What's a valid way to select students for a gifted program?

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Regularly, teachers ask me how they should select students for their programmes for the gifted.[1] Teachers are looking for a set of easy-to-use criteria that are unambiguous to interpret to determine who can or cannot join special enrichment projects organised in pull-out programmes. This expressed need for crystal clear selection criteria shows that the organisation of the education for the gifted is a complex issue for many schools. The complexity of this issue increases if these programmes have to be organised within the concept of inclusive education, as is the situation in Dutch schools (Borland, 2005; Van Gerven, 2016a). This is because from a certain perspective pull-out programmes for gifted students can be seen as segregation, a departure from the concept of inclusion. However one can also easily argue that these programmes are organised from the inclusive point of view that education should create maximum opportunities for each student to develop his potential and that the educational objectives are better served in these pullout programmes (Van Gerven, 2016b).

Every time teachers drop this fundamental question on me; honesty compels me to reply that I really don't have a clue who should enter a programme or not. So many factors influence this selection process that it differs from school to school where students participation to a pull-out programme is relevant (Van Gerven, 2016b). However, if you want to set the standards for selection, there are some considerations that are relevant for every school. These considerations are discussed in this article.
For me, the central question is whether you look for students who fit into your programme or that you want to respond to the educational needs of every student, including the needs of the gifted student. One should ask oneself, "Am I looking for students who are a match for my educational approach or am I trying to see how I can adjust my educational approach to serve my students as well as possible?" To answer this question, it is important that you discuss the function of the Alternative Educational Arrangement (AEA) you want to organise amongst your team of teachers. Because if function takes precedence over shape not all the adjustments to your educational approach have to be organised in a pull-out programme (Janson, 2016). However, changing the shape of the arrangement does not solve the selection problem.

An AEA can best be described as any pedagogic-didactic intervention that departs from the basic education strategies you normally use (Van Gerven, 2014). Thus this definition exceeds the idea of an enrichment class or pull-out programme. A student working on a selection of enrichment assignments is in fact already offered an AEA (Van Gerven & Hoogenberg, 2011). Also, if you let a student work on enrichment assignments in the regular classroom, you have as well to decide why this student applies and why other students don't. In fact, an enrichment class is nothing more than just another variation in the way you can organise education. For most schools it seems easier to cluster students with apparently the same needs in a pull-out programme than to adjust the individual student's programme within the limitations of the daily classroom (Janson, 2009).

[1] Later in this text we'll describe all gifted programmes as Alternative Educational Arrangements (AEA) because this terminology keeps the option open to discuss also arrangements within the classroom with similar dilemma's regarding the selection of participants.

However, it does not matter what arrangements a school team wants to offer, in all situations teams should be held accountable for how they select their participants (Eyre, 2007). Therefore a fundamental discussion about whether an AEA is needed and how an AEA can best be organised should precede the selection procedure for an AEA (Van Gerven, 2014).

Six pitfalls

The selection process for an AEA in a peer group setting is influenced by the flexibility of pedagogic-didactic interventions that are offered to all students. If you are already able to work with a three-tiered structure dividing your group of students based on a Bell curve, then additional interventions would not be necessary for most of your students. Thus a relatively small group might have needs that differ from the top 20 % who are already being catered for in this three-tiered structure (Drent & Van Gerven, 2012). None the less we know that it is relatively difficult to implement interventions that extend beyond the top tier in this three-tiered structure (Kuipers, 2016). Effectively not only the student's needs, but also the teacher's capacity to provide a more in-depth differentiation bound by regular classroom management strategies influences the selection procedure (Van Gerven, 2014). Generally education in enrichment classes is underpinned by various assumptions about what can be defined as 'good' for gifted students. Those assumptions are based on personal traits that are often ascribed to gifted students. If this approach is taken, the selection procedure will be determined by the degree to which these traits in potential candidates for the enrichment class are observed by the teacher.

Here the first pitfall emerges. Every isolated trait that can be observed in a gifted student can be recognised in any other student as well (Mika, 2005; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilus, & Worrel, 2011). The traits are part of a normative concept that places every one of them on a continuum between 'not visible to highly visible'. However, the visibility depends on the opportunity a student has to express specific behaviour (Venderickx, 16-02-2017; Sternberg & Zhang, 1995). If one cannot observe a specific trait in a student, instead of dismissing the possibility that the student can be gifted, one should consider whether the optimal circumstances where created for a student to express these traits to the extent that the intensity of the trait within a gifted student is expected. Being successfully intelligent requires a teacher who creates opportunities to become successfully intelligent (Matthews & Folsom, 2009; Sternberg, 2009).
Quite apart from these considerations, it should be realised that one swallow does not make a summer. If only some traits are to be observed and if these traits can only be observed in an almost clinically created situation, it is hardly likely that this student will be successfully intelligent in a situation that doesn't have the extreme support of this clinical situation. It is always the combination of several characteristics, which become visible in different situations and different circumstances over a longer period, that is more reliable. Parental input to complete observations is therefore very important (De Bruin-De Boer & Kuipers, 2011; Van Gerven & Drent, 2004-2016). Furthermore, it should be realised that although these traits might give some information about the student's educational needs, they are not enough to draw definite conclusions about a student's intellectual capacity (Van Gerven, 2015).

The second trap is that if these particular traits have not been observed in a student, it means he or she is 'not gifted'. Besides educational opportunities to exhibit these traits, there is the effect of socialisation. Socialisation in respect to unwritten behavioural rules is a very important aspect in the educational process. So being an accepted member of the age group they are in, is important for children. A lack of adjustment to those rules means that the student can become excluded from his peers. To avoid this exclusion, a student might decide that being a member of the group is more important than self-actualisation based on natural capacities (Guyt, 2003). Selecting students for an enrichment project based on observed traits can therefore only imply that you can include students (you can state that they might be gifted), but formally you cannot exclude them (you can't state that they are not gifted).

The third trap when selection criteria for an AEA is set up, is to let the scores of an intelligence test determine whether a student can join or not. Setting the threshold for participation at an IQ score of 130 is just as arbitrary as setting a threshold that the student should at least score 100% three times consecutively in Maths. Knowing that a student has an IQ of at least 130 or knowing that the student is able to achieve high grades does not mean that you automatically understand how to adjust the curriculum. An IQ score and high achievements do not make educational needs comprehensible because educational needs are broader than just the curriculum and they also exceed IQ. Educational needs are about interpersonal, intrapersonal, cognitive and academic needs and all of this is intertwined with the need for self-actualisation (Houkema, 2016).

The fourth trap is the result of the former three. Traditional teaching practice assumes all gifted students are the same and that they all have equal needs. The idea that gifted students are a homogeneous group that can be taught with one educational strategy is complete nonsense and also outdated (Matthews & Foster, 2006). That idea is as outrageous as the idea that everybody who has vision problems can be helped with identical spectacles. If they were given identical spectacles, it would not mean that they all could see properly. An examination of the interactive models as developed by Gagné (2010) Sternberg (2002), Heller (2000) or a closer look at the perspective of the Columbus group (1994, as paraphrased in Kreger-Silverman, 2013) on giftedness, brings one to the conclusion that it is easy to argue that gifted students are a heterogeneous group.
Each student's developmental process is influenced by the specific chemistry between all the different (f)actors of that student's ecological system (Van Meersbergen & Jeninga, 2012; Van Gerven E. , 2015). Many wrong assumptions are made about the education of gifted children. It is assumed for example that all gifted children thrive on divergent problem-solving assignments which they can undertake without teacher support. However, whether a student thrives on these assignments depends on what support he/she is given. That means that if you offer a student a more divergent kind of assignment, that student should be facilitated with the kind of support that fits his individual educational needs and capacities regarding the task. A student who has difficulties prioritising the information given and has difficulties starting and ending a task needs more support on this point than a student who can easily prioritise. Offering a student an assignment without offering him the contextual safety of the teacher's educational support, is equivalent to ask a child to play outside on the motorway during rush hour. It engenders the feeling of loss and danger. If a student does not respond with enthusiasm to certain input, that does not mean he/she is not gifted; it may mean he requires something other than the teacher's preconceived notions of what is appropriate the gifted.

The fifth trap is to assume that a pull out programme is automatically necessary for any gifted student (Janson, 2016). Selection procedures for participating in pull-out programmes start with the student's ecological system. The interaction between the six (f)actors of this system (student, teacher, curriculum, learning environment, peers and family) determines the optimal way the student should be educated and how and where this curriculum can be best organised (Van Gerven, 2014). The first step is to identify educational objectives to match the student who has been selected for an AEA Those objectives can relate to content as well as to skills and exceed the basic academic domains. Thus social skills, executive skills, motor **s**kills and intrapersonal skills can become legitimate, relevant educational objectives if they activate the student's development in his zone of proximal development. The next step is to find out what assignments and materials are fit to use in order to reach the set objectives. By doing so, a curriculum is selected that can be an optimal match for the student's needs. However, a curriculum like this calls on the teacher's capacity to organise this curriculum. Step number three is, therefore, to explore which didactical and managerial skills are required to put theory into practice regarding this student and this individualised curriculum. Only after these questions are answered it can be determined what the best place is to realise this educational program. That can differ for each student and each teacher, because what is feasible for teacher Z, is not automatically is also feasible for Teacher X. What is feasible depends highly on the mix of students there are in her classroom, the educational needs of these students and the way responding to those needs calls on the teacher. Thus for gifted student A an AEA might be offered in the regular classroom, but for gifted student B who has different educational needs, the same teacher might suggest participation in a pull-out programme (Van Gerven, 2014).

The final trap is the argument that once placed in a pull-out programme, means the need to participate in this programme will be there forever. I dare to contest the validity of this statement. This statement is only valid if you assume that giftedness is a static concept and education will be without consequences. Modern perspectives on giftedness consider a static conception of giftedness as an outdated perspective. (Matthews & Folsom, 2009; Sternberg 2009). Accepting the assumption that each student – and that includes gifted students – will develop as a result of good education, means accepting that a student's educational needs will differ from time to time (Hattie, 2013; Van Meersbergen & De Vries, 2013). If you don not accept personal growth as a result of education, the efficacy of education would not be measurable. In that case development would be contributed to nature and that would diminish the role of the teacher. Differences in educational needs that are due to good education can become visible in all developmental domains. And that implies that the educational programming of AEA's should be subject to change whenever the set objectives are reached. I, therefore, suggest that we take on a more flexible perspective on the selection criteria for all our enrichment activities. The interaction of the student's ecological system with the needs of every individual student must be pivotal in this matter. If we can make that happen than we are finally able to offer education that fits our students and we can stop searching for the students who match our narrowminded programming.

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