

HOW PARADIGMATIC VIEWPOINTS AND THE TEXAS STATE STANDARDS INFLUENCE IDENTIFICATION PRACTICES

**LINDSAY ELLIS LEE, JESSICA K. OTTWEIN, LEAH MURPHY,
MELANIE S. MEYER, AND KACEY CRUTCHFIELD**

Abstract

Three major paradigms impact gifted education programming, standards, and identification practices. The Gifted Child, Differentiation, and Talent Development paradigms are related to the beliefs educators, legislators, and policymakers hold, and these beliefs ultimately frame the procedures and policies they establish. Elements of each paradigm are reflected within the Texas State Plan for the Education of Gifted/Talented Students, which guides decision making across the state (Texas Education Agency, 2019). As the second in a series of five articles detailing the practical implications of the major paradigms of gifted education, the current article provides district administrators and educators of gifted and talented students with an overview of how gifted identification practices align with each of the paradigms, as well as how they are supported by the standards established in the Texas State Plan. We encourage educators and administrators to use this overview as they consider the beliefs that shape their program goals, the degree of alignment between identification practices and those goals, and how programming goals and identification practices align with the standards in the Texas State Plan.

Keywords: identification, policy and legislation, GT 101, differentiation, talent development

Gifted education professionals' concepts of what it means to be gifted influence identification procedures and programming in school districts (Dai & Chen, 2014; Johnsen, 2011). State and local definitions of giftedness are informed by philosophical beliefs about what giftedness means and who gifted and talented programs should serve. These ideals shape decision making about program design and instruction. For example, if a school district's adopted conception of giftedness focuses chiefly on above-average intelligence, then it is likely that the district's identification practices will rely heavily on cognitive ability measures (Johnsen, 2011). School district personnel may hold fixed beliefs about intelligence and, as such, be less likely to reassess students and adjust placement in response to changing academic needs.

Historically, scholars in gifted education have had difficulty coming to a consensus on a definition of giftedness, due in large part to the fact that researchers and practitioners are approaching advanced learning opportunities from several different perspectives. The belief that giftedness is a stable trait has led to identification procedures that are exclusive (e.g., national norms, rigid cut-off scores) and perpetuate the underrepresentation of traditionally underserved populations in gifted and talented programs (Dai & Chen, 2013; Gentry et al., 2020; Plucker & Peters, 2016). Conceptions of giftedness have shifted in response to growing concerns about equity (e.g., access, representation) and a better understanding of the importance of recognizing and meeting individual student needs. Increasingly, scholars have suggested that giftedness should be assessed in terms of individual academic need (Lee et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2014). Service models that focus on meeting specific academic needs as they arise (e.g., advanced academics) suggest that a gifted label may, in fact, be unnecessary (Borland, 2005; Meyer & Plucker, 2021; Peters & Borland, 2020). Others frame giftedness as domain-specific potential that must first be identified and then fostered through specialized development opportunities (Subotnik et al., 2011). Regardless of how giftedness is defined, or which frameworks are used to construct gifted and talented programs, schools are ultimately responsible for providing services that address the academic needs of advanced learners. This process must begin with selecting and implementing appropriate identification practices (Lee et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2020). Critically evaluating the underlying conceptions of giftedness that frame a school district's gifted and talented program may help administrators better align program goals with identification practices, services, and state and national standards.

Gifted Paradigms and Identification

The first article in our five-part TEMPO+ series outlined the Gifted Child, Differentiation, and Talent Development paradigms as philosophical frameworks that have shaped gifted and talented education programs and research (Meyer et al., 2020). These differing perspectives on the nature of giftedness impact how students are identified for placement in gifted and talented programs and ultimately the services they receive. The Gifted Child Paradigm aligns with a more categorical conception of giftedness in which screening and assessment practices are meant to identify those with measurably different abilities based on psychometric measures (i.e., IQ). Proponents of the Gifted Child Paradigm select identification methods with the goal of revealing a stable, inherent trait (e.g., above-average intelligence) for a small, distinct group of school-aged students (Borland

& Peters, 2020) and creating learning environments for gifted children that are compatible with their qualitatively different lived experiences (e.g., asynchronous development, heightened intensity; Hollingworth, 1926; Morelock, 1996; Silverman, 1997). Those who support the Differentiation Paradigm recommend identifying giftedness as a state of academic need for advanced learners and advocate for identification models that meet the unique learning needs of all students who would benefit from more rigorous curricular interventions (Borland, 2005). Finally, advocates of the Talent Development Paradigm suggest that individuals with domain-specific talent require authentic experiences within talent domains to develop their potential into competence, expertise, and possibly eminence (Subotnik et al., 2011). Those who ascribe to the principles of this paradigm believe more inclusive identification practices are needed to identify potential and cultivate talent.

Gifted Paradigms and the Texas State Plan

Although paradigmatic conceptions of giftedness influence the construction of gifted and talented programs, the policies for gifted programming in Texas are ultimately guided by the Texas State Plan for the Education of Gifted/Talented Students (Texas State Plan; Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2019). Specifically, the state plan outlines expectations for all gifted programs in the state to either meet minimum accountability standards or strive for exemplary standards of service. The identification standards set forth in the state plan represent the beliefs state educational leaders hold about giftedness, and they reflect the characteristics of each of the three gifted paradigms (Meyer et al., 2020).

The purpose of this article is to provide district administrators and educators of gifted and talented students an overview of how common gifted identification practices correspond with the three major paradigms of giftedness, as well as how practices align with the standards established in the Texas State Plan. By providing this overview, we hope to encourage educators and administrators to consider their own programs to uncover the beliefs that frame program goals and to critically evaluate the degree to which identification practices work to advance them. In fact, many of the Texas State Plan standards overlap and align with more than one paradigm, which highlights the need to analyze the contributions of each paradigm to fully understand their integration in gifted programs. Although the standards in the Texas State Plan may apply to more than one paradigmatic viewpoint, the standards provided in this article closely align with the specified three paradigms (i.e., Gifted Child, Talent Development, Differentiation) and are discussed in relation to best practices for gifted service identification.

Identification in the Gifted Child Paradigm

Over the past century, the Gifted Child Paradigm has focused on identifying students as gifted based on high general intelligence and presumed corresponding social and emotional vulnerabilities that may limit their ability to reach full potential without appropriate educational and psychosocial interventions (Columbus Group, 1991, as cited in Morelock, 1996; Silverman, 1997). The belief that “giftedness is a general human quality” necessitates identification practices to find the “truly gifted” (Borland & Peters, 2020, p. 2). This approach uses traditional intelligence tests for identification (Dai & Chen, 2013, p. 154), but this testing is often preceded by teacher or parent referrals that assess student behaviors and

emotional characteristics.

The definitions of giftedness adopted by many gifted and talented programs align with this paradigm in that they use above-average intelligence or cognitive ability as a qualification for gifted program placement (e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2019; NAGC & Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted, 2020; TEA, 2019). Although definitions of giftedness vary, the most commonly agreed-upon characteristic of giftedness is advanced intellectual ability (Callahan et al., 2017). Further, some state plans for gifted education advise schools to use intelligence testing to identify gifted students and to set cut-off scores for placement (Lockhart et al., 2021). Many gifted and talented programs use nationally normed cut-off scores that compare a student's score to a sample of similar-aged students from across the country. Although widely implemented, the use of nationally normed cut-off scores for gifted identification has historically been associated with the underidentification and underrepresentation of students from diverse populations. Local norms and universal screening have been recommended as ways to address this disparity and to ensure that the most academically advanced learners in a school district or on a campus are receiving appropriate educational services (Carman et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2019).

Alignment With the Texas State Plan

The Student Assessment section of the Texas State Plan (TEA, 2019) allows districts to develop their own policies for identification for gifted services. The plan outlines that all educators on the selection committee who review assessment data and determine student identification should be trained in the “nature and needs of gifted/talented students” (Standard 2.26, TEA, 2019, p. 6), which supports the needs of the whole child. Few standards indicate the view that there are unique qualitative differences between students that require categorical identification and services in each area of giftedness (e.g., Standard 2.16.1, TEA, 2019, p. 5).

An ideological cornerstone of the Gifted Child Paradigm is the focus on the stability of general intelligence or aptitude. This is reflected by the reliance on cognitive ability assessments (e.g., Cognitive Abilities Test [CogAT], Lohman, 2012; Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test [NNAT], Nagleiri, 2008) that measure verbal, quantitative, and nonverbal reasoning. The Texas State Plan suggests the inclusion of “nonverbal assessments” (Standard 2.19, TEA, 2019, p. 5) and using a “balanced examination of all assessment data” (Standard 2.28, TEA, 2019, p. 6); however, specific types of assessments are not included.

The Texas State Plan does not designate cut scores (e.g., 95th to 99th percentile) for identification measures, which gives Texas school districts the autonomy to choose their own norming practices. This allows for more inclusive identification practices (Carman et al., 2020) and shows a shift toward ideologies associated with the Differentiation and Talent Development paradigms.

Identification in the Differentiation Paradigm

The ideology underlying the Differentiation Paradigm is to “effectively and efficiently” match a student’s current needs with appropriate academic services (Dai & Chen, 2014, p. 188). Contrary to the Gifted Child Paradigm, identifying giftedness as a stable trait that makes one qualitatively different from similar-aged peers is an unnecessary distinction within this perspective; rather, the focus is on meeting students’ current academic needs (Borland, 2005). Within this paradigm, identification serves to provide all students with appropriate educational programs, interventions, and curricula that align with their interests, strengths, levels of knowledge, and paces of learning (Dixson et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 1997). In the Differentiation Paradigm, assessment focuses on the student’s zone of proximal development, rather than an overall assessment of ability (Dai & Chen, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Instead of a one-time assessment of giftedness, practitioners use ongoing diagnostics to evaluate content mastery and to identify further opportunities to learn (Dai & Chen, 2014). For instance, Response to Intervention (RtI) programs identify learning needs and then utilize tiered levels of instruction with the aim of differentiating learning experiences for multiple abilities and providing opportunities to learn for all students (Johnsen et al., 2013; Peters et al., 2014).

Alignment With the Texas State Plan

Alignment between the Differentiation Paradigm and the standards outlined in the state plan is evident in sections that clarify that “access to assessment and, if needed, gifted and talented services is available to all populations of the district” (Standard 2.24, TEA, 2019, p. 6) and the recommendations for assessing students for gifted services throughout the year. The idea of ongoing assessment is central to the Differentiation Paradigm and is reflected within the Texas state standards. For example, to earn an exemplary rating, a district’s process for identification for gifted and talented services should be both ongoing and responsive, so that “assessment of students occurs at any time the need arises” (Standard 2.14.1, TEA, 2019, p. 5). The phrasing “any time the need arises” (Standard 2.14.1, TEA, 2019, p. 5) indicates that districts should focus on identifying students for domain-specific services; however, the most common assessments are those that measure overall ability. Often, that identification is followed by nonspecific services (e.g., pull-out programs) that are not necessarily focused on specific unmet academic needs. A child identified as gifted may experience a mismatch between their current level of ability and the “pacing, depth, and content of the instruction provided” in one class or subject but not in others (Peters et al., 2014, p. 27).

Further, Standard 2.11 indicates that schools should conduct reassessment for students “based on performance in response to gifted/talented services” (p. 4) and encourages matching students with appropriate learning opportunities “at least once a year at the elementary grades and once a semester at the secondary level” (Standard 2.15.1, TEA, 2019, p. 5). The standards address “transfer students, furloughs, reassessment, exiting of students from program services, and appeals of district decisions regarding program placement” (Standard 2.7, TEA, 2019, p. 4). These suggestions emphasize that districts should be periodically reviewing student data to find the “most effective way to meet their identified educational needs” (Standard 2.18, 2.29, TEA, 2019, pp. 5–6). Although standards for screening may be in place to reduce the number of students overlooked by traditional identification measures, the standards do not specifically include research-based practices (e.g., local norms, front-loading; Plucker & Peters, 2016) that can reduce the underrepresentation of culturally, linguistically,

and economically diverse students in gifted programs. More flexibility in identification practices would be required to truly implement processes that align with Differentiation perspectives (e.g., continuous diagnostics, matching assessments with curricular interventions, flexible grouping).

Identification in the Talent Development Paradigm

The Talent Development Paradigm has shifted the perspective of gifted education from a “purely cognitive view” to an understanding that there is “a broader scope of what constitutes giftedness” (Dai, 2017, p. 172), including internal and external factors that influence an individual’s development. In addition to cognitive ability, gifted and talented students benefit when domain-specific creative potential and psychosocial skills are identified, fostered, and refined in supportive learning environments. In order to serve students in gifted education programs and to prepare them for future educational and career opportunities, supporters of the Talent Development Paradigm suggest that educators embrace the work of developing pedagogy that supports movement from ability to competence and competence to expertise (Subotnik et al., 2011). More specifically, identification in the Talent Development Paradigm hinges on identifying potential in a talent domain and connecting the student with programs to develop the domain-specific skills and psychosocial skills (e.g., persistence, self-beliefs, motivation; Rinn, 2020; Subotnik et al., 2011) necessary for that domain.

Concerns about equity and access to gifted programming have led researchers and practitioners to embrace identification practices that recognize the complex interactions between individuals, their environments, and a multitude of internal and external factors that impact educational and talent development needs (Dai, 2017). Dai and Chen (2014) asserted that identification of students as gifted or not gifted should be replaced by the identification of strengths, aptitudes, and interests in order to offer students educational environments that are more aligned with their talents. Effective talent development programs maximize the potential for students to achieve at high levels and allow individuals to make choices about how to achieve their personal goals (Dixson et al., 2020; Subotnik et al., 2011). In this conception, gifted education “consists of a chain of educational opportunities, choices, and experiences that help learners to internalize and transform knowledge and skills in a personally meaningful and productive way” (Dai & Chen, 2014, pp. 226–227). Siegle et al. (2016) suggested that talent development could be a useful framework for identifying traditionally underrepresented students for gifted services by engaging families from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds in the school community and the talent development process (Mun et al., 2016; Siegle et al., 2016).

Alignment With the Texas State Plan

In the state plan, the introduction to the Student Assessment section explains that identification practices should allow students to “demonstrate and develop their diverse talents and abilities” (TEA, 2019, p. 4). Although the Texas State Plan encourages school districts to provide identification opportunities for students with a variety of gifts and talents (e.g., core academic areas, the arts, leadership, creativity), in practice, many school districts still rely heavily on cut-scores and require students to qualify on multiple measures to be eligible for gifted services (Lakin, 2018). These protocols often undermine the ability of gifted and talented coordinators to identify and serve students based

on demonstrated potential in a single talent domain. For example, in elementary schools with self-contained gifted and talented courses where the same students receive instruction in all content areas (language arts, math, science, social studies) from one or two teachers, if an elementary student qualifies for gifted services in language arts, but not mathematics, some school districts may choose not to place that student in the gifted program, regardless of the academic need. In high school, students demonstrating academic talent have options for talent development through open enrollment in advanced academic programming (e.g., Advanced Placement, dual-credit college courses), but this type of course selection may not be available to students in lower grades who were not identified for gifted and talented services (Kettler & Hurst, 2017). Data collected for each student must include “multiple sources for each area of giftedness served by the district,” and the identification process must allow for data to be collected that highlight “student exceptionalities to the extent possible” (Standard 2.17, TEA, 2019, p. 5). Likewise, “if services are available in leadership, artistic, and creativity areas” the district must use at least three criteria (Standard 2.23, TEA, 2019, p. 6). Thus, multiple standards indicate that districts should use several data points to serve domain-specific areas of giftedness within specific programs, which aligns with the Talent Development perspective.

Alignment of the Texas State Plan, Program Goals, Paradigms, and Identification Practices

There is a desperate need to unify the goals of gifted education to promote equity and excellence within the field (Plucker & Peters, 2016). Each paradigmatic perspective provides a framework for how to approach gifted identification and programming, but their seemingly dissimilar goals and ideologies continue to create tension within the field of gifted and talented education. Excellence gaps are differences in advanced levels of achievement between student groups. Plucker and Peters (2016) developed a framework for reducing excellence gaps that incorporates research-based strategies, including expanding advanced learning opportunities, front-loading, universal screening with local norms, and ability grouping. Although some of these strategies are referenced in the Texas State Plan (e.g., expanding advanced learning opportunities, ability grouping), adding other proven strategies, such as universal consideration and local norms, will allow education professionals to go further in their efforts to promote equity and excellence. Although the three paradigmatic perspectives have their differences, there is a general consensus that students demonstrate individual differences in their learning and development that should be addressed in schools and gifted education programs (Dai & Chen, 2014). It is vital for administrators and teachers to understand how paradigmatic stances shape mandated state standards and to reflect about shared values that could be at odds.

All three paradigmatic philosophies align with the standards in the Texas State Plan to some degree. However, the recently adopted assessment standards are more reflective of the Differentiation and Talent Development perspectives. If a district’s program goals include responding to these new assessment standards by embracing the elements of talent development and differentiation advocated for in the state plan, identification procedures should also be modified to address equitable access and the alignment between identification methods and the services a school district provides once a student is identified (Dai & Chen, 2014, p. 223). Regardless of the perspective of giftedness that a district adopts, it is important to recognize how the goals of a district’s gifted and talented program relate to the standards set forth in the Texas State Plan.

Table 1

Paradigmatic Viewpoints Reflected in Identification Practices and Texas State Standards

	Gifted Child Paradigm	Talent Development Paradigm	Differentiation Paradigm
Methods of Identification	Identification based on cognitive ability compared to similar-aged peers measured by cognitive ability measures (e.g., IQ tests).	Identification based on multiple formats (e.g., product- and performance-based assessments) in various areas of domain-specific talent.	Identification based on continuous diagnostic assessment of student strengths to better align with appropriate curriculum/services to meet individual needs in the classroom.
Goals of Identification	The goal is to identify a student's cognitive and social-emotional needs so that curriculum can be developed to support the whole child.	The goal is to identify potential in domain-specific talent and help a student develop toward a specific trajectory.	The goal is to identify a student's strengths and abilities to teach at the most appropriate level.

Note. Paradigmatic viewpoints in identification have differences in interpretations of the standards, but there are overlapping standards that fall within each category. For a more detailed account of the Texas State Plan Standards, go to https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/GT_State_Plan_2019_I.pdf.

Standard 2 includes 29 substandards that aim to (a) provide increased access throughout the year for testing, (b) create pathways for talent development in different domains of strength, and (c) provide access to testing for linguistically diverse students.

This broad array of recommendations is useful in establishing a wider pool from which to identify gifted students, but appropriate assessment strategies must be chosen with care to avoid program misalignment. Misalignment between identification and services occurs when the services available to gifted and talented students fail to address the academic needs identified in the assessment process, a situation which is ultimately counterproductive. For instance, the use of nonverbal ability tests has been suggested as a way to provide more equitable identification of culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse students (Naglieri & Ford, 2003); however, mere usage of a nonverbal ability test is not going to solve the problem of disproportionality if students are placed in learning environments that require advanced verbal proficiency (e.g., Carman et al., 2020; Lohman & Gambrell, 2012; Peters & Engerrand, 2016; Peters et al., 2019). It is common among school districts to use nonverbal ability tests to include a broader pool of students, but if they provide services that rely heavily on advanced verbal skills (e.g., gifted and talented humanities courses), this creates misalignment between identification and services and may cause issues with retention. Districts should have a clear vision of how the goals of their program drive both identification practices and the services provided to students.

Recommendations for Identification Practices

Unifying these differing philosophies within gifted education may seem like an impossible task; however, focusing on how to identify student strengths and align them with appropriate services is one way to synthesize all three paradigmatic perspectives. The view of intelligence as more malleable than static may prompt school districts to create learning opportunities that focus on growth within gifted and talented service models. The approaches used in gifted education should be inclusive, and gifted education professionals need to be cognizant of individual student differences. Scholars focused on equity and excellence have advocated for widening the pool of students identified for gifted services through universal consideration so that all students are considered for gifted services (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Peters et al., 2020; Plucker & Peters, 2016), rather than relying on students being nominated by teachers or parents for formal evaluation (McBee et al., 2016). The paradigmatic stances and Texas state standards encourage school districts to use multiple criteria in the identification process, but there is no mention of what criteria to use or how exactly schools should use the criteria for placement decisions. Because these decisions are largely locally determined, administrators need to carefully consider how criteria align with programming (Gubbins et al., 2021; Lakin, 2021; Lee et al., 2020) and how criteria are combined to make decisions for placement (Lakin, 2018; McBee et al., 2014). Additionally, Peters et al. (2019) argued that districts could reduce disproportional representation with identification protocols that use local norms to compare students' scores to their immediate reference sample (e.g., building norms). Although there is no "silver-bullet solution" (Callahan, 2005, p. 99) for ensuring equitable identification for gifted services, implementing these practices could reduce unnecessary barriers for students who require advanced learning opportunities. Regardless of the paradigmatic perceptions education professionals embrace, some research-based recommendations on gifted identification practices include:

- align district goals, identification practices, and gifted programming options;
- consider how multiple criteria are combined for identification decisions;
- minimize reliance on referrals (i.e., teacher, parent) as a gateway to formal evaluation;
- adopt universal screening policies and move toward universal consideration;
- reevaluate norming practices, especially arbitrarily high cut-off scores; and
- balance sensitivity and cost of the measurements used.

Conclusion

In gifted education, scholars and practitioners may never reach a consensus on the central issue of who is gifted. One key factor in the Texas State Plan is the recommendation that school districts need to have a method of identifying students for gifted services. Multiple strategies are suggested that align with all three paradigmatic perspectives. It is critical for administrators of gifted and talented programs to evaluate the conceptions of giftedness that drive programming. In doing so, program administrators will be better equipped to follow “the golden rule of identification” and ensure that there is “congruence between the criteria used in the identification process and the goals and types of services that constitute the day-to-day activities that students will pursue” (Renzulli, 2005, p. 11). By understanding identification from the perspective of each paradigm, educators can make more informed decisions that align assessment with service options in gifted programs.

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