

Practitioners' Conceptions of Academic Talent and Giftedness:

Essential Factors in Deciding Classroom and School Composition

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Over the past century, many different conceptions of academic talent and giftedness have been devised. Although conceptions of giftedness may seem abstract, they do, to some extent, influence school and classroom composition. The way in which giftedness is conceptualized has ramifications for identification procedures, program offerings, and the ultimate success of gifted education overall. Giftedness has been conceptualized by experts in terms of very high IQ or other test scores, through the demonstration of certain behaviors or achievements, or in various other ways (Callahan & Miller, 2005; Clark, 2001; Ford, 2003; Reis & Small, 2005; Renzulli, 2003; Sternberg, 2003, 2005; Tomlinson, 2003; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2005). Varying conceptions of giftedness suggest diverse and sometimes mutually exclusive services for children so identified. A variety of gifted education program and curricular models have evolved that seek to serve students who have been identified as gifted by the experts.

Experts have developed varying, and sometimes conflicting, conceptions of academic talent and giftedness. Classroom and school composition often are tied to these conceptions of academic talent and giftedness, and magnet and charter schools select certain students who best “fit” their particular conception of giftedness. Educators’ perceptions and attitudes regarding academic talent and giftedness thus impact what services are delivered to which students. Little is known about educators’ beliefs regarding conceptions of academic talent and giftedness. The current national study surveyed 900 public school educators, including regular classroom teachers, administrators, and gifted education specialists, regarding their definitions of academic talent and giftedness. The educators believed that all traditional and popular conceptions of academic talent and giftedness were valid, but they were less likely to support definitions involving talents in less-traditional areas. Educators accepted some of the more recently conceived, and more inclusive, conceptions of academic talent or giftedness. Such results are potentially valuable to school administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers who work with academically talented and gifted students, as well as to those who are concerned with the factors influencing school or classroom composition.

Summary

Poor conceptualization of programs and models can negatively impact how school leaders conceive of and organize classrooms and schools.

Little is known about the conceptions of academic talent and giftedness held by those who deliver services to students. To gain a better understanding of educators' conceptions of giftedness, surveys were mailed to a national random sample of 900 educators concerning their beliefs about a wide-ranging array of topics central to conceptions of academic talent, giftedness, and gifted education. These topics included factors influencing how academic talent and giftedness are defined, student characteristics that stem from those definitions, and how identified students should be educated. The research question for this study was what beliefs do administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers have regarding the validity of central conceptions of academic talent and giftedness?

Review of the Literature

Determining whom gifted and talented education programs are intended to serve, and indeed what precisely childhood giftedness is, are issues that have bedeviled the field almost since its inception. Some believe that the gifted are those students who may become the eminent minds of their generation (Brody & Stanley, 2005; Mönks & Katzko, 2005; Terman, 1925). Gifted students, it is contended, are those who perform at a much higher level, in objectively measurable ways, than do their age peers (Brody & Stanley, 2005; Mönks & Katzko, 2005; Terman, 1925). Others maintain that while gifted does refer to the extraordinary learner, it also includes those students who possess a capability and a desire to engage in academic challenges or who demonstrate great achievement in matters explored in the classroom (Callahan & Miller, 2005; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Sternberg, 2003). Gifted and academically talented students are, in this light, those who exhibit certain behaviors that indicate superior potential either as a result of task commitment or a

synthesis of thinking skills (Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Sternberg, 2003). Still others believe that academic talent and giftedness are social constructs and that schools possess a mandate to “even the playing field” and to build the capacity of all learners, especially children of color, English language learners, or low-SES students (Ford, 2003; Ford & Harris, 1999; Oakes, 2005; Sapon-Shevin, 1994). In all cases, conceptions of academic talent and giftedness impact which students are served by gifted programs (Schroth & Helfer, 2008).

These positions are not, of course, mutually exclusive. One may, for example, desire to provide services to exceptionally gifted students without wishing to exclude ethnic minorities from the classroom or school where such services are provided (e.g., Brody & Stanley, 2005). Similarly, one may seek to assist diverse learners without wanting to abolish gifted education programs (e.g., North Central Regional Education Laboratory [NCREL], 2004). Although the proponents of all positions harbor good intentions, failure to acknowledge inconsistencies between certain conceptions of academic talent or giftedness and the programs designed to provide services to students selected might imperil certain students' education. When schools or classrooms are arranged in such a manner that some are selected and others excluded, school leaders must take particular care to ensure consistency between selection criteria and services offered (Ford, 2003; Schroth, 2007). Failure to ensure such consistency defeats the alleged purpose of making available separate educational services for a particular group of students (Callahan & Caldwell, 1995; Schroth, 2007).

Conceptions of academic talent and giftedness, and the types of students these conceptions focus upon, are indicative of the philosophies underlying their proponents' actions (Schroth & Helfer, 2008). Indeed, many models of gifted education have conceptions of academic talent and giftedness; the composition of classrooms and schools they engender often are interwoven into the model itself. If careful attention is paid to discussions about the students for whom various models are intended, it becomes apparent which population each model

is designed to serve or exclude (Schroth & Helfer, 2008). Teachers and administrators must ponder their specific goals in implementing or maintaining a model. The more a selected model focuses on the intended population's needs, the more that model empowers the learning community (Greene, 1988). In an age when schools strive to enhance each child's natural abilities and aptitudes, strict attention should be paid to what population a model seeks to serve, especially when it excludes others (NCREL, 2004).

IQ-based conceptions of giftedness dominated early work in the field. Early pioneers in gifted education deemed that children with IQ scores above 135 were gifted (Hollingworth, 1925; Terman, 1925). Program models that rely on a high level of performance on a standardized test persist to this day (Brody & Stanley, 2005; Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). Proponents of the Talent Search/SMPY model suggest that for certain highly advanced students a model using diagnostic testing followed by prescribed instruction (DT→PI) can be used to radically accelerate their education (Brody & Stanley, 2005; Stanley, 1980). Talent Search/SMPY seeks to serve students who perform above the 98th percentile on achievement tests and above certain levels on above-grade standardized tests (Colangelo et al., 2004; Stanley & Benbow, 1982). The students so termed are a tiny percentage of all students in public schools, perhaps as few as .1% of the entire population (Stanley, 1980).

In the early 1970s, the Marland commission sought to develop a more universal, and more inclusive, conception of giftedness (Marland, 1972). The Marland definition of giftedness evolved to include those students who demonstrate (a) general intellectual ability, (b) specific academic aptitude, (c) creative or productive thinking skills, (d) leadership ability or potential, or (e) ability or potential in the arts (Marland, 1972; P. L. 100-297, § 4103 [1988]). Although slightly refined by Congress over the years, many states and local school districts continue to use the original Marland definition as the foundation for their definitions of giftedness (e.g., Cal. Ed. Code Ann., §§ 52201 & 52202 [2001]). Other models, such as the Schoolwide Enrichment

Model (SEM), also strive to “promote both challenging and enjoyable high-end learning across a wide range of school types, levels, and demographic differences” (Renzulli & Reis, 2003, p. 184). Renzulli’s well-known definition of giftedness stems from his “work on a conception of giftedness that challenged the traditional view of this concept as mainly a function of high scores on intelligence tests” (Renzulli, 2003, p. 75). Renzulli’s conception of giftedness involves the intersection of above-average ability as a component, task commitment, and creativity (Renzulli, 2003; Renzulli & Reis, 2003).

The Triarchic Model (TM; Sternberg, 2002, 2003; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000) also attempts to broaden traditional definitions of giftedness. Instead of being based on a single number achieved on a test, intelligence is envisioned as “accounting for the bases of success in all of one’s life” (Sternberg, 2003, p. 88). The factors encompassing intelligence include a balance between analytical, creative, and practical abilities (Sternberg, 2002, 2003; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000). Children who exhibit certain of these intelligences, such as those with a great deal of creative ability, may not necessarily do well on traditional intelligence tests (Sternberg, 2002, 2003; Sternberg et al., 2000). Finally, Gardner’s (1993) multiple intelligence theory (MI) also provides a broader conception of intelligence and giftedness. The MI theory suggests that there are not one or two but at least nine types of intelligence: verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and existential (Gardner, 1993; Károlyi, Ramos-Ford, & Gardner, 2003). These intelligences are not easily identifiable through multiple-choice tests. Instead, they require observations of students interacting with materials and ideas related to various intelligence areas (Gardner, 1993; Károlyi et al., 2003).

Regardless of the model favored, schools that are effective in developing students with advanced academic talent have consistent identification processes, curriculum, and evaluation methods (Callahan, 2001; Ford, 2003; Tomlinson, Gould, Schroth, & Jarvis, 2006). This alignment must be especially tight when the

resulting grouping leads to increased segregated composition of schools (Ford & Harris, 1999; Oakes, 2005; Renzulli, 2003). Far too many children of color are currently subjected to unequal and inadequate educational options—any attempt to justify the composition of racially unequal schools therefore must be based upon criteria that are consistent and equitable (Delpit, 2006; Ford, 2003; Nieto, 1999).

Methodology

The target populations for this study included three groups of educators: administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers who work in public school districts. The sampling plan was developed based upon data obtained from Market Data Retrieval (MDR), a division of Dun & Bradstreet, Inc. MDR provided, in Excel format on CD-ROMs, information regarding elementary school personnel: number of individuals employed at elementary schools in the United States, categories of employment, schools that serve students enrolled in grades K–5, names, and mailing addresses. Included amongst those categories of employment are listings for administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers. The MDR listings were chosen because of the scope of the database. MDR provides access to all administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers with a public elementary school background.

From the lists of eligible members from these three populations, random sampling methods were used to obtain a representative sample of 300 from each group. The research design for this study is descriptive in nature.

The survey items were constructed using a three-step process. First, an extensive literature review validated conceptions of giftedness as defined by experts in the field (e.g., Borland, 2005; Callahan, 2001; Ford, 2003; Renzulli & Reis, 2003; Sternberg, 2003; Tomlinson, 2003). Next, a panel of gifted education experts, including classroom teachers, gifted education

Table 1

Demographic Information About Survey Participants

Category	<i>n</i>	%
Job Title		
Principal	100	24.3
Assistant Principal	48	11.7
Gifted Education Specialist	115	28.0
Regular Classroom Teacher	148	36.0
Total	411	100
Ethnicity		
African American	41	10
Asian	9	2.2
Caucasian	347	84.4
Hispanic	14	3.4
Total	411	100
Experience		
Less than 1 year	13	3.2
2 to 5 years	78	19.0
6 to 10 years	100	24.3
11 or more years	220	53.5
Total	411	100

specialists, administrators from public school districts, and three past presidents of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) reviewed the survey for construct validity. Finally, survey reliability was ascertained to be at a .94 level using the Spearman-Brown split-half approach (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005). The 900 surveys were mailed to respondents via United States mail. After 10 business days, we mailed a reminder post card to all members of the sample who had not, at that point, responded to the initial mailing. The response rate, $n = 411$, was 45.6%. Demographic information regarding survey participants is set forth in Table 1.

After collection, the data were analyzed pursuant to standard procedures (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005; Fink, 1995; Pedhazur &

Schmelkin, 1991). First, the number of dependent variables were counted and entered into SPSS. A determination was made whether to use nominal, ordinal, or ratio scales for each of the variables. For those variables asking for the respondent's job title, for example, nominal scales were used because these produce data that fit into categories (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005; Fink, 1995). Ordinal scales were used with those questions that asked for ratings of agreement (e.g., *strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree*; Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005; Fink, 1995). Ratio scales were used with items that asked for information such as the number of students eligible for federally funded free or reduced-price lunch (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005; Fink, 1995). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and summary statistics by survey item, were produced.

Findings

The study's research question sought to ascertain educators' beliefs about the conceptions of giftedness propounded by various experts in the field of gifted education. When asked to state their level of agreement with common definitions of giftedness, educators as a group were accepting of virtually all definitions of giftedness, as shown in Table 2. Among the choices with which respondents most strongly agreed were Sternberg's (2005) analytical and creative thinking abilities with 247 and 248 responses respectively; Renzulli's (2003) combination of above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment with 239 responses; and creative and productive thinking with 244 responses. Educators also indicated that they agreed with the use of traditional definitions of giftedness such as standardized test scores above the 98th percentile and specific academic aptitude, although only half as many strongly agreed that these constructs define giftedness. All conceptions of giftedness found favor with a majority of educators, something that is not always anticipated by the field. Gardner's concept of bodily/kinesthetic intelligence, for example, was the least popular

of the 21 definitions provided insofar as it was disagreed or strongly disagreed with by 94 educators, roughly 23% of the sample. Even in that case, however, 247 educators, slightly more than 60%, agreed that bodily/kinesthetic intelligence was a valid definition of giftedness.

Table 3 compares administrator, gifted education specialist, and regular classroom beliefs related to various conceptions of giftedness. Administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers demonstrated similar views regarding many of these definitions of giftedness. Although different degrees of acceptance were shown for various definitions, such as students with standardized test scores above the 98th percentile, these were more differences of degree than anything else. Overall, strong support across groups was noted for more progressive, or inclusive, definitions of giftedness (Gardner, 1993; Renzulli, 2003; Sternberg, 2005).

Educators next were asked to rank each of these as factors that should be considered in making decisions determining which students should receive gifted education services. The responses to this question differed somewhat from those where educators were simply asked to express their level of agreement. As indicated in Table 4, the Renzulli definition, as well as Sternberg's analytical and creative thinkers and creative and productive thinkers were ranked in the top five. More traditional means of identifying gifted students, however, such as general intellectual ability and specific academic aptitude also received high rankings, coming in ranked as 3rd and 6th respectively. Those talents associated with the visual and performing arts were ranked fairly low, with talent in dance or theatre/drama being ranked 20th and 21st. Among Gardner's intelligences, those representing a more traditional view of giftedness, specifically verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical intelligences, fared the best, being ranked 7th and 8th respectively. Other of Gardner's intelligences fared less well, with naturalistic intelligence ranking 18th and bodily/kinesthetic intelligence ranking 19th.

Table 2

Educator Beliefs Regarding Definitions of Giftedness

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>	<i>Missing</i>
Standardized test scores at the 98th percentile or above	100 (24.3)*	210 (51.1)	66 (16.1)	28 (6.8)	3 (0.7)	4 (1)
Specific academic aptitude	117 (28.5)	232 (56.4)	37 (9)	7 (1.7)	4 (1)	14 (3.4)
Creative or productive thinking	244 (59.4)	162 (39.4)	4 (1)	0 (0)	1 (0.2)	0 (0)
Leadership ability or potential	125 (30.4)	201 (48.9)	66 (16.1)	6 (1.5)	8 (1.9)	5 (1.2)
Ability or potential in the visual arts	88 (21.4)	227 (55.2)	55 (13.4)	3 (0.7)	15 (3.6)	23 (5.6)
Ability or potential in music	97 (23.6)	215 (52.3)	59 (14.4)	3 (0.7)	27 (6.6)	10 (2.4)
Ability or potential in dance	79 (19.2)	213 (51.8)	75 (18.2)	3 (0.7)	28 (6.8)	13 (3.2)
Ability or potential in theatre/drama	83 (20.2)	215 (52.3)	76 (18.5)	0 (0)	24 (5.8)	13 (3.2)
A combination of above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment	239 (58.2)	132 (32.1)	33 (8)	3 (0.7)	1 (0.2)	3 (0.7)
High level of ability at tasks requiring analytical thinking	247 (59.7)	148 (36)	4 (1)	3 (0.7)	1 (0.2)	8 (1.9)
High level of ability at tasks requiring creative thinking	248 (60.3)	152 (37)	10 (2.4)	0 (0)	1 (0.2)	0 (0)
High level of ability at tasks requiring practical thinking	196 (47.7)	185 (45)	19 (4.6)	3 (0.7)	1 (0.2)	7 (1.7)
High capabilities in Gardner's verbal/linguistic intelligence	109 (26.5)	218 (53)	21 (5.1)	6 (1.5)	50 (12.2)	7 (1.7)
High capabilities in Gardner's bodily/kinesthetic intelligence	57 (13.9)	190 (46.2)	79 (19.2)	15 (3.6)	59 (14.4)	11 (2.7)
High capabilities in Gardner's musical intelligence	69 (16.8)	199 (48.4)	58 (14.3)	9 (2.2)	65 (15.8)	11 (2.7)
High capabilities in Gardner's logical/mathematical intelligence	120 (29.2)	199 (48.4)	26 (6.3)	3 (0.7)	50 (12.2)	10 (2.4)
High capabilities in Gardner's spatial intelligence	86 (20.9)	210 (51.1)	42 (10.3)	3 (0.7)	56 (13.6)	14 (3.4)
High capabilities in Gardner's interpersonal intelligence	56 (13)	203 (49.4)	72 (17.5)	9 (2.2)	60 (14.6)	11 (2.7)
High capabilities in Gardner's intrapersonal intelligence	49 (11.9)	203 (49.4)	69 (16.8)	12 (2.9)	63 (15.3)	15 (3.6)
High capabilities in Gardner's naturalistic intelligence	43 (10.5)	210 (51.1)	65 (15.8)	3 (0.7)	79 (19.2)	11 (2.7)
High capabilities in Gardner's existential intelligence	43 (10.5)	203 (49.4)	60 (14.6)	3 (0.7)	91 (22.1)	11 (2.7)

Note. * () indicates % of respondents.

Table 3
 Summary Data Regarding Beliefs about
 Definitions of Giftedness

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>			<i>Agree</i>			<i>Disagree</i>			<i>Strongly Disagree</i>		
	A	GS	T	A	GS	T	A	GS	T	A	GS	T
Standardized test scores at the 98th percentile or above	32 (21)*	23 (20)	45 (31)	80 (54)	62 (53)	68 (46)	23 (15)	18 (16)	25 (17)	10 (7)	12 (10)	3 (2)
Specific academic aptitude	32 (21)	44 (38)	41 (28)	89 (60)	61 (53)	82 (56)	10 (7)	6 (5)	21 (14)	3 (2)	4 (3)	3 (2)
Creative or productive thinking	93 (62)	73 (63)	78 (53)	51 (34)	42 (36)	69 (47)	3 (2)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Leadership ability or potential	41 (28)	43 (37)	41 (28)	77 (52)	47 (41)	77 (52)	28 (19)	19 (16)	19 (13)	0 (0)	3 (3)	3 (2)
Ability or potential in the visual arts	30 (20)	31 (27)	27 (18)	81 (55)	60 (52)	86 (57)	21 (14)	14 (12)	20 (14)	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (5)
Ability or potential in music	33 (22)	31 (29)	30 (20)	81 (55)	53 (46)	81 (55)	21 (14)	15 (13)	23 (16)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Ability or potential in dance	23 (16)	30 (26)	26 (18)	77 (52)	53 (46)	82 (56)	28 (19)	15 (13)	26 (18)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Ability or potential in theatre/drama	29 (21)	31 (27)	23 (16)	69 (49)	53 (46)	87 (59)	25 (18)	21 (18)	30 (20)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
A combination of above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment	65 (44)	82 (71)	92 (63)	67 (45)	22 (19)	43 (29)	9 (6)	12 (10)	12 (8)	3 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)
High level of ability at tasks requiring analytical thinking	78 (53)	81 (70)	88 (60)	65 (44)	34 (29)	49 (33)	0 (0)	1 (1)	3 (2)	3 (2)	0 (0)	7 (5)

	Strongly Agree			Agree			Disagree			Strongly Disagree		
	A	GS	T	A	GS	T	A	GS	T	A	GS	T
	High level of ability at tasks requiring creative thinking	84 (57)	72 (62)	92 (63)	57 (39)	43 (37)	52 (35)	6 (4)	1 (1)	3 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)
High level of ability at tasks requiring practical thinking	66 (45)	53 (46)	77 (52)	63 (43)	59 (51)	63 (43)	15 (10)	1 (1)	3 (2)	1 (1)	0 (0)	4 (3)
High capabilities in Gardner's verbal/linguistic intelligence	45 (30)	33 (28)	31 (21)	67 (45)	64 (55)	87 (60)	13 (9)	7 (6)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (2)
High capabilities in Gardner's bodily/kinesesthetic intelligence	26 (18)	17 (15)	14 (10)	61 (41)	55 (47)	74 (50)	34 (23)	25 (22)	20 (14)	0 (0)	6 (5)	6 (4)
High capabilities in Gardner's musical intelligence	25 (17)	24 (21)	20 (14)	68 (46)	53 (46)	78 (53)	28 (19)	23 (20)	7 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (4)
High capabilities in Gardner's logical/mathematical intelligence	38 (26)	41 (35)	41 (28)	68 (46)	53 (46)	75 (51)	16 (11)	23 (20)	3 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (4)
High capabilities in Gardner's spatial intelligence	26 (18)	30 (26)	30 (20)	76 (51)	60 (52)	74 (50)	19 (13)	13 (11)	10 (7)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (4)
High capabilities in Gardner's interpersonal intelligence	19 (13)	23 (20)	14 (10)	70 (48)	49 (42)	84 (57)	29 (20)	27 (23)	16 (11)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (2)
High capabilities in Gardner's intrapersonal intelligence	19 (13)	23 (20)	7 (5)	64 (43)	55 (47)	84 (57)	32 (22)	21 (18)	16 (11)	3 (2)	0 (0)	7 (5)
High capabilities in Gardner's naturalistic intelligence	16 (11)	17 (15)	10 (7)	70 (48)	56 (48)	84 (57)	29 (20)	17 (15)	19 (13)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (2)
High capabilities in Gardner's existential intelligence	13 (9)	20 (17)	10 (7)	70 (47)	52 (45)	81 (55)	26 (18)	18 (16)	16 (11)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (2)

Note. * () indicates % of respondents. A = Administrators, GS = Gifted Specialists, T = Regular Classroom Teachers.

Table 4

Educators' Rank Ordering of Factors That Influence Receipt of Gifted Education Services

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rank
General intellectual ability	4.66	5.21	3
Specific academic aptitude	6.02	4.89	6
Creative or productive thinkers	4.76	4.01	4
Leadership ability	9.87	8.56	9
Talent in visual arts	13.30	4.93	15
Talent in music	13.59	5.06	17
Talent in dance	15.86	5.39	20
Talent in theatre/drama	16.52	11.49	21
Combination of above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment	4.04	4.53	1
High degree of analytical abilities	4.49	2.91	2
High degree of creative abilities	5.79	3.19	5
High degree of practical abilities	10.61	5.45	10
High verbal/linguistic intelligence	7.12	3.92	7
High bodily/kinesthetic intelligence	14.98	4.76	19
High musical intelligence	13.06	4.77	13
High logical/mathematical intelligence	7.33	4.34	8
High spatial intelligence	11.57	4.63	11
High interpersonal intelligence	12.45	4.78	12
High intrapersonal intelligence	13.29	4.94	14
High naturalistic intelligence	14.33	5.21	18
High existential intelligence	13.38	5.71	16

Note. Ranking based on a scale of 1 to 21 with 1 = *Most Important* and 21 = *Least Important*.

Discussion

This study ascertained the perceptions of administrators, regular classroom teachers, and gifted education specialists regarding definitions of academic talent and giftedness. The data suggest that conceptual confusion exists regarding what constitutes an academically talented or gifted child. Additionally, the various traits favored to identify children for gifted education

services suggest that practitioners prefer identification methods similar to those used in the Renzulli and Sternberg models. Practitioners also expressed great faith in traditional methods of identification, such as general intellectual ability and specific academic aptitude, choosing them more often than exhibited talents in the fine arts. Both general intellectual ability and specific academic aptitude tend to be measured by standardized instruments. This may suggest that alternative methods of identification, and the students identified by these, are overlooked in special class or school composition. This disconnect puts into question the efficacy of the composition of special classes or schools for these students. Such inconsistencies are especially a cause for alarm when one ponders the decisions concerning classroom and school composition that are based upon these factors.

Regular classroom teachers', gifted education specialists', and administrators' confusion regarding the variety of conceptions of academic talent and giftedness provided by experts in the field is both understandable and troubling. Practitioners' knowledge regarding the characteristics of academically talented and gifted children are a central means by which specific students are identified as needing specific services. The data, however, suggest that educators as a group are accepting of virtually all definitions of academic talent and giftedness. This is problematic insofar as the traits were taken from disparate models of intelligence and instructional models of giftedness. Much of the work to construct "special" populations in need of special schools or classes is thus potentially ineffective and nonproductive.

Gifted students benefit from receiving gifted education services, whether these services are focused upon acceleration, enrichment, or some combination thereof (Callahan, 2001; Colangelo et al., 2004; Renzulli & Reis, 2003; Schroth, 2007). When such services are offered, however, it is vital that a strong degree of vertical integration exist between the identification processes employed, the continuum of services offered, and the evaluation procedures used (Callahan & Caldwell, 1995; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Duke, 2003; Fullan, 2007). Without tight con-

nections between these components of a gifted education program, it is unlikely that optimal results will be achieved (Callahan & Caldwell, 1995; Duke, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008).

Gifted education programs that benefit students must be supported by structures that will allow success to occur. These support structures must assist regular classroom teachers, gifted education specialists, and administrators in making decisions regarding identification and the provision of services that are clear, consistent, and correct. All too often school leaders assume capacity to enact and implement programs where none exists (Fullan, 2007). The paucity of funding for gifted education programs makes the selection of quality supports that build and maintain capacity essential. School leaders should be aware of, and ready to respond to, potential misunderstandings or conflicts that teachers' diverse preparation and life experiences may cause. Supports for change, planning, or information relating to information about the type and needs of a program considered are nonnegotiable (Callahan & Caldwell, 1995; Fullan, 2007). Administrators interested in specific types of programs must be prepared to work with teachers and gifted education specialists serving a wide variety of students with differing areas of giftedness to build capacity for the programs they envision (Callahan & Caldwell, 1995; Fullan, 2007). Additional research might show how conceptions of giftedness are affected by the strengths and limitations of actual gifted education programs in the public schools.

Conclusion

Decisions regarding school and classroom composition often are made in an attempt to provide services to students who meet certain academic criteria. Data from this study suggest confusion regarding the criteria used to make decisions relating to the composition of schools and classrooms to serve the academically talented and gifted. Administrators, gifted education specialists, and classroom teachers interested in running effective gifted

education programs must be prepared to confront this confusion through careful alignment between goals, identification measures, and program services. In light of the limited funding gifted education programs receive, this often is a considerable challenge. Administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers need support in their work with and for gifted children. This support may well include providing time to structure change within specific program models, provide dedicated opportunities for effective planning, and make available resources for ongoing support and refinement of programs. This work, occurring outside of the classroom, would benefit administrators, regular classroom teachers, and gifted education specialists to craft services that will best meet the needs of the students they serve.

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