

Beyond Gifted Education

Designing and Implementing
Advanced Academic Programs

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Preface

It is one of the most frequently addressed topics in gifted education journals and newspaper articles about the field. Every handbook and textbook on gifted education devotes one or more chapters to the topic. It is a central concern of parents and, increasingly one on which they will spend money in the hopes of gaining an edge for their child over the competition. In some states, it is the only mandated activity for gifted education and in others, the largest line-item in the budget. And yet it remains as controversial and, in many quarters, as poorly understood as ever. What is it? Identification. Many of us who have worked to help schools develop better, fairer identification policies have concluded that these efforts are unlikely to succeed as long as they are tied to the word *gifted*. The question “Who are the gifted children in this school?” leads to policies and practices quite unlike the question “Who are the children who are currently mismatched with the level of instruction they are receiving?” or even “Who are the children who show talent in this domain that we might help them develop?” Although many have objected to current policies, few have offered specific guidelines for new ones. This book bridges that gap.

The authors begin by boldly announcing that their approach differs radically from gifted education as currently practiced, so radically that they give it a different name: *advanced academics*. Identification of the cognitive,

motivational, and personality traits that might uniquely characterize gifted learners is left for psychologists to investigate and debate. For practitioners, identification should refer to “a formalized system that sets out to determine which students have needs that are not being met by the standard curriculum of a given school or district” (p. 15). The goals and processes for identifying students in need of advanced academic programming are described in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3. To identify is to predict that a student will succeed (or at least not suffer harm) in a particular instructional program. It is local, not only to the school, but to the particular academic program at that school. At one extreme, students might be allowed self-identify by opting to enroll in a class or participate in a program. At the other extreme, the system can offer (or require) a multi-step, multimeasure assessment that is designed either to prevent unqualified students from entering the program and/or to encourage qualified but unwilling students to participate in it. But it is decidedly not about imposing a more permanent label such as *gifted*.

The consequences for curriculum and school organization are described in successive chapters devoted to Total School Cluster Grouping (Chapter 4), acceleration (Chapter 5), and enrichment (Chapter 6). Then the final three chapters revisit identification, this time addressing knottier issues that are often ignored or mishandled. Underrepresentation is tackled in Chapter 7. Specific guidance is offered on how to use assessment data to achieve better representation of underrepresented groups, a problem that is made much easier when the goal is to identify those who are (or might be) mismatched, not to confer an enduring label. Common pitfalls in identification policies are enumerated and illustrated in Chapter 8. And Chapter 9 gives a nontechnical introduction to procedures for combining multiple measures, a topic that is as poorly understood as it is critical for the success of any identification system that relies on more than one data point for each student.

This book will delight some, annoy others, but challenge all. It offers a radical, but needed, perspective on what gifted education without gifted students might look like.

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Introduction

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Gifted or advanced education is focused on providing appropriate education for those students who need it. Regardless of whether or not we call them gifted, students exist in every school who could do more than they are currently being asked to do. Every school has those students who would benefit—academically, socially, and motivationally—from additional challenge. This book is about how to find and serve those children. However, before we begin this complicated trek, we first address how the perspective we offer differs from that of traditional gifted education. To do so we will, in places, offer some seemingly harsh critiques of gifted education. We have all dedicated our careers to the field, and we believe passionately in championing the cause of challenging all learners. We only offer criticisms to the service of this cause, while simultaneously offering suggestions for change and improvement.

Determining whether or not a child meets a formal definition of giftedness is not a particularly useful thing to do from the point of view of the stakeholders in K–12 education—students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Instead, we believe that it is much more educationally helpful to determine which children are not being well-served by the existing curriculum and then design programs to meet their needs. Identification, when it is necessary at all, then becomes focused on answering the question,

“Who can thrive in the advanced academic program(s) we’ve designed?” instead of “Who is gifted?” In place of the old “gifted education” approach, we will provide a new framework that is logical, clear, and free of some of the internal contradictions and atheoretical practices that have been part of the practice of gifted education for many decades. Although our position stands in contrast to many years of practice, we believe it is supported by theory and is also far more defensible than current practice. We believe that the adoption of the framework we describe in this book would result in vastly improved K–12 educational experiences for bright students. Furthermore, our framework securely grounds programs and policies for gifted students within the context of major current educational initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards and Response to Intervention (RtI).

It is time that we, as passionate advocates of gifted education in K–12 schools, recognize that some (but not all) of the criticism directed at our field is legitimate. We have been unable to provide evidence-based arguments against these criticisms. As a result, advocates of gifted education have been less persuasive of policy makers, K–12 educators, and funding agencies than any of us would like. The history of the field is characterized by the slow assimilation of, and reform around, legitimate criticisms from the outside. For example, the historical concept of giftedness was essentially synonymous with high IQ, whereas now the widespread consensus in the field is that giftedness is a multidimensional construct that cannot be adequately measured by a single IQ score (Borland, 2005; Worrell, 2009). This book should be understood as another instance of the same historical trend within the field.

Finally, this book does not provide a step-by-step procedure or a “canned” program for using these ideas. This book is far more in the spirit of a persuasive essay whose goal is to reframe discussion and debate around gifted education. The principles presented in this book argue for advanced educational opportunities that are intensely local, that is, that are closely tailored to the needs and values of a particular setting at a particular time. Providing a canned program for implementation of our ideas would represent a violation of the very principles we espouse. These ideas place much of the burden of responsibility on local district and school personnel to develop appropriate programming for their advanced learners. This perspective is consistent with a philosophical viewpoint that believes teachers are professionals and experts in whose care we entrust the development of our children. Teaching is not, and should not be, a turnkey operation that anyone with a pulse can simply walk into a classroom and do!

Defining Giftedness, Talent, and Advanced Academics

What can be said most confidently about conceptual definitions of giftedness, talent, and high ability is that they are widely inconsistent. In fact, there is so much disagreement on the topic that even a workgroup of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) had much difficulty agreeing on a definition. The two most general types of conceptual definitions revolve around typical academic skills (those important to student success in traditional K–12 school subjects) and those specific tasks that are not as directly related to traditional academics. For example, Renzulli (2005) referred to children who excel in academic subjects as the “schoolhouse gifted,” and he observed that the schoolhouse gifted are not necessarily the same group of children who exhibit adult creative productivity. Some in the gifted education community have taken this as evidence that we, as a field, have been focusing on the wrong individuals or the wrong goals (e.g., Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011). We disagree. Whether a child will or will not become an eminent adult is irrelevant to K–12 instruction; we hope many children will, but it simply is not possible to predict with accuracy which children will attain eminence as adults. Adult eminence is tangential to whether or not that child will spend his entire year sitting through coursework or instruction in content that he has already mastered. Schools are designed to help children develop expertise in a rather circumscribed set of disciplines and skills, and this book focuses on helping schools conceptualize programming to foster more advanced levels of development in those domains.

Because the approach we describe is so different from what is usually practiced under the rubric of gifted education, we consciously have decided to give it a different name. We refer to our approach as *advanced academics*. We clarify the precise meaning of the term in later chapters of the book. To summarize succinctly, gifted education is about identifying and serving a distinct class of individuals—the gifted. Advanced academics is about providing students who are not challenged by the ordinary curriculum and instruction with faster, deeper, and more rigorous instruction than they would receive within their typical academic experience, regardless of whether or not they are formally identified as gifted. Many students in need of such instruction may have been identified as gifted, but many others who also need and can benefit from such instruction have not. To better

contrast our approach against other ideas, next we review some influential definitions of giftedness that inform current practice.

Defining Gifted and Talented

The current federal definition of “gifted and talented” comes from the 1993 *National Excellence* report created by the U.S. Department of Education:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in *intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields [emphasis added]*. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (p. 3)

What is interesting to note about this definition is that the term *gifted* is conspicuously absent and instead the term *outstanding talent* is included. Although having a national-level definition might seem convenient for the sake of consistency, given the absence of any federal mandate for its use, identification, or programming, this definition serves as little more than guidance for states and districts. In practice, taking a closer look at the state-level definitions reveals many stark similarities.

Also at the national level are multiple conceptual definitions offered by the National Association for Gifted Children, the official current form of which is as follows:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an 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) [emphasis added]. (NAGC, 2010b, p. 1)

This recent NAGC definition is broader and more inclusive than that of the U.S. Department of Education (1993) report and includes a wider range of skills and abilities than are typically addressed in public schools. Even if a school were to adopt this definition verbatim, the school still would have to decide which content areas or domains it would serve under the purview of advanced (specific) academic programming. In addition, this definition specifies the percentage of individuals at 10% or fewer. It is likely that most percentages used in conceptual definitions are arbitrary. Therefore, it is somewhat unusual to mandate that no more than 10% of some unknown group could be considered gifted and/or talented in any single area without first considering what the “other” people can or will do. However, because the NAGC definition does not specify a norm group, the terms *outstanding* and *exceptional* remain open to interpretation by the end user.

State-Level Definitions

Fortunately, a conceptual definition of giftedness turns out to be not all that important when it comes to fostering advanced academic skills. In other words, we don't need a fixed percentage or a psychological framework in order to provide students in need with subject-specific advanced content. However, many states do provide some structure and/or mandate when it comes to anything falling under the guise of “gifted” education. Because of this, programs for advanced academics should, when possible, align with any required state definitions or mandates that relate to gifted education. At the time of the 2010–2011 *State of the States in Gifted Education* report, 41 (out of 45 states responding) states had an official state definition for giftedness (NAGC & Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted [CSDPG], 2011). However, only 32 of these required that their definition be followed, allowing individual schools and districts much latitude in defining and identifying giftedness. For example, the State of Wisconsin dictates that gifted and talented students can and must be identified in five areas: intellectual, specific academic area, leadership, creativity, and visual and performing arts (Wisconsin Administrative Rule PI 8.01(2)(t)2, 2012; see <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/code/>

admin_code/pi/8/01/2). Such state-level guidance in the form of a mandate makes gifted/advanced academic programming easier than if a given state had no formal definition or did not require adherence to such a definition. In theory, all Wisconsin schools must identify students in these five areas and then provide these learners with appropriate services. This is similar to the other 31 states that require either identification or services, or both (NAGC & CSPDG, 2011). However, just because a state has a formal definition and a mandate to identify and serve does not mean the mandate is universally followed or that all areas of the mandate receive equal attention. Some Wisconsin schools have no gifted program even if they do identify students, and many others only identify high-ability learners in math and language arts.

The situation is similar in other states; for example, a recent survey of the high school gifted coordinators across the state of Indiana revealed that although Indiana mandates that all school districts have a gifted and talented coordinator, only 75% of respondents indicated such a position or person existed (Peters & Mann, 2009). Given that the surveys were sent to the person listed by the state as the gifted coordinator, it's clear that having a state mandate does not always assure action. Furthermore, although states such as Wisconsin and Indiana specify that multiple measures must be used in student identification, both stop short of requiring specific assessments to be used, again leaving that decision to the school or district.

States such as Georgia have a conceptual definition similar to Indiana and Wisconsin. In Georgia, a gifted student is defined as

A student 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 commensurate with his or her abilities. The abilities manifest in a collection of traits, aptitudes and behaviors that, when taken together, are indicative of gifted potential. (Georgia Department of Education, 2012, p. 7)

Although this definition is similar to Wisconsin's in that it includes general intellectual, creative, and specific academic abilities, the Georgia definition does not include leadership or visual art abilities (although these perhaps could be considered part of creative talent). However, Georgia

does allow for a high degree of motivation as being sufficient to identify gifted ability in these areas, whereas high ability or achievement are required in the other two states mentioned. Although Georgia leaves some freedom to local districts to decide criteria for identification, the state does specify initial eligibility criteria based on the five areas of their conceptual definition. Students in Georgia then have two pathways to identification. They can either receive high scores on a nationally normed measure of mental ability (99th percentile in K–2, 96th percentile in 3–12) and on achievement tests (90th percentile or “superior” rating), or they can follow an alternate path that involves additional tests of creativity and motivation. For a discussion of some of the inherent issues and complexities with such a system, see McBee, Peters, and Waterman (in press).

The *State of the States* (NAGC & CSDPG, 2011) report is a biannual survey of gifted education policies across the country. In the 2010–2011 report, 45 states responded to a wide range of questions regarding gifted education practice in their respective states. As mentioned above, 41 of the responding states reported having a formal definition of giftedness. Of these, the most common area of giftedness listed was intellectual giftedness (34 states) followed by creatively gifted (26), performing and visual arts (25), academics (23), and specific academic areas (21). Other areas listed less frequently included leadership, culturally diverse, English language learners (ELL), disabled/twice-exceptional, highly gifted, and underachieving.

Within the *State of the States* (NAGC & CSDPG, 2011) report, 45 states responded to the question regarding identification practices. Of those states, 33 required the use of specific identification practices (such as in Georgia, as outlined above). Such requirements included multiple criteria (20), IQ tests (16), achievement tests (13), a menu of state-approved tests from which schools can choose (10), and nominations (8). However, even when specific criteria are required for the local schools, often the process and procedures are not specified. Only eight states mandate a specific process be followed, while seven states allow for collaborative decision making by the state and local district. In 15 states, schools are completely free to create an identification process. For example, how “multiple measures” are to be used in a state that requires such a practice (e.g., Arkansas, Indiana) is not specified, leaving each local district or school to decide what combination of measures to use and/or how to combine them. In another example, eight of the 33 states responding require nominations as

part of the specific methods of identification: Some list specific tools that are approved or recommended, but others do not. The same can be said for virtually all of the various required methods. Even though a class or type of assessment (e.g., IQ test) might be required, the definition specifies neither which particular test to use, nor the manner of its use. Because of this widespread emphasis on local control in education, the roles of the district coordinator, school board, and other local stakeholders can be extremely important in fostering effective identification and programming for academically advanced students.

Some areas of giftedness and talent are easier to assess and evaluate than others. In fact, several states specifically name the local education agency (school or district) as the deciding body for matters related to conceptual definition. For example, both North Carolina and Florida require locally developed plans to guide gifted identification and programming, although in both cases, these plans are reviewed at the state level for their compliance with the state rule.

In conclusion, states vary widely in their definitions of giftedness and their identification of students for gifted or advanced programming. With regard to identification, some states do not specify content areas at all (leaving terms like *specific academic area* to be operationalized by the district or school), other states specify content areas but not how these areas should be assessed, and still others specify the types of assessments but stop short of naming specific assessments to be used. Interested parents or professionals should investigate state-level policies before attempting to create a new framework or program for a specific school or district. *In some cases, the advanced academic approach is sufficiently different from gifted education that schools may not need to worry about whether the advanced academics program is in compliance with the state's gifted education policy, especially for students not currently identified as gifted or in settings where gifted status is not tied to funding. After all, advanced academics are not gifted education!*

Local Definitions

In cases where a state lacks an official definition or specifically leaves the decision to the local education agency (LEA), the decision falls on local school personnel. This situation obviously allows the greatest flexibility for implementing advanced academic programs.