

An Examination of the Giftedness Construct*

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The giftedness construct has implications for (a) procedures for selecting "gifted" learners, (b) program goals and curricula, and (c) labelling of students. Although definitions of the construct vary in applied and research settings, an alternative definition may be derived from theory, from selection instruments, and/or from empirical observation.

Le construit de douance a des implications au niveau a) des méthodes de sélection des élèves doués, b) des buts des programmes et c) de la catégorisation des élèves. Bien que la définition du construit varie suivant les approches pratiques et fondamentales, une autre définition peut être dérivée de la théorie, du choix des instruments ou de l'observation empirique.

Twenty-eight years ago, Getzels and Jackson (1958) raised questions about the definition of the giftedness construct. They showed that the construct was usually defined in terms of scores on an intelligence test: "'Giftedness' as related to children has most frequently been defined as a score on an intelligence test, and typically the study of the so-called gifted child has been equated with the study of the single IQ variable" (Getzels & Jackson, 1958, p. 75). This definition was narrow both in cognitive terms and in the IQ test's choice of intellectual functions to evaluate. With the passage of time, the giftedness construct acquired meanings, value associations, and expectations that had very little to do with the original narrow purposes of cognitive assessment.

Getzels and Jackson (1958) then derived alternative constructs of giftedness from various starting points. These constructs had very different implications for the kinds of performance to be expected of the child and, hence, for kinds of programming. They called for an expanded definition of the giftedness construct. On another reading, they pleaded for more attention to the construct and for more precision in its definition.

Since 1958, expanded efforts to identify gifted children, more numerous

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special educational programs for gifted pupils, and a great proliferation of research studies of the gifted child, show how widely the giftedness construct is in use. It is worthwhile to ask if we have made much progress over the past 28 years in defining the construct.

This issue of definition is important, first, because of the close link between the definition of the giftedness construct and the processes of identifying and selecting gifted pupils (Birch, 1984; Feldhusen, Asher, & Hoover, 1984; Rosenfield, 1983; Treffinger, 1984). Very different selection procedures are involved where giftedness is defined solely in terms of cognitive competencies rather than being broadly conceptualized to include cognitive and noncognitive competencies. Second, there is a close link between definitions of the giftedness construct and decisions about program goals and procedures (Birch, 1984; Feldhusen, 1982; Fox, 1981; Kirschenbaum, 1983; Treffinger, 1984). For example, the use of a definition of giftedness based on a conception of more-or-less stable cognitive skills implies a very different kind of educational program than does a conception based on some notion of dynamic creative potentialities (Feldman & Benjamin, 1986; Renzulli, 1984, 1986). Finally, most applications of the construct entail an explicit labelling process. Some children are labelled "gifted" or "talented" or "exceptional"—and other children are, in effect, labelled "not gifted," "not talented," and so on. Typically, designated children are placed in a special program. Even more important, a whole set of expectations are thereby induced in teachers, parents and the child (Cornell, 1983; Ford, 1978; Sapon-Shevin, 1984, 1986). These expectations may have a great impact on the child. It becomes very important to understand the nature of the construct from which the label and the expectations derive. As Messick (1980) has argued, "In choosing a construct label, we should strive for consistency between the trait and evaluative implications of the name, attempting to capture as closely as possible the essence of the construct's theoretical import . . . in terms reflective of its salient value connotations" (p. 1022). We have a good idea of the decisions and expectations that follow from the label "gifted."¹ The nature of the construct on which that label is based is not always so clear.

VARIABILITY IN DEFINITIONS

We often act as though giftedness were a unitary and universally accepted construct. We talk of *the* gifted child in *the* gifted program. This view is very much in error. There are many giftedness constructs, and there are several dimensions on which the constructs differ (Fox, 1981; Gallagher & Courtright, 1986; Jackson & Butterfield, 1986; Treffinger, Pyrry, Hawk, & Houseman, 1979). I won't attempt to survey all definitions in the literature, but will review the major dimensions on which they differ, and in so doing illustrate some their variety.

Breadth of the Construct

The first dimension is the breadth of qualities or traits represented in the construct's definition. At one extreme are definitions of the construct under a single characteristic such as mathematical aptitude (e.g., George, 1974) or creativity (e.g., Torrance, 1965). At the other extreme are complex, multivariate definitions that include a broad range of traits or qualities. An example of the latter is Hagen's (1980) definition in 15 cognitive dimensions (e.g., use of quantitative expressions and quantitative reasoning), academic skills (e.g., absorption in intellectual tasks), and personality characteristics (e.g., persistence on uncompleted tasks). Although the recent trend is toward multivariate rather than univariate definitions (Feldhusen, 1986; Renzulli, 1978, 1984, 1986; Rosenfield, 1983; Tannenbaum, 1983), there is little consistency in educational practice or in the research literature.

Content of the Definition

The qualities mentioned in the definitions provide a second dimension of variability. The traditional emphasis on cognitive capacities, and general dependence on IQ tests as selection instruments have encouraged definition by IQ tests. In contrast, some definitions of the construct incorporate motivational, personality, or attitudinal variables instead of or in addition to cognitive variables. An example is Renzulli's (1978, 1984, 1986) definition of a person's likelihood to be gifted, based on dimensions of (a) academic abilities, (b) task commitment and (c) creativity. An even broader range of variables is included in the Hagen (1980) definition. Canadian (Borthwick, Dow, Levesque, & Banks, 1980), American (Alvino, McDonnell, & Richert, 1981; Karnes & Collins, 1981) and United Kingdom (Freeman, 1979) surveys document the great variability giftedness constructs across assessment settings.

Level of Exceptionality

A third dimension of variability concerns the level of exceptionality or excellence represented in the construct. This dimension is largely defined by selection models. Selection of the gifted learner may require scores above 130 on the WISC-R or may depend on a teacher's ranking of creativity. These rules have implications for the underlying construct and for programming (Rosenfield, 1983; Sapon-Shevin, 1986). A 90th percentile cut-off on the WISC-R rather than an 80th implies a very different conceptualization of giftedness. Similarly, teachers who attach the label "gifted" to all children denoted above-average in potential, and not just to pupils having the highest potential, are referring to a particular construct.

Static vs. Dynamic Focus

A fourth dimension is the extent to which the conceptualization incorporates a static rather than a dynamic view of its characteristics. On the one hand, narrowly cognitive definitions derived from IQ test performance conceptualize giftedness as a relatively static set of cognitive-academic skills. This assumes we are dealing with a “bright child” who will be bright for all time and under all circumstances. At the other extreme are conceptualizations of giftedness that entail a set of potentialities that may or may not be developed, depending on the circumstances. While the former, static view is the traditional one, there is strong evidence for a shift away from that position: “It would also be desirable to reconceptualize the identification process and move away from the hereditary based concept of a general, fixed, stable, permanent giftedness . . . and attend to the identification of those youth who are not using or developing the full potential of their superior talent or ability” (Feldhusen et al., 1984, p. 150).²

Precision of the Definition

A fifth dimension of variability is the precision of the construct’s definition. Ideally the elements of the construct are explicitly stated, linked to specific measuring operations, with data on the validity of the construct (Messick, 1980, 1981; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976).

In practice we often encounter global, vaguely defined constructs. The definition of the United States Department of Education (Marland, 1972), and the definitions of exceptionality and giftedness formulated by the Ontario Legislature and the Ontario Ministry of Education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1984a, 1984b), are good examples. The *Ontario Education Act* defines an exceptional pupil as “a pupil whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities are such that he is considered to need placement in a special education program.” The Ministry of Education later defined giftedness as “an unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1984a, p. 17). The problem is that many of the concepts in the definitions—communicational exceptionalities, multiple exceptionalities, advanced general intellectual ability—remain largely undefined. Unfortunately, this typical in applied settings.

At the other extreme of the precision continuum are definitions of the construct in purely operational terms—as, for instance, where giftedness potential is treated as an exceptionally high level of aptitude in a particular academic area, and operationally defined by performance on, say, a test of

mathematics achievement. The construct may be said to be explicitly defined in these cases, but with two cautions: first, the linking of the construct definition to specific measuring instruments usually means we are confined to a restrictive rather than a broad definition of giftedness (Renzulli, 1978; Rosenfield, 1983); second, there is a strong tendency to "go beyond" the terms of the operational definitions and to associate surplus meanings with the underlying constructs (Messick, 1980, 1981). In the present case the giftedness construct or "gifted" label comes to acquire meanings far beyond the measuring instruments from which they originally derived.

Summary

There is considerable variability in the definition of the giftedness construct in practical and research settings. Variability in definition is not in itself undesirable. Indeed, definitions of the giftedness construct should flow from assumptions and values that respect the needs of children and that lead to the most effective programming to meet those needs. These assumptions and values are likely to vary from one setting to another, and, hence, alternative formulations of the giftedness construct are inevitable. There is, however, one point on which there can be no compromise: it is essential in all cases that the terms of the construct be made as explicit as possible. If children are to be labeled "gifted," it is essential to understand what that label denotes.

SOURCES OF THE GIFTEDNESS CONSTRUCT

The giftedness construct has three sources: theory, selection instruments, and empirical generalization. In any applied situation, the construct may derive from more than one source.

Derivations from Theory

In some cases the giftedness construct is derived from a psychological or educational theory. One example is the definition Meeker (1969) and others developed from Guilford's (1967) Structure-of-Intellect Model. This definition is based on 12 of the 120 factors represented in that model, and includes various domains of cognitive and academic skill. A second example is Sternberg's (1986) recent work on a triarchic theory of giftedness. The theory incorporates propositions on cognitive processes, describes patterns of their utilization, and ends with a definition.

Definitions of the giftedness construct should be practically, and certainly logically derivable from psychological or educational theory. In many

applied settings, however, the theory is poorly articulated and/or the definition of the construct inadequately linked to theory (Gallagher, 1979; Hagen, 1980; Rosenfield, 1983). Few seek to justify their definitions on theoretical or philosophic grounds.

Derivations From Selection Instruments

The giftedness construct is occasionally derived from the measuring instruments used to identify gifted pupils. The construct is defined as a score above 130 on the WISC-R or as the result of some complex selection procedure based, for example, on a group IQ test score, a teacher nomination, and the judgment of a committee of experts. There is nothing inherently wrong with this practice as long as the operational definition is made explicit and is consistent with relevant theoretical or value criteria.

Without an explication of constructs implied by selection procedures, children are identified as gifted on the basis of test scores or teacher nominations or expert judgment, but without consideration of traits, aptitudes or behaviours detected by the instruments. This is clearly unsatisfactory: intelligent decisions about programming can only be made when the characteristics of children involved are known. Further, when we are engaged in this kind of labelling, we must be able to defend it concretely.

It is not always possible to derive an explicit construct from the measuring instrument. Consider first the case where IQ test scores are used as the basis for identification. What constellation of traits, aptitudes and behaviours is represented by scores above 120 on the Stanford-Binet? The question is impossible to answer at the moment (Neisser, 1979; Birch, 1984; Harrington, 1982; Sternberg, 1982). Analogously, when teachers are asked to rate and nominate gifted pupils, they are usually given such vague instructions and criteria that their judgments are hopelessly ambiguous (Hoge & Cudmore, in press). If there is such uncertainty in the meaning of scores from individual selection instruments, it is easy to imagine that even greater ambiguity would characterize indices from the complex selection devices now in use.

Finally, where there is a discrepancy between the formal or official definition of the construct, and the operational definition provided by the selection instruments, still more problems arise. We often encounter cases where a formal definition of the giftedness construct incorporates a broad range of cognitive, motivational and personality characteristics, yet gifted pupils are identified solely by IQ test performance. This shows Messick's (1981) "model slippage" or "model compounding," a discrepancy between the theoretical model assumed to be operating in the selection situation and the actual model of the selection instrument.

Empirical Derivations of the Giftedness Construct

A third approach to the derivation of the giftedness construct is based on empirical procedures.

Of two most common empirical strategies, the first contrasts the cognitive, motivational or personality attributes of groups of gifted and nongifted children. Jackson and Butterfield (1986) show that this strategy is popular, particularly in identifying cognitive processes in the gifted. This research exhibits two problems: there is inconsistency in the definition and measurement of the child attribute variables, and more serious, there are inconsistencies and inadequacies in how criterion groups of gifted and nongifted persons are formed.

A second strategy requires systematic collection and analysis of data on the attributes of gifted children from teachers and other professionals. Although not extensive, several recent studies show the strategy's value. Kornblau (1982) and Murphy, Jenkins-Friedman and Tollefson (1984) collected perceptual and attitudinal data from teachers on the concept of the "ideal" pupil.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Need for Explicit Definitions

In summary, the terms of the giftedness construct should be explicitly stated whenever it is employed. Because we take concrete decisions on the basis of the construct, and of explicit labelling, we must present a clear statement of the traits, aptitudes and/or behaviours on which we base both decisions and labels.

The Need for a Theory-Value Base

The construct should be derived from some coherent theory or set of values that (a) respects the needs of children and (b) leads to effective programming. That is, it ought to be formally justified.

Three difficulties stand in the way of such justification. First, the theoretical and empirical literature in psychology and education provides numerous and often conflicting advice. We have nonetheless to use the literature so that decisions about the construct are made knowledgeably. Some good definitions of giftedness potential (Feldman & Benjamin, 1986; Hagen, 1980; Renzulli, 1984, 1986; Tuttle & Becker, 1980) will help practitioners.

Second, the construct is not sharply enough defined. Most definitions emphasize exceptionality. An alternative and more desirable approach derives the construct from some comprehensive model of the needs of all

pupils (Birch, 1984; Renzulli, 1984, 1986; Treffinger, 1984). This permits more flexibility in programming than traditional notions of the "gifted." It responds to the charge of "elitism" so often advanced against special treatment of gifted children (Sapon-Shevin, 1986). The principle is well illustrated in Renzulli's (1984, 1986) Revolving Door System of Gifted Education in which programming for exceptionality is provided to all children. It also embodied in the Ontario Ministry of Education's educational programming based on a comprehensive model of pupil needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1984a, 1984b, 1985).

Third, in applied settings there is often only a very weak link between the giftedness construct and programming for gifted learners (Birch, 1984; Feldhusen et al., 1984; Hagen, 1980; Tuttle & Becker, 1980). In some cases separate units of the school administration are responsible for identification/selection and for programming. This is clearly unsatisfactory: derivations of the giftedness construct must be made in terms of program goals and procedures.

Deriving the Selection Model from the Giftedness Construct

Decisions about selection instruments and selection procedures should follow from the construct rather than the reverse. Thus, we should first make decisions about the traits, aptitudes and behaviours we wish to include in the construct, and then search out the best available instruments for assessing those characteristics. This is not easy to do in light of the fallibility of our measuring instruments, but the consequences of reversing the procedure are unacceptable.

The Triad/Revolving Door System of Renzulli (1984, 1986), the GIFT program developed by Rimm (1976, 1984) and the Talent Search Project (Fox, 1981; George, 1979; Keating, 1976) developed rational selection strategies from giftedness constructs.

Need for Empirical Validation

The validity of the giftedness construct and of selection instruments employed in connection with the construct require constant evaluation.

One evaluation strategy requires that giftedness constructs be tested against expert opinion on the reasonable assumption that teachers and other professionals, particularly those with extensive educational experience, can provide us with valid and useful information about pupils (Hoge, 1983, 1984; Hoge & Butcher, 1984; Hoge & Cudmore, in press).

Another strategy assesses the predictive validity of the giftedness construct and associated measuring instruments according to the criterion of students'

success in programs for the gifted (Hoge & Cudmore, in press; Siegler & Katovsky, 1986). There are of course problems in the conduct of such longitudinal research and in nominating a success criterion. Nevertheless, most uses of the giftedness construct assume that it is linked to success in a program for the gifted, and the absence of data on this assumption is a serious matter.

Summary

Consideration of these four conditions does not constitute a mere academic exercise. Some children in our schools are labelled "gifted" and an even larger number "not gifted." These labels have far-reaching implications for the children both in school and out. It is imperative that rules be followed in making such judgments.

NOTES

¹ Sapon-Shevin (1986) and Tannenbaum (1983) have provided full discussions of the political implications of alternative definitions of the giftedness construct.

² A similar argument has been presented by Gallagher and Courtright (1986), Renzulli (1984, 1986), and Treffinger (1984).

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Das Begabungs-Konstrukt wirkt sich a) auf Auswahlverfahren für "begabte" Lernende, b) auf Programmziele und Lehrpläne und c) auf die Klassifizierung von

Schülern aus. Obwohl die Definitionen des Konstrukts im Anwendungs- und Forschungsrahmen variieren, kann eine alternative Definition aus der Theorie, aus Selektionsmitteln und/oder aus empirischer Beobachtung abgeleitet werden.

La educación de niños excepcionales abraza: a) los procedimientos en la selección de niños excepcionales; b) el objeto de los programas educacionales y los planos de estudios; c) la designación de los estudiantes. Aunque el concepto de Excepcionalidad puede variar según el contexto científico, la selección de los factores y/o la observación empírica.

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