

Redefining Giftedness for a New Century: Shifting the Paradigm

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).

The development of ability or talent is a lifelong process. It can be evident in young children as exceptional performance on tests and/or other measures of ability or as a rapid rate of learning, compared to other students of the same age, or in actual achievement in a domain. As individuals mature through childhood to adolescence, however, achievement and high levels of motivation in the domain become the primary characteristics of their giftedness. Various factors can either enhance or inhibit the development and expression of abilities.

Implications for Educators. Exceptionally capable learners are children who progress in learning at a significantly faster pace than do other children of the same age, often resulting in high levels of achievement. Such children are found in all segments of society. Beginning in early childhood, their optimal development requires differentiated educational experiences, both of a general nature and, increasingly over time, targeting those domains in which they demonstrate the capacity for high levels of performance. Such differentiated educational experiences consist of adjustments in the level, depth, and pacing of curriculum and outside-of-school programs to match their current levels of achievement and learning rates. Marked differences among gifted learners sometimes require additional and unusual interventions. Additional support services include more comprehensive assessment, counseling, parent education, and specially designed programs, including those typically afforded older students.

Barriers to attainment. Some gifted individuals with exceptional aptitude may not demonstrate outstanding levels of achievement due to environmental circumstances such as limited opportunities to learn as a result of poverty, discrimination, or cultural barriers; due to physical or learning disabilities; or due to motivational or emotional problems. Identification of these students will need to emphasize aptitude rather than relying only on demonstrated achievement. Such students will need challenging programs and additional support services if they are to develop their ability and realize optimal levels of performance.

Adulthood. As individuals transition to appropriate higher education and specialized training, and eventually to independence, they will profit from targeted guidance and support. Continuing high levels of exceptional adult performance will require, in addition to advanced knowledge and skills, high levels of motivation, perseverance, and creative problem-solving. Exceptionally capable adults are among those most likely to contribute to the advancement of a society and its scientific, humanistic, and social goals.

Implications for Policy Makers. Policy Makers should be aware that the gifted persons described here will comprise a large proportion of the leadership of the next generation in the arts, sciences, letters, politics, etc. If we provide this group with a mediocre education we doom ourselves to a mediocre society a generation forward. Educators know how to provide an excellent education for these students, but it will not happen by accident or benign neglect.

Policy Makers control the allocation of resources, and trained educators of exceptionally capable students know how to use these resources constructively. These should be brought into alignment to the benefit of all. Does this mean that we tear these scarce resources from other students including those with disabilities or living in troubled circumstance? No, quite the contrary. A moral society must care for and enhance the development of all of its citizens. Specific investment in the gifted is an important way to build a society that can help solve the society's needs with creative innovations and organizations.

Board Approval

Approved by the Board (March 2010). The original content, research, and drafts of this position paper were developed and assembled by individuals with expertise in the area. This final version represents discussions, revisions, and conclusions of the NAGC Board to reflect the national policy position of NAGC.

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The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of parents, teachers, educators, other professionals, and community leaders who unite to address the unique needs of children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents as well as those children who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.

All position papers are approved by the NAGC Board of Directors and remain consistent with the organization's position that education in a democracy must respect the uniqueness of all individuals, the broad range of cultural diversity present in our society, and the similarities and differences in learning characteristics that can be found within any group of students. NAGC Position Papers can be found at www.nagc.org.