



# Identifying Gifted Students: Educator Beliefs Regarding Various Policies, Processes, and Procedures

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*Issues regarding the identification of gifted students have perplexed the field almost since its inception. How one identifies gifted students has tremendous ramifications for a gifted education program's size, curriculum, instructional methods, and administration. Little is known, however, regarding educator beliefs regarding gifted identification methods. The current national study surveyed 900 public school educators regarding which identification methods they supported. The educators believed that standardized tests, portfolios of student work, and teacher nominations were valid means of identification but did not support parent or peer nominations. Statistically significant differences existed between administrators and gifted education specialists, on the one hand, and regular classroom teachers, on the other hand, regarding the usefulness of standardized test scores and teacher nominations as methods of identifying students for gifted programs. Such results are potentially valuable to school administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers who work with gifted students.*

## Introduction

Dual pressures exist for gifted education programs to serve more students, especially those from traditionally underserved populations, yet also to serve all enrolled students effectively. Understanding practitioner beliefs related to the identification of gifted students is related to any and all attempts to improve the equity and excellence of gifted education programs. Pressures relating to equity and excellence sometimes result in conflicts that hinder programs from

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achieving either goal. The situation is complicated insofar as most gifted education curricular and program models have been developed by academics but are administered by school personnel. Particular gifted education models often have a distinct population in mind and an individual approach to curriculum and instruction that fits that population. Identification policies, processes, and procedures influence and affect the internal operational requirements of various gifted education models.

To date, many attempts to balance equity and excellence have been unsatisfactory (Borland, 2005; Borland, Schnur & Wright, 2000; Moon & Callahan, 2001; Tomlinson, Callahan & Lelli, 1997). Schools leaders often understand that providing gifted education services of any type improves gifted students' performance (Schroth, 2007). Problems persist, however, in matching services to learners. Many gifted education programs, for example, traditionally have had identification procedures that, whether intentionally or not, have excluded many children of color, English-language learners, and low socioeconomic status (SES) students (Borland & Wright, 1994; Callahan, 2001; Ford, 2003; Ford & Harris, 1999; Oakes, 2005; Renzulli, 1982). Some school districts have attempted to become more inclusive in their identification of gifted learners, hoping that this step would make their gifted education programs more accessible to underrepresented groups. Altering identification procedures can, and has, increased participation by many of these previously underrepresented groups in gifted education programs (Borland, 2005; Callahan, 2001; Ford, 2003; Reis & Small, 2005). Many observers are dissatisfied with the results, however, as modifying identification processes without modifying programming often leaves students inappropriately served (Borland, 2005; Callahan, 2001; Ford, 2003; Reis & Small, 2005; Tomlinson, Gould, Schroth & Jarvis, 2006).

These sometimes conflicting goals can cause great confusion for school leaders seeking to improve opportunities for gifted students *and* to make their gifted education programs more inclusive. If, for instance, school district leaders adopt identification procedures from a model intended to make gifted education programs more inclusive while simultaneously selecting curricular and instructional models that make no accommodation for learners who might have readiness needs, these incompatible choices would seemingly influence





the success of their program. Students from diverse backgrounds can indeed thrive in gifted programs that provide support for their readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Borland et al., 2000; Tomlinson et al., 1997; Worrell, Szarko, & Gabelko, 2001). Schools and programs that are most successful with children of color, English language learners, and students from low-SES backgrounds, however, recognize that diverse learners' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles sometimes differ from those of Caucasian students (Borland & Wright, 1994; Ford, 2003; Tomlinson et al., 2006). Those gifted education programs that have identification processes and expectations consistent with curricular and instructional approaches have traditionally been very successful (Benbow & Minor, 1990; Benbow & Stanley, 1982; Brody, Assouline & Stanley, 1990; Brody & Stanley, 2005; Clark, 2001; Stanley, 1980). Effective programs seem to be those that combine reach and support to extend the capacity of all students enrolled in the program (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Tomlinson et al., 2006). For more programs to enjoy such success, a strong connection between identification procedures and programming options is necessary.

Little is known about the beliefs regarding identification of students for gifted education programs held by those who deliver services to students. Knowledge about such beliefs is important because educators' beliefs influence their practices and actions (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Callahan, 2001; Deal & Peterson, 1999; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Duke, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Stronge, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003). For this study, surveys were mailed to a national random sample of 900 educators to determine beliefs about a wide-ranging array of topics central to conceptions of giftedness and gifted education. These topics included factors influencing how giftedness is defined and those student characteristics that stem from those definitions. The study focused on two research questions: (a) What beliefs do administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers have regarding the validity of the common methods of the identification of gifted students?, and (b) Are there differences of beliefs regarding methods of identification across these groups? Data were analyzed that demonstrates the varying beliefs of these three groups and areas where the groups demonstrate statistically significant differences.





## Review of the Literature

Student identification for participation in gifted and talented education programs is one of the most contentious issues facing teachers and administrators today (Borland & Wright, 1994; Callahan, 1982; Ford, 2003). Certainly many identification processes seem to be a process of dividing “winners” from “losers,” the sheep from the goats (Adler, 1998; Callahan, 1982; Schroth & Helfer, 2008). Part of this divisiveness stems from how gifted education services are envisioned: If a gifted model is seen as necessarily having “a ‘gifted teacher,’ a resource room, a specific time when the services are offered, and/or a specific group of children known as ‘the gifted,’” it becomes an axiom that these precious assets not be “wasted” (Callahan, 1982, p. 18). Such a conception, of course, might also prove a disservice to the gifted child. If he or she is seen as only needing gifted services during certain set times or if the regular classroom teacher feels it is someone else’s responsibility to take care of the student’s “giftedness,” the student suffers (Callahan, 1982; Callahan & Miller, 2005; Renzulli, 1982). Because gifted education is “someone else’s job,” such a child could potentially spend much of the class day receiving inappropriate instruction (Callahan, 1982; Renzulli, 1982; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2005). The conceptualization of identification processes thus has a tremendous influence on both the population to be served as well as the services these children will receive.

Schools in the United States use various identification processes to identify children as gifted. On one extreme, there are those who maintain that intelligence is measurable by IQ tests, which are extremely reliable and valid, and that different types of intelligence tests all measure the same general intelligence (Gottfredson, 1997, 2003). Those who favor IQ tests believe that a population’s IQ range can be represented in a normal curve, with most people clustering around 100 and with only 3% having scores above 130 and thus qualifying as gifted (Gottfredson, 1997, 2003). Proponents of traditional instruments for measuring IQ believe that such tests are not biased against Blacks, other ethnic minority groups who are English speaking, or other native-born people in the United States, predicting equally well for all subgroups (Gottfredson, 1997, 2003). Conversely, others believe children of color, English-language learn-





ers, and low-SES students are discriminated against by standardized tests because such tests are “biased against diverse students” (Ford, 2003, p. 284) and support an identification process that is “color-blind or cultureblind, Eurocentric, monolithic, and narrow” (Ford, 2003, p. 284). Tannenbaum (2003) observed, “it is hard to imagine any hope for conciliation in this IQ debate since the combatants are entrenched in seemingly snug and smug positions” (p. 50). Although the various positions regarding identification may not be reconcilable, the methods favored by different models tell a great deal about their philosophy.

Many who favor limiting gifted education services to students who score sufficiently high on a certain test envision a model predominantly serving students already performing at a high level (e.g., Brody et al., 1990; Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Gottfredson, 2003; Mönks & Katzko, 2005; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2005). Those advocating multiple measures (e.g., portfolios; observations; teacher, peer, or parent nominations; and test scores) to identify gifted students also have a strong interest in serving students who have potential for high performance but additionally emphasize the importance of serving more students, including those who may be missed using only traditional tools (e.g., Callahan & Miller, 2005; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Sternberg, 2002, 2003). Finally, those who focus on the provision of appropriate challenge to virtually all students rather than the labeling process are more inclusive still (e.g., Borland, 2005; Von Károlyi, Ramos-Ford, & Gardner, 2003; Tomlinson et al., 2002).

The federal government, as well as many individual states, has adopted the Marland (1972) definition of giftedness. Marland took a balanced approach, identifying children who were potentially gifted as those with demonstrated achievement or potential ability, singly or in combination, in any of the following areas: (a) general intellectual ability, (b) specific academic aptitude, (c) creative or productive thinking, (d) leadership ability, (e) talent in the visual or performing arts, or (f) psychomotor ability (psychomotor ability was later dropped). Of the two more traditional of these definitions, *general intellectual ability* is often defined as performance two standard deviations above the mean on IQ tests, while *specific academic aptitude* can be demonstrated through grades or achievement test scores (Marland, 1972; Davis & Rimm, 2003). *Creative and productive*





*thinking* often refers to the ability to bring together ideas thought of as distinct, while *leadership* has been defined as the ability to direct individuals or groups to a common goal or outcome (Marland, 1972; Davis & Rimm, 2003). Students who are talented in the *visual or performing arts* are those who demonstrate great ability at particular tasks involving visual arts, music, dance, or drama/theatre and often are assessed via performance assessments by experts or rating scales (Marland, 1972; Davis & Rimm, 2003).

Certain gifted education models have specific identification criteria. Talent Search/The Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY), for example, uses a systematic assessment program to identify talent for services<sup>1</sup> (Lupkowski-Shoplik, Benbow, Assouline, & Brody, 2003). Talent Search/SMPY uses above-level aptitude tests that allow students to use their reasoning abilities to solve problems, even when faced with unfamiliar content (Lupkowski-Shoplik et al., 2003). Identification is a two-step process. First, an initial screening based upon standardized tests such as the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills or the Stanford 10 are used to identify students who score at or above a designated level (95th or 97th percentile; Lupkowski-Shoplik et al., 2003). The next step is to administer an above-level test, such as the SAT-I, the ACT, the School and College Abilities Test, or the Spatial Test Battery (Lupkowski-Shoplik et al., 2003).

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) requires the identification of a *talent pool* from within the school—the talent pool is drawn from the top 10% to 15% of students at the individual school (Renzulli & Reis, 2003). This group is determined using achievement tests, teacher nominations, and assessments of potential, as well as nominations from students and parents (Renzulli & Reis, 2003). Above-average intelligence is thus a part of identification, but it is defined so that every school, regardless of demographics, would have a talent pool in place. This is a larger group than that traditionally served by gifted education programs.

Hypothetically, both the Parallel Curriculum Model (PCM; Tomlinson et al., 2002) and Layered Curriculum (Kaplan, 2005) are not concerned with formal identification processes because both are intended for use with virtually the entire student population and because they are curriculum rather than program models. In practice, however, the classroom teacher using PCM or the Layered







Curriculum must be adept at discerning student needs, both with regard to challenge and remediation, so as to provide each student with an appropriately challenging learning experience (Kaplan, 2005; Tomlinson et al., 2002). Both models acknowledge this need. The PCM encompasses

[G]ather[ing] information about student learning needs as well as about students as members of a group and as individuals, assessment, reflections on what appears to be successful and unsuccessful for individuals and the class as a whole, and evolving teacher sophistication in understanding and responding to student “signals.” (Tomlinson et al., 2002, pp. 43–44)

PCM teachers use assessments to measure student growth over time; to determine the extent to which students have acquired knowledge, skills, or both; and to assist the teacher in making necessary curricular and instructional modifications based on learner needs (Tomlinson et al., 2002). Teachers using the Layered Curriculum also must use assessment to drive their instruction (Kaplan, 2005). If regular education teachers are to serve gifted students in the regular education classroom, these teachers must both be able to identify what gifted students’ academic needs are and then devise appropriate instruction to meet those needs.

## **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 among those categories of employment are listings for administrators, gifted education specialists, and classroom teachers. The MDR





listings were chosen because of the scope of its database. MDR provides access to all administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers in public elementary schools. 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 chosen for this study includes descriptive statistics to assess attitudes, opinions, and preferences and inferential statistics to explore the descriptive results (Brown et al., 2005; Gay & Airasian, 2003; Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991).

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, 2005; Tomlinson, 2003). Next, a panel of gifted education experts, including classroom teachers, gifted education specialists, and 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 U.S. mail. After 10 business days, a postcard reminding recipients of the survey was mailed 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%, a rate that is considered strong by experts (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005; Fink, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c).

After collection, the data were analyzed pursuant to standard procedures (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005; Fink, 1995a, 1995b; 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, 1995c). 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, 1995a). Ratio scales were used with items that asked for information such as number of students eligible for federally funded







free or reduced-price lunch (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005; Fink, 1995a, 1995b). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and summary statistics by survey item, were produced.

Appropriate analysis techniques were performed in order to determine answers for each of the study questions. These techniques included descriptive statistics and the calculation of an analysis of variance (ANOVA; Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). ANOVA was chosen over other alternatives because it assists in formulating a linear model that is appropriate for analyzing data and is most superior to other models insofar that it combines “simplicity with adequacy” (Maxwell & Delaney, 2004, p. 67). Although an  $\alpha$  of .05 was desired and used throughout, the investigators were aware that for items with multiple subparts, some might argue that the chance of a Type I error increases to the number of subparts multiplied by .05 (Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). To control for this, the  $\alpha$  for multiple contrasts can be controlled by dividing .05 by the number of contrasts conducted (Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). Such controls were conducted as part of this investigation. Effect sizes were calculated for statistically significant results. With an ANOVA, the correct estimate of effect size is  $\eta^2$ , with interpretations of the effect size considered to be small (.01), medium (.06), and large (.14; Volker, 2006).

## Findings

The study’s first research question sought to ascertain educators’ beliefs about the various conceptions of giftedness propounded by various experts in the field of gifted education. Educators next considered the effectiveness of various methods of identifying academically gifted students. As indicated in Table 1, a majority of educators believed that two methods of identifying gifted students, parent nominations and peer nominations, were ineffective or very ineffective. The other five methods of identification—standardized tests, teacher nominations, portfolios, performance assessments, and observations—were viewed as either effective or very effective by more than 80% of educators.

Table 2 shows administrator, gifted education specialist, and regular classroom teacher beliefs regarding methods of identifying



**Table 1**  
**Educator Beliefs Regarding Methods of Identifying**  
**Academically Gifted Students (N = 411)**

	Very Effective	Effective	Ineffective	Very Ineffective	Don't Know	Missing
Standardized tests	73 (17.8)	275 (66.9)	52 (12.7)	9 (2.2)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)
Teacher nominations	111 (27)	246 (59.9)	43 (10.5)	9 (2.2)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)
Parent nominations	13 (3.2)	150 (36.5)	195 (47.4)	33 (8)	18 (4.4)	1 (0.2)
Peer nominations	18 (4.4)	110 (26.8)	182 (44.3)	24 (5.8)	73 (17.8)	4 (1)
Portfolios of student work	136 (33.1)	224 (54.5)	26 (6.3)	0 (0)	14 (3.4)	11 (2.7)
Performance assessments by experts	142 (34.5)	231 (56.2)	9 (2.2)	6 (1.5)	15 (3.6)	8 (1.9)
Observations	164 (39.9)	207 (50.4)	21 (5.1)	1 (0.2)	13 (3.2)	4 (1)

*Note.* Percentages of respondents are in parentheses.

gifted students. A certain degree of alignment exists between administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers with regard to methods used to identify students for gifted education programs. A larger percentage of administrators than the other groups indicated that parent nominations were ineffective, while a larger percentage of regular classroom teachers felt standardized tests were ineffective.

These feelings were consistent with educator rankings of methods of identifying academically gifted students. As seen in Table 3, performance assessments, teacher nominations, standardized tests, and portfolios were ranked as the top four choices. Observations were ranked as somewhat less effective, and parent and peer nominations were ranked the lowest.

When asked to rank various methods of identifying gifted students, administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers demonstrated both similar and differing views with



**Table 2**  
**Summary Data Regarding Methods of Identifying Academically Gifted Students (N = 411)**

	Very Effective			Effective			Ineffective			Very Ineffective		
	A	GS	T	A	GS	T	A	GS	T	A	GS	T
Standardized tests	22 (15)	32 (28)	19 (13)	115 (78)	77 (66)	83 (57)	10 (7)	3 (3)	39 (27)	0 (0)	3 (3)	6 (4)
Teacher nominations	38 (26)	19 (16)	54 (37)	89 (60)	75 (65)	82 (56)	14 (10)	18 (16)	11 (8)	6 (4)	3 (3)	0 (0)
Parent nominations	3 (2)	9 (8)	1 (1)	39 (26)	46 (40)	65 (44)	91 (62)	43 (37)	61 (42)	13 (9)	7 (6)	1 (1)
Peer nominations	3 (2)	15 (13)	0 (0)	31 (21)	36 (31)	43 (29)	70 (47)	38 (33)	74 (50)	8 (5)	3 (3)	0 (0)
Portfolios of student work	50 (34)	42 (36)	44 (30)	77 (52)	59 (51)	88 (60)	9 (6)	7 (6)	10 (7)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (2)
Performance assessments by experts	52 (35)	44 (38)	46 (31)	89 (60)	68 (57)	74 (50)	0 (0)	3 (3)	6 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (5)
Observations	44 (30)	54 (47)	66 (45)	86 (58)	49 (42)	72 (49)	7 (5)	8 (7)	6 (4)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)

*Note.* Percentages of respondents are in parentheses. A = administrators, GS = gifted specialists, T = regular classroom teachers.

**Table 3**  
**Educators' Mean Ratings and Rank Ordering of Methods of Identifying Academically Gifted Students (N = 411)**

Method	M	SD	Rank
Performance assessments by experts	2.84	1.58	1
Teacher nominations	2.89	1.43	2
Standardized tests	2.93	1.73	3
Portfolios of student work	2.96	1.71	4
Observations	3.64	1.65	5
Parent nominations	5.49	1.38	6
Peer nominations	6.16	1.44	7

*Note.* Ranking based on a scale of 1 (*Most Influence*) to 7 (*Least Influence*).



**Table 4****Summary Data of Rank Ordering of Factors Influencing Who Receives Gifted Services (N = 411)**

	Rank		
	A	GS	T
Standardized tests	3	1	5
Teacher nominations	4	4	1
Parent nominations	6	6	6
Peer nominations	7	7	7
Portfolios of student work	2	3	2
Performance assessments by experts	1	2	3
Observations	5	5	4

*Note.* Ranking based on a scale of 1 (*Most Important*) to 7 (*Least Important*). A = administrators, GS = gifted specialists, T = regular classroom teachers.

regard to the relative merits of methods. As Table 4 shows, each group ranked a different method as “most important,” with administrators choosing performance assessments, gifted education specialists favoring standardized tests, and regular classroom teachers supporting teacher nominations. All three groups agreed that parent and peer nominations were the least important methods of identification.

*Differences Between Groups*

The study’s second research question investigated whether differences of perceptions existed regarding key beliefs about conceptions of giftedness amongst administrators, regular classroom teachers, and gifted education specialists. The authors had hypothesized that no statistically significant differences would exist between groups. The analysis of variance run regarding methods of identifying academically gifted students resulted in *F*-tests at the statistically significant level of  $p < .05$  with regard to standardized tests, teacher nominations, peer nominations, and performance assessments by experts, as shown in Table 5. Differences in beliefs about the use of standardized tests and teacher nominations were statistically significant at the  $p < .01$  level.





**Table 5**  
**Analysis of Variance of Administrator, Gifted Education Specialist, and Regular Classroom Teacher Beliefs Regarding Methods of Identifying Academically Gifted Students ( $N = 411$ )**

	Administrators		Gifted Education Specialists		Regular Classroom Teachers		<i>F</i>	Sig.
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Standardized tests	0.91	0.46	0.86	0.90	1.21	0.71	10.3**	.00
Teacher nominations	0.91	0.71	1.10	0.91	0.70	0.59	9.9**	.00
Parent nominations	1.82	0.80	2.07	2.05	2.03	2.37	0.7	.47
Peer nominations	3.23	2.73	2.55	2.70	2.48	2.08	3.8*	.02
Portfolios of student work	1.05	1.68	0.93	1.48	0.91	1.17	0.3	.67
Performance assessments by experts	0.93	1.53	0.70	0.86	1.20	1.82	3.4*	.03
Observations	1.08	1.65	0.86	1.50	0.73	1.19	2.1	.12

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

The Tukey and Scheffé tests<sup>2</sup> indicated statistically significant differences at the  $p < .01$  level existed between administrators and gifted education specialists, on the one hand, and regular classroom teachers on the other hand regarding standardized tests and between gifted education specialists and regular classroom teachers regarding teacher nominations. Differences at the  $p < .05$  level existed between gifted education specialists and regular classroom teachers and between administrators and regular classroom teachers regarding peer nominations. Finally, differences at the  $p < .05$  level were identified between administrators and regular classroom teachers relating to the use of teacher nominations as a means of identification on the Tukey (the Scheffé showed a difference at slightly above the .05 limit).

Controlled  $p$ -values indicated statistically significant differences existed between groups with regard to the value of standardized tests and teacher nominations as means of identification (see Table 6).





**Table 6**  
**Effect Sizes and Controlled  $p$ -Levels for Significant  $F$ -Tests ( $N = 411$ )**

	Controlled $p$ -level Significance Level of .007	Effect Size $\eta^2$
Standardized tests	.00***	.05
Teacher nominations	.00***	.04

*Note.* \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### Discussion

Understanding the perceptions of administrators, gifted educational specialists, and classroom teachers regarding the identification of gifted children for the receipt of services is essential to those interested in preservice teacher preparation, in-service professional development, or, ultimately, the delivery of services to gifted students (Callahan, 2001; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Duke, 2003; Fullan, 2007). Without a sense of how those individuals responsible for the instruction and administration of gifted programs perceive methods of identification, it is impossible to speak in any useful way about how these methods either help or hinder the identification process in general; their perceptions color and affect their actions with students (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Duke, 2005; Fullan, 2007; Stronge, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003). This study's findings support three conflicting perspectives. First, classroom teachers' views regarding their preferred methods of identification are inconsistent insofar that although teacher nominations are the preferred means of identifying gifted students, they do not highly regard observations and test data, the basis of teacher nominations. Second, the preference by administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers for particular methods of identification indicates possible confusion between the relative importance of general or specific aptitude and good effort and study habits. This is problematic because student manifestation of teacher-pleasing behaviors would thus seem to trump academic talent in some educators' minds as the determining factor relating to the receipt of gifted education services. Third, the







variability of preferred choices between groups of educators indicates that, regardless of method, the traits that characterize a gifted child and the most appropriate means of identifying and assessing these traits are not uniformly clear to those working in the schools.

In many ways, the precocious child's initial identification as gifted is largely in the hands of his or her classroom teacher. It is unlikely that gifted specialists in pull-out settings or administrators with their many responsibilities have much knowledge of, or access to, the work of an unidentified gifted child. The data indicate that regular classroom teachers feel the most important determinant in whether or not a child receives gifted services should be teacher nominations. This preference is understandable and may be likened to other types of behavior that elicit attestations of, "I know it if I see it." This preference however, is at odds with regular classroom teachers' appreciation for observation as a means of identifying gifted children. Whereas teacher nominations was ranked first among their choices, observation was ranked fourth. Admittedly, there is no indication as to why these two interrelated constructs are differently preferred. It is clear that for a regular classroom teacher to nominate a student to receive gifted services, he or she must first observe the student in a variety of settings (i.e., individual work and group work) and, based upon these observations, decide whether or not to issue a nomination. To be sure, the nomination form itself may include a variety of components (see, e.g., Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Rimm, 1984). Failure to trust observation may be based in part upon past negative experiences with such a system (Borland & Wright, 1994; Callahan, 1982; Renzulli & Delcourt, 1986; Sternberg, 2002).

Even in light of these considerations, the schism identified in these data is perplexing. Although teachers may "know it when they see it," the data suggest that what teachers are "seeing" is treated one of two ways. On the one hand, what teachers see *may* be taken seriously as a means of identification. On the other hand, it may be that teacher nominations ask teachers to bracket a student's work within the classroom in an artificial manner. Perhaps the observation protocols teachers have been asked to use seem narrow to them in comparison with ongoing observation that occurs throughout the school year by the classroom teacher. Perhaps observations have been conducted by a gifted education specialist or another individual rather than the





individual regular classroom teacher, which might result in a belief that an outsider is less likely to be accurate, insofar that the observation time span is too narrow to allow accurate data to be accumulated. The main result of this informal phenomenological reduction is a misinterpretation of the numerous contextual factors that some gifted children may be especially good at using to their advantage (Helfer & Schroth, 2007).

Related to this preference for teacher nominations is the expressed lack of preference for parent or peer nominations. Despite research showing the effectiveness of parent or peer nominations (see, e.g., Cramond & Martin, 1987; Gagné, 1983; McCoach & Siegle, 2007), regular classroom teachers rejected such nominations as an effective means of identification. Perhaps some of this trepidation is based on negative experiences—although research has demonstrated the benefits of peer nominations (Cramond & Martin, 1987; Gagné, 1983; McCoach & Siegle, 2007), educators may have experienced, or can imagine, situations wherein peer nominations were ineffective. Nongifted peers, or even gifted peers, may not be aware of the subtle manifestations of giftedness in another (Schunk, 1987). Parent nominations, like teacher nominations, also are based upon observations over time. While many parents of gifted children are excellent resources for the support and development of their child's abilities outside of the school, it may be questionable if the variability of contexts and time are indicative of "genuinely" gifted behaviors. Negative past experiences also may bias educators against parent nominations (Borland, 2005; Callahan, 1982; Renzulli & Delcourt, 1986). Although the data indicate that teachers do not think that parents' observational skills are a useful means of identifying a gifted child, this does not mean that parents are not a useful resource schools can use for the identification of gifted children. In order to best assure that the identification of the gifted child is not based largely upon teacher-pleasing behaviors, school leaders should work to ensure that the views of parents are seen as a valuable resource in the development of a case for a child receiving gifted services.

Conversely, the expressed preference for portfolio and performance assessment by experts may imply an undue emphasis on the student's ability to produce a product. Both the portfolio and the performance assessment assume that a child has completed a task





(or series of tasks; Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005; Wortham, 2008). As used in many classrooms, portfolios emphasize the outcomes of particular projects. This use ignores evidence of how students select, reflect upon, and store their work (Torrance, 1984; Wortham, 2008). School leaders and those involved in teacher preparation must work so that educators base their views of giftedness upon the *what* and not solely upon the *how*. Part, maybe most, of the gifted child's precocity is shown in how he or she works through a problem, and the types of strategies used in the initiation, development, and consummation of a challenging task (Callahan & Miller, 2005; Renzulli, 2003; Sternberg, 2002). Further, portfolios must include information about time. That is, in addition to the solution or consummation of a problem, portfolios should contain information about how long a student spends on solving a problem or developing a solution (Wortham, 2008). Such information could prove a central means for identifying children in need of acceleration. In light of the funding issues facing much of gifted education, such a use of portfolios also would help accentuate the relationship between identification practices and the means of supporting those students identified (Callahan, 2001; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007).

Finally, the variability in preferences between administrators, who prefer performance assessment by experts; gifted education specialists, who prefer standardized tests; and regular classroom teachers, who prefer teacher nominations, might indicate more than a simple difference in professional opinion. Rather, this variability also may suggest those traits that the various groups believe most suggestive of giftedness. For instance, gifted education specialists' preference for standardized tests seems to imply an emphasis on verbal and mathematical skills—traditional academic subject areas. Regular classroom teachers' emphasis on teacher nominations may imply a preference for certain teacher-pleasing behaviors, but this preference also might be seen as indicative of a specific teacher's pedagogical beliefs. Finally, administrators' beliefs regarding the appropriateness of performance assessment by experts may not only serve to further deprofessionalize his or her teaching staff (i.e., someone outside the school knows better) but also is exceptionally outcome based, thus overlooking the necessity of viewing the processes in which the potentially gifted child solves problems and so on. Further, the emphasis of all groups





on authentic assessments at the expense of objective measures indicates a potential misunderstanding of the validity and reliability of standardized instruments that have undeniable benefits in identifying specific traits of gifted children (Brody & Stanley, 2005; Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005; Colangelo et al., 2004). Although such identification instruments may have their limits, they are useful for certain children.

### **Conclusion**

Although many different educator views related to identification exist, knowledge of what these beliefs are can assist those seeking to better serve gifted students. Current beliefs regarding the effectiveness of certain identification policies, processes, and procedures are of value to school decision makers regardless of whether the beliefs align with those identification measures used. Many gifted education programs are based upon distinct curriculum and program models. Each of these models' potential for success hinges, at least in part, upon students' explicit and implicit talents, abilities, and readiness levels. At a minimum, school leaders and other interested parties should desire and demand an understanding on the part of all stakeholders of the connection between identification of giftedness and services delivered as a consequence of that identification. A better understanding by all, including theoreticians and practitioners, of the connection between identification and services might well increase the efficiency, efficacy, and ethics of gifted education programs and models.

Educators guiding teacher preparation programs, school leaders interested in serving gifted children, and teachers and parents of these students must grapple with how best to align identification processes so that all students needing services receive them. This study suggests that differences exist between public school administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers regarding the optimal means of identification. At a minimum, those working with specific administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular classroom teachers should ascertain what those individuals believe about the behaviors and characteristics that indicate giftedness. Optimally,





these beliefs would be aligned with the identification methods used and subsequent services offered. Further research is necessary to consider how these beliefs affect work in the schools and with children. Additional studies also might explore the connection between identification methods and services. In this way, hopefully, all eligible children can be identified to receive services that will maximize their learning potential.

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### **End Notes**

- 1 The numbers of students who are formally identified are very small. For example, of 3,675 very bright boys and girls who met the initial rigorous screening criteria, slightly fewer than 300 had a qualifying score on the SAT (Stanley, 1980).
- 2 Those interested in tables detailing the post hoc tests run may receive them via correspondence with the lead author.

