

### ISSUES concerning IDENTIFICATION of 'gifted' students

#### Why not ask teachers to nominate gifted students?

Because different teachers will have different criteria and therefore the identification process will not be fair to all students. Furthermore many studies have shown this to be an inaccurate method despite the fact that some teachers are highly perceptive.

#### Why not use achievement tests to identify gifted students?

Because some gifted or even highly gifted students do not put out the effort needed for high achievement, particularly in the early years of secondary school. Furthermore, those achieving highly will probably get to universities. One purpose in identifying 'gifted' students is to ensure that no one with high ability gets overlooked. Another reason not to use achievement tests is that they often have a ceiling (hence the addition of an A\* grade) and there are different amounts of challenge in different subjects and even syllabuses.

#### At what age should students be identified as gifted?

The answer will depend on what can be done following the identification process.

Many schools may feel that to identify highly able students on entry to the school allows them to work carefully with such students throughout secondary school. However, those currently in the fifth and sixth forms also need to be tested to make sure that every effort is made to get able students into university, even if currently they are not achieving particularly well.

#### What about the Warwick University centre that has a government grant to run summer schools for gifted students?

As you can see from the website ([www.warwick.ac.uk/~warwick/summer](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/~warwick/summer)), we are partners with Warwick University. But, as they know, *we do not recommend the procedures currently suggested on their website.* To ask parents to pay and

to have students undertaking special preparations to sit an American test is certainly not an even-handed, fair way to identify gifted students. Furthermore, the American test suggested is verbal and numerical, without a perceptual element. Perceptual reasoning is probably very important, particularly for future scientists, and it is also the least culturally-biased measure of aptitude. We understand that when Warwick appoint a permanent Director these problems will be addressed.

#### Why label students as, for example, 'gifted'?

One reason is because the government is encouraging schools to do so, but a more important reason is to acknowledge that some students who may not currently be achieving very highly, perhaps could do so. To make such an assertion is to make a distinction between **aptitude**, a general set of abilities of diverse nature including numerical, verbal, and perceptual abilities, and **achievement**, which whilst it requires ability can be substantially altered by effort on the part of the student or effective teaching on the part of the school. Particularly in view of the agenda for widening participation in universities, it is important that students who might not currently be putting out much effort, but who have high abilities, are identified and do get to university.

#### How should mentally gifted students be identified?

We recommend that students with high aptitudes should be identified strictly by the use of aptitude tests. To use teacher recommendations has been found in much research to result in inconsistencies from school to school and teacher to teacher. This is inevitable when students present such different pictures of themselves to different teachers in some cases and since aptitude does not necessarily show up in the same way in all subjects. Aptitudes are themselves quite diverse and hard to identify without an objective test of reasonable length.

#### What about talented students? The DfES presumes that talents will be

identified by achievement tests in art and design, music, PE, and/or performing arts such as dance and drama. This may be reasonable and we will concentrate our efforts on the identification of **mentally gifted** students and leave the identification of **talented students** to schools. However, in future Issues we will share some work being undertaken with a Local Education Authority that does address the identification of 'talented' students.

#### Will students be damaged by being labelled 'gifted'?

This is a possibility, and we would welcome your observations on this issue.

Unfortunately, despite years of special programmes for gifted students in the United States, there has been no substantial study of the impact these programmes have on students' careers, their self-concepts, their relationships with their peers, nor on the impact it has on students who are tested but not identified as gifted.

We are concerned about these issues and we are actively putting in place a research programme to begin to provide some answers. **We would welcome your comments on this topic.** Case histories are always interesting and, of course, should be anonymous. We would also like to know if you would find a web-based forum of interest and/or a newsletter on gifted and talented.

Since many Independent schools are selective the Independent sample is heavily skewed towards high ability

For more information or comment about this article please contact

Professor C. T. Fitz-Gibbon  
email : [c.t.fitz-gibbon@cem.dur.ac.uk](mailto:c.t.fitz-gibbon@cem.dur.ac.uk)

CEM Centre  
Mountjoy Research Centre 4,  
University of Durham  
Stockton Road  
Durham  
DH1 3UZ

Fax: (0191) 374 1900

<http://cem.dur.ac.uk/>