

Simply Gifted: Their Attributes through the Eyes of College Students

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By

Ruben Gentry, Ed.D.

Professor of Special Education

Jackson State University

Jackson, MS 39217

ruben.gentry@jsums.edu

And

Tracy Knight Lackey, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Special Education

Jackson State University

Jackson, MS 39217

tracy.k.lackey@jsums.edu

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Abstract

For years, scores on IQ tests and standardized achievement tests were the principal means for determining whether or not persons were gifted. Early literature often referred to them as fluent, flexible, original, and elaborate thinkers; as persons who were extremely curious, sensitive, attracted to aesthetic values; and as individuals who could readily see relationships. More recently, Howard Gardner introduced the concept of multiple intelligences. The literature on multiple intelligences views giftedness as spanning more than one area of human development and achievement. However, neither earlier nor more recent identification procedures sufficiently identify minorities for gifted programs. Underrepresentation, and in some cases decreasing enrollment, of African American students in gifted and talented programs/classes contributes to the achievement gap between African American students and their White counterparts. Perhaps a supplementary means for identifying gifted individuals would be through the eyes of the beholder, especially teacher education candidates as they are in a pretty good position to judge exceptional ability. In support of this contention, one college calls its student newspaper the “Eagle Eye,” which could connote that college students have sharp vision and maintain a keen watchfulness. Further along this line, at one historically Black college a basic course in special education is required for undergraduate education candidates across majors. In the course, the candidates were requested to “think of a person in school or society that they considered gifted” and write a brief synopsis on the individual. They listed many persons that had not been formally identified as gifted. The list included the no-study test passer, multi-talented who stutters, excellent memory kid,

four year old road sign reader, know-all with autism, and hands-on expert. This manuscript examines some key issues in gifted education. It also informs the education profession that perhaps a closer look is needed at who might be considered gifted and that the eyes of college students may help in the identification process.

Introduction

Certain human attributes are simply held in high regard in society. Gifted and talented fall into that category. Throughout history, gifted individuals have been acknowledged and admired in a variety of ways. Plato went so far as to recommend that the ruling of countries be assigned to those with natural gifts and whose minds could tolerate the higher academic exercises necessary for the education of kings (Bayat, 2012).

So the question that readily comes to mind is – Just who are the gifted and talented? The Marland report (cited by Bayat, 2012), defined gifted children as those children identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. Therefore, these children require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. Hallahan, Kauffman, and Pullen (2012) describe students with special gifts as those who excel in some way compared to others of the same age. From this perspective, giftedness is viewed to a large extent by what the surrounding culture values and believes is most useful or necessary for its survival.

A long-standing concern in education is sufficient identification of students from underrepresented groups as gifted and talented. When it comes to exceptionalities such as intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, etc.,

minority or diverse groups are often overrepresented. This is not the case with gifted and talented, where minorities are often underrepresented. It has been postulated that heredity and environment are prime reasons for these representations. But there may be more in the eyes of the beholder than is given credit. In many cases giftedness may exist but the person looking simply does not see the attribute.

This paper briefly focuses on aspects of giftedness to include identification challenges, characteristics of minority gifted children, learning styles of minority gifted children, and the varying nature of individuals who are gifted and talented. The underlying focus is on how college students may play a role in identifying gifted individuals who in the past have tended to go unnoticed.

Identification challenges

Performance tends to be a primary indicator of who gets identified as gifted, particularly performance on standardized tests. Hallahan, Kauffman, and Pullen (2012) state that the most common methods of identifying giftedness include IQ, standardized achievement test scores, teacher nominations, parent nominations, peer nominations, self-nominations, and evaluations of student work or performance. Typically, a combination of these methods is used for identification. But giftedness cannot always be identified by traditional measures. Why? Along the way gifted children may not have been appropriately challenged, became bored, and thus resorted to unacceptable behaviors, conformed to low expectations, and developed negative attitudes toward school and school authorities. For such children, teacher observations and parental reports, the usual first steps in the identification process, will not suggest that these are gifted children (Bayat, 2012).

Another major challenge in the identification process is that for many minorities, school success is not so cool. Among their peers, failure may be more tempting than school success. It has been said that being gifted and Black can be like being between a rock and a hard place (Callahan, 2005). Doing well in school and taking advanced courses may be considered “acting White,” while being laid-back and pretending not to be smart may be considered “acting Black” (Maxwell, 2008).

The array of identification challenges can produce some appalling results. Black and Hispanic students are less than half as likely to be in gifted programs as White students, and American Indian and Native Alaskans fall between Blacks and Whites (Callahan, 2005).

Ways often heralded as impacting the identification challenge include carefully examining the factors that influence the identification process (definition, paper-pencil assessments, inherent biases, lack of coordination of curriculum with identification and placement procedures), increased advocacy for underrepresented students, and attention to current research. There is the need to use authentic assessment tools that emphasize genuine performance tasks that are part of the child’s world; use problems that might be encountered in school, home, or in caring for younger children; and rewrite procedures for identifying the gifted – use multiple avenues and paths into and through the identification process (Callahan, 2005).

Characteristics of Minority Gifted Children

When things go well for persons with gifts and talents, they are happy, well liked by their peers, emotionally stable, and self-sufficient. Many have wide and varied

interests and perceive themselves in positive terms (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2012).

According to the Marland report (cited in Bayat, 2012), children who are gifted demonstrate any of the following abilities:

- General intellectual ability;
- Specific academic aptitude;
- Creative or productive thinking;
- Leadership ability;
- Visual or performing arts aptitude; or
- Psychomotor ability (integration of cognitive and motor process, such as pairing numbers to symbols).

Selected traits of gifted children, reflecting on minorities, in key areas of performance are as follows:

- Cognition – Vivid and rich imagination, learn new things rapidly, fast thinker;
- Perception – Passionate/intense feelings, childlike sense of wonder, open minded;
- Motivation – Very independent/autonomous, curious/desire to know, high drive;
- Activity – Lot of energy, sustained concentration on things of interest, spontaneous; and
- Social relations – Questions rules or authority, very compassionate (Heylighen, n.d.).

Learning Styles of Minority Gifted Children

For effective teaching, it is important to understand how gifted minority students learn. It has been reported that some of their unique learning styles and characteristics

include – independence, internal locus of control, persistence, perception strengths, non-conformity, task commitment, and high self-motivation (Ewing & Yong, 1992).

It is further reported that three variables that most characterize gifted African-American students are – motivation, responsibility, and preference to study in the afternoon. In teaching and learning, they should be involved in high cognitive processing, logical reasoning, creative problem solving, and abstract thinking. They should be provided with manipulative materials and active, real-life experiences (Ewing & Yong, 1992).

Varying Nature of Individuals who are Gifted and Talented

Certain domains of emphasis tend to emerge when discussing the gifted. The common ones for this paper have been identified as: Bell-curve gifted, classroom gifted, street gifted, Gardner gifted, and “simply gifted.” A brief of these domains follows.

Bell-curve Gifted

The bell-shaped curve gifted results from an idealized version of what happens in large sets of measurements. These individuals obtain a high intelligence quotient (IQs) and have great capacity to acquire knowledge, apply knowledge and engage in abstract reasoning. This type intelligence is definitely thought to have a powerful genetic component (Boeree, 2003).

Lewis Terman developed the Stanford-Binet intelligence test at Stanford University, and advanced the idea of intelligence quotient (IQ). The IQ test was used to classify children. The top 2 percent of children measured by the test (scoring above 135) were considered gifted (Bayat, 2012). Other accounts show slightly different scores for classifications. For example, Heylighen (n.d.) states the levels and scores as bright – 115,

gifted – 130, highly gifted – 145, exceptionally gifted – 16-, and profoundly gifted – 175. Standardized tests of intelligence are heavily reliant on the linguistic and mathematical abilities of an individual (Bayat, 2012). Boeree (2003) provides an overall view of the Stanford-Binet in reference to the general population, indicating the mean score is 100 and the standard deviation is 15; beliefs are that it has a powerful genetic component and environment aids and/or hinders intelligence; and it is conceivable that some groups have higher or lower average intelligence than others.

Classroom Gifted

The student who is classroom gifted is described as the typical school achiever who readily masters the abstract. Effective instructional strategies for the classroom gifted might include independent projects, academic competition, vertical enrichment, and learning centers. A point of caution is to not turn the gifted student into a tutor or teacher's aide. It is more acceptable to find the gifted student a mentor (Meeting the Need, n.d.).

Street Gifted

Street smarts or gifted is a specialization of intelligence just like academic intelligence is (Boeree, 2003). Life nowadays on the streets is not easy. Some individuals have to navigate very dysfunctional environmental living conditions to achieve success in life. However, many students become quite smart at mastering life on the streets and achieving high-level success in school. From a checklist, selected recommendations to prevent violence to children are:

- Know to never get in a car with anyone other than the parents or other trusted family members, unless given permission;

- Know to stay distant from any strangers, in a car or walking, out of grabbing range;
- Know what inappropriate touching is;
- Stay away from deserted places, including construction sites, dumps, and empty parks;
- Know how to go to the vulnerable points to bite, spit, scratch to get away in case of abduction;
- Feel comfortable saying no on a date, and end if you start to feel uncomfortable;
- Ensure that dating progresses gradually, starting with short and safe interactions;
- Know that sometimes kids can use drugs or alcohol to manipulate;
- Know to never tell someone who calls when a parent will be home;
- Know that hitchhiking is never acceptable, under any conditions; and
- Learn about how to resolve conflicts peacefully (The Street Smart Child, n.d.).

Gardner Gifted

Students possess different abilities and learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways (Multiple intelligences, n.d.). For example, some may literally see what others do not see - spatial-visual, while others may have great ability to influence people – interpersonal (Psychological adjustment, n.d.). Therefore, scholars such as Howard Gardner have suggested culturally competent and multidimensional performance-based criteria as important considerations in determining intelligence and giftedness (Bayat, 2012). Table 1 contains Gardner’s proposed types of intelligence and the capability and perception for the individual.

Table 1
Gardner Types of Intelligences

Intelligence type	Capability and Perception
Linguistic	words and language
Logical-Mathematical	logic and numbers
Musical	music, sound, rhythm
Bodily-Kinesthetic	body movement control
Spatial-Visual	images and space
Interpersonal	other people's feelings
Intrapersonal	self-awareness

Simply Gifted

It is argued that any criteria for a definition of giftedness should look at both performance as well as potential in various areas in children (Bayat, 2012). Some come simply to be recognized as gifted by making the best of the given situation; whereas others in the same or similar situation would fail miserably.

Gifted people have a number of personality traits that set them apart, and that are not obviously connected to the traits of intelligence, IQ, or creativity that are most often used to define the category. Many of these traits have to do with their particularly intense feelings and emotions, others with their sometimes awkward social interactions. However, such traits often make these people misunderstood and underestimated by

peers, by society, and usually even by themselves. As such, most of their gifts are actually underutilized, and they rarely fulfill their full creative potential (Heylighen, n.d.). However, a strong exception to this is on record. *Dr. Ben Carson's Gifted Hands* is the inspiring autobiography of an inner-city kid with poor grades and little motivation who grew up to become one of the world's most renowned and important surgeons (Carson, n.d.). This exception must become more like the rule.

Giftedness through the Eyes of College Students

This section depicts how college students may prove instrumental in identifying persons that may or may not meet traditional criteria, but are “simply” gifted. The eyes (vision and insight) of college students are made analogous to those of an eagle. The eagle's vision is six times sharper than that of ordinary humans. It has binocular eyesight (outward and forward) to help gauge distances precisely. The rotating head can turn up to a 270 degree angle. It can quickly refocus between far and near things (Bald Eagle's Eyesight, n.d.).

In a “real” sense, college students do have eagle eyes. They see so far, so clearly, and so accurately. College students have the potential to play a significant role in identifying nontraditional, simply gifted individuals. To illuminate this point, “The Eagle Eye,” is a student newspaper of Lock Haven University of PA. The logo is “Keeping an Eye on the Haven.”

Some Real, Simply Gifted People through the Eyes of College Students

At one university all teacher education majors are required to take the course Exceptional Children and Youth in the Schools. One chapter in the textbook for the course is on students who are gifted and talented. An item on the teacher-made

assessment instrument for the chapter calls for candidates to write an essay on a person that they have encountered and considered gifted or talented. Some of the persons were well known politicians, media personalities, educators, and students in gifted programs. However, many were local, unpopular persons who did things that made them “simply” gifted. Such persons are listed in Table 2. The names of the persons were generated from the descriptions in the essays. Traditional assessment measures may never have identified these individuals, but who would deny the possibility of their being gifted? It appears that college students may have something to offer when it comes to identifying persons with gifts and talents.

Table 2

Simply Gifted People through the Eyes of College Students

Name	Attributes/outcomes
Excellent memory kid	At 7, read books for older children; In gifted program
Goal accomplisher	Achieves every goal set; Taking online courses in the army
Hands expert	Does good electrical, mechanical, construction work; Writing problem
Independent learner	Mother never had to help; Photographic memory; 1 st to finish assignments
Know-all with autism	Knew everything posted; Now, doing well in 1 st grade
Multi-talented who stutters	No complaints; Helping others realize anything is possible

No-study test passer	Naturally smart, didn't have to study; Scholarship to out-of-state college
Reading off radar	At 10, reading at 8 th grade; Moved to NC, out performs classmates
Road-sign reader (4 yrs old)	Mother read to her, she read to mom, now reads signs
Swift-on-feet Jr high girl	Runs 100m dash in 11.18; May break all records in college

Implications for Identifying Gifted Minority Individuals

Some awesome findings are reported in this paper. They are:

- African Americans are underrepresented in the gifted population;
- Some progress has been made, much more is needed;
- Some 20 to 50% (up to 80% of African Americans) underachieve academically;
- Mistaken tendency is to equate giftedness with success;
- The gifted encounter social and psychological problems (fears, anxieties, stress; become frustrated, feel helpless (Ford & Harris, 1995); and
- With eagle eyes, college students and universities can help pave a better path in identifying and educating gifted and talented individuals.

Summary and Implications

It has been pointed out that many gifts and talents, especially among minorities, go unnoticed. This is a tremendous loss for the individual and society. It is evident that college students have the eyes and ability to recognize giftedness as they are about the business of earning a degree. America must capitalize upon this ability and engage it in developing its most treasured resource, the human mind. A parting thought is "Let your

eyes see giftedness in our children and youth.” Use Johnny Nash’s (n.d.) song lyric and say:

“I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,

I can see all obstacles in my way

Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind,

It’s gonna be a bright, bright sun-shiny day.”

When our eyes see clearly, they will see the giftedness in Black children, White children, all children. When our see giftedness in all children, we will see a better world for all mankind.

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