

Intellectual Assessment of Exceptionally and Profoundly Gifted Children

by

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Ringing the Bell Curve: Saving and Surviving Amazing Kids (forthcoming)

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Exceptionally and profoundly gifted children...have been found to have qualitatively and quantitatively unique cognitive characteristics that differentiate them from intellectually gifted children performing at lower ranges of intellectually gifted ability (i.e., an IQ between 130 and 160). Of the estimated three million intellectually gifted students served in the United States,¹ there are probably no more than a few thousand who can be classified as exceptionally or profoundly gifted. The average educator will never personally encounter such a student, but the news media in every community will periodically cover an exceptionally or profoundly gifted child: a nine-month-old who names objects and uses words; an eighteen-month-old who knows the alphabet; a three-year-old who is able to read more than children's books;...or a ten-year-old who graduates from high school.

Current Intelligence Tests

In spite of their many limitations, measures of intelligence remain the most common and effective way by which children can be identified as intellectually gifted. Intelligence tests should always be used in conjunction with other evaluation methods, because they reveal little about the functional living skills, drive and motivation, and

¹ U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. (1996). *Digest of education statistics 1996* (NCES 96-133). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

social-emotional characteristics that are also important in predicting life success. Testing is only one component of a full evaluation that will help parents and educators provide appropriate support for a gifted child's needs. Only a few intelligence tests, specifically those listed below, are commonly used to identify intellectually gifted children.

Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Form L-M (SB L-M)

The SB L-M remains unmatched in its breadth of procedures and is probably truer to the changing nature of cognitive-intellectual abilities over development than any test subsequently published. Its unique age-scaled format and liberal discontinue rules enabled testing to continue far beyond one's chronological age, thereby providing examinees with an opportunity to demonstrate considerably advanced competencies.

I consider this test to be preferred only after an examinee has approached the ceiling of a more recently normed test (such as the WISC-III or SB-IV, or any of the tests described below), as a method of resolving just how far above the ceiling the examinee's true abilities may lie. When reported in an appropriately conservative manner (because of its limitations), the ratio IQ approach provides the only available means of estimating intelligence in exceptionally and profoundly gifted ranges that has any prior foundations in research (e.g., the work of Terman and Hollingworth).

Levels of giftedness

To effectively serve the needs of exceptionally gifted children, an intelligence test must have sufficient discrimination at the upper ranges of ability. It must differentiate levels of giftedness up to and including the exceptionally and profoundly gifted.

Measures such as the WISC-III and the SB-IV reach their upper limits at about 155 to 160. The Stanford-Binet L-M (SB L-M) permits the calculation of an IQ beyond 160 (using an adjustment of the formula $MA/CA \times 100$). As I have mentioned, this method may be criticized, but it formed the foundation for identification of the exceptionally gifted.

Toward the future

Assessment science and the publishers of intelligence tests still have a considerable distance to go before the special needs of exceptionally and profoundly gifted children can be identified and formally measured. The professional who wants to measure intellectual ability in these children finds a striking shortage of options; the SB L-M represents the only testing approach with a relevant research history. New promise may be offered by the WJ III Cog and the upcoming fifth edition of the Stanford-Binet, but these tests either are unproven in their ability to serve the exceptionally gifted or are not yet available.

Several research initiatives need to be undertaken. The first is a clear-cut and unequivocal validation with contemporary intelligence measures, preferably those that emphasize *g*, of the extraordinary intellectual gifts of exceptionally and profoundly gifted children. Few researchers since Terman and Hollingworth have had the assessment tools capable of identifying and serving these children. Second, there needs to be an examination of the ways in which intelligence tests with inadequate ceilings (e.g., the Wechsler intelligence scales) inadequately represent the abilities of children who are thought to be exceptionally and profoundly gifted. Given that intelligence tests measure a variety of constructs, it will be important to identify which of the contemporary tests

provide the most meaningful information about a gifted child's learning abilities and special needs. A comparative study of intelligence tests with exceptionally and profoundly gifted children, along with objective measures of their capacity to predict successful functioning in everyday life, may be necessary in order to identify the best tests to use for assessment purposes. Finally, intelligence tests with adequate ceilings must be administered in conjunction with achievement tests and other measures of special abilities with adequate ceilings, in order to begin the process of arriving at clear and accurate identification of subtypes of gifted children with learning disabilities and other comorbid conditions. It is only with the right tools that we can measure the unique gifts and special needs of exceptionally and profoundly gifted children.

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