

# Gifted Behavior: A Nonelitist Approach

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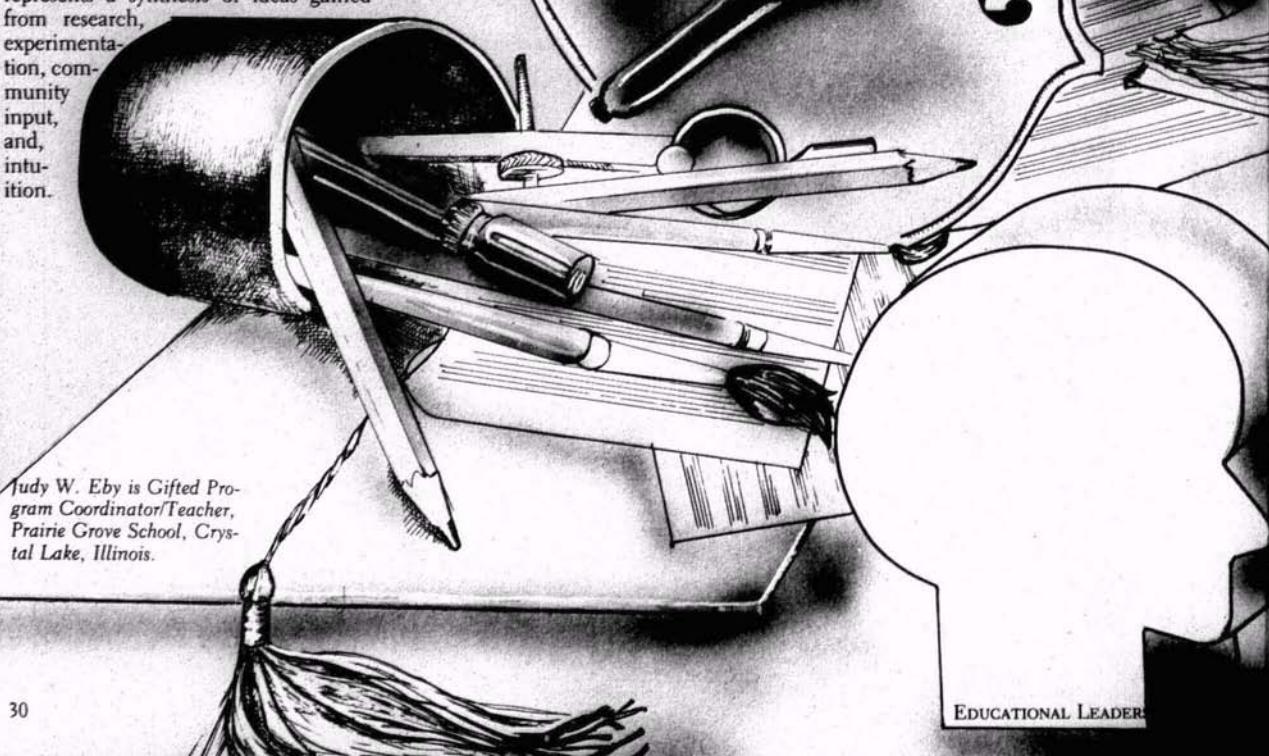
**W**hat is giftedness? Is it a function of behavior or of innate ability? Is "general intellectual ability" a sufficient reason for offering a child additional "gifted programming," or should we respond to the needs of children who are demonstrating by their academic behavior, strong interests, or specific talents that they want and need a more challenging curriculum? Is there any justification for the elitist attitude surrounding "gifted programs" that serve tiny percentages of the school population, usually selected by the use of unseen and often unmentioned test scores?

The identification model and definitions presented here were developed in a public school with direct input and feedback from the entire school community. Parents, students, administrators, and teachers were all involved in the initiation of the program and in its daily evaluation and modification. The program, established in 1978 at Prairie Grove School in Crystal Lake, Illinois, represents a synthesis of ideas gained from research, experimentation, community input, and intuition.

## The Need for Standard Definitions

Ever since Lewis Terman developed the first IQ test as a systematic way of identifying "gifted children," the concept of giftedness as an innate, largely unchangeable quality bestowed on certain people has become firmly entrenched as an educational "fact." It is impossible to calculate the full impact of Terman's view of giftedness on educational policy and practice," wrote Feldman, "but giftedness and genius came to be defined in IQ terms not just among educational researchers but in the public mind as well" (1979, p. 172).

The widely used words "giftedness," "creativity," "intelligence," "talent," and "potential" have never been defined in a way that provides for common understanding and communication. As Neuman found when he visited 15 different school districts in a large midwest city, "The defini-



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By focusing on the behavior, not the child, educators can avoid the painful comparisons that come with the "gifted" label.

tions of 'gifted' and 'talented' were completely idiosyncratic to the school districts or persons who influenced the thinking of the school districts. There was little common ground on which school systems could relate to one another regarding either curricula or procedures for identifying gifted and talented children" (1981, p. 115). Federal and state guidelines for reimbursement of programs for the gifted have long, detailed definitions of giftedness, but again, the important terms are left undefined. This in itself is not bad, but local school districts are seeking leadership and direction about the nature of giftedness and appropriate interventions. Agreement of definitions and standards is therefore essential.

Support groups have sprung up around the nation, forming an influential gifted child movement. These groups, made up primarily of parents and educators, seem to be philosophically linked to the concept of the gifted child as a function of innate ability or potential.

Public schools are expected to respond to this movement and to state and federal guidelines that usually require documentation of giftedness for a specified small percentage of the school population (2 to 5 percent in most cases). But schools are finding it difficult to justify spending limited resources on such a tiny minority of their population, especially when, in many cases, the children who are selected on the basis of test scores are not always the same children who are at the head of their classes, asking for harder, more challenging work.

The public schools are also finding the unwelcome specter of elitism accompanying virtually every gifted program based on the notion of innate giftedness. In order to generate lasting support for education of the gifted, giftedness must be conceived in nonelitist terms. Over 20 years ago, John Gardner faced this issue squarely in *Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?* Gardner argued that recognition and support of giftedness must in some way avoid creating hostility in those who are not gifted. The only way to do this, he concluded, was to promote an educational system that provides "opportunities and rewards for individuals of every degree of ability so that individuals at every level will realize their full potentialities . . ." (1961, p. 137).

**Gifted Behavior, Not Gifted People**  
Educators should replace the notion of the "gifted child" with the concept of "gifted behavior." The remainder of this article will focus on a comprehensive definition of gifted behavior that can be easily communicated and agreed on and successfully measured:

The behavior and accomplishments of highly productive members of our society have been studied by a number of researchers. One of them, Paul Torrance, challenges educators to make a place in their gifted programs for the creative child. Torrance's definition of creativity describes many nonintellectual capacities used by individuals in an active rather than a passive stance. He defines the creative process as:

Figure 1. Nonintellectual Traits Seen as Components of Gifted Behavior.

Researcher	Synopsis of Study	Identified Traits
Terman and Oden (1947)	Observed other characteristics in high-IQ children	Persistence Goal integration Self-confidence
Roe (1952) Guilford (1959)	Studied creative scientists Analyzed components of intelligence	Autonomy Fluency Flexibility Originality Independence
MacKinnon (1962)	Studied creative adults (architects)	Independence
Lucito (1964)	Compared conformity and intelligence	Inventiveness Industriousness
Barron (1969)	Studied creative adults	Awareness of problem Gaining information Search for solutions Testing hypotheses Communicating results
Torrance (1969)	Defined creative process	Creativity Task commitment Specific commitments Willingness to work
Renzulli (1978)	Defined giftedness	
Bloom (1981, 1982)	Studied accomplished adults	

... becoming sensitive to or aware of problems, deficiencies, gaps in knowledge, missing elements, disharmonies and so on, bringing together available information; defining the difficulty or identifying the missing element; searching for solutions, making guesses, or formulating hypotheses about the deficiencies; testing and retesting these hypotheses and modifying and restating them; perfecting them and finally communicating the results (Miller, 1981, pp. 83-84).

Other personality characteristics have also been studied to help formulate an aggregate representation of gifted behavior. One that seems related to high ability and high performance is independence or risk-taking. A study by Lucito (1959) illustrates this point. He compared 55 "bright" and 51 "dull" sixth-grade students on a task that measured conformity to group judgment. The children were asked to choose which of three lines was longest. There was no perceptual problem involved; one of the lines was clearly longest, but the experimenter told each child that others in the group had chosen one of the shorter lines. The child had to choose between trusting his or her own perceptions or going along with the group. None of the dull children opted for independence, but 29 percent of the bright children followed their own inclinations.

High degrees of curiosity, imagination, superior judgment, perceptive-

ness, and originality are also observed in children who are highly productive and therefore thought to be gifted. These characteristics seem to fit the wider, more comprehensive concept of gifted behavior rather than the artificial image of the "typical gifted child." The more valuable and usable term may be to say that children display academic talent or "gifted behavior" in certain situations (Renzulli, 1981a).

Another important personality factor is the motivational characteristic of persistence or task commitment. Even Terman concedes that giftedness encompasses far more than innate ability. In his study following the careers of high-IQ students, Terman (1959) explained that personality factors were extremely important determiners of achievement. The four traits on which these students differed most widely were persistence in the accomplishment of ends, integration toward goals, self-confidence, and freedom from inferiority of feelings.

Many years later, in a study of highly accomplished people in several fields, Benjamin Bloom concurred: "The major point is that in the talent field the individual becomes fully engaged. There is a major commitment to learning and development in one field, while other activities are given lower priority" (1981, p. 92). In another related study, Bloom called this characteristic "willingness to work" (1982, p. 512).

Joseph Renzulli is responsible for making the term "task commitment" an integral part of the definition of giftedness. Renzulli advocates a view of giftedness that goes far beyond reliance on test scores of ability or achievement. He concludes:

... although no single criterion should be used to identify giftedness, persons who have achieved recognition because of their unique accomplishments and creative contributions possess a relatively well-defined set of three interlocking clusters of traits. These clusters consist of above average, though not necessarily superior, general ability, task commitment, and creativity. It is important to point out that no single cluster 'makes' giftedness.' Rather it is the interaction among the three clusters that research has shown to be the necessary ingredient for creative/productive accomplishment. ... Although this cluster of traits is not as easily and objectively identifiable as are general cognitive abilities, they are nevertheless a major component of giftedness and should therefore be reflected in our definition (1978, pp. 182-184).

Several other noteworthy studies support the findings of Bloom and Renzulli. Anne Roe (1952) conducted an intensive study of the characteristics of 64 respected scientists and found that *all* of her subjects had a high level of commitment to their work. Other studies (presented in Figure 1) used different populations of children and adults, but found patterns of characteristics that are consistently similar, even though the researchers all used their own terminology.

These studies rarely use the term "giftedness" in their findings. Rather, they discuss traits associated with high performance, creative production, and eminence in a field. Nevertheless, many educators use the term "giftedness" today to describe the same type of high performance or accomplishment described in these studies, while other educators use the word to mean merely high, unrealized potential. This confusion could be eliminated by labeling behavior, rather than children. "Gifted behavior" can be defined more readily than "giftedness," and consensus on this important concept may be easier to reach.

An Identification Model

This Elementary Identification Instrument was developed to provide administrators of gifted programs with an easily administered, objective, and comprehensive process for selecting students for gifted programming on the basis of performance and behavior. It is intended for use in kindergarten through eighth

grades. The emphasis is on academic talent or gifted behavior, and as such it provides a balanced and comprehensive evaluation of a child's potential for academically challenging educational experiences. The instrument serves as an excellent basis for communicating with both parents and children about eligibility for gifted programming. The instrument includes the following three components:

**1. General Selection Matrix.** A General Selection Matrix (Figure 2) should be compiled on each child considered for gifted programming because of meeting one or more of the following criteria: (1) a composite score at the 85th percentile or above on a standardized achievement test given by the school district; (2) a grade point average of 4.0

or above, or honor roll status; (3) recommended for gifted programming by a classroom teacher; (4) recommended for gifted programming by a parent; (5) self-nomination for the program.

If the achievement test, grade point average, and teacher's recommendation total nine or more points on the weighted score, the IQ and GIFT or GIFFI tests (Rimm, 1980) should be administered. These tests were selected for this model because they offer a biographical, performance-based view of a child's creative behavior. Any standardized achievement test or IQ test can be used

After all applicants' scores have been computed, the administrator determines the eligibility cut-off score. If a mid-point score of 12 points is used, the result will be a program made up of very highly qualified students. If it is desir-

**Figure 2. General Selection Matrix**

Student Name _____		Grade _____	Date _____		
Teacher Making Recommendation_____		Avg. Score _____			
This matrix is designed to measure three important components of academic talent: above average ability (*), task commitment (**), and creativity (***)					
Enter child's score for each assessment area. Tally and compute score.					
ASSESSMENT AREAS		WEIGHTED SCORES			
USE THIS	Achievement Test Composite Score (*)	>98%ile	97-94	93-90	89-88
	Test Used: _____	85-87			
	Norms Used: _____				
	Date Given: _____				
OR THIS	General Intelligence Test (*)	>140	135-139	130-134	125-129
	Test Used: _____	116-124			
	Date Given: _____				
	Grade Point Average (**) 3rd-8th Grades Only	5.0	4.9-4.8	4.7-4.6	4.5-4.3
GIFT or GIFFI Test (***)	>90%ile	89-80	79-70	69-60	59-50
Teacher's Recommendation (*), (**), (***)	60-55	54-49	48-43	42-37	36-30
Column Tally (Number of Entries Per Column)					
Weight	X5	X4	X3	X2	X1
Score					
TOTAL SCORE	ELIGIBLE (____ or more points) INELIGIBLE (less than ____ points)				
<span style="border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 150px; height: 20px;"></span>					



**Figure 3. Teacher Recommendation Form.**

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Teacher Making Recommendation \_\_\_\_\_

Recent research has shown that creative behavior and/or academic talent is a combination of three basic traits: above average ability, task commitment, and creativity. Please circle the number that indicates this child's degree of the characteristics described below as compared to other students of the same age.

	HIGHLY SUPERIOR	ABOVE AVERAGE	AVERAGE	BELOW AVERAGE
<b>ABILITY</b>				
1. Learns rapidly, easily, efficiently.	4	3	2	1
2. Reasons things out; uses logic; makes good decisions; organizes tasks well.	4	3	2	1
3. Understands abstract ideas readily; recognizes relationships and implications.	4	3	2	1
4. Uses a large vocabulary with accuracy.	4	3	2	1
5. Academic work is above grade level.	4	3	2	1
<b>TASK COMMITMENT</b>				
1. Is a self-starter; shows initiative.	4	3	2	1
2. Is able to maintain long periods of concentration.	4	3	2	1
3. Follows through and completes tasks on time or before.	4	3	2	1
4. Is willing to spend more time than required on subjects that interest him/her.	4	3	2	1
5. Has one or more strong interests; seeks complex and challenging activities.	4	3	2	1
<b>CREATIVITY</b>				
1. Displays great curiosity and imagination.	4	3	2	1
2. Generates many solutions or alternatives.	4	3	2	1
3. Is a risk-taker; shows independence.	4	3	2	1
4. Reveals originality in oral or written work; gives unusual, unique, or clever responses.	4	3	2	1
5. Other students turn to him/her for ideas and suggestions when something must be decided.	4	3	2	1
<b>TOTAL SCORE</b>				
	<input type="text"/>			

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**"The school climate that results from this selection system is positive and achievement oriented."**

able to serve a specific percentage of the school population in order to meet state or federal guidelines, on the other hand, then the cut-off score can be set so as to meet this percentage.

If this program is modeled on Renzulli's Revolving Door Model (1981b), the General Selection Matrix may be used to identify a pool of eligible students of up to 15 or 20 percent of the school population. Then the Unit Selection Matrix, described below, can be used to select students from the pool for specific program activities.

2. *Teacher Recommendation Form.* The Teacher Recommendation Form

(Figure 3) is an important component of this identification system. It has been developed with a great deal of input from classroom teachers so that it is clear and unambiguous and can be completed quickly. Most important, it gives the administrator usable information about each of the three important traits that comprise academic talent or gifted behavior.

As in other components of this identification system, the recommendation form is behavior based, allowing teachers to use their skills as observers of performance, rather than asking them to judge a child's character or abstract potential.

**3. Unit Selection Matrix.** The Unit Selection Matrix (Figure 4) is designed to determine which children, among those who have been identified as having a high potential for academic achievement or talent on the General Selection Matrix, have the motivation, task commitment, and creativity to take part in a specific learning experience or unit offered by the school district as part of its gifted program.

For example, if a research project on the brain is planned, a pretest or pre-task—such as drawing the brain and labeling it appropriately—is announced to all eligible students. A due date is also announced, and on that date, the drawings are evaluated using the Unit Selection Matrix. A cut-off score is determined (suggested cut-off is 30 points), and the completed matrix is used as the basis for notifying students and their parents whether the child has earned a place in the unit of study or not. This approach helps children understand specific areas that need to be improved if they are to qualify for future units.

The Unit Selection Matrix can also be used by itself to judge a pretask done by any student in the school, regardless of grades or test scores. If a child demonstrates a strong interest or talent in a specific area of study in the gifted program, that child may be allowed to

submit a pretask for evaluation along with other eligible students.

The Elementary Identification Instrument allows school personnel to select children for gifted programming on the basis of performance and behavior, rather than subjective judgment or over-reliance on IQ and vague notions of potential.

The school climate that results from this selection system is positive and achievement oriented. All children are informed about specific requirements for participation in the gifted program. They decide whether to submit a pretask for each unit on the basis of their own interests and willingness to work.

While not all children gain a place in the program, they can understand why they did not succeed and what they need to work on if they want to take part in a succeeding unit.

One by-product of this selection process is a marked increase in high-quality work as children compete with themselves to submit pretasks that are accurate, neat, and original.

#### Behavioral Definitions

The following behavioral definitions will make the terms used in gifted education less abstract, easier to communicate, and easier to justify as the basis for

selecting students to participate in enriched curricula.

**Gifted Behavior.** The "gifted" label can create confusion, resentment, and ego damage. As Haim Ginott points out, "Direct praise of personality, like direct sunlight, is uncomfortable and blinding" (1965, p. 41). Children who are labeled "gifted" feel set apart from their peers; they feel guilt and fear when they don't live up to the label. While their parents may relish the label at first, they will find it hard to explain the concept to other children in the family, who feel they have been unwittingly and automatically labeled "nongifted." Moreover, teachers may adopt stereotyped expectations for both groups of students, and administrators may have to face the problem of explaining to parents why a child who was labeled "gifted" in an earlier grade or different school district isn't "gifted" anymore.

Gifted behavior, on the other hand, is not confined to a selected few. It is defined as behavior that shows a creative, productive commitment to accomplish a particular task. Gifted behavior is displayed when a child uses intelligence or ability in a creative way and follows through to the completion of a task. It may appear at any time, in any child, and may disappear or reappear periodically according to the child's need for challenge and accomplishment.

Commitment to a task, idea, or talent area may alternate with periods of latency or plateaus while children internalize new learning or accomplishments or simply use their energy to adjust to a new environment or set of circumstances. Puberty is an obvious example. Students who, during their elementary years, begged for more and harder work, who became excited by the possibilities in books and maps and word problems, show a definite decline in academic interests in junior high. Social and physical issues dominate, and academic interests wane. It is important for a supplementary enrichment program to respond flexibly to this periodicity.

**Creative Behavior.** Creative behavior, which replaces the abstract term "creativity," is original, flexible, independent behavior that sets a person's product or ideas or accomplishment apart from the ordinary. Again, the emphasis is on outcome: the evaluation of products or behaviors rather than of people themselves. The ideation and fulfillment of an original conception is the essence of creative behavior. It is neces-

**Figure 4. Unit Selection Matrix.**

Student Name _____	Grade _____	Date _____	
Unit of Study _____	Evaluated By _____		
Description of Pretask _____			
EVALUATION OF PRETASK SHOWS:	HIGHLY SUPERIOR	ABOVE AVERAGE	BELOW AVERAGE
<b>TASK COMMITMENT</b>			
1. Pretask turned in on time or before	4	3	2
2. Accuracy and authenticity	4	3	2
3. Completeness and attention to detail	4	3	2
4. Care and pride of workmanship	4	3	2
5. Goes beyond the minimum required	4	3	2
<b>CREATIVITY</b>			
1. Captures attention of reader or viewer	4	3	2
2. Originality and imagination (unique responses)	4	3	2
3. Flexibility and independence (redefines problem or goal)	4	3	2
4. Complexity of thought (depth of responses)	4	3	2
5. Fluency of ideas (many responses)	4	3	2
<b>TOTAL SCORE</b>	<u>ELIGIBLE</u> (____ or more points) <u>INELIGIBLE</u> (less than ____ points)		
<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>			

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sarily linked to the motivational factors of commitment and perseverance, as creative behavior can only be demonstrated and evaluated by a finished product.

**Talent.** In the school setting, we can applaud creative behavior in talent areas such as music, dance, and the other arts. Some large secondary school districts have set up differentiated curricula to accommodate artistic talent among their students, but most elementary districts lack the resources to do so. We should, however, take full responsibility for the development of gifted behavior in academic talent areas such as math, science, language arts, and research skills.

**Potential.** Every child in every school system has an unknown possibility for creative, productive behavior. Until children have been given an opportunity to demonstrate what they can or cannot do, they should not be eliminated from consideration for supplementary enrichment. Public school gifted programs should be as nondiscriminatory, and as nonelitist, as any other program in the school. The method of identification should be clearly explained to all students and their parents along with the program goals and objectives.

**Intelligence and Ability.** Intelligence is a degree of adaptability to new learning experiences because of both innate (brain-related) and learned (motivational) capabilities. IQ scores may give us an estimate of potential for learning, but intelligence or ability in real life is unavoidably bound to such behavior traits as desire to learn, perseverance, and self-concept.

### Summary

The terms "giftedness" and "gifted child," though widely accepted, imply a passive, innate quality bestowed on some individuals and not others. By substituting a behavioral term such as "academic talent" or "gifted behavior," we can accomplish two important educational gains:

1. We can develop behavioral definitions that are less abstract and more directly measurable for the identification of specific children whose behavior warrants specific enriched or accelerated programming.

2. We can avoid the elitist attitudes that tend to permeate gifted programs when children are selected on the basis of hidden criteria, usually test scores.

The identification model described

here has been used successfully to select elementary students who exhibit gifted behavior in specific talent areas. Because the criteria are communicated to every student in the school, and because each child has an opportunity to demonstrate his or her capacity in much the same way that a school sports program is managed, this approach avoids any taint of elitism.

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