

Gifted and Talented

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Definition

A shift in ideology is moving education towards an inclusive revisioning of gifted and talented that is cognizant of context and racial bias, and replacing misconceptions with enrichment methods based on empirical data and authentic implementations. Inclusive models for giftedness, founded on research-based methods, have been described by Lo et al's (2018) TCAD process, Ericsson's (1993) The Role of Deliberate Practice and Renzulli's (2000) Schoolwide Enrichment Method. Lo et al's proposed redefinition is, "Giftedness is a function of context, personal qualities and development... relevant to all individuals and outlined as an inclusive guiding framework. Giftedness is process-based rather than person-based and focuses on learning paths that lead to excellence for all rather than on who is deemed to need special education by virtue of their score on a test of intelligence."

The National Association for Gifted Children states that there are no nation or state-wide standards for gifted and talented and that each school district determines which and how many students are serviced. None of the state level definitions listed mention context and process, and very few school districts have made the revision. The Princeton School District (Princeton) and New York PS 9 (Richards, 2020) are examples of public schools that have moved to fully inclusive models. New Jersey continues to define gifted and talented students as "those who possess or demonstrate high levels of ability in one or more content areas when compared to their chronological peers in the local school district and who require modifications of their educational program if they are to achieve in accordance with their capabilities."

Incidence

Gargiulo states that most educators believe that approximately 3 to 5% of the school age population is gifted. However, the range is in actuality much broader. Models estimate talent pools at the top 1.5% (Richards, 2020), 5% (NAGC), 15 to 20% (Renzulli), 20% (Ericsson), and Lo et al redefines giftedness at 100% inclusion. Renzulli's (2000) study proved that 20% of all students were able to succeed in a gifted program, and that the top 5% did not achieve any better than the top 20%. NAGC identifies giftedness as a talent pool of the top 5%. The New York City's education department identifies giftedness as the top 1.5% (Richards, 2020).

Etiology

The etiology of "giftedness" is historically misunderstood. From its Greek and Roman associations with mythology and divinity, to late-19th century misconceptions of its linkage to birthright and heredity etiology (Galton, 1869, as cited in Lo, 2018), to its becoming a meritocratic attribute that is psychometrically measured (e.g. the Stanford-Binet Measurement Scales), we see that there are historic reasons behind the misconceptions. The measures are not research-based, the cut-off is subjective and the learner's context is ignored. Terman (1877-1956), considered the father of giftedness, found that gifted individuals were more likely to have immediate family members identified as also gifted, and concluded that giftedness must be transmitted from parent to child (Vialle, 1994). It is this simplicity of hereditary explanation that is attractive to the public (Ericsson, 1993) but theoreticians in behavioral genetics (Plomin, DeFries, & McClearn, 1990 as cited in Ericsson) say it is extremely challenging to prove due to the interactions between context and genes that occur during the development of talent. Gifted and talented comes from a learner's context, deliberate practice, access to strong mentors and attention to supporting skillsets (e.g. memory) (Ericsson, 1993.)

Characteristics

Gargiulo (Gargiulo, 2018) refers to a set of characteristics of gifted behavior as four types. The general type includes high levels of abstract thought, adaptation to novel situations, and rapid retrieval of information. Specific ability types include application of ability, capacity to sort out relevant data and capacity to use knowledge and strategy to solve a problem. Task commitment types include capacity for high levels of interest, hard work and determination, self-confidence and setting high standards. Creativity types include fluency of thought, open to new experiences, curiosity, willing to take risks and sensitivity to aesthetics.

Current research finds that giftedness is not about characteristics of the individual but about their environment, personal qualities and the development opportunities available to them. It is a process. It is the demystifying of the child's environment and personal challenges and the exposure to the child of how others have attained talent in the face of adversity and the talent opportunities that exist in their environment and how they can set their own talent path. Renzulli, when describing the characteristics of talent refers to what he calls "the total talent portfolio." This process is designed to illuminate the very best characteristics that we know about each student and what teachers and parents can do to capitalize on a student's talents.

Educational Implications

Considering this new definition of gifted and talented, we see that the educational implications impact a much broader set of students than before considered. Differentiation and enrichment are needed to reach all students, and that student assessments are needed to capture what the school must add to their curriculum to support a gifted and talented path for most students. More information about the types of services provided are described in the section on Intervention below.

Psychological Implications

Two important films that help surface the psychological implications that can result from the use of the term “Gifted and Talented” are “Rethinking Giftedness” (Rethinking Giftedness Film) and a multi-year documentary from Killas (2019) tracking the lives of seven students labelled gifted as they go through elementary gifted programs and graduate and attend college.

In “Rethinking Giftedness”, at first the “gifted” label makes the child feel special as it was identified as something that came from within the child, not something the child had to work at. The reality these children found was that they needed to always be working at what they were doing because they felt there was no room for error. Children labelled gifted may feel they are not supposed to ask questions or ask for help, or they may not be given adequate structure, because they are expected to know the answers or how to find them. The child may try to put a front up and act like the work is effortless. When faced with a struggle, the child may feel that their giftedness is “running out” or that they are “not a gifted after all and no longer belong.”

In Killas’ (2019) writings on the documentary “SuperKids” we learn that accelerated programs bring with it heavy testing and homework loads that are very stressful on these children and are a source of stigma of failing. Where the programs are too lax, lacking in direction or demands, assuming the child is smart and should be given freedom, the child may wind up without crucial study and organizational skills to handle the work. Children placed in gifted programs need a support network to handle the pressures, labels and social isolation and age-inappropriateness that can go along with being placed in a gifted and talented program. These children can have feelings of regret when their friends are told they are not gifted but they are, and often recognize themselves the unfairness of the situation. Landing in a gifted program and not standing up to the pressure to succeed can be devastating to their self-esteem and take

years to find themselves again with some even dropping out of college. These children are found to be placed in situations of expected high maturity and have to make career-defining life choices at perhaps too young an age to understand where their interests are. On looking back, these students may regret not having been involved in hobbies and extra-curriculars.

Interventions

There are two types of gifted programs highlighted by Killas et al's (2019) observations, The first are accelerated programs, which compress the materials, place heavier testing and homework load, increase the teaching quality and greatly increase the pace. The second are programs that are self-directed which put focus on autonomy and self-directed learning.

Renzulli (2000) sees the intervention possibilities differently and his work integrates enrichment programs with a schools existing curriculum using a "School-wide Enrichment Model." Curriculum compression is used to create time for the added programs. An assessment is used to ascertain students' interests, learning styles and strengths. The information is not for admittance to the pool, but for programming purposes, to expand learning styles and adjust programming at the school to meet the interests of the children. Type I Enrichment provides general exploratory experiences and activities to get the learner involved with areas not in the regular curriculum. Type II Enrichment provides process-oriented activities that are designed to develop supporting skillsets (e.g. creative thinking, problem solving and study skills.) Type III enrichment is typically for students that are ready to become an actual investigator of a real problem in a given field of interest. These activities are typically self-selected and for those students that are able and have the interest, commitment and willingness to pursue the study in a highly professional fashion.

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