

Open Gifted

Module 2: Definitions of Giftedness

This video discusses several key definitions of giftedness which will help inform your understanding and practice with regard to giftedness in the classroom.

Francis Galton is regarded as the father of giftedness. Galton's book 'Hereditary Genius' 1869 was an attempt by him to find the underlying reasons for what he called 'eminence'. In explaining the title of his book, stated he was describing "an ability that was exceptionally high, and at the same time in born".

For Galton " hereditary genius.....seemed to be a more expressive and just title than hereditary ability, for ability does not include the effects of education, which genius does"

Galton acknowledged "freely the great powers of education and social influences in developing the active of powers of the mind".

One of the most enduring aspects of Galton's work was the use the word 'gifted' to refer to people who have achieved eminence in their particular field. He used the word 'talent' as a synonym for gifts.

In the 1920's Lewis Terman drew on the work of Alfred Binet and developed the Stanford Binet IQ test. He conducted a longitudinal study of gifted individuals which lasted over 40 years. Terman used an IQ 140 as a cut-off point for his subjects who became known as 'Terman's Termites'.

The cold war encouraged an expansion in gifted education in the United States.

In 1972 a United States congressional report, called the Marland Report, stated that

“gifted and talented children were those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high-performance. These are children require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided in regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society”.

The Marland report listed six specific abilities in which children can be gifted these are

1. General intellectual ability
2. Specific academic aptitude
3. Creative or productive thinking
4. Leadership ability
5. Visual and performing arts
6. And psychomotor ability

It's worth noting that the final ability, psychomotor ability, was dropped from the definition because it was felt that this had already been well catered to in school.

There is a very clear issue here. Schools traditionally are quicker to credit achievements in sport and performing arts compared to academic pursuits.

The Marland report also recognised teachers as ‘professionally qualified’ to identify gifted children. In an Irish context, this raises several questions, in particular, how can teachers identify gifted children when there is no formal training at Initial Teacher Education level in the field of giftedness.

The Columbus Group

In 1991 a group of gifted education writers met up in Columbus, Ohio to discuss existing definitions of giftedness. The aim of the group was to develop a definition which more accurately accounted for what they believed were the distinguishing features of goodness.

This definition became known as the Columbus Group definition and states

“Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner

experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally”.

This definition drew on several sources but its defining feature is the identification of asynchrony and intensities as key characteristics of gifted children.

Gifted Education in Ireland

Gifted education in Ireland is poorly developed. The first official mention of gifted education was in the Report of the Special Education Review Committee, 1993. This report recommended the use of the term ‘Exceptionally Able’ to denote children with an IQ of 130 or higher. The report recognised the limitations of a precise cut-off point and defined

Pupils who are exceptionally able or talented are those who have demonstrated their capacity to achieve high performance in one or more of the following areas:

1. General intellectual ability;
2. Specific academic aptitude;
3. Creative or productive thinking;
4. Leadership ability;
5. Visual and performing arts;
6. Mechanical aptitude;
7. Psychomotor ability, e.g. in athletics, gymnastics.

This definition is similar to the Marland definition.

In Ireland, The Education Act of 1998 offered the first legislative recognition of giftedness. It defined “special educational needs” means the educational needs of students who have a disability and the educational needs of exceptionally able students;

In 2007, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment published a set of guidelines for teachers of Exceptionally Able children. There is a link

These guidelines defined exceptionally able students as

“Students who require opportunities for enrichment and extension that go beyond those provided for the general cohort of students. It should be noted that good practice for exceptionally able students is also good practice for all students and can improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school”.

There are a number of interesting features to this definition. The first is that it uses the term exceptionally able rather than ‘gifted’ and thereby avoids the negative connotations that travel along with the word gifted.

Secondly the NCCA definition recognizes the need for a enrichment and extension for gifted students. However it completely ignores acceleration as an approach to educational provision for gifted students.

Thirdly the NCCA definition is unusual because it emphasizes that good practice for exceptionally able students is also good practice for all students. While this is true it can be interpreted as support for gifted provision within the mixed ability environments regardless are the efficacy of this provision.

The Guidelines recognise ability and attainment in

1. general intellectual ability or talent
2. specific academic aptitude or talent
3. visual and performing arts and sports
4. leadership ability
5. creative and productive thinking
6. mechanical ingenuity
7. special abilities in empathy, understanding and negotiation.

This view of giftedness is much broader and is more likely to identify gifted children who might otherwise be missed by conventional assessments of ability such as tests.

On the down side, the Guidelines assert that 5 to 10 of the cohort in any school is likely to be gifted. This is at odds with the IQ levels the Guidelines suggest represent gifted.

Given the heterogeneity of gifted children, there is no one definition which is sufficiently adequate in all instances to describe giftedness. For me, an adequate definition is one that captures the

intellectual curiosity, drive and ability of gifted children and which also captures the personality characteristics of these children. Because of this I favour the Columbus group definition over others.

School-based Conception of Giftedness

In a school context is not sufficient the child is gifted and that they need do more no more then be gifted.

The scarcity resources and the competing needs in a school environment require teachers to justify continued school intervention so that a gifted child must be able to produce at the level that justifies the resources he or she receives. Tracy Cross and Laurence Coleman write about the school-based conception of giftedness where a gifted child meets the identification criteria but also performs at a level necessary to justify continued resource input.

“In secondary school, giftedness is manifested by consistent interest, creative production, and achievement in an area of the curriculum. Being gifted means moving beyond potential to actual performance.”

Cross, T. L., & Coleman, L. J. (2005). School-based conception of giftedness. *Conceptions of giftedness*, 2, 52-63.

I think it is important to recognise this. However it is also important to recognise that there are circumstances under which a gifted child will not perform a level commensurate with ability.

Because of this there are difficulties in admitting a child to services only to be denied gifted services other point in time. In the absence of specific resources, such as in Ireland, I believe it is important that teachers are trained to adapt their teaching to the take account of the presence of gifted children the mixed ability environments. This is not an ideal situation – a mix of approaches to school organization would be more appropriate – but in the absence of appropriate resources, the gifted child in an Irish classroom is dependent on the motivation and commitment of teachers to receive appropriate educational challenges.

Who is gifted?

In the next video, we will look at different approaches to the identification of gifted children.

References

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