

Characteristics of Gifted and Talented Students

It is important to recognise that the gifted and talented are not a homogeneous group and that every student possesses a unique blend of traits. However, when we look at gifted and talented students as a group, we can see clusters of common characteristics. Some students show evidence of these characteristics across a number of areas, while in others such evidence may be confined to a single endeavour. In the more highly gifted, these traits may be much more marked or intense.

With many gifted and talented students, the behaviours indicating their exceptional ability may not be readily observable. Some students may not have been provided with experiences in the areas of their giftedness or may not have had opportunities to demonstrate their ability. Others, for a variety of reasons, may be underachieving or deliberately hiding their giftedness. Some gifted and talented students may have learning difficulties that mask their real ability.

Almost every text ever written on the subject of giftedness contains a list of characteristics associated with the concept. As definitions of giftedness have broadened, so too have the categories of characteristics. Schools should view the list below (McAlpine and Reid, 1996) as a starting point in this area. Each school must develop a set of characteristics that reflects its own definition of, and approach to, the concept of giftedness and talent.

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Note that no one gifted student is likely to possess all the following characteristics. It would be possible for a student to show clear evidence of all, or nearly all, the behaviours in one category but few in another.

Learning Characteristics

- Displays logical and analytical thinking
- Is quick to see patterns and relationships
- Masters information quickly
- Strives for accurate and valid solutions to problems
- Easily grasps underlying principles
- Likes intellectual challenge
- Jumps stages in learning
- Seeks to redefine problems, pose ideas, and formulate hypotheses
- Finds as well as solves problems
- Reasons things out for her- or himself
- Formulates and supports ideas with evidence
- Can recall a wide range of knowledge
- Independently seeks to discover the why and how of things

Creative Thinking Characteristics

- Produces original ideas
- Displays intellectual playfulness, imagination, and fantasy
- Creates original texts or invents things
- Has a keen sense of humour and sees humour in the unusual
- Generates unusual insights
- Enjoys speculation and thinking about the future
- Demonstrates awareness of aesthetic qualities
- Is not afraid to be different
- Generates a large number of ideas
- Is prepared to experiment with novel ideas and risk being wrong
- Seeks unusual rather than conventional relationships

Motivational Characteristics

- Strives for high standards of personal achievement
- Is self-directed
- Is highly self-motivated and sets personal goals
- Is persistent in seeing tasks to completion
- Becomes committed to and absorbed in tasks
- Tends to be self-critical and evaluative
- Is reliable
- Prefers to work independently

Social Leadership Characteristics

- Takes the initiative in social situations
- Is popular with peers
- Communicates well with others
- Actively seeks leadership in social situations
- Shows ability to inspire a group to meet goals
- Persuades a group to adopt ideas or methods
- Is self-confident
- Is adaptable and flexible in new situations
- Actively seeks leadership in sporting activities
- Is socially mature
- Is willing to take responsibility
- Synthesises ideas from group members to formulate a plan of action

Self-determination Characteristics

- Is sceptical of authoritarian pronouncements
- Questions arbitrary decisions
- Pushes teachers and adults for explanations
- Displays a precocious interest in “adult” problems
- Is reluctant to practice skills already mastered
- Is easily bored with routine tasks
- Expresses ideas, preferences, and opinions forthrightly
- Relates well to older children and adults and often prefers their company
- Asks searching questions

As pointed out in the last chapter, cultures vary in the way they define giftedness and talent. This affects the characteristics seen as indicating exceptional ability. Some multicategorical approaches to defining giftedness and talent are inclusive and flexible enough to include many culturally specific abilities. However, as Bevan-Brown (1996) notes, the important difference may exist in the *interpretation* of a special ability. For example, Māori value three different styles of leadership: the “up front” style, similar to that valued by Pākehā; leadership-by-example; and behind the scenes leadership. This illustrates the importance of schools consulting with their community when developing sets of characteristics to guide identification.

Seeing Beyond the Positive

Most of the behaviours listed above are essentially positive in nature. However, it is also very important to examine whether behaviours that may be considered much less acceptable reflect signs of giftedness. Sometimes these may be directly related to a special ability, for example:

- A student who can recall a wide range of knowledge may dominate class discussions.
- A student who displays intellectual playfulness, imagination, and fantasy may be constantly inattentive or off-task.
- A student who strives for accurate and valid solutions to problems may repeatedly correct other students and the teacher.

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- A student who has a keen sense of humour and sees humour in the unusual may use it inappropriately to poke fun at others.
- A student who strives for high standards of personal achievement may avoid tasks where there is a risk that this may not be attained.
- A student who prefers to work independently may actively resist working with others.

Often, how a teacher perceives the behaviour of a gifted student reflects how much he or she understands gifted students, and empathises with them. For example, some teachers celebrate the gifted student's tendency to generate unusual insights; others will find such behaviour disruptive. Some teachers may welcome a gifted student's questioning of arbitrary decisions; others will perceive it as disrespectful.

Sometimes less acceptable behaviour may be an expression of frustration. Very often, a student who achieves quick mastery of information, easily grasps underlying principles, likes intellectual challenge, and jumps stages in learning becomes extremely bored and frustrated when required to work on the same programme and at the same speed as the rest of the class. This student may become disruptive, act as a "class clown", or develop a total lack of interest in schoolwork.



Subtypes of Giftedness

Betts and Neihart (1988) suggest that gifted and talented students can be grouped into six categories, which are summarised below. These profiles are especially useful in identifying older gifted and talented students whose special abilities are less likely to be evidenced in their schoolwork.

1. The **Successful** Gifted

These students achieve highly at school and are the group most likely to be identified as gifted and talented. They are conforming, eager for the approval of others, and perfectionistic. They lack autonomy and assertiveness and avoid taking risks.

2. The **Challenging** Gifted

These students are highly creative but frustrated, bored, questioning, and sometimes rebellious. They do not conform to the school system and often challenge school rules and conventions.

3. The **Underground** Gifted

These students deny their abilities in order to fit in. They may be insecure, shy, and quiet, avoid taking risks, and resist challenges. Many are never identified as gifted.

4. The **Dropout** Gifted

These students are resentful and angry because they feel that the system has failed to meet their needs. They are often perceived as “rebellious loners” and can be disruptive or withdrawn. They fail to complete schoolwork, and their levels of achievement fall well below their ability.

5. The **Double-labelled** Gifted

These students are gifted but also have a physical or sensory disability or a learning difficulty. Often their giftedness goes unrecognised because people fail to see past their disability. They can become angry and frustrated and may feel powerless.

6. The **Autonomous** Gifted

These students are confident, independent, and self-directed. They are intrinsically motivated and willing to take risks. They set goals for themselves and take responsibility for their own learning.

Bevan-Brown (1999) suggests that a seventh profile could be added to this list:

7. The **Culturally Diverse** Gifted

These are students who are not identified as having exceptional ability. Some may go unrecognised because their performance generally is affected by low self-esteem and low teacher expectations. Their gifts and talents may not be recognised or valued within their school, or the values and behaviours of their culture may discourage them from displaying their abilities.

The consensus of opinion is that, as levels of giftedness increase, so does the need for appropriate support in the emotional and social areas.

Emotional and Social Development

Many gifted and talented students, probably the majority, give little indication that their emotional and social development is anything but normal. Some of this group may experience considerable difficulties in these areas, but they use their exceptional ability to skilfully disguise their struggles. In other gifted students, these issues are far more obvious.

In the past, educating gifted and talented students has been dominated by concerns about their learning. More recently, attention has been paid to aspects of their emotional and social development. The consensus of opinion is that, as levels of giftedness increase, so does the need for appropriate support in the emotional and social areas. It is important to recognise that the emotional and social development of these children is not necessarily problematic on its own but that it can become problematic if they find themselves out of step with their peers.

One way of identifying the emotional and social issues confronting gifted and talented students is to look at what they say about themselves. The following "eight great gripes of gifted kids" align closely with the areas of vulnerability most frequently described in the research (Schmitz and Galbraith, 1991).

- No one explains what being gifted is all about – it's kept a secret.
- Friends who understand us are few and far between.
- We feel different.
- School is too easy, too boring.
- We feel overwhelmed by the number of things we can do in life.
- Parents, teachers, and friends expect us to be perfect all the time.
- Kids often tease us about being smart.
- We worry about world problems and feel helpless to do anything about them.

Self-definition

Gifted and talented students frequently place unrealistically high expectations on themselves, and in some instances, others have unrealistically high expectations of them. This can lead to gifted students feeling they have little control over their lives. They may avoid tasks where high achievement is not guaranteed, or they may retreat to a world of fantasy.

Gifted and talented students often have strong academic self-concepts, but their social self-concepts are sometimes poor. Research indicates that gifted students have mixed feelings towards their giftedness. While gifted students may be positive about being labelled gifted, they sometimes feel their peers and teachers have negative views of them.

Uneven Development and Alienation

The intellectual, emotional, and physical development of gifted and talented students is often uneven. This "asynchronous" development means that their experiences are measurably different from those of their peers, which may lead to feelings of not fitting in. These feelings can become particularly acute in early adolescence, and gifted and talented students at this stage may mask their abilities in order to gain acceptance.

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Perfectionism

Perfectionism can be described as a compulsive need to achieve and be the very best. Gifted and talented students who achieve highly will naturally attract positive feedback from parents and teachers. Some students become dependent on this affirmation for their self-definition. It is not uncommon for parents, teachers, and peers to unwittingly create an environment where the gifted student is expected to be perfect.

Perfectionists will often avoid experiences that pose a risk of failure. Perfectionism may be accompanied by intense reactions to criticism, consistent failure to complete tasks, extreme anxiety in test situations, low risk-taking, nervous disorders, ulcers, and eating difficulties. This is called disabling perfectionism.

However, perfectionism can be a positive quality that provides the impetus for achieving excellence. This is termed enabling perfectionism.

Adult Expectations and Role Conflicts

It is not unusual for gifted and talented students to feel that the expectations of them are unrealistic. Often such expectations occur because these students display a level of maturity beyond their chronological age. They also receive mixed messages from adults and peers about academic achievement and social behaviour. Some gifted and talented students may hide their giftedness in order to obtain peer acceptance. This tension between achievement and acceptance is particularly strong for gifted and talented girls in early- to mid-adolescence.

Sensitivity

Many exceptionally gifted and creatively gifted individuals possess high levels of emotional sensitivity, or what Dabrowski (1967, 1972) refers to as emotional "overexcitability". Piechowski (1997) refers to this as "emotional giftedness", and reports that such people demonstrate a heightened awareness of the needs of others, a strong sense of right and wrong, and a sensitivity to social injustices. They are often independent thinkers, non-conformist, and self-directed. In the classroom, they may have a preoccupation with social, moral, and ethical issues and often act on their convictions in these areas. They may resist tasks that they perceive as insignificant or irrelevant.

Intensely sensitive students may experience soaring highs and dark lows. During the high periods, they may experience great joy, energy, and stimulation. During the low periods, they may become shy, anxious, and fearful. They may have feelings of helplessness and despair as they contemplate the discrepancy between the real and the ideal -- the way one is and the way one "should be".

Overexcitabilities may include rapid speech, marked excitation, intense physical activity, pressure for action, compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions, wanting to be in the limelight, mixing truth and fiction, and extremes of emotion.

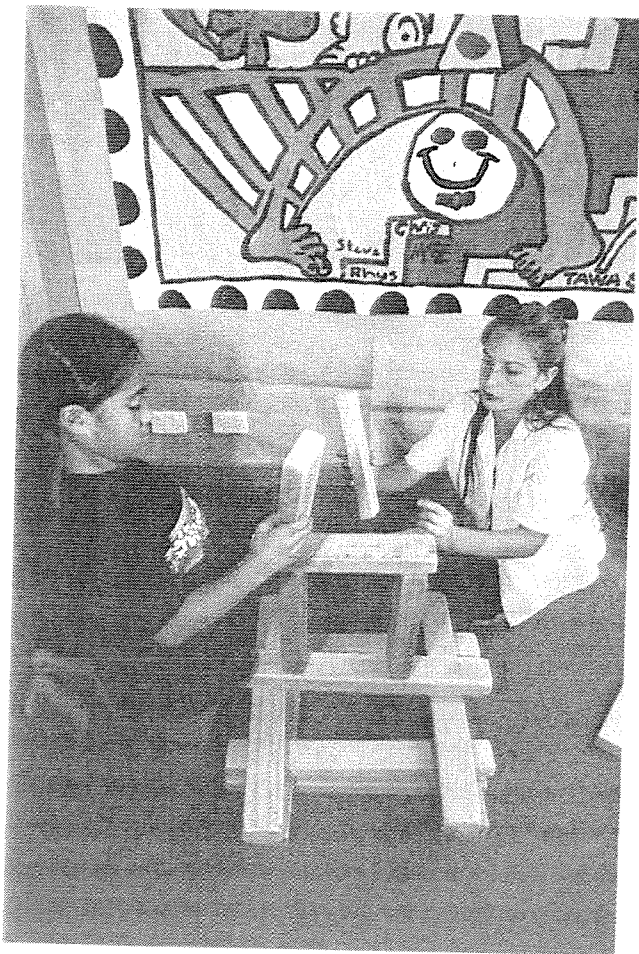
Giftedness and ADHD

Dabrowski's theory (1967) is very useful for understanding the emotional development of gifted individuals. He observes that giftedness is frequently marked by a set of primary intensities that he calls overexcitabilities. These overexcitabilities may include rapid speech, marked excitation, intense physical activity, pressure for action, compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions, wanting to be in the limelight, mixing truth and fiction, and extremes of emotion. It has been pointed out that these characteristics run very close to those associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). There is some concern overseas that significant numbers of gifted and talented students are being misdiagnosed as having ADHD. Separating the two is not an easy task.

Underachievement

Much has been written about the underachievement of gifted and talented students. There is almost universal agreement that a high proportion of them fail to achieve to the level of their ability.

The discrepancy between ability and achievement in many gifted and talented students is disturbingly large. It is important to identify these students and to provide support to help them reverse such patterns of low achievement.



Some profiles of underachieving gifted students are:

- the rebel, who will not or cannot see the value of many classroom tasks;
- the conformist, who opts for mediocrity so as not to appear different;
- the perfectionist, whose self-esteem depends on achievement, who has a fear of failure, and who avoids taking risks;
- the struggling student, who progresses through the early years of school with ease but cannot cope with a more challenging curriculum;
- the victim, who takes little responsibility for his or her learning and who blames lack of success on others or the system;
- the distracted learner, whose personal problems or responsibilities make it difficult to give priority to schoolwork;
- the bored student who may be lacking challenge;
- the complacent learner, who is happy with his or her own performance even though the expectations of parents and teachers are much higher;
- the single-sided achiever, who chooses to achieve in selected endeavours.

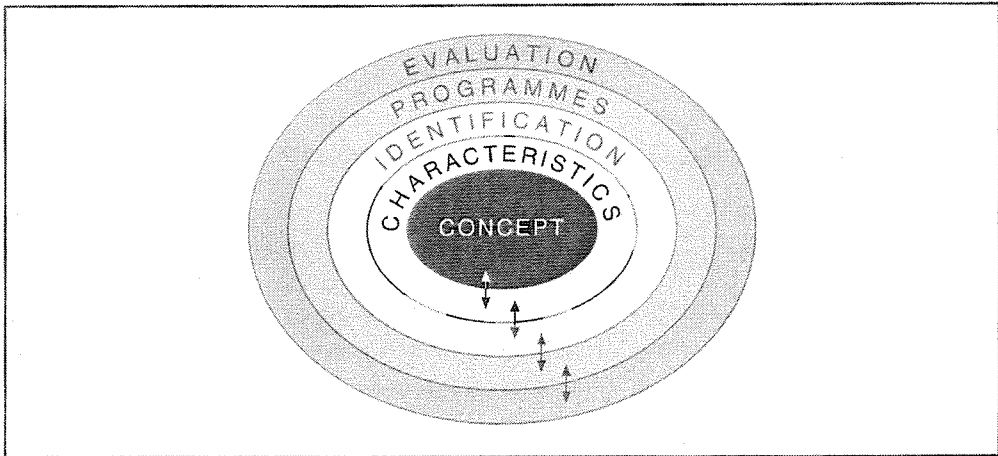
(Adapted from Heacox, 1991, pages 19–20)

Summary: Characteristics of Gifted and Talented Students

- As definitions of giftedness have broadened, so too has the diversity of characteristics included in each concept. Each gifted and talented student is unique, with his or her own set of behaviours and characteristics. It is important for schools to note behaviours and characteristics that are valued by different cultural groups. It is also imperative that schools develop a set of characteristics that reflects their individual definition of, and approach to, giftedness and talent.
- Characteristics of the gifted and talented student can be grouped under the following headings:
 - learning characteristics
 - creative-thinking characteristics
 - motivational characteristics
 - social leadership characteristics
 - self-determination characteristics.
- While most characteristics of the gifted and talented are positive in nature, some characteristics typical of the gifted and talented can be less acceptable. For example, a student who can recall a wide range of knowledge may dominate class discussion. A student who prefers to work independently may actively resist working with others.
- The emotional and social development of most gifted and talented students is within the bounds of normality. However, for some, emotional and social difficulties arise as they progress through life. It is important to recognise that the emotional and social development of these students is not necessarily problematic on its own but can become problematic if they find themselves out of step with their peers.
- Gifted and talented students often have strong academic self-concepts but weaker social self-concepts.
- Gifted and talented students are sometimes characterised by a sense of perfectionism — a compulsive need to achieve at the highest level and do the very best work possible.
- Gifted and talented students often display high levels of sensitivity, which they may direct to a strong sense of right and wrong and social justice. In the classroom they may have a preoccupation with social, moral, and ethical issues and will often act on their own convictions in these areas.
- The behavioural characteristics of some gifted and talented children closely resemble those associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- With many gifted students, there is a significant discrepancy between their ability and their performance. The first step in reversing this underachievement is to identify students in this category.

Identification of Gifted and Talented Students

While the identification of gifted and talented students is often ranked the number one issue in the field of gifted education, it should never be seen in isolation or viewed as an end in itself. Rather, it should be a means to an end – that is, a means to the development and implementation of appropriate educational programmes.



INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CONCEPT, CHARACTERISTICS, IDENTIFICATION, PROGRAMMES AND EVALUATION

The identification process also takes note of the major criteria highlighted in definitions of giftedness. In a way, identification is a mediating link between definition and programmes. There should always be a good match between the three elements of definition, identification, and programme.



It is essential that there is a co-ordinated and school-wide approach to identification. Principles and practices of identification can then be consistent across the school. Furthermore, it is helpful if the process of identification is ongoing.

Principles of Identification

- Identification should *begin early* (that is, during early childhood or at least during the junior classes at primary school). Because of the developing nature of young children's abilities and interests teachers should be cautious of any "labelling" at this stage but rather should offer interesting and challenging educational experiences through a responsive learning environment.
- There should be *open communication* between parents/caregivers, students, teachers, the principal, and the Board of Trustees over the identification process.
- Identification should be a *continuous process*. Students' interests, abilities, and personalities are constantly changing, so teachers need to be alert to emerging abilities and talents. A responsive learning environment that offers challenging experiences is in itself a catalyst for the identification of new abilities.
- Identification should be a *means to an end* and not an end in itself. It is counterproductive to spend long periods of time trying to identify the "right" child for a particular programme at the expense of time spent on developing appropriate programmes for a wider group of students.
- Identification should be as *unobtrusive* as possible and a natural part of the student's learning environment. Large "big bang" identification programmes with a battery of tests administered by outside experts are seldom necessary or appropriate.
- Using a *team approach*, where a number of teachers co-ordinate the identification programme on a school-wide basis, is an effective strategy. Teachers may also obtain input from others, such as parents and representatives from the child's whānau and iwi.
- Identification programmes should be alert to the *hidden gifted or under-represented groups*. These include minority groups; different ethnic groups; those for whom English is a second language; underachievers; those with learning, sensory, and physical disabilities; and those from lower socio-economic groups. Some attention should also be given to gender differences.
- A *multimethod* approach, which co-ordinates different methods of identification for students with special abilities in a particular domain (for example, creativity) should be used. Identification should not depend on just one method alone but employ a variety of different approaches.

Broad Approaches for Identifying the Gifted and Talented

Broadly speaking, there are two different philosophies of identification. One is the formal data-gathering approach, and the other is the responsive learning environment approach. In the first, a team of professionals uses a systematic, school-wide approach that includes a battery of tests and rating scales. The identification process usually takes one or two months, with programmes for the identification of the gifted and talented being comprehensive, carefully planned, and set in place for a year or more.

In the second approach the teacher is a key catalyst for setting up challenging learning experiences that encourage those with special abilities to "surface". The teaching programme offers opportunities for higher level thinking, creative thinking, and original student research. Since the responsive environment approach operates in a mainstream context, its effectiveness depends greatly on the teaching abilities of the classroom teacher. This method reflects an inclusive, liberal philosophy of identification, where there are no "winners" or "losers".

Methods of Identification

Teacher Nomination

This is one of the most commonly used methods of identification, and its effectiveness varies enormously. Identification of gifted and talented students improves when teachers are informed of the nature and purpose of the programme for gifted and talented students. Teachers are likely to support their judgments with the help of tools such as checklists, teacher observation scales, and student portfolios.

Rating Scales

Rating scales can help teachers identify gifted and talented students by focusing on typical behavioural characteristics. Without rating scales some of these characteristics might otherwise be overlooked.

The *Teacher Observation Scales for Identifying Children with Special Abilities* (McAlpine and Reid, 1996) has been developed with the assistance of classroom teachers throughout New Zealand. The scales are designed for middle primary, intermediate, and junior secondary school levels. The accompanying *Teachers' Handbook* contains information on the kinds of students for whom the scales were designed, when the scales should be used, the content of the scales, information on scoring, and technical information on reliability and validity. The five scales relate to:

- learning characteristics;
- social leadership characteristics;
- creative-thinking characteristics;
- self-determination characteristics;
- motivational characteristics.

Standardised Tests

Standardised tests have a fixed set of test items; specific directions for administration and scoring; and norms, based on a representative sample. Sometimes norms allow for comparing an individual's test score with those of other special norm groups, such as the gifted and talented.

Standardised tests of one form or another are amongst the more commonly used measures for identifying the gifted and talented. Some tests used for this purpose are:

- tests of intelligence or scholastic ability
- tests of achievement.

Tests of Intelligence or Scholastic Ability

These tests can be classified into (i) individual tests or (ii) group tests. Individual tests, such

as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – Revised (WISC-R), are administered orally by qualified psychologists. Subjects reply orally to most questions. The WISC-R yields a verbal IQ, a performance IQ, and a student profile derived from all the subtest scores. A full-scale IQ is also given.

Group tests of scholastic ability, such as the Test of Scholastic Abilities (TOSCA), can be administered by teachers. Students read the test items and write their answers. Group tests of scholastic ability may be appropriate for initial screening but are unsuitable for children with reading difficulties and for some children from different ethnic groups.

Tests of intelligence can also be classified as (i) verbal or (ii) non-verbal. The Standard Progressive Matrices (with New Zealand norms) is an example of a non-verbal test. It can be useful for children from different cultural and ethnic groups and for children for whom English is a second language.

Identification should never rely on intelligence tests alone, whether group or individual, but should include other forms of evidence from other methods.

Tests of Achievement

Standardised tests of achievement are sometimes used for initial screening, particularly in intermediate and secondary schools. The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) series of Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) in reading, mathematics, and listening comprehension can be useful for initial screening.

Most standardised achievement tests do not have enough items at the higher end of the scale to challenge gifted and talented students. That is, they have too low a ceiling. Furthermore, they emphasise convergent rather than divergent thinking.

Standardised tests have both advantages and disadvantages as instruments for identifying the gifted and talented. Some of the advantages are high reliability, relatively high validity, and the existence of national norms. They are also relatively inexpensive (as group tests) and are useful for initial screening. However, some standardised tests, such as the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, lack validity, while others have a low ceiling and a cultural, and gender bias. Some standardised tests are inappropriate for students with reading and language difficulties.

Teacher-made Tests

Some teachers are well qualified to design tests of their own. Some of these tests can be targeted towards students with special abilities in specific curriculum areas. They may contain a high percentage of items at the upper level of Bloom's Taxonomy (see Curriculum Models, Part 2), as well as some open-ended and divergent-thinking items. Some teachers also develop local norms.

Portfolio Assessment

Student portfolios are a useful form of assessment and can be helpful in identifying gifted and talented students. They have the advantage of focusing on the individual child's performance. Portfolios offer opportunities for examples of "best performance" and can show systematic evidence of student achievement over time. They also allow for a rich variety of

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student choice in terms of content and learning style and encourage higher levels of thinking and reflective practice. The reliability and validity of portfolio assessment, however, remains problematic because the assessment of them is subjective.

Parent Nomination

Parents and caregivers have a wealth of knowledge about their children that can be useful in the identification process. While most of this knowledge is based on experiences outside the classroom, insights into the child's motivation, interests, attitudes, and special abilities may be relevant to some programmes.

Some schools have parent/caregiver interview forms that contain questions related to examples of advanced development, such as early reading, advanced language skills, advanced reasoning ability, and intellectual curiosity, which can be precursors of giftedness. Parent judgments are particularly important when students from minority ethnic groups are being considered.

While most parents/caregivers may have a realistic understanding of their child's performance compared with that of others of the same age, some parents do not.

Self-nomination

Self-nomination is a useful form of identification for some educational programmes. It is valid for identifying areas of unique special ability and interest, such as computers, poetry, musical ability, and social and ethical concerns. Self-nominations have been found to be useful at the secondary school level. This approach can also give valuable insights into student self-concepts, self-esteem, attitudes, and values.

Self-nominations can be facilitated through teacher-student interviews or through interest inventories and questionnaires, which list a wide range of special interests. Self-nominations can, however, be subject to bias in that some students lack a realistic appraisal of their own abilities. On the other hand, some students may be reticent to put their name forward despite having exceptional abilities. This may be particularly the case with students from Māori and Pacific Islands cultures.

Peer Nomination

Peer nominations can be effective for identifying students who show special abilities both inside and outside the classroom (for example, sporting abilities, musical ability, social leadership, community service, business acumen, or perhaps a special interest in science).

Teachers can assist students using peer nominations by suggesting relevant attributes and behaviours that match some dimensions of giftedness and talent. For example, in the area of creativity, teachers may develop peer nomination forms with such questions as, "Who, in your class, comes up with the most clever and original ideas?" Sometimes make-believe questions can be used, such as "If the class were stranded on a desert island, who would be likely to come up with the best ideas to make life enjoyable?" Teachers should encourage students to focus on specific traits related to giftedness rather than simply nominating their best friends.

Peer nomination can be used in conjunction with self-nomination and teacher nomination.

Peer nominations can be effective for identifying students who show special abilities both inside and outside the classroom (for example, sporting abilities, musical ability, social leadership, community service, business acumen, or perhaps a special interest in science).

Some teacher rating scales for identifying gifted and talented students also suggest that peer nomination be used in tandem with the teacher rating scale.

For example, *Teacher Observation Scales for Identifying Children with Special Abilities* (McAlpine and Reid, 1996) suggests that teachers ask students to nominate two or three students in their class whom they think have special abilities in each of the five scales. They might ask, "Who, in your class ...

- solves difficult problems quickly and easily? (learning scale)
- makes a good leader? (social leadership scale)
- has the most original ideas? (creative-thinking scale)
- expresses their own ideas forthrightly? (self-determination scale)
- works well on their own? (motivational scale)."

Peer nominations made on the basis of such questions can then be compared with the results of using the scales. If self-nominations are also used, the resulting triangulation increases the reliability of the results.

It is important that peer nomination forms consider key areas of behaviour that closely relate to the concept of giftedness and talent, including behaviours and values that are relevant to different cultural and ethnic groups. Peer nominations can be helpful in identifying students with special abilities from minority cultural groups, and students with disabilities.

Special Groups and Identification

Students from Diverse Cultures

Many of the more commonly used methods of identifying gifted and talented students — particularly standardised tests of intelligence and achievement — are often inappropriate for and ineffective in identifying students from minority cultures. This is true, for example, in relation to Māori students (Bevan-Brown, 1996; Reid, 1990).

Teachers nominating and identifying gifted and talented students should be aware of special abilities and attributes prized by other cultures, such as Māori, Pacific Islands, and Asian.

Self-nomination may also be unsuitable because putting your name up for special treatment is not traditionally acceptable in some cultures, for example, for Māori. Shyness (*whakamā*) could also prevent self-nomination.



Culturally Appropriate Identification for Gifted and Talented Māori Students

- *Observation* is a powerful tool for identification. Teachers making observations should focus on the positives of achievement across many contexts. It is also worth observing a child's rate of progress as an indicator of potential talent.
- *Products* are useful indicators of a student's talent. It is important to understand the motivation and purpose behind products and discuss these elements with the child. Products such as art work, stories, and samples of work can be incorporated into portfolios, which can be sensitive to students' special interests, abilities, and learning styles.
- *Whānau* members and kaumātua can be valuable resources in helping the school identify Māori students with special abilities. While students may not nominate themselves and parents may be reluctant to nominate their own children, it may nevertheless be in order for other whānau members or kaumātua to suggest nominations.

(Adapted from Bevan-Brown, 1993, 1996)

The responsive learning environment approach to identification, whereby rich, stimulating, and culturally relevant experiences act as triggers for special abilities to surface, is a sound basis for identifying gifted and talented Māori and Pacific students. In this setting, teachers can develop positive relationships and encourage children to value their culture.

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Students with Learning Difficulties

Although gifted students with learning difficulties may seem a contradiction in terms, some students nevertheless have both learning difficulties and special abilities.

Traditional methods of identification – particularly screening programmes – have not picked up gifted students with learning difficulties. Quite typically, these students score “average” on screening tests and are not identified. However, average scores often mask peaks and troughs in performance (that is, special abilities and disabilities). Significant discrepancies between verbal subscale scores and performance subscale scores on the WISC-R often indicate a learning disability (verbal scores are typically much higher than performance scores).

As well as noting such discrepancies between verbal and performance profiles on the WISC-R, teachers can identify gifted students with learning difficulties by examining students' behavioural profiles. A typical profile might include: considerable variability in performance across tasks, difficulty with visual/auditory processing, short attention span, impaired memory, low self-concept and self-esteem, poor writing skills and organisational skills, and yet exceptional interests, abilities, and knowledge in specific areas, sometimes linked with special abilities in creative and abstract thinking.

When gifted students with learning difficulties have been identified, they have been shown to respond positively to a responsive learning environment approach, such as Renzulli's enrichment triad model. As a result of such programmes, student motivation, commitment, performance, and self-concept have been shown to improve.