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TEACHING Gifted Children

IN TODAY'S Preschool AND Primary Classrooms

Identifying, Nurturing,
and Challenging
Children Ages 4–9

Joan Franklin Smutny
Sally Yahnke Walker
Ellen I. Honeck

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Praise for Teaching Gifted Children in Today's Preschool and Primary Classrooms

"A wonderful new book that contains a vast amount of helpful, practical information for anyone interested in gifted education.

It will serve as a great resource for teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents of young gifted students who want to learn new and innovative ways to spark imagination and learning."

— Patricia Hollingsworth, Ed.D., director,
University School at the University of Tulsa

"A 'must have' for every early childhood and primary teacher's educational library. Through their collective wisdom and clear understanding of the needs of the *whole* gifted child, the authors provide a plethora of strategies . . . that any primary teacher could use the next day with his/her gifted and talented students."

— Julie A. Brua, Ed.D., assistant superintendent,
Curriculum and Instruction; director of the Gifted and Talented
Education Program for Aptakisic-Tripp School District No. 102, Illinois

"I enthusiastically applaud this update of the already impressive original version. Teachers will find this book both a classic and an inspiration toward teaching with creativity and innovation in today's classroom."

— Dina Brulles, Ph.D., director of Gifted Education,
Paradise Valley Unified School District, Arizona

"This engaging and informative book is filled with current information on meeting the needs of young children with gifts and talents. Practical strategies and examples are given for implementing the ideas . . . a must-have resource for educators and families."

— Mary Ruth Coleman, Ph.D., senior scientist,
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute,
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

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Dedication

To all the teachers and families who shared their lives so generously with us and inspired this revision. And to all the young gifted children in our classrooms and homes who hunger for new discovery and creative challenge.

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Introduction

“A beetle has a real short life, but that’s okay. After it’s born, it mates and lays eggs, and the rest is free time.”

“I feel microscopic in the crowded hallways.”

“I wasn’t playing on the roof—I was seriously on the roof.”

Sound familiar? Who hasn’t delighted in hearing the wisdom of bright, creative young children like the six-year-olds who made these statements? Often, the choice of words, ideas, images, and phrases we hear from these gifted children are what we might more commonly associate with fourth, fifth, or sixth graders. Sometimes we can’t imagine how such sophisticated thoughts and vocabulary can come from children so young.

Some people may ask, “Can you really tell that a preschool- or primary-age child is gifted?” This question likely comes from past experiences. When programs for gifted learners were more prevalent than they are today, most schools did not assess students for special services until third or fourth grade. Some schools began to identify and address the abilities of highly able children as late as middle school or junior high. However, as teachers of young children, we know that the signs of giftedness can appear much earlier. Many of us have watched our students express their talents and abilities in ways that surprise and delight. A question about a rare mammal in Australia ignites a whole room of eager learners. An attempt to dramatize the movement of the planets amazes us.

Every September, we look at our new classes of young students and notice characteristics and behaviors that make some children stand out. The fact that we notice these girls and boys is important. What we do about them—and with them—is equally important. If we listen to them, we hear that their unique words, questions, observations, and interpretations continue to percolate. Every day, we observe their hunger to know more. And we are impelled to ask, as we do for every student, “What can I do for

them?” Working with young gifted learners brings its share of challenges, but it also brings adventure to the classroom.

Creativity and a Sense of Wonder

What inspires many of us to teach young learners is the open curiosity and delight they bring to our classrooms. Young children look upon the world with fresh eyes. Rachel Carson, marine biologist and founder of the American environmental movement, called this “the sense of wonder.”¹ She valued it above knowledge or skill as an inner force guiding the discoveries and awakening the passions of children in their earliest years of life. Without the sense of wonder, Carson claimed, the seeds of learning cannot flourish, and imagination and curiosity—once felt as a vital link to what children see, smell, hear, and touch—diminish. We educators can preserve children’s sense of wonder in our classrooms by using creativity to encourage children to look above, beyond, around, and into the fields they’re learning.

But few of us have time to think about the sense of wonder in our classrooms. We are consumed with the pressure to meet higher standards for more students and with concerns about how our districts measure their learning. Today’s preprimary and primary educators live in a different world from the one that existed when the first edition of this book, *Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom*, was published in 1997. Some teachers worry about forcing younger students to learn curriculum content that they used to explore at higher grades. And the increased use of testing has brought anxiety to some classrooms, as teachers wonder what will occur if their children’s year of in-depth, multidimensional learning and exploration does not result in high scores.

¹ Carson, Rachel. *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998): 54.

Despite the greater focus on minimum competency and content mastery in modern classrooms, we still find creativity to be the most effective way to enable even reluctant students to engage in, understand, express, and own new knowledge. We believe, as Rachel Carson did, that “it is more important to pave the way for the child to *want* to know [emphasis ours] than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.”² This edition of our book remains faithful to its original aim: to help you foster a creative classroom environment in which learning is interactive, process oriented, and nurturing to young children.

Teaching Young Gifted Children in a Standards-Driven Era

Teachers of young children today find themselves under unprecedented pressure to increase the academic achievement of their students regardless of the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and special learning needs to be addressed. Standardized testing, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), full-day kindergarten, and universal preK can provide more students access to good-quality education. But as teachers have told us, the term *good-quality education* often means “intensive academic education.” As standards rise, each grade has to master the curriculum of the one that follows; preK becomes kindergarten, kindergarten becomes first grade, and so forth.

Some schools offer ongoing support and resources for teachers and provide a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate curriculum. But in the large number of schools that do not, students (including the gifted) stand little chance of developing their potential. A focus on mandated standards in literacy and mathematics narrows the field of learning and inhibits growth and development for all young learners. The need for young children to explore ideas and themes across disciplines, to engage in projects using multiple media and materials—in essence, to create, experience, construct, imagine, and invent—goes unanswered in many early childhood and primary classrooms today. Since the first edition of this book was published, many schools have turned away from play, drama, music, movement, art, and exploration.

With tighter controls on their time and planning, teachers may adhere to a more rigid curriculum and a more structured setting; they may not evaluate student progress as they once did or adapt as creatively to individual learning needs.

Our intent in revising this book is to address the needs of teachers who currently face many demands in schools and who feel less free to offer creative choices for their students. Many gifted young children hunger for any opportunity to experience intellectual challenge, accomplishment, and delight in learning. They come to school brimming with excitement and curiosity about the world around them. Creativity preserves that world and enables teachers to target CCSS and any other articulated goals without feeling constrained by them. This book focuses on practical ways to identify and assess gifted learners, work with families, and ignite meaningful learning in a variety of subjects. What is more: the ideas in this book are creative and adaptable, so they apply to learners of all ability and knowledge levels.

In this new edition of our book, we'll share updated strategies and techniques that will help you identify the high-ability children in your classroom, encourage their talents, and help them grow. Typically, young gifted students come to us already *knowing* a great deal. Yet, regardless of their advanced knowledge, they enter our classrooms with intellectual and emotional needs that are universal: to be recognized, to be accepted, and to experience the challenge and joy of learning. To meet these children's needs, we need a curriculum that offers developmentally appropriate opportunities for challenge, discovery, mastery of new skills, and sharing of new knowledge.

Young gifted children—even four- and five-year-olds—are often hungry to make sense of the world in ways we may not expect from most preschoolers and early elementary students. These children have the desire to exercise and expand their minds intellectually and creatively. In our extensive work with highly able and talented children, we have found that the most effective approaches evolve in an environment that is rich in critical and imaginative thinking, one in which learning is an interactive process. We have also found that these approaches can be successfully implemented within the regular classroom, to the benefit of *all* children, through curriculum practices appropriate to each child's development.

In 1996, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) adopted the

² Carson. *The Sense of Wonder*: 56.

position statement “Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8.” In 2009, NAEYC published an updated version of this position statement.³ While not diverging from the fundamental commitment to teaching based on understanding how young children develop and learn, the new statement increased focus on the importance of doing more to address the achievement gap in the earliest years of school. It articulated ideas on a curriculum that would recognize and respond to the unique rate and pattern of each child’s learning and would work toward an integration of practices between preschool and the early elementary grades.

While the new 2009 NAEYC statement responds to more current realities and concerns of young children in the classroom, it merely complements earlier position statements. NAEYC proposes that developmentally appropriate practice includes the following key elements:

- **Creating a caring community of learners:** learning as an interactive process; supportive relationships fostered between teacher and students as well as among students; individual and group explorations; engaging, lively activities; rich variety of materials and resources; representations of children’s cultures, languages, and interests in the classroom
- **Teaching to enhance development and learning:** stimulation, direction, and support to ensure growth; knowledge of children and how to translate learning goals to students with specific developmental needs; creation of meaningful activities—creative, explorative—that involve them in learning experiences beyond mandated domains; differentiated complexity and challenge in response to students’ level of skill and knowledge
- **Planning curriculum to achieve important goals:** integration of children’s physical, emotional, social, and cognitive growth; adaptations to children’s developmental progress (based on teacher assessments), interests, and cultural and linguistic differences; mandated goals targeted

³The position statement is published in Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp, eds., *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8* (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2009). Write to NAEYC, 1313 L Street NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005, or call 1-800-424-2460. The position statement is also available at www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSDAP.pdf.

through careful sequencing and pace based on children’s needs, abilities, and knowledge; study that allows in-depth and cross-disciplinary focus

- **Assessing children’s development and learning:** ongoing assessment that measures children’s progress toward most important goals (developmentally and educationally); methods appropriate to age and range of differences in classroom (cultural, linguistic, and knowledge and ability levels); use of information from families; assessment of performance in a variety of contexts
- **Establishing reciprocal relationships with families:** collaborations that increase understanding and communication for the benefit of the children; shared responsibility and respect between teachers and families; deeper insight into the lives of individual children; greater awareness of family concerns and preferences and opportunities to link families with services for and information about children

In a nutshell, these principles underscore that to *teach* a child, you must *reach* the child. And the best way to reach the gifted children in your classroom is to design differentiated experiences that extend their creative and analytical thinking. Despite the increased demands for academic rigor and, in many classrooms, the loss of elements that once made early schooling so much more child-centered and flexible, preschool and primary grade teachers are among the most inventive educators around. Differentiation is not new to them! With the range of ability, readiness, and background in their rooms, they have to think on their feet and improvise. They notice that Abdi is struggling to read, but Marta is standing at the bookcase pulling out a book in the biography section. This edition provides strategies for developing and extending the abilities and talents of your gifted children that benefit all students in your class.

About This Book

In arranging the content of this new edition of *Teaching Gifted Children in Today’s Preschool and Primary Classrooms*, we’ve approached our task in much the same way you might approach yours as the school year begins and your program unfolds:

Chapter 1 helps you identify high-ability children in your classroom in an affirming way. It draws on the most current understanding of giftedness in

young children, focuses on talent development, and presents a range of strategies for gaining a more complete and accurate picture of what your students can do.

Chapter 2 explores the learning environment as the foundation for learning. It includes information on using brain research to set up the environment and using learning centers that draw on students' preferred learning modalities. We explain how to create a classroom setting that makes young children feel safe and also entices them to energetically and constructively pursue their interests.

Chapter 3 focuses on planning for curriculum and extending learning in response to the needs of high-ability children, who often know much or even most of what will be presented in the classroom for the entire year. With timely information and examples, we explain how you can use compacting, tiered groups, interest groups, and other strategies to expand students' learning opportunities and school success.

Chapter 4 explores creative, integrated approaches to the study of environment, history, and culture and provides up-to-date sources and materials. We detail specific strategies that will enhance the discovery process in these subject areas and describe activities you can use or adapt for your own classroom. All subject chapters aim to help teachers burdened by demands to raise academic achievement levels adapt and/or develop more freedom and flexibility in their classrooms.

Chapter 5 provides an exciting range of creative strategies for teaching language arts. Drawing on a wide range of visual art, dramatics, music, photography, film, video, and technologies as catalysts, we show how you can generate and sustain the imaginative process in young people, enabling them to produce original and creative work.

Chapter 6 offers a variety of original activities and strategies to help children imaginatively investigate mathematics and science through story making, design, role play, and other explorations. Up-to-date sources and information offer a wealth of ideas for engaging young gifted learners, including the use of technologies that promote greater interactivity.

Chapter 7 examines the use of standardized testing and looks at ways to determine what the young gifted child needs to know, how the child's needs can

be documented, and how to advance the child's skills and talents. It focuses on the effects of current testing practices on gifted young children, and clarifies the limitations of tests, the misunderstandings that can result from testing, and the vital importance of assessment through multiple measures. It also offers information on tests more suitable for gifted learners from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Chapter 8 discusses response to intervention (RTI), along with other techniques for enabling children with high ability to find consistent challenge, accomplishment, and growth through group work in the regular classroom.

Chapter 9 shows how you can build partnerships with parents that will enable you to gain support and assistance where you most need it. It includes ideas on reaching out to parents and working with them to provide the kind of learning experiences your gifted students need.

Chapter 10 presents the unique social and emotional characteristics and needs of young gifted children, offering perspectives that will broaden your understanding of the challenges and difficulties talented students commonly experience. The chapter focuses on understanding and fostering social and emotional characteristics in a positive way to help families, teachers, and students.

Chapter 11 investigates the experiences and needs of diverse populations among gifted learners, including children from minority cultures, talented girls and boys, and students who are twice exceptional. The chapter offers information on current demographic trends and strategies for responding to the demands of increasingly more diverse classrooms.

Each chapter includes a "Questions and Answers" section with responses to questions we commonly hear from educators.

References and Resources recommends useful books, periodicals, and other materials related to the chapter topic.

Appendix A lists and describes standardized tests that can be used to identify young gifted children.

Appendix B lists and describes resources for teachers.

Appendix C lists sources for gifted education materials.

The general bibliography, which lists sources we consulted in writing and revising the book, might also be of interest to you as an additional source of practical references for boosting your background in the many facets of teaching the gifted child.

The ideas we share with you in this book are wholly *doable*. They will work for your students, their families, and you. As you use them, you will offer the talented and bright young children in your classroom many wonderful opportunities to:

- discover new possibilities for themselves
- delight in fresh challenges and the excitement of learning
- think of school as an exhilarating adventure of intellectual and aesthetic discovery
- thrive in a setting you have created to respond to their individual needs

In our experience of teaching, counseling, consulting, and talking with thousands of children, parents, and teachers, we have found that early awareness and knowledge of a child's unique abilities will make for a highly motivating educational experience throughout the school year and the child's school career. At the heart of it, we know that all children are looking for a conscious sense of their own value. A priority of this book is to affirm children's self-worth. We are certain that the strategies included here will create an environment that will benefit each student. In using these strategies, you can take pride in the knowledge that you're doing what you need to do for *every* child in your classroom: providing an appropriate educational opportunity for growth and success in school and life.

Just as a poem comes alive when it is read aloud, the activities and suggestions we've developed and described in this book will come alive for you as you try them out in your classroom. These ideas will enhance your work with all your students while enabling you to support the unique needs of the young gifted children in your charge. This book will also show you how to encourage family members, community members, and colleagues to share their time, skills, and expertise in developing classroom projects to broaden the realm of learning possibilities.

We believe that the most exciting and dynamic teaching in the world often happens in preschool and early elementary classrooms. No one is more sensitive to new ideas than the preprimary and primary teachers who devote themselves to working creatively with young children and who preserve

their own sense of wonder and joy in learning. We know, too, that as one of those teachers, you welcome exhilarating challenges that will spark fresh inspiration in you and in all your students.

This book is designed to be that spark: to enable you and each student in your classroom to discover a new, individualized level of critical and imaginative thinking—to take greater risks, to dare more, and to attempt more. Young children love to stretch beyond the limits of conventional knowledge. Their natural responsiveness to creative catalysts and hands-on, participatory activities will ignite their enthusiasm, extending their discovery and inventiveness.

The impact of this book will arise from how you use it to expand your own repertoire of teaching strategies, especially in the face of greater expectations at the school and district levels. Our hope is that it will embolden you to explore new ways to nurture the development of your young students and to share in the joy and wonder of creative learning in different fields.

Let this second edition of *Teaching Gifted Children in Today's Preschool and Primary Classrooms* be a springboard for you. We encourage you to experiment and improvise with the book's insights and strategies, adapting them to the unique needs, interests, and talents of the children in your classroom. As you do this, many of your own ideas will emerge. Teaching and learning in your classroom will take on a new dimension—a stimulating climate of thinking and discovering, creating and originating.

We'd like to hear about how you use the activities in this book and about any new ideas our book generates for you. Please write to us at:

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An adventure awaits us all!

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CHAPTER 1

Identifying the Young Gifted Child

Emily was a highly verbal child. She asked lots of questions and wondered how the world worked. She had a difficult time starting a task because she would much rather be engaged in conversation. Emily was involved in her own ideas and appeared absorbed in her own thoughts. When the teacher was providing directions, the classroom distracted her. Tasks provided to her were difficult for her to complete—she wanted to know the purpose and wanted to move past the directions to adding her own ideas.

During center time and free exploration, Emily directed the other classmates on what they should do and how they should play. She would get frustrated with her peers when they did not want to play the same things that she wanted to play or when they didn't want to play a game or activity the way she thought it should be done. She appeared bossy and uncooperative

When Emily was on the playground, she often sought out older children to play with. Relationships with these students appeared to be much different from her relationships with her classroom peers. The teacher was concerned that Emily would not have

same-age friends and was frustrated with Emily's lack of compliance on assigned classroom tasks.

This teacher struggled to engage Emily in classroom learning. In the preschool and primary years, most teachers are trained to focus on helping children acquire social skills and meet readiness markers. Yet, in this situation, one thing was clear: Emily's creativity and intellect were not being appreciated or developed in school. To help Emily experience learning and fit comfortably into the class, this teacher needed to recognize Emily's giftedness and look for ways to accommodate her unique learning needs.

On Being a Pioneer Teacher

Giftedness can be an uncomfortable topic for many adults. Many people have strong reactions when they think a teacher is favoring one child as intrinsically "better" than another. Much of the problem here lies in perceptions of giftedness. In the classroom and

at home, *each* person develops with some qualities that are similar to those of other people and some qualities that are unique. Gifted children are not *better* than other children; they are *different* from other children. But it is vital to understand that a gifted child has unique characteristics and learning needs that should be fostered. These unique needs are important to recognize and program for both at school and at home.

Teachers who recognize and identify giftedness in the earliest grades are pioneers. Usually children are not formally identified as gifted by a school system until the third or fourth grade. This can be too late if the children's learning environments have not met their unique needs.

Why Is Early Identification Important?

Children's brains are highly sensitive and susceptible to new experiences; this is especially true up through about age five. If young children don't receive appropriate recognition and response during this sensitive period, potential skills may deteriorate. By fourth grade, some of the most intelligent children are resentful of waiting for the other kids to catch up. These high-ability students often find little meaning in a school day and may have fallen into a pattern of low performance. Since they're required to do only general classwork that may be far below their ability level, some have come to think of themselves as "the best." At times, they are bored and unchallenged, which may lead to depression or anger. These emotions may be turned inward, or they may be expressed outwardly—most often as behavior problems. The earliest school years are critical for finding gifted children before their eagerness for and joy in learning have been conditioned out of them.

Recognizing and rewarding giftedness in young children helps develop their confidence, self-esteem, and enthusiasm for learning. When children are encouraged to use their special abilities for worthwhile results, the outcomes are generally positive.

To recognize giftedness, we need to notice and accommodate ability and interest with appropriate opportunities. If parents and teachers respond enthusiastically to a child's exceptional abilities and interests, these qualities will continue to be expressed. A young child who is provided with appropriately challenging, stimulating schoolwork

can show substantial gains in achievement, motivation, and self-concept.

It is within your power to catch these children before they learn to hide their abilities or decide that school isn't worth their effort. You have the opportunity to become a pioneer in identifying and cultivating giftedness among the young children you teach.

What Are You Looking For?

Determining what it means to be gifted is a challenge. Several definitions of giftedness exist. The definitions are based on various intelligence theories, schools of thought, and perspectives in gifted education.

DEFINITIONS OF GIFTEDNESS

In 1972, the Marland Report by the U.S. Commissioner of Education to the U.S. Congress defined gifted children as children "who by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas, singly or in combination:

- general intellectual ability
- specific academic aptitude
- creative or productive thinking
- leadership ability
- visual and performing arts
- psychomotor ability"¹

More contemporary theories reach beyond cognitive ability to describe giftedness in broader terms. Joseph Renzulli's three-ring conception of giftedness, Abraham Tannenbaum's psychosocial model of giftedness, Robert Sternberg's triarchic theory of intelligence, and Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences are some of the common theories and definitions embraced by professionals in the field of giftedness.

The three-ring conception of giftedness designed by Joseph Renzulli is based on the idea that an individual has three factors that converge in order to create the potential for creative, productive giftedness.

¹ S. P. Marland Jr. *Education of the Gifted and Talented: Report to the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Commissioner of Education, Volume 1* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972).

The three factors include above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment. Renzulli also addresses the idea of schoolhouse giftedness, or high technical competence and skill level. Ideally, however, teachers following the Renzulli model would focus on the idea of creative, productive giftedness with high levels of innovation and expression.²

Tannenbaum's psychosocial model of giftedness includes five factors. These factors are general intelligence, special aptitudes, nonintellective factors, environmental influences, and chance or luck. These factors converge, thus leading to great performance or great productivity from the individual.³

Yale psychology professor Robert Sternberg's theory defines intelligence by how it is applied in real-life situations—through intelligent behaviors. As indicators of giftedness, Sternberg looks for effective approaches to both identifying and solving problems and for the ability to make the best use of an environment.⁴

In his 1983 book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner first identified seven intelligences: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.⁵ In later research he added a naturalistic intelligence and is considering the possibility of a ninth intelligence: existential giftedness.⁶

In 2012, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) reexamined its definition of giftedness and released the following statement: "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 percent 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)."⁷

² Joseph S. Renzulli. *The Enrichment Triad Model: A Guide for Developing Defensible Programs for the Gifted and Talented* (Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press, 1977). This is the initial work introducing the enrichment triad model and the three-ring conception of giftedness.

³ Abraham Tannenbaum. "Giftedness: A Psychosocial Approach." *Conceptions of Giftedness* edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Janet E. Davidson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁴ Robert J. Sternberg. *Beyond IQ: A Triarchic Theory of Human Intelligence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). This book provides information for understanding and appreciating intelligence as demonstrated through intelligent behavior.

Using the NAGC definition, the task for educators is to recognize the student's optimal development and provide differentiated educational experiences targeted to the domain(s) of strength. The purpose of this approach is to focus on strengths instead of weaknesses, which in turn will minimize the barriers to identification. Barriers to identification can include socioeconomic status and access to early education experiences, acceleration opportunities, and appropriately trained educators. Focusing on children's strengths provides teachers the opportunity to meet and challenge children in their strength areas while still addressing their areas of weakness.

With many children, particularly those from minority cultures, it's important to be sensitive to the varied emphases and expressions that special abilities can take. Knowing the characteristics of giftedness and understanding the various definitions of giftedness will help educators observe all children with a wider lens and more easily recognize exceptional skills and interests.

Defining giftedness is a challenge, because no two children—including gifted children—are the same. Regardless of which definition you or your school or district prefer, it is important to identify the characteristics of giftedness that your students manifest. The characteristics are identifiable in children at a young age. The characteristics will be present no matter what; the definition just helps you focus on those that are the most important for your setting.

It's exciting and rewarding to be the person who makes a difference to exceptional children and their families. You can make your classroom a safe place that has enough understanding and flexibility for children to exhibit the unusual, idiosyncratic, and even esoteric qualities that make them extraordinary. In doing this, you invite gifted children to identify themselves.

⁵ Howard Gardner. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). This is a provocative exploration of intelligence that broadens our conceptions of giftedness.

⁶ Howard Gardner. *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

⁷ National Association for Gifted Children. "Redefining Giftedness for a New Century: Shifting the Paradigm" position statement, March 2010. www.nagc.org.

ASYNCHRONOUS DEVELOPMENT

Many gifted children are out of sync with developmentally expected behavior for their age. To find these children, you need to look beyond what is usually considered “normal” and into the individual child. Consider this explanation:

“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.”⁸

Please reread the passage quoted above and think about how much it refers to qualities that are immeasurable and emotional. You may find that you need to adjust your expectations for children’s mental and chronological ages. The example of Emily at the beginning of this chapter illustrates this need. Rather than trying harder to fit Emily into the classroom structure, the teacher might win more enthusiastic cooperation by expanding opportunities that challenge and engage Emily. The fact that Emily is the same chronological age as most of her other classmates doesn’t mean that her mind functions at the same level. As a second-grade boy once said, “What does size have to do with what grade you’re in? Shouldn’t it be about how much you know?”

ENIGMATIC BEHAVIOR

Gifted children can be difficult to understand. They differ from one another more than they are alike. For any trait that might describe one gifted child, the opposite will define another. Defining giftedness is like trying to describe a symphony; giftedness, like a symphony, encompasses a spectrum of qualities. Children with the same IQ will have different interests, personalities, abilities, and temperaments. Each gifted child is intricate, paradoxical, and complex; the brain that drives this child intensifies everything the child does. This intensity gives energy to intelligence and abilities, heightening and expanding these capacities even more.

⁸ Linda Kreger Silverman. “The Gifted Individual.” *Counseling the Gifted and Talented* edited by Linda Kreger Silverman (Denver: Love Publishing Company, 1993): 3.

Some aspects of giftedness present a real challenge to a teacher’s traditional training. For example, astounding precocity can appear with gaps in physical, social, and emotional development. At times, it’s just not convenient to accommodate a gifted child’s special needs. To meet such challenges, you’ll need to keep foremost in your mind the goal of supporting *all* children’s growth and learning.

SHIFTING PASSIONS

It can be hard to keep up with a gifted child’s ever-evolving passions. The passion may be dinosaurs, then creative cooking, then a computer game, then slime mold propagation experiments—until the child moves on to astronomy.

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

It is important to recognize that the characteristics of giftedness can manifest themselves both positively and negatively. Negative manifestations are more difficult and challenging; however, they do not render a child less gifted. It is easy for teachers to overlook exceptional abilities and instead focus on problems of immaturity, socialization, and discipline. Parents, too, may be inclined to focus on the perceived negatives of giftedness. As a result, adults may sometimes misdiagnose giftedness as a behavioral disorder. The table on page 10 provides a sampling of potential benefits and strengths as well as challenges that can come with the characteristics of giftedness. This is not meant to be an inclusive list.⁹

Getting to Know Your Students

How might you begin to see a child’s passion? Giftedness goes beyond the confines of a classroom. To learn what excites a gifted child’s curiosity and imagination, you need to look into the child. Here are some tools you can use to get to know your students better.

⁹ Barbara Clark. *Growing Up Gifted: Developing the Potential of Children at Home and at School* (Hoboken, NJ: Pearson, 2012). This classic text familiarizes educators with information and processes for understanding and teaching gifted children. And Gary Davis, Sylvia Rimm, and Del Siegle. *Education of the Gifted and Talented* (Hoboken, NJ: Pearson, 2010). This textbook focuses on the history of gifted education, definitions, characteristics, and programming.

Characteristics of Giftedness: Potential Benefits and Challenges*		
<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Potential Benefits</i>	<i>Potential Challenges</i>
Long attention span and intense concentration	Long periods of uninterrupted work time; depth of exploration in personal passions and interests	Transitions may be difficult; ignores others or activities
Preference for older playmates	Finds peers that have a similar style of play or passion for a topic	Older peers may not be easily accessible; exposure to content that may not be developmentally appropriate
Early and extensive vocabulary	Able to participate in advanced conversation; exploration of word play	May use words to manipulate; dominates conversations and discussions
Excellent memory	Remembers facts, previously taught or encountered information	Frustrated with repetition; remembers everything
Extreme curiosity	Real-world learning opportunities and applications connect to various areas of learning	Excessive interests; asks embarrassing questions
High activity level and unusual alertness	Likes to learn through movement	Frustrated with inactivity; may appear hyperactive
Rapid learning ability	Rapid pace of instruction; limited repetition	Impatient with others; frustrated with perceived inactivity
Excellent sense of humor	Able to understand puns and playful language	Peers may misunderstand the humor; may use sarcasm (which is often hurtful)
Keen sense of observation	Joy and recognition in little changes	Nothing goes unnoticed
High degree of sensitivity	Ability to understand various aspects of information	Sensitive to feedback or criticism; becomes overwhelmed (sensorial)
Abstract reasoning	Able to focus on bigger picture and not just the small details	Continues to question; wants to know more and why

*Barbara Clark. *Growing Up Gifted* (Hoboken, NJ: Pearson, 2012). And Gary Davis, Sylvia Rimm, and Del Siegle. *Education of the Gifted and Talented* (Hoboken, NJ: Pearson, 2010).

Interviews

One of the best ways to learn how to motivate a child is to have a conversation with the child. Ask the child questions about likes, dislikes, interests, passions, feelings, family, friends, school, and learning. The child's answers will give you insights that will help you differentiate lessons and activities to make them engaging and meaningful to each child.

Early in the year and as often as you are able, create time for a short interview session with each student in your class. Tell your students that you want to get to know them and will be spending some special time with each of them.

A few days before you begin interviewing students, send home a copy of the family letter titled

“Your Child’s Pictures” (page 18). When you schedule a child’s interview, ask the child to bring about six photographs or pictures to share with you. (These are requested in the family letter.) This contribution gives the child a personal stake in the meeting, which enriches the discussion. Usually children have a wonderful time selecting or drawing pictures, and so have an initial positive association with your meeting. They also have some control over the image of themselves that they present to you.

This one-on-one time with you can have an enormous impact on the child and on your teacher-student relationship. The child feels more valued and liked by you. You are likely to see some marvelous ripple effects later in your classroom. Feeling liked

by a teacher is one of the most important elements influencing children's school success.

Here are some conversation starters and questions that might help you structure your student interviews:

- What are some things that you do best?
- What are some things that you like to do?
- What are some things that are hard for you to do?
- What do you like best in school? Why?
- What don't you like in school? Why?
- What do you wish you could change to make school better for you?
- What do you like to play or do (such as a game, activity, or sport) outside of school?
- What are some things you would like to be and do when you are grown up?
- If you had three wishes that could come true, what would they be?

Portfolios

Another excellent way to identify young gifted students is to collect and examine evidence of giftedness by creating portfolios. A portfolio is a collection of products and observations about the child. It reaches beyond the confines of a classroom, integrating what the child is capable of at home and elsewhere, too.

Portfolios provide *authentic assessment*—evidence of actual witnessed behaviors. Such evidence is valuable in determining instructional plans, especially for young gifted children. Portfolio assessment has many advantages. It:

- validates your observations and hunches about a child
- enables you to talk more decisively about your plans with parents, guardians, caregivers, and support staff
- builds a concrete bridge between you and family members so that each can see what the other is talking about
- helps you document and evaluate the child's progress
- guides you to a more child-centered and responsive curriculum
- broadens your ideas and the choices you have to offer to all the children in your class
- becomes a learning tool for you by helping you identify giftedness in other students
- creates a source of pride and accomplishment for the child

Another advantage of portfolio assessment is that it gives you a means to find talents that may not be evident when children “perform” in front of other students. A portfolio can help you identify advanced or unique abilities in children who are culturally different from the majority of students. A child who feels different from most others in the class might be reluctant to directly reveal unusual abilities that could further emphasize difference. However, when children work and play uninhibitedly, their special gifts are likely to become apparent.

Portfolio work samples can be selected by the teacher, the student, or both. The materials selected should document both the process and the products of the child's work in order to demonstrate growth. In other words, not all materials should be final products; some should be drafts in various forms. When creating a portfolio, focus on the growth and strengths of the child.

NOTE STRENGTHS

Collect evidence of gifted behaviors and characteristics. Create a file for each child that includes succinct anecdotal statements of notable strengths. Aim for one entry a week. Yes, this takes time, but it's well worth it. Most teachers find that this process improves their perceptions of students. Equally important, when you look for and interpret behaviors as exceptional abilities, you're likely to get a payoff from your students, too. Children will be aware that you are watching for and responding to strengths. A positive reaction from students is a natural outcome.

Because expressions of giftedness vary among children and cultures, you will be looking for and noting evidence that corresponds with some characteristics of giftedness. Use the “Checklist of My Child's Strengths” (pages 22–23) as a guide, and also consider the following categories.

Use of language (early and extensive vocabulary):

Things to note include vocabulary range, precision in word usage, and sentence complexity. Example: “Maya asked if she would be ‘permitted’ to take home her project ‘in the foreseeable future.’”

Level of questioning (extreme curiosity): Is there more to the child's questions than the usual who, what, where, when, and why? Do the questions show depth of understanding or an unusual level of complexity? Example: “Luís asked if there was another two-dimensional universe beyond this one.”

Problem-solving strategies (generating original ideas): How does the child attack difficult or novel problems? Does he persist? Does he seem to have a system or strategy for solving the problem? Can the child change his thinking if his strategy is not working? Example: "Bobby found answers when he had manipulatives and visuals to guide his learning."

Depth of information (rapid learning ability): Sometimes a child is a profound expert in an area. This can indicate a high level of curiosity, resourcefulness, and understanding. It also points to an excellent memory. Example: "Grace was able to explain the theory of extinction using several views."

Breadth of information (excellent memory): Sometimes a child is interested in everything. A child like this has a variety of interests and also an excellent long-term memory. Example: "I offered a choice of watercolors or colored pencils, and T.J. asked for the acrylic paints we used several months ago, because he liked their vivid colors."

Creativity (thinking outside the box): Is the child original in her creations? Can she elaborate on simple details? Are there instances in which you see creative or expressive movement, art, dramatization, or music making? Are any examples unusual for a child of this age? Example: "Shantelle makes her own products by reimagining materials and using them in different ways."

Focus on or absorption in a task (task persistence): When working on a task or problem, is the child so engrossed that he's unaware of all else that is going on around him? Are there times when the child doesn't hear that it's time to pick up? Does the child resist distractions? Can the child tune out others? Example: "Harry gets so involved with his projects that I sometimes need to sit down next to him and speak directly to him to interrupt his focused concentration."

Profound interest in existential and spiritual questions (moral development): Some children's thoughts and questions are intensely spiritual. They express a deep concern with the existential reasons for things. Example: "Clara said, 'It doesn't matter that I was born because Mommy would have had another little girl that she would have loved just as much as me, so why was I born?'"

Self-evaluation (perfectionism): Does the child appear to have an inner set of standards that he sets for himself? Is the child self-critical or impatient with his ability from time to time? Is he sensitive? Example: "Maruf revised his neighborhood map four times because he couldn't proportion the spaces to accommodate the elaborate details he envisioned."

Preference for complexity or novelty (abstract thinking): Does the child prefer to work on tasks that are difficult or challenging, rather than on simple ones? Given a choice, would the child choose an unusual or complicated game instead of an easy one? Example: "It's hard for Mei to find playmates at recess because she comes up with play ideas so complicated that the other children get confused and walk away."

Ability to synthesize, interpret, and imagine (making connections): Another way to collect information for your notes is by reading simple, lavishly illustrated stories and asking students questions about the pictures. Use questions that require creative imagination, such as: "What else could the dog be thinking?" or "What might Kai be doing if he lived on the planet Mars?" Listen for and make note of:

- elaborate vocabulary
- use of contextual clues
- logical reasoning to arrive at answers
- integration of factual knowledge
- intense emotional involvement in answers
- vivid imagination

OBSERVE SENSIBILITY

When you are creating portfolios, observe *sensibility* as well as sense. Sensibility is a child's capacity to be involved with something. It is a deep, internal, emotional response to what other children might not even notice. With gifted children, things matter a lot. Catching a snowflake summons up a keen, intense response. Learning how long it would take to travel to Jupiter evokes awe and excitement.

You can focus on sensibility by observing children and asking yourself: How acute are Kavon's feelings when he sees frost patterns on the windows? Is Libby totally immersed in stacking the blocks? Does Brendan talk to the books he organizes? Does Rachel anxiously try to find some food when she sees the guinea pig's dish empty?

At the end of her kindergarten year, five-year-old Katja's teacher-created portfolio included the following:

- photocopies of her work on math puzzles in workbooks brought from home
- samples of her paper folding in elaborate and inventive three-dimensional shapes
- the teacher's summaries of conversations with classmates demonstrating Katja's efforts to intervene as a peacemaker
- notes on the teacher's observation that Katja often chooses to play by herself with blocks and boxes, creating her own involved world of shapes and scenarios
- Photographs of her "block world," dramatic play interactions, and math problems solved through manipulatives
- drawings done at the beginning, middle, and end of the year

It also included the teacher's summary note:

"Katja's fine motor development and social progress are well documented. The math puzzles in the workbooks she brought from home and worked on during her free play time established that her math level is several grades higher than what will be offered in first grade. Katja appears to enjoy working alone, yet she is exceptionally sensitive to other children's needs and feelings. It is likely that Katja is a visual-spatial learner who learns best when concepts are shown to her and when she is manipulating materials. Her use of expressive language is developmentally appropriate."

CHILD-CREATED PORTFOLIOS

Portfolios that you compile are one kind of ongoing assessment. Another valuable window on a student's talents, abilities, and growth is a portfolio created and maintained *by the child*. Child-created portfolios help you foster children's passion for learning and gain insights into how children view themselves and their work.

Provide a space, folder, box, or bag for each child to use to collect favorite and special work. Encourage children to label their containers (example: "Mikiko's 'I Did It!' Collection") and decorate them however they wish using photos, drawings, or artistic designs.

You may want to make the initial selection for this portfolio. Start with a standard sample of a piece of work that everyone in the class has done, originating in the curriculum and grounded in instruction. This first example gives you a baseline from which to judge children's ability relative to their classmates' growth. From there, invite children to select the work they want to save, using criteria they have established. Guide children who need assistance in determining the criteria. They might select work that is special to them or that they feel represents their best efforts. The best portfolios are the ones that are created when students feel the importance of gathering and sharing their work. A helpful way to organize this process is to identify a space in the classroom for portfolio work. A file box with a hanging file for each child is a space-efficient way to house the portfolios. Not all work samples will fit into a hanging file, so you may need to take photographs of them or find an alternative location.

When children enter pieces of work in their portfolios, have them explain why they selected these particular items. They can write their explanations on attached notes or dictate them for you or another student to transcribe, as in this example: "I included this sheet because I got every answer wrong, but I learned a lot. This was really hard but I now know each right answer."

With child-created portfolios, each child has a special personal space in the classroom. This communicates to the children that they can make decisions. It lets them see that their work has value. It also encourages them to think critically about what they have done. At the end of the year, you have an illustration of each child's development—from the child's point of view.

Dynamic Assessment

In looking for learning potential—eventual ability development—one way to find outstanding qualities is to arrange for a child to demonstrate her learning capabilities. This method enables you to measure what a child knows and can do and helps you offer the next increment of challenge—what the child is ready to do or could do with a little instruction. Here are the steps for this kind of dynamic assessment:

Pretest: This establishes the current competency and skill level.

Instruction: Lessons should be designed to teach just beyond that level.

Assessment: Assessment should be ongoing throughout the instruction and also may be summative (after the lesson or unit).

These steps are particularly effective for children who may be socially awkward, inhibited, or shy. Exceptional abilities can be harder to detect in children who are introverted or less adept in revealing their thoughts, ideas, and feelings. The strengths of extroverted, socially confident children are more conspicuous; these youngsters get our attention and tell us what they know. Introverted or shy children can be inhibited, slow to warm up, and reticent in their responses. Often, teachers expect less of these children, who may appear to be immature or may seem to have less to offer. But some introverted children only *seem* less able, when in fact they simply prefer to understand and mentally rehearse activities before experiencing them.

Chapter 7 gives an in-depth discussion of assessing children's ability and development. See pages 113–132.

Enlisting Parents as Colleagues¹⁰

Parents can be of great help in your effort to identify gifted children. Parents (and other family members) tend to be realistic predictors of their children's abilities and needs. Since about 80 percent of parents of gifted children can identify their children's giftedness by age five or six,¹¹ a shortcut to finding young gifted students is to ask the parents.

When Grandmother brought four-year-old Maurice to preschool, she told the teacher that her grandson thought differently from other children his age. Grandmother owned a laundromat, and Maurice spent countless hours there with her. To occupy himself, he read magazines. He liked to read National Geographic and People; he liked to learn what was going on in the world. Maurice had also mastered an important task: making change. Grandmother knew

¹⁰ Throughout this book, we use the word *parents* to refer to mothers, fathers, grandparents, guardians, or any other primary caregivers.

¹¹ Elizabeth A. Meckstroth. "Guiding the Parents of Gifted Children: The Role of Counselors and Teachers." *Counseling Gifted and Talented Children: A Guide for Teachers, Counselors, and Parents* edited by Roberta M. Milgram (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1991): 95–120.

that her own son had been very bright, but she felt that her grandson was more than bright. He was "different."

This grandmother may not have had the skills to judge the extent of her grandson's precocity. Nonetheless, she recognized that he had abilities unusual for a child of his age. She was able to accurately report his behavior and bring it to the attention of the preschool teacher.

How can you enlist families' help in identifying children's special talents and abilities? Your goal is to obtain insight into children's strengths that might not be apparent in the classroom. To do this, we suggest that you start the school year by requesting three things from families: pictures, information, and examples of products the child has made at home.

Request Pictures

As close as possible to the first day of school, send home the family letter titled "Your Child's Pictures" (page 18). You will want to do this before you interview each student. Use the letter we have provided, adapt it, or write your own request for family pictures. Having students bring in a family photo for display in the classroom is also a wonderful way to help the students feel ownership of the classroom.

Request Information

Have families complete the family letter titled "Information, Please" (page 19) and invite parents to complete the forms titled "About My Child" and "Checklist of My Child's Strengths" (pages 20–23). You can send these sheets home at the same time as or after the request for photos. You will need to gauge your population and determine the best time to send home various requests. If a family marks most of the characteristics on the checklist, you might want to take a closer look at their child's potential giftedness.

Request Products

After you have received the written information about children, you may want to follow up with a homework assignment for students to design a personal exhibit that includes examples of the child's home activities. Younger students often enjoy the idea of homework. Designing this as a homework task will give you information about the home support the child will have with task completion. Ask parents to help their child assemble a collection of

items that demonstrate the child's particular interests and abilities. In making your request, you may wish to use or adapt the family letter titled "Your Child's Personal Exhibit" (page 24).

Depending on your population, it's likely that some children won't bring pictures or other materials from home. You may want to allow time in class for *all* children to draw pictures of themselves and their families and to draw or cut pictures from magazines of their favorite activities. This will provide the opportunity for every child to share something with the teacher and the other students and will provide a foundation for creating a personal exhibit.

A personal exhibit has dimensions to reveal a child's special skills and interests through real evidence that the teacher might not discover in the classroom. It can include photographs, art projects, video or audio recordings, writings—whatever captures the child's extraordinary interests and abilities. The personal exhibit can be stored or presented in any suitable container—perhaps a shoe box, a small unused pizza box, a stationery box, or a grocery bag. Make sure if video or audio recordings are used, you have a way to share them in the classroom.

A personal exhibit has great additional value if the child can briefly present it to the class. If you don't have enough time for class presentations, arrange a time for individual children to share and describe their exhibits to you. We suggest that you write a note about the exhibit to be added to the child's portfolio.

Seven-year-old Josh's personal exhibit, which he shared with his second-grade class, included the following:

- a map he used to locate several Civil War battles
- a replica of a Confederate dollar bill
- pictures of military uniforms and weapons

Josh's teacher wrote this note for his portfolio:

"Josh seemed to enjoy and take great pride in showing his exhibit to the class. He was completely engaged and enthusiastic as he shared his knowledge of the Civil War. We learned that he has participated in reenactments and that he knows weapon types, strategies, and the locations of many battles. He demonstrated a keen sense of technical knowledge and interest as well as logical and sequential knowledge. Josh's exhibit itself was small and simple, as he prefers to spend his time learning more information rather than creating projects."

Chapter 9 provides more information about communicating and working with parents. See pages 142–153.

What About Testing?

The earlier children's special needs are identified, the better it is for their development. Currently, the focus seems to be on finding very young children who have delayed development. Federal programs and money are available to identify any delay or learning difficulty and give these children optimal opportunities to meet their exceptional learning needs. It is equally important to recognize young gifted children. In general, test scores, checklists, and developmental scales are used for identifying giftedness.

Formal intelligence testing instruments may include the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales, the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence, or the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children.¹² Each instrument provides an objective appraisal of a child's abilities. These tools are not perfect, but they do assess a *minimal* level of ability. A child might not demonstrate optimal performance, for many reasons, but the child can't pretend or fake a score such as 133; you know that the child with this score has abilities that are at least this high.

Multiple forms of assessment exist to identify students' abilities. When you are interpreting test scores, look for the ability areas in which the child's performance is most advanced. Highly advanced performance often points to exceptional abilities and potential strengths. This perspective helps identify gifted children who might be overlooked if only the full-scale IQ test score—which is an average of several scores—is considered.

For young children, physical, social, and cognitive development is rapid and variable. Cognitive and motor skills develop suddenly—one moment the skill is not observable, then it miraculously appears! This is just one reason why you should use a multifaceted assessment approach. The variety of assessment tools utilized can include nonverbal assessments or checklists.

You'll find more detailed discussions of assessment and testing considerations in Chapter 7 (page 113) and Appendix A (page 215).

¹² For more information about these and other formal assessment instruments, see Appendix A, page 215.