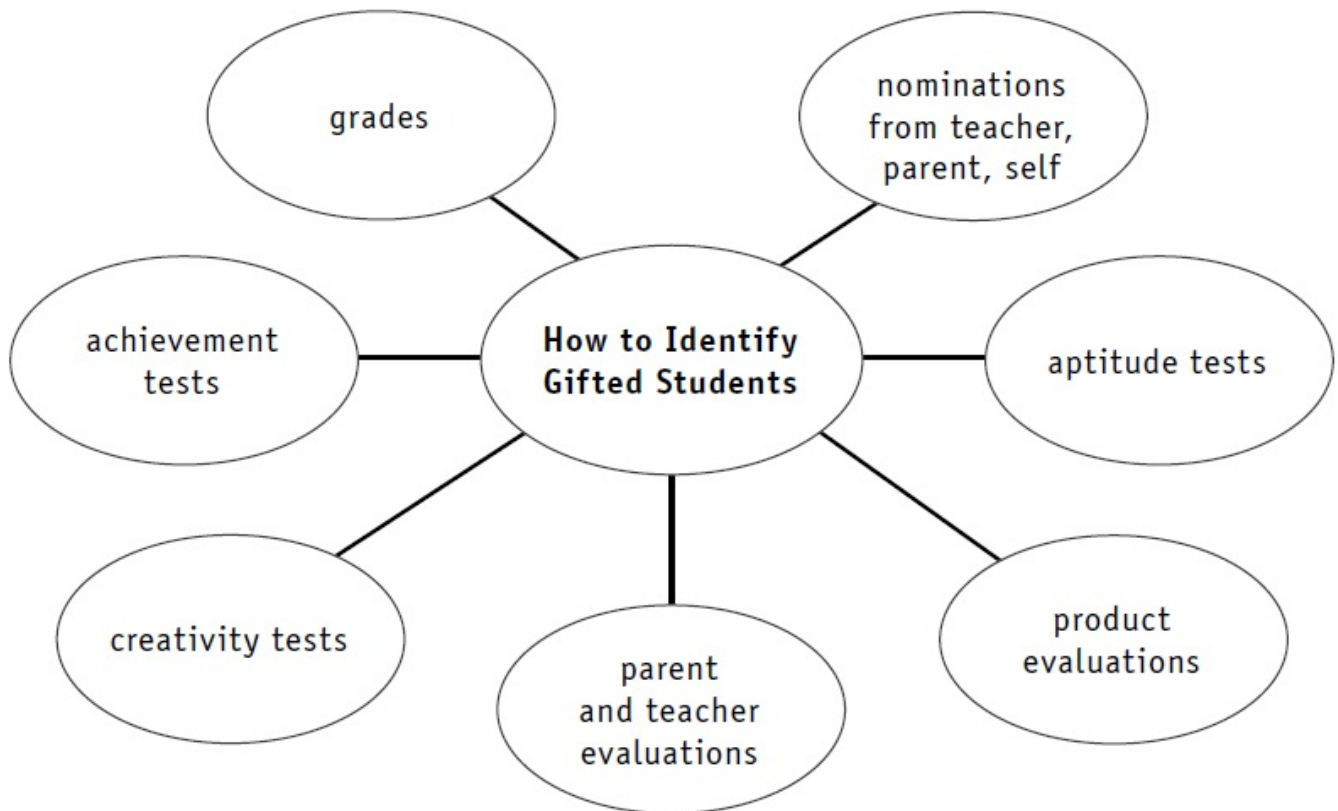
A starting point is to identify what the federal government uses in its definition. Many states may take their lead because of the funds involved in educational programs. The definition from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 states:

The term “gifted and talented,” when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities (Title IX, Part A, § 9101, No.22).

Each state identifies gifted students differently. For example, in the State of New Jersey, gifted students are identified as those “who possess or demonstrate high levels of ability, in one or more content areas, when compared to their chronological peers in the local district and who require modification of their educational program if they are to achieve in accordance with their capabilities” (2014). The state of Georgia defines a gifted learner as “one who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability(ies), exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and who needs special instruction and/ or special ancillary services to achieve at levels which commensurate with his or her ability(ies)” (2014). While there are some similarities between these two state definitions, such as needing modifications in what they are learning to achieve their best work, there are some differences, too. One main difference between these two states is that New Jersey compares students’ high levels of ability with their peers to distinguish them from one another.

School districts use their state definitions to help them determine their identification processes as seen in [Figure 1.3](#).

Figure 1.3 How Some Districts Identify Gifted Students



According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2014), it is believed that approximately 6–10 percent of the total student population in the United States is considered gifted—about three to five million students! If a broader definition of giftedness is used, a school district could expect to identify up to 15 percent (ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children 1990). This is a significant number of children who have special needs within the educational domain.

Identifying Gifted Students in Your Classroom

It is a teacher’s responsibility to search for the indicators of student potential and seek ways to nurture that ability further (Coleman 2003). So, how can teachers identify the wide variety of students who may qualify for gifted programs?

Some gifted students might be straight-A students who excel in all subjects and score high on the standardized tests given each year. Remember Ty and Michael at the beginning of the chapter? These are the bright students who make good grades and know the answers. These types of students are generally easy to spot.